

The background of the cover is a painting of a crown made of woven straw. The crown is dark brown and has two long, curved horns. It is set against a dark green, textured background. At the base of the crown, there are several purple flowers with yellow centers, surrounded by green leaves and more straw. The overall style is painterly and somewhat somber.

CROWN OF ASTER

EMMALINE STRANGE

Crown
Of
Aster

Crown of Aster
Emmaline Strange

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For **Kaye** and **Kendra**,
who helped Adair and Nathaniel fall in love.

Table of Contents

[I - First Blush](#)

[II - Fever Dream](#)

[III - Iron Gall](#)

[IV - The Entire Forest](#)

[V - Tethered](#)

[VI - Blood Compass](#)

[VII - Any Three Stars](#)

[VIII - The Invitation](#)

[IX - Nightshade Wine](#)

[X - A Builder's Treasury of Staircases](#)

[XI - Ezra Stone](#)

[XII - The Bramble](#)

[XIII - One of Us](#)

[XIV - Whatever Always Means](#)

[XV - More Beast than Man](#)

[XVI - Changing](#)

[XVII - Like Mother, Like Son](#)

[XVIII - What a Beast Ever Wants](#)

[XIX - Dirt and Blood](#)

[XX - Smudge](#)

[XXI - Hen in a Soup Pot](#)

[XXII - To Fear Him](#)

[XXIII - The Heart-eater](#)

[XXIV - A True Heir](#)

[XXV - Sick of Fear](#)

[XXVI - Beautiful and Strange](#)

[XXVII - A Dryad's Prayer](#)

[XXVIII - Sacrifice](#)

[XXIX - What She Wants](#)

[XXX - Why You're Here](#)

[XXXI - Your Radiance](#)

[XXXII - The Aster King](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[About the Author](#)

I

First Blush

The morning tasted of false spring. Adair had lived through countless seasons changing, enough of them to know when winter was truly giving up its ghosts, and today was not that day. He could tell by the shy way the buds clung to the trees and the stubborn chill of the wind. There even remained a thin cover of snow on much of the ground, though it was trying its damndest to thaw.

Court would be lively today, he knew. Spring, even false spring, never failed to have fae blood running hot. The wine would flow, the air would be heavy with love-stink and the sounds of mating. The notion held only passing interest for Adair, who attended court merely to visit with friends and kin, and to please his mother, the queen.

His bare toes squelched in the chill mud as Adair approached his favorite tree. It was an old thing, older than him and his mother and *her* mother. There was nothing like a reliable old tree, Adair had always thought, and he'd spent decades selecting this particular one as his from among many valid contenders. His fingertips brushed against the scars in the tree's bark, scars made from his horns in years past. With a smile, Adair braced his palms against the tree. He lowered his face, nudging the bark with his forehead. With a twist of his neck and a happy grunt, he slid the sleek curves of his horns against the trunk. Adair loved the feel of the vibrations as his horns caught the grooves in the bark; they pulsed down into his skull, tingling past his neck all the way to his spine as he raked the bark again and again. He made certain to gouge the bark anew every spring, lest another faun think to claim the tree for their own. His scent would be left behind in the fresh scars in the wood, and after so long parts of the tree had been

scraped clean by his ministrations. Satisfied that he'd marked his tree sufficiently, Adair put his back against the trunk. He rolled his spine, itching between his shoulder blades on a certain knot that always hit just so, and sighed happily.

That was the first moment Adair caught the scent. He froze, and breathed deep.

In a long life built around wild things, a truly alien scent was rare. Adair took several long breaths, eyes growing wide as the aroma filled his lungs, his legs quivering below him. He couldn't get enough, so he decided to follow the smell. Adair found himself overtaken by a ravenous hunger so acute that when he located the source of the scent he wasn't certain whether he wanted to eat it, fight it, or fuck it. Perhaps all three. His heart hammered in his chest as he drew breath after breath, pulling more of the fragrance deep into his lungs. Mere smell no longer enough, Adair parted his lips, tasting the scent on the air, trying to find his way to the source.

With his mind so singularly focused, or as focused as it could be with all the blood in his body seeming to pump directly to his groin, Adair did not at first realize the path he took was a familiar one, leading him toward the healing springs, one of his favorite spots in the forest. As he approached, he heard a shriek and a splash. He frowned. The new, enticing smell was stronger than ever, yet the voices just beyond the trees were known to him: his sisters. He was certain the smell did not come from them; he'd grown with them and smelled their smells all his life. Adair paused, letting the scent fill his sinuses, trying to pinpoint its source. He closed his eyes and listened, a challenge over the pounding of his pulse, and heard a sharp intake of nervous breath, a stifled groan. The smell on the wind intensified and Adair almost lost his balance, dizzy with want. As he peered through the tree line, he saw it at last: crouched behind a rock, thin and shaking and covered in hides against the cold.

A human.

Adair found himself sorely tempted to turn on his heel and put as many leagues between himself and this interloper as his long legs possibly could, but something about the fragrance

still filling his lungs had him rooted to the spot, electrified and painfully aroused.



Nathaniel Stone woke to a sound he hadn't heard since autumn: the rush of the river. The sound was muffled, distant, but almost brought a tear to his eye all the same. The thawed river meant the promise of food, the promise of life. Winter had been cruel and hard and his family was slowly starving.

Cautious but hopeful, Nathaniel trusted in the first blush of spring, gathered his father's fishing gear and set out into the forest that lay beside his village. The knot of anxiety settled in Nathaniel's guts—tightening each morning when he heard the rumble of a cough deep in his mother's chest—loosened for the first time in weeks. Nathaniel wasn't much of a woodsman, truth be told, but he could wrangle a fishing net.

He knew the stream led to a fishing hole, though he'd never been there himself. His father had fished there, but he was eight years in the grave. The villagers of Myrna avoided the forest if they could help it. Stories of monsters and changelings kept even the boldest from straying too deep. Nathaniel hardly counted himself among the boldest, but desperation to provide for his family had won out in favor of caution. He paused for a moment, resting his hand on a moss-covered stone. It was an ancient thing, predating Myrna itself by a few centuries, if the talk was true. Very plain, it resembled a roughly formed wheel and came up to about Nathaniel's hip. The stone marked the edge of where the villagers could safely tread, or so the legends went. Nathaniel swallowed his nerves and left the stone behind him as he followed the stream, doing his best not to turn and peek at it over his shoulder as he walked.

A ways into the trees, Nathaniel crouched beside the stream, suddenly struck by how cool and inviting the water appeared, glittering in the morning sun. Stuffing his gloves into the pockets of his ragged coat, he plunged his hands into the water and scooped up as much as he could in his cupped palms. He drank long and deep, finding the water to be bracing, cold and invigorating. As he reached his hands in a

second time, he frowned, watching the way the water flowed. He had been walking up stream, hadn't he? Suddenly he wasn't certain. Spinning on his heel, Nathaniel turned to check his tracks in the snow, but they'd vanished. Then, a feeling like eyes on his body, crawling over his skin beneath his clothes, had him whipping his head in all directions. He shivered, feeling exposed despite his layers. Lights popped in front of Nathaniel's eyes, and he stumbled on jelly legs. He mentally shook himself. It didn't matter that the prints had vanished. It didn't matter that he had gotten turned around. He was by the stream now, of course, and could simply follow it. He had to make it to the fishing hole; the Stones hadn't had a full meal in days. If he didn't find something to bring home, something to fill his family's bellies—it didn't bear thinking about.

Nathaniel told himself it was the cold and his own anxieties that had his shoulders up around his ears, but he couldn't shake the feeling he was being watched. The sun moved across the sky and Nathaniel soldiered on, encouraged by the fact that the stream was increasing in size. He knew he had to be close.

A high-pitched shriek cut the silence, and Nathaniel nearly jumped right out of his boots. It was followed by a series of splashes and a chorus of shrill laughter. Nathaniel approached warily, following the sounds and the stream until he found a boulder to crouch behind. Dizzy with hunger and relief at finding the fishing hole, Nathaniel braced himself against the rock, searching for the source of the noise.

Three women splashed about in the water, naked despite the cold. Hungry as he was, Nathaniel's first, rather panicked, thought was that they'd scare the fish away. However, he was still a red-blooded young man, so that thought was chased swiftly away by the look of crystalline water beading on shimmering bodies. Nathaniel's breath caught in his throat as he watched the women, at first curious how they could stand the freezing water, then hypnotized by their flesh and the droplets of water as it ran down their flawless skin. They played like children, floating lazily, splashing each other, and giggling. Nathaniel's head started to ache and his legs shook below him like they wanted to reject the weight of his body.

He couldn't tear his eyes away from the women in the water, his usually sharp mind going a bit fuzzy. As Nathaniel watched them braiding flowers in each other's hair, he wondered vaguely where they'd even found flowers this time of year before his brain seemed to empty, his mind humming with a pleasant fog. Nathaniel felt a deep heat growing below his navel, and surprised, he found himself palming his hardening cock through his trousers. It twitched hopefully against his hand as he stifled a groan and tried to regain control of himself. *This is wrong*, he thought, *I should just go*.

But, they were just *so* naked. He couldn't quite convince himself to move away back into the trees, so he remained where he was with his stomach rumbling and the blood pounding in his ears—and, elsewhere.

The more he watched, trying to tamp down his desire, the more curious Nathaniel found these women. Where it had at first seemed merely pale, he realized their lush skin was as white as the snow he crouched in—but as the sun hit them, he caught flashes of purple, green, and orange. They dazzled, like opals catching the light. Otherworldly. He shivered, and missed the sound of a twig snapping behind him.

“Why are you watching my sisters bathe?”

Nathaniel yelped and tumbled from his hiding place, flushed and mortified. The girls in the pond screamed when they saw him and bolted for the trees. Nathaniel scrabbled backward away from the voice. His eyes rose from a pair of bare feet up to the face of a very peculiar young man. He was tall, staggering tall, with an unkempt beard and tawny golden hair to match. It was soft and wild at the same time, and for some strange reason Nathaniel's immediate thought was that he wanted to run his fingers through that hair. Like the women in the water, this man was naked, or near enough.

“Erm,” said Nathaniel, casting around of a suitable excuse for his voyeurism and coming up quite empty.

The newcomer continued to stare with wide, unblinking eyes—startling green and enormous, larger than any eyes Nathaniel had ever seen. He crouched down, and his gaze fell

to the pile of discarded fishing supplies beside Nathaniel on the ground. Frowning, the strange fellow plucked at Nathaniel's net with a long-fingered hand.

"Were you hunting them?" He asked, voice low and dangerous, eyes now boring into Nathaniel's face.

Sweat broke on Nathaniel's forehead. "Of course not!" He flushed with deeper shame as he realized that his plan to get food for his family had fallen from his mind as he'd gawked at the women in the pond. "I was looking for my fishing hole and got lost ..." he trailed away, quailing under the gaze of this man, whose green eyes now flashed like a field on fire. "I'll just go."

Nathaniel scrambled to his feet, grabbing for his gear, and made to run like hell back through the forest. His sleeve snagged, and he stumbled on shaky legs, realizing the bizarre man had seized his arm.

"You're hungry," he said.

"My family," Nathaniel admitted. "We've been starving."

"Little ones?"

"My brother."

The man nodded, his eyes never leaving Nathaniel's face. Nathaniel noticed his nostrils flaring repeatedly, like a hound trying to scent something on the wind. He had a peculiar manner of speaking, like his voice had gone to rust from disuse. It was old, that voice. Nathaniel took a closer look at his face, dodging the hypnotic pull of his unblinking eyes to try to discern how old he might be. At first, Nathaniel thought the man to be around his own age, twenty, or perhaps a bit older. However, the more Nathaniel heard him speak the less certain he became. He had no wrinkles to speak of—though God only knew what was happening under that wild tangle of beard—a fine straight nose, and high, rounded cheeks with a splash of freckles across them that reminded Nathaniel of the spots on a baby deer. The more he looked, the more Nathaniel found his fear bleeding away into a bone deep curiosity. "I'm Nathaniel Stone," he offered. "I live in Myrna."

The other man cocked his head to the side. "I'm called Adair," he said. "I live here."

They stared at each other in tense silence for a bit, and Adair seemed to decide something. He turned to approach the water. He passed by Nathaniel, pausing to sniff the air around his head before moving to the side of the pool. As his head turned, Nathaniel caught a hint of something poking out from his tangle of golden curls. It glinted briefly in the sun before Nathaniel lost sight of it, distracted by the pull of muscles moving below the skin of Adair's sharp, freckled shoulders. He was bare from the waist up, and from the thighs down, that much was certain. However, below the dimples at the base of his spine, slung low around his hips, Adair seemed to be dressed in sunlight. There was simply no other way for Nathaniel to frame it in his mind: Adair wore sunlight, dappled across leaf litter and moss on a forest floor. It blurred and sparkled, shifting around his body as he moved. Nathaniel tried desperately to bring it into sharper focus, but the more he thought about it the less sense it made, like trying to recall a dream. Nathaniel knuckled his eyes, assuming it was some trick of the light, and watched as Adair picked his way gracefully over the roots to the pond's edge.

"Come," he said, without turning around.

Nathaniel hastened to comply, crouching by the water's edge at Adair's side. Adair made a series of noises, dipping his hand into the pool, waving his fingers back and forth, back and forth. Nathaniel wasn't sure what he was supposed to do, so he waited, clutching his net.

"I'm sorry about your sisters," he said, feeling his voice was crass and loud and didn't belong in this place. "I got so ... distracted watching them. It wasn't right."

Adair turned his face, smiling faintly for the first time. He twitched a tanned shoulder up and let it fall. "They are quite beautiful."

Nathaniel blushed. Adair continued humming his quiet music, turning back to stare at the water, moving his hand among the ripples.

“I’m not usually like that,” Nathaniel tried again. “I just forgot myself a bit. You have to know, I wasn’t *hunting* them.”

Adair stilled, turning again to stare at Nathaniel, and this time he showed a true smile, his eyes crinkling up at the sides. He moved one of his hands from the water and reached for Nathaniel. Paralyzed, it didn’t occur to Nathaniel to flinch away as Adair brushed the shaggy black fringe from Nathaniel’s face with tender fingers. “I know, now.” Adair looked at him for a long moment before drawing his hand back. “Please hush. And ready your net.”

The water around Adair’s fingers suddenly churned, teeming with fish. Nathaniel gaped at the sight, before remembering his instructions. He tossed one end of the weighted net down into the water and scooped it up. It was full of flapping fish—enough to give his family a true feast tonight and salt preserve more besides. His mouth fell open, and he turned to stammer his thanks to Adair for his help, but the other man was already retreating back into the trees.

“Wait,” said Nathaniel, straightening up and struggling to maintain his hold on the net. Adair turned back toward him, silent and staring. Nathaniel shifted foot to foot, nervous. “Can I see you again?” He blurted. *Why did I say that?* He’d only meant to say thank you.

“Yes.”

“How—?”

Adair smiled, eyes glowing. “I’ll find you.”

II

Fever Dream

The moon was high over the village of Myrna, but still Nathaniel couldn't sleep. The true smile on his brother's face—the first he'd seen in long weeks—and the warm hug from his mother had only momentarily distracted him from what he'd seen in the forest. Even lying in bed with a full stomach for the first time in a long while, he couldn't think of anything but getting back to that pond, and not for food.

Looking out the window, Nathaniel still wasn't entirely sure he hadn't fallen at some point, striking his head on a rock. A head wound would have explained things quite tidily, and he probed his own skull for the tenth time that night searching for one. No such luck. In attempt to get a grip on himself, Nathaniel pummeled his pillow and rolled over onto his stomach. The fish had certainly been real enough; his mother had let out a shriek of delight when saw him approaching at the back garden with the net full. It would be easier, he decided, if he assumed the rest of it was some sort of hunger-borne fever dream. Resolved to forget everything he'd seen, Nathaniel forced his eyes closed and tried to rest.

Preoccupied minds don't lend well to dreamless sleep, however, and when Nathaniel opened his eyes again he was floating on his back in a pool of warm water. His skin tingled pleasantly from head to toe. It was dead silent, peaceful, until a peal of cruel laughter cut the quiet. Nathaniel sat up with a splash, oddly muffled. Fear coiled tight in his chest as he realized he couldn't identify the source of the laughter. At once it was all around him, filling every inch of empty air. The clearing filled with fog and the noise grew deafening. Nathaniel scrambled to get out of the pond and flee, but the

edge was slippery and he couldn't find purchase on the bank gone slick as glass. Frantic to escape the laughter as it grew and swelled, surrounding him, he clawed at the walls of the little pool. The fog grew thicker, blinding. His foot snagged on something below the surface of the water—a net. Ensnared, naked and dripping, Nathaniel was hauled from the water, bagged up in a fishing net. A pair of green eyes loomed out of the thick fog and a musical male voice added to the chorus of laughter. Nathaniel woke, sweating, a cry on his lips as he fought to extricate himself from the net—no, no, just his sheet. His heart hammered in his chest and he felt as though he could still hear the laughing. It was still dark, but sleep did not come again.



Feeling like he owed it some attention after abandoning it so abruptly earlier, Adair returned to his tree. He climbed up the trunk, giving the bark a grateful pat before sitting down among the branches. Adair pressed his back against one of the thicker boughs, intending to dwell on the strange young man he'd encountered. His parting words rattled around in Adair's mind. "Can I see you again?" He shivered.

Settled happily among the branches, Adair closed his eyes, picturing the young man and peeling apart all of the peculiar things about him. First, he'd found the healing springs. Adair had been certain that was a fae place, warded against humans stumbling across it. Second, his scent. The scent clinging to Nathaniel Stone had done things to Adair that nothing, *nothing*, had ever done to him before. Even the memory of the smell on the air had him simmering in his skin.

It had been a great long while since Adair had fucked anyone, human or fae, and these days he didn't much get the urge, so this feeling took him by surprise. He decided to savor it. The young man who'd called himself Nathaniel Stone would return to the forest, Adair was certain as sunrise. In the intervening hours, he curled up in his tree with images of his beautiful blue eyes and kissable lips to keep him warm.

When he couldn't wait any longer, Adair hopped from the tree and walked the path that would bring him close enough to

the human village of Myrna to find the young man when he returned. There were still several hours before dawn, so Adair hunkered down with his back nestled in the roots of a maple, pulling his knees up under his chin. He was concerned, as well as curious, hoping the fish he'd helped Nathaniel collect would be enough to help his family. Though Adair himself never partook of animal flesh, he understood that humans were a different sort, with different needs. He'd apologized to the fish, but ultimately felt that Nathaniel had been deserving of his help. The more Adair had smelled him, the more certain he'd been that the young man could be trusted, that he wasn't hunting anything except a good hot meal. Adair couldn't place his finger on it, but he'd smelled ... innocent. Honest. Someone so beautiful and sweet shouldn't be made to suffer, Adair had thought.

He could always get them more fish if need be. The waters had plenty to offer. Adair chewed his lip, uncertain. Should he go now and fetch some? No, perhaps that would be presumptuous. His courtesies had grown worn after long decades of avoiding humans, and suddenly Adair was nervous that he'd say the wrong thing and send Nathaniel Stone running from the trees never to return. He'd simply have to learn, learn what Nathaniel might want of him, and deliver it. That's the way it went, with humans. They came to the forest with a need. Adair filled it.

So, with a pleasurable anxiety squirming in his belly, he waited.



The following morning, Nathaniel rose with the dawn to find his mother scaling fish in the kitchen.

“Morning, Mama,” he said, kissing her cheek and trying to stifle a yawn.

She was not fooled. “Didn't you sleep last night, love?”

Nathaniel filled the kettle and set it to heat for some tea. “Strange dreams,” he said evasively. His mother smiled at him, up to her elbows in scales.

“I’m going to get these salted this morning,” she said. “Could you bring me some firewood? I want to let your brother sleep a while.”

His brother, Thomas, had indeed seemed peaceful when Nathaniel looked in on him on his way to the kitchen. Thomas was twelve, and small for his age. He favored the boys’ mother, Moira, who was quite petite. They shared the same dark chestnut hair and warm brown eyes. Moira often said Nathaniel looked just like their father, tall and slim. The thought soured Nathaniel’s smile as quick as it had emerged. He blew on his steaming mug and made his way to the back door of the kitchen. Pausing, Nathaniel ran his fingers over the tiny, intricate carvings that decorated the beams of the door frame. Vines and leaves, etched deep into the wood, carved by his father years and years ago, never failed to make Nathaniel’s heart ache. As the door swung shut behind him, Nathaniel heard his mother release a wet, hacking cough that she’d clearly been holding back.

His father Ezra had been dead and gone for eight years now, having passed when Nathaniel was around his brother’s age, and things had begun to deteriorate for the family after that. Nathaniel’s thoughts now clouded with worry of his mother’s health and the memory of his grief. He reflected angrily on his own failings in the years since his father’s passing. They’d never been wealthy; no one in Myrna was wealthy. They had a modest amount of land, though, plenty enough to keep a family of four well fed. Season by season however, without his father, the crops had begun to fail. It was almost like they knew he was gone—the crops knew the man who had loved them, cared for them, was gone. Nathaniel and his mother did their best, but she had her hands full with a young child and Nathaniel had still been half a boy. By the time he’d gotten the hang of tending the land, there was barely enough to feed them during the growing season, let alone to preserve for winter. It had gotten worse, year by year.

As Nathaniel walked toward the lean-to that covered the Stone family’s wood stores, he noted the neighbors on either side were stirring. A few waved, but Nathaniel kept his head down, eyes on his feet. He often felt wrong footed and

anxious, tripping over his words and his feet alike whenever he tried to talk to the other townsfolk, so most times he simply avoided them.

When he reached the woodpile, he found it quite depleted. This sent a strange thrill swooping through Nathaniel's stomach. He'd have to return to the forest and fell some more trees. After telling his mother where he'd be going, Nathaniel pulled the family's sledge behind him, struggling a bit with its weight even when empty. As he crossed the tree line, Nathaniel buzzed with anxiety. He hauled the sledge toward the copse of trees from which he usually chopped firewood. He reached it well before the border stone, and after a moment's hesitation, left both behind him. It looked to be a snow sky, and if the weather took a turn for the worse, it would be better to leave the trees closer to the house. Or so he told himself.

Nathaniel walked on, heaving the sledge, squinting into the forest. Every squirrel darting up a tree, every branch finally cracking under the weight of accumulated snow, every flash of movement found him twisting his head to peer into the trees. He saw nothing out of the ordinary. Nathaniel honestly could not work out if he were relieved or disappointed. Finally, he had to give up this thin pretext—if he walked much further he wouldn't be able to haul the trees home before dark.

Nathaniel sighed, hefting his axe. He swung it back over his shoulder, ready to vent his frustration—at what, he wasn't too certain—by hammering the blade deep into a nearby tree.

“Did the little one eat?”

Nathaniel was already mid-swing, and startled, he overbalanced and fell into the snow. The axe went spinning out of his hands and he hit the ground. Rolling over, he squinted up into the bright sunlight to see Adair, who was blinking his big round eyes and waiting for an answer.

“You—you found me.”

Adair nodded and tilted his head to peer dreamily up at the tree. After a beat, he looked down at Nathaniel, still flat on his ass in the snow. “I told you I would.”

“Yes, but why?”

Adair shrugged one tawny shoulder. “You intrigue me.”

Nathaniel struggled to conceal a smile; those three little words filled him with bubbling warmth. “Oh,” he said. *Profound*, he cursed himself. He got awkwardly to his feet.

“Did the little one eat?” Adair repeated, wiry brows knit with concern.

“Yes,” said Nathaniel. “Thank you.”

Adair nodded. He seemed perfectly at home in the silence, happy to stare at Nathaniel with those eerie green eyes of his. Well, if Nathaniel were being honest, he didn’t hate staring at Adair, either. “I dreamt of you,” he said before he could stop himself.

Adair’s grin was positively wolfish, his teeth startling white. “A good dream?” He took a few steps closer, and Nathaniel was struck by how tall he really was—at least a head taller than Nathaniel himself. Adair stepped quietly, circling around him.

“Actually, no,” Nathaniel said. “A frightening one.” Though he was frightened now, too, he resisted the urge to turn, to follow Adair with his eyes. He felt hot breath on his neck, just below the lobe of his ear. Insistent. The soft current of air on the tiny patch of exposed skin below his hairline startled him. “Are you ... sniffing me?”

“You smell lovely,” came the rumbling reply. “And as I said, you intrigue me.”

Elated to have drawn a longer sentence out of this strange man, Nathaniel asked, “Why?”

“Humans can’t usually find the place we met.” Adair returned to square off in front of Nathaniel, eyes boring into his face. He stepped closer, and the fog of their breath joined to form a cloud between them on the chilly air. Nathaniel watched, wide eyed, as Adair’s nostrils expanded repeatedly, flaring as he inhaled Nathaniel’s scent.

“So,” Nathaniel prompted, his fears at least partially confirmed. “You’re not human, then?”

“No,” said Adair, seeming unconcerned to reveal this information. He stooped down abruptly, pushing his nose against Nathaniel’s jawline, nudging up toward his ear, breathing deep. Nathaniel squeezed his eyes shut, trembling, half convinced he was about to have his throat torn out. If that were the case, Nathaniel didn’t want to die without following his first impulse upon meeting this peculiar person, so he threaded shaking hands through Adair’s soft mane of curls.

His fingertips brushed up against something hard. Frowning, Nathaniel opened his eyes. He pushed away a thick lock of hair above Adair’s right temple and gasped. A small, sharp horn pushed up through his scalp, curved at the end like a goat’s. Nathaniel moved his left hand, finding the horn’s mate. He brushed his thumbs over them; they were smooth and firm, warm like stones laid in the sun for hours. Adair closed his eyes with a satisfied hum, nuzzling into Nathaniel’s touch.

Nathaniel’s breath caught in his throat. Dropping his hands to his sides, he backed away one step at a time. “Erm,” he said, moving a few more paces. Without another word, he turned and fled.

Nathaniel didn’t stop until he saw the border stone in the distance. It wasn’t until he reached it, clutching a stitch in his side, that he realized he’d left his axe and sledge behind. Feeling a fool, Nathaniel squinted back through the trees, half hoping Adair had followed him.

He hadn’t.

Well, now he’d gone and done it—not only was he clearly mad, he’d gone and alienated his own hallucination somehow. Plainly, Nathaniel wasn’t meant to get along with anyone, including the figments of his own imagination. His cheeks flushed with shame, knowing he’d be heading home quite literally empty handed, with no firewood and the tools now missing as well. He expected an earful from his mother. The kitchen was quiet, however, the hearth cold. Thomas sat alone at the table, hands clutched tight around a clay cup. He looked

up when Nathaniel entered, eyes miserable. All else was whipped from Nathaniel's mind, and without hesitation he went to his brother, crouching beside his chair. "What is it?"

"It's Mama," said Thomas. "She took a coughing fit and collapsed."

Nathaniel wrapped him in a tight hug.

"I couldn't find you," Thomas said into the front of Nathaniel's shirt. "And I didn't want to leave her."

"I'm so sorry. I'm here now."

"I got her to bed, gave her some tea ... she keeps saying she's cold."

Nathaniel pulled away, covering his face with his hands.

"Did—did you get the firewood?"

"There were wolves." Nathaniel choked on the lie. "I'll go out again first thing."

Together, the brothers covered their mother with every blanket in the house, and Nathaniel spent another sleepless night—this time by her bedside. Her breathing was weak, constantly disrupted by a persistent wheeze or a wet, wracking cough. He stroked her hand and rested the back of his own against her forehead, checking for fever. It was well before dawn that he knew he'd have to return to the wood, filled this time with dread in place of thrumming anticipation. Snow fell in thick flurries as he walked with his arms wrapped tight around himself. He simply *had* to find the sledge, the axe. He couldn't let them freeze. The stars still shone above the trees, and the air was harsh and cruel, but still he walked on.

III

Iron Gall

Adair's reflection stared back at him from the surface of the water, an echo of his current surly demeanor. His affair with Nathaniel Stone was over before it had even begun. As soon as the young man had laid his hands on Adair's horns, he'd fled. He'd even left his tools behind in his haste to put distance between them. Adair watched his frown deepen on the surface of the water, probing the growths on his head with his own long fingers.

This turn of events had him flummoxed, though to be sure, humans were reliably complicated. Adair had come to know this over the long years of his life. Learning the desires of their hearts was an intrinsic part of his courtship of them; they always came to the forest for *something*. In his experience, Adair had found that "something" was usually a good hard fuck—which he was always happy to give. Their want ignited a sense in him, and he could track them through the trees. When he appeared to them, it was like he was answering a call in their hearts. A woman fleeing an unhappy marriage; a man who felt there must be more to the world of pleasure than he'd experienced; two friends afraid to transform into lovers—they wanted it. Wanted *him*. For a little while, anyway. Once he satisfied the curiosities of their flesh, they were gone. That was the problem with humans: they were flighty, selfish, and never failed to break Adair's heart.

After his last bout with humanity had ended, he'd sworn off them entirely, ignoring the pull behind his navel whenever it came along. Ignoring the pull was difficult, painful even. It left him with an ache in the pit of his stomach and a feeling of yearning he couldn't satisfy on his own no matter how hard he

tried. Over time, though, he had come to find the solitude easier. The ache in his belly would eventually fade, far quicker than the hollow emptiness he invariably felt after being used up and discarded. Each time he ignored an amorous human in the forest, he felt better and better about his decision to do so. Never mind the fact that of late, humans had grown more—well, they might use the word “civilized” but Adair would use the word “fearful.” They stayed within the border of their little settlements and lost whatever had once made them hunger for the touch of wild things.

Enter, Nathaniel Stone. He was fearful, certainly, but he’d also wanted something from the forest. Everything about their encounter had been bumpy, different. Adair hadn’t tracked his desire through the trees—at least, not in his usual way. He hadn’t the faintest idea what he would find when he first followed Nathaniel’s tantalizing scent through the trees. Nathaniel’s desire, of course, had been to provide for his hungry family, and encountering Adair had been a complete surprise—but he was sweet, innocent, and beautiful. The gaunt lines of his face, the haunted look in his striking blue eyes, all of it captivated Adair. And, of course, his *scent*. He’d thought of little else since their meeting. All of it made Adair feel like he was waking from a long, cold, lonely sleep. Yet, to his immense dismay, the boy was repulsed by him. Adair scowled. The other humans he had loved over the years had tolerated his otherness. It seemed almost like a game to them, a conquest. Not everyone could claim to have lain with a fae prince, after all—and considering his knowledge of their desires, he never failed to leave them *well* satisfied.

Nathaniel Stone, on the other hand, had balked at the sight of Adair’s horns. This bald rejection stung like nothing else, especially considering Nathaniel had let Adair get so close, had even touched him with his strong but nervous fingers.

Adair splashed his feet into the center of his reflection, hardening his resolve. He simply had to get another chance. Surely, Nathaniel would return to retrieve his tools, and Adair could try again.

“Little One.”

Adair looked up from the water to see his mother coming through the trees, and was in equal parts happy and embarrassed. It was hard to let oneself feel a child after several long centuries, yet sometimes he welcomed it, as now. She had always called him Little One, though at his current height he overtopped her by nearly two feet.

“Mother.”

Gliona, the Aster Queen, ruler of all the fae folk, approached her son wearing a soft smile. “I hate to see you so forlorn,” she said. “What causes you to frown so?”

Adair smiled in spite of himself. “It’s nothing, truly.”

She sat beside him at the water’s edge, and Adair loved to see her queenly demeanor fall—if only for a little while. Gliona hiked her gown up past her knees and swung her feet in the water, carefree as a young girl. She looped her arm through Adair’s and rested her head upon his shoulder. “Your sisters worry about you. Something about a human boy?”

“They talk too much,” said Adair moodily. Erne, Slaney and Brosna had pestered him for details about Nathaniel—you’d never know the boy had scared them out of their wits the day he caught them bathing.

“True. But if someone has hurt you, I would know of it.”

Adair considered for a moment. “It’s ... a different sort of melancholy,” Adair told her. “Something new, something thrilling, but it went poorly. I’m hoping for a successful second attempt.”

His mother smiled at him, brushing errant curls from his face to look in his eyes. “Then I shall indulge your maudlin ways without too much worry.” She stood again. “And I’ll tell your sisters to mind their business.”

Adair grinned.

It started to snow that evening as Adair waited beside Nathaniel’s abandoned axe and sledge. The moon climbed higher and his hopes fell lower. Still, he waited, standing occasionally to dust the snow from the tools. It was just before dawn, when Adair was finally about to give up, that the

muffled footfalls told him the boy had returned, and the clearing was filled with Nathaniel's scent.

"You came back," Adair said, trying to rein in the eager timbre of his voice. He looked at Nathaniel, every bit as lovely in the moonlight as he had been in the daytime. Nathaniel barely reacted to Adair's presence this time; he simply stood there, shivering.

"I'm sorry I ran," he said finally, and Adair's heart sang to hear it—excepting that Nathaniel's pretty face was clouded, distracted.

"Something is upsetting you," said Adair with a frown, cocking his head to the side.

"It's my mother. She's ill—a cough. She can't shake it."

Adair couldn't help the smile tugging up at the corners of his mouth. This was something he could fix. "Come," he said, offering his hand. Nathaniel Stone accepted it without hesitation, and Adair wrapped his long fingers around Nathaniel's icy ones, elated to be touching. He led Nathaniel to a place where he knew certain flowers grew. Under the moon the pale blooms seemed to glow silver. "Dig these," he said pointing. "Make a broth from the roots, and a pinch of pepper if you have it."

Nathaniel glanced over his shoulder, back the way they'd come. "But—firewood, the house is so cold."

Adair shook his head, pointing at the flowers again. "Those first."

When he dropped Nathaniel's hand so he could crouch to dig the roots, he backed off a few steps. He was scared to push, to presume too much, so he stood to the side, watching Nathaniel's shoulders move beneath the fabric of his jacket as he clawed at the cold ground. The young man turned, looking over his shoulder at Adair.

"Don't go," he said.

"Alright."

Nathaniel stood, hesitant, and closed the distance between them. Adair did his best to remain still as he came closer. “Why are you helping me?”

Adair twitched his shoulder up. “I like to. And ...” his voice dropped to a shy whisper. “I’d like you to trust me.”

Nathaniel reached for his hand again. “I do,” he said, voice quiet and determined like he’d just made up his mind. Adair scrunched up his toes, suddenly hot all over. He couldn’t quite stifle the happy little hum that came out between his lips. Nathaniel brushed his thumb softly over Adair’s knuckles.

“You should get those home to your mother.”

With a parting squeeze of Adair’s fingers, Nathaniel nodded. He gathered the roots to his chest and took off through the trees.



Nathaniel spent three days coaxing broth down his mother’s throat, and each day saw her feeling more well. The morning after the first day, Nathaniel was surprised to find the sledge had mysteriously returned to the edge of the Stone family’s land, full of neatly chopped logs with their axe resting on top. Smiling, Nathaniel brushed his fingers over the axe handle, around which someone had braided the stems of purple aster flowers. He hauled the sledge back up toward the house, feeling a blush creep up his cheeks. Once inside, he pressed the flowers between the pages of a book and slid it under his pillow.

Soon, Nathaniel had a roaring fire going in the hearth. He allowed himself a moment to bask in the warmth, filling the house and his heart. He held his palms close to the flames, savoring the slight sting of the heat on his skin. He set about preparing another batch of broth as the fire crackled merrily. Thinking they’d have something as luxuriant as pepper in the house was laughable, but Nathaniel had a sudden thought.

The Stones’ closest neighbors, the Bells, had a young daughter. She was also plagued by coughing fits, chronic spasms wracking her tiny body all year, not just in the winter.

Nathaniel looked down at the pot of bubbling water, churning with chopped roots, considering his options.

Chewing his tongue, he called Thomas to keep an eye on the fire and took his jacket from the peg by the door. Nervous, Nathaniel marched across his own land and directly up to the Bells' front door. He couldn't remember the last time he'd willingly sought out a conversation with his neighbors—if he ever had. Before he could lose his nerve, Nathaniel raised his knuckles and rapped against the wood.

“A moment!” A voice called.

Nathaniel waited, twisting his hat in his hands. The door opened and Mrs. Bell emerged, dusting flour covered hands on her apron.

“Nathaniel!” She sounded surprised. “What brings you out in the snow? Is everything alright?”

“I've been working on a special broth,” he said without preamble. “For my mother. She's taken ill with a cough. It's helping, but I know it would work better with a pinch of pepper.”

Mrs. Bell frowned, her hand going to rest on the head of a small blonde girl who'd materialized at her side.

“I was thinking,” Nathaniel went on, speaking to his shoes, “perhaps if you had some pepper I could give you some of the finished broth.”

“For Niamh?”

Nathaniel looked up and nodded, chewing on his tongue as he waited for an answer.

Mrs. Bell glanced down at her daughter, brow creased. “We've tried everything,” she said quietly. “Spent all our extra coin on different medicines. Nothing's helped her.”

It was almost as if a stranger had taken control of Nathaniel's mouth when he responded. “This will.”

She looked taken aback by the forcefulness of his assurances. As he said them, though, he knew somehow that they were true. With a curious look on her face, Mrs. Bell

retreated back into the house, her daughter stumbling behind her, little hands fisted in her mother's skirts.

Nathaniel stood awkwardly on the threshold, straining to hear. He heard Niamh coughing in the kitchen, Mrs. Bell clucking over her, soothing whispers the words of which did not reach Nathaniel's ears. She returned, pressing a small tin to Nathaniel's palm.

"I hope you're right about this," she said, giving his hand a squeeze as she passed him the tin.

He flinched from the touch, but held her earnest gaze and said, "I am."

On the fourth day after Nathaniel had returned from the forest with Adair's roots, he was confident enough in his mother's healing that he could entrust her care to his brother. The broth worked wonders. In fact, Mrs. Bell had come over to the Stones' house with a basket of fresh baked rolls and thrown her arms around Nathaniel's neck. Her daughter had never seemed better, she said. Startled, Nathaniel promised to continue making the broth for them, and the poor woman nearly broke down in tears. Nathaniel patted her back awkwardly, unused to such unrestrained affection. "Happy to help," he told her, and found as he said it that it was the truth.

When he'd first returned to the house from the woods to see his mother's pale face, hear her weak breathing like a death rattle, all lingering thoughts of Adair had fallen from Nathaniel's mind. On the fourth day, however, Moira had sat up to accept the bowl of broth and drink it herself, smiling a bright but tired smile. Then, Nathaniel had felt secure enough to daydream. A lot. His mind filled with golden hair catching the sun, tanned skin and wide green eyes. Whoever Adair was, Nathaniel felt something between them—something magnetic, frightening, and urgent. He sincerely hoped he wasn't the only one who felt it.

With the weight of his mother's health lifted temporarily from his shoulders, Nathaniel found himself with a morning of leisure time. As was his custom, he walked the perimeter of the family's land, nudging the fence posts with his foot to

check their structural integrity, keeping an eye out for any needed repairs. When he'd circumnavigated the property in its entirety, Nathaniel set off up the lane to the same place he always went when he felt troubled.

Walking in the town, Nathaniel kept his eyes on his shoes, hands deep in his pockets, allowing his feet to take him to the doorstep of Iron Gall, the bookshop.

"Morning, lad!"

Nathaniel couldn't help the slow smile that pulled across his face. The owner of Iron Gall, Rory, had always been kind to him. After his father had died, and Nathaniel's mother had been lost to grief for some time, the ruddy-faced, potbellied bookseller had offered a safe haven for Nathaniel. He never complained that Nathaniel sat and flipped through the books for hours without making a purchase, though the man was none too rich himself. Rory had even taught Nathaniel his letters, and Thomas after him. Nathaniel always came here to curl up with a book whenever he was feeling lonely or distressed. He'd spend half his life reading if he had the time, but it had been long weeks since he could justify escaping to the worlds between their pages.

"Morning, Rory."

"You searching out anything particular today?"

"No," Nathaniel lied. "Just haven't been here in a while."

Rory's smile faded. "Aye," he said. "I was a day or two away from stopping by to check on you lot. How's your mother?"

Gossip flew fast in such a tiny hamlet. Nathaniel flushed. He hated feeling like he couldn't manage things for his family. "She's feeling much better actually."

"Oh?"

Then, because he was accustomed to speaking his mind in this place, Nathaniel said. "I found some roots in the forest that make a very potent broth."

Rory frowned. “Can’t say I like the notion of you going alone too deep into those trees, Nathaniel.”

“I didn’t have much of a choice, did I?”

“No, I suppose not,” Rory said with a sigh. “I worry, though. You’re no woodsman, lad, if you don’t mind my saying so. There’s wolves and worse things in there.”

Nathaniel shivered, and tried to pass it off as a stretch of his shoulders. “Well, I came out in one piece.”

“That’s all that matters, I suppose.” Rory smiled again and clapped Nathaniel on the shoulder, but his eyes remained crinkled in thinly veiled concern.

When Rory left him to it, Nathaniel meandered through the shelves, taking a few volumes at random, stacking them in his arms to disguise his true intent. Only then did he seek out the books for which he was truly searching. Once he found what he was after, he brought the lot of them back to the rear of the shop and set them on a rough-hewn wooden table.

The first volume he cracked open was entitled *The Faire Folk*. Nathaniel skimmed through the pages, looking at the illustrations, trying to find something to help him. He passed over changelings, sprites, tales of kelpies and the púca, satyrs and all manner of things. None of the drawings resembled Adair, nor his sisters, whatsoever. He pulled the next book, *The Bestiary*, toward himself. This one was frightening; the tales and illustrations contained within were grotesque and violent. Nathaniel’s stomach clenched, and he shut the book quickly, pushing it away. Everything about those stories seemed wrong; they didn’t compute with the gentle stranger he’d encountered.

The pile of books around Nathaniel grew, and as he replaced the discarded volumes on the shelves he found more to investigate. He read until his eyes burned and his fingers shook, but still found nothing. At some point, a clay cup of hot soup appeared at his elbow. He sipped from it absently and continued to read.

Some long hours later, Nathaniel startled, coming to with a shiver and a fearsome ache in his spine. His face stuck to the vellum of a book, and Rory had placed a thin blanket around his shoulders. The room was dark, his candle burned down to a smoking nub, and he had no idea the hour. Nathaniel stretched and stood.

This was far from the first time he'd fallen asleep at Iron Gall. Nathaniel rolled his aching shoulders and folded Rory's blanket to tuck neatly in a basket by the long-cold hearth. He slid each volume back in its proper home and reached below the till to find the spare key for the front door. Rory would have long since retired to his apartments above the shop. After tucking the key up above the door jam, Nathaniel set off for home, annoyed that his search hadn't borne any definitive fruit.

The following morning, Nathaniel ventured back into the forest. As he walked through the trees, hardly hesitating at the border stone this time, actually faced with the prospect of encountering Adair again, Nathaniel felt like he was losing his nerve. If he were being honest, he also felt a little foolish.

Absent any answers from the books, Nathaniel had worked out three theories regarding the nature of his fascinating new acquaintance and his beguiling sisters. First, they could be demons. The thought had crossed Nathaniel's mind more than once, causing his guts to clench horribly, considering he'd unwittingly fed his mother—not to mention an innocent little girl—a mysterious brew at Adair's request.

His second theory, the one that had been niggling at the back of his brain since their first meeting, was that he'd truly lost his wits. He'd seen drunks and madmen raving in the town square before, screaming at things only they could see. Nathaniel reasoned he could quite well have caught some sort of malign humor, an affliction of the mind, and that Adair and his sisters were simply manifestations of his own dark delusions.

Nathaniel wasn't sure which of those two theories scared him more.

His final notion was not frightening but merely mundane, making it the most depressing of the three. He had a vague suspicion that this was all some elaborate lark pulled off by someone in a neighboring village. Perhaps someone who lived to torment gullible fools. Like Nathaniel. Cursing himself, Nathaniel allowed his feet to lead him where they would, assuming Adair would find him eventually.

“You came.” Adair’s musical voice made Nathaniel’s heart swell even as he jumped, startled.

“I had to thank you.”

“The broth worked?”

Nathaniel nodded, his face breaking into a grin. He couldn’t help it. “Like magic.”

Adair’s lip twitched, eyes shining. The two stood facing each other, and Nathaniel slowly approached Adair, who stood frozen like a frightened deer. Swallowing his own nerves, Nathaniel reached his hands up to Adair’s head, who flinched away from his touch, seizing Nathaniel’s wrists.

“Don’t,” Adair said, his voice quiet and fearful.

Nathaniel couldn’t help notice the heat present in the strong fingers wrapped around his wrists. “Why not?” Adair had seemed so eager to touch, before.

“I don’t want you to run again.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

Adair hesitated for several beats. Finally, he nodded, releasing Nathaniel’s hands.

For the second time, Nathaniel pushed his hands into the shining golden fluff on Adair’s head, marveling at the silken curls, so soft between his fingers. Adair blinked dolefully at him through thick lashes, still wary. His hands fell to his sides, twitching, as Nathaniel’s probing fingers finally found his horns. Nathaniel stroked up and down them with his fingertips, testing the sharp little points, touching where they protruded from his scalp. Adair shivered, and a small huff escaped his

lips. Nathaniel smiled, pressing his palms against the horns, their warmth radiating into his cold hands.

“How are you so warm? You’re barely wearing anything.”

Adair let one of his shoulders rise and fall, a gesture he seemed to favor. He smiled down at his feet. “Perhaps your hands are just cold.”

Nathaniel lowered his hands. He moved back a step, taking in Adair from head to toe, happy for the chance to admire.

Adair raised one of his brows. “What?”

“What, what?”

“What are you staring at?”

“Oh.” Nathaniel blushed. “I’m trying to figure out what you’re wearing. I’ve wondered since we first met.”

Nathaniel could have sworn he detected a flare of pink beneath Adair’s freckles. He reached again for Nathaniel’s wrist, and Nathaniel couldn’t deny that it gave him a little thrill the way Adair’s fingers wrapped around it entirely. Eyes bold, with a wicked grin, Adair tugged Nathaniel’s hand down toward his own thigh. “You can touch,” he said.

It was a scant three inches of air but Nathaniel felt he was trying to move his fingers a mile. Eventually, he bumped up against something—not leather, nor cloth, nor (as he’d half expected) leaves, but the bare warm flesh of Adair’s thigh. A tiny gasp slipped out between Nathaniel’s lips and he felt his cheeks burning. Nathaniel stared in awe as the tips of his fingers vanished from sight, like he was probing into some sort of opaque, swirling fog. He yanked his hand back as if scalded, clutching it to his chest. He looked up into Adair’s face, still unable to call words to mind for what he was seeing.

“It’s called a glamour,” Adair said. “A trick to the eye. I can conjure it up if I’m feeling modest.”

His smile now was anything but. Nathaniel, speechless, extended his hand again, swiping through the foggy enchantment, trying to grab something in his fingers.

“I find I don’t have much use for clothes,” Adair said. He reached out to pluck at the collar of Nathaniel’s shirt, his fingertips whispering down the side of Nathaniel’s neck, but he shied away from the touch.

He swallowed, his fears all but confirmed. “It’s true then,” he breathed.

“What’s true?”

“You’re—you’re a demon!”

Adair frowned for a split second before throwing his head back, a laugh like thunder exploding out of his mouth. He leaned back, clutching his belly, laughing long and loud and wild. Each time he began to calm himself, he’d catch Nathaniel’s eye and boil over with fresh mirth. “D-demon,” he wheezed, brushing a tear away from his eye and gasping for breath.

“Well?” Nathaniel said, annoyed. “What’s funny?”

“I’m sorry—I’m sorry.” Adair struggled to regain his aloof, ethereal demeanor, a challenge since he was still nearly breathless from laughter. “What made you think I was a demon?”

“I don’t know, your skin is hot ... you can conjure glammers.” He pointed to Adair’s shiny horns, glinting in the sun. Now that he could see them properly, they appeared inlaid with whorls of gold. “Those.”

Adair’s fingers went to his horns like he’d forgotten they were there. “Ah.”

“If you’re not a demon, what are you?” He asked aggressively. Nathaniel had been wanting to ask that question all along of course, but he’d planned on asking it in a much more diplomatic fashion.

Adair stilled. “A faun. Haven’t you ever heard tales of the fae folk before?”

“Of course I have, but they’re just that. Tales.”

“So, you’ll believe in demons but you won’t believe in fauns, even though one is staring right before you?”

Nathaniel frowned. He looked from Adair's dirty bare feet to the tips of his horns, eyeing him critically. "You don't look like any faun I've ever seen."

Adair scoffed. "And how many have you seen, exactly?"

"In books," said Nathaniel, defensive, "loads."

"Uh-huh."

"I'm serious—I thought you were supposed to have, you know," he paused, gesturing to Adair's lower body.

"What?"

"Goats' legs? Hooves? I don't know!"

Adair roared with fresh laughter, doubling over to brace his hands on his knees. Nathaniel felt that if he blushed any further, his head would catch fire. The pleasant tension of the previous moments, which had Nathaniel's pulse thrumming with anticipation, had evaporated like a summer storm. Now, he just felt wrong footed and awkward. Embarrassed, he turned away and shoved his hands in his pockets.

"Come, now," Adair said, recovering himself. He wrapped his fingers around Nathaniel's elbow to give it a squeeze. "Would you care to take a walk?"

IV

The Entire Forest

With each day that passed, Nathaniel spent more and more time in the woods. He found Adair's presence addictive, not least because the faun showed him wonders he'd never known were so close at hand. When Nathaniel explained how well the broth had worked on his moulder's cough, he glowed with pure elation at being able to help. As such, Adair had eagerly shown Nathaniel more plants he could use to brew remedies. Nathaniel took to the practice well, earning much needed coin for his family by trading with the neighbors. It also gave Nathaniel a perfectly legitimate excuse to spend all his spare time in the forest.

Adair continued to guide him through the forest that bordered the village of Myrna, pointing out glades and rivers and quiet little hilltops that Nathaniel had never seen. They walked hand in hand through the trees, trading shy glances and small smiles, stories and questions. Sometimes they shared sweet silences that lasted for hours, listening to birdsong and the scurry of creatures on the forest floor. The forest was far more vast than Nathaniel had ever imagined, and far more beautiful. He could almost laugh at the way the villagers thought it so dangerous. With Adair at his side, Nathaniel felt lighter, safer, more carefree than he'd felt since he was a boy.

However, Nathaniel still found Adair a bit unnerving. He moved suddenly, like an animal, and he could travel through the forest absent any noise at all, often scaring Nathaniel out of his wits when he stepped out from behind a tree to greet him. Adair *loved* touching him—innocent lingering touches on the back of his hand, his neck, the small of his back—and didn't often ask before doing so. It was unlike anything

Nathaniel had ever known; Adair's fingertips brushing across his skin had him flinching and blushing, always on edge. He found he couldn't get enough. Nathaniel wasn't sure what was happening between them, afraid that if he asked it would break the spell.

"Come along," Adair called. He crouched on an outcrop of rock above Nathaniel's head.

Nathaniel huffed, sweat beading on his forehead. When he'd suggested to Adair that he wished to see the entire forest, the faun apparently assumed he'd meant "at once." So, the pair found themselves climbing higher and higher on a path leading up a staggering ridge. Nathaniel had seen the mountains from the village before, but never come anywhere close to them—let alone had the courage to climb them.

Adair hopped easily from stone to stone, nimble as a mountain goat. His bare toes seemed made to grip the tiniest footholds, leaving Nathaniel puffing and panting and scrabbling ungracefully behind him. Adair moved on instinct, hardly pausing as he propelled himself up the side of the cliff, never needing to think where he placed his feet. Nathaniel, on the other hand, found himself repeatedly frozen in fear, in indecision. Cold, nervous sweat slicked up his palms, slipping between the rock and his fingers to render his hands untrustworthy. He second guessed every placement of his feet. To Nathaniel's estimation, they were about halfway up. From here, he could only guess because the last time he'd looked down he'd felt the immediate urge to vomit, cry, or both. He wasn't about to look down again. So, he hugged the stone, cursed his guide, and soldiered on.

Every so often they'd emerge onto a crest, some sort of plateau where Nathaniel could stretch his aching limbs and catch his breath. But, Adair was relentless and in short order would set off again up the ridge. Nathaniel allowed himself to admire the faun as he climbed: the muscles in his shoulders, the spread of his ribs under his skin as he moved his arm to grasp a handhold. Adair's legs seemed endless like this, long and tanned as he stretched to his full length, his entire body mostly bare and covered in a glistening sheen of sweat.

Nathaniel tried to focus on his task, difficult with such a view—especially when Adair would cock his head, peep over his shoulder with a smile, and ask if Nathaniel was alright. As Adair returned his attentions to the climb, Nathaniel’s eyes pulled up the impossible length of Adair’s thighs—the glamour he wore around his waist dazzling and shifting under the direct light of the sun. Nathaniel couldn’t help but detect a hint of flesh below the layers of enchantment, and his mouth ran dry. With a gasp, he missed a handhold, fingers scraping uselessly against the rock, grabbing nothing. Nathaniel shut his eyes, certain he was about to fall and snap his neck, but a hand shot down from above and grabbed him by the collar. Adair hauled him up, and Nathaniel sprawled on his back, dazed, nothing above him but sky.

The faun crouched by his head. “You alright?”

Nathaniel could only nod, covering his eyes with a shaking hand. Adair helped him to his feet. “Now what?” Nathaniel asked, embarrassed by the quiver in his voice.

In answer, Adair laid his big hands on Nathaniel’s waist and turned his body toward the cliff. He didn’t move his hands away, merely standing behind Nathaniel in silence.

“What’re we—“

“*Shh*,” Adair said, giving Nathaniel’s hips a little squeeze.

Nathaniel’s stomach lurched, having nothing at all to do with the dizzying height. They stood in a buzzing sort of quiet, and Nathaniel looked out over the world he’d known his entire life that suddenly seemed so foreign.

Here, now, with Adair’s hands on his body, it was easy to imagine the whole forest teeming with mystery. From this height it seemed to conceal a whole other universe. Nathaniel could just see the tree line to the south, knowing in that direction laid the village. The silence continued, and with the sun’s passage to the west, Adair’s reason for climbing the ridge became clear.

The first prelude to sunset, no colors in the sky but dazzling flaming gold, made the breath hitch in Nathaniel’s throat. The

sunlight flowed over the trees like molten fire. He turned up to look at Adair, upon whom the setting sun had nothing, especially with the light shining on his horns, his hair, his glittering eyes. Adair was born to be seen in this light.

“What do you think?”

Nathaniel swallowed, searching for the right words. “Definitely worth almost dying,” he blurted, and Adair laughed.

Tightening his hands on Nathaniel’s waist, Adair leaned down, eyes fluttering closed. Nervous, Nathaniel cast his eyes away at the last moment, back toward the sunset. He felt Adair’s lips connect softly with the top of his head, and his face burned. The bald desire on Adair’s face made Nathaniel anxious; he knew what it meant, though no one had ever, *ever* looked at him like that. Nathaniel wasn’t ready to meet him there just yet, but he didn’t want to pull away either, so instead he leaned back against Adair’s chest and the faun rested his chin on the crown of Nathaniel’s head, sliding his arms around Nathaniel’s middle. They watched the sun set in its entirety, the gold bleeding into pinks, oranges and purples as the evening mist rolled in around the trees, luxuriant as tobacco smoke.

No more words passed between them until the stars winked to life overhead. “Thank you,” Nathaniel whispered, and Adair hummed in reply.

They stood for a few more moments before Nathaniel slid out of Adair’s arms with a frown, struck by a sudden realization. “There’s no way in hell I can make that climb in the dark.”

Adair gave him a sly smile, wicked in the deepening twilight. He shrugged a shoulder. “I can carry you.”

“What? You can?”

Adair laughed. “Easily.”

Nathaniel shoved him. “So you just enjoyed watching me struggle my way up here?”

“A bit.”

“You ass,” he said, trying not to grin and failing.

Adair moved close again, his face growing a touch more serious. With a crooked finger, he nudged Nathaniel’s chin up to look into his eyes. “Besides, sometimes a thing is all the sweeter for the labor exerted.”

Nathaniel couldn’t help giving the faun a little eye roll, but his insides squirmed with pleasure. Adair crouched beside him. “Hop on.”

He looped his arms around Adair’s neck, and the faun hoisted him up onto his back. As he clung there, Nathaniel brushed a tentative kiss to the skin beside Adair’s ear. “Don’t drop me.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

When they reached solid ground, Adair set Nathaniel on his feet and backed off a step. “So,” he said.

“Yes?”

“It was your wish to see the entire forest was it not?”

“It was.”

“Well, with your wish granted, what now?” Adair gave him a long, searching look.

Nathaniel looked up at the sky, glancing sidelong at Adair and then back up at the stars. “I suppose I’ll have to find another reason for my visits here, then.”

It was Adair’s turn to blush. He walked Nathaniel back through the forest to the border stone where he could follow the narrow path home.

They turned to face each other, and Nathaniel’s heart quickened at the expectant look in Adair’s eyes. “Wait,” he stammered, breaking his gaze. “I almost forgot.” He dipped his head, rummaging in his pocket to pull out a fistful of coins. “I thought maybe I could give you this? For helping me?”

Nathaniel dropped the money into Adair’s palm. The faun lifted his hand to his ear, smiling at the sound of the coins

clinking together. He brushed his fingertips over each one, feeling the etchings with a bizarre sort of reverence.

“I can’t keep these,” he said finally.

“Why not?”

“You need them! For your family.”

But his eyes hadn’t moved from the little things in his palm, so pure in his delight that Nathaniel didn’t want to take them back. “Go on,” he said. “You should probably have more, to be honest.”

Adair laughed. “Why would I have need of money?”

“Don’t you ever need to buy anything from the village?”

“I’ve never even been into the village,” said Adair, brows raised.

“*What?*”

Adair looked a bit wrong footed. He took Nathaniel’s hand to give the coins back. “You should keep these.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake,” said Nathaniel, “just keep one, at least. You like them!”

“For true?”

“*Yes*. Of course.”

Adair considered each coin, eventually selecting one with a hole punched in the middle. “I like this one,” he said, holding it up to peer at the moon through the hole.

“I’m glad.”

With a final squeeze of Adair’s fingers, Nathaniel walked up the path toward his house.

V

Tethered

Adair swung down from the boughs of his tree. He'd slept there the previous night with Nathaniel's coin clutched tight against his palm, and he hadn't been able to stop touching the spot beside his ear where Nathaniel had kissed him, grinning like a damn fool. Looking down at the coin, he decided to make a trip to his cavern. Usually, Adair slept in his tree. Sometimes, though, if he was sleepy enough he'd curl up under a hedge or sprawl out on the riverbank. In truth, Adair wasn't too choosy. One of his many sleeping spots was a cavern he maintained for himself deep in the forest.

The cave was sparse. Adair didn't have all that much by way of possessions; to be honest he didn't have much use for *things*. In fact, he didn't have all that much use for the cave either. In years past, he'd found some humans were reluctant to mate under tree and sky, so he'd found the cave. Some of them were reluctant to mate on the cold stone floor, so when others in the forest would hunt, Adair collected some pelts. That was how it went. The first thing he'd ever really wanted for himself was the little coin Nathaniel had given him. So, Adair found himself digging through the cast off haberdashery he kept in a small chamber of the cave.

Sometimes the humans he lay with were so eager to flee they left items behind. Over the years, Adair had amassed a collection of abandoned articles of clothing. He never entered this chamber if he could help it—the single shoes and broken spectacles reminded him too much of himself. They'd surely seemed necessary at one point, but soon enough the poor things found themselves hastily forgotten and abandoned.

Adair pawed through the items, trying very hard not to think of the people who'd left them, until he found what he was looking for: a fine silver chain. He threaded it through the punched hole in his coin and clasped it around his neck. Its cool weight between his collarbones was foreign, but reassuring all the same.

Adair considered what he'd show Nathaniel the next time he came into the forest, turning his back on the sad collection of forgotten things, and left the cavern. As he walked through the trees, his fingers never left the coin around his neck.

“What is *that*?”

Adair turned to see his sisters sitting in a patch of sunlight, breath misting the chill air. He closed his fingers around the coin, trying to hide it from view. “Nothing.”

“It's not nothing,” his eldest sister, Erne, said. She approached, plucking at the chain to get a better look at it. “Did your sweet human boy give you this?”

Adair narrowed his eyes. “Maybe.”

“He was sweet, wasn't he?” Brosna looked up from braiding her hair. “Those eyes.”

The third sister, Slaney, agreed. “He gave us such a fright at first, but we've been watching you two quite a bit from the water.”

With a scowl, Adair opened his mouth to retort, but Erne grabbed his hand. “We've missed you,” she said. “Come sit with us.”

He could hardly deny them; he loved his sisters dearly and it had been several days since they'd spoken. “Of course.”

“So, tell us about this, then.”

“This what?”

Erne shared an exasperated look with the other two. “*Nathaniel*.”

“Such a pretty name,” chimed in Brosna.

Adair felt his cheeks grow hot. “There's nothing to tell.”

“Oh please,” said Slaney, “You can’t stop smiling.”

Trying to marshal his expression into a more neutral one, Adair changed the subject. “I haven’t been to court in days,” he said. “Have I missed anything?”

“Oh nothing of import,” Brosna finished her braid, flicking it over her shoulder. “Clíodhna has been experimenting with the Nightshade wine,” she told Adair.

“Has she, now?” Clíodhna lived alone in a moor. She’d staked her claim on a territory far, far to the north of the human village. Her keening shriek terrified the villagers, and she had a kind heart and no wish to disturb them. She rarely spoke, and lived alone, but loved coming to court and sharing her famous liquor, distilled from the petals of a certain variety of flower.

“Yes. She’s begun smoking the flowers, ground up, like a pipe weed.”

Brosna had a fondness for human pipe weed, when she could get a hold of it. One of her lovers over the years had introduced her to the stuff, and she said the heady smoke reminded her of him. She no longer remembered the man’s name, but her love of the aroma had stuck.

“I don’t think Clíodhna needs any help extracting the effects of Nightshade wine,” said Adair, laughing. It was already the sort of drink that could turn any mundane affair into a boisterous, wild bacchanal, or a vicious brawl. Or an orgy.

“I wouldn’t mind trying it,” said Slaney, because of course she wouldn’t. “Even the wine has been more potent of late, she told me.”

“Well, that explains the other day,” said Erne.

“What happened the other day?” Adair found he was eager now, for more court gossip.

“It’s just Gael. He’s grown restless again.”

Adair’s face darkened. Gael had lived in this forest for an untold span of years, and he was hard to like. He was

handsome, but cold—prone to cruel turns. He could subsist on the flesh of animals but preferred the blood of man, or if he could get it, fae. “What did he do?”

Erne laughed. “He got so drunk he tried to drink from Beith.”

Adair huffed a laugh, too, trying to picture it. Beith was the fiercest faun in this forest, and Adair’s oldest friend. “He can’t have liked that.”

“No,” Erne agreed, “he did not. He held Gael down and pulled out one of his fangs. No one’s seen Gael since.”

Adair let out a low whistle. He certainly had missed a great deal at court in favor of touring the forest with Nathaniel. Gael went through these turns every couple decades. He’d come to court begging Adair’s mother for permission to feed off the humans of Myrna, and she would categorically deny him. Gael would retreat deep into the trees, drain some elk, sulk a few days, and then come back to court. “He’ll calm down. He always does.”

“I don’t know,” said Slaney. “He looked awful foolish with only one tooth.”

Aside from the bit about Beith and Gael, the gossip largely amounted to who was fucking whom, spats over differing territories in the forest, and who had said what while drunk. Adair liked to hear it though, a return to his usual world to refresh him, ground him a bit. He’d missed them, his sisters.

When he bid them farewell, Adair walked toward the border stone where he and Nathaniel had been meeting each day. The sun was high, and he assumed Nathaniel would be coming from the path any moment. When he reached the stone, he found Nathaniel’s scent to greet him, though it was stale. Adair breathed deep, trying to pick up the trail. He found it there on the wind, and realized as he followed it that it was leading him to the moon flowers he’d showed Nathaniel to help with his mother’s cough.

Adair found Nathaniel standing in the center of the little clearing, hands on his hips. He leaned against a tree, watching

as Nathaniel scratched his head, looking around the clearing in confusion. When he spied a narrow strip of pale skin just below Nathaniel's scarf, Adair couldn't help himself. He came up behind Nathaniel, trailing an idle finger across the exposed nape of his neck and said, "They only bloom at night."

Nathaniel let out a yelp and jumped about a foot in the air, swinging his small trowel like a sword. He turned to see Adair behind him and put a shaking hand over his eyes. "Why do you *do* that?"

"Do what?"

"Scare the bloody piss out of me!"

Adair cocked his head. "I don't try to."

"Well, you're a natural then," Nathaniel grumbled. "What were you saying about the flowers?"

"They only bloom at night, but the roots are still just there below the earth." Adair frowned. "Your mother—is she still ill?"

"No, there's a little girl in the village. Her cough is a different sort. The broth makes her well but she needs to keep drinking it."

Adair squatted, plucking one of the leaves. "They wither after true spring," he told Nathaniel. "They won't be proper for much longer."

Nathaniel frowned. "I wonder if there's a way I can preserve them..."

Adair watched as his face grew thoughtful. He enjoyed seeing his lips part, his dark brows knit together, his blue eyes flicker around the clearing. Reaching out to take Nathaniel's wrist in gentle fingers, he said, "We should wait until the moon peaks to dig them. They're stronger picked then."

Nathaniel slipped his fingers into Adair's with a smile. "Alright." Looking at Adair, his eyes traveled down his face, past his beard, to see the necklace around his throat. Nathaniel reached out and touched the chain. "The coin," he said.

"Yes."

The warm look on Nathaniel's face outshone the sun, and Adair felt his own face glowing. "It suits you." Nathaniel raised himself on tip toe to kiss Adair's cheek. "Now," he said, stepping away and crossing his arms. "I'd really like to discuss how I might find *you* in the forest sometime."

"Oh?"

"Yes, and just maybe I'll be able to scare the trousers off you one of these days."

"I don't wear trousers," Adair reminded him.

"You know what I mean."

"I do." Adair was quiet for some time, considering—considering the young man before him, considering how carefully he usually guarded his heart. He cupped Nathaniel's face with one palm, all thought of protecting himself whipped away as he looked into those bright blue eyes. "Are you certain you trust me?"

An odd shiver passed over Nathaniel's face. "Yes."

"Good," Adair said. "Now, hand me your knife."

A few days later, Adair stretched on his back, reclining in the boughs of his tree, clearing his mind to think only of Nathaniel Stone. He was so timid, so anxious. They had been spending a fair amount of time together, and slowly, agonizingly, Adair felt that Nathaniel was becoming more comfortable among the trees, more comfortable with him. Adair had showed him many of his favorite places, even here, his tree. He had only to close his eyes to picture him, just the other day, sitting cross-legged among the branches with a book open in his lap. Adair had been content to watch him read—more than content. Every once in a while, Nathaniel would pause, look up from his page, and make eyes at Adair over the top of the book.

"What?" He'd said.

"What, what?" Adair had replied.

"You're staring."

“No I’m not.” And then they’d both smiled, knowing Adair was lying.

As smitten as he plainly was, Adair was still terrified of frightening Nathaniel off. He was so easily startled, but he was also clever, gentle, and attentive. Adair could not get enough of him. Nathaniel was so responsive to every minute touch, every innocent glance—cheeks flushing so pretty, blue eyes darting to Adair’s face and away again.

He looked at the slice he’d made on his palm. The spell was a simple one, executed on a whim. Perhaps Adair should have considered the consequences a bit more before binding them together like this—what if Nathaniel tired of him, as his kind was wont to do? Adair stuffed the thought deep, down and away. He’d been lonely for some time, and wanted to indulge, so he let his mind go blank, focusing only on the way his cut palm sent delicious tingles lancing up his wrist. When he accessed this part of himself, he could feel the young man to whom he was now tethered. He wondered if Nathaniel could feel him, too, uncertain how the spell worked for humans. The thought excited him—wondering if Nathaniel could feel his desire through the leagues that separated them.

Quite simply, Adair could not *wait* to bed him. Adair palmed his rapidly hardening cock with his off hand, wild with the desire to fuck. He had decided, however, to let Nathaniel steer their courtship, maddening though that may be. Adair had never had to execute this level of self-control before. Every press of Nathaniel’s palm against his own had him wanting to throw the lad down on the grass and mount him then and there—but, he supposed, the waiting was its own delicious sort of agony. He stroked himself a bit faster, biting his bottom lip. Adair found himself wondering if Nathaniel thought of him this way, and began to fuck his fist in earnest, imagining Nathaniel writhing at his moment of pleasure, perhaps with Adair’s name on his lips. That lovely imaged carried Adair over the edge. He came with a whimper, pumping himself through his climax in time to his pounding heart. Even as he spent, Adair let out a frustrated groan, the pleasure just shy of enough. So he let his mind conjure up some more images, and eventually fell into a frustrated sleep.

VI

Blood Compass

It had been a rainy week, keeping Nathaniel from the woods for a few days. Stuck inside, Nathaniel had been surprised at how much he'd missed going into the trees, how much he'd missed Adair. He found himself wondering if the faun was lonely too, imagining him sitting in his tree waiting out the storm all by himself. Nathaniel was itching to return to the forest after two days, but couldn't formulate a plausible excuse to go traipsing about in the freezing rain. Finally, when he could barely stand it any longer, a morning dawned grey and cold, but dry.

Nathaniel made his way to the border stone, holding his cut palm to the sky, a queer twist in his belly as he recalled Adair slicing it open. He'd squealed, shamefully, but Adair had smiled to hear it. Without cleaning the blade, he'd sliced his own palm and grasped Nathaniel's wounded hand in his own. Their blood and breath mingled on the chilly air of a night unsure if it was winter or spring. Adair had pulled Nathaniel close and pressed his lips to his ear. "Now you can find me whenever you like."

The cut ached and itched; it was deep and sent strange tingles up his arm. He'd told his mother he'd sliced it on his hunting knife—which was technically true—but she'd given him the strangest look when she'd seen the wound.

It had all seemed very mysterious and eerie in the twilight forest, but now as Nathaniel walked through the trees with the angry scab exposed, he felt rather foolish. Adair hadn't really taken much time, or any time rather, to explain how this

blood-compass was supposed to work. Somehow, though, Nathaniel's feet seemed to know something his mind did not.

Nathaniel was surprised to find that his feet had led him straight back to the pond where all of this had begun. He saw Adair sitting by the water, his back to the tree line. Elated with his success, Nathaniel took two steps into the clearing before Adair said, "I can still hear you, you know," without turning around.

Nathaniel sighed, throwing up his hands. "It's impossible to sneak up on you then, I suppose."

Thunder rumbled overhead. As Nathaniel searched the sky for signs of lightning, Adair approached him from the edge of the water. He seized Nathaniel's arm, turning his palm up to look at the cut. He brushed his fingers along the scab. Nathaniel winced and attempted to pull his hand back, but Adair's grip was firm. "Why haven't you got a bandage on this?"

"I don't know," said Nathaniel, defensive. "I had one, but I didn't know if it would interfere when I was trying to find you."

Nathaniel could tell that Adair was trying very hard not to laugh. "Come," he said, pulling him toward the edge of the pond.

Adair crouched, tugging gently on Nathaniel's arm until he submitted to kneel at his side. Their hands broke the surface of the pool, and Nathaniel gasped at the chill, trying to twist away.

"Now, now," the faun cooed softly. "Just be still."

Leaning out over the edge, Nathaniel realized beneath the cold bite of the water the wound began to prickle. "Wha—?"

"These waters are restorative," Adair explained, moving to sit more comfortably. He released Nathaniel's arm and dangled his feet in the pool. They heard another round of thunder.

Nathaniel rested on his knees and the elbow of his other arm, watching his fingers swirl beneath the surface of the water. After a while, he pulled his hand out, shaking it dry, and

examined the cut. Where before the wound had been swollen, with angry red flesh puckering around the edges, it now looked older, cleaner, and the skin around the slice was healthy and pink. As he stared in awe at his palm, a raindrop burst across it.

The erratic *plink-plink* of a fledgling squall filled the air around them, and with a fresh crash of thunder the heavens opened. Adair and Nathaniel found themselves immediately soaked, scrambling to their feet and running for cover under a nearby willow tree.

The leaves didn't do much to keep off the water, but it was better than nothing. Nathaniel was soaked through and frozen, trying not to shiver lest Adair insist he go home. "Can I see where you live?" He asked after a while.

"You know where I live," Adair said, shaking rain from his hair like a dog, spraying Nathaniel with droplets.

"I don't mean the forest," said Nathaniel. "I mean, where do you *live*? Where do you keep your stuff? Where do you sleep?"

Adair turned to look at Nathaniel, wet curls plastered to his forehead and the sides of his face. The faun's voice was eager when he said, "You want to see where I sleep?"

Nathaniel's face grew hot as he realized the implications of what he'd said, but Adair let it pass with a mischievous smile.

"It's not far from here, but you'll get soaked."

Nathaniel shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant to camouflage his burning curiosity. "Can't get much wetter than I already am."

He followed as the faun took off through the trees, marveling at the way Adair could shift from stillness to motion, sudden as a bird taking flight. The path narrow and winding, Nathaniel realized Adair led him somewhere in the forest he'd never been. The trees grew dense and the rain slowed, blocked in part by the thick canopy above.

Concealed in a cleft of rock was the entrance to a cave. Nathaniel followed Adair as he slipped through the narrow

opening. Inside, the cave was muted, hushed and dark. Adair crouched beside a small circle of stones and had a fire started in seconds. He turned to face Nathaniel, face aglow in the flickering orange light. Nathaniel looked around, taking in the cave's interior. It was sparse, containing only the stone hearth and a pile of sleeping furs.

"I don't spend all that much time here," Adair said, following Nathaniel's eyes. He sounded a bit self-conscious. "Sometimes I just come here to sleep, or sit in the quiet for a while. Or swim in the pools."

"Pools?"

"In the next chamber," he said with a vague gesture. "Hot springs."

Almost on cue, Nathaniel's body convulsed in a violent shiver. Adair clucked his tongue and smiled, beckoning with a small jerk of his head. Nathaniel followed him to the rear of the cave, through a narrow stone corridor into a second, far larger chamber. Nathaniel gasped. The floor was covered wall to wall in multileveled pools in varying sizes, broken up by walkways slick black stone and gnarled, pointing stalagmites on obsidian teeth. That's not what stole Nathaniel's breath.

The high arched ceiling of the cavern glittered in the darkness, covered in thousands and thousands of shimmering green lights, countless little things sparkling and winking above him. They reflected on the glassy surface of the pools, and looking down, it was like Nathaniel had stepped up into the sky and now floated through the stars. The color of them was like nothing he'd ever seen, a soft turquoise glimmer.

Nathaniel was utterly speechless, his mouth open, twisting his head every way to take it all in.

"I thought you might like this," Adair whispered, and Nathaniel jumped. He'd almost forgotten he wasn't alone.

"What are they?"

"A type of worm, I'm told."

Nathaniel laughed, still gazing up. No worm he'd ever seen could make something so beautiful. Enchanted, he forgot

entirely why they'd even come in here, happy to stare up at the twinkling lights, until he felt Adair's fingers under the bottom hem of his shirt, brushing against his damp skin. "Wait—what?" Nathaniel twisted out of his touch.

"Did you want to get in the water in your clothes?" He seemed genuinely curious.

"Oh," said Nathaniel, thankful for the dark to hide his blush. "No, I suppose not."

"I can lay your wet things out by the fire to dry." Adair stared at him expectantly.

Nathaniel clutched the neck of his shirt, flustered. "Can you please just, not watch me undress?"

Adair heaved a theatrical sigh and turned his back, hands coming to light on his hips. Struck with a sudden playful urge, Nathaniel peeled off his sodden clothes, balled them up, and whipped them at the back of Adair's head. He yelped in surprise, and Nathaniel jumped into the nearest pool, submerging himself before Adair could turn around. Grumbling, Adair gathered up Nathaniel's things and stomped off to deposit them by the fire.

With a grin, Nathaniel relaxed back into the warm water. He reclined against the smooth stone at the edge of the pool, looking up at the strange lights above. Adair could move through the world on silent feet, so Nathaniel didn't hear him return until he lowered himself into the water with a soft splash.

The faun pulled Nathaniel's feet into his lap, kneading into his arches with strong thumbs. A satisfied groan slipped between his lips as Adair's fingers worked the tension from his feet. Between the steam, the soft glow of the insects on the ceiling, the warm water and Adair's hands, Nathaniel felt his eyelids go heavy. Then—perhaps struck by vengeful impulse—Adair dragged the sharp edge of his fingernail up the arch of Nathaniel's foot. He let out a shriek and yanked his foot back, acutely ticklish, and twisted sideways off his sunken perch. Nathaniel went under with a splash, coming up flailing and

spitting from below the water to Adair's laughter booming around the chamber.

The water in the center of the pool came to just below Nathaniel's navel and he frowned, crossing his arms over his chest. Adair stood, wading toward him and trying very hard to stifle his smirk. The apples of the cheeks bore sweet little creases below them, betraying the smile that hid behind the tangle of his beard. He brushed his hands up and down Nathaniel's upper arms. "Why are you so skittish?"

"I'm not skittish," Nathaniel snapped, without any real heat behind it.

"Yes, you are," Adair insisted. "Like a jumpy little squirrel, or a mouse. Or a minnow!"

"I am *not*," said Nathaniel, but he was grinning. "You just like to scare me."

Adair rolled his shoulders, sinking into a crouch. He wiggled his fingers before lunging forward. Nathaniel spun away, laughing as Adair dove for him—missing entirely and splashing below the water.

"See?" Adair said when his head again broke the surface. "Just like a minnow, darting through the water."

In retaliation, Nathaniel slapped the surface of the pool, sending a wave of spray right into Adair's face, but he jumped forward through the splash and grabbed Nathaniel by the waist. "Can't get away from me, little minnow."

Nathaniel's hands were caught, pressed against Adair's chest. The lights from the ceiling reflected in his luminous eyes, like they were full of tiny constellations. With his hair heavy and wet against his skull, Adair's horns stood out, stark and shining. Smiling, he trailed the knuckle of his thumb up Nathaniel's spine. Nathaniel swallowed nervously and leaned in, parting his lips to offer Adair a tentative kiss.

It must have been a signal, something Adair was waiting for—because immediately he cradled Nathaniel's face in his hands and pulled him close like he was born to fit against his lips.

Adair dropped his massive palm to spread across the small of Nathaniel's back, pulling their bodies closer together. Nathaniel opened his mouth hungrily for Adair's tongue, which slipped between his lips, eager to explore. Adair sucked Nathaniel's lip into his mouth, testing it with sharp teeth. When Nathaniel responded with a breathy moan, Adair's hand slid down to cup his ass and pull him even closer, pressing every inch of their naked bodies together. The feel of Adair's desire pressing hot and firm against his own had Nathaniel dizzy, feeling lucky to have someone there to hold him up.

With gentle nudges, Adair steered Nathaniel back toward the edge of the pool, pushing him to sit. He knelt between Nathaniel's thighs, his kisses growing hotter, more insistent. His hands slipped to grasp Nathaniel's waist, giving him a little squeeze. Nathaniel pulled his lips away to catch his breath, turning his head to the side, gasping. The heady steam, the weight of Adair pressed against his body, the heat of the water—it was all a bit much.

“Wait, wait.”

Adair pulled back immediately. “Yes?”

“What's—what's happening?”

Adair blinked. “I thought we were about to fuck,” he said baldly.

A nervous laugh bubbled out of Nathaniel's mouth before he could stop himself. He looked away, scared and embarrassed. “I can't—I'm not,” Nathaniel stammered. “It's just that I've never—”

“That's alright,” said Adair, and it came out like a purr. He nudged his forehead to Nathaniel's, kissing the tip of his nose.

“I would like to,” Nathaniel said, deciding suddenly. He reached a hand up to stroke Adair's cheek. “Just not ... not quite yet.”

With a faint smile, Adair nodded. “Okay.” He offered a hand to pull Nathaniel back down into the water to sit beside him and brushed the sodden fringe from Nathaniel's forehead with tender fingers.

Nathaniel swallowed; his tongue felt thick in his mouth. “Perhaps we could ... keep kissing?”

Adair’s grin was wicked. “Whatever you like,” he said. He paused. “Minnow.”

Nathaniel rolled his eyes.

VII

Any Three Stars

The next day dawned warm, and Adair lay in the grass, listening to the rough music of his closest friends sparring. He had been neglecting Síol and Beith, he knew, spending almost all his time with Nathaniel. So, today he devoted to them, propping himself up on his elbows to watch the other two fauns fight.

They balanced opposite each other on a log, locking horns and trying to throw each other to the ground. Beith was usually the victor of this particular game, since he was nearly twice Síol's size, but she lived for the thrill of the fight. Adair played sometimes, but today he wasn't in the mood, preferring instead to watch the others and dwell on what had happened the previous day.

He watched as Síol pressed her advantage, ruddy hair a tangled cloud around her face. She stuck one nimble foot between Beith's legs, tripping him and tumbling him off the log. The larger faun hit the ground with an undignified "*whoof!*" With a cocky smile, Síol tossed her hair behind her shoulders, freckled chest heaving as she caught her breath. "Come have a go," she called to Adair from her victorious perch.

He grinned, and shook his head.

"Pathetic," Beith snapped from the grass. "Just bed the boy, and have done with it! I'm sick unto death of your endless moping."

"You haven't fucked him yet?" Síol sounded shocked. "Why on earth not?"

“Perhaps he doesn’t want you,” said Beith. The big faun offered a hand up to Siol to help her hop down from the log.

Adair frowned. “Perhaps not,” he said, trying to sound unconcerned, but his heart fell at the thought.

Adair had been enjoying their courtship immensely. It was more pleasurable than anything he’d ever experienced in a way he couldn’t quite put to name. The feel of Nathaniel’s mouth on his own the previous day had Adair so hot in his skin that he could barely stand it; the echo of his sweet lips had kept him awake half the night. He’d finally coaxed Nathaniel out of his clothes, gotten to touch and taste and fill his mind with the image of Nathaniel coming toward him in the water to timidly press a kiss against his own eager lips. Adair wiggled his toes at the thought of what might happen when they met again, his stomach tied up in knots. This was a whole new kind of desire to him; the exquisite agony of waiting satisfying in its own way, like a puzzle Adair was happy to take his time solving, knowing the solution would be extraordinary.

Courtships past had usually all taken place over the whirlwind span of one afternoon. Contact, seduction, fucking. Leaving. Occasionally, a dalliance would last a while, but they all ended the same way. To date this was the longest Adair had ever gone between initial desire and fucking by a significant margin. Beith could be right. Perhaps Nathaniel Stone had no interest in him.

Beith grinned, knowing full well he’d struck a nerve. After nigh on two centuries, the two had certainly honed how to antagonize each other, their own unique forms of torture. Beith cracked his knuckles and leered. “Perhaps I’ll seek him out and try my hand. From what your sisters have said, the lad is sweet to look upon.”

A growl slipped out of Adair’s mouth before he could stop himself. Nathaniel was *his*. He got to his feet. Beith had always been the big one, the strong one. He was massive, with broad shoulders and rippling muscles, but Adair was taller, so when he crowded into the other faun’s space he towered over him. “You will not,” he said, quiet. Deadly.

Beith backed off a step, gave a bark of laughter and a mocking bow. “As my prince commands.”

Adair boiled. He reached out and pinched the spot on Beith’s neck where a faded bruise betrayed the bite from Gael. “Your talk is fairly bold from someone who lost control over a love-bite.”

Beith dodged away with a snarl, swinging his fist to cuff Adair about the ears in retaliation. The scuffle was quick and brutal, as their bouts always were. Adair ended kneeling on Beith’s chest, the victor—but his lip was split, courtesy of Beith’s meaty fist.

Growling, they stared at each other for a while before Adair eased off, turned on his heel and stomped away into the trees, fuming. His indignation carried him a few hundred yards before he again felt the crawling, creeping sensation of doubt. With a scowl, Adair kicked a small rock in his path, dabbing at his swollen lip with his knuckle.

“Hey?” A timid hand grabbed his elbow.

Adair actually startled.

“Oh my *God*, I did it!”

Adair shook himself to see Nathaniel pumping the air with his fist—carefree and youthful. It was enough to knock loose Adair’s gloomy thoughts. Nathaniel never seemed childlike, invisible weights always bearing down on his slim shoulders. Adair delighted to see him smile, lose himself a bit. “Did what?”

“Snuck up on you!”

Adair grinned. He had been preoccupied to be sure, but his Minnow was right. “Yes,” Adair agreed, unpleasant thoughts forgotten. “You’ve caught me.”

Nathaniel cupped Adair’s cheek, brushing his thumb over his split lip with a thoughtful look. “What happened here?”

Adair had already forgotten his spat with Beith. He seized Nathaniel’s wrist, pressing a kiss to the pad of his thumb. “Nothing you need trouble yourself with.”

They spent the evening on one of Adair's favorite hilltops, waiting for the stars to emerge. New to Adair, among so many other things, was worrying if another person was cold. In an abstract way, Adair knew the night to be a chill one. Stubborn winter still grasped the wood with strangler's fingers, and while the days were bright and brisk the nights were still cold enough to fog the breath.

Adair glanced fondly at the man beside him, who sat in the grass with his arms wrapped around his knees. He scooted closer, pressing hip to shoulder next to Nathaniel, his Minnow, imparting some of his own plentiful warmth. The moon was high, the stars were bright, and Beith's words were far away. For now, he was content to watch the mist puffing between Nathaniel's lips.

"You're staring at me," Nathaniel said.

"I'm trying to tell if you're cold."

Nathaniel rested his head on Adair's shoulder. "Hard to feel cold, next to you. It's like sitting beside a pile of coals."

Adair nudged Minnow's temple with his own, and the young man let out a relaxed sigh. "Do the fae folk have their own names for the stars?" He asked after a while.

Adair frowned. "What?"

"The stars. The shapes they make in the sky."

"That's absurd, Minnow. They're far too many to name."

"Well, we don't name *all* of them."

Adair was bewildered. "The stars are ancient. They were here when my mother's mother's mother was young. They would probably have named themselves by now."

Nathaniel laughed. "That's not what I mean."

"Then what're you getting at?"

"The stars," said Nathaniel, looking at Adair with his blue eyes wide. "Some of them form shapes together. Sailors have navigated by them for hundreds of years."

Adair turned his face skyward. "Show me."

Pointing, Nathaniel said, “See that one, the brightest one in the sky?”

“Yes.”

“That’s Sirius, the Dog Star. The point is the front of his chest.” Nathaniel grabbed Adair’s hand in his own, extending his fingers to the heavens and using Adair’s hand to trace the shapes above them. “Those three stars there form the snout—hey!”

Adair blushed, caught staring transfixed at Nathaniel’s mouth instead of up at the sky. “Sorry, Minnow.”

“Anyway,” Nathaniel continued. “See there, the three that make a triangle?”

“Any three stars make a triangle.”

“Yes,” Nathaniel said, and Adair was pleased at how flustered he was becoming; riling Nathaniel up had quickly become one of Adair’s most acute pleasures. “But I’m talking about those three in particular. Those three are the dog’s snout. Then you see—four legs and a tail.”

“Come on,” Adair said with a chuckle. “That looks nothing like any dog I’ve ever seen. You’re just having a laugh!”

“I am not,” he insisted. “I told you, sailors have been using them to navigate for ages now.”

“No wonder humans are always getting turned around.”

Nathaniel gave him a playful punch on the shoulder. “You’re hopeless.” He reclined back on the grass, tugging Adair down beside him.

They lay down side by side, fingers tangled up together. Adair felt quite at peace, until he felt the vibration of a poorly concealed shiver through their connected hands. Smooth as silk, Adair rolled himself over, pressing himself directly on top of Nathaniel’s body. He braced his hands on the ground on either side of Nathaniel’s head. “You are cold.”

Nathaniel squirmed below him. “Not now.”

“I’ll just stay here then,” he said. “Unless I’m squishing you.”

“A bit.” It indeed sounded like the breath was being squeezed from his body, so Adair rolled again, this time seizing Nathaniel’s shoulders so the momentum took them both. With his Minnow now safely caught, warm against his chest, Adair wound his hands into Nathaniel’s hair and pulled him down toward his lips.

The kisses they’d shared in the pools had been heavy, charged with desire, and Adair had let himself be driven by his instinct, by his want. This was different. Unbidden, Beith’s words echoed in his head. “*Perhaps he doesn’t want you.*” So Adair released his pressure on Nathaniel’s scalp when their lips were an inch apart. His heart hammered in his chest as Nathaniel closed the distance between them, pressing against Adair’s lips without hesitation. Adair dropped his hands to his sides, trembling as Nathaniel squeezed his hips with his thighs.

Nathaniel pulled back with a frown. “What’s wrong?”

Adair’s eyes darted away. “Nothing.”

“It’s not nothing.” Propping himself up on his elbow, Nathaniel traced Adair’s jaw with his fingers. “Tell me.”

Adair wriggled a bit, nervous. “I don’t ... I don’t know what you want from me.”

“I don’t understand,” Nathaniel said. He gave a bashful smile. “I want to kiss you. I thought that was obvious.”

“But then what?”

“I don’t know,” Nathaniel said. He pulled himself up, straddling Adair’s waist. “Hasn’t anyone ever just wanted to kiss you for a bit?”

Adair shook his head. None of his former paramours had harbored such innocent desires.

Nathaniel cupped his cheek. “Well, I do. I want to kiss every inch of your face and feel your lips on mine.”

Adair blinked. That sounded lovely. “Is that all you want?”

“For now.” Nathaniel frowned, suddenly concerned. “Isn’t ... isn’t that enough?”

Adair felt a slow smile break across his face and he nodded. With an answering smile, Nathaniel lowered himself again so their lips could meet.

Still determined to keep himself unassuming and pliant, Adair gripped the grass with shaking hands as Nathaniel slipped his tongue into Adair’s mouth, nervous but growing braver with each muffled breath. His mouth tasted so sweet it was like an ache in Adair’s chest as his mind overcrowded with eager ideas of how the rest of Nathaniel’s body might taste. When Nathaniel moved his lips up Adair’s neck, the feeling of his teeth nibbling on his ear had Adair bucking his hips. He was trying desperately to behave himself but he just couldn’t help it.

Adair’s mind went blank as he lost track of time, lost himself to the simple joy of kissing, of being kissed—yet another sparkling, shining new experience, thrilling beyond measure. As Adair caught his breath, he noticed Nathaniel’s forage bag lying some ten yards away and realized they must have rolled quite a distance, swapping positions here and there, following what their bodies wanted to do.

Without words the kisses slowed eventually, the cool wind of night tingling over heated faces, plumped lips. The space between them filled with gasping puffs of air. They mutely decided to watch the stars again for a while, and Minnow curled tight against Adair’s side, head resting on his chest. Adair wrapped an arm around his shoulders and pressed his lips to the top of his head, inhaling deeply and letting his eyes fall closed.

VIII

The Invitation

At sunrise Nathaniel woke damp with dew, surprised at the strange contrast of a chill creeping up through the earth and a steady warmth pressing all around him. He could feel the soft tickle of grass against his cheek and something heavy was squashing his body into the ground: Adair.

Nathaniel wiggled a bit and the faun released a sleepy huff, annoyed at the disturbance. He tightened his arms around Nathaniel, trying to pull him closer although they were already plastered against each other. “No,” he grumped, burying his face between Nathaniel’s shoulder blades.

“No’ what?”

“Moving.” He tightened his grip further.

“It’s dawn,” Nathaniel said, and in saying it he realized he’d been out all night. “I should go home.”

“No,” Adair said again, and it was an adorable whine.

Nathaniel smiled, rolling over, his hands going to pry Adair’s arms off himself. The faun finally opened his eyes, squinting up at Nathaniel. “I really should go,” Nathaniel said, smoothing the curls on Adair’s forehead.

Adair sat up, nudging against Nathaniel’s temple.

His smile widening, Nathaniel wound his hands in Adair’s hair, moving over his scalp until he reached his horns. “I hate leaving you,” he whispered before he could stop himself.

“So don’t.”

“What?”

“I hate you going,” Adair said. “Stay with me.”

Nathaniel sighed, prolonging the moment of parting. “I can’t,” he said. He knew his family would be worried sick. It wasn’t fair, what he was doing. He knew it. And yet, the warmth of Adair’s arms, the press of his lips, had him wishing he could disappear into the woods forever.

When he reached his house, Nathaniel slid into the kitchen through the rear door, hoping he would be able to get to bed unnoticed. His night spent on the ground was making itself felt. His back was stiff and he seriously wondered how Adair could sleep on the forest floor each night.

“*Nathaniel!*”

He cringed as his mother flung her arms around his neck, squeezing him so tightly he could barely inhale.

She pushed him back after a moment, holding him at arms’ length. “How dare you?” She asked, giving his shoulder a light smack with her open palm.

Nathaniel looked down at his shoes. “I’m sorry.”

“Where on *earth* have you been? I’ve been so worried.”

He chewed his tongue. What could he possibly say? Luckily, his forage bag was stuffed to bursting with roots from the moon flowers, so he showed her. “These need to be picked at moonrise.”

“Oh don’t you give me that absolute *shite*, Nathaniel Stone.”

Nathaniel gaped at her. He honestly could not remember ever hearing his mother curse.

She gave him a stern look. “You’re a man now, to be sure,” she said. “You can go where you like. But you live under my roof, so if you’re off someplace, I’d know of it.”

“Why?”

“Oh for Heaven’s sake! So I know if you’re coming home or if I should send a bloody search party after you!” She

folded her arms over her chest, waiting. Nathaniel towered over his mother, but he still quailed from her anger.

Casting around for a suitable excuse, Nathaniel was struck by the fact that his mother was always pestering him to leave the house, talk to people. Spend less time alone. Well, he certainly wasn't spending much time alone now. So, he settled on the truth—a version of it anyway. “I met someone.”

“Oh?”

“He lives in Riverchapel,” said Nathaniel, talking out of his ass. Riverchapel was a larger town to the southeast of Myrna. He knew that by ‘someone’ his mother was probably hoping he meant a nice girl, but Nathaniel couldn't bring himself to lie *that* much. He also couldn't bring himself to call Adair merely a friend, so he let his mother infer whatever she wanted. “We met in the forest.”

His mother scrutinized his face, like she was trying to catch him in a lie. “Is that so?”

“He's been teaching me about all these remedies,” he said, grateful for another truth to bolster his story. “The ones I've been making for the townsfolk.”

Moira still seemed suspicious, but he knew she couldn't find a hole in his story. “Alright,” she said, and her gaze softened. “I still just worry about you.”

“I know,” he said, stooping to kiss her cheek. “I'm sorry.”

He could feel her eyes on his back as he made his way to his bedroom.

A week later found Adair and Nathaniel sitting in the shade of a budding tree on the very same hilltop they'd spent their night under the stars. Nathaniel reclined with his back against the trunk, and Adair lay sprawled on his back with his head in Nathaniel's lap.

Nathaniel pulled his fingers idly through the mop of curls on Adair's head, pausing occasionally to brush his thumbs over the grooves of his horns. He loved how they always felt hot under his touch. Adair closed his eyes, preening under Nathaniel's soft attention. Nathaniel's right hand eventually

wandered to some wildflowers, and soon enough he was braiding them into the faun's hair.

Adair opened one eye to squint up at him. "What are you doing?"

"Making you look like a proper fae," Nathaniel teased. "Crowning you in wildflowers like a faun in a story."

Adair's eye fell shut again and he snorted, but didn't move to stop Nathaniel's nimble fingers. He was silent for so long that Nathaniel thought he may have fallen asleep, but eventually he said, "Your hair is getting longer."

Nathaniel smiled to himself, trying to conceal his pleasure that Adair had noticed. "I thought you might like it."

The faun smiled. "I do," he said, without opening his eyes.

"There you are."

Adair sat up, soft pink and white petals falling around his shoulders like snow. "Beith?"

Nathaniel gasped. Another faun approached them up the side of the hill. He was tall and broad, with deep olive skin and dark amber eyes—big, like Adair's. His horns were short, grey and thick.

Nathaniel had grown so accustomed to Adair's presence that he could almost forget the Other-ness of him. It was strong on Beith though, the strange wild essence of the fae coming off him like a stink. Nathaniel supposed he was beautiful too, in his way—but terrifying. Briefly, Nathaniel wondered if there even were any ugly fae folk.

"We haven't seen you in a few days," said Beith with a sly grin. He glanced at Nathaniel and raised one thick brow.

Nathaniel flushed, his eyes darting sideways toward Adair, who was scrambling to his feet with a scowl. Following his lead, Nathaniel stood as well, making to introduce himself, but Adair moved to plant himself square between Nathaniel and the newcomer.

"I've been occupied," Adair said, his voice sounding too clipped to be as airy as he'd clearly like to appear. His hands

went to his hair, pulling the flowers out and dropping them to the grass. Nathaniel watched, stung, as they fell while struggling to stay abreast of this bizarre interaction.

Beith's eyes gleamed. "I'll say." He rose up on his toes to peer over Adair's shoulder and get a better look at Nathaniel, who could see his nostrils dilating furiously. *Why are these fauns always sniffing me?* Nathaniel wondered. Something hungry and unsettling stirred behind Beith's eyes, and he licked his lips. He extended his hand. "I'm Beith."

"Nathaniel."

"I've heard a lot about you," Beith said, squeezing Nathaniel's fingers. "Enchanted to make your acquaintance."

"Likewise." Nathaniel looked away as Beith stared a little too long.

Adair cleared his throat, directing Beith's attention off Nathaniel and back to himself. "I'm curious why you're so concerned how I spend my leisure time."

Beith's eyes snapped back to Adair's face. "You're wanted, at court. Her Radiance sent me to tell you that she expects you tomorrow."

The air between the three of them was tense, and Nathaniel had the distinct impression that some sort of silent conversation was taking place. Adair frowned still more deeply. Beith turned to leave, but he looked back toward them over his shoulder. "Enjoy the night with your latest pet," he said with a rakish wink.

Confused, Nathaniel opened his mouth to ask the first of about a hundred questions chasing each other around in his head, but Adair seized his hand. "Come," he said, voice agitated. "I'll walk you home."

The look on his face was foreign to Nathaniel: his brows furrowed, eyes dark and distant, lips drawn into a tight, severe line. Adair didn't say a word as he led Nathaniel by the hand, taking a direct path toward the village. Nathaniel's brain hummed along, cataloguing the bizarre conversation between Adair and the other faun. Other faun! Nathaniel had forgotten,

somehow, that Adair had a whole other life before they'd met. How many fae lived in these woods? Plainly, enough to hold "court," whatever that meant. Aside from Adair and his sisters, Nathaniel hadn't seen hide nor hair of one.

Nathaniel felt his stomach drop, a sour taste in his mouth. He frowned, turning over Beith's words. He'd referred to him as Adair's "latest pet." He wasn't sure if it were the "latest" or the "pet" that upset him the most.

He was so distracted he didn't notice they'd reached the little clearing near the border stone where they met each day until Adair stopped and Nathaniel walked straight into him. Nathaniel made to drop his hand, but Adair tightened his fingers.

He stared into Nathaniel's eyes with frightening intensity, and Nathaniel realized he knew not one jot of what might be going on in Adair's head. With a jerky sort of motion, the faun reached up toward his face and Nathaniel flinched away.

Adair softened immediately, his fingertips barely whispering over Nathaniel's skin. His hand crept around the back of Nathaniel's head, winding through his hair. He tugged him closer and brushed a soft kiss to Nathaniel's lips. "Don't cut your hair," he said with a smile.

Nathaniel stood, alone and confused, long after Adair had retreated back into the trees. That evening, he was distracted and distant. He caught his mother and brother exchanging worried looks when they thought he wasn't looking. Nathaniel ignored them and went to bed early, brooding endlessly on Adair and Beith.

Nathaniel spent half the night awake, wondering what to make of the conversation he'd witnessed today. The phrase "latest pet" rattled around in his mind like a pebble in his shoe, pinching at him whenever he'd almost fallen asleep. He reflected back on all that had passed between Adair and himself since they'd met. The faun wanted him; that much was plain. Had he not spent the majority of their days trying to talk Nathaniel out of his clothes?

Nathaniel pummeled his pillow. Their night together under the stars was itching at him as well. When he'd voiced his desire to spend the evening caught up in each other, kissing, had Adair not said, "Is that all?" It had meant everything, to Nathaniel, who'd never before been kissed, not until their lips had met for the first time in the pools in Adair's cavern. Perhaps it held no meaning for Adair, for whom Nathaniel was merely the latest in a long line of lovers. The following morning, Adair had asked Nathaniel to stay with him, and he'd declined—like a fool.

Well, tomorrow, Adair was going home. Home to his people, probably to laugh with his kin at the shy, prudish human who'd been foolish enough to rebuff him. Nathaniel found himself suddenly wracked with fear at the thought that he may never see Adair again.

When dawn broke, Nathaniel was tempted to spend the entire day in bed, playing sick to avoid the inevitability of standing in the forest like an idiot waiting for someone who would never come. He covered his face with his pillow, willing himself to fall back asleep.

When that didn't work, he sighed, rising to dress. He had to know, he supposed, one way or the other. Nathaniel went to their meeting spot, rubbing his hands together against the chill. He dusted the frosty ice crystals of a stump and sat, watching the sun climb higher and higher. Nathaniel had just about convinced himself to go home with an ache in his guts, trying to pretend it was fine, really, if he never saw the faun again.

"What on earth are you doing out here?"

Oh, thank God.

Adair's face creased in a concerned frown. "You'll catch your death."

He scooped Nathaniel's hands into his own larger ones, and Adair's skin was hot like he'd just emerged from a bath—in fact, his whole body was giving off a faint steam. Perhaps he *had* just emerged from the bath. The thought was distracting. He held Nathaniel's hands close to his lips, breathing on his fingers to warm them.

Adair moved in closer. He released Nathaniel's hands, sliding his knuckles up his arms, one hand finding the back of his head, and the other slipping down to grasp the bone of his hip. "I'm sorry about yesterday," Adair murmured. He stooped, nudging his forehead to Nathaniel's. "I scared you."

"Yes."

Adair nodded. Nathaniel looped his arms around his waist and they stood quietly for a while.

"Nathaniel?"

"Mmm?" He loved the sound of his name in Adair's mouth.

"Would you like to meet my family?"

IX

Nightshade Wine

Adair and Nathaniel stood hand in hand beside a thick maple tree. They were in a part of the forest Nathaniel had never seen, and Adair watched as Nathaniel's eyes flickered over his surroundings.

"You'll be fine," said Adair, but he was nervous. Beith had crossed a line, sniffing around Nathaniel when he had no right. Adair wasn't ashamed of Nathaniel, far from it. He just felt very protective of him, territorial. Something about Beith's teasing had him wanting to show his Minnow off, let all the fae folk know that Nathaniel was *his*. Beith's brazen mockery had goaded him into extending the invitation, but now Adair felt queasy and uncertain.

He watched as Nathaniel swallowed visibly, looking quite uncertain himself. Adair swooped in for a kiss.

"Just one more thing," Adair said as he drew away.

"Hmm?" Nathaniel had a soft, dazed look on his face that had Adair in half a mind to toss him over his shoulder, say bugger-all to court and spend the entire day with his tongue between Nathaniel's lips.

The summons home was not to be denied, however, so Adair tamped down that idea and waited for Nathaniel to open his eyes again. "No human has ever seen the path to our meeting place," Adair said. "You can't know where we're going."

"I don't even know where we are now," Nathaniel protested, and his eyes fell for the first time to see that Adair held something in his hands.

“Still,” Adair said, raising his hands and displaying a silver silk bandage. “I have to bind your eyes.”

Nathaniel balked, taking a step back, but Adair caught his wrist.

“No harm will come to you.”

He hesitated before setting his jaw. “Alright.”

With deft, soft fingers, Adair wrapped the silk around Nathaniel’s eyes. It was no ordinary swathe of cloth; it blocked light completely, rendering Nathaniel blind. Perhaps Adair should have warned him—Nathaniel’s hands went instantly to the knot, fumbling to pry it from his face. Adair knew the bandage could only be undone by the one who’d tied it, and being blind in a forest full of dangers plainly had Nathaniel terrified. He couldn’t free his eyes, however hard he pulled the fabric. Panicked, Nathaniel took a step, promptly tangling his foot in an errant root. He stumbled straight into Adair’s arms with a squeak of fear. The faun pulled him close, steadying him and taking his chance to push kisses to the apples of his cheeks, the tip of his nose. “Easy, Minnow,” he said softly, and couldn’t keep the smile out of his voice.

Adair grabbed Nathaniel’s hands, tangling their fingers together. His thumb brushed across Nathaniel’s knuckles and he pressed one final kiss to the shell of his Minnow’s ear before saying, “Are you ready to attend the court of the fae folk?”

Nathaniel gulped.

Adair tugged him along the path, tripping, stumbling and occasionally cursing. When a branch struck him across the face, Nathaniel planted his feet and yanked his hand free.

“This is ridiculous,” he snapped, trying again to claw the bandage from his eyes. It wouldn’t budge. “And humiliating.”

Adair sent his fingers to the sides of Nathaniel’s face and pulled the fabric away. He blinked in the sunlight.

“You’re sure you don’t want to put a yoke on my neck? A saddle on my back?” Nathaniel crossed his arms over his chest, spitting mad.

The notion was an intriguing one, if Adair were being honest, but the look on his Minnow's face was one of betrayal, hurt. "You're upset," he said, clutching the strip of silk in his hands.

Nathaniel glowered at him. "I'm not—I don't want to be a pet," he spat.

Adair stepped closer, hesitant. *How could he think that?* "You're not," he said, voice barely audible. "Why do you think I brought you here?"

Nathaniel frowned, uncertain.

"A human has never attended court before," Adair continued. "Ever. At least, not as long as I've been alive. I wanted to you to see where I'm from." He paused, looking down at the forest floor, poking a twig with his toe. "I can just bring you home if you like."

Nathaniel's frostiness melted before his very eyes, reaching for the strip of silk twined around Adair's fingers. He tied it back around his own eyes with an aggrieved sigh. Adair moved forward again, eager, pressing in close to adjust the fabric, touching every inch of Nathaniel's face.

"I just don't like stumbling blindly through the forest," Nathaniel grumbled. The words were barely out of his mouth when Adair scooped him up in his arms and kissed his forehead.

"You should have said so."



Cradled against Adair's chest like a new bride, Nathaniel allowed the rest of the journey to pass in curious silence. He strained his ears, trying to use anything he could to identify where he was being taken, but to his ears one part of the forest sounded very like another. Finally, they stopped moving. Adair lowered Nathaniel gently to his feet and pulled the blindfold from his eyes.

Nathaniel squinted in the dappled half-light of the forest. The trees were thicker here than places he'd been brought before, and the whole place took on an eerie, hushed quality

that made him feel he shouldn't raise his voice above his whisper. "Are we here?"

Adair nodded. "Just about." He reached out and took Nathaniel's hand. They moved onward, and in the muffled quiet Nathaniel could hear the trickle of a stream up ahead.

They reached a clearing, and Adair dropped Nathaniel's hand in favor of sliding a possessive arm around his waist. The clearing was bright and serene, butting up against a small, tranquil pool. The focal point of the glade was a thick old tree with silvery bark. To Nathaniel, it seemed ancient, but welcoming. The glade was empty but for the two of them.

"Are they invisible?" Nathaniel whispered before he could stop himself.

Adair stifled a laugh as he steered Nathaniel to a spot by the spring-fed pool. "No," he said, smiling. "We're just early."

Adair sat, bracing his back against one of the tree's gnarled roots, and patted the moss beside him. Nathaniel sat with a small huff at being laughed at, and adjusted until he sat cross-legged with his back against the root, surprised to find the moss so dry after being covered in frost. The thought brought him up short; he frowned around at the clearing, searching for a lingering trace of winter and finding none. The air was warm and balmy as a summer evening, such that Nathaniel shrugged out of his coat as soon as he realized it. He folded it in his lap and waited, pulse thrumming in anticipation.

Nathaniel nearly jumped out of his skin when the small pond beside them began heaving and churning like a pot on a cook fire. Amidst the frothing water, a head of silvery blonde hair burst upward, shaking itself off. Two nearly identical heads appeared beside it, and Nathaniel blushed as he recognized Adair's sisters. They recognized him as well, climbing out of the water, elbowing each other and grinning wickedly. Their opalescent skin shimmered in the sun, just as it had when he'd first laid eyes on them. Nathaniel couldn't help but stare as the water ran down their naked bodies. They didn't bother with glammers the way their brother did; in fact, they seemed delighted to flaunt themselves under Nathaniel's

embarrassed gaze. The one in the middle caught his eye, winked, and gave him a flirtatious little wave. Nathaniel startled to hear Adair clear his throat aggressively. He glanced at the faun, who was scowling at his sisters. Adair cracked his knuckles before laying a possessive hand on Nathaniel's thigh. The girls clutched each other, giggling, and making eyes at Nathaniel. They took a seat on the other side of the pool, stretching out to sunbathe.

Adair harrumphed at Nathaniel's side, and he smiled to think the faun wasn't immune to a bit of jealousy.

Nathaniel pulled his eyes away from the girls and realized they weren't the only new arrivals in the glade. A woman with skin like the petal of a peony selected a spot in the shade, arm in arm with a man covered entirely in coarse black hair. At least, Nathaniel thought he was a man. There was something lupine about his face, and when his companion stroked his ear, he turned, licked her palm and gave a small bark. In the crook of her arm was a small fox, startling white and fluffy as a cloud. She released it to the forest floor, where it bounded across the clearing toward Adair and Nathaniel.

Adair held out his hand for it to sniff. The fox pushed its quivering nose into Adair's palm before turning abruptly and leaping into Nathaniel's lap. Nathaniel looked toward Adair, brows raised, as the fox curled up on Nathaniel's folded jacket. Adair looked back with an amused expression, and Nathaniel gave the fox a gentle scratch behind the ears.

Others were taking their places around the clearing, and apparently arriving with animal companions was something of the fashion here. Nathaniel gasped, seeing a thickly muscled man reclining against the tree opposite them wearing nothing but an enormous jewel-green snake draped over his shoulders. Adair elbowed him sharply and Nathaniel returned his gaze to the fox in his lap, which seemed the safest place to look.

"You came," said a deep voice. Nathaniel looked up again and was almost relieved to see Beith standing before them. The other faun was at least a familiar face, if not an overly welcoming one. He took a seat on Adair's other side. "And I see you brought your plaything. How daring."

Adair ignored him, giving Nathaniel's leg a squeeze.

Later, Nathaniel did his best to recall as many things as he could, but watching the fae folk arrive at their meeting place was like a fractured collection of images from a fever dream. Some wore glammers, like Adair, and more still were nude. Others garbed themselves in the most peculiar pieces—one woman wore a garment that seemed to be made entirely of living worms. Nathaniel saw a man dressed from head to toe in tiny green leaves—until he realized it was his skin. Nathaniel tore his eyes from him to see his first female faun, with mahogany colored horns like antlers on a deer, sticking straight up from a tangle of auburn hair that fell down to her waist. Catching Adair's eye, she gave a nod and a tight smile. Her eyes flicked to Nathaniel before she turned to talk to a man wearing a toga like Nathaniel had seen depicted in books—until the toga shivered and opened, fluttering to his back, revealing itself to be a set of white gossamer wings. Still another attendee appeared to just be a swan the size of a plough horse with a shining silver beak.

Some of the people greeted Adair, with a smile or a noise or a musical exclamation in a language that Nathaniel couldn't understand. Some fae folk would merely walk by and nod. Others bowed deep, or made other deferential gestures. Nathaniel looked at Adair, who was avoiding his eye. "Who are you to them?"

The faun smiled enigmatically, giving a characteristic twitch of his shoulder.

In any case, the one thing Nathaniel read crystal clear was the look of distaste on many faces as they realized he wasn't one of them.

"Look what we have here." A man with devilish black eyes and hollow cheeks approached Nathaniel and Adair where they sat. His smile was queer; one pointed tooth extended far beyond his lower lip giving it an unbalanced quality, and it didn't reach his eyes. The man's lips were purple, like an old bruise.

"Gael." Adair's voice was tight, controlled.

“I didn’t know we were allowed to bring pets to court,” he said, and Nathaniel knew that he wasn’t addressing the fox.

Nathaniel was surprised when Beith stood, menacing, and said, “Back off, or I’ll even out that smile for you.”

His eyes narrowed, and Nathaniel saw a small ripple of fear pass over Gael’s face. He sneered at Nathaniel, baring his single fang, before retreating to the other side of the glade.

“Bloody leech,” said Beith under his breath, resuming his seat. “I liked it better when he was hiding.”

Adair grunted in response, and Nathaniel seemed to understand a nuance that had before escaped him. There were things Adair would tolerate from Beith, and not from others. Teasing him about Nathaniel, plainly, was one of them.

They sat in silence for a while, watching the others assembling. Some raked their eyes over Nathaniel, sitting at Adair’s side, with similar expressions to the one worn by Gael, though they seemed wise enough to hold their tongues. Adair’s position was clearly high enough to prevent any further verbal retribution.

Some were kind. One woman, pale and so thin that her body looked like a skeleton wrapped in silver silk, bent down to kiss Adair’s cheeks. The thick black curtain of her hair concealed their faces and Nathaniel felt his own prickle of envy before she swooped in and kissed Nathaniel as well. Her lips were cold as ice, but her smile was fond. Her eyes glittered like black beetle wings, and she offered them each a crystal flute of something pale blue and glowing.

Adair smiled and thanked her for them both. “Drink it,” he advised. “This will all seem to make a little more sense if you do.” He downed his in one, and Nathaniel watched in amazement as the now empty crystal flute disappeared in a wisp of smoke.

Nathaniel held his own glass up to the light, squinting at the blue liquid. Adair nudged the glass aside, staring intently into Nathaniel’s face.

“It’s the same color as your eyes,” he said, voice a throaty purr.

Nathaniel frowned, looking back at Adair, whose own eyes now shone fever-bright.

“Take a sip,” Adair urged.

Nathaniel took a hesitant swallow. It was cold like snowmelt, but seared his throat as it went down. He coughed and sputtered, barely registering the taste. Nathaniel noticed Adair’s hand crawling higher up his thigh. His breath hitched in his throat, recalling his worries from the night before, but he took another tentative sip from his glass. This time, he tasted blueberry and mint and the copper tang of blood. He tasted wood smoke and sea water, buttery biscuits and dark chocolate. With each swallow, Nathaniel felt lighter, warmer, more relaxed. His buzzing mind quieted, and the moss below him felt softer than the finest bedding, the clothes on his body like being wrapped in a cloud. Adair’s hand on his thigh was scorching hot, as were the faun’s lips, which were suddenly attached to the triangle of exposed skin below Nathaniel’s scarf. As tingles flowed from his scalp to his tailbone, Nathaniel’s doubts vanished and he downed the rest of his glass without question. When it vaporized from between his fingers, he clawed the scarf off his neck, exposing more flesh to Adair’s electric kisses.

“What the hell is that stuff?” Nathaniel gasped, tilting his head, allowing Adair’s clever tongue unfettered access to his skin. In a distant corner of his mind, Nathaniel did recognize he probably should have asked that particular question *before* emptying the glass. However, the soft, insistent pressure of Adair’s lips on his neck felt too good for him to care all that much.

“Nightshade wine,” said Adair between kisses. His sharp, white teeth found Nathaniel’s earlobe. He nipped it, sucking it into his mouth to make Nathaniel moan. “The effects do settle off after a bit.”

Adair’s fingers walked from Nathaniel’s thigh to press against the bulge of his cock, now throbbing against the fabric

of his trousers. The pressure from the faun's hand made him dizzy, his dick so hard it was almost painful. Nathaniel felt drunk—drunk off his ass and feverish and hot—and like if he didn't mount something immediately his heart would surely burst.

A fresh breeze ruffled the shaggy fringe on Nathaniel's forehead, and suddenly it was like he'd been hit by a cool summer rain. Adair left one last searing kiss on his jaw before leaning back against the tree, utterly relaxed, his lips twisting into a lazy smile. Nathaniel's heart slowed, and his boiling blood retreated to a happy simmer beneath his skin. Adair moved his hand from Nathaniel's crotch to his hip, massaging little circles with his thumb, and Nathaniel felt like he could form thoughts again. Almost.

The whole glade had taken on a hazy, shimmering quality, now full of guests with flutes of Nightshade wine, and Nathaniel had a hard time pulling their individual faces into sharper focus. The colors all shone brighter than before, and the fae folk moved around the clearing, groping each other or themselves openly as everyone drank and talked. Eventually Beith moved away, and no one else approached them. Nathaniel was happy to watch them though; they did all seem beautiful—as he had suspected. He registered dimly an insistent tugging on his elbow as Adair pulled him to recline against his chest, nestled snug between the faun's long legs.

Nathaniel tipped his head upward. "Human courts aren't much like this, you know." Granted, Nathaniel had never been—but he was reasonably confident in his assessment.

"Really?" said Adair, continuing his exploration of Nathaniel's hip bones. "How dull."

Nathaniel eyes were drawn to a woman with pale blue skin—and he wasn't sure if it was the wine or her true coloring but her flesh glowed, shifting like sun on water. Her hair was blue as well, dark and shining like the night sky, and around her brow she wore a circlet of braided flowers, asters, unless Nathaniel was mistaken. She wore a gown—or perhaps it was a glamour, like Adair's. Nathaniel thought perhaps it might be

some combination of the two. It covered her from throat to ankle in what could only be described as starlight.

She moved from guest to guest, clasping hands, bestowing dazzling smiles. All of the fae folk present regarded her with obvious deference. They knelt, kissed her fingers, bowed, curtsied. Through the amorous fog still seething in Nathaniel's mind, he felt the tremors of anxiety begin to form as the woman approached Adair and himself. Adair scrambled to his feet, hauling Nathaniel up to stand beside him. Nathaniel hastily adjusted his well-rumpled clothing.

"Your Radiance," Adair said, taking her hand in his. He bowed his head to kiss her knuckles.

"Sweet boy," she said with a warm smile, "so formal."

When Nathaniel had first laid eyes on Adair's face, he'd seemed ageless—or at least, difficult to place in time. His face was soft and unlined, but his voice and eyes seemed older. Looking at this woman, Nathaniel adjusted his thinking. Adair was *young*. This woman, though her face was fresh as a daisy, was ancient. It was something about the way she carried herself, her eyes, the lilt of her voice. Nathaniel found himself wondering if she were here in this forest when the trees first sprouted. Perhaps she planted the trees here to make her home. She was beautiful, no doubt—heart-achingly so, in fact. Even Nathaniel's gorgeous golden faun seemed almost human beside her glow. Nathaniel realized his mouth had fallen open, so he snapped it shut.

She smiled indulgently at him. "I haven't seen you here before."

"This is Nathaniel Stone," Adair said. "He's my guest. Nathaniel, may I present Her Radiance, the ruler of the fae folk, the Aster Queen. And ... my mother."

Nathaniel's mouth fell open again and he didn't bother to close it. Strangely, somewhere under his shock, Nathaniel registered that the Aster Queen was scrutinizing him in such a way that meant she found him nearly as intriguing as he found her. A frown flickered across her perfect face for a moment before she turned back to her son.

“Adair, my darling. Walk with me,” she said. “We haven’t spoken in days.”

Adair looked fretful, hopping from foot to foot. He glanced at Nathaniel.

“He’ll be fine,” the queen said airily. “The girls will look after him.”

Nathaniel broke out in a cold sweat as Adair’s sisters materialized beside him. The tallest was sipping from a flute of the Nightshade wine. Panicked, Nathaniel looked to Adair for help but the faun merely looked back helplessly and took his mother’s arm.

“We didn’t think he’d ever share you,” said one of the sisters in obvious delight. She seized Nathaniel’s upper arm with surprising strength.

“I’m not,” Adair growled over his shoulder, as his mother pulled him from the clearing. “Just don’t let him out of your sight.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” answered one of the other girls, and all three dissolved into shrill giggles as they dragged Nathaniel back to where they’d been sunbathing by the side of the pool.



Something was amiss. Adair glanced sidelong at his mother. Her lips pressed into a thin line, her eyes clouded over with worry. They went twenty paces in silence before she dropped Adair’s arm and turned to face him.

“Does he know?”

Adair cocked his head to the side, bewildered. “Does who know what?”

The queen seized her son’s hand with powerful fingers. “Does that young man know who his father was?”

Adair was lost, struggling to catch up. “Speak plainly.”

“Nathaniel Stone is *not* human.”

“What? Don’t be absurd, of course he is.”

She frowned. “Can’t you smell it on him?”

Adair’s guts clenched, and he chewed his tongue. He’d just thought Nathaniel’s smell was a unique little quirk.

“Let me put it this way,” his mother said. “Does he smell *anything* like any human you’ve ever encountered?”

“So? He’s just special.”

Adair’s mother released his hand and massaged her temple. “Little One, you truly are an idiot.” Upon seeing the confused frown on her son’s face, she relented with slight smile. She gave the side of his head a gentle prod with her fingertip. “You should use this a bit more, and your cock a bit less,” she advised. “Certain things wouldn’t so easily escape your notice.”

Adair shook off her hands, pacing back and forth. He knew Nathaniel’s father had passed away, but little else about him. If he’d been fae, perhaps he’d simply abandoned his human family. Adair did not like the thought of that. “So who was Nathaniel’s father?”

“One of us,” she said. “He was called Abhain. Your friend’s resemblance to him is staggering.”

“How is it I’ve never met him?”

The queen looked him in the eye, weighing her words. “He kept to himself, mostly—didn’t enjoy coming to court. Then, he took up with a human woman, married her,” she paused. “Then he died.”

“*What?*” That was most unexpected. “He’s actually dead?”

“I buried him myself,” she said, her voice heavy with grief. She frowned. “You truly think Nathaniel doesn’t know?”

Adair shook his head. “It’s not possible. Meeting *me* scared him half to death.”

She nodded, thoughtful. They stood in silence for a moment, before she abruptly changed the subject. “You’ve been avoiding me.”

“I have not.”

“Then why haven’t you been to court?”

Bracing his hands on his hips, Adair turned defiant eyes on his mother. “You know I don’t much enjoy court.”

“Yet you usually attend.”

“I’ve been occupied,” Adair snapped. “Nothing happens at court that requires my eyes upon it.”

“A time may come when it will,” the queen said gently, “and it would do for everyone to remember what you look like when it does.”

Adair let loose a snort and turned away from her. He could think of about a thousand things he’d rather do than attend court every day.

“I’m not saying you have to be here every day,” she added, as if reading his thoughts. “But the folk have to see you here, being part of our world. Your sisters and friends miss you dearly, Little One.”

“Oh please,” he said, “they just want fodder for their endless gossiping.”

“True,” the queen allowed. She hesitated. “I’ll admit, when I had heard about how much time you were spending with a human, I was concerned.”

“Why? I’ve courted dozens of humans.”

“Not like this.”

He twitched a shoulder up in response, but he could feel the heat rising in his face. “No, perhaps not. What of it?”

“For the folk to accept you,” she said carefully, “they’ll have to accept your mate as well. You’ll have to make him one of us.”

“Nathaniel has his own life,” Adair protested. “His own family.”

“Be that as it may,” she continued, “he *is* one of us. At least partially. That’s all to the good, I think. The folk would think you’d lost your wits if you tried to bring a full blooded human along as your consort.”

“I truly don’t care if they think I’ve lost my wits,” said Adair, some heat in his words. He crossed his arms over his chest and glared at his mother.

She raised her fingers to touch the coin hanging like a pendant around her son’s neck. After an appraising look, the queen said, “You’re very fond of him, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Well then, we should get back to rescue what’s left of him from your infernal sisters.”



One of the girls pressed a glass to Nathaniel’s lips, filling his mouth with more Nightshade wine, and as he watched Adair and his mother walk off into the trees he realized the wine probably wasn’t brewed with human constitutions in mind. Belatedly, he tried to spit out a mouthful, but Adair’s sister pinched his nose and dumped the entire flute down his throat. As the liquid reached his stomach, Nathaniel doubled over; even the touch of fabric from his own clothing brushing against his skin had him boiling with lust. The girls pulled him down onto the grass, and when their fingers began plucking at the buttons of his shirt he was powerless to resist. Nathaniel’s eyes rolled up into his head as one of the girls pulled him to lay on his back with his head in her lap. The soft swell of her breasts blotted out the sun like an eclipse, and his brain filled with an intense desire to grab hold of them, or bury his face between them—anything. She peered down at him, stroking his hair. “I’m Erne,” she said with a smile, and her voice vibrating in his ears had Nathaniel’s dick twitching. “These are my younger sisters, Slaney and Brosna.”

The one called Slaney continued to work open the buttons of Nathaniel’s shirt. She straddled him as she pulled the fabric aside. “It’s so unfair of our brother to keep you all to himself,” she said, leaning forward to rub herself against his bare chest. Nathaniel thought he was going to faint. His hands gripped the ground, pulling out grass in tufts.

Brosna pulled off his boots, her fingers working the arches of his feet. “He looks like he has the softest lips,” she

observed.

Slaney pressed her lips to Nathaniel's, testing her sister's theory. She tasted fresh as a mountain spring. Nathaniel couldn't help the moan that slipped out of his mouth as she drew away. The girls moved around his body like undulating serpents and the sights and sounds of them had Nathaniel feeling like his body was actually on fire. He'd certainly thought them beautiful from a distance, but this close they were almost painful to look at.

"I don't know why he wouldn't share you," Slaney told him. "We'd treat you so nicely."

Erne gave a yank on his hair, and the slight pain sent a rolling wave of desire from Nathaniel's scalp down to his toes. "Or meanly, if that was your wish."

"Look at him," cried Brosna with a laugh. "Bless, he's actually trembling."

Nathaniel opened his mouth to tell them to stop but all that came out was a groan, and honestly, a little drool. He pushed his hips up, thinking that if he didn't get some friction on his cock he might legitimately die.

"We know you were looking at us," said Erne, "the day our brother came and stole you away."

"We're much prettier than he is," added Slaney, seizing Nathaniel's wrists, moving his hands to cup her ass. She moved her hips a little, and twisted around to face her sister. "We need to get him out of these trousers," she told Brosna.

"*Hey!*" Adair's voice cracked like a whip. The girls stopped their writhing and looked up. If they were embarrassed at all they didn't show it. Nathaniel made up for it by being horrified enough for all of them. When the girls moved off his body he scrambled to sit, trying to conceal his painful arousal by curling his legs to his chest. Adair reached out a hand to help him to his feet. Just the press of the faun's palm against his own had Nathaniel's head spinning, and as he stood up he collapsed forward against Adair's chest, shaking.

"Did you give him more wine?"

“Just a hint,” said Brosna innocently. “He was having trouble relaxing.”

“He’s *human*,” Adair snarled. “One glass was probably too much.”

The faun scooped Nathaniel up into his arms and with a final glare at his sisters took off into the trees. Nathaniel pressed his ear to Adair’s chest to listen to his heartbeat, letting out a happy sigh as his arms tightened around him. Nathaniel still felt dizzy with the desire to stuff his dick into something, but something about being held had his heart begin to slow enough that he no longer felt he was going to drop dead.

When they’d finally put some distance between themselves and the clearing, Adair slowed his pace. “Can you walk?”

Nathaniel nodded against his chest. Adair’s skin felt silky and hot. When Adair put him down, he swayed a bit on his feet. “You’re pretty,” he said, still feeling quite dazed.

“Thank you,” said Adair with a tiny smile. “I’m sorry about them.”

Nathaniel frowned. He felt like he had to explain himself, but he also couldn’t quite form his thoughts into words. “*I’m* sorry,” he said. His tongue felt thick in his mouth.

“Why are you sorry?”

Nathaniel stepped toward him, standing on tip toe to kiss Adair full on the mouth, clumsy. “It’s you I wanted,” he said when he pulled away. “Want. You.”

Adair returned the kiss, hungry, still at least a little enflamed by his own libations. He kissed Nathaniel long and slow, tongue probing into his mouth. When Adair sucked Nathaniel’s bottom lip between his teeth, biting down gently, Nathaniel cried out and pressed himself shamelessly against Adair’s leg. Releasing his lips, Adair placed his hands firmly on Nathaniel’s shoulders. He pushed him back half a step and slid his hands down to Nathaniel’s chest.

When he realized Adair was simply doing up his shirt buttons, Nathaniel let out a sad little whine. “Please,” he

whispered, reaching out to grab for Adair's hips. "I thought this is what you wanted."

Adair kissed him again, softly, as he finished buttoning Nathaniel's shirt. Pressing their foreheads together, he grabbed Nathaniel's hands, holding them tight as Nathaniel squirmed. "Not like this," he breathed, sounding immeasurably sad, like it cost him a tremendous effort. He took another step back and offered Nathaniel his hand. "Let's get you home, Minnow."

They walked in silence, and Nathaniel thought he was coming back to himself a bit as he realized it was actually bloody freezing. He'd left his jacket and scarf back in the clearing. And his boots. His toes were numb with cold. Now that he'd noticed his brain seemed to be back in charge, the fire left his body and he felt weak, aching like he'd just fought off a fever. They reached the border stone and Adair pulled Nathaniel into a tight embrace before holding him at arm's length. "You should go straight to bed", he said sternly. Adair gripped Nathaniel's jaw with iron fingers, staring into his face for a moment before leaning in to whisper, "But I hope you dream of me."

Nathaniel shivered, watching Adair retreat back through the forest. When he couldn't see him any longer, Nathaniel walked alone through the thinning trees, up the path to the rear of his house. Staring at the door, he felt like he'd been gone for days, when it had been only a matter of hours. He went inside, wanting nothing more than to fuck his fist aggressively until he passed out. However, his mother sat at the kitchen table, hands clasped before her—clearly waiting for him.

"Hi, Love."

"Hi," he said, stifling a groan. He made to pass by her, to head for his bedroom.

"Nathaniel," she said, halting him in his tracks, "will you sit and have tea with me?"

"I'm *really* not feeling well."

She looked him up and down, narrowing her eyes. "Were you out in the forest dressed like that?"

Nathaniel glanced down at himself. His brain far too muddled to form a proper excuse to be running about half dressed, he said, “I suppose I forgot my jacket.”

His mother scoffed. “And your boots?”

“Them too.”

Moira sighed. “I’m worried about you, Love. Please, sit.”

Nathaniel sat down across from her, trying to make eye contact and not think about the face that he had spent his afternoon drinking strange potions with the fae folk, and being ground like corn down into meal by three nymphs. Nathaniel’s mother stared at him, scrutinizing every inch of his face. “You’ve been spending an awful lot of time in those woods,” she said after a while.

He made himself shrug. “I suppose,” he said, like he hadn’t noticed.

“Is there anything you wanted to tell me about what you’ve been doing in there?”

“Well, you know I’ve been foraging—“

She interrupted him. “You know you can tell me if it’s ... more than that right? If you’ve found a girl you like?”

Nathaniel flushed, knowing his mother would be overjoyed to learn he was out in the woods, rolling around under the trees and getting his hands on one of the neighbors’ daughters. Much more normal than getting his hands on a towering faun, at any rate. Below the table, Nathaniel’s dick twitched. He pressed his hand against it, trying to squash the traitorous thing into behaving. “It’s not like that,” he stammered, knowing as he said it that his face must resemble an apple.

Nathaniel’s mother gave him a smile, like she didn’t believe him, but was content to let the conversation rest. “Well,” she said. “I hope you’re behaving like a gentleman, at any rate.”

Nathaniel bit the inside of his cheek. Hard. He nodded. “Truly though, I’m not feeling well,” he said. “I’d really just like to get to bed.”

Without another word he fled the kitchen.

X

A Builder's Treasury of Staircases

Adair sat in his cavern, relaxing in the hot pools and toying with the coin around his neck. His head ached from his mother's advice and the knowledge that Nathaniel had fae blood. He had immediately wanted to tell Nathaniel the truth about his father, but when he'd returned to where his sisters were swarming around him like amorous moths to a flame it had fallen from his mind. Minnow hadn't been in any state to receive such information, regardless.

It had been too easy to simply drop him off at home, letting the conversation rest for another time. He wasn't sure how telling Nathaniel about his father would affect their relationship, and he wasn't eager to find out. Adair had gone back to the meeting place long after court had been adjourned for the day, gathering Nathaniel's jacket, scarf and boots.

He wasn't ready to see Nathaniel again just yet—afraid of telling him the truth, and of concealing it in equal measures. So, he filled his Minnow's boots with aster flowers and set them on the edge of his family's land in the dead of night and snuck away like a coward.

Adair was still furious with his sisters. He loved them, would die for them, but he couldn't believe how brazen they were sometimes. Then, there was Nathaniel himself. "*It's you I wanted.*" His drunk, lust-thick voice had gone straight to Adair's cock. Had he not been wanting to hear those words since they'd first encountered each other? And yet, he had submitted so easily to the desires of the sisters. Had Nathaniel's desire for Adair been from the wine alone?

Adair couldn't help the sinking, envious feeling in his chest. Nathaniel had indeed been first drawn to the girls, the

day they'd all met. His fingers clutched at the coin on his neck. It had been three days, and he couldn't hide from Nathaniel any longer. There was nothing for it; he'd simply have to ask him the truth of things. If he wanted nothing to do with Adair beyond a lively fuck, so be it. Besides, Adair cared for him enough to know that he owed him the truth about his father.

Adair found Nathaniel waiting nervously in their spot by the border stone. The young man paced, twisting his hat in his hands and wearing a look of utter anguish. "Recovered, I see," Adair said in a mild voice.

"Adair, I—"

"Hush, Minnow," he said with a grin. Every time Adair laid eyes on Nathaniel's face his doubts seemed to vanish. Adair moved closer, and his voice turned serious. "I should have prepared you better. I shouldn't have left you alone with them. They're lovely, really, they just ..." Adair sighed. His sisters were difficult to explain. Nathaniel's expression still appeared anxious. "What is it?"

"I've come here the past three mornings," he said. "You've stayed away."

"I needed some time."

Nathaniel opened his mouth again, to apologize, but Adair found himself tired. He didn't want or need to hear it.

He held up his hand. "I shouldn't have let Beith get under my skin—and I should have been more careful with you. The fault was my own, Minnow. Besides," he said, "I was eager to show you off."

Nathaniel looked at his feet, smiling and bashful.

"So," Adair said, tentative. "How are you feeling?"

Nathaniel mumbled something.

"Didn't catch that."

"I feel like an appalling ass," he said, louder. "I feel humiliated. I feel awful that I upset you."

Adair took his hand. “That’s . . . not what I meant.”

The silence between them grew, neither giving ground, until Nathaniel finally said. “I’ve had an idea. To make it up to you.”

“Oh?”

“I think I’d like to show you off, too.”

So, for the second time, Adair found himself rummaging through the cast of items in his cavern to find something proper to wear to the village. Dressed and as ready as he’d ever be, Adair made his way through the wood. How Minnow could bear to wear things such as these he would never know—the fabric was tight, it abraded his skin, it snagged on branches and restricted his movement. By the time he reached their meeting place he was thoroughly annoyed with all of it. He heard voices through the trees and slowed his steps, listening to Nathaniel assure his brother the forest was nothing to fear.

Nathaniel and Adair had spent the previous afternoon concocting him an entire human life. Apparently, he was a gardener, apprenticed to an Apothecary in Riverchapel. “Just say we met in the forest and you’ve been teaching me about all the remedies and such.”

A half-truth, then. Adair found himself sort of wishing the story were entirely true. As he stepped out of the trees, both Stone brothers startled. He noted that Thomas jumped forward, placing his tiny body in front of his older brother. Brave. Adair smiled. “You must be Thomas.”

The boy peered up at him, bald mistrust on his young face. Adair noted that Thomas had a similar scent to his elder brother—less alluring perhaps, but it held the same strangeness. Human and wild. He supposed, after what his mother had told him, he shouldn’t be surprised.

After a tense silence that to Adair seemed endless, Thomas stuck out his hand. Bewildered, Adair glanced sidelong at Nathaniel, who gave him an encouraging sort of gesture. Unsure of what to do, Adair patted Thomas’s upturned wrist,

like he might pat the head of an animal. By the flabbergasted and judgmental look on Thomas's face, it was not the correct gesture. He could tell Nathaniel was trying very hard not to laugh.

Adair cleared his throat and withdrew his hand. "Shall we?" He gestured up the path with a casual confidence that he did not feel. Venturing past the safety of the trees was like shattering an invisible barrier that had shielded Adair all his life. He could feel Thomas's shrewd eyes on his back, so he took a step forward like he had nothing to fear.

He felt a hand in the small of his back. "You can do this," Nathaniel whispered in his ear. And he could, he knew.



When Adair came out of the trees, Nathaniel did his best to stifle his laughter as he took in the faun's bizarre appearance. Adair had promised he would disguise himself as a human for the day, insisting he could find some proper clothes. Well, he'd certainly tried. He wore a pair of loose grey trousers, far too short for his long legs, and no shoes. Under a green wool coat, he had on an enormous white shirt, bunched up all around the sleeves and stuffed untidily down the front of his trousers. On closer examination, Nathaniel was certain it was a night shirt, and indeed made for someone with a much heavier frame. Topping off the entire ensemble was a wide brimmed straw hat, balanced precariously on top of Adair's mop of curls, hiding his horns.

As Nathaniel made to follow Adair up the path toward the village, Thomas grabbed his sleeve.

"What?"

Thomas raised his brows. "Are you serious? *That's* the friend you've been spending all your time with?"

Nathaniel shifted, uncomfortable. "Yes."

Thomas's eyes went wide. "Nathaniel," he whispered, sounding terrified. "What is he?"

Frowning, Nathaniel lowered his voice. "You—you can tell —?"

Thomas scoffed, dropping his brother's arm. "Good grief," he said, turning to march back toward the house, trailing after Adair. "I'm not an idiot."

They spent the morning wandering the village, and Thomas remained cool and wary of his brother's companion. Nathaniel, however, was happy to show Adair around. They greeted the neighbors, introducing Adair according to the story they'd concocted. Nathaniel explained that Adair had been the one to teach him herb lore, and the citizens of Myrna gushed to him over how much the remedies had helped them all. Adair demurred, shyer than Nathaniel had ever seen him, but he could tell how pleased he was. Nathaniel delighted to watch as Adair interacted with his world, loving how charmed he seemed by the simplest things.

Niamh Bell was nervous to meet him—to her Adair must seem a veritable giant. But as Mrs. Bell insisted on having them in for tea so she could thank Adair for his part in helping her daughter, the little girl warmed to him considerably. Nathaniel laughed to see her clutching at his pant leg, trailing after him as Mrs. Bell showed him around the little house. When Nathaniel and Adair said their farewells, Niamh had given Adair a small bouquet of wild flowers well-crushed in her tiny fist.

Adair thanked her solemnly, and tucked the ruffled blooms into the band of his hat.

Thomas wandered off home sometime around midmorning, and Nathaniel decided to lead Adair to Iron Gall.

"Nathaniel!" Rory greeted him warmly when he led Adair inside. "And who is this absolute tree of a lad? I thought I knew everyone in this town."

Nathaniel grinned. "This is Adair. Adair, Rory."

After what happened with Thomas, Nathaniel had explained the custom of shaking hands, and Adair glanced at Nathaniel for confirmation before extending the courtesy to Rory. They shook hands, and now that they stood closer, Rory stared intently into Adair's eyes. "Pleasure to make your acquaintance," he said, sounding quite stiff and formal.

Nathaniel watched as Rory scrutinized Adair's face, uncharacteristically closed off. A tiny frown passed over Adair's lips. Rory dropped Adair's hand and stepped away, visibly shaking himself, and mustered a smile.

"Well, Adair, lovely to meet you. Lads, enjoy your browsing. I'll be doing some inventory out the back. Just give a shout if you need me."

He disappeared through a door behind the counter, and Adair watched him go with wary eyes until the door clicked shut, leaving him and Nathaniel alone. Nathaniel meandered down the aisles, running his hands over the spines of the books, searching. When he found what he was looking for, he slid it off the shelf. It was a book he'd read after he and Adair had first met. He flipped through the pages, beautifully illuminated with color illustrations, until—

"There," he said, laughing. He flipped the book around to show Adair. "It's you!"

Adair took the book, looking down at the rendering of a faun with a snort of disgust. The faun in the drawing was hideous: short and squat with hairy goat's legs and perverse leer on his face.

"As you can see," said Nathaniel, tapping the page. "He is wearing a flower crown."

Adair rolled his eyes, but he was smiling. They strolled through the shelves.

"You should pick something out," Nathaniel urged.

"What?"

"I want to get you a gift." He shrugged. "The only reason I have any coin to spend at all is because you taught me all those things."

Adair turned wondering eyes to the books, considering the titles. His eyes kept flicking back to Nathaniel, who was watching him eagerly. He perused the bookshelves in solemn silence, and Nathaniel was certain the faun had considered every single title in the shop before pulling one from the shelf. He held the volume so gingerly, like he thought it might

disintegrate in his hands, brushing fingers reverently across the cover. Adair flipped the book open, turning a few of the pages before closing it again and clutching it to his chest.

Nathaniel moved closer to read the title. It was *A Builder's Treasury of Staircases*.

He stared. "Are you sure?" Nathaniel suddenly wondered if Adair could read.

The faun nodded, eager.

"How about a book of poetry," Nathaniel wheedled. He'd been hoping Adair would choose something a bit more romantic, hoping to put a lot of unsaid things into the gift. Adair frowned down at his book, looking embarrassed.

"I like this one," he said in a small voice. "It's human."

Around lunch time, they sat on a grassy knoll on the outskirts of the town. Adair hadn't said a word since the bookshop and Nathaniel was certain he'd done something wrong. He watched Adair, who was looking at the book in his lap. Not reading it, just looking down at the cover, touching the leather and turning the volume over and over in his hands.

"Is everything alright?" Nathaniel asked at last.

Adair looked up. "I feel peculiar."

"In what way?"

The faun shifted around, looking out of sorts. "No one's ever gotten me a gift before," he said finally.

"What?" Nathaniel asked nervously. "How is that possible?"

Adair shrugged, and continued looking at his book. Nathaniel watched him, steeling himself to ask something he'd been wanting to ask for some time. "Adair," he said.

"Hmm?"

"How old are you?"

He looked up again. "I'm honestly not certain," he said. "I can remember your village being built. I watched from the

forest.”

Nathaniel gaped. “The village is at least two hundred years old.”

Looking at him with sad eyes, Nathaniel could tell that Adair was begging him silently not to ask the question he simply had to ask next. Nathaniel still recalled Beith’s words. *Latest Pet*. “Adair,” said Nathaniel. “What happened to your other lovers?”

Something slammed closed behind his eyes. “I’m not sure. They’re dead now, I expect.”

“They’re *dead*?”

“Dead, or gone, what’s the difference?” he snapped. “They all stopped coming to the forest eventually, anyway. I’ve kept to myself for quite some time.”

“I’m sorry,” said Nathaniel. “I shouldn’t have—“

“It’s alright.” Adair stood, clutching his book and holding out his hand to help Nathaniel to his feet.

They walked together back through the village, side by side, allowing their knuckles to bump together. When they reached his house, Nathaniel made to open the gate, but Adair grabbed his hand. “Thank you for today, Minnow.”

“Of course,” said Nathaniel, turning the new information over in his mind. Adair had been alone for longer than Nathaniel had been alive, a sobering thought. Looking up at him, in his ridiculous straw hat, Nathaniel decided it didn’t change a thing. None of it mattered. He smiled. “You should stay for dinner.”

The faun returned the smile in a tremulous sort of way. “Lead on.”

While Nathaniel helped his mother cook, he watched Adair curled up on the hearth rug with his new book open in his lap. Thomas sat in a rocking chair, watching the faun as well. After a while, he got up and joined his mother and brother in the kitchen.

“Why is he reading about *staircases*?”

Nathaniel shrugged. “He likes it.”

“You told us he’s a gardener,” Thomas reminded him.

“He can like two things.”

“Hush, Thomas,” said their mother. “You’re being very rude. Why don’t you offer our guest some tea?”

Grumbling, Thomas retreated to fetch the kettle. Nathaniel could feel his mother’s eyes on his back. He peeled potatoes over the bin as he listened to her not saying anything quite loudly. He sighed, laying down the paring knife, and turned to look at her. He was startled to find her looking sad—sad and scared and weary. Nathaniel saw every line of her face was scratched deep with grief. Her breath caught in her throat and she took her son’s face in her hands. She kissed his forehead and turned away, wiping her eyes on her apron. “Mama, what—?”

“It’s nothing, Love,” she said, hiding her face. She busied herself stirring the pot of stew simmering away on the kitchen fire.

When dinner was ready, Nathaniel sat across the table from his mother, Adair on his right and Thomas on his left. As he ladled stew into everyone’s bowls, he realized he had no idea what Adair ate. He shot the faun a look, lifting an eyebrow up. Adair looked at his bowl, eyes wide. He poked politely at it, seeming to enjoy the vegetables but leaving the cubes of meat behind.

“So, Adair,” said Thomas abruptly. “What’s the name of your village?”

“It’s called Riverchapel.”

“And what exactly do you do there?”

“Well, I tend the Laird’s garden, and I’m apprenticed at the apothecary shop in the village.”

Thomas returned to his food, in no way mollified. Nathaniel nudged him under the table with his foot and cleared his throat to change the subject when Adair said suddenly, “So, Moira, when did you and your late husband meet?”

Moira startled, but recovered quickly. “Oh, we met about twenty four years ago, now.”

“And when did he pass away?”

Nathaniel gaped at him, fork halfway to his mouth. “*Adair*,” he hissed.

“About eight years ago.” Her whole face tightened.

“Why didn’t you take another husband?”

Nathaniel kicked his shin. Adair ignored him, and Moira blushed. “Well, the boys’ father was the love of my life,” she said. “I had no desire to wed again.”

There was a brief pause before Thomas spoke up again. “Why do you come all the way to the forest near Myrna?”

“This forest holds a great many rare plants,” Adair answered. “Well worth the journey. Now, tell me, Moira, where did you and your late husband meet?”

Nathaniel assumed Adair was trying to be polite, making conversation and asking about his mother’s life—but prying into his father’s death was a bit much. Adair grunted as Nathaniel stomped on his toes below the table, but didn’t move his eyes from Moira Stone’s face. Nathaniel watched as his mother set her jaw, an uncharacteristic aggression etched into her soft face. She held Adair’s gaze for a long while. “I met him in the forest,” she said, and she said it like a challenge.

Nathaniel frowned, looking between them. Adair broke first, lowering his eyes to his plate with a shaky nod. Bewildered, Nathaniel attempted to divert the flow of conversation, but Thomas had already seized control during the brief silence. “Adair, what’s your family name?”

Nathaniel panicked, realizing they hadn’t invented one. Adair hesitated for the briefest of moments, just long enough to seem odd, and stammered. “Leaf . . . son.”

Thomas’s eyebrows shot up toward his hairline. “Leafson.” His face read frank disbelief.

Adair nodded. “That’s right.”

“It’s Halvän!” Nathaniel said loudly, with a glare at his brother. Halvö was a cold, dreary country on a peninsula far to the north.

The rest of the meal passed much the same. Nathaniel tried in vain to interject, to stop the unending volley of questions from both Adair and Thomas. Neither one would be deterred, no matter how many times he found their shins with his foot, so by the time he stood to collect the dishes he’d all but given up hope of getting a word in edgewise.

As Nathaniel scraped the plates into the bin, he strained to hear the conversation transpiring in his absence.

“Why do you wear your hat inside?”

“It’s part of my ... culture.”

“Your *Halvän* culture?”

“Er, yes.”

Feeling the whole thing had gone horribly, Nathaniel was shocked to hear his mother ask if Adair would like to stay the night rather than travel home by dark. He accepted graciously, thanking her for dinner, and she made up the trundle bed in Nathaniel’s bedroom. Nathaniel was utterly lost, feeling like at some point he must have blacked out and missed something.

“What on earth was that about?” he whispered to Adair as he climbed into bed. The faun rolled over, propping himself up on one elbow. He’d taken off his hat, but pulled the blanket up around his head like a hood. His feet stuck awkwardly off the end of the trundle.

He shrugged, perhaps a shade too innocent. “I guess she liked me.”

“Uh huh, Mr. Leafson.” Nathaniel blew out the candle on his windowsill and watched Adair scrunch around to get comfortable. After much grumping and huffing, Nathaniel finally asked, “What?”

With a final snort, Adair wound up on his stomach, one leg bent at a right angle and the other sticking straight off the mattress. “Beds are weird.”

Nathaniel rolled his eyes.

Something moved on the corner of his mattress, and he squinted in the dim light to see Adair's upturned hand resting by his pillow. He smiled and walked his fingers across the blanket to twine their hands together.

When Nathaniel woke some time later, pins and needles shot up his arm, which had fallen down off the edge of the bed. His hand, and the trundle bed beside him were empty. He reached down and touched the pillow, finding it still warm. Assuming Adair had wandered off to relieve himself or get a drink of water, Nathaniel shook the feeling back into his tingling hand and rolled over to fall back asleep.

Then he heard voices coming from the den. Curious, he got up, moving quietly through the door and down the hall. He saw his mother sitting beside the fire in her rocking chair. Adair passed behind her, his hat back on his head.

"I know what you are," Moira said suddenly.

Adair sighed. "Yes," he said. "I thought you might."

Nathaniel moved closer to listen.

"Did you know him?" Asked Moira, the break in her voice nearly imperceptible.

"No," Adair said. "My mother told me. She says Nathaniel favors him quite closely. I'm sorry."

Nathaniel watched, confused, as his mother nodded sadly. She still hadn't taken her eyes from the fire. "My son loves you," she said, and Nathaniel thought he was going to die of shame, until he caught Adair's private smile, sweet and pleased in the half light. His mother stood from her chair and picked up Adair's book from the table. She handed it over, and he wrapped his arms around the volume, holding it close. Standing in the shadow of the corridor, Nathaniel saw his mother lift Adair's hat off his head by the brim, brushing his curls aside so she could see his horns. He slouched, allowing her to touch them, blinking apprehensively.

She sighed in a resigned sort of way as she drew back. "You are very handsome," she said.

“You’re kind to say so.”

She plopped the hat back down on his head. “I always did think Nathaniel favored his father,” she said with a wry smile. “But I suppose he takes after me as well.”

Nathaniel retreated back to his bedroom, head spinning. He lay down, stiff as a board, feigning sleep when he heard Adair slide in through the creaky doorway.

“I know you’re awake,” he said, exasperated. “You think I couldn’t hear you walking down the hall?”

Nathaniel sat up. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t know how. I only just found out.” Adair sat on the edge of the bed. “I’m so sorry.”

Nathaniel’s throat constricted, burning. He found he couldn’t speak, so he turned away and looked out the window toward the trees. With a sad little sigh, Adair moved to lay back down on the trundle mattress. Nathaniel tossed and turned a bit, unsure of what to say or how to feel. “Hey,” he said into the dark.

“Yes?”

Nathaniel chewed his lip. “C’mere.”

The weight of Adair’s body on the bed beside him was reassuring, and Nathaniel scooted closer, curling into his side. Adair brushed his hand lightly up and down Nathaniel’s arm, his breathing soft and slow until they both fell asleep.

XI

Ezra Stone

The bed in Nathaniel's room was the same one he'd had since he was a boy, and it was not large. He'd never shared it with anyone before.

So when Nathaniel woke up entirely enveloped, surrounded, pressed into the mattress—it was a lot to take in. It was warm, first of all, stifling—though he suspected at least part of that was unique to Adair, whose skin was always hot.

Nathaniel rolled over as gently as he could. When he saw the way a sunbeam glowed across Adair's sleeping face, his first thought was that he'd fallen into bed with an angel. Then the faun's mouth fell open and he let out an enormous snore, and Nathaniel had to bite his arm to stop himself from laughing; even so, the bed shook with his silent giggles. He finally got himself under control, squirming under the weight of Adair's arm and leg that had slung carelessly across his body sometime in the night. Extricating one hand from the press of limbs, Nathaniel tangled his fingers in the faun's hair, examining the curls, amusing himself by trying to identify each individual color he found there. As Nathaniel worked his fingers through Adair's mane, he noticed the sunlight bouncing off the gold inlays of his horns and had to touch them too. They were warmer than the rest of him, something Nathaniel had noted before, but it gave him a little thrill all the same.

Adair snoozed on, so Nathaniel continued his exploration of his face with his fingertips. A small voice in the back of his mind stirred, trying to remind him what he'd learned last night. Nathaniel squashed it. Ignoring the voice was easy with

such a vision in his bed. The splashes of freckles across Adair's cheeks looked especially sweet with the sun falling on them like this. Nathaniel dragged his thumb over the soft blush of Adair's bottom lip, plump and twitching with every sleepy breath. He smiled to himself, moving his fingers down into Adair's wiry beard, past the jut of his jaw bone, and had to stifle another laugh when he realized Adair had slept in the horrendous billowing shirt he'd worn the day before. The collar dipped down into a deep vee, exposing a thick tuft of chest hair.

Nathaniel's breath hissed out between his teeth, and as he worked up the nerve to touch it, he felt a pair of enormous hands moving through the hair on his own head. Startled, he looked up into Adair's sleepy smile, and saw the faun had opened his eyes to peer blearily down at him.

Nathaniel pulled his hand back and sat up, embarrassed. Adair sat up too, his long legs braced on either side of Nathaniel on the cramped mattress.

"You look strange in clothes," said Nathaniel before he could stop himself.

Adair actually looked bashful, his freckled cheeks glowing pink, and before Nathaniel could stammer in protest, he reached down below the hem of his nightshirt and pulled it off over his head. It snagged on one of his horns. Nathaniel chewed his lip in attempt to steady himself, half because watching Adair get undressed was a *lot*—strange, considering he'd never even seen him in clothing until the morning prior—and half because he was trying not to laugh at his beautiful, grumbling, angel struggling to wrestle his head out of the hideous shirt. He finally extricated himself with a snort, shaking his freshly tousled curls.

Tossing the nightshirt aside, Adair laid back down on the pillows stretching his arms above his head, arching his back to push his body up into the sunlight. Nathaniel raised his brows, and Adair blinked his enormous eyes, lashes fluttering innocently. "You could keep doing what you were doing before," he said. "If you want."

With a smirk, Nathaniel braced his knees on either side of Adair's hips, placing his palms on his chest. Adair slid his hands up to grip Nathaniel's wrists, squeezing his forearms. He closed his eyes with a contented little hum, and Nathaniel leaned down to kiss him.

Nathaniel felt Adair's lashes tickling the skin of his face as he pulled away. He brought his hands up to touch the faun's freckles, his ears, his horns, the soft skin of his throat. Adair stretched and sighed, clearly happy to be enjoyed. Nathaniel moved his hands down Adair's chest, sliding his palms to his sides, walking his fingers up the bones of his ribs. He stroked the hair below Adair's navel, feeling almost as drunk as he'd gotten on the Nightshade wine. Almost.

Adair shifted his hips, pushing his hardness up against Nathaniel's body—the thin fabric of the sheet doing little to create a barrier between them—and his feeling of inebriation doubled. The faun opened his eyes, staring intently up into Nathaniel's face.

“What?”

“If I said you looked strange in clothes, would you undress too?”

Nathaniel laughed. “Perhaps.”

Adair sat up against the headboard, pulling Nathaniel eagerly into his lap. His hands moved to the collar of Nathaniel's shirt, gentle, and he popped the first button open, then the second. The third took him a bit longer, because his lips had attached themselves greedily to Nathaniel's throat and he started getting in his own way. A few frustrated snorts later and Adair had managed to undo the rest of the buttons before licking a hot, wet stripe from Nathaniel's navel to his collar bone. Nathaniel's head dropped back and he wrapped his arms around Adair's neck. The faun slid his warm hands up Nathaniel's chest beneath his shirt, and Nathaniel peeked down between them to admire Adair's finger bones jutting out beneath the soft white fabric.

Adair pushed the shirt off over Nathaniel's shoulders, letting it fall away. Slipping out from beneath him, Adair knelt

in front of Nathaniel on the mattress. His eyes drank in the sight of Nathaniel's bare skin, staring at him like he'd never tire of it. For some reason it made Nathaniel want to hide. Adair trailed the knuckles of one hand up the side of Nathaniel's arm, up to his chin, tilting his face up into the sunlight streaming in through the window. "Beautiful," he said, voice hoarse.

Nathaniel averted his eyes, demure and nervous.

With his other hand braced against the small of Nathaniel's back, Adair yanked his body tight against his own, kissing him hard and hungry.

Nathaniel moaned against his mouth, melting into the kiss. Adair's hands were everywhere—fluttering over his waist, his neck, tangled in his hair, and Nathaniel struggled to keep up. His own fingers trailed up Adair's spine, stroking his shoulder blades, gripping the muscles of his arms. Nathaniel was hard enough to hammer a fence post, and Adair was soon digging an eager hand down the front of his trousers, wrapping Nathaniel's cock in his long fingers. Nathaniel gasped, and Adair filled his open mouth with his tongue while using his other hand to wriggle down the waistband of Nathaniel's trousers. Adair kissed his way across Nathaniel's jaw, down to his neck, pumping him in time with the hot press of his lips. Nathaniel whined, rutting harder into Adair's tight fist, his fingers sliding up into the faun's hair, now damp with sweat.

With a powerful twist of his shoulders, Adair spun Nathaniel so he was lying on his back with the faun braced on top of him, looking into his eyes. His hand was still busy on Nathaniel's leaking dick, thumbing the slit at the head to slick him up with his own pre-come. His other hand cupped Nathaniel's cheek, and he lowered his lips to kiss him again like he couldn't get enough.

When Nathaniel turned his head to draw a shaky breath, Adair pushed a soft kiss to the shell of his ear and whispered, "You know that I love you, too, Minnow."

Nathaniel stared at him, incredulous and glowing. He swallowed, opening his mouth to try to find the right words. "I

—”

Bang. “You lads should come get some breakfast!”

Like he’d been struck by lightning, Nathaniel jolted, wrenching himself out from under Adair and rolling onto his front down onto the trundle bed mattress. “Just a moment!” He called, voice a croak. Nathaniel moved to kneel, looking up at Adair with an embarrassed grin, stuffing his dick back into his trousers and searching for his discarded shirt.

Adair sat cross legged on the bed, a confused pout on his face like he didn’t understand the connection between the knock on the door and them having to stop pawing at each other. Once again covered up, Nathaniel braced one knee on the mattress and took Adair’s face in both of his hands. “I love you.” He paused. “Sorry you had to hear it from my mother first.”

Adair smiled, still bemused, but dressed himself all the same. Nathaniel swept the hat over his horns and kissed the tip of his nose.

After breakfast, the two absconded to the woods, sitting back to back on a fallen tree beside the pond where they’d first met. Adair had barely waited until they were beyond sight of the village before stripping out of his human clothes with ill grace and mumbled complaints.

They sat in silence for a while, the pleasant glow of their morning together tucked safely away for later examination, before Nathaniel said, “So that’s what your mother wanted to tell you? The day we went to court?”

“That,” Adair sighed, “And other things. I should have told you straight away.”

“It’s alright,” Nathaniel said. “I know you would have, once you found the words.”

The quiet over took them again for a while, and Nathaniel could feel the tension in Adair’s body behind his.

“How could you not have known him?” He asked after a while.

Nathaniel felt the bones of Adair's ribs shift against his back as he shrugged. "Not all of us like to gather, Minnow. I'm certain there's dozens of folk in this forest I've never met before. My mother said he kept to himself mostly, and he hardly ever came back to the woods once he met your mother."

Nathaniel pulled a chunk of moss off the log and tossed it into the water, saying nothing.

"He loved her very much," Adair said quietly. "And you. And Thomas."

"How am I supposed to tell him about this?"

"I don't know."

"Did she tell you anything else about him?" Nathaniel asked, desperate to learn anything else about this man he thought he'd known, and missed so fiercely.

Adair let out another sigh before answering. "She told me one more thing."

"What is it?"

"She told me where he's buried."

Nathaniel spun to face him. "You have to take me there."

"Minnow—"

"No," Nathaniel said. "That's not a question. I have to see—I have to," his voice broke. "We never knew."

Adair slid gracefully to his feet and extended a hand. "It's quite far."

"Good thing I'm wearing my best boots, then."

Adair squeezed his hand. "Alright."

They walked, and walked. It was hard to place the time as the sky was thickly clouded, but Adair showed no signs of slowing. As they moved further and further into the forest, Nathaniel felt something like a fist contracting around his heart. "We're near, aren't we?"

Adair turned to him, surprised, and nodded. “Just over that ridge.” His eyes were restless as he let Nathaniel lead them up the small hill down into the glen beyond.

The glen itself was unremarkable, but Nathaniel approached the center with a strange fear squirming in his belly. The clearing was empty but for a slim tree, straight and sad as a dry bone and just about the same color. Somehow, Nathaniel knew the tree was there to mark his father’s place. He approached it warily, struck with an urge to touch the bark. Suddenly, Nathaniel realized he was alone in the ravine. He turned around to see Adair hovering nervously on the ridge.

Adair wrapped his arms around himself, and his eyes grew big and round, darting all over like he was looking for an escape route. Momentarily distracted, Nathaniel crossed back up and wrapped a hand around Adair’s upper arm. The faun nearly jumped out of his skin, like he’d forgotten Nathaniel was there.

“What’s wrong? You’re shaking.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, his voice hoarse and agitated. “We don’t usually ... visit our dead.”

“What?”

Adair squeezed his lips shut and shook his head, frantic. “Fae graves are cursed places. I shouldn’t have brought you here.” He backed away a step.

“Fine,” said Nathaniel, reaching up to brush the fringe from Adair’s forehead. “Stay right here.”

Nathaniel turned and went back down the hill toward the little tree. He could feel Adair’s agitation behind him and it set his teeth on edge. He hugged himself, looking at the tree, trying to feel something of the father he remembered. There was nothing.

He shuddered as a gust of wind rattled the branches of the surrounding trees, setting the leaf litter scurrying around Nathaniel’s feet. Looking down, something at the base of the little tree caught his eye. A small flat stone had been laid

against the roots. Nathaniel crouched, feeling his throat constrict, and brushed the rest of the leaves away.

Carved roughly into the surface were four letters. “EZRA.”

A few small droplets fell and burst on the surface of the grave marker, and Nathaniel reached shaking fingers up to his face, looking for tears he hadn’t realized were falling, but his eyes were dry. Drops on the back of his head, more on the stone. Rain. Nathaniel brushed the carved letters with his fingers and stood. A warm, trembling hand slipped into his.

Adair pressed himself close to Nathaniel’s side, clearly still terrified. “What’s Ezra?” He whispered.

Nathaniel frowned, turning toward him. “My father,” he said. “His name was Ezra.”

Adair looked bewildered. “I thought his name was Abhain.”

“What?” Nathaniel dropped Adair’s hand at once. “You’re telling me,” he said, “I didn’t even know his *name*?”

Adair balked. “That’s just what my mother told me—“

“Oh my *God*.” Nathaniel covered his face with his hands.

“Keep your voice down,” Adair hissed, looking wildly around the clearing.

Nathaniel crouched, covering his head and pressing his forehead to his knees. Adair dropped beside him and wrapped long arms around him. “I didn’t know him at all,” Nathaniel told his kneecaps. “What kind of person is like that? Who even was he?”

Adair wormed his hand in to nudge Nathaniel’s chin up, forcing him to look back toward the grave. “Look,” he said. “That tells it all.”

“What?”

“Whatever else, he asked to be buried under the name he took when he made his life with your mother. That tells you all you need to know about what kind of man he was.”

Nathaniel allowed Adair to haul him to his feet, and the faun slid an arm around his waist. He let his head fall to

Adair's shoulder and they stood quietly in the rain.

"Minnow?" Adair's voice was weak and small.

"Yeah?"

"Can we please leave now? This is not a good place."

"Oh for heaven's sake," Nathaniel snapped. "Can't you see this is important to me? I know you have your own superstitions but—"

"Superstitions?" Adair hissed. He took Nathaniel by the shoulders, giving him a little shake. "It's so much more than that. Look at me. You never asked how—how your father died."

Nathaniel went cold all over, realizing Adair was right. "How—"

"I don't actually know. But we don't ... we don't have very many dead, Minnow. You told me that I'm at least two hundred years old. My mother is far older than I am." He paused. "I haven't known *anyone* from our world who's died."

Nathaniel blinked. "How is that possible?"

"I don't know but these places—they're wrong. They shouldn't be."

"Shouldn't be what?"

Adair struggled with himself. "They just *shouldn't be*. They're vulnerable to things. Bad things."

Nathaniel opened his mouth again but Adair bowled straight over him.

"I promise, I'll answer any question I can but, can we please, *please*, just get away from here?"

Nathaniel swallowed around the lump in his throat and nodded. He was cold all over, feeling something in his chest tearing slowly. Talking about his father's final resting place like it was a nest of vipers was a particular sort of pain. "Alright."

They walked in silence for a while, and Adair tugged Nathaniel along, refusing to slow his pace until they'd put significant distance between themselves and the grave. The rain fell harsher and colder with each step, the sky darkening overhead with night and clouds alike. Nathaniel's steps grew slower as the rain soaked his clothes and filled his boots.

"I think we'd better stop somewhere for the night," said Adair. "My cavern is near here."

Nathaniel nodded again, still not quite ready to speak. He was not eager to go home and face his family with what he now knew. By the time they reached the cave, Nathaniel was beyond weary. Adair was treating him like he were made of glass, barely making eye contact and keeping his touches minimal. It was unlike him and tiring. Nathaniel could tell he felt guilty: guilty for keeping the knowledge of Nathaniel's father to himself, guilty for pulling him from the side of the grave.

"Why don't you take a bath, Minnow?" Adair's voice was soft and gentle. "You're shivering."

Once they were inside the cave, Adair turned his back and busied himself with the hearth, wordlessly giving Nathaniel privacy to shrug out of his wet clothes and pad off alone toward the pools.

He soaked in the water, staring up at the worms glowing on the ceiling, wishing he could will his mind to blankness. He stayed in the water for a long time, dissecting the memories he had of his father, wondering why his mother had never told him who he'd been. He wasn't angry with Adair for not telling him, not truly. If anything, he was angry with his father, and his mother. But in actuality, Nathaniel felt he didn't have the strength to be angry with anyone just now. It wasn't until he'd been sitting for quite some time that he realized he hadn't even considered what this information might mean for himself or Thomas. He'd been so lost in his grief, in thoughts of his father's double life, and hadn't even spared a single thought to how having fae blood might affect him. Nathaniel realized he didn't even know *what* his father was. His time at court with Adair had shown him there were fae folk of all sorts.

Immediately, Nathaniel ran his hands over his own scalp, probing for signs of horns, peering down at himself as if he'd suddenly sprout wings or a tail. It was odd, a feeling like someone had hidden something in his body and he'd had no idea.

By the time Nathaniel climbed out of the pools, Adair was curled up asleep by the hearth in the adjacent chamber. Nathaniel's heart ached to see that the faun had set him up his own sleeping spot on the other side of the fire. His clothes were dry and folded, and as he slipped them on, he couldn't decide if he was happy to have his space, or just crushed and lonely.

Nathaniel found he couldn't sleep. Rolling toward the mouth of the cave, he watched the rain for a while. The sound was oddly reassuring. Rationally, Nathaniel knew it would be foolish to trudge his way home in the freezing rain, but he knew his family would be worried. His mind buzzed and he wanted nothing more than to turn it off.

The cave was snug and warm, though the fire had burned low, casting golden shadows on the walls. It was warm enough that Nathaniel was suspicious there was more to the fire than met the eye, but he was not about to complain. Nathaniel wrapped himself tighter in Adair's fur blankets and rolled back over to watch the flames flicker. Adair lay on the other side of the hearth, reclining on his back and snoozing contentedly. Nathaniel smiled to watch him sleep, seeing the carefully constructed otherworldly demeanor melt away.

Nathaniel moved as quietly as he could around the fire to sit beside his sleeping host. Adair had snuck up on him so many times in the woods that a small, wicked part of him wanted to get revenge. He was just about to prod Adair in the ribs, curious if he were ticklish, when the faun huffed out a deep sigh, shifting in his sleep. It struck Nathaniel how colossally stupid it would be for him to startle a wild being of unknown power as he slept. For all they'd shared, there was still quite a bit that Nathaniel didn't fully understand about him. Considering just retreating back to his side of the fire, Nathaniel swept his eyes over Adair's body.

Stretched naked on the floor of the cave, perfectly at ease, Adair was an absolute masterpiece. Nathaniel couldn't help himself; he feasted his eyes on the sleeping faun, committing every inch of his body to memory. They'd been at such close quarters in Nathaniel's bedroom, half dressed, with blankets between them—he hadn't been able to take in the entirety of him, the beauty of his form as a whole. He worked his eyes down Adair's chest, toward his navel and past his hips and found himself hypnotized. Even at rest, Adair's manhood lay heavy and thick against his thigh, nestled in a thatch of wiry golden curls. He hadn't gotten a direct look at it when they'd woken up together—had it only been just that morning? But he was certainly looking now. The desire to touch Adair now was painful in its intensity. Where before it had been borne of a playful impulse to tease, it had evolved into something else entirely.

Before he could lose his nerve, Nathaniel reached out a trembling hand to cup Adair's face, brushing his thumb over his sharp cheekbone.

Adair woke instantly, reaching up to seize Nathaniel's wrist. Without taking his eyes from Nathaniel's face, he tilted his head to press a soft kiss to his palm. "Hello."

He flushed and looked away.

"You blush quite prettily, did you know that?"

"Funny enough, no one's ever told me that before." Nathaniel was stalling. The intention in Adair's eyes was plain as the sun, and certainly Nathaniel had woken him for a reason. He wanted this desperately, but he was also nervous.

Adair pulled himself to sit upright and cradled Nathaniel's face in his hands, like he understood exactly what was going through Nathaniel's mind. "You sure about this, Minnow?"

Nathaniel's eyes fell to the coin around Adair's neck, and he realized he was indeed sure. Looking back up, though, he frowned. Adair's eyes were wide and anxious all of a sudden. "Are *you*?"

Adair chewed his bottom lip, saying nothing. He dropped his hands to his lap.

“Talk to me,” Nathaniel said, resting a timid hand on Adair’s knee.

Adair twisted his fingers over each other. “What happens after?”

“What do you mean?”

The faun looked back at him, green eyes now focused entirely on Nathaniel’s face. “After. Will you still ... want me?”

Nathaniel frowned, flustered. “Why, are you bad at it?”

Adair let out a disgruntled snort. “Of course not.”

“Then I don’t understand the question.” The last thing Nathaniel expected was to have to talk Adair into this.

“This is very new ground for me.”

“How so?”

Adair fidgeted with the edge of the fur pelt beneath him. “Usually this is the end.”

“What?”

“Usually, this is all anyone needs from me,” Adair said. “And then they go.”

Nathaniel’s heart broke for him. “I won’t go.”

“I don’t want to lose you, Minnow.”

Nathaniel pulled him in for a deep kiss. “You won’t.”

In answer, Adair kissed him again, and Nathaniel sank into his lips, allowing Adair to explore his mouth, content to let him have control. Adair’s kisses grew more insistent, and when he bit Nathaniel’s lower lip, Nathaniel moaned out loud. Adair lowered his hands to Nathaniel’s waist, tugging him forward. He swung his leg over obediently, straddling Adair’s lap. Nathaniel ran his hands through the faun’s hair, tugging lightly against his scalp. Their noses met in a messy collision as Adair broke their lips apart.

“You know how I found you? The day we met?” His voice had sunk to a low growl, the ghost of his confidence returning. Nathaniel couldn’t help but smile; something in the way he spoke told him that this was a dance with which Adair was intimately familiar.

“How?”

Adair tightened his grip, almost painful against Nathaniel’s skin. He thrust up, grinding his cock against the inside of Nathaniel’s thigh. “I could smell you,” he rumbled. The way he said it was a bit threatening, and with a frightening strength he tipped Nathaniel over, swapping their positions. The faun seized his hands, entwining their fingers together and pinning Nathaniel to the floor of the cave. Adair lowered his lips to kiss Nathaniel again, bruising hard, and nosed the line of his jaw, covering it with kisses and bites until his breath was hot on Nathaniel’s ear. “Never smelled anything like it,” he whispered rolling his hips against Nathaniel’s body pressed below him. The feel of their hard cocks pushing against each other, separated only by the fabric of Nathaniel’s trousers, was agonizing. “I knew I had to have you.”

Nathaniel shivered, feeling like possibly he should be a little afraid, but Adair’s words seemed to bypass his brain and go straight to his throbbing dick. With little movements of his hips, Nathaniel humped shamelessly against Adair’s body, begging, needing to be touched. Adair smiled against Nathaniel’s cheek, and rasped his tongue across the soft skin behind his ear, down the side of his neck, not shy about using his teeth as much as his lips.

Making quick work of Nathaniel’s buttons, Adair stripped him of not only his shirt, but every other stitch of clothing. A draft blew across Nathaniel’s chest, and he broke out all over in gooseflesh. Adair’s enormous green eyes were hungry, pupils blown wide and glittering strangely in the light of their dying fire. Nathaniel couldn’t help it; he scrambled to cover himself with a blanket but Adair grabbed both of his hands in one of his and used the other to tilt up Nathaniel’s chin. “Let me look at you,” he said. His voice had changed again; it had now gone warm and soft. “Please?”

The tension in Nathaniel's arms relaxed, and he swallowed, nervous, as Adair raked over his naked body with his eyes for the first time. When the faun kissed him again it was softer, a gentle sort of question, and the sweetness Nathaniel tasted there had heat coiling in his belly. He circled his arms around Adair's torso, gripping his broad shoulders to pull their bodies together.

The noises coming from Adair made Nathaniel bold; he ran his tongue across the faun's collarbone, tasting the salt of his sweat, kissing each freckle on the warm skin of his shoulders. Nathaniel worked a hand between them and wrapped his fingers around both their cocks, pressing them against each other and pumping them both erratically with his nervous, sweaty palm. Nathaniel was dizzy, enchanted, watching the two of them rutting harder and harder into the hole made by his fist. Then, with a snort like an angry bull, Adair reared up, slipping his dick free of Nathaniel's grasping fingers and leaving Nathaniel stroking his own, rather lonely, shaft for a few bewildered moments. He seized Nathaniel by the hips and flipped him like a griddle cake, maneuvering him onto his hands and knees.

"Wait—wait," Nathaniel gasped, grabbing Adair's wrist to still him.

The faun released him immediately, and he wriggled free and turned over to see Adair rock back on his heels, eyes quizzical. Nathaniel had to stifle a small laugh behind his hand; seeing Adair's face—innocent, guileless, intensely vulnerable—with the contrast of his enormous hard dick thrust up between his legs, was equal parts filthy and sweet.

"What?" Adair said, sounding pained. He didn't bother trying to disguise the look of eager desire on his face.

Nathaniel took a second to gather his thoughts. "You've told me you've ... courted humans before."

Adair shrugged a shoulder. "A few. Mostly women."

"So, you have loved with men before?"

Adair nodded.

“And is it always like—like that?” Nathaniel gestured vaguely with his hand.

“Like what?” Adair asked impatiently, with the air of one who wanted to end the conversation as quickly as possible so they could resume fucking.

“You said—you said you ‘had to have me,’” Nathaniel said. “Has anyone ever ... had you?”

Adair’s eyes widened in surprise, his lips forming a tiny *oh*.

Nathaniel sat cross-legged, looking down at his hands. “If this could be a first for us both,” he said, “I’d like that.”

Nathaniel glanced up as Adair wrapped a hand around his own cock, almost subconsciously, like he couldn’t bear not touching it for a second longer. He sucked his lower lip between his teeth to stifle a whimper, and the tiny, eager sound that managed to escape had Nathaniel turning into the beast. He lunged forward, tackling Adair backward onto the pile of pelts, sinking his teeth into the faun’s neck like meant to draw blood, and covering his skin with frantic kisses. When he drew back to catch his breath, he moved his lips to the shell of Adair’s ear and whispered, “Let me make you mine.”

Adair trembled below him, thrusting his hips wildly to find some friction for his needy cock. “I’m already yours, Minnow,” he said, laid entirely bare.

Nathaniel sat up, just wanting to pause and admire the man beneath him for a moment. He slid his hands down Adair’s chest, over the taught muscles of his stomach, trailing his thumbs over the deep vee of his hips. He walked his fingertips up Adair’s dick, wrapped his hand around it and gave it a few strokes before moving back so he could get to the faun’s thighs, shoving them apart.

Having Adair splayed out on his back like a feast for the taking had Nathaniel swoon, faltering in his confidence, but he was hungry enough to be brave and fumble through. He pressed his fingers to Adair’s lips, and the faun opened his mouth, pink tongue darting out to pull his fingers in and coat them with spit. Adair looked straight into Nathaniel’s eyes as

he worked his tongue around his fingers; the gentle sucking pressure coupling with the movements of his tongue filled Nathaniel's mind with a whole host of ideas. He had to close his eyes to steady himself—one thing at a time.

His fingers slippery and wet, Nathaniel slid his hand between Adair's legs, stroking the delicate skin below his balls, and Adair whimpered eagerly. Nathaniel leaned forward, showering kisses on the tendons of Adair's neck while pressing gently with the pad of his finger, testing his entrance. The faun accepted him, hot and willing, clenching around Nathaniel's hesitant finger. The thought of getting that same tight, slick heat around his cock had Nathaniel reeling. He froze in place, overwhelmed, until Adair nuzzled up into the side of his neck. "More," he begged. "I need you."

Nathaniel pressed more kisses to Adair's sweaty forehead, pulling back with his finger and pushing in again with two. Nathaniel stroked Adair's channel, hesitant at first, slow, but with each sound breaching Adair's lips he grew more confident. Ever studious, Nathaniel took note of a certain spot that, when touched, had Adair bucking like an unbroken horse, pleased moans echoing around them. Nathaniel lingered there, stroking and circling it with his dexterous fingertips until he simply couldn't stand to wait any longer. He slipped his fingers out, and spit in his palm, slicking himself up before positioning his cockhead against the pink little pucker between Adair's legs. Braced on his knees, Nathaniel pushed inside.

Adair sighed, like music. He sighed like summer wind in marsh grass, sighed like the wings of a bird in flight as Nathaniel sunk in, deep. Adair clenching hot and tight around the meat of his dick had him roiling.

"Fuck," Nathaniel growled as he seated himself. Adair moved his thighs, angling his hips, opening himself. He wrapped his legs around Nathaniel's waist, locking his ankles together and squeezing tight with his thighs, pulling Nathaniel deeper. Nathaniel reared up tall on his knees, sliding his hands to cup the thick flesh of Adair's ass. He rolled his hips, sliding in and out—slow at first, transfixed as he watched his shaft disappearing and reappearing where they joined. As Nathaniel

buried himself to the hilt in Adair's beautiful body, he felt powerful, strong. He hooked his forearm under the crook of Adair's knee, pushing his thigh down against his belly, chasing a need to fuck him more deeply, as deep as he possibly could. Something dominant and animal roared to life in his chest as he watched Adair fall apart below him.

Nathaniel pressed his torso down, pushing as much of their fevered skin together as he could, moving his hips faster and harder. "You make me wild," he grunted into the faun's ear, bottoming out with an almost pained groan.

To Nathaniel's surprise, Adair submitted entirely, turning up his throat with a hungry gasp—his body begging to be claimed.

Nathaniel's free hand wound through his thick golden hair. "You're mine," he said, slamming into Adair's body over and over. "*Mine.*"

Nathaniel curled his spine, Adair's hands gripping frantically at his waist, pulling him close, pulling his hips to encourage Nathaniel to take him harder, faster.

Pushing himself back up, putting a little space between their bodies, Nathaniel grabbed for Adair's dick, squeezing hard, possessive. Nathaniel's thumb brushed over the velvety soft head, teasing the slit, pearly thick dew beading below the pad of his finger. "Come for me," he said, "Let me have you."

As Nathaniel slammed into him again, Adair moaned his name, arching his back and painting them both with thick, silvery ropes of come. Their chests slid over each other, the wet mess of Adair's pleasure against his skin had Nathaniel pumping his own seed deep into Adair's fluttering channel. He nipped and kissed Adair's upturned throat. "*Mine.*"

Adair, boneless beneath him on the pile of furs, nosed up toward Nathaniel's ear. "Yours," he husked. "All yours."

Panting, lying together on the blankets, they made no move to disentangle their bodies. "I can't believe," Nathaniel said, gulping for air, "that in two hundred years no one has ever fucked you like that."

Adair hummed happily, pulling Nathaniel to lay at his side. “I guess I’ve never met someone like you.”

“Oh, ha-ha,” said Nathaniel rolling his eyes. “Don’t patronize me.”

Adair rolled over immediately, staring intently into Nathaniel’s face. “I’m not,” he said, voice quiet. Then he grinned. “Besides,” he yawned, stretching like a cat and rolling onto his back. “Tomorrow, you’re mine.”



Nathaniel curled in on himself while he slept, tight and tiny with blankets wrapped around him, gripped with fitfully clutching fingers. Adair pulled himself to sitting, absolutely mesmerized to watch his little Minnow in slumber. His body was tired, aching, but his mind hummed with possibilities.

The echo of Nathaniel’s voice, quiet and thoughtful as he suggested they share something new together, was keeping him awake. That, and of course, the feeling of Nathaniel thrusting away inside him, thick and long and deep, a strange confident beast emerging from his timid shell to claim Adair’s body. The feeling of eager submission was a new one to him, but it had been like instinct. He’d meant it when he said he belonged to Nathaniel, more than just fevered pillow talk.

It wasn’t that he hadn’t felt that type of pleasure before. One did not live in one’s body for centuries without exploring every inch of it. He’d fucked himself on his fingers enough times to know the feeling—or so he’d thought, but being *filled* in such an exquisite way...Adair frowned, wondering if Minnow would be upset to be awoken after only a few hours’ rest. Adair was beyond eager to try again, eager to feel whatever other pleasures their bodies could bring to each other.

However, the day had been an eventful one, and part of Adair’s mind—the part that didn’t have a direct line to his cock—knew Nathaniel needed some time to rest, to process everything he’d learned about his father. The rest of Adair’s brain, however, was a bit more selfish. He carded a hesitant hand through Nathaniel’s hair. He gave a sleepy squawk in

response, pulling the blankets even tighter around himself. No. Adair could wait, until the morning at least.

He decided instead to worm his way into Nathaniel's impossibly tight cocoon of fur pelts, pulling their bodies flush together. Adair wrapped an arm loosely around Nathaniel's waist, scooting as close as he possibly could, pressing his lips to the knobby bone at the nape of Nathaniel's neck. His Minnow was so thin, curled up like a bundle of twigs. The bones of his hips were sharp, little handles made to fill Adair's hands. He stroked his thumb along one now, breathing in deeply of Nathaniel's scent. Adair didn't think he'd ever get enough of that smell, and in his opinion the aroma had only improved with the mingling of their seed and sweat under the blankets. He inhaled, closing his eyes. This seemed a fine thing, perhaps the finest he'd experienced in all his years. Smiling into Nathaniel's skin, Adair indulged himself for the first time in an entirely different sort of fantasy, of returning here every night with this man by his side—returning anywhere, really, he wasn't too choosy. They could curl up together, love and sleep and spend the nights wrapped entirely in each other.

As many nights as could be had, said a tiny voice in the back of his mind, *they are finite in number.* It was an ugly thought, one that had no place under these blankets. Adair tried to shove the words away.

His hand wandered down Nathaniel's thigh, just barely skimming his skin so as not to wake him. If he did wake, Adair reflected, it wouldn't be the worst thing. Adair could just fuck him right back to sleep again. The notion had the blood returning rapidly to his groin. There were *so* many things for them yet to share. Frowning, Adair stilled his fingers, trying and failing not to get himself too worked up.

He squirmed his hips back away from the soft skin of Nathaniel's ass, as it formed far too tempting of a target—but then he gave up and pressed against him again almost immediately because he disliked their being any space between them. With a frustrated huff, Adair peered to the

mouth of the cavern to track the progression of the sky from inky black to the first blush of dawn.

XII

The Bramble

The following morning, Nathaniel woke draped in musty fur blankets and sweaty faun limbs. Adair's nose pressed against his ear, filling it with huffs and snores. Nathaniel rolled over, curling against Adair's chest, letting their lips tangle up in a sleepy kiss. Adair roused straight away, his hands going to Nathaniel's hair before pushing him gently onto his back.

"Morning," Adair said with a yawn. He still hadn't even opened his eyes, but was already climbing on top of Nathaniel with an impressively hard dick.

"Good morning," Nathaniel replied with a breathless laugh as he marveled at the faun's ability to transition seamlessly from sleeping to fucking. Adair nuzzled into his neck, tongue and lips moving lazily over Nathaniel's skin.

"Wait, wait—ah!" Nathaniel gasped as Adair sucked his earlobe between his lips and flicked his tongue over the soft flesh.

"What?" Adair asked pulling away. He cocked his head to the side, wearing the quizzical expression Nathaniel couldn't help but love.

Nathaniel squirmed under the hot weight of Adair's body. "I have to go home," he said.

Adair snorted, grumpy. "Now?"

"Soon. My family will be worried." Nathaniel stretched his neck and Adair lowered his lips again immediately. "They'll think I was carried off by the dastardly fae folk," he breathed into Adair's ear, "and devoured."

“Hmm...” the faun mumbled, biting Nathaniel’s earlobe, perhaps a little bit harder than was strictly necessary. “That’s really not a good way to convince me to let you leave.”

Nathaniel closed his eyes and sighed, dropping his head back onto the blankets, allowing Adair’s lips to claim his jaw, his neck, the sharp expanse of his collarbones. Adair slid his tongue down Nathaniel’s chest, darting over the hard bud of his nipple, sucking it into his mouth and biting down just so, before propping his head on one hand to look up at Nathaniel, who was already panting.

“And you’re definitely about to be devoured,” he said with a wicked grin.



Since their first night together in the cave, Nathaniel had come to realize that despite his seeming to the contrary, Adair had been holding himself back, before, waiting patiently for Nathaniel to initiate their loving. Because now, Nathaniel could hardly go two steps into the forest without Adair pouncing on him. One minute he’d be strolling along and the next Adair would be pushing him up against a tree and shoving his hand down Nathaniel’s trousers.

Sometimes, he’d offer some sort of explanation like, “The sun was so beautiful shining on your face I had to see it on the rest of your skin,” or, “watching you eat that apple made me want to taste the juice from your lips.”

Often these explanations sounded like smutty poetry. Other times, Adair was more direct. “I wanted to fuck you while we watched the stars,” he said one evening as they lay tangled up and panting on a grassy hilltop with fireflies flickering all around them.

Nathaniel went home covered in scratches and little bruises, with torn clothing and twigs in his hair, dreamy eyes and a fucked out smile he could never quite wrangle into a more neutral expression. He knew his fellow townsfolk were probably whispering rumors behind their hands, especially with Adair dogging his footsteps in the village on an almost daily basis, because the faun was *not* shy with his looks, or

idle touches. Nathaniel found it very difficult to care, since he continued to bring home rare plants—flowers and roots and fungi Adair had taught him about—earning some much needed gold for his family by brewing medicines and balms and even perfumes. Whatever the villagers might say behind closed door was their business, as they were always grateful for Nathaniel’s help soothing the aches and pains of their care worn bodies.

The people of Myrna took to Adair kindly as well. He became famous for his ridiculous straw hat, soft smiles, and quiet ways.

One afternoon, Nathaniel and Adair made their way up the central dirt road in Myrna toward Iron Gall. One of Nathaniel’s favorite past times had quickly become showering his extra coin on Rory, the bookseller, to send away for volumes from the nearby city of East Carrigan. He was eager to learn more of healing, to be of more service to the townsfolk. The more he learned, the more he helped, the more he got to know his fellow villagers through his work—and the more he came to care for them.

A commotion on the side of the lane drew their attention. Myrna boasted an ancient dingy tavern called the Bramble, and a small crowd gathered by the door, looking at someone hunched on the ground, howling in agony. Nathaniel jogged over, Adair at his heels. He shoved his way into the press and crouched beside the man on the ground, sucking in a breath.

It was Sam Darling, a young man a few years older than Nathaniel who lived alone by the river on the outskirts of the town. The juncture where his neck met his shoulder was swollen and bruising, a strange lump rising from the meat of his shoulder. He clutched the arm close to his body, unable to move it.

“What happened?” Nathaniel asked those gathered.

The owner of the Bramble, a hard faced woman named Roisin, answered him. “Some hell-horse came tearing up the street,” she said. “No rider, no tack, big ugly wound down his side.”

“We tried to grab him,” someone else chimed in. “Got him to the stable ‘round back here, but the thing was *wild*.”

“Sam here tried to soothe him and got a hoof to his shoulder for the trouble,” Roisin continued. “Now that thing’s in my stable and none of the men can get within a foot of the door without it pounding against the wood. Far as I know, damn thing’s still bleeding.”

Nathaniel opened his mouth to say something, but at that moment Sam Darling let out a pained howl, drawing his focus. “Help me get him inside,” he commanded. Together, he and Adair assisted Sam over the threshold into the tavern.

They laid him out on one of the long tables, and Nathaniel set to work immediately undoing the buttons of his shirt to get a better look at the wound. Examining it, Nathaniel felt that it wasn’t as bad as he’d first thought. The skin wasn’t broken, and though Sam would have some spectacular bruising, Nathaniel thought it would heal up alright. He pressed gently on the grotesque lump on Sam’s shoulder, and the young man cursed foul and loud. Roisin wordlessly dumped a few shots of liquor down his throat.

Nathaniel’s heart raced, and he tried to steady himself. The bone was certainly broken, but Nathaniel knew what to do. “Hold him down,” he said. “Keep him still.”

Nathaniel sucked in a breath, knowing that to hesitate in his next action would cause Sam Darling even more, unnecessary pain. He braced his fingers on the lump of bone and pushed. Hard. Sam howled in agony, but Nathaniel knew he’d gotten the bone back in its proper place.

He pulled him to sit, and Sam was white as a sheet. He held out his hand expectantly and Roisin filled it promptly with a bottle. Sam took a long unmeasured swig as Nathaniel wrapped his arm to keep it in place as it healed,

“I think you’ll heal up well,” Nathaniel told him, checking the sling. “Keep it wrapped like this. I’ll come by your house tomorrow and check on you.”

“Thanks,” Sam said with a grimace. “Can’t wait.”

Nathaniel took a step back, shaken. He'd never set a broken bone before—he'd only read about the practice, and he was relieved he hadn't accidentally pulled Sam's arm off. He swallowed, hoping his lack of confidence didn't show on his face.

"This is all well and good," Roisin said, interrupting Nathaniel's thoughts, "but what about the bloody demon ransacking my stable?"

"Let me talk to him," Adair said abruptly.

"Talk to who? The horse?"

"Yes."

Nathaniel frowned, unsure what Adair was getting at, but he and Roisin followed him 'round the back of the Bramble all the same. Sure enough, the screams coming from the old stable were like nothing human—nothing like any animal that Nathaniel had heard, either.

Adair's face twisted with something, like he was feeling pains of his own. "Everyone stay back," he said, approaching the door of the stable which looked like to burst from its hinges as the creature inside hammered it with his hooves.

"Be careful," Nathaniel called, unable to keep the fearful tremor from his voice.

Adair ignored him, and approached the door. With one hand he grabbed for the latch and with the other he braced his palm against the wood. From where he was standing, Nathaniel could see Adair's lips moving, but he couldn't hear what he was saying over the braying screams of the animal inside.

The sounds quieted, and the door stopped shaking, but as soon as Adair lifted the latch to go inside, the horse screamed with renewed vigor, rearing and snorting and as its hooves connected with the door again it did burst free of the hinges.

Nathaniel started forward but Roisin grabbed his arm, holding him back as Adair moved forward into the stable. He was talking now, louder, his eyes on the beast—soothing noises, humming, kind words. Adair never took his eyes from the animal, feeling around the wall behind him for a lead.

When he found one, he took a few steps forward, and the horse backed away, retreating deeper into the cool, musty dark of the stable. Nathaniel shook free of the barmaid's grasp and approached the door. The horse was enormous, and while he indeed had no tack, he appeared to be dragging a splintered length of wood by a leather band around his middle, like a piece of a cart that had been ripped off. The wound on his side was hideous, deep and bleeding freely as the animal thrashed and stomped. His eyes rolled, and he reared, and with each movement fresh blood wept from the gash over his ribs. Still, Adair approached, holding the lead outstretched—almost like he wanted the horse to see he had it.

He took careful, deliberate steps—moving slow but showing no trace of fear. To Nathaniel's amazement, as Adair got closer the horse seemed to calm, bit by bit. He still seemed frantic and scared, but he kept his feet on the ground, reduced to little stomps of agitation, until Adair was close enough to pat the side of his face. He resisted at first, jerking his head away from the touch, but after a few moments he allowed Adair to touch his forehead and stroke the side of his neck.

“Well, I'll be damned.” Roisin had ventured to stand beside Nathaniel, a few paces inside her now-ruined stable door.

“I'm going to slip this on,” Adair told the horse, showing him the lead, letting him sniff the leather. “You've worn one before.”

Sure enough, the horse stood still and allowed Adair to put the lead around his neck.

“Well done,” Adair told him, speaking in a soft sing-song voice. He kept his tone gentle as he said, “Nathaniel? Could you come here please?”

Nathaniel knew that wound needed seeing to, so he hurried forward now that the animal seemed calmer.

As soon as he approached the horse brayed and tried to rear away, and Adair clucked his tongue. “It's alright,” he said. “This is Minnow. We like him.”

Nathaniel would not have thought that a horse could appear skeptical, and yet here he was. He shifted foot to foot nervously, allowing this animal to pass judgement on him. In the end, he supposed he must have passed inspection, as the horse stood quietly and allowed Nathaniel to disentangle him from the ruined fragments of the cart and get a good look at his wound.

Adair stood by the horse's head while Nathaniel cleaned and treated the gash best he could, petting him and speaking to him. To Nathaniel's utter amazement, the horse stood still and docile as a pony while Nathaniel tended to him. He even let Roisin approach and feed him an apple, whickering happily like he hadn't just tried to trample them all to death.

"You have a way with beasts," Roisin told Adair, watching as he combed his fingers absently through the horse's mane, undoing the tangles.

Adair shrugged a shoulder. "I suppose I—"

The horse bared its teeth, suddenly snatching Adair's hat by the brim and pulling it from his head. Adair gasped and ducked behind the animal's body, attempting to conceal the top of his head from view. He groped blindly as the horse kept the hat just out of reach, almost like it was teasing him, keeping the hat away on purpose.

Nathaniel stood frozen, panicked, sure Roisin was about to run screaming from the stable that Nathaniel had brought a horned demon among them. He turned toward her and saw that she had indeed clapped a hand over her mouth, eyes wide with surprise. Nathaniel skirted around her, tugged Adair's hat out of the horse's mouth and passed it to the faun, who hastily perched it back atop his head.

"Erm—" said Nathaniel, quite unsure of what he would say next.

Roisin turned abruptly on her heel and called over her shoulder, "I'll just go check on Sam, then, shall I? You lads just lock him in a stall when you're through here. I'll ask around town and find out if he belongs to anyone."

Nathaniel turned to Adair, who stood dumbstruck.

“Maybe she didn’t see,” he said, not really believing it.

“Yeah.” Adair’s brows knit together. “Maybe.”

Nathaniel shook himself and turned to look at the horse. “I don’t think he belongs to anyone in town.”

“He doesn’t,” said Adair.

Nathaniel startled. “How would you know?”

“He told me.” Adair turned worried eyes on Nathaniel. “They were traveling from Riverchapel. He was pulling his master’s cart along the road at the edge of the forest and something attacked them.”

“Something like, what—a wolf? A bear?”

“Perhaps,” Adair said, but it seemed to Nathaniel that there was something he was not saying.

Nathaniel waited for him to continue but Adair said nothing else, petting the horse’s forehead and regarding him thoughtfully. “What about the man?” Nathaniel prompted.

Adair shook his head sadly. He led the horse to one of the stalls. “I should go,” he said abruptly, his eyes already far away.

Adair left the stable, leaving Nathaniel standing alone and bewildered.



Adair stood over the smashed ruin of wood and splinters, all that remained of the cart the horse in Myrna had been pulling. He had found the place easily enough, the secluded road that connected Myrna and Riverchapel swept close to the forest for this small stretch. Smashed clay pots and piles of grain lay scattered around the wreckage, trampled into the mud in places by anxious hooves. There was blood on the wood, and with a sniff Adair could tell it was mingled human and animal.

The scent clinging to the wreckage was unfamiliar to him, and it was a twisted smell, wrong somehow. He crouched,

looking through the scraps, looking for evidence of who, or what, might have done this. He found small ruck sack filled with clothes, well made but well worn, and a tiny purse, still fat with coin. Adair frowned. He knew enough of humans to know that bandits often preyed upon unwary travelers, but what sort of bandits would kill a man and leave behind his goods, his gold?

The horse in Myrna hadn't been able to name his assailant, but that didn't always mean anything. Animals had their own words for things, and often the words of fae or man could not make sense of them. Adair could tell though, by the fear in the creature's eyes, that no mortal beast had done this. Looking at the scene before him, Adair knew in his bones that no man had done this, either.

This was troubling, to say the least. Adair was familiar with his people's complicated history with humans—centuries ago these lands were lawless. Before his mother had put up the border stones around Myrna, giving the humans a fair bit of forest to call their own, it had been a wild and dangerous place for men to tread. It still was, in some ways—but now the folk were more likely to hide from humans than kill them.

The folk were powerful, true, but the humans had far superior numbers, and there were ways the fae folk were vulnerable. Peace was the more appealing option, when compared with blood and chaos.

Fae notions of what humans were best for—such as tricking, hunting, ignoring, eating, or fucking—were as varied as the folk themselves. Over the course of Adair's life, he'd known a few humans to “vanish” in these trees. A courtship gone wrong, or a hunter looking to claim an otherworldly trophy. It wasn't much talked about, and Adair's mother would quietly handle the transgression. These unfortunate happenings were rare, and Adair truly couldn't remember the last time he'd been privy to one.

Adair turned his attentions back to the scene before him, searching for an indication of who might have done this. There were no tracks in the dirt—save for hoof prints—but he noticed a spray of blood on a stone by the side of the road,

partially smeared by what looked like a hand. Adair saw droplets of blood on the ground, leading away into the trees.

The trail was a faint one, and Adair had only the lingering scent of blood to lead him. That thought brought him up short. Adair was about twenty paces into the trees when he realized the foul smell that had clung to the wreckage of the cart was absent.

How odd.

He followed the droplets for quite a ways through the forest, wondering if the horse's master had perhaps survived the attack and crawled away. If he could find the man fast enough, perhaps he could get him to Minnow in the village and—

He stopped dead. A pair of feet stuck out from a tangle of branches just ahead of him. Wary, Adair dropped into a crouch and approached the feet—pale and bare. That was peculiar. As he got closer, Adair realized the man's skin was translucent and papery, dried out and brittle like a leaf in autumn.

Like he'd been drained.

Adair cursed under his breath. He examined the body, though by now he knew what had happened, who had done this. There was only one in the forest who smelled like *nothing* and blood. Sure enough, the dead man's neck was bruised, just below the juncture of his ear and his jaw, bruised in the vague shape of a hungry mouth, at the center of which was a single, perfect, puncture.



The Mystery Horse, as the villagers had taken to calling him, provided weeks of gossip for the people of Myrna. It was a small town, and no one had ever seen the horse before, meaning he didn't belong to any of the townsfolk. After the incident at the Bramble, Roisin the barmaid had taken it upon herself to make sure all of the villagers were accounted for, and in fact they were.

When no one arrived in Myrna to claim the horse, there was much discussion around the pub as to who'd keep him.

In the end, they decided they'd send the horse to market and split the earnings. Roisin claimed she deserved a fair amount, because of her damaged stable. Sam Darling had clapped Nathaniel on the shoulder and proclaimed loudly that Nathaniel should get the lion's share for setting his broken bone. Both the Mystery Horse and Sam Darling had healed up well, thanks to Nathaniel. Someone piped in that Nathaniel's friend—the odd bloke with the giant hat—should have some stake in the horse's sale. He was such a lovely young lad, all agreed. Roisin had caught Nathaniel's eye at this point in the conversation, pursing her lips into a tight, nervous line, but she said nothing.

Later, Nathaniel offered to help her close up the tavern, in hopes of finding out what she'd actually seen when the horse had snatched Adair's hat. He began stacking the chairs on the tables as Roisin collected cups to wash in the basin out back.

“Tell you what, Nathaniel,” she said abruptly.

He swallowed, so nervous he nearly dropped the chair he was holding. “What's that?” And Nathaniel hated that his voice had pitched high and squeaky.

“I noticed the queerest thing in my stable the other day.”

This is it, he thought. I'll be run out of town for cavorting with demons.

She turned to stare Nathaniel directly in the eye. “The sunlight comes in through the wood in the most peculiar way.”

“Pardon?” He had absolutely no idea what she was getting at.

“The sunlight,” she repeated, “it comes through those old beams, and with that and all the dust and the shadows—it makes one see the strangest things.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, in fact. I swear it makes one see things that aren't even really there at all.”

Nathaniel hadn't realized he'd been holding his breath, and he let it out now in a relieved rush. “That is peculiar,” he said,

voice still a bit shaky.

“Indeed. And I certainly wouldn’t go around telling anyone what I saw, because it was just a trick of that light coming in through the walls. Nothing to trouble anyone about.” She smiled warmly, and winked. “Why don’t you run along home now, lad? I can manage the rest of this.”

They never spoke of it again.

XIII

One of Us

Adair did his best to keep Nathaniel out of the forest for some time after he'd uncovered the truth about the man who'd been killed. His mother told him he was over worried—when Adair brought news to her of what Gael had done, her fury had been frightening to behold, and she'd banished him from the forest. No one had seen hide nor hair of him since, which gave Adair some small comfort. Something lingered at the back of his mind, however, something he couldn't put his finger on.

So, when Nathaniel declared that he wanted to venture to one of the most remote corners of the forest, Adair was reluctant to allow it.

In any other circumstance, Adair would have been quite pleased to be making this trek with Nathaniel. Since his brief but eventful time at court, Nathaniel had shown zero interest with mixing with the rest of the fae folk. Recently though, Nathaniel said he'd quiet like to learn more about the brewing of the Nightshade wine.

They were in Nathaniel's bed, each laying on his side. Adair had his hand on Nathaniel's hip, his thumb tracing the dip of his waist. Their knees brushed together on the narrow mattress.

"Minnow, forgive me, I don't think Nightshade wine agrees with you."

Nathaniel had blushed, of course, and explained his true intent. "Not for *that*," he said. "I just wonder if perhaps there's a way to use the flowers to make some sort of salve, or tonic for the people here, in the village."

Adair pushed Nathaniel onto his back, brushing the fringe from his forehead. “You think the people of Myrna don’t fuck enough?”

“Oh my *God*,” Nathaniel said. “No. I mean—when I had the wine, at court, it wasn’t just—” He paused, clearly flustered with Adair on top of him, teasing him. “I didn’t feel the cold. I wasn’t even nervous. Everything felt light, peaceful. I’d been thinking, perhaps it would be good for someone in a great deal of pain. Maybe it would keep a person from suffering, while they healed.”

Adair frowned. He had honestly never even thought of something like that.

“Well,” Nathaniel prompted, raising one of his hands to drag a fingertip up and down Adair’s horn. “What do you think?”

“I think,” Adair said, lowering his lips to Nathaniel’s forehead. “You have an enormous, kind heart.” He punctuated each word with a kiss.

The following morning however, once the besotted glow had worn off, Adair realized what Nathaniel was actually suggesting: he wanted to visit Clíodhna, in her remote northern glen, to learn about the Nightshade flowers that grew there. Adair mentioned his reluctance, but he found his Minnow would not be deterred.

“Why not?” Nathaniel had asked. Adair had never hesitated to bring him anywhere before.

And of course, Adair couldn’t come up with a suitable reason, and that was that.

Adair was jumpy as they walked through the trees, guilty for keeping a secret from Nathaniel. It had taken him so long to convince his Minnow to feel at home in the forest, to relax around Adair. Nathaniel’s experience at court had been quite enough, and Adair was worried that if he reminded Nathaniel how dangerous the folk could be, he’d be frightened off.

Adair shook himself. He was being ridiculous. No one would dare accost Nathaniel if he was with Adair, and anyway,

Gael was gone.

“Are you going to tell me what’s on your mind?” Nathaniel asked him.

“I’m fine, Minnow.”

Nathaniel sighed, but let the subject drop.

The walk was a long one, well past Nathaniel’s father’s grave, and there was no sign of Gael, nor any other force that might wish them harm, so Adair began to relax. Perhaps he was just being silly.

They returned that evening to Nathaniel’s home in Myrna, and though it was late nothing would do but for Nathaniel to begin work immediately, examining the flowers that Clíodhna had given him. He’d taken as many as he could carry, some with the roots still attached, which he put into a clay pot straight away and set on the sill. Others he put into a pickling liquid, or pulled the petals off to examine them.

Adair watched from the hearth rug, relaxing by the fire. He had grown comfortable enough around Nathaniel’s mother and brother that he no longer wore his hat in their home, and they comfortable enough around him that he didn’t often catch them staring any more. Thomas had even offered him a cup of tea, unsolicited, for the very first time that night. Adair didn’t like tea, but never mind. He held the mug and sniffed it and took comfort in the fact that it was offered.

Adair thoroughly enjoyed watching Nathaniel at work, moving around the little kitchen as he studied the petals and stems of the pale blue flowers. However, it was late. Thomas had long since gone to bed, and Moira was dozing fitfully in her customary rocking chair. Adair was considering it might be time to tempt his Minnow away from his work and to bed when a thunderous knock at the back door shattered the sleepy peace of the evening. Nathaniel dropped the notebook he was holding in surprise, and Adair scrambled for the peg by the front door to get his hat and jam it on his head.

“*Help! Please!*” A desperate cry jolted Nathaniel to action and woke Moira from her doze.

Nathaniel strode to the door and flung it open, standing aside as a young woman stumbled across the threshold, struggling to bear the weight of the man beside her. It was the woman who'd cried out—and Nathaniel went to her side. She appeared seconds away from collapse. He bolstered the young man, barely conscious, and Moira helped the trembling girl into a chair by the table. Adair turned his attention to the man for the first time and nearly lost his footing. Something had gutted him—or near enough. He was pale as death, completely covered in blood. A wound at his side soaked into the fabric of his shirt and jacket, and he clutched his arm against his body—an arm that ended in a ragged, bloody stump.

Adair looked at Nathaniel, and he knew enough of his Minnow to read the panic on his stricken face. Nathaniel was almost as pale as the bleeding man in his kitchen, and he looked to be at a total loss. This was very outside the realm of simple stitched cuts and muscle pains with which he usually assisted the villagers of Myrna. The kitchen was thick with silence, like a bent sapling about to snap at any second; the only sound was the steady drip of blood onto the floorboards.

Adair watched as Nathaniel's eyes hardened to a fierce and blazing blue, and he set his jaw. "The fire," he told Adair, pointing. "Now!"

Nathaniel swept everything from the table and helped his mother lift the man up onto the surface of it. Laid on his back, the man twitched feebly, and the ghastly stump at the end of his arm continued to bleed. Adair didn't have to have Nathaniel's knowledge to know that he was dying.

"Erm—," said Nathaniel, shakily, "Erm."

"*Nathaniel!*" His mother shouted, snapping him out of it.

"Right. Mama, get the kettle on the boil, fill it with wine. Adair—put the iron in the fire."

They set to work straight away, and the commotion finally roused Thomas, who emerged bleary eyed and bewildered from his bedroom. "What on—"

“Thomas,” Nathaniel snapped, “I need bandages and two wooden spoons from the cupboard.”

To his credit, Thomas reacted immediately, dashing down the corridor to fetch the bandages from Nathaniel’s bedroom.

“Cara,” Nathaniel said to the young woman, who stood by the table at the man’s head, smoothing his hair, “You may not want to watch this.”

She grit her teeth and shook her head, resolute. Adair watched in abject horror as Nathaniel selected one of the spoons from Thomas’s hands, and set it between the man’s teeth. Fear gripped his heart as Nathaniel seized the kettle of wine from the fire and dumped a significant amount onto the open wound at the end of his wrist. The man roused for the first time—and screamed, even past the wooden spoon in his mouth, and at the agony in the sound Adair felt his knees go weak, and the woman called Cara fainted dead away, falling to a heap on the floor. Nathaniel cursed, stepping over her body as he wrapped the man’s forearm in strips of linen. Moira and Thomas hastened to get Cara out of the kitchen, laying her on the sofa. Adair stood, mute and useless and paralyzed as Nathaniel stuffed the second wooden spoon down inside the bandage and twisted it. He twisted it hard and fast, pulling the bandage impossibly tight, digging cruelly into the man’s skin as he grunted and whimpered.

Nathaniel seized the iron from the fire and held it, smoking, near the wound. He braced his opposite forearm over the man’s chest—but he was bigger than Nathaniel, and stronger, and even the suggestion of the heat against the wound had him thrashing like mad.

“I need—hold him down—“

Adair couldn’t move, rooted to the spot.

“*Adair!*”

The anguished cry did it for him, and Adair launched forward, holding down the man’s shoulders as Nathaniel sucked in a breath and said, as if to himself, “Here we go.”

He pressed the smoking iron to the open wound, held it there, mercilessly, and the smell and the sound of the sizzling flesh was like to choke Adair as he held the man through his screaming, thrashing fit of agony.

Finally, he blacked out. The silence in the aftermath was worse than the screaming, somehow. Nathaniel shook from head to toe, and Adair thought *he* might be about to faint as well. Deep, heaving gasps of breath, he looked up at Adair, wide eyed and terrified. There was blood splattered all over Nathaniel's face, and the *smell*—burning, mortified flesh. Nathaniel brought a trembling hand to his mouth like he was about to retch, and he turned away. Adair released the unconscious man's shoulders, moving toward Nathaniel at the other side of the table.

He flinched away from the touch, twitching his shoulder as he reached for the leather roll on the sideboard, the one where he kept his tools. He'd accumulated each of them, one by one, at great cost as he learned more of healing and earned more for his services. Nathaniel set the tools on the table beside his patient. "Put the kettle back on the hearth," he said.

Adair watched Nathaniel's hands, hands that had touched him so many times, as they undressed the man on the table. Thomas came back into the kitchen, and Nathaniel murmured instructions to him as they moved around the table. Adair couldn't help but admire the boy's courage; he stayed mute and attentive at his brother's elbow as they peeled off the bloody jacket. The shirt posed a difficulty; it was matted to the wound on the man's side in a ruin of congealed blood.

Nathaniel selected a slim silver knife and a pair of forceps from among his tools, cutting away the fabric and pulling out the strips that had adhered to the gash.

After the horror of the man's missing hand, Nathaniel seemed almost relieved to handle the wound at his side. It had bled, and it was surely deep, but it was simply a matter of cleaning it with boiled wine and sewing it shut with silk.

Simply, of course being a relative term. Adair marveled at Nathaniel as he worked. Adair had lived a long time, but his

life had been relatively free from violence. The fragility of mortal life weighed heavy on his shoulders as he watched his Minnow trying to sew a man up so his insides wouldn't spill out upon the floor.

Finally, it was done. Cara came to, and Moira made her a cup of tea with a few shots of brandy in it, and she stood by the man's head. He still hadn't stirred since Nathaniel had closed the wound at his wrist, but he was breathing. Sean Ulmer, his name was, Cara's husband. They got the story out of her in fits and starts as Nathaniel bustled around the makeshift sickbed, bandaging the wounds, checking his pulse. Cara explained he'd gone hunting in the forest.

"Well within the path of the border stones," Cara told them. "He never strayed far into them trees."

Nathaniel looked up, catching Adair's eye briefly before returning to his work. "Did he say what did it?"

She shook her head. "He could barely say a word by the time he crawled out of the forest."

Cara looked sadly down at her husband's mutilated arm, stroking his cheek. At last, Nathaniel declared himself finished.

"I think you should both stay here," Moira said gently. She looked at her son. "Nathaniel will be close by if something should happen in the night."

Cara nodded, taking a shaky sip from her tea.

After some arguing, it was decided that they'd lay Sean out in Moira's bed.

"It's the biggest one in the house," she snapped as her sons both launched into protest. "And I fall asleep in my chair half the time anyway. The sofa will be plenty big enough for me."

When Nathaniel had seen the others all safely to bed, he returned to the kitchen. Beneath the blood smeared across his face he was still pale, and his breathing came ragged and uneven. Here, alone, with his work finished, Adair saw the cracks beginning to show. Nathaniel moved jerkily around the kitchen, filling the kettle this time with water and setting it to

boil. When it was good and hot, he dunked a rag and began scouring the kitchen clean.

Adair watched him, concerned. When he cleaned the table, Nathaniel scrubbed and scrubbed until his hands were red, his knuckles raw and bleeding.

“Minnow,” Adair whispered, the first word he’d spoken in hours.

Nathaniel either ignored him or didn’t hear, the muscles in his shoulders looked tight enough to snap as he scrubbed the wood of the table.

“*Minnow*,” Adair said, a bit louder. “It’s clean enough, now.”

Nathaniel shook his head and continued scrubbing. Adair sighed and walked around the table. He took Nathaniel’s hands in his own, stilling him, prying the cloth from his fitful fingers. It was stained pink with blood. “Come,” he said. “Let’s get you to bed.”

Nathaniel nodded absently, and allowed Adair to pull him down the hall to his bedroom.

“Sit,” the faun ordered.

Obediently, Nathaniel stumbled to the edge of the bed and sat. Adair returned to the kitchen, retrieving the last of the hot water and a clean cloth. He brought these to Nathaniel’s bedroom. Over the course of the last several weeks, Adair had noted that if he were invited to guest at the Stones’ home, Nathaniel’s mother Moira would wordlessly make up the trundled bed for him, but seemed supremely unconcerned if he actually slept on it. Now, he sank to his knees on the trundle, hands braced on Nathaniel’s thighs, looking up into his face. Mattresses may be an unnecessary human invention, Adair thought, but he was thankful for the soft feathers cushioning his knees, as he planned to stay on them for some time.

With gentle reverence, Adair undid the buttons of Nathaniel’s shirt one by one before casting it aside. He dipped the soft white rag into the basin of hot water, and moved it over Nathaniel’s chest, his neck, his face. He washed every

trace of blood from Nathaniel's arms and hands, until he was scrubbed pink and clean. Once Adair had disposed of the rag and the basin of soiled water, he returned to kneel in front of Nathaniel, who hadn't moved and in truth seemed a bit dazed.

"You were brilliant, Minnow."

Nathaniel attempted a scoff, but it sounded a bit hysterical. "I wasn't," he said, voice tremulous. "I had no bloody idea what I was doing. I was afraid I'd killed him half a dozen times."

With a smile, Adair took Nathaniel's hands—strong, soft, gentle hands. Healing hands. "But you didn't," Adair said. "You saved him." He kissed the tip of each finger, kissed Nathaniel's palms, his wrists. Adair brushed his lips over the cracked skin on his knuckles, before releasing his hands in favor of laying his palms against Nathaniel's waist, so narrow he could almost wrap his hands around it entirely.

"What *did* this?" Nathaniel said.

Adair shrugged. He didn't want to think about the poor man and his ghastly wounds any longer. He didn't want *Nathaniel* to think about them anymore, either.

"You amaze me," he said, dipping his thumbs down below the waistband of Nathaniel's trousers, determined to distract him, to reward him for his strength and skill and bravery. He'd prefer Minnow always be naked, of course, but undressing him was its own sort of pleasure, peeling back the layers of wool and cotton and leather to bare his flesh bit by bit.

Here, Adair paused, looking up at Nathaniel, silently asking for permission to continue. As much as it would pain him, Adair knew that there was a very real possibility that Nathaniel wanted nothing more than to collapse on the mattress and sleep. However, the hooded blue eyes gazing down at him were indeed sleepy, but they were also dark with lust. Adair couldn't resist surging up to capture Nathaniel's slightly parted lips in a kiss. It took Nathaniel by surprise, and he melted against Adair's mouth, his hands going into his curls to pull him closer. Adair let loose a little growl, tugging at

Nathaniel's waist until he scooted forward and allowed the faun to remove his trousers.

Adair took his time, touching every inch of his Minnow's chest, soft skin and lean muscle, hairless above his navel, soft black fluff below. Nathaniel was flushed pink of course, to be stared at with such hungry intensity, but Adair couldn't help himself. Nathaniel's body was the most beautiful thing he'd ever laid eyes on. He was tall enough that even kneeling he could reach most of Nathaniel's torso with his lips. Adair tried to calm the fire in his own chest, resisting his usual urge to mount as quickly as possible. Instead, he lavished lazy kisses and gentle nips across Nathaniel's skin. Happy, tired little mews slipped out of Minnow's mouth; Adair knew he must be exhausted. That was alright, he thought, he'd sleep well enough when Adair was through with him.

He laved his tongue down the narrow valley of Nathaniel's breast bone, and pressed a path of feather light kisses toward his nipple, darting his tongue over the hard, pebbled flesh. One delightful thing Adair had learned about Nathaniel was that his nipples were beyond sensitive; Adair knew he could tease Minnow almost to completion with just his tongue on his chest. Nathaniel was already quivering, so Adair moved on. He didn't want to tease, just now.

Nathaniel's dick was hard, standing proud and ready to be touched, worshipped. Adair brushed his fingertips from the shaft to the head, smiling to see it jump in response. "You have the most beautiful cock," Adair said, looking up into Nathaniel's face.

Dirty pillow talk always had Nathaniel turn bashful, as now. "Oh for heaven's sake," he said, with a fearsome blush. Adair was certain only his Minnow could be so aroused and exasperated at the same time. "It's just a *hnnnnngggg!*"

His words became a choked off groan as Adair took his entire dick into his mouth in one swift movement. He slowly pulled his lips back, and off, squinting up to see Nathaniel panting, eyes closed, face upturned to the ceiling. "You should stay quiet, Minnow," he teased. "Can't take care of you the way I want if you wake the whole town."

Nathaniel's flushed chest heaved, but he nodded, sucking his lower lip into his mouth to muffle any further offending noises. Adair grinned, his hands holding tight to Nathaniel's hips, before returning his attentions to Nathaniel's dick.

For a moment, he just looked at it, jutting up from a thick patch of wiry black curls. Adair brushed his fingers through that hair, somehow coarse and soft at once. Gentle pets of his fingertips turned into a firm grasp as Adair wrapped his long fingers around Nathaniel's shaft. Its warm, firm heft against the pulse of Adair's palm was almost too much. For a moment he almost forgot himself, tempted to bend Nathaniel's tight body over the side of the bed and fuck him senseless.

Later.

Instead, he tightened his grasp on Nathaniel's hip and took the head of his cock between his lips again. His hand remained firmly anchored around Nathaniel's shaft, holding it in place as he savored the slick, velvet soft heat of the tip. Adair never thought he'd be so happy to have a dick in his mouth, but here he was. Nathaniel moved his hands to the top of Adair's head, wrapping his hands around the faun's horns, brushing over them with his thumbs. The light touches sent tingles down Adair's spine as he sucked, and his own cock throbbed between his legs, straining against the wool of his trousers. He'd left his own clothes on by design; he knew himself well enough to know that his self-restraint went only so far.

When they'd first met, Adair had thought nothing could compare to Nathaniel's scent—laughable, now that he knew how every inch of his skin tasted. Nathaniel's hands tightened on his horns, and Adair moaned deep in his throat, vibrating his lips around Nathaniel's meat. Above him, Nathaniel let out a strangled cry.

He pulled his lips off again, with an obscene, wet "*plop*," kissing the tip of Nathaniel's dick before looking up at him, sternly. "Minnow," he said, "You've got to hush."

"Can't."

"You'll wake everyone."

“Don’t care.”

Adair regarded him, feigning laziness, pumping his cock with a loose fist, making no move to lower his lips again.

With a muffled groan, Nathaniel fell back on the mattress. Adair had to admit that though he hadn’t set out to tease, watching Nathaniel’s composure crumble into shameless neediness was quite satisfying. Adair had fully intended to remain on his knees, worshipping Nathaniel the way he truly deserved, but something about his Minnow lying weak and agonized on the bed called out to him.

Adair climbed up onto the mattress beside him, stroking his cheek. “You tell me what you want.”

“You,” Nathaniel said without hesitation.

Adair nuzzled down the side of his face, along the cords of his neck. “I was *trying*,” he said, breathing heavy in Nathaniel’s ear.

“No,” Nathaniel said, staring at him with intense longing. “*all* of you.” He tugged Adair by his collar into a kiss that was half a whine. “Want you to hold me, want to feel all of you against me.”

Eager to please, Adair divested himself of his clothes and lay behind Minnow on the bed, yanking him close. They curled around each other, Adair’s longer body surrounding Nathaniel’s smaller one, his palm skimming Nathaniel’s soft skin from his thigh to his shoulders, pulling his back flush against his own chest. Adair murmured filth and praise into Nathaniel’s ear, nipping and teasing the skin of his sharp jawline as he slid his palm to cup the flesh of Nathaniel’s ass, thinking it sweet how perfectly it fit in his big hands.

Adair kissed the nape of his Minnow’s neck, a thrilled shiver twitching down Nathaniel’s spine in response, and he ground his ass back against Adair’s groin. “Eager, are we?” Adair asked, nosing up close to whisper into his ear.

Wordlessly, Nathaniel nodded, reaching back to grab for Adair’s hip, trying to tug him closer. Adair nudged him to lay on his belly, planting kisses up Nathaniel’s spine as he draped

himself over the curves of his back. Adair allowed himself a moment to rut against Nathaniel's hole, smiling at Minnow's shameless little whine, muffled into the pillow as he buried his face. He knew he shouldn't keep teasing poor Minnow like this, but he couldn't help it. The man was *so* responsive.

He sat up, leaning over to grab for a little bottle of olive oil from Nathaniel's bedside table. They'd taken to using it to slick each other up for fucking. Adair had always found that spit had worked well enough for getting on with, but Nathaniel of course, ever searching for the best way to do things, had thought the fragrant oil might be more pleasant. He'd been right—then again, he usually was.

With his fingers slippery and glistening, Adair spread Nathaniel wide and finally gave him what he wanted, stroking him, pleasing him, feeling the tightly wound young man fully dissolve, giving himself over to pleasure. Really, that's what Adair had always wanted from him, for him. The only time Nathaniel ever truly came undone was in Adair's arms, under his touch. Adair longed to melt the tension from Nathaniel's body. Every time they came together it was the same; he found his own delight easily in Nathaniel's explosive responses to his touch, his tongue, his dick. Adair *tried* to give selflessly, but Nathaniel was insatiable and loved all the more for them to go over the edge together. So it went that with slow, beautiful rolls of hips and soft moans they floated as one in Nathaniel's bed, the world outside retreating to a blurry abstract. It started with shallow, almost lazy thrusts, but as Nathaniel pushed his thighs wider, Adair let his knees fall between them. He fisted a hand in Nathaniel's hair, tugging against his scalp, turning his head so he could reach his lips.

"I should have known," he whispered. "Should've known you were one of us."

Though he seemed to have lost capacity for speech, Nathaniel's body told Adair everything he needed to know.

He grabbed Nathaniel's waist, hauling him up on all fours. "You're so beautiful," he murmured, nipping at Nathaniel's shoulder. "So wild. Never seen anything like you."

Whatever semblance of self-restraint Adair had managed until this point fell away as he snapped his hips harder, plunging in to the hilt, then holding Nathaniel tight and opting for a slow, deep grind against his ass. The slippery oil, Nathaniel's satin heat around his cock, it was all just shy of enough—he needed more, more of Nathaniel's skin, the sounds of him, his smell. He wanted *everything*. Adair looped an arm around Nathaniel's torso, pulling his back up toward his chest, plastering Nathaniel against himself. With his other hand, he grabbed for Nathaniel's cock, pumping it in his slick fist as he pounded away erratically. "You're a force of nature," he growled into Nathaniel's ear. "Perfect. I love you so damn much, Minnow."

Adair clamped a hand over Nathaniel's mouth just in time; he cried out as he came, desperate against Adair's fingers, while the faun's other hand milked him through his release. Adair lasted only a few more thrusts before he was emptying himself deep in Nathaniel's perfect body. He muffled his own cry with a mouthful of flesh on Nathaniel's shoulder, cradling Nathaniel against himself as he fell limp in Adair's arms. Adair winced as his cock slid from Nathaniel's ass, and Nathaniel gave an answering groan as Adair laid him gently down against the pillows before collapsing at his side.

He felt doozy and sated, soft. He brushed the strands of sweaty black fringe from Nathaniel's forehead. Nathaniel looked wrecked, basking in afterglow, his usually clear eyes dazed and out of focus. When their breathing had slowed, and Nathaniel clearly couldn't keep his eyes open any longer, Adair pushed on his shoulder, rolling him gently onto his other side. Nathaniel gave a feeble sort of protest as he was moved, but Adair just pulled him close, his chest pressed to Nathaniel's back.

"Love you," Nathaniel mumbled, wriggling happily in Adair's arms.

With a smile, Adair nosed Nathaniel's hairline and mouthed clumsily at his ear once more before he drifted off.

XIV

Whatever Always Means

Sean recovered well, and the story of what happened to him spread fast through Myrna. When Nathaniel visited him at home to ensure the stump on his arm was healing clean, he'd pressed him for details.

"I didn't see it," Sean told him, as Nathaniel examined the burned flesh, sniffing the wound. "Damn thing snuck up behind me, a bear I think it was."

"A bear, this close to the village?"

"Aye," said Sean, wincing as Nathaniel poked the sensitive flesh around the wound. "Took my game, too. I think the long winter made 'em hungry, more bold."

Nathaniel supposed that made sense. He wasn't much of a hunter, but Sean certainly was. He knew his business, hunting and trapping plenty of game in the narrow band of trees between Myrna and the border stone. Applying fresh bandages to the stump, Nathaniel reflected sadly that Sean would probably not be doing much hunting any more.

"We're lucky to have you, Nathaniel," said Cara, passing him a warm tea cake. "Even a year ago—I don't know what would have happened."

It was true, Nathaniel reflected, as he bade them farewell. Myrna was a small enough little hamlet that aside from the Midwife, Nathaniel was the closest thing to a doctor the villagers had. It was a lot of responsibility, and he didn't like to think about it too often because it made him feel a little queasy.

He walked up the lane, turning over what Sean had said. The villagers didn't seem to be making any connection between the arrival of the horse and Sean's attack, but Nathaniel was. He couldn't explain it to himself, but he felt something stirring deep in his guts that told him the two incidents were related.

Adair seemed convinced otherwise, but Nathaniel was also certain that the faun wasn't telling him everything. Why else would he suddenly be so reluctant to bring Nathaniel into the trees? Even when they planned to spend time in the forest now, Adair met him at the tree line at the rear of his family's land, instead of waiting by the border stone like they'd used to. He didn't like the feeling he was being lied to, especially with the people of Myrna at risk, but in the end he trusted Adair, so he tried not to dwell on it. It could have been a bear, just as Sean said. Even without the presence of anything otherworldly, the forest was a dangerous place.

With everything going on in the aftermath of Sean's attack, Nathaniel hadn't been able to spare a lot of time for his faun, so they'd made plans to meet that evening and spend the following day together. It brightened Nathaniel's spirits immeasurably to think of it. Adair had shown him so many things, countless things—Nathaniel desperately wanted to return the favor.

He thought he had an idea of how, but knew it would take some clever maneuvering to lead Adair through the trees without him discerning their path. Nathaniel grinned as he approached the back gate and saw the faun pacing by the fence, an eager smile lighting up his face when he saw Nathaniel walking toward him. He didn't think he'd ever tire of that.



If Adair had once thought that he and Nathaniel could not get enough of each other, it was nothing compared to how he felt now. If they spent the night together—which they did, often, sprawled out on the pelts in Adair's cave or pressed tight together on the narrow mattress in Nathaniel's bedroom in Myrna—Adair would wake in the middle of the night and

find himself hard. Proximity to Nathaniel's skin was enough to do it, or his breath on Adair's neck, or an errant arm slung around the faun's waist. Nothing would do then but he try to bring himself off by hand or gently rut against a sleeping Minnow's leg, the blankets, anything, and Nathaniel would wake and in a tangle of hands and kisses bring him over the edge. Other nights, and he wasn't certain how he sensed it absent feeling it pressed against him, but he'd rouse to find Nathaniel hard and squirm toward him between the blankets before he was even fully awake, not happy till he filled his sleepy mouth with Nathaniel's cock.

Those times were some of his favorites; Nathaniel made the sweetest, softest sounds when he came in his sleep, happy and sated and untroubled, hauling Adair up toward himself after for open mouthed kisses with lazy tongue to taste himself on Adair's lips.

The only problem came each morning. Unless he woke with Nathaniel pressed tight against him, Adair would know a split second of fear; Nathaniel had finally lost interest him, had taken whatever it was he'd needed and stolen away in the dead of night. The grief and dread in his heart would only subside when he cast his eyes around and found the dawn sun glowing on the pale expanse of Nathaniel's back as he slept nearby on his belly, face squished into the pillows, and Adair could pull him close to curl at his side once more. Each time he woke like that, Adair wondered if that feeling would ever fade.

One such morning, Adair woke alone to feel the blankets cold beside him. He sighed, feeling his heart sink deep. Nathaniel was gone at last. Pulling the thin sheet up over his head, Adair figured he'd spend the rest of the day wallowing in his misery—wait.

As his self-pitying but half-asleep brain caught up, Adair realized he was gripping a sheet, not a fur blanket. He remembered that they'd fallen asleep the night before in Nathaniel's family's home. Even in the most insecure corners of his mind, Adair found it hard to believe that Nathaniel would abandon him in his own bedroom. He sat up in confusion, blinking bleary eyed around the room, his fear

fading and being replaced by a playful sort of frustration. Nathaniel nudged his way back into the room, opening the door with his hip. To Adair's dismay, he saw that Nathaniel was already dressed, digging into his forage bag, fishing for something with his hand.

"Why are you up so early?" Adair asked, voice froggy from sleep. "More importantly, why are you dressed?"

"I've had an idea. I want to take you somewhere."

"Oh?"

Nathaniel found what he'd been searching for, pulling something silvery grey from deep within his bag. It was the silk blindfold Adair had used to bind Nathaniel's eyes the day he'd brought him to court. "Do you trust me?"

Adair did, of course, but the bandage still made him nervous. Nathaniel knelt on the bed beside him, and pushed both his hands up into Adair's curls, awaiting an answer. He nodded.

"Good. Get dressed."

When Nathaniel slipped the bandage around his eyes, tying the knot tight with gentle fingers. Adair immediately sought Nathaniel's hands, searching for the warmth and reassurance of Nathaniel's palm pressed against his own.

Adair allowed himself to be lead along through the house. "Where are you taking me, Minnow?"

"You'll see."

"Will I though?"

Nathaniel's only answer was to squeeze Adair's fingers.



Tugging Adair along down the back garden path toward the tree line, Nathaniel grinned. He knew Adair couldn't see his smile, but Nathaniel so rarely had the upper hand that he decided to savor it. Besides, it's not like he was planning anything nefarious; he merely didn't know how else to bring

Adair somewhere in the forest without him immediately recognizing the path they tread.

He pulled Adair by the hand, playfully annoyed that despite his blindness the faun seemed ever sure where to place his feet. They walked for hours. Nathaniel had charted their path as directly as possible, using his new knowledge of the forest, a few maps, and his memories. He couldn't be certain that he was leading Adair somewhere new, but something told him the faun had never taken this particular path before.

Adair raised no complaint or question, but when Nathaniel glanced at him he could see his nostrils flare, his lips part as he tasted the air to try to discern their path. They stopped for a rest, Nathaniel popping sweet grapes into Adair's mouth, tipping a flagon of water to his lips, still refusing to loosen the blindfold upon his face. Adair, to his credit, seemed to enjoy this game—his pink tongue eager to taste Nathaniel's fingers as well as the fruit.

It was only when Nathaniel's—admittedly much duller—human sense could also determine that they were close that Adair balked. He planted his feet, tugging his hand loose.

“Minnow, what is that?”

Nathaniel couldn't help but smile. “Can you hear it? Or smell it?”

“Both,” Adair said. “And the trees thin ahead, do they not?”

“How could you possibly know that?”

Adair twitched a shoulder up. “I just do.”

With a sigh, Nathaniel reached up and removed the blindfold. Adair's eyes went round as he saw the tree line taper off before them as they neared the coast.

Nathaniel took his hand again, encouraging him along. The rush of the waves against the shore was at once loud and soft, an ever present hush. Step by step, they left the press of the forest for the wide expanse of the coast. It was a cold, rocky little beach, nothing like the rumored white sands of which Nathaniel had read, but his father had always brought the family here, to play in the waves and sparse sand, to look at

shells and watch the silver sparkle of fish darting in the waves. As a boy, Nathaniel had always loved how their scales caught the sun.

Nathaniel released Adair's hand and took a few steps through the thinning trees, kicking off his boots to feel the mud transform to sand between his toes. He dropped his forage bag on a stone beside them. Ten paces from the trees, Nathaniel turned back to see Adair hovering among them, seeming more frightened even than when first went into the village.

This was different though. Nathaniel knew that being by the sea, seeing it, seeing the full breadth of the horizon before you could be overwhelming. He wasn't going to push. His fingers went to unbutton his shirt, the warm sun and cool salt air on his chest like a balm. Wiggling out of his trousers, Nathaniel felt pure. He felt whole. The sea did that to him in a way most places did not. He'd forgotten—he had refused to visit this place in the years since his father had passed.

Adair would follow when he was ready, Nathaniel knew. The little cove was secluded, private. Most of the villagers of Myrna journeyed to the larger port town of Carrigan if they felt the call of the sea, but Ezra Stone had always brought his sons here.

Nathaniel waded into the water, cold and bracing, waves lapping at his calves. He closed his eyes and inhaled deep of the ocean air. Timid arms slipped around his middle. "You're cold," said Adair against the crown of Nathaniel's head.

He laughed. "Yes. But it's a nice cold."

Nathaniel turned in Adair's arms, pressing their bodies together. He looked up at Adair's face and saw that his eyes had grown larger, rounder, wider than Nathaniel had ever seen them. Adair towered over him, towered over most people, yet here he seemed small. Seeing Adair's face full of unabashed wonder made Nathaniel's heart glow.

"You've really never come here before?"

Adair shook his head wildly. “I told you, I’d never left the trees before we met.”

Nathaniel slipped from the faun’s embrace but maintained his grip on his hand, pulling him deeper into the water. The surf was aggressive, slapping against them harder the deeper they went, tugging at their limbs and splashing their chests, raising gooseflesh and shivers. Adair hovered behind Nathaniel, feet anchored to the sand beneath the water, one eye on the beach behind them. The insistent tug of the tide drawing outward told Nathaniel a large wave was coming, so he braced himself instinctively to keep his footing. Adair, however, had no such notion.

“Minnow!” He yelped, afraid, seeing the wave barreling inexorably toward them.

Nathaniel opened his mouth to tell the faun that a wave was no cause for panic, but he couldn’t get the words out before Adair had scooped him up, tossing him over his shoulder with a fleshy, wet smack. Adair tried to outrun the wave, hauling Nathaniel toward the shore. Nathaniel was laughing so hard that he couldn’t explain that it would be alright, and of course the wave took them, bowling them over and sending them tumbling through the surf toward the beach. Nathaniel’s head broke the surface and he found himself flat on his ass at the edge of the water, the wave already receding. Adair’s frantic grip didn’t relax; the faun clung to Nathaniel’s fingers even while on his hands and knees, coughing up sea water.

Nathaniel tried to stop laughing, but for such a majestic person, it was remarkable how much Adair currently resembled a drowning kitten. He looked up with reproach in his big eyes. His hair was flat and heavy, wet against his skull, his innocent eyes accusatory as he gulped and choked.

“What kind of water is this?” He gasped.

“It’s just ocean water.”

“Tastes like cold soup. But it burns.”

Nathaniel laughed again. “It’s salt water. You’re not supposed to drink it.”

“You could have told me,” Adair said, blinking. “It’s in my eyes!”

“I thought you knew.”

Adair scowled.

With an apologetic smile, Nathaniel stood, hauling Adair to his feet. “I’m sorry,” he said, brushing his lips to the back of Adair’s hand. “Could we try wading out again?”

Adair pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

“Look, just there beyond where the waves start to break,” Nathaniel said, pointing.

Adair shielded his eyes with his free hand to follow Nathaniel’s extended finger.

“The water is deeper there, but calmer.”

Adair nodded, still anxious. He brought his other hand down to grab hold of Nathaniel’s, grasping his hand tightly in both of his own.

“Come on,” said Nathaniel, with a gentle tug. “It’s nice. You’ll see.” He paused. “Just don’t drink it.”

Adair scowled again.

With a laugh, Nathaniel backed into the water, eyes only for his faun’s sweet face, encouraging him out deeper into the surf. The water pulled at them, drawing away from the sand at the shore. Nathaniel turned to watch the water gather ahead of them into a rumbling, churning wave, frothy white, taller than even Adair. “Are you ready?”

“Ready for what?”

“When it gets close, drive straight through.”

“What!?”

“Get ready,” said Nathaniel, with a squeeze of Adair’s fingers. “Now!”

Nathaniel released his faun’s hand and dove. His head burst through the back of the wave on the other side, where the water was rolling and calm. Adair surface beside him, spitting

out a mouthful of water. Nathaniel reached for him, wrapping his arms around Adair's neck.

"I told you not to drink it."

In response, Adair puffed up his cheeks and sprayed Nathaniel full in the face. Laughing and sputtering, Nathaniel pushed his lips against Adair's, kissing him sloppy and silly and clumsy, and tasting the brine on his tongue.

Nathaniel dropped his hands to Adair's waist, turning him to face the horizon. They hopped with the gentle roll of the fledgling waves, floating up and down with each crest. "See?" Nathaniel said. "It's peaceful out here."

Adair nodded, standing beside Nathaniel and sliding an arm around his waist. Between waves, the water reached just below Nathaniel's chest. Below the surface, Adair brushed his fingers over Nathaniel's hip. "I like to see you like this," he said.

"Like what?"

The faun gave his hip a squeeze, trailing his fingertips down to brush along Nathaniel's thigh. "Free."

Nathaniel raised his brows, and nudged his bare hip against the side of Adair's body. "Free, huh?" He turned to plant himself in front of Adair, pressing their bodies close beneath the surf.

Adair butted their foreheads together with a grin. "That's not what I meant, Minnow."

"No?"

Adair rolled his eyes, and Nathaniel wrapped his arms around his neck once more. He jumped up, locking his legs around Adair's waist. Adair hummed happily, his palms braced below Nathaniel's thighs to hold him up, hold him close. "Well, perhaps that's what I meant a little."

Nathaniel laughed.

"But, that—that's what I truly meant. You're laughing easier. You seem lighter." Adair brushed one palm up Nathaniel's spine, across his shoulder blades, letting it come to rest on the side of Nathaniel's neck. "Your shoulders aren't up

around your ears. You're never this at ease in the forest. Or the village."

Nathaniel shrugged. "There's always eyes on us in the trees," he said with a sly smile. "Your kin are quite nosy."

"That's true."

"Out here ... there's no one watching us."

"Also true," Adair said, his voice dropping to a whisper. He shifted his grip, pulling Nathaniel closer and kissing him deeply as the waves rocked them together.

"Cousin!"

"Oh for fuck's sake," Nathaniel said, disentangling his lips from Adair's to turn toward the sound of the intruding voice. He couldn't even summon enough disbelief to be startled.

A shimmering face peeked at them from a nest of floating seaweed. Nathaniel glanced toward Adair, who did not seem to recognize the newcomer. "Hello," the faun said, cautious.

The creature stood, and Nathaniel realized that what he'd taken for seaweed was actually her hair—or, it grew from the top of her head at any rate. She had round, curious eyes and, Nathaniel realized with a start, no nose. When she parted her lips, wide slits fluttered open on the side of her neck. Gills. She dipped back below the surface, mouth open, and took a long pull from the sea before standing up again. Her skin was a deep, shifting green, almost grey, and when she caught the light Nathaniel could see her body was covered in tiny translucent scales.

"Abhain?" she said, cocking her head to the side. Her eyes shone, but appeared oddly flat in her face. "Is that you?"

Nathaniel slipped from Adair's arms, suddenly finding the water cold and uninviting. He wrapped his arms around himself. "No," Nathaniel said. "His son."

"You look just like him."

"Who are you?" Adair asked, aggressive, moving to rest a hand on Nathaniel's shoulder. He clearly sensed Nathaniel's immediate change in demeanor. "How do you know me?"

“My name is Sáile,” she said. “I’m kin to your sisters. There’s a place just past those rocks where the river empties. The water is brackish and uncomfortable but I can go part way up to talk to your sisters when the mood strikes—or they part way down to talk to me.”

Adair’s look grew stern. “Did they send you to spy on us?”

“No. Erne just said they’d seen the two of you coming this way. I wanted to meet you.”

“Well,” Adair said, his look softening a bit, “that’s very kind of you. We were hoping for a bit of privacy, though, actually.”

She wrinkled the skin where her nose should have been and looked at the wide, open expanse surrounding them. “Odd place to come for privacy.”

“At any rate—“

“Your father use to come here often with his mate and his little ones. One of them was you?”

“Yes,” Nathaniel said. He felt strange. Sáile dipped down into the water again, and Nathaniel watched transfixed as her gills moved below the surface.

“He stopped coming,” she said when she stood. “I liked to see him.”

“He’s dead,” Nathaniel snapped.

Sáile’s lip trembled, and she suddenly launched herself through the surf to pull Nathaniel into a fierce embrace. “I’m sorry,” she said. “He was always very kind.”

Her arms were cold and wet against Nathaniel’s skin, clammy—but thrumming with life, and her hug was sweet. Nathaniel returned the embrace, surprised but touched. He didn’t know what to say.

She withdrew with a sad, lingering look. “Our sort don’t often come here. He was one of the few who did.”

“It must be lonesome.”

Sáile nodded.

Nathaniel managed a small smile. "I'll come then."

She brightened. "What's your name?"

"Nathaniel. Nathaniel Stone."

"Nathaniel," she echoed, tasting the sound of it. "I'll see you when you next visit, then."

With a parting smile she was gone, seeming to dissolve into a swathe of sea foam before vanishing completely.

Nathaniel looked at Adair. "Your family is weird."

He shrugged. "You never said it was your father who showed you this place."

"Yes, well." Nathaniel crossed his arms over his chest. He looked away.

Adair took Nathaniel's face in both of his hands, brows creased. "See?" He said, his voice full of sorrow. "Like the sun going behind a cloud. You're sad again."

"Not sad," he said, as Adair scrutinized his face. "Just remembering."

Adair covered his cheeks with soft kisses. "Tell me."

Nathaniel looped his arm around Adair's waist, turning to face the horizon line. He stayed quiet for a while. "My father loved the water," he began. "But it scared my mother so much. She used to say ..."

"Yes?" Adair prompted him when he didn't continue.

Nathaniel frowned out at the waves. "She used to say he wasn't meant to be in the water this way, that he belonged with his roots in the earth," he said. He had forgotten that. A grin split his face. "When I was a child I always thought it meant he didn't know how to swim."

Adair said nothing, but Nathaniel saw that he was smiling, too, waiting for him to carry on.

"He'd bring us out here, past the waves; Thomas on his shoulders, me hanging off his arm. He'd pull me out, through

the surf. I'd look back and see Mama hovering on the shore, and I'd wave to show her I wasn't afraid."

"But you were."

"A little. At first."

"What made you brave?"

"My father."

"You're like him, then."

"Oh?"

Adair scooped Nathaniel up into his arms, spinning in the surf. "You've made me brave."

"Be serious."

"I am," Adair said, setting him on his feet again. "I never would have come here without you. I'd have never touched the sea."

"Just c'mere, you," Nathaniel pulled Adair in for a kiss. "Thank you for coming with me."

"Thank you for bringing me."

"Even though you drank all that sea water?"

"Yes."

They stood close in the waves for a while, happy silence shared. Nathaniel pressed his ear to Adair's chest to listen to his heart. "I thought I'd found a place for just the two of us," Nathaniel said ruefully.

"Just so you know," Adair whispered, "I don't care how many eyes are on us."

"Oh?"

He stooped to nip at Nathaniel's ear. "I'd lay you down on the grass and love you with the whole world looking on."

Nathaniel laughed. "Why does that not surprise me?"

"Because it shouldn't," Adair said. "I'm amazed every day I get to call you mine. I want everyone to know."

“Oh good grief,” said Nathaniel, feeling the heat rise to his face despite the chill of the water.

“What?”

“I don’t know how you can just say such things.”

“Because they’re true,” Adair said, earnest. He kissed the corner of Nathaniel’s mouth, a chaste little peck. “Because they make you smile.”

“You’ll really take any chance to flirt with me, won’t you?”

“Always.”

Nathaniel stiffened. After a moment’s hesitation, he stepped away and asked, “Always?”

Adair looked away, twitching up his shoulder and letting it fall. He looked suddenly quite shy, clearly more embarrassed by that one small word than by baldly expressing his willingness to fuck Nathaniel in front of his entire family.

“It’s alright,” Nathaniel said, reaching for his hand. “It’s alright if you didn’t—“

“I did.” Adair was now staring directly into Nathaniel’s face, eyes burning with fierce intensity.

“Oh.”

“I have to know,” he said, “Is that what you want, as well?”

“Of course it is.”

“For true?”

“Well,” said Nathaniel carefully, “always means something different for each of us, does it not?”

Adair’s green eyes clouded over with grief. “It does.”

They stood in an awkward, pressing silence for several moments.

“Whatever always means,” Nathaniel said finally, “I’ll love you for it.”



They slept that night on a blanket on the sand, with the waves as their lullaby. When Adair stirred the following morning, for the first time upon waking he knew he'd find Nathaniel where he belonged, curled tight against his side.

XV

More Beast than Man

There were few times when Nathaniel wanted to be alone, but occasionally the mood struck him. The desire for solitude came creeping slowly down his spine, until his limbs were heavy with it. When the first man died beneath Nathaniel's hand, he felt it. He spent a few days trying to outrun the feeling, but sure as sunrise it was soon draped all over him like cold, wet blankets.

So, he tread the long and lonely path to the one place he knew he wouldn't be disturbed. He'd been back to his father's grave only a few times since Adair had shown him where it was, and each time he'd come alone. Since visiting the beach that he'd gone to as a boy, Nathaniel felt a pull toward his father, wanting to understand more about the life he'd lead before laying down his roots in Myrna.

Adair feared and mistrusted the barrow, but Nathaniel found the little glade gave him a sense of calm. He'd sit on the grass by his father's stone, his fingers tracing the roughhewn letters of his name, and let his mind hum to blankness. When Nathaniel wanted to be alone it went unspoken that he would go there, attend his father's grave, and experience a peaceful sort of melancholy.

As he walked the now familiar path, Nathaniel considered the man he'd lost a few days prior. James Kelly had been his name. He'd been mauled by, well—his wife said a bear, but she hadn't seen the animal. The wounds had been hideous to behold, and Nathaniel had felt in his bones that the man would not survive them. As he examined James, he'd noticed more than one similarity to the wounds on Sean Ulmer. It troubled

him. Both men had gone into the forest, and both men had been attacked.

“I don’t know how you can stand to go so deep into those woods, Nathaniel,” his wife had said tearfully. “There’s such fearsome things in there.”

Nathaniel had lain his hands on James’s torso, listened to his failing heartbeat and ragged breaths. The wounds, like Sean’s, did not seem natural. He been so frantic trying to save Sean’s life that he had not been able to spare such thoughts, but everything about them had been off, wrong in a way that he could not put to name. Looking at James Kelly, he had felt an unshakeable, creeping dread. He could hardly say that to Mrs. Kelly, however, so he rolled up his sleeves and did his very best—he cleaned the man’s flesh and stitched him up but still his heart had beat its last under Nathaniel’s palm.

Nathaniel climbed the ridge, feeling the knot in his chest loosen slightly. Hovering on the edge of his perception, he sensed Adair’s presence in the trees. He would not come into the glade, but Nathaniel was reassured to know that he was prowling, restless, near.

When Nathaniel sat on the soft moss beside his father’s gravestone, he let out a sigh, expecting to feel the normal release of solitude he’d felt before. However, he couldn’t quite shake the feeling that something was amiss. Nathaniel frowned down at the grave bearing his father’s name. Curling up over the edge of the stone was a strange new growth, something he’d never seen before. It resembled most closely the lichen that blanketed many surfaces in the woods, except that it was black as pitch. He reached to touch it with curious fingers, but upon contact it disintegrated to dust, fine and soft like black ashes in an old cook pit. Frowning more deeply still, Nathaniel couldn’t shake the bone deep feeling of *wrongness*. Hesitantly, he puffed up his cheeks and blew the dust from his father’s stone. The particles scattered, revealing a deep, ugly crack through which the strange lichen had grown. He was certain the break had not been present the last time he’d visited this place.

He looked around the edge of the stone, trying to find the source of the growth, and swallowed, cold sweat breaking on his forehead. It was coming from directly below the grave marker, where Nathaniel knew his father's bones had been laid to rest. Something twisted in Nathaniel's guts as he remembered Adair's words. *Fae graves are cursed places*, the faun had said, eyes round with fear. Nathaniel's instinct to take some of the black lichen home to study had been so strong just moments ago, but now he stared at his fingertips in revulsion. He hastily wiped the dust from his fingers on his trouser leg. Perhaps Adair had been right. There were other ways to honor his father's memory, other places to be alone.

Ten paces from the glade, Adair dropped out of the tree to land at his side. "What do I smell?"

Nathaniel shoved his hand deep into his pocket. "How should I know?"

Adair frowned, seizing Nathaniel's wrist and pulling his hand up under his nose. The faun inhaled deep, then leapt away—dropping Nathaniel's arm like it had burned him.

"What the *hell*?"

Nathaniel explained what he'd found at his father's grave.

"And you *touched* it? Minnow, are you mad?" Adair seized his other hand and half dragged him back down the path. "We've got to clean that off you straight away."

"What is it?"

"I don't know! Nothing good."

Adair hauled Nathaniel through the trees to the healing springs and nearly shoved him into the water in his haste to cleanse Nathaniel's skin of whatever had been growing on his father's grave. Adair wouldn't relent until Nathaniel had dunked his entire body in the pool, and for once he didn't appear to be trying to talk Nathaniel out of his clothes because he insisted those needed to be scourged as well. Dripping, scared, and confused Nathaniel emerged from the water some time later, shaking out his sodden sleeves. Adair sniffed him all over like a bloodhound, and Nathaniel supposed he must

have smelled like himself again because when Adair's nose reached his collarbone it was followed closely by his lips.

Adair moved away to hold Nathaniel at arm's length, large hands gripping his shoulders. "What's wrong, Minnow?"

"Other than the fact that you just nearly drowned me and I still don't really understand why?"

Adair dropped his hands to his sides, meek. "Yes. Other than that."

Nathaniel said, "I want you to tell me what's going on."

"What do you mean?"

Feeling quite ridiculous having this conversation while soaked to the bone, Nathaniel said nothing. He merely crossed his arms with *squelch* and waited.

Sure enough, after a moment, Adair sighed. "I don't really know."

"Do you think all of these things are connected?" He pressed.

"What things?"

"The horse, the attacks on Sean and ..." Nathaniel couldn't say James Kelly's name. He cleared his throat and uncrossed his arms, gesturing down at himself. "This."

"No."

"No, what?"

"No, they're not connected."

Nathaniel frowned. "You seem very certain."

"I am."

The faun was plainly not in an expansive mood, but Nathaniel was wet, cold, annoyed and his patience was limited. "Tell me why you're so certain," he said.

"Don't you trust me?"

"Of course I do, that's not the—"

“Then just trust me, and drop it.” Adair’s eyes were hard, and something unfamiliar flashed behind them.

Nathaniel balked. Adair had never snapped at him like that before. He took a step back, shivering.

Adair shook himself, and the fleeting look vanished. “Apologies—“

Nathaniel shrugged it off; the trajectory of the day seemed knocked off course. “No matter,” he said gruffly, looking down at the puddle around his feet from his dripping clothes. He felt prickly and wrong footed

“Minnow, I—“

Nathaniel put a hand to Adair’s lips. “Let’s not discuss it,” he said, summoning a smile. “I’d rather you divert my attentions.”

Adair extended his hand. “Let’s walk to dry you off a bit,” he said. “I think I know just the thing.”



Grateful that Nathaniel had let the subject drop, Adair took his hand and pulled him along the path. Adair tried to convince himself Nathaniel’s fretting that these incidents were related to be nothing short of paranoid. The fact was, strange things happened in the forest all the time. The mysterious growth on Abhain’s grave was disturbing, especially to poor Nathaniel in his grief, but it did not surprise him that something foul had taken root there. Adair was certain Gael had killed the man driving the horse cart, but he was equally certain that Gael did not have the strength to perpetrate the attacks on the two men from Myrna. Gael was a pathetic leech, he thought with a derisive snort, sent off by the queen with his tail between his legs.

Nathaniel looked at him, but said nothing. Adair could tell he was still in a strange mood, and he was determined to shake him out of it.

Glancing sidelong at Nathaniel, Adair could tell he was nervous. With the exception of their visit to Clíodhna in her remote northern glade, Adair had kept Nathaniel well away

from his kin since their visit to the Aster Queen's court. However, Adair had known from Nathaniel's tone that by "divert my attentions" he had not, curiously, meant "make love to me." So, he decided that perhaps it was time for his Minnow to blend more with his world, without the influence of Nightshade wine.

Besides, Adair felt like he owed Beith a good thumping. Beith had been spoiling for a fight, and Adair wanted nothing more than to stomp him into the mud, with Nathaniel there to watch. The thought had him hot in his skin and breathing rather hard. He gave Nathaniel's hand a squeeze.

Beith was already waiting on top of the log when they approached, cracking his knuckles and pacing, impatient to spar. Síol was there as well, but occupied playing some sort of kissing game with the sisters. She sat cross-legged, blindfolded, and Slaney, Erne and Brosna would take it in turns to press their lips to hers. Síol would then hazard a guess as to which sister had kissed her. Usually, Síol seemed hard as the root of an old tree, but she always melted soft and girlish under the attentions of the sisters. She seemed to delight in the game, though she hardly ever guessed correctly.

Bán was there too, and he bounded eagerly up to Nathaniel, recognizing him from court. He wound around his legs like an affectionate housecat, and it made Adair smile to see it. He'd known Bán his entire life, and his approval of Nathaniel meant a great deal. Nathaniel smiled, crouching beside the fluffy white fox and scratching behind his ears.

This seemed a perfect atmosphere for cheering Minnow's solemn heart. Adair deposited him on the grass with a kiss to his forehead before squaring his shoulders and hopping up to face Beith on the fallen tree. The other faun grunted. "You remember how to fight? Or have you gone soft from all that kissing?"

"I suppose you'll find out, won't you?"

"I'd like to fight next match," Síol called without removing her blindfold as she disengaged her lips from Brosna's. "I'll face the victor."

“Then who’ll play with us?” Erne asked, winking at Nathaniel. “I don’t like the way Beith kisses.”

“I’d rather take my chances on that fallen tree, to be honest,” said Nathaniel, and everyone laughed. Nathaniel’s smile was stiff and nervous, but genuine. Adair’s heart swelled to watch him petting Bán, who was curled on his lap. Perhaps he could belong here, with Adair’s people.

Looking at Nathaniel’s face, alight with fearful excitement, Adair felt something primal stir in his chest. The desire to impress him with this showing burned across his skin. He returned his attentions to Beith, planting his feet, his eyes promising violence. Adair let his body fall into a crouch, rocking forward onto the balls of his feet. He knew Beith like he knew himself: he was aggressive, and impatient, and would want to strike first. Sure enough, a scant few breaths had passed before Beith exploded forward, trying to hit low and topple Adair off his feet. Beith dove, and just as he made a grab for his legs Adair hopped straight up, the muscles in his legs sending him like a spring. He landed squarely between Beith’s shoulders. The bigger faun landed on his belly on the log with Adair perched like a bird on his back. Adair blushed with pride when he heard Nathaniel give an appreciative whoop, but in his moment of distraction, Beith reared up trying to dislodge him. Adair slipped, but managed to twist himself, looping a forearm around Beith’s neck before being thrown off the log.

Adair wrapped his long legs around Beith’s middle, clinging to his back. Beith let out a roar and snapped his head back, smashing into Adair’s face. A white hot pain blazed between Adair’s eyes, and he dropped his hold on Beith, landing on his back on the fallen tree. Beith knelt on his chest, leering into his face. Tasting his own blood, Adair struggled to regain focus, dazed by the blow to his face and the back of his skull hitting the wood below. Beith seized his hands, pinning him down, cocksure in his dominance. Adair sucked in a breath, thrusting his head up with all his strength, his forehead colliding with Beith’s. It dismayed him just long enough for Adair to twist one leg up and fire a kick into Beith’s gut.

Beith outweighed him, significantly, but the pair of blows was enough to have him staggering backward, and Adair didn't waste his moment to regain his feet with a snarl. His blood sang as he threw all his weight at Beith, launching toward him and sending them both tumbling to the mud.

That would normally have been the end of the match, but Adair's heart pounded in his ears and his fists coiled of their own volition. He saw his own hunger echoed in Beith's eyes as he swung back and sank his knuckles into the side of his friend's face, sending his other hand to wrap around Beith's throat.

Beith hissed—in pain, in anger, or elation, Adair could not truly tell—scrabbling against the iron grip of Adair's fingers, his eyes slits in his face. Drawing his own fingers into a meaty fist, Beith slammed his knuckles into the bottom Adair's jaw. His teeth banged together, lights bursting in his eyes as he found himself knocked to his back. Trying to clear his vision, Adair rolled onto his belly, struggling to all fours before Beith was surrounding him, massive sweaty thighs pressing around his waist. Adair could feel Beith's heart pounding against his back and suddenly he wanted nothing more than to reach into his chest and rip it out.

Other sounds, sights, faded dimly away as Beith and Adair pounded each other with their fists, snarling and growling—the pure unfettered joy of striking one another all that mattered. Suddenly, Adair found it a struggle to draw breath, and he realized a slim forearm was clamped under his chin, pressing against his windpipe. He blinked, realizing a heady rushing sound filled his ears—and in realizing it, it began to fade. Strong, thin fingers crushed the meat of his upper arm like a vice, pulling, pulling.

It was like waking from a dream, sudden and disorienting—Adair was being hauled back by Síol and Nathaniel, who were both screaming at him, trying to penetrate the fog of his blood lust. The sisters had grabbed hold of Beith, who seemed to be coming back to himself with a similar look of blank confusion. All at once it was over, Síol's arm fell from his neck and Adair submitted to Nathaniel's pulling, breath coming in great

heaving gasps. Beith shrugged off the pearly white hands of the sisters and turned on his heel to march off into the trees.

Adair blinked, panting, sweat and blood stinging his eyes. He ached all over, but his blood still hummed beneath his skin. Nathaniel lowered his hand from Adair's arm to grab for his fingers.

"I'll go after Beith," Síol said. Adair watched as she turned to Nathaniel, dimly aware he hadn't actually introduced them. "Are you alright with him?"

Nathaniel nodded, and as soon as they were alone, he seized Adair by the waist and pulled him in for a bruising kiss. He tasted fire and hunger on Nathaniel's lips, and responded in kind.

They broke apart for breath and Adair noted a peculiar gleam in his Minnow's eye. "Well," said Nathaniel, "consider my attentions diverted."

Surprised but pleased, Adair allowed Nathaniel to explore the bruises blooming on his face and chest with gentle fingers.

Nathaniel pulled his lower lip between his teeth, hesitating before asking, "How badly are you hurt?"

Adair answered with his lips, channeling his thrumming pulse into an entirely different physical pursuit, and in a grappling whirlwind he was on his back again, Nathaniel already nude and straddling his waist. He gripped Nathaniel's hips, finding him ready and eager, and Adair admired the smears of blood he left on Nathaniel's soft, pale skin, unsure if it was his own or Beith's.

Adair surprised himself; in his agitated state he came after only a few rapid thrusts, Nathaniel riding his dick and clawing at the skin of his chest, clearly equally heated as he clamped down on Adair's cock and grabbed his own with eager hands, pumping himself with his fist. Adair squeezed tight to Nathaniel's hips, still trying to fuck up into him as he came down from a dizzying high. Nathaniel gave a beautiful, strangled cry as he joined Adair in his climax. Panting,

Nathaniel glanced down at himself, covered in sweat and blood and come, and startled.

“Goodness,” he whispered. “I’m sorry.”

Adair scooted up onto his elbows, cocking his head to the side with a smile. “I don’t see why you should be.” He thought Nathaniel looked lovely like this—naked and wild and uncontrolled.

“I’m not sure what ... came over me.”

Adair bit back a quip, instead shifting with a wince until he was sitting with his legs braced on either side of Nathaniel’s body. He cupped his face with one hand and pulled him in for a soft kiss. “Well,” he said. “I certainly wouldn’t complain much if it came over you again.”

Upon reflection, Adair wasn’t certain what had come over himself, either. He and Beith had sparred so many times over the years; they were always pushing each other, challenging each other, but never, *never* had they lost control like that. Adair shrugged it off, thinking it must just have been because they hadn’t sparred in a while, had some pent up aggression to get out. He helped Nathaniel find his clothes, scattered around the clearing like they’d been seized by a small tornado.



A few days later, Nathaniel bounced on the balls of his feet beside the border stone. He had to collect some herbs to mix a healing balm for one of the families in town, whose little ones had broken out all over in fearsome itching spots. Anxious to begin the brew, which worked best when steeped for several hours, Nathaniel finally gave up on waiting and set off along the path alone. He remembered where the necessary plants grew, and Adair could find him anywhere in the forest.

As Nathaniel walked, he felt a cool breeze ruffle the hair at the base of his neck, and he shivered. The day had promised to be warm, so he was dressed lightly, and the wind tugged at the fabric of his shirt as he moved deeper into the trees.

He felt a prickle down his spine, a feeling he usually associated with the imminent arrival of Adair. It wasn’t

unpleasant, and now that he had learned to place the feeling, Adair hardly ever caught him at unawares anymore. Sometimes though, he still pretended to be surprised. Smiling to himself at the memory of the last time he allowed himself to be hunted, he paused, squinting through the trees.

When he didn't see any sign of his faun, he sighed and continued down the path. The prickle did not subside. Nathaniel walked another hundred yards, pausing every few steps. As he moved further into the wood, his smile began to fade. Nathaniel's shoulders worked their way up closer to his ears each time one of his feet hit the ground. The snap of every twig had him whipping his head around, searching for the source of the noise. The muscles along Nathaniel's spine twitched, like a horse trying to shake off an invisible fly.

A bead of sweat trickled down his temple despite the chill, and Nathaniel moved further along the path, feeling like his body had been caught mid-shiver for several tense minutes. Nathaniel realized he'd been clutching the strap of his forage bag with white knuckles and shaking hands.

Someone was most definitely watching him, and with every step he was more certain it was not Adair. He tried to place his feet quietly, but each of his footfalls sounded deafening in the close press of the forest. Still, the prickle—from his scalp down his neck, between his shoulder blades, tingling down to his tailbone—persisted. Nathaniel's heart pounded, and he realized he'd been holding his breath. Shaking like a rabbit in a snare he pulled his knife from his belt. It was a little thing, but it made him feel a bit braver to clutch it in his sweaty palm.

Quick as a striking serpent, a hand darted from the trees and seized Nathaniel's arm. Nathaniel closed his eyes, screaming, and swung wildly with the hand holding the knife.

“Hey! *Hey!*” Another hand seized his wrist, holding him tight. “Stop—stop screaming!”

Nathaniel opened his eyes, face to face with Adair. He dropped the knife.

“Are you alright?” Asked the faun, releasing Nathaniel’s hands.

“I don’t know, what the hell was that—was that you?”

“Was what me?”

“Erm.” Nathaniel was still shaking, his entire body covered with nervous sweat. He covered his face with his hands. “I don’t—I don’t know.”

Adair seized Nathaniel’s wrists, pulling his hands down to peer into his face and Nathaniel got a good look at him for the first time, too. He was agitated, luminous eyes bulging, never still, and he sniffed the air like a hunting hound. It took Nathaniel a moment to realize that Adair was quivering too, but more like a bowstring about to snap. Yanking Nathaniel along by the arm, he half dragged him back through the trees. “I’m taking you home.”

Nathaniel hastened to follow, curious and frightened. They reached the edge of the trees without another word passed between them, and Adair released Nathaniel’s hand immediately. “Go inside. Don’t come into the forest again without me. Don’t let your brother out of your sight, especially not near the trees.”

“Wait!”

Adair had already turned back toward the forest. He paused, and something feral flashed behind his eyes, causing Nathaniel to back away half a step. “What?” He snapped.

“What on earth is going on?”

Adair closed the gap between them and kissed Nathaniel in a distracted sort of way, like his mind was already elsewhere. “I’m not certain,” he said, and turned to stomp back off into the woods.

Nathaniel was on edge for the rest of the day, flinching at the smallest noises and easily losing his train of thought. Eventually, he gave the day up as a bad job and went to bed early. For hours, he stared at the ceiling above his bed, turning things over in his mind. The attacks on the men in the forest, the mysterious growth on his father’s grave, and of course

Adair and Beith's snarling fury as they turned simple game to bloody contest.

Nathaniel tried to quiet his troubled mind, with little success. He couldn't shake the feeling of something watching him in the woods, and whenever he managed to drift off to sleep his dreams were troubling, filled with sinister eyes and gusts of wind that turned to hisses.

Waking from one such dream, Nathaniel sat up, gasping for breath. His heart nearly stopped dead when he saw a pair of huge green eyes staring back at him through his window.

"What is the matter with you?" He asked as he opened the window.

Adair climbed through the frame and set immediately to pacing the floor. "Close the window."

Nathaniel obeyed, sitting cross legged on the bed, watching in fear as Adair walked back and forth.

"Did you see anything strange today?"

Nathaniel raised his eyebrows. "Besides you, you mean?"

"This is not a joke." Adair tossed his head, turning to stare Nathaniel down with eyes burning. "Something dangerous is in the forest," he said through gritted teeth. "I can feel it."

"What is it?"

"I don't know," said the faun. He stopped up short. "But I can smell it too, everywhere. And I'm not the only one who can."

Adair resumed his pacing, and Nathaniel watched for a while before he slid off the bed. He braced his hands on his hips. "How long?"

"What?"

"How *long*?" Nathaniel repeated. "How long have you felt this—this presence?"

Adair would not meet his eye.

"I bloody knew it."

“Minnow—“

“You *lied* to me.”

The statement hung heavy in the air between them. “I wasn’t certain before,” Adair said finally. “I was mistaken.”

Nathaniel crossed his arms. “A dangerous mistake.”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Nathaniel asked him.

“Couldn’t—can’t—“

“Can’t what?”

“Lose you.”

“How could you—“

Adair silenced him with a kiss, a bruising, ferocious kiss. Heat came off of the faun in waves, blistering the air between them. It wasn’t an apology, but Nathaniel got the sense that they had larger concerns.

When they broke apart, he asked. “What can I do?”

Adair seized Nathaniel by the shoulders, giving him a little shake. “Nothing,” he said, fierce and angry. “I don’t want you anywhere near this thing. I only came to make sure you’re safe.”

“You’re scaring me,” Nathaniel said, trying to squirm out of his grip. “You’re not yourself.”

Adair stilled, breathing like he’d just run miles, and pushed his forehead aggressively to Nathaniel’s. Nathaniel reached up to touch Adair’s horns, to soothe him like he’d done so many times, but he drew his hand back with a hiss of pain. Adair’s horns were always warm to touch but now they were positively scorching. Nathaniel pulled back a bit to look at them, and unless he was much mistaken, his faun’s sweet little goat horns had suddenly *grown*. Bracing himself against the heat, he touched them again. They were definitely thicker, hotter, and far sharper than before, and as Nathaniel probed them with hesitant fingers he found the shining gold inlays had faded to dull, angry bronze. “What’s happening to you?”

Adair flinched away from Nathaniel's touch like a wary animal. "I don't know," he said, seeming more beast than man. "But I know you need to stay away from the forest right now." His wild eyes flicked to the window.

"Don't go."

There was a beat of silence before Adair tightened his grip on Nathaniel's shoulder, pulling him close. "You're mine," he growled in Nathaniel's ear. "I can't let anything happen to you."

He wrapped his arms around Nathaniel and held him tight, crushing his body against himself. Nathaniel could feel Adair's heart pounding against his own chest, and the faun kissed him again like he truly meant to consume his flesh. He moved his lips to Nathaniel's neck, biting hard. Nathaniel muffled his answering whimper best he could in the silent house as Adair pushed his back against the wall, rough and urgent. His head banged into the wooden beam, and when he opened his mouth to curse in pain Adair shoved his tongue between his lips. It had been a few days since they'd been together, and Nathaniel's body responded immediately. When Adair felt Nathaniel growing hard against him, he pulled his lips away to snarl, "Take off your clothes."

Nathaniel hastened to undo his shirt buttons, difficult with Adair's lips at his throat. With a frustrated grunt, Adair seized the fabric with both hands and yanked. It didn't tear cleanly, and buttons flew around the room as Adair grappled with the torn shirt. Nathaniel felt like he was being strangled, like Adair wasn't bothered if his head came off along with his clothes—so singularly focused with ripping and yanking the soft cotton in his haste to bare Nathaniel's flesh.

Finally it came away and Adair covered Nathaniel's chest with incendiary kisses. His skin ran so hot that Nathaniel was already soaked in sweat. Adair trailed his tongue along Nathaniel's collarbone, moving to his neck again with bared teeth and hungry lips. Nathaniel tangled his fingers in the faun's hair, struggling to catch his breath before Adair claimed his lips again, sliding his hands down Nathaniel's legs. He

moved his palms to grip Nathaniel's thighs and scoop him up against his body.

Nathaniel couldn't breathe; he was hot and dizzy and the faun was everywhere, the noises coming from his throat electric and terrifying. Nathaniel's legs locked around Adair's waist and the faun turned to carry him across the room and toss him roughly on the bed.

Nathaniel wriggled out of his trousers, and the look on Adair's face at the sight of his naked body had his own need doubling down. Nathaniel's hand went to his dick, desperate to give it a few strokes but Adair grabbed his wrist. "No," he growled. It seemed like the only light in the room came from the reflection of moon glow in his wild eyes. "Mine."

Adair pinned both of Nathaniel's hands to the bed as he climbed on top of him, sucking Nathaniel's bottom lip between his teeth. Adair bit down, pulling his head back to tug on Nathaniel's lip like he meant to tear it off.

He hissed in pain. "You're—you're hurting me," he gasped, but the thought of being taken, possessed by this absolute force of wild magic was intoxicating. This was a new side of his faun, possessive and beastly and thrilling. Drunk on lust, Nathaniel squirmed out of Adair's grasp and got to his hands and knees, presenting himself to this strange beast that had climbed through his window—silently begging with his body for Adair to mount him, to understand that he could take what he wanted. The faun clearly did not need telling twice, moving gracefully to kneel behind him, pressing against his body. Adair shoved his fingers into Nathaniel's mouth while rutting against his backside. Nathaniel moaned around Adair's fingers, suckling each one into his mouth, and when Adair drew his hand away they were dripping. The idea that Adair did not have the patience to find a more suitable lubricant promised a lively night, and Nathaniel simmered in his skin at the thought.

He couldn't help it; he reached between his legs to tug on his leaking cock, but as soon as he touched it, Adair delivered a stinging slap to the meat of his ass. "Don't you dare," he snarled. Nathaniel bit his lip to keep from crying out as Adair

struck him again, dropping his hand obediently to the mattress. The heat, the pain, the tingling sting from Adair's strike had Nathaniel aching with desire, and part of him wanted to inspire the faun to slap him again. Nathaniel trembled, waiting, needing so badly to be touched, and in his frenzied state Adair didn't keep him waiting long. Without preamble, Adair pushed two fingers past Nathaniel's tight entrance, working him over with brutal efficiency. Nathaniel thought he might liquefy as Adair's breath, scorching hot on his ass gave him but split second warning before Adair's tongue joined his fingers, lapping and tasting Nathaniel's hole. Nathaniel's face burned; he thought he had learned everything their bodies could do together but he'd never been so wrong in his life. When Adair pulled his fingers back and flexed his tongue to a devilish point, it was all he could do not to moan with shameless need.

Finally, Adair drew his gorgeous mouth away and rammed his dick straight into Nathaniel's core. With a satisfied grunt, he stilled his body, happy for a moment to feel Nathaniel clenching eagerly around his cock. Soon enough he was moving again, sliding all the way out to drive back in again, slow and *deep*. Adair's hands slipped from Nathaniel's waist to his shoulders, pushing his chest down toward the mattress. Nathaniel turned his head to one side, his cheek pressed to the bed, peeking back toward Adair behind him. He arched his spine, pushing back against Adair, needing so much more than he was being given. Adair bent over Nathaniel's body, grabbing his arms and folding them at the small of his back. Nathaniel found himself well and truly speared, unable to move an inch. Adair's other hand slipped down the taut slim lines of Nathaniel's waist, finding purchase on the bone of his hip. He dug his fingers into Nathaniel's skin and used his grip to hold him still. There were times for their bodies to move in concert; this plainly, was not one of them.

Nathaniel was happy to give freely what Adair so desperately needed to take from him. Some part of his sweet faun was clearly lurking behind this forceful beast because Adair leaned forward and pressed a tender kiss to Nathaniel's sweaty shoulder before straightening up and pounding into him.

It took all Nathaniel had to avoid screaming at the top of his lungs each time Adair struck home, fucking him with a base, animalistic fury. Being hammered relentlessly this way was like nothing he'd ever experienced—he felt his climax begin to build and it felt like it was starting somewhere in the vicinity of his tailbone, like every nerve in his body was about to combust, skipping rope between pleasure and pain. Adair's cock was as hot as the rest of his flesh, enflaming Nathaniel from the inside out, and with each thrust he felt closer and closer to feverish delirium—and still Adair moved harder, faster, more erratic.

Adair braced one of his feet against the bed, moving into a bestial crouch to gain better purchase, lending him strength to snap his hips and crush Nathaniel into the mattress with each thrust. Nathaniel could tell Adair was close—they'd been together enough times that Nathaniel had learned the signs: his breathing, his movements, the frantic grip of his fingers. Nathaniel braced himself, pushing his knees wider, offering himself up as completely as he could. Adair let out a strangled moan that was half a sob, sinking his teeth into Nathaniel's shoulder as he came hard and sudden as a thunderclap. Feeling the hot gush of his pleasure pumping deep into his body had Nathaniel coming, explosive, with his dick untouched, and they collapsed as one on the bed, covered in a sheen of sweat like morning dew.

Nathaniel would have been content to remain squashed into the mattress with Adair's dick still inside him, but Adair moved away immediately to curl around himself, facing the window. He looked small and fragile, the fury gone out of him all at once like a snuffed candle. Nathaniel laid a hand on his shoulder and found it trembling. Concerned, he laid himself against Adair's back, wrapping around him, pulling the blanket over them both.

“It's alright,” he whispered. “I've got you.”

Adair let out a great, shuddering breath and allowed himself to be held as he fell into a fitful sleep.

XVI

Changing

Nathaniel woke alone, shivering from the draft coming in his open window. He might have been able to convince himself he'd been dreaming, if not for the fresh teeth marks on his neck, the bruises on his hip from Adair's punishing fingers, and the sweet bone-deep ache in his entire body. Nathaniel did his best to occupy his mind with his work in the village, and for the first day not find it all that difficult to keep his word and avoid the forest.

The second day was more difficult, and the third more difficult still. By the fifth day without any word from Adair, Nathaniel was beside himself. The forest seemed to drink the light of the sun and draw his eyes at every moment. Nathaniel hovered by the trees, squinting into the distance and seeing nothing helpful. The closer he got to the tree line the pricklier his skin became

By the morning of the sixth day, Nathaniel was on the verge of tearing his hair out, so when he saw a slender form moving just beyond the tree line he let out a relieved yelp and ran toward the wood. He knew when he was twenty paces from the trees that not only was the person staggering toward him not his faun, but that something was very wrong. He kept running. He recognized the perfect face of and opalescent skin of one of Adair's sisters. New to him was her expression of abject terror. She stumbled toward him, near collapsing against his chest, and burst into tears.

Nathaniel cast his eyes around nervously as her wails echoed through the morning mist. He saw Mr. Bell out milking

his cow. “Who’s that you’ve got there, Nathaniel?” He hollered.

“Er—just, she’s my cousin. Very disturbed.” He shucked off his jacket and wrapped her in it as he tried to figure out which sister he was looking at. Slaney, he decided. She was the most petite of the three and—if he recalled correctly, with a deep blush—the most buxom.

She clutched desperately at the front of Nathaniel’s shirt, burying her face into his chest. He frowned as he looked down at the top of her head; her hair was matted and filthy, her shoulders covered in scratches like she’d been traveling through the forest for days. That was odd in itself, as Nathaniel knew the girls usually traveled through the network of streams and rivers.

“I’m so glad I found you,” she said, her voice hoarse and desperate.

“Come on,” he said gently. “Let me take you inside.”

With a small wave to Mr. Bell, Nathaniel steered Slaney up the path to the back door of the house, trying to cover her as much as possible with his jacket. While Adair’s eyes were certainly bigger than the average man’s, his horns could easily be concealed by a hat and as long as you didn’t look too closely, he seemed human enough. His sisters on the other hand, were entirely alien with their skin shining like pearls and casting rainbow reflections on the ground when they caught the light. Nathaniel hoped that if he got Slaney inside quickly Mr. Bell wouldn’t question it too much.

Nathaniel’s mother was scrubbing a porridge pot as he led Adair’s sister inside.

“Nathaniel, love, I just need you to—“

Smash. Thomas entered the kitchen, carrying a vase of dead flowers, which slipped from his hands immediately when he laid eyes on Slaney. Nathaniel’s mother whirled around at the noise, taking in the broken china before her eyes lit on the strange girl in her kitchen. She let out a gasp. “Gracious,” she said, hand going to her chest.

“This is Slaney,” Nathaniel told her. “She’s Adair’s sister.”

“She doesn’t look much like him,” said Thomas bluntly, apparently getting over his initial shock. He stepped over the pile of broken vase and dried flower fragments. “What is she, a sprite? A nymph?”

Nathaniel’s mother stared at her youngest son in surprise.

“I read, too, you know,” said Thomas drily.

Nathaniel guided Slaney to a chair. She held tight to his coat around her shoulders. “We can’t find our brother,” she began, eyes swimming with tears. “We haven’t seen him in days.”

“*Days?*” Nathaniel echoed, the bottom falling out of his stomach.

She nodded, miserable. “I had to leave the water to come find you—we thought he might be here.”

“He’s not,” Nathaniel said. “I haven’t seen him either. Where are your sisters?”

“Erne and Brosna are in the lake—or they were when I left them. It can’t follow us into the water.”

“What can’t?”

Slaney looked down at her interlocked fingers. “We don’t know.”

She wouldn’t say another word. Heavy silence fell over the kitchen. The more Nathaniel looked at Slaney, the more worried he became. He ran his fingers through his hair, thinking. Nathaniel’s mind raced, as he recalled everything he understood about Erne, Slaney, and Brosna and turned over what Adair had said when he saw him last.

“Alright,” he said. Everyone jumped. “Draw Slaney a bath. River water, not well water. Don’t go into the forest. Ask Sam Darling if you can fill the jugs from the edge of his land. Don’t heat it.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll be back before nightfall,” said Nathaniel, turning and marching out the door.



Adair could smell it—some kind of fell beast. He could taste its scent on the air and it had every hair on his body bristling. He didn’t know much about it, but he knew that it was old, and it was dangerous, and it had to be made to leave. If it got its claws on his sisters, his mother—his Minnow... Adair growled as he followed the smell. It had already killed a man from the village, maimed another—and Adair had thought that it might have killed Gael.

There was no love lost between Adair and Gael, but the fact that there was something in his forest gutting and killing fae folk and humans alike had Adair fuming. He would flay the flesh from its hide with his bare hands. Anger like an ever present itch had his fingers twitching, the desire to wrap them around a throat burning through him like fever.

Sunrise, two days ago, Adair had come across his first body—nearly unrecognizable but for a few bloody clumps of formerly silky black hair, and silvery skin sliced wide. Clíodhna was laid out like an offering, oddly beautiful with a circle of the Nightshade flowers growing around her broken body.

Time had skipped, then. One minute Adair had been kneeling beside the wreckage of a person he’d known for hundreds of years—the next, it was dusk. It was dusk and his body was on fire, burning shifting heat pumping under his skin. Adair’s eyes went wide, seeing clearly under the darkening sky—too clearly, too open, too much. He hissed, squinting, the light from the setting sun high and hot and painful. There was a hum in his ears and an ache across his skull, and looking around he wasn’t anywhere near where’d he last recalled being. Finding himself crouched, he stood, peering through the trees, trying to get his bearings. He sent his fingers to probe his scalp, the pain tearing across it like it’d been cracked open. When his hands found his horns, he frowned. He ran his hands up, higher and higher, feeling the

bones had grown and stretched, thickening and twisting up away from his skull. He reached the tips and winced. Sharp.

None of this made sense, nothing except following this foul smell to its source and eviscerating what he found. Adair grinned. The thought filled his belly with heat. He tried to scent the wind again, his nostrils filling with the forest around him, alive with a thousand thousand smells. He shook his head, giving a violent snort as he tried to direct his senses. Adair doubled over, overwhelmed. The blood of a squirrel, honey, tree bark, moss. Mud. Things dead and things dying. Mint. Wild roses. Rain. Could he only smell these things, or hear them? He clapped his hands over his ears with a grunt, squeezing his eyes shut as he curled in on himself, assaulted by his own heightened senses.

Steadying breaths calmed him as he focused on his hammering heart, slowing it by force of will. He shivered. The white hot fire on his skin burned away, and as his head gave a final, sickening throb, he stilled. Adair took a tentative sniff.

There, he found it.

The beast.

A low growl tore at this throat and he took off again to follow the stench directly to its source. Adair had been moving for days without sleep, and he carried on barely registering the rise and fall of the sun. Finally, he found it. He came upon the beast as it drank from a stream.

Hideous, foul, wrong. Enormous. For the first time, Adair faltered in his ferocity. He watched from behind a tree, looking at his foe. Its body hunched over the water as it scooped liquid into its dripping maw with hands like black bones ending in steel claws. Adair frowned, trying to put to words what he was seeing, but words had been coming slower to his mind over the last few days. At any rate, this beast was like nothing he'd ever seen. The color of its body was ... dark. The only word for it, yet *wrong*, not enough. Instead of existing the thing was a gaping hole, like someone had scratched or burned away the world in the shape its body, torn its figure like a picture from a page in a book to reveal absolute *nothing* behind it.

It felt him.

It towered over the faun, dripping with menace, and before he could blink the beast lunged forward and dug both its hands into the flesh of his chest and tore him open.

XVII

Like Mother, Like Son

Nathaniel's hand, scarred with the knife wound Adair had given him, had been aching for days. He'd been trying to ignore it, but the second he'd stated aloud his intent to follow its pull into the forest, he felt the pain settle off into a dull throb. Nathaniel raised his palm, flexing his fist and sighing with relief.

The pulsing wound drew him where he'd been wanting to go for nearly a week, toward the line of trees at the edge of his land. Steeling himself, Nathaniel accessed an instinctual part of his mind that let everything else fall away but the desire to find his faun.

The space between the trees was as unwelcoming and hostile as it had been several days before, but with the courage of purpose filling his gut, Nathaniel pressed on.

He'd been walking for an hour or two when a spasm of pain lanced up from the wound in his hand, snaking through Nathaniel's arm all the way to his chest, white hot, stealing his breath. He staggered into the trunk of a tree, gasping and squeezing his fist closed tight, pressing it to his chest. When the pain ebbed, Nathaniel opened his eyes, dizzy. He glanced at the tree and almost lost his lunch; spattered across the grooves of the bark was a dark, thick spray of blood.

Looking down, it wasn't long before Nathaniel found the trail. He swallowed. He didn't need his pulsing scar to tell him where to walk. Tears prickled his eyes, and the more blood he saw on the leaf litter the less he bothered preventing them from falling. Still, he walked on.

When he reached the clearing where he and Adair had first met, he shouldn't have been surprised. Adair had clearly been making his way to the pool and its restorative waters. He laid face down on the grass, one hand stretching toward the pond. His bare back was covered in hideous gouges, bone deep and weeping blood. Nathaniel rushed forward, and without pausing he seized the faun's arms and yanked him the rest of the way to the pond, grunting with the effort. With each pull, Nathaniel saw the wounds gape wide like hungry mouths, fresh blood squeezing out, but there was nothing for it. Finally, he got Adair to the edge of the pond and unceremoniously pushed him in. Nathaniel splashed into the water beside him, rolling Adair gently to support him while he floated on his back.

The wounds on Adair's chest were even worse; the skin of his rib cage had been flayed to the bone by a set of enormous claws and the cuts were filthy where he'd dragged himself across the forest floor. What scared Nathaniel most was the strange, clammy chill settled on Adair's skin. Nathaniel rested a trembling hand on Adair's chest and felt the faint, frantic hum of his heart. Dizzy with relief, Nathaniel used his hands to scoop water over the wounds on the faun's chest and arms, the pool clouding red with his blood. "Come on," Nathaniel murmured, urging the water to work faster.

"Knew you wouldn't stay away."

Nathaniel's eyes snapped to Adair's face, pale and pained beneath the crusted smears of blood and heavy bruising. His gaze traveled up to the grime that matted his golden hair and let out a gasp of surprise. Adair's horns had erupted upward from his skull, at least a foot long now, sloping with elegant curves. They were covered in thick, knobby ridges and spiraled up and away from Adair's head, ending in lethal points. They were also deeply stained with blood, almost down to the crown of his head.

"We can't stay here," Adair grunted, pulling Nathaniel from his bewildered examination of Adair's staggering new rack. "You're not safe."

"You have to get better before you can move," said Nathaniel. "You've lost so much blood."

“I’ll be alright,” Adair said through gritted teeth. “It’ll take too long. We’ve got to get out of the woods.”

Adair struggled to his feet, shaking, but when he tested his leg to see if it would bear his weight he crumpled to the ground. Nathaniel knelt beside him, pulling Adair’s arm around his shoulder. “I’ve got you,” he said.

When Nathaniel took Adair’s weight, however, he realized they were never going to make it home. He set his jaw, adjusted his grip and stepped forward into the trees anyhow. Step by agonizing step they moved, and they’d barely gone ten yards before Nathaniel’s legs shook below him, and with each movement Adair’s face twisted in fresh waves of suffering.

“Is it going to come back for you?” Nathaniel whispered, squinting into the forest for signs of movement.

Adair nodded. “You have to run. I think I injured it—you should have heard it scream,” he said with a grim smile that quickly faded with a grunt of pain, “but it’ll be back. Soon.”

“Well, then, we need to hurry,” said Nathaniel with fresh determination, giving Adair’s arm a yank, but his thighs quivered beneath the weight as Adair sagged against his shoulders.

“You have to run.”

“No, I can just—here,” he shoved his shoulder up under Adair’s armpit. “That’s loads better—“

“Please, go—“

“It’ll be alright, just lean—“

“Nathaniel!”

“I’m not leaving you!”

“You two really should try to move more quietly.”

Nathaniel felt his arrival seconds before Beith approached them from behind a tree. The other faun had undergone his own transformation. His eyes were burning amber fire and his horns had grown as well, grey and thick and cruel, curling down around his ears like a ram’s. He’d seemed big to

Nathaniel before, but now Beith loomed hulking and bestial in the half light of the forest.

He took in the sight of Nathaniel and a semi-conscious Adair, drenched with water and soaked with blood, and the look on his face twisted with rage. “I didn’t do this,” said Nathaniel stupidly.

Beith’s mouth curved into a smirk, which only served to make him look more frightening. “In no universe do I think you could possibly have done this,” he said. “Come, let me.”

Beith crouched beside Adair and let him loop his arms around his thick neck. He lifted Adair like he weighed no more than a kitten and took off through the trees.

Nathaniel jogged to keep up with Beith’s purposeful strides. He seemed to know where to go without being told, which—after Slaney had turned up on his doorstep—probably shouldn’t have surprised Nathaniel, but he wondered aloud about it all the same.

Beith stopped, adjusting his grip to lift Adair more securely onto his back, and shot Nathaniel a look. “You think the queen didn’t have eyes on her son’s mate? You’ve been watched very closely, Nathaniel Stone.”

Nathaniel frowned, pausing as Beith moved on down the path toward his family’s home, trying to decide how he felt about this revelation. Shaking his head, he decided he’d sort that out later—though he did think that “mate” was, at least, a marginal improvement to “plaything.”

“Hurry!” Beith barked through the trees and Nathaniel hurried after him.

“Where is the queen?” Nathaniel asked him.

“I’ve not seen her,” Beith said, his voice over-gruff to conceal his worry. “I’m going to search for her once we get Adair to your home.”

They reached the tree line and Beith stopped short, looking out toward Nathaniel’s house. “Can you get him to the door?”

“You’re not coming?”

Beith stooped, guiding Adair's arm around Nathaniel's shoulders. "I don't mix well with humans," he said, but allowed a small smile to soften his words. "Besides, someone has to go after it."

Nathaniel didn't have to ask what "it" was. "Alright. I think we can manage."

Beith cracked his knuckles. "You'd better get him healed up, human," he said, before turning back to the forest.

Nathaniel peered out from the tree line, hoping no neighbors were looking out their windows, but knowing there wasn't much he could do about it if they were. With a nudge, Nathaniel moved Adair out of the woods and up the back garden path. His eyes fluttered feverishly behind his lashes, feeble groans punctuating each clumsy step. They were halfway to the house when the door banged open and Thomas came running out. Jaw set, Nathaniel's brother wrapped an arm around Adair's waist and helped Nathaniel bear his weight over the threshold and into the house.

"Help me get him onto the table." Looking around the kitchen, Nathaniel saw Slaney, peculiar and beautiful in one of his mother's old dresses. She quailed at the sight of her brother, swaying on her feet like she might faint. "Get Slaney out of here," Nathaniel said, and Moira hurried to shoo the girl into the other room.

When Nathaniel's mother returned, she cleared the table as the brothers hauled the faun up to lay on his back. Immediately, Nathaniel snapped orders at his brother who kept silent and did precisely as asked. They cleaned the wounds with boiling wine, and Nathaniel pulled his flesh back together, sealing some of the worst gashes with fire, sewing others closed with his precious silk thread, heating his silver needle over a candle flame to sterilize it. He tried to dull Adair's agony with the potent mixture he'd made from the Nightshade flowers, but Adair refused, thrashing wildly when approached with the jar. Eventually, Adair's words failed him; the only sounds he could make were wails of pain. Each one was like a knife to Nathaniel's heart. His hands shook as he mixed the proper herbs to keep out infections, but held steady

as he applied them to each gash. By the time they'd bound each wound with clean, white linen, Adair had finally passed out cold.

Thomas yawned, swaying on his feet.

"Go to bed," Nathaniel ordered, knuckling his own dry eyes. He didn't hear Thomas move, so he lowered his hands to see Thomas, covered in Adair's blood, lower lip trembling. Nathaniel opened his mouth to—apologize? Thank him? But before he could say anything, Thomas flung his arms around Nathaniel's middle and squeezed. "He'll be alright," he said, before running off without another word.

Terrified, heartsick, and bone weary, Nathaniel dragged a stool to sit by Adair's head. Now that they were alone, he washed Adair's golden curls and scrubbed his horns clean of blood and dirt. Adair's breathing was slow, steady enough for Nathaniel to know he was no longer in any immediate danger. He brushed an errant curl from Adair's face before gathering one of his hands in both of his own. Nathaniel opened Adair's palm, stroking the faint lines of his scar, before closing his hand again into a soft fist and kissing each of his knuckles.

"You should sleep, Love." Nathaniel's mother appeared in the doorway to the kitchen.

Nathaniel shook his head, eyes never leaving Adair's face. "I'm alright."

Moira pulled up another stool to sit beside her son. "I can sit with him."

Nathaniel shook his head again. "How is Slaney?"

"Resting now, poor girl. I have her some of that draught from your stores, knocked her right out."

In response, Nathaniel nodded absently. They sat in silence for a while, and under his exhaustion and fear Nathaniel realized that he hadn't been alone with his mother for some time. Without looking at her, he said, "How could you not have told me? About Dad?"

She sighed. When she finally spoke, she sounded decades older than she was. "I was hoping to spare you from the

strange and dangerous world.”

He looked at her with a wry smile. “I suppose that didn’t work out so well, did it?”

“No, I suppose not.”

“Tell me what happened to him.”

She was quiet so long Nathaniel thought she wasn’t going to answer. “I suppose I should start with how we met,” she said finally. Nathaniel watched her smile like the sun coming out. “I used to escape to the forest as often as I could—like someone else I know.”

Nathaniel rolled his eyes, still stroking Adair’s hand.

“I’d always go in to read, which was unbecoming of a young lady—or so my father thought. He was quite old fashioned. There was a certain tree, far enough away from prying eyes, where I could sit in peace with my books. I went as often as I could, nearly every day during the warmer months if I could manage it. I’d been sitting under the same tree for nearly three years before the most peculiar young man dropped down from the boughs to land beside me.”

Nathaniel joined her in a smile, because it was a bit obvious where the story was about to lead. “Let me guess,” he said, “he took your breath away.

“He did at that.”

After giving her a few moments to remember the romance of her girlhood, Nathaniel prompted her to continue.

She cleared her throat. “For a while, he pretended to be human, passing through. He didn’t have horns like your young man here, so it wasn’t obvious at first. But as we…” she trailed off, blushing. “I discovered the truth soon enough.”

“And?”

“And I asked him if he would ever give up forest life and move to the village. My father wished for me to marry, and soon. I couldn’t bear the thought of wedding another.” She cupped her son’s cheek and gave him a sad smile. “You know the next bit of the story.”

“You got married.”

“Yes.”

“And you had us.”

“We did.” She paused. “We were very happy.”

“Well, then what happened?”

Moira heaved a great sigh, like she didn't want to part with her next words. “Your father was possessed by the idea that he would outlive me. He couldn't live after watching me grow old and waste away before his eyes, didn't want to be alone after I was dead and gone.”

Nathaniel's eyes darted to Adair's face, and a cold weight landed in his stomach. He returned his gaze to his mother, and when he saw the knowing, pitying way she was looking at him, his grip on Adair's hand tightened. “So he left you? Left us?”

“Oh, Love, no. He would never. It became his obsession to join me in a mortal life. He traveled, seeking spells and wards and advice from many in his old world. Your father insisted he had lived long enough as a young man, and wished to grow old with me and watch you and your brother grow to men and have families of your own. The things he tried to shake loose his fae blood were dangerous, frightening.” Tears collected in the corners of her eyes and she blinked rapidly. “I was too afraid to tell him to stop, but I should have. I should have begged him. One day, he set out, sure had some sort of lead on a new spell, a potion of some kind with rare ingredients.” She drew a rattling breath, twisting shaking hands in her lap. “That was the last I ever saw him.”

Nathaniel frowned. “Hold on a moment,” he said. “If he vanished—how, how did you know that he'd died?”

She held her son's gaze for a long moment before showing him the palm of her hand, which bore a thin scar, faded almost to nonexistence with the passing of years. “I felt it.”

XVIII

What a Beast Ever Wants

The pain in Nathaniel's tailbone told him he'd been asleep for some time. He'd slumped forward, his forearms crossed on the table and his head resting on them. He still clutched Adair's hand in his own. Strong fingers slipped through his hair, so he opened one eye and saw that Adair had rolled onto his side and was staring at him with cloudy eyes and a tired smile. "Hi, Minnow."

"Hey," said Nathaniel, stretching his spine and feeling several small pops. "You should be lying still."

"I just wanted to look at you. Makes me feel better."

But Nathaniel was already up and moving, ignoring the protest in his stiff back and fetching water from the jug to tilt down Adair's throat. Adair coughed and sputtered, grunting in pain as he tried to sit.

"Don't sit up," said Nathaniel, trying to push him back down.

"You're going to drown me," said Adair, swatting at the cup being forced against his lips. He grunted again, clutching the bandage at his side. Wracked with a spasm of pain, Adair allowed himself to be pushed back to a prone position. Nathaniel stood over him, chewing his lip and touching the faun's hair.

"You're still so cold," he said nervously, brushing the back of his hand against Adair's forehead.

"I'm lying naked on a wooden slab."

“You’re always naked, and you’re never cold.” It was still dark outside, and the kitchen was indeed drafty. “D’you think you could move?”

“If you helped me.”

Together, they moved into the dark sitting room, where the fire had burned low. Nathaniel deposited Adair on the carpet in front of the hearth and retrieved the blankets from his bed to cocoon him. He threw a few more logs on the fire, fussing over it with a poker, trying to coax a bigger flame from the embers.

When he turned, Adair gripped the corner of the blankets and held them open like a cloak. Nathaniel went to him, curling up beside Adair to share his warmth. Avoiding the worst of his wounds, Nathaniel wrapped his arms around Adair’s waist and pulled him close, hating the cold feel of his skin, willing his own heat onto Adair’s flesh.

Adair nuzzled against Nathaniel’s neck, and he flinched away from Adair’s frightening new horns.

Adair stilled his head with a look of hurt and pulled away. He extricated a hand from the nest of blankets to touch one of his horns. “Sorry,” he said, running his fingers up the spike, probing the new growth. “I don’t know how to get these back to normal. Or why they...” he trailed away, looking into the fireplace.

Nathaniel turned to look at him, gaunt and beautiful in the shifting light of the dying fire. The new horns were indeed frightening, but as Nathaniel looked at them more closely he felt something else stirring in his chest, where before there had been only worry. He trailed his fingertip up the side of one, wrapping his hand around to feel its heft, touching the thick ridges and tracing the streaks of ruddy bronze. “I like them,” he whispered.

Adair turned his head with a wry smile. He raised his brows, eyes glowing in the firelight to make him look like sin incarnate. Nathaniel blushed, burying his face in the blankets. The faun kissed his temple. “That’s good to know.”

Adair shifted, trying to sit more comfortably, but with a twist of his waist, he let out a hiss of pain that he tried to muffle with a handful of blanket.

Nathaniel was not fooled. “You need to lie down.”

“I’m alright, Minnow,” Adair said, but it came out with a grunt.

Nathaniel slipped from the blankets and padded down the hall to retrieve the thin mattress from the trundle in his bedroom. He arranged it in front of the fire and ordered Adair to lie down. He curled up, facing the fire. Nathaniel lay behind him, as close as he could without pressing against Adair’s wounds. He pulled the blankets over them both and draped his arm over Adair’s hips. Taking care to make sure his face wasn’t in danger of being skewered, Nathaniel buried his nose in Adair’s curls and lightly kissed the nape of his neck.

Adair let out a long, slow breath, settling into the warmth of their cocoon. Nathaniel wanted nothing more than to slip off to sleep, but now that he wasn’t terrified of his faun bleeding to death in his arms, he had to know.

“Adair,” he said. “What did this to you?”

The muscles in Adair’s back tensed. “Something I’ve never seen before,” he said. “But it was old. It knows the wood intimately.”

“Then how has no one ever seen it?”

“I think it’s been sleeping for quite some time.”

“What does it want?”

Adair was quiet for several long moments before he answered. “What does a beast ever want?” he said. “To consume.”

At dawn, Nathaniel removed himself from the mattress with care. He had forgone sleep in favor of watching Adair’s chest rise and fall, feeling Adair’s heart beating under his nervous palms. As he was wont to do, Adair had sprawled chaotically across the makeshift bed, so Nathaniel had to slip out from under his heavy arms and legs to rise. In the tepid

light of the morning sun, it seemed Adair had gotten some color back in his face, and when Nathaniel squatted beside him to feel his forehead, he felt the ghost of Adair's usual heat returning. Nathaniel let out a soft sigh, feeling the tension in his shoulders back off slightly.

He walked to the kitchen and set the kettle to heat. Looking out the window, he saw a small flash of white dart past the very corner of his vision. Frowning, Nathaniel squinted out into the fog, following the small shape as it zipped back and forth by the fence at the back of his yard.

It was a rabbit, a rabbit Nathaniel recognized though he couldn't place from where. Some instinct told him the creature was there for him. Without hesitation, Nathaniel grabbed his hunting knife and left the house. He stopped five yards from the rabbit, who sat on his haunches and regarded him warily. Nathaniel crouched, extending his hand, and the rabbit approached to sniff it. It bounded off, running around Nathaniel in frantic circles before darting off into the trees. When he didn't follow straight away, it came back out, clearly impatient.

Nathaniel drew his knife and dropped into a wary crouch. The rabbit moved swiftly, but stopped every so often to make sure Nathaniel followed. Nathaniel knew the sun should be climbing higher, but the trees around him pressed close and the forest darkened, growing colder with every step. The now-familiar prickle covered Nathaniel from scalp to toes, and he knew they were not alone. The rational part of Nathaniel's brain suggested that he should at least question the intentions of his furry little guide, but he shrugged it off. He knew in his bones that he could trust the rabbit, just as he could tell the presence nearby was a benign one. Sure enough, the rabbit led him straight to the entrance of Adair's cave and slipped inside.

Nathaniel approached the narrow entrance, the hairs on his neck sticking up. He'd barely made it two steps inside the cave when he heard a snarl of rage and found himself slammed against the rough stone wall.

So much for his instincts.

A freckled face bared its teeth at him, and as his eyes adjusted to the gloom Nathaniel recognized Adair's friend Síol. She pressed a muscular forearm up into his windpipe.

"Tell me who you are," she growled, "or I'll tear your throat out."

Nathaniel wanted nothing more than to answer, confused that she didn't recognize him, but he couldn't speak with her arm crushing his neck. All that came out was a strangled squeak. He dropped his knife, scrabbling desperately at her skin, trying to loosen her hold and get a breath of air. She only pressed harder, pushing him higher on the wall so his feet dangled uselessly below him. Síol's breath was hot on his face as she stared at him, and little lights popped in front of his eyes, his vision darkening until—

"*Síol!* Stop!"

The pressure vanished and Nathaniel fell to his knees on the stone floor, coughing and gulping in attempt to fill his lungs again.

"Nathaniel?"

Leaning against the wall of the cavern, Nathaniel climbed unsteadily to his feet. He massaged his windpipe, searching for the source of the voice that knew his name, and was relieved to see Adair's other two sisters standing by the hearth.

Síol whipped her head around. "*That's* who you found? What good is he?" It took Nathaniel a second to realize she was addressing the rabbit. "You were supposed to bring Adair," she told it. "Not his human pet."

It clicked into place in Nathaniel's brain. "Who is he?" he asked Síol, ignoring the insult.

"This is Bán," she said.

"He was a fox, when I met him."

The three women in the cave exchanged dark looks.

"What?"

Brosna stepped toward him. “Bán changes his form when—when he’s killed.”

“He’s the oldest among us,” Síol said, squatting down to scratch Ban behind his ears. “Some say he came to this forest as a giant mammoth. Every time he’s killed he takes a smaller form, his new body emerging from the carcass of the spent life.”

Nathaniel turned this information over in his mind, before coming back to the matter at hand with an unpleasant jolt. “Wait, hold on a moment—he was *killed*?”

Síol nodded. “The beast got hold of him.”

Erne, the oldest of Adair’s sisters, approached Nathaniel and took his hand. “Where are they?”

He knew she meant her brother and sister. “At my family’s house, in the town,” he said. “Slaney is fine,” he assured the girls.

“And our brother?”

“He’s ... he’s hurt.” Nathaniel massaged his throat, voice coming in rasps. “But he’s alright.”

“Hurt badly enough that he didn’t accompany you,” said Síol shrewdly. Now that Nathaniel could get a good look at her, he saw that like her kin she had undergone some sort of metamorphosis. He eyed her new, deadlier horns with apprehension. They stood broad and tall, with multiple tines like the antlers of a buck.

Erne squeezed Nathaniel’s hand. “But he lives,” she said. “We’d feared.”

Aside from Erne, Brosna, Bán, and Síol, the cavern was empty. “Where are the rest of your people?” He asked, dreading the answer. “Where is Beith?”

“The beast scattered everyone,” Síol said. “It’s old, and it’s powerful. We haven’t seen the queen since it appeared.” She paused, her eyes unsure. The fierce creature who’d attacked Nathaniel was gone, and he was struck by how young she now appeared. “Beith is here. He’s hurt badly, too.”

“Take me to him.”

They led Nathaniel to the adjacent chamber, the one with the pools and the twinkling lights. He could tell it was bad before he was within ten paces of Beith. They’d laid him out on a flat stretch of rock, and the whole chamber stank like blood. Adair’s wounds had been awful enough, but Nathaniel’s first impression of Beith’s condition was that someone had turned him near inside out—it was a miracle that he still breathed at all. Nathaniel gagged on the stench of infection as he drew near, which seemed impossible since it had been less than twenty four hours since he’d last seen Beith—but then again, Nathaniel’s bar for impossible things was pretty high these days.

A lump rose in Nathaniel’s throat. He wasn’t sure if he liked Beith very much at all. The big faun scared him, in truth, and seemed to take pleasure in making him uncomfortable, but Adair would surely have died without him. Beith had been there to carry Adair, saving his life when Nathaniel had not the strength to do so—and Nathaniel would be forever in his debt for that. So, he swallowed his fear and knelt at Beith’s head.

On closer examination it was much, much worse than he’d thought. One of Beith’s massive horns had been snapped clean off, down near his skull, leaving behind a gaping, jagged hole that bled freely. His thickly muscled chest was flayed open like someone had tried to tan his hide while he still wore it. Fever and the stink of necrotic flesh came off him in waves.

Nathaniel stood, closed his eyes, and counted to three before exhaling and turning back to the others hovering at the entrance to the chamber. “I need more light in here. Síol, build a fire. I need it high and hot. Brosna, Erne—I need one of you to get word to Slaney in the village. I’ll need supplies from my house if I’m to save him.”

They stared at him in stunned silence for a beat.

“What are you waiting for? Go!”

In the meantime, Nathaniel pulled off his shirt and cut the fabric into strips with his knife. Using the water from the pools and strips of cotton he washed Beith’s body best he could

while Síol built a towering fire. Nathaniel heated his knife over the blaze, using the blade to scrape away as much of the infected skin as he could. Beith barely reacted, which to be honest Nathaniel found more troubling than screams. Síol hovered behind him, setting him on edge, so he sent her into a nearby glade to gather some herbs.

Nathaniel wiped his sweating forehead on his bare arm; between the heat of the fire and the fever coming off Beith's skin he was roasting. He couldn't do more without his supplies from home, as he needed to stitch several of the wounds and would need fresh cloth for bandages, so while he waited he kept careful eyes on his charge and took a chance to rest for a moment.

He enjoyed the silence, letting it calm him, listening to Beith's raspy breathing and the crackle of the fire. Exhausted and preoccupied, it took a few moments for his brain to register an approaching commotion. Angry voices bounced off the cavern walls, distorted and echoing, and Nathaniel jumped to his feet, afraid—until he heard one voice boom louder than the rest.

Nathaniel shook himself and jogged back to the main chamber of the cave.

“*Minnow!*” Adair's voice rang out shrill and angry as he grabbed Nathaniel by the shoulders. “What were you thinking? Are you hurt?”

“I'm fine—“

“You're covered in blood—“

“It's not mine, it's—“

“I woke up and you were *gone*,” Adair said. His hands moved to Nathaniel's face, holding it still as he kissed every inch of it. “I thought I'd come out here and find your mangled body—what, what happened to your neck?”

Nathaniel frowned, forgetting already that Síol had almost crushed his windpipe earlier. When he touched the skin of his throat he winced; he must have some serious bruising. His eyes flicked over toward Síol, and Adair whirled toward her.

“What did you do?” His voice pitched low and dangerous.

Síol did not back down. She squared her shoulders, looking Adair in the eye. “He could have been a threat. I was protecting your sisters.”

“Síol, calm down,” said Erne softly, placing a hand on her shoulder, but Síol shook her off with an angry snort.

“Adair,” said Nathaniel loudly, “I’m fine.”

But he ignored him, advancing on Síol and lowering his head like he meant to ram her with his horns. Nathaniel seized his arm—in Adair’s current state he seemed more than capable of running her through.

“Stay out of it, Minnow,” he growled.

“It was an honest mistake,” Nathaniel said. “She just didn’t recognize me. You’re still hurt, please calm down. You shouldn’t even be out here!”

Síol’s eyes narrowed to angry slits as she braced herself for an attack. “Yes, you should,” she told Adair. “You should have been here with us instead of off fucking your little human.”

Nathaniel thought that was wholly uncalled for. “Now, hold on a moment—“

But the fauns paid him no mind, circling each other like prowling beasts. Their tempers ran hot, something like a drug in the air had their baser instincts overpowering their better natures. They’d transformed into wild animals, running on adrenaline and rage and territorial impulse. Nathaniel had begun to slide the pieces into place when Adair had climbed through his window the week before, nearly unrecognizable from his usual self. Injuries had gentled him, but here, exposed and vulnerable in the wilderness it was obvious that whatever caused the change wasn’t leaving him, or Síol, anytime soon.

Adair and Síol lunged at each other, locking their horns together and grappling with fists and teeth and furious roars that had Nathaniel paralyzed with terror. Adair was bigger, stronger, but badly hurt and Síol was quick as a snake. She stuck one of her feet between Adair’s long legs, tripping him to the ground. He rolled, dodging her as she leapt toward him

and sprang back to his feet. His shaking fingers closed into a fist. Before he could launch himself at Síol again, Nathaniel did the only thing he could think to do and jumped between them.

He knew one second of blinding pain as Adair's fist sank into his eye socket, carrying the force of his unhinged, feral strength behind it, and Nathaniel went down like a bag of apples to the floor of the cave.

Nathaniel awoke some time later with his head fit to burst. He groaned, touching the swollen skin around his eye. He realized his head was resting in someone's lap and he opened his good eye, looking up to see Adair's face looking suitably abashed. He grimaced. "I'm so sorry, Minnow."

Nathaniel let out a grunt and sat up. "Are you two friends again?" He asked grouchily, jerking his thumb toward Síol, who lurked, fearful, on the other side of the fire.

Adair nodded, carding his fingers through Nathaniel's hair. "I don't know what came over us."

"I think it's the beast," Nathaniel said. "You started going off right around when I first felt it in the forest. Clearly, it's not just you." He frowned, peeking past Adair's arm to the wound at his side. It was still bandaged up, but he could see traces of blood showing through. "Hey!"

Adair tried to cover himself but Nathaniel seized his wrists and pried them apart.

"You've opened your stitches," he said, exasperated. "You should have stayed at the house."

Nathaniel rolled onto his knees and got to his feet, giving his throbbing head a shake. He immediately regretted it. Lights danced through his vision and a trickle of something dripped down from his brow into his swollen eye.

"You split my forehead open," he said, more in disbelief than anything.

Adair looked at the floor, ashamed.

"Did you at least bring my supplies?"

“Yes!” Adair bounded up, leading Nathaniel to the opposite corner of the cave—eager to show he’d done something right. Nathaniel seized his bag, eyeballing the contents before marching off to the adjacent chamber without another word.

Nathaniel feared Beith might already be too far gone to save, but he had to try. He’d already bled through the wadded up strips of Nathaniel’s shirt, and his flesh still burned with fever. Nathaniel set about sterilizing his silver needle, pulling Beith’s skin back together with sure hands and stitching him up. He plastered him with salves to keep out further infection, fearing it might already be too little too late. Nathaniel was dizzy from the smell, from hunger, and from lack of sleep, but by the time he finished, Beith’s heart was still so weak he was scared to leave his side.

He tipped water down Beith’s throat, and had a small jar of the medicine he’d made from the Nightshade flowers, should he wake enough to be able to accept it. Sitting by Beith’s head, listening for his pulse and his feeble breaths, Nathaniel could barely keep his eyes open.

The others had given him space while he worked, but Adair refused to be kept from him any longer. Though he was still angry at being clobbered, Nathaniel accepted the strong, warm arms wrapping around him. “You haven’t slept in two days, Minnow,” Adair whispered in his ear.

“Have too.”

“Barely. An hour or two hunched over a table or lying on a cold floor don’t count.”

“I’ve got to stitch you back up,” Nathaniel said, turning toward Adair, reaching to unwrap his wound and survey the damage.

Adair grabbed his probing hands and held them tight. “In your current state I’d be afraid you’d sew my arm to my ribs.”

“Might do it on purpose,” he said with a yawn. “You punched me.”

Adair leaned in to kiss the swollen skin around Nathaniel’s eye. “I’ll stay with him,” he said. “I’ll wake you if you’re

needed.”

“Can’t,” said Nathaniel, but his eyes were already falling closed. He was glad Adair’s skin had grown warm again. It was nice. Nathaniel’s head nodded to his chest, just for a moment, and when he jerked awake again he’d been tucked snug into a pile of furs beside the fire. Adair sat at Beith’s side, watching over him as promised, so he let his head fall back onto the pile of pelts and was asleep in seconds.



A persistent wave of nausea had taken home in Adair’s guts. Looking down at Beith, covered head to toe in hideous wounds, Adair was happy to be alone. His rival, his friend—closer than any kin, constantly by his side for hundreds of years, lay smashed and broken in front of him. Beith’s beautiful horn was broken, too, and seeing him without it made Adair ache. He touched Beith’s face, feeling the hot burn of his fever.

If only Adair had been strong enough to dispatch the beast before this happened ...

Beith’s face contorted, and he groaned, a low sad whine like no sound Adair had ever heard him make. It was like a knife at Adair’s throat. He glanced over to where Nathaniel was curled up by the fire. “*Minnow*,” he hissed. No answer. Nervously, Adair took Beith’s hand and listened as he groaned again, a terrible weak sound from a person lost in a world of agony. “Nathaniel!” Adair called a bit louder, but at the noise Beith’s voice gained some volume and a wail came from his dry, cracked lips. His grip tightened, vicelike, on Adair’s fingers. Adair didn’t call out again—he didn’t want to wake Beith. Eventually, the big faun’s cries petered off into whimpers. Adair stifled noises of his own, occasional snuffles squeaking out as he watched Beith drift back to fitful sleep.

XIX

Dirt and Blood

When Nathaniel next woke, he was unsure of the time. The fire in the cavern burned low, and there was no way to see the sky from the interior chamber. His gaze went first to Beith, who was still lying where Nathaniel had left him, with Adair sitting vigil by his head. Nathaniel watched them for a bit, and Adair seemed to feel Nathaniel's eyes on him. He turned his face and beckoned Nathaniel over with a small jerk of his head.

"He stirred," Adair murmured. "Just briefly."

"You should have woken me," Nathaniel hissed, lying his hand across Beith's forehead. It was still feverish, but his breathing seemed stronger.

Adair raised his brows. "I tried, Minnow. You were dead to the world."

"Oh." He paused. "How long have I been asleep?"

"The sun is up again."

"Too long," said Nathaniel, turning attentions toward the dressings of Beith's wounds. "He must be in terrible pain."

"Yes."

"Now that you're awake, I'll go check on the others," Adair said. He kissed Nathaniel's temple before retreating.

Nathaniel began with the wound at Beith's mangled horn, which had finally stopped bleeding. Leaning close, Nathaniel gave it a sniff. This injury, at least, smelled clean, and for that he was grateful. He threw a few more logs on the fire and set a kettle over to boil. He would have preferred wine, but the clear mineral water from the cavern pools would be alright. While

the water heated, he unwrapped the other injuries, probing the skin and checking the stitches. Nathaniel was relieved to see that no new signs of infection had set in. When the water was bubbling, he used it to clean off the crusted remains of the salves he'd applied the night before, and plastered each wound with fresh medicine and clean, dry bandages.

Unfortunately, Beith came to as Nathaniel dumped heated water into a particularly nasty gash on his leg. With a roar and a swipe of his massive arm he sent Nathaniel sprawling to the floor of the cave. Miffed as he might be to add yet another bruise to his growing collection, Nathaniel was overjoyed that Beith's brute strength had not deserted him. Clutching his ribs, Nathaniel rolled over to see Beith trying to sit up.

His deep amber eyes cast wildly about, finally lighting on Nathaniel on the floor. "What the bloody hell are you doing to me?"

Nathaniel scurried back to his side, laying a hand on his shoulder. "Beith, please, lie back down." He tried to keep his voice soothing; maimed though Beith may be, Nathaniel was certain the giant faun could still squash him like an insect.

"Where am I?"

"Adair's cavern," said Nathaniel. "Síol brought you here when you got hurt."

Beith shook; a bead of sweat traveled from his brow down his cheek. With a groan, he allowed Nathaniel to push him back down. "You do good work, human," he said, eyes closed. "When that thing slit me open I thought I was dead for sure."

"Here, eat this." Nathaniel spooned some of the Nightshade medicine into Beith's mouth. "It'll help with the pain."

"Wha—?" He'd barely swallowed one mouthful before his eyes rolled back and he was unconscious again. Nathaniel frowned down into the jar, thinking perhaps it was a little stronger than he'd intended.

When he was certain Beith was under again, he finished dressing his wounds. Satisfied with his work, he stood up and

stretched his arms above his head, rolling out his stiff shoulders.

“I love watching you work.” Adair had snuck back into the chamber to stand behind Nathaniel. He reached around to run his hands over the bare expanse of Nathaniel’s chest, kissing the nape of his neck. “You look so beautiful covered in dirt and blood.”

Nathaniel frowned, thinking perhaps that might have been the most peculiar compliment he’d ever received. Adair’s hands roamed freely over Nathaniel’s body, his lips moving down his shoulders, tasting his sweat.

“I was actually thinking of washing off all this dirt and blood,” said Nathaniel mildly.

Adair hummed against his neck. “Even better,” he said, fingers dropping to the buckle of Nathaniel’s belt.

“You know that someone is *right* there.” Nathaniel gestured to Beith.

“He hardly seems like he’d mind.”

“What about the others?”

“What do you think the others are doing at this precise moment?” Adair punctuated this rhetorical question with a nibble at Nathaniel’s earlobe.

“Still,” said Nathaniel, swatting Adair’s hands.

“Let me at least get you into the pools,” Adair said. “I’ll behave.”

“Will you though?”

“I’ll try.”

Doubting very much that Adair would try at all, Nathaniel nevertheless allowed him to strip off his blood strained trousers. Nathaniel slung them over his shoulders, thinking they could do with a washing. He turned back toward Adair. “When you were gathering my supplies, did you by any chance bring me any extra clothes?”

“Hmmm.” Adair frowned as if in thought. “I suppose I didn’t think of it.”

Nathaniel rolled his eyes, bracing one hand on his hip, naked. He enjoyed seeing Adair’s eyes widen at the sight, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed. “Very convincing.”

Nathaniel descended into the warm water in the nearest pool, dunking his trousers to soak away some of the blood. A few ruddy clouds dissipated in the water. He scrubbed them a bit with his hands, wringing them out and tossing them back to Adair who went to lay them by the fire to dry.

Despite his long sleep, Nathaniel was still exhausted. The water helped ease his aching muscles and frantic mind, especially as he watched the hypnotic twinkle of the glowing insects on the ceiling. He lay back against the edge of the pool, listening for the splash that meant Adair had joined him.

“Turn your back,” Adair said as he lowered himself into the pool at Nathaniel’s side. He obeyed, and Adair’s hands moved to splash warm water over Nathaniel’s shoulders, in theory washing away some of the filth covering his skin but in practice using the movements as a thin pretext to touch Nathaniel’s body.

Nathaniel sighed, resigned, allowing him to continue because it felt as though Adair was washing the tension from his neck and shoulders with each firm press of his palms. Soon, his lips joined his fingers as he probed the tense knots in Nathaniel’s back. His hands slipped around to Nathaniel’s chest, splashing water over his front and scrubbing him clean.

Nathaniel did not fail to notice that Adair’s touches were trending lower and lower, and that he was nudging himself closer and closer until his chin rested on Nathaniel’s shoulder. Nathaniel held his tongue until Adair abandoned all pretext and wrapped his hand around Nathaniel’s dick below the water.

“That didn’t take very long, did it?”

Adair whined low in his throat. He pulled his hand back and used it to sweep the hair from the nape of Nathaniel’s

neck, pressing apologetic kisses to his wet skin. “I can’t help it.”

“You absolutely can,” Nathaniel said, turning to face him.

Adair’s grabby fingers found Nathaniel’s hips, pulling him in for a deep kiss. “I haven’t touched you in *days*,” he said, with the air of one describing a horrific tragedy.

Nathaniel leaned back, a bit breathless and in truth, more than a bit tempted. He glanced at Beith before returning his gaze to Adair’s earnest face. “Now really isn’t the time,” he said gently, as much to himself as to Adair.

“I know.” Adair’s pupils had blown so wide there was hardly any green left in his eyes at all.

“Goodness,” said Nathaniel. “Are you alright?”

“I don’t know. It’s all this.” He gestured upward from the top of his head. “I feel like I’m going mad. I’m ... scared and furious all the time, and ravenous and—“

“—horny?” Nathaniel supplied, tapping one of Adair’s impressive new antlers.

Adair scowled. He climbed out of the pool, summoned his usual glamour and draped the enchantment around his hips before stomping off. Nathaniel couldn’t help but laugh. He would feel guilty about the jibe, of course, if it weren’t for the fact that Adair had been trying to bend him over a rock formation while his friend lay half dead not ten yards away. He waited until Adair had left the chamber before getting out of the water himself.

Nathaniel’s trousers were still quite wet, so he wrapped a fur blanket around his waist and went to check on Beith, who was stirring with a series of pained grunts.

“If you don’t fuck him soon, I might have to,” Beith grumbled as Nathaniel approached.

“I beg your *bloody* pardon?”

“Every time he comes in here with his pheromones stinking up the place I feel like I’m going to burst a stitch.” Beith laid a

massive hand on the bandage that covered a deep gouge running from the top of his hip to just below his navel.

“Oh for heaven’s sake,” Nathaniel snapped. “Don’t touch that.”

Beith coughed, rolling over to prop himself up on one elbow. He cocked an eyebrow. “I can smell it on you too, Human.”

Nathaniel rolled his eyes. “Well, it seems you’re coming back to yourself a bit,” he said. He touched Beith’s forehead. “But, your fever hasn’t broken and you’ve lost quite a bit of blood. My medical opinion is that you shouldn’t be trying to fuck anyone just yet.”

“Noted,” said Beith, lying back down with a groan.

XX

Smudge

Beith took two more days to fully return to them. Judging by his and Adair's respective recoveries, Nathaniel took a mental note that perhaps the fae folk had stronger regenerative capabilities than humans did. By the time he was up and about, Beith was fit to be tied. He wanted desperately to get back into the trees and hunt the beast. Even in their own agitated states, Síol and Adair greed it would be folly since he still wasn't at his full strength—and, it had defeated him once already. Nathaniel spent quite a deal of time sitting with Erne and Brosna watching the fauns argue. They didn't come to physical blows, but Nathaniel privately felt that wasn't going to last long with the three of them cooped up in the same cave.

One morning, Nathaniel puzzled over the Beast and the things they knew about it thus far. "Adair," he said, cutting off the hundredth circular discussion of hunting and brawling tactics. "Is this cave warded?"

Adair considered the question. "Not by me," he said. "Though the cave is older than I am, to be sure."

"Who lived here before you did?"

"A bear, I think."

Nathaniel nodded, poking the floor with a twig. After a beat, he said. "We've been here almost four days. Why hasn't the Beast come after us yet?"

The five fae stared at him. Síol frowned. "That's odd, isn't it?"

Nathaniel stood and walked cautiously to the mouth of the cavern, peering out into the trees. He saw nothing, so he took a few small steps outside. He could feel Adair's breath on the back of his neck, and knew the faun wouldn't want Nathaniel to leave his line of sight. The little clearing at the mouth of Adair's cave was unremarkable, lined with soft grasses and dandelions like any other in the forest. Nathaniel moved forward, tentative. Toward the edge of the clearing butting up against the tree line, the glen boasted a wild, untamed thicket of mint. With Adair trailing after him like a guard dog, Nathaniel walked around the edge of the clearing. There was something about the ring of herb that felt intentional. He picked a few sprigs, frowning down at the fragrant leaves.

Mint occupied a complicated space in Nathaniel's mind. At the forefront of his memory was the taste of Adair's mouth. All his kisses were fresh and bright like the faun spent all day grazing on the stuff. Under those sweet thoughts, however, were memories of the previous winter, memories of himself and his family huddled by the fire. They'd sip weak mint tea in a vain attempt to trick their empty bellies into thinking they were full.

Nathaniel looked up, suddenly realizing that the border of his family's plot of land was lousy with mint. In fact, he'd even tried to pull some of it up, since it sent creepers up through the grass each season, but it always returned.

"I wonder," said Nathaniel, turning the sprigs over between his fingers, "if perhaps it's this."

"This what, those leaves?" Beith had joined them beyond the mouth of the cavern.

"The Beast hasn't breached this circle," said Nathaniel. "Nor has it crossed out of the tree line into the village."

"That's a pretty thin hope to hang our lives on, Minnow," said Adair, plucking the leaves from a few stalks and popping them into his mouth. "It could be a coincidence."

"It could also be this," said Nathaniel. "With all the things that grow here, is that really so odd? Why else wouldn't the Beast have come here to finish you off?"

Adair tilted his head to the side, considering.

Beith looked at him in disbelief. “You can’t be serious,” he said. “We’re going to shove a bunch of mint up our asses and prance out into the forest and hope for the best?”

Nathaniel massaged his temple and resisted the urge to poke Beith’s wound.

“He’s right though,” said Síol. “That thing went through Beith like he was made of straw. Neither he nor Adair are returned to full strength. If your theory is wrong—“

“If my theory is wrong, it should be coming here for us at the cave regardless. And besides, we can’t just stay here indefinitely.”

In the end, they agreed to make the trek back to the village. It was vulnerable. Even if Nathaniel’s thoughts about the mint proved correct, it only bordered one side of the village. Erne pointed out that a wide river protected the village on the north-western side. “It can’t follow us into the water,” she reminded them. “It was hot on our heels, we could feel its foul breath—and then when we slipped into the water it abandoned the chase.”

“Couldn’t follow you, or wouldn’t?” Beith asked.

“Beith,” said Nathaniel, “If you have an alternate suggestion, we’d all love to hear it.”

He went quiet, but not without grumbling. Nathaniel gathered up all his supplies, tucking them into his forage bag. As he slung the bag around his bare shoulder, Nathaniel knew his mother and brother would be beside themselves with worry—Slaney too now that he thought about it. She at least could talk to her sisters at distance through the water. Nathaniel sighed. He’d see them soon enough. They picked as much mint as they could, binding the stalks together with twine to create thick smudge sticks for each member of their party to carry.

They set out at midday. Adair walked to the side of the group, constantly shunting Nathaniel to the interior of the circle created by his kin. He held his smudge in his left hand,

nudging his right into Nathaniel's side. In spite of everything, Nathaniel smiled and took Adair's hand in his own, threading their fingers together.

"I've been meaning to ask you," Adair said. "You told me you could feel the Beast when it first arrived. What did you mean?"

Nathaniel shrugged. "It's hard to describe," he said. "It's like my body can sense you all before I see or hear you."

"Us all?" Adair echoed.

Nathaniel nodded, his smile going a bit wider. He glanced shyly at the faun beside him. "I first noticed with you, of course."

"Oh?"

"It's sort of like, a prickle on my skin—a shiver."

Adair frowned.

"A nice shiver," Nathaniel added hastily. "But I realized I could feel you coming through the trees and you didn't startle me half as often."

"Can you feel them?" He gestured with his opposite hand at the other two fauns and sisters.

"It's different," Nathaniel said. It was hard to put to words, and he wasn't sure why Adair was so curious. "Like a gut feeling. When Bán came to fetch me I knew I could trust him. When he led me to your cavern I just knew, somehow, that whoever was inside didn't mean me any harm."

"Except Síol."

Nathaniel laughed. "Any *lasting* harm."

"But you can feel the Beast, too?"

"Yes."

Adair was quiet for a while, brushing his thumb idly across Nathaniel's knuckles. "When you felt the Beast, what was it like?"

“I wasn’t certain at first,” said Nathaniel slowly. “At first I just noticed that I felt a shiver, so I was hoping it was you. Then it got ... cold, strange. Malignant. Why?”

Adair looked troubled. “That makes me think ... “

“What?”

“That makes me think it’s one of us.”



If she thought it strange to have her kitchen over crowded with fae folk, Moira Stone didn’t say so. Adair admired her; she seemed the sort of woman who took everything in stride, worked very hard to keep things from rattling her. Nathaniel’s brother Thomas stared unabashedly at Beith, who looked around the room with restless eyes. Introductions were made, and the group gathered around the table, looking down at a map of the village of Myrna and the surrounding forest.

Nathaniel frowned at the rendering of the town and Adair found himself distracted by the tightness in his brows, the intensity in his blue eyes. His graceful hands fluttered over the parchment, pointing out things on the map. Adair wasn’t listening. He missed the feel of those hands, and his own fingers twitched to reach out and seize them, to drag Nathaniel down the corridor so they could be alone—

“Well?”

Half a dozen faces turned to look at Adair. He cleared his throat, eyes flitting around, lighting on each of those gathered in turn.

“Pardon,” he said. “What?”

Beith pointed to a spot on the map. “This is where I encountered the Beast,” he said. “And you fought it here?” He slid his finger a short distance.

Adair nodded, watching Nathaniel mark the places on the map. It appeared they were trying to establish the range of the Beast’s hunting ground. Other markers on the parchment showed where the sisters had fled, and where Bán had been killed and shed his fox pelt.

Dismayed, Adair realized the vastness of the territory covered by this scourge. There appeared to be no clear pattern. He traced the distance between the marks on the parchment with a fingertip.

“This tells us nothing,” Beith snapped.

“And yet,” said Nathaniel through gritted teeth, “it’s important to note where the Beast has struck.”

Beith let out a noncommittal grunt, crossing his arms over his enormous chest, still covered with bandages.

One by one the others drifted off to bed, Moira having laid out pallets and blankets much as she could for everyone to have space to sleep. Beith claimed he wouldn’t be able to sleep under a roof, and as such would stand guard outside the door to the house. Adair butted his head against Beith’s, clapping him on the shoulder. “Be careful,” he said. “You raise the alarm if you see something.”

Beith nodded and retreated to spend his night under the sky.

Adair turned back to see Nathaniel beckoning from the hallway and he hastened to follow him to bed. Once the door closed behind them, Adair pulled Nathaniel close. “We’re alone,” he said.

“Yes,” he answered, yielding to Adair’s urgent kisses.

He licked eagerly into Nathaniel’s mouth, tasting what he’d been missing for days. Beneath his rapidly building arousal, Adair sensed something lacking. He drew his lips away. “What is it Minnow?”

Nathaniel’s hands tangled in Adair’s curls. “I worry.”

Adair lowered his forehead to Nathaniel’s with what he felt was a gentle bonk. “Of what?”

He lowered a hand to brace against the back of Adair’s neck. “Truly, all of this.”

“The Beast?”

“Yes.”

Adair frowned, sensing something Nathaniel was holding back. “What else?”

Nathaniel’s eyes darted up. “You’ve changed.”

Immediately, Adair took a step back, stricken. “I—“

“I just fear you won’t come back to me, back to yourself,” Nathaniel said, closing the distance between them again. He grabbed for Adair’s waist with one hand, bringing the other to rest on the side of Adair’s face. Adair didn’t think he’d ever seen Nathaniel look so sad. “So much anger in your eyes now.”

“None of it toward you.”

Adair watched as the tips of his Minnow’s fingers went, almost subconsciously, to light on the bruise around his own eye. Adair cursed and looked away, ashamed. Nathaniel hadn’t said a word but the point he made stood clear between them, clear as the angry blue swollen mark left by Adair’s errant fist.

Adair skirted around Nathaniel, averting his eyes, his hand on the latch of the door. “I’ll go assist Beith keeping watch,” he mumbled to his feet.

A slim hand seized his arm. “No,” said Minnow. “That’s not what I meant—please. Stay with me.”

Anguished, Adair gathered Nathaniel in his arms, pushing soft kisses to the bruise around his eye. “Always, if you’ll have me.”

“Always.”

Adair traced fretful hands over Nathaniel’s back, feeling the knots below his skin, muscles taut enough to snap. “Minnow,” he whispered into Nathaniel’s hair, kissing the crown of his head. “Let me take the aches from your shoulders.”

“I’m alright,” Nathaniel said, twitching in Adair’s grasp even as he spoke.

Adair clucked his tongue. “Come, lie down.”

Nathaniel rolled his eyes. He braced his palms on Adair’s chest, rising on tip toe to press a kiss to his lips.

Nathaniel's kisses never failed to quicken Adair's pulse, but they left a sour flavor in his throat given the conversation that had only just transpired. Adair steadied Nathaniel's shoulders and backed him off half a step. "No, Minnow," he said. "I seek only to ease the tension you carry. You must relax, and rest."

Nathaniel cocked a brow, bemused.

Adair watched hungrily as he dropped his trousers and moved to rest on his stomach on the bed. Adair tamped down his desire, determined as he was to prove to Nathaniel that he could control himself, but there was no harm in looking, surely. No matter how many times he saw Nathaniel naked, the sight of his body still stole the breath from Adair's lungs. Adair took a moment to settle himself, to slow his racing heart at the sight of Nathaniel laid out on the bed, head turned to regard him with a coy smile.

Adair tucked the thin sheet snug about Nathaniel's hips and retrieved the bottle of oil from the shelf. Kneeling astride Nathaniel's thighs, Adair covered his hands in oil, warming it in his palms before moving strong hands to press against the tight muscles knit across Nathaniel's shoulder blades. His fingers probed the knots, and he felt Minnow wince with every press of his hands. It would be painful before it got better, Adair knew, but the poor young man couldn't go around with his muscles all twisted like this or he'd end up a hunchback before his thirtieth birthday.

As he worked his fingers, doing his best to ignore the appealing curve of Nathaniel's ass barely hidden by the thin white fabric of the sheet, Adair encouraged small noises of pained pleasure from Nathaniel's lips. The soft groans of relief, muffled into the down of the pillow, seemed to go directly to Adair's cock, now resting half hard against the cleft of Nathaniel's ass.

Clearly, this was not lost on Minnow, who began rocking his hips just so, bucking up with tiny movements against Adair's body.

"Minnow," Adair scolded, his quiet voice half a groan. He braced a firm hand on the small of Nathaniel's back to still

him. “Now who’s the one who can’t behave?”

“Can’t help it,” Nathaniel said, echoing Adair’s earlier words, turning his head to peek at Adair over his shoulder. “Those hands. Besides, we are actually alone now.”

Adair allowed a small smile. This was not going to plan, and he struggled to recall why this had *not* been his plan. Adair shook his head to clear it, and rose up onto his knees, placing a few inches of distance between himself and Nathaniel, trying to regain his composure. However, Nathaniel seized the opportunity to roll onto his back, the outline of his gorgeous hard cock ghosting through the sheet. Nathaniel’s hands went to Adair’s waist, trying to pull him back down.

“Minnow.” The endearment came out a plea. Adair closed his eyes. “Are you trying to kill me?”

“What do you mean?” Nathaniel looked up at him, thumbs teasing the creases of Adair’s hip bones.

“You tell me I frighten you,” Adair said. He seized Nathaniel’s probing hands, holding them still what one of his own. He teased his fingers up the outline of Nathaniel’s dick, and was rewarded with Minnow arching up into his touch. “This tells otherwise. Which is it?”

When Nathaniel lowered his hips back to the mattress, squirming between Adair’s thighs, the look on his face was a wary one.

“Well?” Adair teased his cock again.

“I can’t think with your hands on me,” Nathaniel said, breathless. Adair squeezed his hands more tightly still.

“And yet, I can’t release you until you answer.” His thumb brushed over the head of Nathaniel’s dick, feeling a damp spot growing below the pad of his finger as it moved the fabric.

“The change in you frightens me,” he admitted, panting. “But it heats the blood as well. I can’t explain it.”

“A good answer,” said Adair, lowering his lips to offer a kiss. “But, Minnow, I can’t have you doubting my heart.”

As much as his body begged otherwise, Adair nudged Nathaniel to return him to lying on his front. As he rolled reluctantly to his side, Nathaniel slipped a hand free gave a playful swat to Adair's cock. "It's not your heart I doubt currently," Nathaniel grumbled, but allowed himself to be positioned again under Adair's palms.

"I'd rather have you frustrated and now that I love you," Adair said with a smile, returning to the task of working the knots from Nathaniel's shoulders—but not without first giving Nathaniel's ass a squeeze. He had something to prove, but he certainly wasn't perfect. "I would see you eased from stress, Minnow."

Nathaniel snorted, as if to say that there were other ways to relieve stress, but soon enough the pleased groans returned like music to Adair's ears, confirming that this was indeed what his Minnow most needed. The pleased groans eventually gave way to breathy snores. With the tight muscles of Nathaniel's slim shoulders plied supple and soft beneath Adair's fingers, Adair maneuvered around him to find a comfortable position for his own rest. His horns now prevented him from lying his head beside Nathaniel's on the pillow, lest he lodge them in the wood of the headboard. So, Adair made a pile of blankets on which he could prop himself up and pulled Nathaniel against his side, stroking his hair and listening to his breathing until he drifted off himself.

XXI

Hen in a Soup Pot

We need more information,” Nathaniel said over breakfast. “Everything we think we know so far is naught but guess work.”

He had been thinking things over as he sipped his tea.

Adair sat beside him, nibbling on a sharp white cheese to which he had taken a fierce liking. “That’s true, but where are we to find it?”

“I think we need to pay a visit to Iron Gall.”

“Is he a great warrior?” Beith perked up at the title.

“Afraid not,” said Nathaniel, lowering his cup. “It’s a book shop.”

“*Bloody* hell,” Beith said, throwing up his hands. “It’s fighters we need.”

“It’s knowledge we need.”

“We would do well to gain both,” Adair chimed in, silencing their sniping. He turned to face Nathaniel. “What do you suggest?”

“There are countless volumes in the book shop,” Nathaniel said. “Far too many to purchase, or borrow.”

“So what are we to do?”

“I know where Rory keeps his spare key,” Nathaniel said. “Tonight after dark I could slip in and peruse the volumes at leisure.”

“I’ll accompany you,” Adair replied immediately. “I don’t like the idea of you prowling alone after dark.”

When the moon was high, Adair followed Nathaniel out his bedroom window to make their way unseen toward the locked door of Iron Gall. Nathaniel slipped the spare key from its hiding place above the door jam, the lock yielding with a muffled *click*.

They entered the silent book shop, and Nathaniel lit a candle, shielding the flame in part with his hand. "If we sit below the level of the window, we should avoid notice."

Nathaniel's stomach, which had been churning with anxiety, eased as he sat among the stack of books. His frantic mind always quieted here, even with the mess in which he currently found himself. They read for hours, poring over volumes Nathaniel selected from the shelves: references, grimoires, dusty old personal histories. Nathaniel skimmed every page with care, noting with a bite of annoyance that Adair would cast a book aside with a scoff after reading only a few sections.

"This is ridiculous, Minnow," Adair hissed. "None of these books contain a single kernel of worth."

"You're barely even reading them."

In answer, Adair read aloud from his current book. "Avoid with care a ring of fungus," he read, "for there within the faire folk may entrap you."

Nathaniel stifled a giggle behind his hand. "That's not how you entrapped me, then?"

Adair rolled his eyes. "Ah yes, I'd forgotten. I surrounded you with mushrooms like a hen in your mother's stew pot."

Nathaniel sighed as Adair tossed the book on the pile. "Well, check the next one."

The candles burned low and the pile of discarded books grew higher around them. Nathaniel lay on his back, head resting in Adair's lap, book propped open against his hip. The faun ran the fingers of his off hand through Nathaniel's hair, holding a book open in the other hand to read. The two had fallen into an easy silence, moving or speaking only to retrieve another book from the stack.

“Apparently I ought not to have even told you my true name,” Nathaniel told Adair, tossing the book aside. “Beith was right, this was a worthless venture.”

“Well now I know you must be delirious, Minnow, to admit such—“ Adair paused mid-sentence, cocking his head to the side. He sat up straighter against the wall.

“What is it?”

“*Shhh.*”

This time, Nathaniel heard it as well. The telltale creak of a stair, far too late for either of them to hide.

Rory leapt with the agility of a man half his years from around the door at the base of the stair, raising a heavy iron skillet like a club with both hands to defend his precious books. “*I’ll know your business here, you skulking—Nathaniel?*” The pan fell from Rory’s hand with a deafening clang in the quiet of the shop. Rory brought a hand to his chest as he took in the sight of Adair absent his customary hat, clothing, and with the rather obvious addition of the duo of enormous spikes thrust up from his wild tangle of golden curls.

Nathaniel scrambled to his feet, and heard Adair do so as well. “Rory,” he began, with absolutely no notion of what he might say next. He wondered for half a moment if he could convince Rory he were dreaming.

Rory wiped his sweaty brow with a shaking hand. “If you needed to read some of the books, lad, you could have *asked*, rather than scaring me half into the grave in the dead of night.”

“I’m sorry,” Nathaniel cast a glance to Adair, who met his gaze with a question in his eyes.

The three stood staring at each other for some time. Eventually, Rory approached and walked around Adair in a slow circle, looking him up and down.

“So,” he said, his eyes focused on Adair’s horns. “These certainly wouldn’t fit under a hat any longer, would they?”

“You knew?”

“I knew he hid something under there, certainly. I had my suspicions.”

Adair and Nathaniel exchanged looks.

“Is it that surprising? Look at him.”

Nathaniel glanced at Adair, who looked a bit affronted.

“And how easily you forget,” Rory said, “I knew your father.”

Nathaniel gaped. That thought had never occurred to him. “You said nothing.”

Rory shrugged. “The faire folk are not to be trifled with. I feared for you at first Nathaniel. That is, until I saw this one’s love sick puppy eyes always upon you.”

“Oh?” Nathaniel grinned, looking toward Adair, whose cheeks flushed.

Adair opened his mouth, indignant.

“Alright, alright,” said Rory with a grin. He clapped Adair on the shoulder. “So what’s this then?”

“The horns?”

“Aye.”

“That’s what we’re here to discern. And there’s more.”

“These wounds, I assume, and their source.”

Nathaniel had always known Rory was sharp, one of the smartest men he’d ever known in fact, but still his quick wit took him aback. “Y-yes.”

“There is a beast in the wood,” Adair said. “Ancient, strong. Foul.”

Rory’s brow creased. “Is the village in danger?”

“We believe yes.”

“James Kelly’s mauling, and Sean Ulmer?”

“Our thoughts as well.”

The frown on the older man's face deepened. "Well," he said finally. "I'd see you two off to bed. The hour is late. I will come by your home tomorrow with some *relevant* volumes, after closing."

"I fear there are none," said Nathaniel.

Rory scoffed. "Lad, you don't know half of what I've got stashed in these walls." He kicked back the corner of the carpet, revealing a square trap door with a wrought iron ring for a handle.

Adair collapsed immediately on the mattress upon return to Nathaniel's bed through the window, arms and legs splayed out like a content sea star, and was snoring in an instant. Nathaniel knew sleep would not come as easily for himself. He sat a moment on the edge of the mattress envying Adair in his easy slumber, and admiring his form in equal parts. Nathaniel rested his palm on the dip of Adair's lower back, the warmth of his skin comforting him as his mind raced.

After a few moments, Nathaniel stood and returned to the kitchen, looking at the map of Myrna on the table as if over the last several hours it may have sprouted new words upon the parchment. He felt wretched doing nothing, the idea of sitting idle choking him. Nathaniel decided he would see if he could spread the protection of the mint plants to the neighboring houses. That was at least something he could do now. Dawn was still a few hours off, so Nathaniel knuckled his dry eyes, seized his forage bag and exited through the door off the kitchen.

By the light of the moon, Nathaniel approached the lean-to against the house and retrieved his spade. He strolled through the damp grass to the edge of the trees, inhaling the scent of mint with a small smile. Thank goodness the herb that proved ward against the Beast smelled so sweet.

Nathaniel crouched by the overgrowth of mint, fingering the leaves fondly. His tired but overactive mind was half on thoughts of Adair's fresh tasting lips and half on the task at hand. The mint was in bloom, little blossoms sprinkled through the thicket. Nathaniel frowned. It was early in the

season for the mint plants to be bolting. He took a closer look at the flowers.

They weren't mint flowers.

They were the icy blue blooms of the Nightshade plant. That was more than passing strange. It had been Nathaniel's understanding that the Nightshade flowers only grew near where Clíodhna lived in the far northern part of the forest. His mind was so occupied it took a moment for him to realize his skin felt like it was crawling with ants. Nathaniel squinted into the trees, afraid.

He could feel eyes upon him, unfriendly eyes. Angry eyes. The night was dark, but a shadow moved between the trees with no source of light to give it life. It approached the edge of the trees, and Nathaniel felt an odd sense of calm. He trusted in the lush green barrier between him and the Beast as it came closer. Like his own heartbeat, Nathaniel could feel the Beast's hunger. He took a slight thrill of satisfaction at its impotence to cross the barrier. He met its gaze, curious how something could seem darker than the dark of night itself.

"You cannot cross," he ventured. Exhaustion made him bold. "For all your malice, you are stymied by a few little sprigs of a plant."

"He is," said an unfamiliar female voice from somewhere behind him. "Clever of you to discern it. How unfortunate for you that I am not so dismayed."

XXII

To Fear Him

Adair woke with the warmth of the sun coaxing his eyes to open. Sprawled out on the soft, feather stuffed mattress of Nathaniel's bed, he considered that perhaps humans might know a thing or two of comfort. He clawed the blankets, seeking the warmth of his Minnow's flesh. With his sleepy mind reminding him that the bookmonger wouldn't arrive until evening, he had thought to linger in bed with Nathaniel for a time. When Adair's grasping hands came up empty, feeling the pillows beside him cold, he sat up, blinking in the sunlight.

Adair had distinct memory of Nathaniel's hand upon his back as he drifted off to sleep, and rolled his eyes. Adair realized Nathaniel would have course sought work in place of rest. Adair swung his long legs over the edge of the mattress, stretching his arms above his head. Though he'd long since abandoned the thin veneer of wearing his hat in the Stones' home, he still felt a bit odd parading about in just his glamour—especially having been caught in only such by Rory the night previous. So, before exiting Nathaniel's bed chamber he slipped on a pair of loose trousers.

Adair padded to the kitchen, half a mind on morning kisses and the other half on securing another chunk of that excellent cheese. He glanced into the sitting room, where Síol and his sisters lay contentedly entangled in a nest of blankets. The kitchen was empty, the map lying forlorn on the table. With a slight frown, Adair moved to the front threshold, where he knew he'd find Beith. Adair shook him awake.

“Has Nathaniel passed this way?”

“I haven’t seen him,” said Beith, annoyed at being woken so early. “I’d thought to find him with his lips around your cock.”

Adair cuffed him playfully about the ears in rebuke, but concern niggled at the back of his mind. If Minnow’s lips were indeed *not* around Adair’s cock, nor pursed in thought as he considered the map in the kitchen, Adair found himself with a curiosity bordering close to fear. Where was he?

With hackles raised, Adair went to every door in the house. He found Thomas, peacefully asleep in his tiny bedroom, and Moira sitting with her ghosts in a chair by the window in her own chambers. Bán sat, nose quivering, on the sill in the sitting room looking out down the lane. Adair’s pulse hummed, nerves firing as he realized Nathaniel was nowhere within the small house. Adair returned to the kitchen, eyes searching the room. Perhaps he had returned early to the book shop?

He saw Nathaniel’s forage bag was missing from its customary peg and felt a quiver of unease. Minnow would have no need of the forage bag if he was going to Iron Gall, since Rory had promised to come by with a cart full of the relevant volumes for their search. Adair shouldered out the rear door of the house, squinting in the shimmering light of dawn. Panic rose like bile in his throat when he saw the familiar worn brown fabric of the missing bag lying discarded by the edge of the trees. Adair jogged toward it, breathing hard. The bag was discarded along with Nathaniel’s hunting knife and a small spade by the tree line beside a half dug hole.

Adair crouched by the hole. It appeared Nathaniel was digging up some of the mint plants, most likely to move them to offer the neighbors some protection. As he took in the scene, Adair noticed something strange. Aside from the untamed thicket of mint leaves growing through the wooden fence, the ground was covered with delicate blue blossoms—the Nightshade flowers. Adair didn’t have the time to puzzle over that, however. He stood for several moments staring at the tableau before him. The blood boiled beneath Adair’s skin, pounding in his ears, and before he even realized he was

moving he found himself striding to where Beith sat with his back against the door jam. Adair seized Beith by his one good horn and sank his fist into the side of his face.

“Have you lost your damn wits?” Beith spat a mouthful of blood on the ground.

“Have you?” Adair said. “You insist on keeping watch and I find you fucking asleep.”

Beith came to his feet, ready for a fight though he still wasn't sure the cause. “We just spoke,” he said. “You seemed in fine enough spirits—“

“Nathaniel is *gone*.”

Beith dropped his fists to his sides. “What?”

“He is *gone*.” Adair's own fists shook, and he found himself eager to sink them into someone's flesh. He tried to steady himself, knowing Beith wasn't truly at fault, but his skin was catching fire all over again. “Right under my nose.”

An uncharacteristic softness passed over Beith's face. “Come,” he said, regarding Adair with wary eyes. “Let's return to the house. Perhaps he is simply on some errand.”

Adair tried desperately to steady his breathing. In his bones he knew that Nathaniel wasn't simply off on some errand, but he also knew Beith was not his enemy. The blow was ill struck, so he let Beith lead him inside.

Inside the house, the rest of the family—his and Nathaniel's, blended now together, an odd thought—was stirring. Thomas ambled to the sideboard to seize an apple and a hunk of cheese. He tossed the cheese to Adair, who caught it reflexively.

“Where is my brother?” Thomas asked, rumpling his hair with his empty hand.

Adair opened and closed his mouth, finding his throat constricted, unable to answer.

“Missing,” Beith supplied bluntly.

Adair watched as the boy's bleary eyes returned to startling clarity. "What?"

"It's true," Adair finally said. "I found his forage bag and knife abandoned by the trees' edge."

The apple fell from Thomas's hand, hitting the floor with a wet thud. "The Beast—?"

"I don't know," Adair said. "It seems unlikely—it doesn't seem to carry off..."

"Carry off what?" Thomas snapped, his young face hard, defiant.

"Living victims." Adair realized he had squashed the cheese in his hand to a grainy pulp and dropped the mess on the table, wiping his palm on his trousers.

Thomas crowded into Adair's space, his small body vibrating with rage. He shoved his hands into Adair's chest. "*You* did this."

"Thomas I—"

"Don't," the boy said. He shoved him again. "You brought him into this. You better go find him. Alive."

The others stirred, coming into the kitchen. "What is all this shouting?" Moira asked, concerned eyes flicking from one angry face to the next.

"Nat is gone." Thomas whirled toward his mother.

Adair would have given much and more not to have seen the stricken look on Moira Stone's face. Her eyes were the image of her son's, and over the past few months he'd learned of her generous heart and history of acute suffering. He hated to be the cause of more.

She closed her eyes. "Where?"

"We do not know," said Beith. "He was only just taken."

Adair seized Nathaniel's mother's soft, small hands. "I will find him. I will tear every tree from its roots before—"

"No."

“No?”

“I know my son’s heart,” she said, her watery eyes fierce. “If he were to know I allowed his love to charge off, wounded, into the trees, he would never forgive me.”

“But—“

Moira reached her hands out and grabbed hold of Adair’s horns. She yanked his head toward herself to look him in the eye. He staggered, shoulders stooped toward her. “You will remain here,” she hissed. “Where my son can come home and find you whole.”

Never had Adair found himself so chastised, gripped by the hands of this tiny mortal woman. He nodded his head the fragment of an inch allowed by Moira Stone’s vice-like fingers. Adair could not find the words, his base instincts at war with each other. His eyes flickered between Minnow’s brother and mother, both in fierce opposition.

Beith cleared his throat and said, “I could chase him down.”

Adair shook his head. “No.”

“Why not?” The look in Beith’s eye was a fierce one.

“You’re still not recovered,” Adair said, regaining his full height as Moira released him.

“Neither are you!”

It was a stalemate, one that certainly wouldn’t be resolved that morning. The look on Thomas’s face was enough to send Adair sailing into a maelstrom of guilt, but the answering one on Moira’s face had him unable to do anything about it.

He couldn’t let Beith go searching for Nathaniel, his wounds had been more grievous than Adair’s own and he was still recovering. Besides, Adair thought, looking at his palm, it was the scar that would help him track Nathaniel. It was the bond they shared.

Adair left the kitchen abruptly and retreated back to Nathaniel’s bedroom, curling up on the mattress, burying his face in the pillows to breathe his Minnow’s scent in hopes of calming his mind.

It did not help—it only made him furious. He pummeled the pillow, pulling the sheet up over his head. Adair agreed with Thomas, of course. If not for Adair's presence in Nathaniel's life, he would be happily ensconced here in Myrna with no cause to worry about what happened between the trees.

Adair held up his palm, staring transfixed at the scar. It stung and ached, but it didn't seem to pull him in any certain direction—a product of his own confused and frantic thoughts. Suddenly, he felt as though he couldn't breathe. He couldn't stand the thought of remaining in this tiny room, within these walls, under this roof a second longer. Adair flung the window wide and leapt from the sill to land on the grass.

The soft, dewy blades beneath his feet grounded him. Adair took a breath, forcing himself to take as much air as possible between his lips, filling his lungs, steadying himself with the taste of wild things on the wind. Adair was a wild thing, too, and this beast would come to fear him.

XXIII

The Heart-eater

Nathaniel woke, curled around himself, knees close to his chest, arms crooked to shield his face. He felt like he'd been hit in the head with a sledgehammer, and lights danced against his closed eyes. His memory full of fog, Nathaniel silently took stock of his body. He found his shoulders cramped and tight, his spine stiff and aching. With increasing fear, he realized his wrists were bound, and upon testing his ankles he found them to be tied as well. A chill draft blew across his skin, and Nathaniel realized he was absolutely naked. His eyes flew open in surprise, searing with pain like being snow blind but worse. He buried his face behind his arms again, letting his eyes adjust to the dimmer light there before peeking out again. Trying to slow his pounding heart and call memories to his disoriented mind, Nathaniel took a few steadying breaths and set about taking inventory of the rest of his body. Aside from the cramping spine and pounding head, he couldn't detect any major injuries. That was something.

Shivering, he decided to chance another look beyond the safe little cave created by his forearms. Peeking out, he could see that he was beside an enormous fire, and not much else. The light was staggering, high and hot and unnatural. As he blinked and looked around the edges of the glow he saw nothing but blackness. Nathaniel tried to sit up, but his head smacked against something solid, the pain in his skull doubling down as he bit back a curse. He rolled onto his back, bringing his hands up to test the barrier above him. It felt like solid wood. Memories came back to him a little bit, and he turned away from the fire in attempt to adjust to the blackness

and get his bearings. As his vision cleared, Nathaniel saw that he was caged as well as bound.

Nathaniel forced his terror inward. He knew that showing weakness wouldn't do him any favors, so with sheer force of will he stilled his body, breathing so slow it felt unnatural while his mind hummed high and white with complete panic.

By keeping his eyes trained away from the white glow of the fire, Nathaniel's vision slowly returned. Looking around, Nathaniel didn't recognize his surroundings, but he could tell he was in a cavern. The damp walls were covered in growth, countless tiny vining plants heavy with the pale blue blossoms.

He tested the bonds on his arms and legs and found them impossibly snug; there was no way he'd be able to simply wriggle out.

"He's awake," came a voice.

"I can see that," came an answer, a silky, poisonous voice that seemed to fill the air of the cave.

Nathaniel squeezed his lips shut, searching for the source. A luminous face appeared beside the bars of his cage.

Nathaniel had never known something so beautiful and so repulsive; she was like a lily with a scorpion concealed inside. Her skin was a pale lilac color, and as the light from the fire shifted around her face it transformed her—she went from looking like an angel to looking like a corpse with each flicker. Her lips were bruise dark, her hair glossy and black. She crouched by the cage, wrapping skeletal fingers around the bars, peering into Nathaniel's face.

"Well?"

Nathaniel startled, pulling his eyes from the woman before him, searching for the source of the first voice. He found it by the wall of the cavern: the familiar face of the one-toothed Gael, white enough to shine in the darkness.

"Well, what?" The woman by the cage answered him.

"Well, what now?" Gael asked her.

She straightened up, turning toward him. “Now, you are dismissed.”

“You told me—“

She held up a finger. “We will discuss your rewards for your labor at another time. I believe I said you were dismissed.”

Gael grumbled and left the cavern, and as he left, Nathaniel felt something else. The woman watched Gael go.

“Gorgeous, is he not?”

“Who, Gael?”

She laughed. “No, of course not. I’m talking about *him*.” She indicated the shadow moving near the wall. It was the Beast, Nathaniel was sure—but in the darkness Nathaniel could barely make it out. “He’s called a Heart-eater. The name is a touch dramatic for my taste, and yet—it suits him. He used to be one of us, did you know?”

Nathaniel refused to answer, keeping his eyes and demeanor as defiant as he could manage—a feat, given his current state.

She smiled. “It’s interesting you don’t recognize him.” She prowled around Nathaniel in his cage, forcing him to twist and turn to keep her in his sights. She wore a gown so dark it drank the light of her mysterious fire. He thought it might be a glamour, but it was hard to tell in the shifting glow. Where she stepped, tiny buds burst through the cracks in the cavern floor. “It’s love that killed him, you know,” she said, before her face split into a grin. “That’s not strictly true, I suppose. It’s me that killed him. But it was love that made him stupid. And that’s what lead him to me.”

“Who the hell are you?”

“Oh, I’m an old friend of the queen’s,” she said, airily. “Atropa. And I know who you are, Nathaniel Stone. I know all about you.”

Nathaniel frowned. She reached up and touched the Heart-eater’s face.

“I’m impressed you managed to ensnare the Little Prince,” she said, returning to crouch by Nathaniel’s cage. “I never knew his tastes to be so ... vulgar.” She reached a hand between the bars to stroke his hair. He twisted away, looking at her with the most venom he could muster, a challenge considering he was literally bound with his ass hanging out. She laughed, stroking his exposed backside with an ice-cold fingertip. “Perhaps you’re just excellent at taking his dick.”

Nathaniel narrowed his eyes, determined to remain mute, certain this woman was going to twist anything he said anyhow.

“You don’t look like much,” Atropa went on, clearly trying to goad him now. “Humans were only ever good for a quick fuck, and here the prince is—claiming you as his own for all our people to hear.” She narrowed her vile eyes and added, “He ought to be ashamed of himself, loving a lowly thing like you.”

Nathaniel didn’t think of himself as a prideful person, didn’t think of himself with a man with a short fuse. But, he had his limits like anyone. “What would you know of love?” he spat, doing his best to seem unafraid.

The pale woman’s grin widened like it would split her skull. “More than you could ever conceive, you dirt-veined insect.”

She strode out of his line of sight, leaving Nathaniel to stare at the Heart-eater. Its moist, rumbling breath and the hammering of his own heart were the only sounds in the cavern. It looked at him, radiating sadness, loss and fear. And anger—that too, perhaps that most of all.

Nathaniel wriggled fruitlessly against his bonds. There was a lot to unpack, but perhaps that could wait. Right now he was bound, caged, and naked at the mercy of a powerful beast, *and* the malevolent power controlling it.

He heard Atropa’s laughter again, and ceased his struggling. Nathaniel’s skin pulsed with rage. Then, her clammy hands were in his hair. “*Sleep*,” she cooed, and he did.



Adair tried desperately to follow Nathaniel's scent. It was there, faint, feeble, masked by something else. It was not the smell of the Beast, which had been scorched into Adair's memories. This was something older, fouler. It had a familiarity to it, the smell, but he couldn't quite place it.

Someone had taken Minnow. That simple thought chased itself around Adair's mind, which was full of angry, buzzing fog. Someone had taken Minnow.

Adair could feel that Nathaniel was suffering, could feel it in the scar on his hand. He dug his nails into his palm. The scar wasn't working properly—it wasn't leading him. Adair could feel that Nathaniel was alive, that he was hurting, and that was it. Part of it was his fault, he knew. Using the connection made by the wounds required focus, and while he was certainly trying his damndest to access the part of his mind that would allow him to follow the pull, to find Nathaniel—he couldn't. His fear and rage, twisting and swooping through his guts, pounding in his skull, threatened to consume him.

Someone had taken Minnow.

He stopped, skin prickling all over like insects crawling on his body. Adair closed his eyes, knowing he had to get his mind right or he'd never find Nathaniel. His stalking through the trees had led him to the riverside, so he crouched to drink some water, to splash some on his face and clear his head. He reached shaking hands to the surface and was shocked to see a terrified face peering back at him.

“Sáile?”

Her head broke the surface. “I'm so glad I found you.”

“What are you doing this far from the ocean?”

“Her Radiance sent me. I've been looking for you for days,” she said. Her voice sounded hoarse and ragged. “It's hard to move through this water. You have to come! Follow the river.” Without another word she submerged herself again and took off downstream.

Momentarily diverted, Adair followed alongside the water. He hadn't heard from his mother since all of this began, and he'd feared that she and the rest of the court had been chased from the forest or worse. Moving as quickly as he could through the trees, while trying to keep his senses sharp enough to watch for the Beast. Adair took the path beside the river toward the small beach he'd visited with Nathaniel. His heart twisted in anguish. He stopped. What was he doing? He was supposed be searching for his Minnow. How had he forgotten?

Adair shook his head, a frustrated snarl escaping through his lips. Perhaps he should go see his mother, perhaps she knew something about the Beast and how to destroy it. Perhaps she knew where it lived.

Indecisiveness and doubt clawed him, itching over his half healed wounds and tugging at his hair, whispering in his ear and tying him in knots. After a few moments he decided to continue toward the beach.

As he stepped from the trees, blinking in the over-bright glare of the sun bouncing off the water, Adair heard a shout and his vision was obscured as his mother pulled him into a feverish embrace.

“Little One,” she said, clinging to her son.

Adair was unused to such displays from her—she always seemed so composed. He returned the hug gratefully.

“Where have you been?” She asked. “Where are your sisters—are they—?”

“They’re alive,” he said. “They’re in Myrna with Nathaniel’s mother. Síol, Beith and Ban are with them.”

She covered her eyes with a trembling hand and let out a relieved sigh before lowering it to get a good look at her son. “What happened to you, Little One?”

“That *thing*,” he spat. “It nearly killed me. And Beith.”

She turned away. Adair looked out at the water to see Sáile bobbing awkwardly in the surf, clearly unsure if she should be listening to this conversation.

“Who is it?” Adair hissed, seizing his mother by the arm. The question came without his permission, where “What is it?” may have been more appropriate. However, the part of Adair’s mind not given over to animal instinct had been churning the few crumbs of information he possessed. Nathaniel could sense the Beast. He could also sense Adair, his kin, and other fae folk.

“I’m not certain,” the queen said evasively, telling Adair she probably had some working theories.

“You have thoughts.”

“I do.”

“You don’t wish to share them?”

“I do not.”

“Then what are you doing?” Adair said, his temper surging. “Hiding here? How can you be so selfish? Our people are out there dying. Clíodhna is dead. Ban lost another skin. Someone—it...” Adair choked on his own words. His head was spinning. He doubled over, bracing his hands on his knees. “It took Nathaniel,” he said finally.

Adair’s mother grabbed for his hand, but he jerked away. She looked older than Adair had ever seen her, but he found that his sympathy was limited. He flexed his scarred hand, opening and closing his fingers compulsively as he waited for her to speak.

“The Beast is not working alone,” she said, her voice barely audible. “I came here alone hoping ... hoping to draw her out.”

“Draw *who* out?” Adair already regretted coming here rather than continuing the search on his own.

“Someone I’d thought left this forest before you were born.”

Advancing on his mother, Adair growled. “Speak. Plainly,” he said through gritted teeth.

“She’s ... a former paramour.”

That startled Adair out of his pacing frenzy for a moment. His mother was not one given over to romantic entanglements; in fact, Adair had not ever known her to take a consort.

“We were at court together as girls,” she said. “We both attended my predecessor, who was childless.”

Adair never knew what had happened to the previous Aster King. His mother had ruled for so long, it wasn't much talked about. “So you and ...” he paused, realizing his mother had not offered a name.

“Atropa,” his mother said.

“So you and Atropa were lovers?”

“We were.” The queen shook her head sadly. “There was a time when I thought we could be more, that we could rule together, but Atropa had very different ideas about how the folk should conduct themselves. Especially ...” she trailed off, afraid to continue.

“Especially what?”

“Especially with regard to humans.”



Nathaniel woke with a shocked cry, drenched with a bucket of frigid water that pulled him from his fitful rest. Reflexively, Nathaniel tried to throw his arms in front of himself to shield his face, forgetting his hands were bound. The rope looped around a hook dangling from the ceiling, leaving Nathaniel hanging like a side of beef at the butcher's. As he jerked his stiff arms, he muffled a grunt of pain by biting his lip. His shoulders ached, muscles burning from the forced position and the limp weight of his own body. Nathaniel struggled to find his footing, scrabbling with his toes to find precarious purchase on the cold stone floor, easing the pain in his shoulders. Pins and needles shot into his hands, numb from the rope around his wrists.

At that moment Nathaniel's mind was a thrumming nucleus of cold, pain and fear, each sensation grappling to win out as Nathaniel simply stood, naked and shivering and dripping wet.

Finally his eyes adjusted to the dark, and he saw he'd been moved from his cage to a dank, chilly cell. "I couldn't wait any longer," said a bored voice, the pale woman, Atropa—he was certain.

He couldn't see her, but he felt hot, wet breath on his shoulder and recoiled from it, repulsed. The stench of her was floral, heavy, and wrong. Her hands explored his body, touching, probing with jagged nails scratching and picking. Nathaniel pushed forward onto his toes, a useless attempt to put some distance between the two of them. That only made her laugh.

"You're afraid," she said.

Nathaniel bit his tongue. Of course he was afraid; he was bloody well near pissing himself but he wasn't about to give her the satisfaction of admitting it.

"A terrified little vermin," came her voice, breath hot on his cheek now. There was something unnatural about this darkness. It was thicker in places, and Nathaniel was sure it was meant to conceal her as she moved around him. "You're going to tell me how to find the Little Prince."

The darkness thinned, and she sauntered in front of him. He watched as she toyed with a whip between her cruel fingers. He squeezed his lips together, bracing himself a blow that did not fall. It took several tense breaths before Nathaniel realized he was alone again.

As he grew accustomed to the dark, normal dark without Atropa there, Nathaniel learned all he could about his surroundings. There wasn't all that much to tell. He was left on his own, to test fruitlessly at the bonds, do his best to ease the cramping in his calves as he scrabbled to support himself on his toes and fret endlessly.

Every so often he'd be woken by water so cold it burned. Atropa touched him and struck him, mocked him and stroked every inch of his skin. Her feather light probing was worse than the sting of her whip at his back, insidious and false where at least Nathaniel felt he could take solace in the pure honesty of pain.

Weak, exposed, humiliated. In the dark he couldn't discern the passing of time. His throat ran dry and his stomach cramped—no food or water was offered. He came to welcome the splash of the water she used to wake him, as he could lick a few droplets from his own lips as they ran down his skin.

His wrists chafed bloody against the harsh, cruel fibers of the rope, stinging every time he moved. Each time he dozed he'd slump down, the weight of his body yanking the joints on his shoulders and snapping him back to consciousness. And yet, whenever she came to him, he marshalled his courage and gave her nothing.

He assumed she was waiting for him to break, use the link he had with Adair through the scars they shared to track him down for her. After a while—he didn't know how long—Nathaniel simply hoped he would die before he broke.

She set her Heart-eater to guard him, for all the good it did her. Nathaniel could more easily have sprouted wings than shaken himself loose.

“Still don't recognize him?” She said, indicating the Heart-eater, one of the times she came to visit. She brushed her fingers through Nathaniel's hair.

He stayed mute.

She sighed. “Perhaps I'll tell you how a Heart-eater is created. You can't make one unless your heart beats fierce with love.” Her fingers tightened against Nathaniel's scalp, tugging his head back. She dragged one long fingernail across his throat. “Love fierce enough to make you kill.”

“Something tells me you didn't need an excuse for that,” said Nathaniel before he could stop himself.

She laughed. “That's only half of it,” she admitted with a grin, giving his hair another yank. “The one you kill has to be stupid with love, too.”

That gave Nathaniel pause.

“You're listening now, aren't you?”

“So what, you’re going to turn me into another one of those things?”

“Oh bless, no.” She laughed again, releasing Nathaniel’s scalp and trailing an icy finger across his jawline. “You’re certainly stupid enough, but I only needed the one. It’s a peculiar, finicky sort of curse, and at any rate—the victim needs to be fae.” She considered him a moment. “Pure fae,” she added.

“How did you—“

“I can smell it on you,” she said, wrinkling her nose.

This was the game they played, now. She would taunt and tease with stories, tastes of information to goad Nathaniel to speech. He had no choice but to play. He learned swiftly that if he remained entirely silent that she would quickly anger and beat him until he passed out. If he gave too much she would laugh, and that was worse.

He was weakening. He knew it. Nathaniel’s defiance had its limits, and he felt them fast approaching. He did his best to remain neutral of expression as she talked of all sorts of things, of purity of blood, of shame, and how the fae folk used to be seen as gods.

“We used to be worshipped, revered. And what are we now?” She scoffed. “We get drunk, we fuck, we play our little jokes on humans. Half of them don’t even believe we exist, and our powers dwindle with every passing year. Gliona ought to be ashamed of herself.”

Nathaniel spat on the floor. “Who?” he gasped.

Atropa turned to him like a cat who’d caught a mouse. “Oh, dear,” she said. “Perhaps the Little Prince isn’t as proud of his pet as I’d been lead to believe. Gliona is his mother, the queen.”

Nathaniel frowned. He tried not to let her words truly reach him, but the longer he remained here the harder it was.

“At any rate,” she continued, turning to walk toward the bars of Nathaniel’s cell, regarding the Heart-eater who stood silent guard. “If *you’d* had any proper sense of pride, we

wouldn't be in this unpleasant situation at all. But here we are—you, me, and your revolting spawn. I would have loved to dispatch the other one, and your widow too, but there simply wasn't time."

Whether the Heart-eater could understand her words or not, Nathaniel couldn't tell. Eventually, it merely turned and lumbered away. Nathaniel's mind raced—surely what she implied was not possible. And yet... "*These places shouldn't be. They're vulnerable to things. Bad things.*" Adair's words echoed in his frantic mind, words spoken over the stone at his father's grave.

"Caught up yet?" She was mocking him.

"I—you're lying," he spat, trying to throw some venom behind the words.

She only laughed, caressing his hair. "Darling, I simply do not care enough about you to lie."

So it went.

"I think I'll try to get him to come to us," she said one day. Well, Nathaniel told himself it was a new day. He honestly hadn't the faintest idea how long he'd been there. "You're stronger than I would have thought."

Nathaniel stared straight ahead, mute.

"Then again," she said with a glance to the Heart-eater. "It's in your blood."

Lifting Nathaniel like he weighed no more than a child, she moved him to the floor of the cell where he keeled over immediately. She wound her fingers in his hair and yanked, hauling him to his knees with his bound hands in front of him. Nathaniel had no strength left to resist.

Atropa drew a knife, the blade cruel and sharp. She twisted Nathaniel's fingers, bending them back away from his palm as he tried feebly to keep his first closed. "A crude, amateurish spell," she said, dragging the point of the blade across Nathaniel's scar. She pressed the blade against his clammy skin, lying the edge across the scar Adair had made. "But effective. More so if the wound is opened."

She sawed against his palm, brutal, and despite his best efforts Nathaniel screamed, screamed like he never had in his life as the blade slid back and forth, deeper and deeper until he could feel it scrape against the bones of his hand, hot blood streaming down his arms.

XXIV

A True Heir

Adair was too far gone already to listen to reason, to puzzle over what his mother was saying. Luckily, she realized this before he had the chance to say or do something he'd regret. Adair couldn't quite bring himself to care either way, as long as he found out what the hell was going on, found out how he could rescue his Minnow.

"We've always lived beside humans," she began. "Even before the village sprung up. Some of us enjoyed mixing company more than others of course, and for the most part we were free to do as we wished—we really only ever had one higher law."

"Which was?"

"On the whole, the humans couldn't know the truth of us. We could love them, trick them, whatever we wanted, but never were we to truly reveal our society, our kingdom. Our true selves." Gliona gave an enormous sigh, pacing at the water's edge.

Another small growl from Adair hastened his mother in the telling.

"It was that, I think, that had my predecessor select me to rule after him, as opposed to Atropa. She was reckless, passionate...violent. She didn't care what the humans witnessed; to her eye we would always be above them."

"She put the folk at risk."

"She did."

Adair sat down on a rock, rubbing his face with his hands. “Carry on,” he said, voice muffled. He peeked out between his fingers and saw his mother looking weary and fearful. Again, he found his sympathy to be limited.

“After I was raised to the Aster Crown, she begged me to take her on as consort—in truth it was what we had always planned. But,” she sighed again. “Things that seemed bold and exciting when I was girl suddenly seemed like the makings of war, disaster.”

When she didn’t speak again, Adair looked up to see her staring sadly at him.

“You’ll understand, Little One, when you take the crown.”

“Understand *what?*”

“There are responsibilities that come with ruling,” she said gently. “When I spurned her, all those years ago, her fury—” Gliona’s voice shook. “She scared me. I told her—I told her if she ever returned to this forest I’d have her head. I should have taken it then.”

“You certainly should have,” Adair snapped.

The queen smiled at her son. “Love can make fools of all of us.”

Adair did not have time for her veiled lessons. None of this was bringing him any closer to understanding his foe, or finding Nathaniel.

His mother opened her mouth to speak again, but Adair didn’t hear her. All at once, his hand seared like he clutched burning coals. Adair yelped in pain, in surprise, looking down at his palm, the one he’d sliced open with Nathaniel’s hunting knife. He shook his hand, trying to drop something that wasn’t there. As he stared, the pain grew, whiting out the rest of the world, flowing up his arm like he’d plunged it deep into a forge. Adair fell from his seat, twisting and howling, and the only thing that existed in the world besides this agony was the sound of screams. The screams pulsed through his blood, pounded in his chest, surged in his guts—he could taste the awful sound on his tongue.

The screaming was worse than the pain, far worse, a thousand times worse, because it wasn't his own.

It was Nathaniel screaming.

The burning, searing ache continued to spread from Adair's hand until his entire body throbbed with it, waxing and waning with the screams in his head. Adair had never known such pain—like his skin was being burned away, his bones bursting from his flesh, his skull cracking open. Dimly, in the far distance, he heard his mother's voice but it was meaningless to him, like the buzzing of a fly.

Twitching, with his chest heaving like he a drowning man's, Adair turned his howl of pain into something else. A roar, a battle cry. He felt his throat would tear as he trumpeted his anger and agony to the sky, but it was the only way he could drown out the screaming and clear his head. *I'm coming*, he thought, before his brain hummed high and blank and he couldn't think much of anything any longer.



Nathaniel must have blacked out, because when he came to he was hooked to the ceiling again, hanging limp, blood still coming warm and strong from the wound on his palm, dripping down his arms in sickening rivulets. With his hands above his head he knew he wouldn't bleed out, but that didn't stop the throbbing pain that pulsed through his entire body with each beat of his heart.

Atropa had been right. Now that the wound had reopened Nathaniel could feel Adair moving in the woods, frantic and wild and angry. His faun was feeling quite fierce; he could feel it in every throb of his own pulse. Each heartbeat was a graceful footfall coming closer. Had Adair felt the bite of the knife? Did the ghost of the wound now emptying blood down Nathaniel's arms call out to him? Nathaniel tried with all his might to will Adair to stay away.

When Atropa came for him again, she unhooked Nathaniel's hands and dragged him from the cell. He stumbled meekly behind her as she hauled him back into the adjacent

chamber. “You don’t have to tell me,” she cooed. “I can tell that he’s near.”

Nathaniel could feel it too, but he’d hoped to be mistaken. She stood behind him, filling his lungs with her unnatural scent, holding fast to the bonds on his hands, and waited.

They stood in silence for so long that Nathaniel could no longer tell if he felt Adair’s footsteps or could actually hear them approaching, until Atropa said in a voice soft and reverent, “There you are.”

Adair glowed in the dim light like hot coals, like sun on snow. His eyes were wide and animal, nostrils dilating, every muscle twitching. If Nathaniel hadn’t been intimately familiar with every line and freckle of Adair’s body, he may not have recognized him. His whole body had grown larger, even taller than before, but he hunched forward with the bones of his shoulders looking like they were about to burst free of his skin. His soft golden hair had transformed into a wiry bristling hide that spread down his back and shoulders, across his chest and arms. His horns stood deadly and sharp, bigger than ever.

“Just look at you,” said Atropa. “How beautiful you are.”

Adair growled, literally baring his teeth at her—a rumbling warning as she stepped from Nathaniel’s side and moved forward.

“This is how you were meant to be—I know you can feel it. A *true* heir.”

Adair narrowed his eyes and snarled, looking from her to Nathaniel.

“It’s alright that you’re confused, darling,” she said softly, like someone trying to soothe an unbroken horse. Adair’s eyes rolled madly in his skull and he hovered on the balls of his feet like he was trying to decide between lunging at Atropa and bolting from the cave. She smiled. “It’s a lot to take in, I know.”

The fact that Adair let her step closer and closer caused Nathaniel to break out in fearful sweat.

“Look at this pathetic thing,” she said, indicating Nathaniel with contempt. “You risked yourself to come here, for this?” She reached Adair’s side with her slow, confident steps. She lifted a slim hand to Adair’s throat, grabbing the chain around his neck, the one that held the human coin Adair loved so well. “You let him chain you up,” she hissed. “You forget yourself, Little Prince.”

Atropa yanked on the chain, snapping it, and tossed the necklace into the fire.

After everything she had put him through that simple gesture should not have held such power to hurt him, but Nathaniel saw that Adair had not even reacted—not protested in the slightest to Atropa destroying the pendant—and it utterly broke him. He glanced up and Adair looked into his eyes like he’d forgotten why he’d come. There was hunger there, too, a hunger that scared Nathaniel more than all the rest combined. Adair’s lips parted, and his tongue darted out, tasting the close damp air. She ran her fingers through his hair and under everything Nathaniel felt a lurch of anger in his guts. *How dare she touch him?*

And she was *still* talking. “You could have strode into that village and stolen a dozen humans to give you pleasure, to take your seed, and yet here you are trailing after this wretched thing like a lost dog, wearing its collar.” She was back at Nathaniel’s side, yanking on his hair, exposing his throat. “He fears you now, though. Does his terror arouse you, Little Prince?”

Adair said nothing, the thick veins on his arms and chest twitching in the flickering light of the cavern. Nathaniel wondered if he’d lost capacity for speech entirely, watching as Adair’s white teeth poked out between his lips, pointed canines distended like fangs.

“I never meant you any harm,” said Atropa to Adair. “I just wanted you to be who you were meant to be. We are power,” she said. “And if we want something from these baser animals, we take it.” Atropa shoved Nathaniel, sending him sprawling to the ground.

He tried to brace himself with his bound hands but ended up slamming to the floor on his knees and elbows, biting his tongue.

Atropa crouched by his head, petting it, and whispered, “He likes to see you like this. I can smell it.”

Nathaniel summoned the last of his defiance and spat a mouthful of blood in her face. She laughed, bringing a pale finger to collect a few droplets from her cheek and taste them with a dark, purple tongue. “Oh, I would simply *love* to stay here and watch him fuck you until nothing remained but bloody tatters of skin, but I have urgent matters to which I must attend.”

Nathaniel felt her go, and it was just the two of them. Nathaniel didn’t move, couldn’t move—he was weak and beaten and broken and never more exposed than now. Adair moved closer, the hunger in his eyes more pronounced, evidence of his arousal hanging thick and heavy between his legs. Clearly this version of Adair did not bother to hide himself behind a glamour. Nathaniel said nothing as he moved closer, step by step. He couldn’t make a sound so he stayed on all fours, shivering in fearful silence. Adair’s eyes bored into Nathaniel’s, pupils blown wide as he stared, unblinking.

If Adair took him like this, here in this awful place, bleeding and starved and frozen to the bone, Nathaniel sincerely hoped that coupling with this beastly form would indeed kill him as Atropa implied. He didn’t think he could bear to survive it.

Adair approached him warily, still sniffing the air. When the faun’s hot hands pawed the flesh of Nathaniel’s ass, his courage fled and he squeezed his eyes shut, a burning lump rising in his throat. Nathaniel held his breath as Adair grabbed his hips with hands that had only ever soothed him, held him, brought him pleasure, struck with the fear that his faun, his Adair, had deserted him. The one who had fed his starving family and taught him how to help the ills of the villagers for no other reason than the desire to do good, was lost.

The hands on Nathaniel's waist eased his body back, pulling him to sit on his heels, kneeling with his bound hands resting on his thighs. Then, the hands were gone.

Nathaniel peeked out through his lashes to see Adair crouched before him on the cavern floor, on all fours with his spine arched like a cat's. An icy fist clenched around Nathaniel's heart and he tried to squirm away, but Adair reached for him, jerky and sudden, to grab for his waist again. Nathaniel lifted his bound wrists to brush his trembling fingers through the matted filthy tangle of Adair's beard, then brought them up to touch his cheek. Adair closed his eyes, and released a rumbling, low sort of growl, so different from the noises he'd made upon entering the cave that it gave Nathaniel a tiny spark of hope.

With a snort, Adair pushed his nose to Nathaniel's jaw, like he'd done the first time they'd ever touched, snuffling aggressively at his skin. Adair's hot breath scorched across Nathaniel's skin, and he nipped gently at the space where Nathaniel's neck met his shoulder. Nathaniel wilted, guiding his arms up and over Adair's spectacular horns, and sagging against his chest. His arms looped around Adair's neck, held together by blood soaked ropes. The faun clung to him, and Nathaniel could feel the fever-sick sweat of his body and the trembling of his muscles. He pulled Nathaniel against his chest, lifting him.

His strong, once gentle, loving hands now ended in cruel, sharp claws, digging in where they held Nathaniel tight against himself. Adair wasn't trying to pierce his flesh. Nathaniel *had* to believe that; he was surely trying to be gentle. But he gripped tight, and the points of his claws dug deep into Nathaniel's thigh and back where Adair used his hands to support him.

Despite this, Nathaniel let himself be carried, hiding his face in the crook of Adair's neck, filling his lungs with the familiar scent of him to slow the pounding of his own heart.

"I'm bleeding on you," Nathaniel mumbled stupidly, and he felt Adair's lips ghost over the crown of his head, whether or not it was intentional. Nathaniel chose to believe it was.

XXV

Sick of Fear

Adair's steps were shaky at first, like he needed to regain his sea legs, but with every footfall that put distance between them and Atropa's cavern they grew steadier. Nathaniel must have drifted off, because when he jerked awake, he was flat on his back, covered in so many pelts he was certain Adair must have skinned every creature in the forest.

The hearth was cold, however, and that disturbed him. Adair always lit a fire, always. Nathaniel cast around the room, searching for him, but he was alone. Naked, cold, alone. He pulled the furs tighter and curled in on himself. His body ached, each movement agony. He needed to sleep, but he'd never felt more awake. Nathaniel shivered, standing. He stretched his spine, relieved immeasurably that his body seemed to be his own again: no bonds, no chains. He shook his limbs just because he could, even though it hurt.

There was wood piled neatly by the hearth, as always, and Nathaniel had a small pack of odds and ends that he kept here, so he padded across the cavern. He crouched by the bag, digging through for his tinder box. Nathaniel winced as the fabric scraped across the raw, angry flesh of the deep wound on his palm. Squinting at it, Nathaniel tried to make sense of what he was seeing. His captor had given him neither food nor water, but the wound on his hand was *days* old—far too old for him to stitch it closed, as the flesh had already dried and hardened around the edges of the cut. If he were to guess, he would put the wound at a week old.

How had he survived that long without water? Thinking about it had him dizzy. The cave pitched and swooped around him in the dark, the only light coming from the setting sun just beyond the chamber door. Nathaniel staggered to his knees, dropping the bag and the tinder box. He shook his head to clear it, and groped in the dark for the things he dropped. He fished around in the bag for some fresh bandages. Clutching the items tight in shaking hands, he tried and failed several times to regain his feet. With no other choice, he crawled on his hands and knees back to the hearth, and by the time he reached it, he felt weak as a baby.

Nathaniel collapsed on his back, breathing hard, waiting for the room to stop spinning. Finally his heart slowed, and his head cleared enough for him to sit up and work the tinderbox. Soon enough, he had a fire going. By its high, warm light he examined the wound on his hand, sniffing it, testing for signs of infection and thankfully finding none. He barely had the wherewithal to wrap the wound in bandages before he keeled over and gave in to his body's pleas for rest.

After what felt like mere seconds, his eyes flew open, and he sat up, heart pounding, to hear shuffling movements in the darkness. Nathaniel turned toward the sound, regretting it immediately as his stiff and battered body made its displeasure known.

“Adair?”

No answer came, but the hulking shadow moving toward the rear of the cavern could be cast by no other. As he stepped into the light, Nathaniel flinched to see his form unchanged.

He couldn't recognize anything of the Adair he loved in those green eyes anymore.

Adair approached Nathaniel where he sat by the fire, his movements slow and his gaze predatory. Nathaniel remembered that he was naked and grabbed for the blanket, covering himself as best he could and hating himself for it. If Nathaniel were being honest, he was afraid of Adair's eyes on his body now, afraid of the desire written plain on his face. Afraid of *him*.

It all came crashing back to him then, as Adair prowled in tight circles around him. Everything Nathaniel had thought when they met, but had tucked away in the back of his mind as he'd gotten to know the man beneath the fierce exterior, came screaming back. Adair was *wild*. He was wild, and frightening, and dangerous.

Adair, put simply, was not human.

Nathaniel clutched the blanket tight against his lap, fingers twitching as Adair circled him. Always, Adair had promised him. Always, Nathaniel had agreed. *Whatever always means*. But where did this fit in?

Adair passed behind him one last time, and Nathaniel felt hot breath on the nape of his neck, his only warning before Adair's newly sharpened teeth pressed against his skin, the points unforgiving as his mouth closed again over the juncture of Nathaniel's neck and shoulder. Nathaniel closed his eyes, sitting as still as he could though his body throbbed with the desire to flee.

It was a soft bite—and how many times had Adair bitten him in his passion? How many hundreds of times? Yet somehow, this was entirely foreign, these teeth cruel and sharp, so unlike the ones that belonged in Adair's shy smile. The pressure was slight, but plenty enough to pierce the skin. Adair's tongue rasped over the spot as he drew away, tasting the tiny pinpricks of Nathaniel's blood. Then, he left and Nathaniel was alone again.

He curled up and watched the fire flicker, trying in vain not to lose himself to panic.

When Adair returned, he had something slung over his shoulder. He approached the fire and as he stepped into the circle of its glow Nathaniel recoiled. Over Adair's shoulder was a dead thing, matted with blood. Adair's hands were red to the wrist, and when he opened his mouth Nathaniel saw blood and feathers in his teeth. He dropped the dead animal in front of Nathaniel with an expectant sort of stare. Nathaniel couldn't tell what it had been—some sort of fowl, plainly, but it had been mutilated beyond further identification.

It wasn't the dead bird that frightened Nathaniel. He ate as much meat as the next man. It was that Adair had killed.

Nathaniel had never known him to harm a living thing. He'd helped Nathaniel catch fish, but never partaken of the flesh himself. He had the pelts, but he'd once admitted to Nathaniel that he'd taken them from things others had killed. The thought of Adair hunting, killing—it was like something shattered deep in Nathaniel's chest.

Adair blinked at him, cocking his head to the side, and the gesture was like a cruel laugh, so achingly familiar, a mockery of the man Adair had been. Despite his revulsion, Nathaniel's stomach gurgled hopefully at the promise of food. So, he plucked and cleaned the bird, cooking it over the fire. Adair watched him eat, growling if Nathaniel made any signs of slowing down, until the bones were picked clean.

Nathaniel's throat was dry as sand. He still hadn't had anything to drink since he'd been taken. He stood, swaying a bit on weak legs, clutching the fur blanket around his waist. Before he could take one shaky step into the adjacent chamber, Adair flew to his side, so sudden Nathaniel jerked away and stumbled. Adair seized him by the arms to steady him, and Nathaniel couldn't help but try to twist from Adair's grasp.

As he struggled, his movements pathetic and feeble, Adair lifted him and carried him into the adjacent chamber, with the pools and the twinkling lights.

They'd always seemed so romantic, before. Now the lights cast eerie shadows, long and grotesque and cold. When they approached the water, Adair set Nathaniel on his feet and before he could summon any sort of protest, he shoved his fingers into the knotted pelt at Nathaniel's waist and yanked it away. Nathaniel gasped and made to cover himself, but Adair simply picked him up and lowered him into the water instead.

The water soothed, but Nathaniel could not relax. Adair crouched by the edge of the pool, watching him—stock still, unblinking. Doing his best to ignore him, despite the prickle on his skin, Nathaniel sank deeper into the water. He opened his mouth as he swam to gulp it down. It was hot as ever, but

sweeter than anything he'd ever tasted. He drank until his stomach was full and tight, finally feeling his thirst quenched. Then, he soaked for a while, careful to keep his bandaged hand dry. As he floated, Nathaniel pondered his time with Atropa, wondering how he could possibly have survived without water for so long.

So lost in his thoughts, Nathaniel startled when Adair splashed ungracefully into the pool beside him, scooping him up and carrying him back to the front chamber. He deposited Nathaniel once more on the pelts by the fire, and they scratched against his damp skin. Full, his thirst sated, Nathaniel thought he might possibly be able to sleep, until Adair sat beside him on the furs.

A sickly wave of fear passed over him as Adair shuffled around and settled on his side behind Nathaniel, close. Too close. The thought broke Nathaniel's heart, because even a day ago he would never have thought there was such a thing as too close.

Adair's body was bigger now, ungainly, and as he moved about, snorting into Nathaniel's hair, Nathaniel wanted to scream. They'd fit together so effortlessly before, and now their limbs bumped together, awkward and forced as Adair tried to press against his back. Nathaniel flinched, the wounds and bruises still fresh upon his skin, and when Adair laid a palm on Nathaniel's hip, his claws scraped harsh little lines where they connected with his flesh.

Nathaniel did not sleep, at least, he didn't sleep much. He would doze, but Adair would shift beside him and he'd jerk awake, cold sweat breaking on his chest as he wondered what had Adair stirring in the night.

This was how they passed the next two days, and by the time the sun set on the second day Nathaniel was crawling out of his skin. He hadn't slept, he was terrified, and nothing seemed to bring his Adair back to him. Sometimes, the faun looked at him with hunger, and that scared him. Others, he had a look in his eyes like he'd forgotten entirely who Nathaniel was, and that was worse.

There was something of his faun in there, Nathaniel told himself constantly, with increasing desperation, believing it a little less each time. Adair still plainly desired him, in his limited way; Nathaniel felt the evidence of that pressed against his ass each morning when they woke, tiny movements of Adair's hips, a low whine in Nathaniel's ear, more bites on the spot on his neck that had become Adair's favorite.

He was terrified, of that—Atropa's words that Nathaniel would not survive loving his faun this way still ringing in his head as he rolled away, squirming to escape Adair's embrace before he tried to escalate things.

On top of all of this, Nathaniel knew their time was limited. He had to get back to the village, to talk to his family—who knew what kind of havoc Atropa was wreaking?

Nathaniel tried to talk to him.

“Adair?” It was the first word he'd spoken aloud in days.

Adair ignored him, or perhaps he no longer recalled his name.

He tried again. “Adair?”

Still nothing.

This was the first time Nathaniel had attempted an approach on his own, but he felt like he was going mad. He had to find out if anyone knew how to fix this problem, and they had to make sure everyone was safe. They had to leave the cave and rejoin the others. He walked up to where Adair crouched at the mouth of the cave, looking out. Adair spent a great deal of his waking time there, presumably guarding the cavern.

“Adair.” Nathaniel placed the flat of his palm against the faun's shoulder.

Adair jumped to his feet with a snarl, turning and lunging. Nathaniel tripped over his feet as he tried to dodge away, falling flat on his ass as Adair loomed over him. Realizing who it was, he grunted, turning back to once more watch the entrance to the cave.

It tore his heart, but Nathaniel realized he needed to leave. He hated the thought of abandoning Adair in this state, but staying here wasn't going to help either of them. Nathaniel also did not love the idea of walking stark naked through the forest while Atropa and the Heart-eater were still at large, but he was at his wit's end: out of options, out of ideas, out of time.

Nathaniel waited for morning and walked to the mouth of the cave, clutching the fur blanket around his hips. However, he had barely taken one step into the sunny grass beyond the cave when a pair of thick, muscular arms wrapped around his middle and hauled him into the air.

Nathaniel yelped, struggling, but of course he was no match for Adair's strength. Growling and snapping, Adair dragged him back inside, tossing him roughly on the furs beside the fire. Nathaniel tried to sneak off six more times, and each time he was dragged back, seething.

Adair didn't seem all too happy about it either.

After Nathaniel's sixth attempt at escape, as Adair pulled him back inside, Nathaniel lost it—howling and flailing as he tried to wriggle free. His hands curled into fists and he pummeled every inch of Adair he could reach.

“Why—won't—you—answer—me?” Nathaniel's voice grew shrill as he punctuated each word with a strike of his fist.

Adair seemed barely to feel the blows, so Nathaniel tried begging, calling his name, screaming, anything to penetrate the feral fog clouding Adair's mind.

“Let me go,” Nathaniel said, chest heaving, struggling against the crushing force of Adair's arms.

When Adair still didn't—or couldn't—answer him, Nathaniel fought against him with wild, hysterical strength, trying to yank his arms free, but the faun still made no response except to tighten his grip.

“Please,” Nathaniel said, chanting it like a mantra as he fought, “*Please*, please just let me go—just let me—“

The breath choked from Nathaniel's lungs, his words ending in a cry of pain as Adair slammed his body to the floor of the cave with a roar, seeming to reach the end of his limited patience at last. There was no semblance of tenderness as Adair pinned him on his back. Nathaniel coughed and gasped, trying to crawl free of the overwhelming weight of Adair braced above him, the hands on his wrists squeezing tight.

Nathaniel turned his face to the side as Adair snarled. No trace of sweet, fresh mint remained on the scorching hot breath blowing across Nathaniel's cheek.

Adair's grip on his wrists relaxed when Nathaniel stopped struggling, so Nathaniel yanked his arm free and grabbed hold of Adair's beard. He pulled on the bristly hair, hard. Adair howled, his head twisting from the pain and Nathaniel wriggled free.

He sprung to his feet, a burst of frustrated energy propelling him through the cavern. Adair was up again already, moving faster than Nathaniel could ever hope to move. The faun planted himself between Nathaniel and the mouth of the cave.

Nathaniel had no idea what he was going to do, but he had to do *something*. He cast wildly around for something, anything to grab and his eyes fell upon the tree stump where Adair kept his personal library of one book. Nathaniel lunged for it, grabbing *A Builder's Treasury of Staircases*.

Adair was fast, but he hadn't expected Nathaniel to go for the book.

Nathaniel stood by the fire, holding the book open.

Adair frowned, and a warning growl filled the air between them. Nathaniel placed a shaking palm on the page in front of him. Nathaniel frowned at the ridiculous, dull book, and something took hold of him. He closed his fist, dragging the page with his fingertips, clawing it from the binding with a loud *rip* echoing in the moist air.

He tossed the page in the fire, watching the vellum smoke and curl as it burned. The shining glow of orange spreading over the words was sickly satisfying. Nathaniel looked up, and

saw that Adair had taken a few steps toward him, a pained look on his face, lips twisted into a threatening snarl.

“Just tell me to stop,” Nathaniel said, ripping another page from the book, “And I will.”

He tossed the second page into the fire, watching it burn.

Adair moved closer, staring at the book in Nathaniel’s hands. He whined like a kicked cur.

“Just tell me,” Nathaniel said, his voice breaking as he tore page after page from *A Builder’s Treasury of Staircases*. Diagrams and instructions and essays on the construction of staircases flew around the cavern like snow. Some landed in the fire but more fell to the floor around Nathaniel’s feet. “*Tell me to stop!*”

Nathaniel’s throat burned, his eyes blurred, and he blinked, furious, taking his anger out on the stupid book.

Still, though, Adair said nothing. He’d moved closer, only a few feet away, and the look on his face was one of hurt, but it was an animal sort of hurt, not the sort a man would feel.

“Just say something,” Nathaniel begged him, holding the book by the leather cover, dangling the entire thing over the flames. “*Anything*, just so I know you’re still in there, please —“

Before Nathaniel could drop the book Adair dove for him, tearing the thing from his grasp and tossing it far from the fireside. Adair slammed Nathaniel against the wall of the cavern, and he cried out as the raw flesh of his back scraped against the stone. The wounds opened again, blood slick between his back and the wall as Adair pushed against him.

Adair was close enough for Nathaniel to count his eyelashes, to feel his hot breath coming in ragged gasps against Nathaniel’s neck. Nathaniel struggled, but he may as well have been begging a boulder to release him for all the good it did. Adair pulled back his lips, showing his teeth, and the heat from his skin burned into Nathaniel’s own flesh.

They were pressed close, both naked, and as Nathaniel struggled he felt Adair growing hard against him—the

movement, the heat, the friction, perhaps even the way Adair had Nathaniel entirely surrounded. Adair's heart pounded against Nathaniel's chest, and he lowered his teeth to Nathaniel's neck with a growl, pressing a fierce bite to Nathaniel's throat. Utterly helpless, Nathaniel wrapped his legs around Adair's waist, grinding against him. He tilted his chin up, exposing as much of his vulnerable throat as he could and said, "Do it."

Adair's tongue rasped over Nathaniel's Adam's apple, and Nathaniel felt, rather than heard, another growl against his skin. The teeth against his throat, the stone scraping the flesh of his back—this was it, he thought. Atropa would get what she had wanted.

"Do it," he said again, and Nathaniel wasn't certain if he was telling Adair to fuck him, rip out his throat, or both. Nathaniel honestly didn't even know if Adair could understand his words. All he knew was that he couldn't exist like this any longer. "*Do it.*"

In the span of a breath Nathaniel crumpled to the floor, coughing, shivering with the draft closing in around his feverish skin. Nathaniel looked up to see Adair retreating alone to the other side of the cavern, breathing hard, tossing his head. With a snort, Adair curled around himself, staring out the mouth of the cavern.

Nathaniel's burst of energy deserted him, and it was all he could do to crawl back to the side of the hearth, collapse on his belly and watch the fire flicker. His heart slowed, and with his limbs like water, Nathaniel struggled to cover himself with a few pelts.

One moment he was staring at the burnt pages of *A Builder's Treasury of Staircases* in the embers of the fire, and the next, the inside of his own eyelids. Adair was gone again. Nathaniel sat up and pulled the blanket around his shoulders, staring into the hearth again as he drew his knees up to his chest to rest his chin upon them.

The few hours rest had done him some good, he thought—his brain felt clearer than before, like he was shaking cobwebs

free that had collected inside his skull.

Nathaniel knew he couldn't bear much more of this. The question chasing itself around his head like a rat chasing its tail was going to kill him if he didn't answer it. He had to know for sure if Adair was lost to him, or if his gentle faun was still buried under the teeth and claws and bristling hair, the filth and blood and anger. Instead of shying way, Nathaniel opened the question up. He dissected it, examined it as he would an injury.

There was as simple truth, a truth that Nathaniel clung to: Adair had come for him.

When Atropa had reopened the long-healed wound on Nathaniel's palm, he'd sensed Adair in the trees. Nathaniel extricated his hand from the blankets and unwrapped it, looking directly into the marred flesh. Aside from the pain, what had he felt? Anger, ferocity, frantic desperation. That hadn't come from him, plainly; he'd known that straight away. He was feeling what Adair had been feeling.

For the first time, Adair wondered what Adair may have felt of Nathaniel in return, the instant when Atropa's blade sawed against his flesh. Plainly reopening the wound had exposed their connection, like destroying a dam in a river to turn a trickle into a torrent. If Adair were to get a gushing sense of what Nathaniel had been feeling—pain, and hunger surely, and grief. And—

Fear. Above all else, Nathaniel had been afraid, sick with terror that he'd never see anyone he loved again, that the last face he would see in this life would be Atropa's. Afraid she would do real harm to the man he loved. Afraid he'd die alone in the dark, beaten and starved and humiliated.

He was afraid now, too—was Adair feeling it, as he had then?

When the Heart-eater had first made its presence known, the first time Nathaniel sensed the change in Adair, it was when he'd come through his window driven mad by his desire to shield Nathaniel from this unfamiliar danger. Adair had

sought to fight it, to drive it from the forest, perhaps even to kill it if he could.

Adair would be out hunting now, killing. Nathaniel couldn't let him keep doing that; when he came back to himself he would be wretched with guilt. That thought startled him—the first time since he'd been brought here that he'd considered Adair's return to be a foregone conclusion. It hardened Nathaniel's resolve. Of course Adair would come back to him. He had to.

Ragged breathing and lumbering footfalls told him Adair had come back. He had indeed been hunting. Adair plopped his bloody offering on the floor in front of Nathaniel with a disgusting *splat*. Nathaniel watched him amble away to sit in his corner, hunched ungracefully, staring out the mouth of the cave.

Nathaniel sighed, ignoring the carcass on the ground, forcing himself to take deep, slow breaths. He had tried hiding, he had tried running. He'd tried fighting. None of that had worked.

He was sick unto death of fear.

Nathaniel dropped the blanket from his shoulders, letting it fall to the floor with a soft *swish*. When it hit the ground, Adair turned glowing eyes on Nathaniel's body. Nathaniel swallowed, nervous, and fought the impulse to cover himself. Using every ounce of control he possessed, Nathaniel took slow, careful steps across the cold stone floor. He kept his eyes on Adair's face, watching as his lips parted and his pupils blew wide at the sight of Nathaniel moving toward him. The chill air outside the halo from the hearth raised gooseflesh on Nathaniel's arms, his chest, and with an enormous effort he did not shiver. He did not flinch.

Adair hadn't moved yet, but Nathaniel could see his throat bob as he swallowed, raking his eyes over Nathaniel's body. As he drew closer, Nathaniel thought how silly it seemed to be so afraid, after how many countless times they had been naked together. There wasn't an inch of Nathaniel Adair had not explored with greedy eyes, gentle fingers, hungry lips.

When he reached Adair after what seemed like a mile of timid steps, he held out his hand, palm up. Nathaniel waited, and for the first time in a very long time, he prayed.

Nathaniel waited so long for a reaction that he teetered on the edge of thinking this was some horrible mistake, like Adair would devour the flesh from his body and pick his teeth with Nathaniel's bones. Blinking rapidly, Adair shifted his weight, drawing himself to his full height to tower over Nathaniel. The tight muscles in Nathaniel's legs begged him to run, but he chewed his tongue and held firm. A twitchy flurry of movement, and a massive clawed hand came to rest against Nathaniel's palm.

He smiled, closing his fingers around Adair's and giving them a small squeeze. "Come," he said, tugging gently on Adair's hand, and it did not matter that he couldn't answer.

Nathaniel led Adair into the adjacent chamber, stepping down into one of the pools, guiding him to follow. Adair sank into the warm water, eyes wary, and Nathaniel had to admit he wasn't even certain himself what he was planning. In fact, a lot of his energy was going into *not* planning, not thinking. So, he sat beside Adair in the water for a time, just looking. He hadn't yet looked at him without balking, with turning away, without hiding.

He looked now, searching for the beauty he'd seen so easily before. Nathaniel found it in a few places, a blend of the familiar and the strange. He started with Adair's horns, admiring them as he had done so many times. Nathaniel stood so he could reach the points, ignoring Adair's eyes staring at him so intently it was like he could feel them pushing against his skin. Stroking down the side of Adair's horns, he saw that they were coated in the grime of travel through the forest, with blood and dirt, so he wet his hands and washed them slow and careful till they shone. He shielded Adair's eyes with his hand, cupping the other to scoop water over his hair, scratching lightly at his scalp to clean the bristling golden tangle as best he could.

Nathaniel brushed his knuckles over Adair's cheek, and it seemed that his eyes had softened, though perhaps that was the

light. His freckles were still there, the pattern the same as it had always been. Nathaniel took comfort in that, smiling faintly as he combed his fingers through Adair's beard.

When Adair's hands came to rest on Nathaniel's hips, he did his best to ignore them. The tips of Adair's claws whispered against his skin and he shivered, but otherwise allowed them to remain there.

They stayed in the water for a long time, movements slow and careful like both of them were trying not to startle the other. Finally, Nathaniel's shoulders came down from around his ears. Eventually, Adair was scrubbed clean, reclining against the edge of the pool. Nathaniel sat between his thighs, lying back against Adair's chest. He winced as the cuts on his back connected with Adair's wet skin, but he did his best to remain still—both man and beast rigid with tension. Neither moved, nor made a sound, and even their breaths felt deliberate. Nathaniel decided that perhaps it was time to make a leap, albeit a small one. In a gesture of trust, he tilted his head to the side, up and back against Adair's shoulder, exposing the long lines of his neck.

Adair met him there immediately, rewarding Nathaniel's faith with happy noises, mouthing over Nathaniel's skin. The movements weren't quite kisses, but they were close enough, for now. Nathaniel felt a rumbling against his back, low growls like purrs vibrating between his shoulders. A long sigh fell from Nathaniel's lips, and he allowed some of the worry to melt away from his shoulders as he settled closer to Adair's chest. The sharp, rough edges of the last few days smoothed and blurred, letting them fit together almost like they once did.

After a good long while, Adair nudged Nathaniel forward, and when he turned to face him in the water his heart broke all over again. Adair remained wild and unchanged, the point of one sharp white tooth poking out over his bottom lip like a reminder that Nathaniel was still failing him.

He touched Adair's freckled cheeks again. "Tell me what to do," he whispered. "*Please.*"

Adair merely blinked, his eyes full of unknowable things.

After a moment he stood, scooping Nathaniel with him in one fluid motion, carrying him back to the fire. They curled together on the blankets, pressed close. The feel of the faun's body was so different, but he was still big and he was still warm. He was still Adair, or so Nathaniel hoped.

One thing remained unchanged: Adair was asleep in an instant, snores echoing round the cave, a strange discordant music that left Nathaniel aching—unable, again, to sleep. He slithered from Adair's arms to pace around the cave. He tossed a log on the fire, and glanced around like he'd find something writ on the walls to help him. His eyes fell to the torn pages and the rumpled cover of *A Builder's Treasury of Staircases*.

Seething with guilt, Nathaniel picked up the pages littering the floor and carried them with the book back to the pile of furs. He recalled the day Adair had picked it out.

"I like this one. It's human."

Nathaniel smiled as he flipped through the pages, tucking the torn ones back in where they belonged. He'd never actually read the book—it was perhaps one of the few on the shelves at Iron Gall that hadn't called to him, even at his most bored. Adair had loved it though, the first gift he'd ever been given.

Nathaniel sat cross-legged on the pelts, just nudging his lower back to Adair's ribs. Unsure of what possessed him to do so, Nathaniel let the book fall open in his lap, cleared his throat, and began to read. He paused to examine the etchings, and for some reason he described them aloud, reading the labels and the descriptions. The words were brittle and bland, but there was a rigid sort of poetry to them, he supposed. He was a quarter through the volume when he felt the faun stirring behind him, curling against his back and resting his chin on Nathaniel's shoulder.

Nathaniel wondered if the words sounded familiar at all to his wild ears. He wondered how many times Adair had read the book. He'd never asked.

He read on, and after a few more segments Adair snaked an arm around Nathaniel's waist and pressed his lips to the thin

slope of Nathaniel's shoulder, another series of clumsy, wet half-kisses.

Continuing to read, pointing out things in the diagrams, Nathaniel felt foolish. Adair hadn't understood Nathaniel's pleading, how on earth could he understand trusses and tools and measurements and whatever else this book was explaining? They neared the end, and despite all of that Nathaniel found he didn't want to stop reading from the outrageously dull book. However, as he moved further along through the text he found his eyelids drooping. His throat was dry, and the words swam on the page in front of him. He found himself stumbling over the words, reading the same line over and over. Nathaniel paused, trying to clear his throat.

"Don't stop," said a weak, tiny voice. "This is a good part."

Delirious with exhaustion as he was, it took Nathaniel's mind several seconds to understand why his heart had stopped. He twisted wildly in his seat, flinging the book to the side with the yelp. He turned to the faun behind him, a cry of confusion and disbelief forming on his lips, but before it could escape, a hot forehead pushed against his own.

"Hi, Minnow."

Nathaniel flung his arms around Adair's neck, feeling his palms slide across warm flesh instead of bristling hide. He shifted to kneel, cradling Adair's face in hands that shook so badly he nearly poked the faun's eye out. Adair blinked, dazed, unable to speak. Nathaniel couldn't speak either; he just touched Adair's face like he was trying to be sure he was real. His face was pale and pinched, drawn tight below his beard and freckles, and he looked thin and peaked, sick, but he looked like Adair. Nathaniel's eyes raked over his face again and again and again, from the warm green eyes to the apples of his cheeks to the tips of the horns that had shrunk down into Adair's skull, becoming again the sweet little things Nathaniel had loved.

Adair gathered Nathaniel's shaking hands in his own, and when Nathaniel saw that his fingers no longer ended in dark claws, he breathed, and in breathing felt it was the first true

breath he'd had in days. Adair kissed each of Nathaniel's knuckles, and they were real kisses, true kisses—soft, reverent, familiar, *right*.

Neither spoke, moving as one to lay side by side on the pile of furs, their hands still clasped together, fitful, tight and desperate. Nathaniel thought he could stare and stare and never tire, but tire he did; the days without sleep, without peace, came crashing down on him sudden as summer thunder, and he struggled to keep his eyes open.

“Sleep, Minnow.”

“S'okay,” Nathaniel lied. His eyes were already closed. “Not tired.”

A tiny press of a kiss to the tip of Nathaniel's nose was the last thing he recalled before he was sucked down into sleep.

XXVI

Beautiful and Strange

Every bone, every muscle, every joint in Adair's body ached. He supposed it came from the changes he'd undergone, and returned from. Like growing pains, but worse, so much worse because it came with a sickly rotten feeling nestled deep in his gut. It was a struggle to reconcile his memories of the last several days.

Adair had them—memories, that is—or so he thought, but it was difficult to call them up. They were more like flashes, flashes of how he'd felt, rather than actual recollections. Getting Nathaniel out of that wretched place had occupied the entirety of Adair's mind—then caring for him, protecting him, on some base sort of level.

Now though, in the relative calm, coming back to himself, Adair found he could look, really look, at Nathaniel's body and what Atropa had done to him.

The wound on his hand stood out, deep and angry, far deeper than the original cut Adair had placed there. His eyes traveled reluctantly up Nathaniel's wrist, forcing himself to take it all in, to memorize every injury inflicted on the sweet young man lying beside him. Each mark on his Minnow's body was a promise, a promise Adair made in his heart to pay Atropa back in kind. The papery skin on Nathaniel's wrist was chafed raw, red, hot to touch where his hands had been bound. His arms were thin, painfully so. Nathaniel had never been a big man, didn't have much bulk he could stand to lose. Being kept so long absent food had him seem fragile, his bones moving fitfully beneath flesh so thin that Adair was afraid of it tearing, of Nathaniel falling to shreds before his eyes.

Moving carefully so as not to wake him, as Adair thought rest might be the best thing for him, he shifted around to get a look at Nathaniel's back.

Adair's own skin burned hot as he looked, still thrumming raw with whatever had changed him, and it was only his hand on Nathaniel's shoulder that kept him grounded. Nathaniel's back was a deep, mottled mess of bruising, the soft pale skin Adair loved completely concealed with black and blue marks. Crossed over the bruises, shallow but vicious open stripes of flesh made a cruel erratic pattern, the unmistakable evidence of a whipping. Several whippings. With shaking fingers, Adair touched the places beside the sliced up ruin of his Minnow's skin, kissing beside the marks that he was certain would remain forever.

As Adair looked, he saw a series of small, shallow cuts down by Nathaniel's hip, and little bruises. Hating himself, Adair laid his hand there, knowing as he did so that the bruises would line up perfectly with his own fingertips.

Adair turned his head away, muffling a broken sort of sob against his own shoulder. He saw too the bite marks he'd left on Nathaniel's neck, and recoiled, feeling sick. Adair rolled away from Nathaniel, being close enough to touch too much for him to bear, like Adair shouldn't be allowed to touch him.

Unfortunately, as soon as he moved away, Nathaniel began to shiver in his sleep. Adair's instinct, so strong it was like an ache in his gut, was to gather his Minnow in his arms and hold him tight and keep him warm and safe. In fact, Adair had almost moved back to wrap his body around Nathaniel's before something stopped him—guilt, pain, fear.

Now that he'd examined Nathaniel's wounds, traced the flesh memories of what Atropa had done to him, seen the hurts Adair himself had caused, he wasn't certain Nathaniel would want to be touched at all, just now. In truth, Adair was afraid to touch him, afraid of the knife thrust to his heart if Nathaniel woke still afraid of him.

So, instead, he piled Nathaniel with every fur he possessed, save for one, which he laid on the other side of the hearth for

himself to curl up on.

Adair was exhausted. His eyes itched and burned, and his limbs were trembling and weak. Lying on the pelt, Adair fixed his drooping eyes on the top of Nathaniel's head, the only bit of him still exposed. Each blink came a bit slower and soon enough Adair was dozing.

Jolting awake, covered in icy sweat, Adair sat up and cast his eyes wildly around the cave. In his dream, filthy grasping hands had dragged Nathaniel screaming from the cavern as Adair fought to get to him, struggling fruitlessly against a choking blue smoke that gripped him and suffocated him.

Adair tried to slow his heart, eyes lighting on the top of Nathaniel's head, just where he'd left him. He let out a sigh and tried to relax back to sleep. After waking similarly three more times, Adair gave up with a soft groan. He couldn't sleep without being sure Nathaniel was safe. So, he crept around the fire on silent feet and curled up like a dog on a hearth rug on the edge of the pile of blankets covering Nathaniel's slumbering body. Finally, close enough to hear the steady huff of Nathaniel's breathing, close enough to fill his lungs with the comfort of his scent, Adair could rest.



Nathaniel must have drifted off. When he woke, he was bundled under a veritable mountain of pelts. He wriggled a bit beneath the weight of the furs, feeling warm and safe for the first time since he'd been brought to Atropa's lair. His back stung and his muscles ached, but it was alright. There came with the weight of the blankets a strange sensation like he and the bedding were belted down, strapped to the floor. He twisted his head, confused, peeking out from the furs to see the top of Adair's head. Seeing the horns poking out of his hair was such a reassuring sight that Nathaniel smiled. He felt around inside the blankets for Adair's body and felt nothing. Bewildered, he realized the faun was lying on top of the nest of pelts. The things Nathaniel had taken to be straps were in fact Adair's heavy arm and leg draped over Nathaniel's body. Adair felt him squirming and woke, turning his face to look at him. "What are you doing?"

“What are *you* doing?”

“I was sleeping,” Adair said, blinking owlshly in the light of the fire. “It’s the dead of night.”

“Why are you outside the blankets?”

Adair looked away, silent, like he wasn’t sure how to answer. “You were so afraid,” he said finally.

“Back with ...?”

He nodded. “But again, before. Of me. I thought perhaps you wouldn’t want to be touched, so I was sleeping over there.” He pointed to the other side of the fire, where a solitary pelt remained.

Nathaniel frowned. “But, you’re just about on top of me.”

Adair’s eyes were round, vulnerable. “I missed you.”

A happy little glow came to life in Nathaniel’s chest. “Just c’mere,” he said,

Adair immediately wormed his way into the pile of pelts, reclining on his back. Nathaniel pressed his chest to Adair’s side, and the faun kissed his forehead, draping his arm around Nathaniel’s shoulders, carefully to avoid his wounds. Nathaniel relaxed against Adair’s warm body, breathing slow and deep as the faun’s soft snores tickled the top of his head.

Nathaniel slept like the dead. When he finally came to, it was with his body plastered against Adair’s, thinking he’d be content to stay here with his nose buried in the patch of coppery fluff on Adair’s chest forever.

Adair’s hands moved, knuckles brushing up and down Nathaniel’s side, dragging his fingers over the bones of his ribs. “You’re awake.”

“Somewhat,” said Nathaniel, voice muffled against Adair’s skin.

“The sun’s been up for hours.”

“Why didn’t you wake me?”

Adair moved his fingers to Nathaniel's hair. "You look very sweet when you're sleeping." He tilted Nathaniel's head up to peer into his face. "Besides, you need rest. How are you feeling?"

"Better."

Adair touched Nathaniel's cheek, tracing the line of his jaw with hesitant fingers. "I'd really like to kiss you," he said.

Nathaniel blinked. "You don't have to ask to kiss me."

Adair's face creased with worry. "I feel like I do."

Nathaniel kissed his frown, in hopes of melting it away. "There," he said.

"I've missed you so much."

Nathaniel kissed him again. "Hush," he said. "And show me."

Adair's face only grew more troubled, eyes clouded over. He didn't move. Nathaniel nudged him gently to lay on his back and leaned on top of his chest, hands clasped over Adair's heart. "What is it?"

The faun was silent for some time, moving his fingers through Nathaniel's hair in a distracted sort of way. "I can't shake the look on your face," he said eventually.

"What look?"

Adair blinked, lashes fluttering over moist eyes, and he gazed up to the ceiling. "When you looked at me like—like I was some kind of monster. Like you didn't know who I was anymore."

Nathaniel rested his chin on his interlocked fingers. "I know who you are."

Adair pressed his lips together and shook his head. "I just hate the thought that you were so afraid of me."

"Hey," said Nathaniel. He sat up, pulling Adair's hands into his own. "I was afraid I'd lost you. I was afraid she'd taken you from me—twisted you into someone you're not." He kissed the tip of each of Adair's fingers, his knuckles, his

palms. “And,” he hesitated, unsure if he should go on. “She kept saying I was nothing, a vermin, a thing. When I saw the way you looked at me I was afraid she was right.”

Adair yanked his hands away. “How could you think that?” He sat up, clasping his hands in his lap, anguished. “How can you not understand why I’m afraid to touch you now? I can’t bear it if I make you feel that way.”

“What of you, then?” Nathaniel asked. He cradled Adair’s face and pulled him in for a deep kiss. It was breathy, full of desperate want. “Are you afraid to *be* touched?”

Adair’s brow furrowed, like perhaps he was.

Nathaniel’s knees nudged against Adair’s as he leaned in to brush another kiss to his lips. “Because I need you,” he whispered. “I need to touch you and hold you and fuck you until I’ve erased the memories of that disgusting toxic witch on my skin.”

The words came tumbling, reckless, from somewhere deep and dark, and came with a burning at the corners of Nathaniel’s eyes.

“Please,” he breathed. “I need to make sure you’re ... you again. Mine, again.”

Adair rested his palms upturned on his knees. “Of course I’m yours, Minnow,” he said in a voice weak with need. “I’ve been aching for you to touch me.”

Nathaniel put the palms of his hands on the sides of Adair’s face again. “How could anyone think you were a monster? You’re the most gorgeous, gentle person I’ve ever known.”

Adair’s eyes went wide and bashful before Nathaniel leaned in to kiss him, soft and sweet, little movements of his lips like they had all the time in the world to explore each other’s mouths. Adair didn’t move his hands; he merely responded to Nathaniel’s lips and tongue with his own, keeping his body still and quiet.

“These sweet eyes,” Nathaniel said when he paused for breath, brushing his thumbs over Adair’s cheeks. “How could I ever have doubted them?”

Their lips met again, and this time Adair moved his hands up Nathaniel's arms, clutching at his shoulders, desperate. Breathing hard, he nudged his forehead against Nathaniel's. "How could I get so lost as to forget you? How could I think I had to take what you always give with all your heart?"

Nathaniel smiled, heat rising to his cheeks as he said, "I love you."

"I love you too, Minnow."

With one hand cradling the back of Adair's head, Nathaniel guided him to lay back down. He pressed his body down on top of Adair's, feeling his dick twitch between them as he peppered his jaw with light kisses. Like it had its own desires, Nathaniel's tongue led him down Adair's neck, across his collarbones, steering his mouth down Adair's chest. He tasted Adair's nipples, sucked each one into his mouth, tonguing and teasing until they were hard and shiny and wet. Lingered there, Nathaniel alternated between flicking the point of his tongue over the pebbled flesh, lapping over each one, and suckling them between his lips. Adair's voice keened around him in the cave, and he arched his back into Nathaniel's touch. Nathaniel brought his thumbs to press over both of the faun's nipples, rolling them between his fingers, pinching lightly as he kissed down Adair's chest. He made a path of feather-light kisses down to Adair's navel and through the flaxen hair below, inhaling the woody, earthen scent of Adair's body—like peat and pine trees and sweat and leather. Good things, real things.

Adair's fingers were in Nathaniel's hair, his palms barely skimming his scalp, still anxious. Nathaniel paid the hands no mind, knowing the faun would find his heat soon enough, and lapped his tongue along the deep crease of Adair's hip, pointing like a guiding arrow that Nathaniel ignored in favor of veering off toward the soft skin inside his thigh. When Adair realized Nathaniel had utterly bypassed his dick, he released a sad little squawk and his fingers tightened ever so slightly in Nathaniel's hair. Nathaniel let Adair feel his grin, scraping his teeth on the flesh of his upper thigh as Adair's

hips bucked, like he was trying to remind Nathaniel his cock was right there, just in case Nathaniel wanted it for anything.

Nathaniel shamelessly stuffed his nose into the wiry hair at the base of Adair's dick, wanting to permanently fill his lungs with the faun's musk, to burn away the stench of Atropa who had smelled so unnatural. Adair's cock dripped slick, and Nathaniel pumped it a few times with his hand so he could admire it. Truly, it was a pretty thing, thick and warm with a rosy golden blush at the head. Nathaniel hadn't realized before how much he adored it.

"What?" Adair asked, and Nathaniel was pleased to hear the high, breathy quality of his voice

"What, what?" Said Nathaniel, though he knew perfectly well.

"You're staring."

Nathaniel stilled his fist, running the pad of his thumb over the head of Adair's cock, slipping over the sticky moisture beading there. "Just admiring," he said innocently. Adair groaned, lifting his hips, trying to fuck into Nathaniel's fist.

Nathaniel did enjoy teasing, but right now more than anything he wanted to give. He wanted to give pleasure to this man he adored, give to him so that he knew in his bones that Nathaniel did not fear loving him, or being loved by him. So, he bent his neck and took Adair into his mouth, eager and hungry.

Adair's fingers relaxed in Nathaniel's hair, like he didn't want to push—didn't want to take, so Nathaniel made up for it by moving his lips faster, sucking hard and using the tip of his tongue to trace every ridge and vein, moaning around Adair's meat so the faun would know how much he wanted it, loved it, needed it. He lapped up Adair's sweat and honey taste, thinking in that moment there was nothing finer, his own dick aching hard between his legs.

Nathaniel worked his fingers around Adair's shaft, pumping him in tandem with the motion of his mouth, and when he'd sufficiently drenched his hand with the sloppy mess

he'd made on Adair's cock, Nathaniel pushed two fingers inside him.

Adair dissolved under the combined sensation of Nathaniel's mouth and the fingers working his channel, and with a few more strokes, he gripped the back of Nathaniel's head and came with a grateful yell, pulsing between Nathaniel's lips as he swallowed every drop of Adair's pleasure.

With continued mewling, Adair seized Nathaniel's upper arms and hauled him up for a weak and desperate kiss before pulling back to whisper, "Take me."

"What?"

"Please," Adair said, "take me now, fuck me so I know I'm still yours."

Nathaniel certainly did not need to be asked twice, especially since Adair was already moving, encouraging Nathaniel to kneel so Adair could straddle his lap. Adair braced one hand on Nathaniel's shoulder, and spat in his other palm. He wrapped his hand around Nathaniel's cock, slicking it up before positioning the head against his eagerly twitching hole.

Adair seated himself with a soft sigh and a beautiful blush, gasping as Nathaniel filled him. Holding tight to Adair's waist, Nathaniel laid down, wincing as the raw flesh of his back scraped against the floor. Adair stilled. "You're still hurt, Minnow."

Nathaniel shook his head, savoring the sting. He was here, here where he belonged and the hurt was part of that. Adair stroked his cheek. "Your bruises, your cuts," he said, pleading. "I'll make them worse."

Nathaniel dug his fingers into Adair's hips. "No," he said, gritting his teeth, determined. "You'll make them *yours*."

Nathaniel moved, thrusting careful and slow, wanting to take his time, to watch, to memorize the look on Adair's perfect face as he took Nathaniel's dick. He wanted them both

to forget, forget everything that had happened before this moment, to feel only each other.

The languid pace didn't last long, however, and Nathaniel found himself drilling upward. Though reluctant at first, Adair soon found himself giving in, as Nathaniel had known he would—the faun posted up and down rhythmically, angling his body to get Nathaniel's cock just where he wanted it. Adair put on a show for him, head falling back, elegant long fingers splayed across his chest, stroking up and down his own skin, teasing Nathaniel as he teased himself with his fingers. With a wicked grin and a strong determination to shake the composed, horny grace of Adair's performance, Nathaniel tightened his grip on Adair's waist and snapped his hips up with all his strength.

Adair yelped, falling forward, bracing his hands on Nathaniel's sweat soaked chest, and Nathaniel laughed to see Adair's dick half hard again, bouncing obscenely between them. Adair joined him in his mirth, his laughter a sweet music as they kissed through their giggles.

Soon, Adair regained his upright posture, riding Nathaniel hard, and he found himself completely arrested by the sight. "I could look up at you forever," Nathaniel said, the praise falling from his lips easy as autumn leaves. "You're perfect. My sweet golden angel."

"Then come for me," Adair shot back, panting. "Show me. Make me yours."

Nathaniel was seconds from obeying, his balls tightening, ready to burst, but he didn't want this to be over yet so he slowed the pace of his hips instead, soft rolls of his spine letting him return from the brink. He dropped his head back on the blankets with a groan, hearing his own blissful torment echoed in an answering moan from Adair above him, feeling himself pulled away from his climax like a wave returning to the sea. Together, they found a slower, gentler rhythm.

Adair leaned down, kissing Nathaniel's forehead, the tip of his nose, and Nathaniel trailed his fingers up Adair's spine to grip his shoulders. Nathaniel closed his eyes, hands moving

almost unconsciously to grab for Adair's horns. He pressed their smooth, warm heft with his palms, sliding his thumbs up to the points—remembering the first time he'd ever touched them.

It took Nathaniel a second to realize that Adair had stilled, his entire body vibrating with tension. Nathaniel opened his eyes. "What's wrong?"

Adair shied away from his hands, looking anywhere but at Nathaniel's face. "Just thinking."

"Thinking what?" Nathaniel summoned some self-restraint and stilled his bucking hips. He brushed his knuckles over Adair's flushed cheek.

"Just ... why do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Touch them."

Nathaniel sat up, immediately dropping his hands to the floor. "Does it hurt you?" He asked in alarm, his dick slipping out of Adair's body, forgotten. "Why didn't you—"

"No, it doesn't. It feels lovely," said Adair with a tiny smile. "In my experience, humans would like to forget they're there. Forget that I'm not like they are. After everything that's happened, everything I've done ... how could you want ..." he trailed away. Adair touched the little bites on Nathaniel's throat.

Nathaniel cradled Adair's face, staring deep into his sparkling green eyes and said, "Why would I ever want to forget them?" He pulled Adair's face close and placed soft kisses at the base of each horn.

"The first time you saw them, you were so afraid," Adair said. "You ran from me."

With a sigh, Nathaniel drew himself to sit more comfortably. The greedy part of his mind wished he'd let himself come when Adair had commanded him to, because it now seemed as though they weren't going to get back to it until the air was cleared between them. He took Adair's hand.

“Only because I didn’t know you yet. I’d never met anyone like you.”

Adair still wouldn’t meet his eyes, so Nathaniel put two fingers under his chin and pushed until they were staring each other in the face.

“Do you remember the first time I kissed you?”

The ghost of a smile flickered across Adair’s face. “How could I forget?”

“We were in the pools,” Nathaniel said. “You stood there, and your hair was so wet it was stuck to your skull.” He sent his hands to stroke Adair’s horns, pushing his curls out of the way. “These were all I could see. These, and your eyes. They looked like they were full of stars.”

Adair held his breath as he listened, sucking his lower lip between his teeth.

“I think that was the first time I truly *saw* you.” Nathaniel cupped Adair’s face and leaned in to kiss each horn again, feeling their warmth under his lips. “They’re so beautiful. Beautiful and strange—and you.”

“Truly?”

“Truly.” Nathaniel said. He kissed down Adair’s brow, the tip of his nose, and finally his mouth. “I love them,” he said between kisses. “I love you.”

Adair’s face blushed full scarlet at the praise; he looked more bashful than Nathaniel had ever seen him.

“Now,” Nathaniel said with a small scoff. “I’d really like to get back to fucking you senseless, if that’s alright.”

Adair blinked, chewing again on his bottom lip. “Would you ... could you keep your hands on them while we ...” his voice trailed away and his flush deepened, filling Nathaniel’s chest with heat.

“Yeah?”

“I like it,” Adair whispered in a rush.

Nathaniel took a second, trying to recall if Adair had ever once asked for anything in bed. He hadn't, Nathaniel was certain—at least not in so many words. Nathaniel frowned slightly, wondering if none of Adair's past lovers had cared for his pleasure, which is why he didn't bother asking.

In that moment, Nathaniel was glad Adair hadn't asked him to pull down the moon while they were fucking, because there's no way he could have refused. Nathaniel pulled him in for a wild, desperate kiss, before backing off to kneel. With his cock now only half hard after all that talking, Nathaniel stood, padding over to retrieve some of the olive oil he'd stashed with the scant belongings he'd left here in Adair's cavern.

When he returned, Adair had positioned himself on his hands and knees. Nathaniel knelt behind him, bracing one hand on the small of his back, using the other to fist his cock, slicking it up with oil. He groaned as it returned to full attention. He massaged Adair's rim with his oily thumb, little teasing circles and finally breaching inside, and Adair gave a small, needy whimper.

Nathaniel slid the head of his dick past the tight pucker of Adair's entrance, trailing soft hands up his sides, admiring the spread of Adair's shoulders, his freckles, the delicate curve of his spine. Adair watched him over his shoulder with hungry eyes as Nathaniel thrust quick and shallow, barely dipping inside. He kept that up until he could tell neither of them could take it much longer and sank into the root, hips perfectly flush against Adair's body. Adair arched his back like a cat, moaning low and urgent, and Nathaniel slid his hands up Adair's side, up into his hair until he gripped his horns, squeezing them tight.

"Like this?" He asked, feeling something dominant and forceful stir inside him. Adair had lost capacity for speech but nodded, and Nathaniel delighted to watch the faun's torso expand before him with each heaving breath. Nathaniel began slow, merely holding onto Adair's horns as he rocked back and forth with his hips, savoring the feeling of being completely joined. He gave an experimental tug, pulling Adair's head back just a bit, to see how it felt. Adair moaned, clenching

tight around Nathaniel's meat. He bucked back eagerly against Nathaniel's thighs, nearly knocking him over. To compensate, Nathaniel tightened his grip on Adair's horns, pulling back like he was reining in a horse. When Adair cried out, Nathaniel surrendered immediately to a swoop of hot, dark desire.

He thrust harder, accenting each movement with a pull back on Adair's horns, and Adair was clearly losing his wits with pleasure, ramming his hips back to fuck himself on Nathaniel's dick, meeting him thrust for thrust. Nathaniel smiled, wicked, thinking if he could hold off his own rapidly building climax he could get Adair to spend a second time. He grit his teeth, adopting a bruising pace, fucking Adair so hard he could feel his balls slapping against Adair's ass.

He released one horn in favor of sliding a possessive hand to Adair's hip, squeezing tight as he pulled Adair up against his chest, and Adair's head fell back to Nathaniel's shoulder with a guttural yell. Nathaniel lowered his lips to suck hot, red marks into the back of Adair's neck, sliding his free hand down to stroke up and down the front of Adair's body, from his throat to his nipples to his hips to his cock. His other hand remained anchored to Adair's right horn, pulling his head back so he could whisper in his ear, "Wish I had a dozen more hands to get on you."

Adair shook in his arms, filling the echoing air with unintelligible noises, gasps and shrill cries and Nathaniel could tell that he was close. He curved his spine, changing the angle of his thrusts just so until Adair was coming again, his hot channel fluttering with his release, enough to have Nathaniel spilling deep inside him as well, roaring as he fucked Adair through the pulsing fit of his climax. Spasms wracked Adair's body, milking everything Nathaniel's cock had to give until he was quivering and empty, his grip on Adair's body tight and frantic.

They clung together on their knees, back to front, Nathaniel pushing his forehead to the nape of Adair's neck. He felt dizzy and boneless, like if he let go of Adair's body he would dissolve into a puddle on the ground.

Somehow, though, they slid together to the pile of pelts, ungainly limbs tangled up together, and whose were whose hardly seemed to matter. Adair lay on his back with Nathaniel draped over him, heaving chest to heaving chest, hearts pounding together. Adair tangled his fingers in Nathaniel's hair so he could steal a kiss. "I'm never letting you out of my sight again," he said.

On his belly, rising and falling with each of Adair's breaths, Nathaniel thought that sounded alright by him. The rest of the day passed with more fucking, napping, soft touches, kisses, and humping lazily until one or both of them had recovered enough to fuck again.

There was a guilty sensation of knowing that they had larger concerns, but somehow each time the idea threatened to invade their sanctum it was eroded by the taste of each other's lips or the press of flesh together.

"Oh for fuck's sake!"

Adair and Nathaniel broke apart, flushed cheeks and kiss plumped lips, startled eyes.

Beith and Síol appeared at the entrance of the cave, looking relieved and exasperated. "So," Beith said, crossing his arms over his chest. "Found him, did you?"

Adair looked back baldly, unconcerned to be caught naked, dick in hand, by his friends. Nathaniel however, scrambled to pull one of the fur blankets tight around himself. It was then that he recalled he had not one single stitch of clothing to put on his body—Atropa had stripped him down to his skin and Adair, justifiably, hadn't been bothered nosing around for Nathaniel's lost things when he'd come to rescue him.

"So were you planning on coming back to help us, or just hide in here buggering each other sideways until the Beast kills us all?"

"Erm," said Nathaniel. "The ... the first one?" He glanced at Adair, who seemed to have reached the opposite conclusion, judging by the look on his face.

Soon enough, and wearing one of Adair's sleeping furs as a kilt, Nathaniel followed the others back to the village. He noticed Adair staring at him. "What?"

"Nothing."

Nathaniel nudged his elbow into Adair's side. "Seriously, what?"

"I think you should dress like this more often," Adair said.

Nathaniel raised his brows in disbelief. "Oh?"

Adair brushed his fingers over Nathaniel's hip, jutting up from the blanket around his waist. "It suits you."

"Good grief," said Nathaniel, hitching the pelt a little higher, and Adair laughed—sounding so much like his old self that Nathaniel could not help but grin.

XXVII

A Dryad's Prayer

They reached the village by dark, convening at the table in the Stone family's kitchen. Nathaniel had finally escaped the near strangling embrace of his mother to slip away and toss on some actual clothing, and shrugged off Adair's hands, plucking forlornly at the collar of his shirt.

Adair suggested that Atropa may have kept Nathaniel from dying of thirst with some sort of spell. As he came back to himself, Nathaniel's hunger and thirst doubled down, whatever enchantment kept him from death wearing off as he ate everything in sight and gulped water directly from the jug. He felt almost himself again, sitting at the table and surrounded by the oddest collection of folk he could imagine.

Clutching a steaming mug in shaking hands, Nathaniel recounted what had happened in Atropa's cavern. When he reached the part about the Beast, or rather the Heart-eater, and its origin, he had eyes only for his mother's face. The color in his cheeks drained away and her eyes shone over-bright. Moira's lips pressed into a hard line, and Nathaniel knew she would be strong until she could seek a private moment to later to feel her grief. To spare her feelings, he omitted a few of the choice things Atropa had said about his father, but he knew she got the gist. When he reached the end of the telling, the room was quiet.

Mutely, Nathaniel's mother turned on her heel and left the kitchen. No one spoke. She returned shortly, carrying a thick leather book, holding it tight to her chest. She laid it down reverently in front of Nathaniel, before gripping his shoulder with frantic fingers. "Your father's journal," she said. "It had everything he learned about the nature of his people," she glanced at the assorted fae standing around her kitchen. "Your

people. While he was trying to—“ she took a steadying breath. “While he was trying to end his immortal years. Perhaps there is something in here that you can use.”

Nathaniel flipped open the journal, his finger brushing over the careful lettering made in his father’s hand. He looked up. Everyone stared at him. “I think I’ll ... take a look at this in private,” he said.

Retreating to his bedroom, Nathaniel didn’t have to look over his shoulder to know that Adair would follow—couldn’t help but follow. Adair knew that “in private” included him and always would. The faun slipped in behind him as he closed the door. Adair said nothing, merely moving to sit behind Nathaniel on the mattress, slipping his arms around Nathaniel’s middle—warm, quiet, comforting. Solid. Nathaniel slouched back into his arms, reading to himself, taking the time to feast his eyes on every page—neat letters, intricate drawings, all written to find a way to preserve the human life his father had shaped here, in this house.

He read long into the night, long after Adair had sprawled on the mattress behind him to sleep. He read until his eyes burned and his dry throat itched, read every page again and again. Finally, he tucked the book carefully under his pillow and laid back to rest. It didn’t take long for Adair’s limbs to encircle him, drawn to him even as he slept—his leg flung across Nathaniel’s thighs, his beard tickling Nathaniel’s cheek. His breathy snores soon had Nathaniel’s eyelids growing heavy. He’d just take a little cat nap is all, a few hours’ rest for his subconscious brain to work the problem for him while he recuperated a bit of his strength.

Nathaniel woke with the dawn. He allowed himself a few moments of peace, resting in his own bed, tangled up with the man he loved, safe and warm, if only for a little while. He watched Adair’s face for a bit before slipping out of his embrace to return to the kitchen, his father’s journal snug under his arm. Peering into the sitting room, he saw Beith curled up asleep on the hearth rug, meaning Síol must be standing watch.

Nathaniel propped the journal open against a water jug, flipping to a page he'd scrutinized the night before. An intricate drawing of an arch splashed across the page. At the top, the words "*A Dryad's Prayer*," labeled the picture. The arch in the drawing was decorated with tiny leaves rendered in solid black ink. Glancing up at the doorframe at the rear of the kitchen, Nathaniel smiled.

He had only to close his eyes to remember his father, crouched on the floor, a tiny delicate knife in hand. Nathaniel himself would sit cross-legged at his side, watching as his father carved the designs into the wood. He'd always thought them merely decorative. According to the journal, however, the house was now warded by the careful artistry of his father's hand. None could pass the threshold unless invited in by someone sharing his father's blood, and then only if their hearts bore no desire to do harm. Nathaniel wandered to the door, touching the leaves and vines fondly and saying silent thanks for his father's foresight.

Nathaniel pulled out a sheaf of parchment, the biggest he could find in the house. He uncurled it, weighing down the edges with mugs and bowls on the kitchen table, and began scratching away at it—pausing to consult his father's journal. By the time the rest of the house stirred, Nathaniel had covered his parchment with notes, his fingers stained with ink.

Nathaniel felt soft fingers at the nape of his neck, brushing his hair aside to make way for kisses. "If I wake again to find you not at my side, I will haul you back to the bed and chain you to it," Adair said.

Nathaniel turned, kissing the tip of his nose. "An intriguing thought," he said, but saw that Adair's eyes were troubled. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to worry you."

Adair pulled him close. "No matter. You're here."

They stood together for a time, before Nathaniel wriggled from Adair's embrace to turn back toward his notes. Adair slipped his hands to grasp Nathaniel's waist, peeking over his shoulder at the parchment spread across the table.

"That is a lot of information, Minnow."

Nathaniel nodded. “I’m still missing a lot of key pieces, however.”

Adair frowned down at the paper, where Nathaniel had written the faun’s name, and circled it. “Why am I on here?”

Nathaniel’s shoulders tensed. “She was very interested in you.”

Adair did not ask who “she” was. Instead he said, “You as well, Minnow.”

He shook his head. “No. Her only use for me was to get to you.”

“She tried to have you killed,” Adair said, tightening his grip on Nathaniel’s waist. “She wanted *me* to kill you.”

Nathaniel shook his hands off and stepped away. He met Adair’s eye and said, “No. She merely didn’t care if I died—a vast difference there.”

Adair didn’t seem to think so. “My mother told me she has great contempt for humans,” he offered.

“I had figured that out on my own, actually,” Nathaniel snapped. Then he sighed. “Sorry,” he said. He rubbed his face in his hands. “I’m still exhausted.”

“Then return to bed, Minnow,” Adair urged. “There is no call for you to be up before the sun.”

Nathaniel shook his head, rumpling his hair and turning back to the map and his notes. Nathaniel flipped through the journal. Was there anything sadder, he wondered, than the number pages ending abruptly and the blank ones that followed?

Nathaniel shut the book. “Tell me about Gael.”

“Gael?” Beith had woken, joining Adair and Nathaniel in the kitchen. “I’d thought the leech was dead.”

“Afraid not,” said Nathaniel. “He’s working with Atropa.”

“He’s *what*?”

“That bloody—“ Beith released a string of curses loud enough to wake the dead.

Nathaniel ignored him, focused on Adair. “Well?”

“Gael is of the *dearg-due*,” Adair told him. “There aren’t many of them left.”

“*Dearg-due*,” Nathaniel repeated. He was certain he’d read that somewhere. “Blood drinkers?”

“Yes.”

“Fools,” said Beith, sitting in a chair and putting his feet up on the table. “Gael is one of the only ones left. Let themselves get hunted almost to extinction by humans because they couldn’t keep it in their trousers.”

Nathaniel cracked a smile in spite of himself. “Oh?”

Adair rolled his eyes. “They can live on animal blood well enough,” he said, “but human blood makes them stronger, and it has a...unique effect on the males.”

“Which is?”

“It makes them mad to fuck,” said Beith bluntly. “Too much blood in their cocks and none in their brains.”

Adair continued. “Every so often Gael would come to court and beg my mother to allow him to hunt in Myrna.”

Nathaniel’s smile soured. “And?”

“She wouldn’t allow it, of course,” Adair said. He hesitated. “Then, he killed someone.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know his name, but he was traveling on the road beside the forest.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“He was banished straight away,” Adair said, “I didn’t see the point in scaring you.”

Nathaniel scoffed.

“I should have told you,” Adair said quietly.

“Yes.”

“I thought the Beast had killed him,” Beith said with a frown.

“Apparently not,” said Nathaniel. “Do you know how he can be killed? Is he vulnerable to iron, like most of the fae folk?”

“The *Dearg-due* are only vulnerable to yew,” said Beith. “I thought everyone knew that.”

Nathaniel ignored the last bit, but jotted down the part about the yew.

“I can see why working with Atropa would appeal to him,” Adair said, giving Nathaniel’s shoulder a squeeze.

“I’m certain it fits right into his bloody agenda,” Nathaniel agreed, putting a few more notes under Gael’s name on his parchment. He returned his attentions to his father’s journal.

As his mother had said, it appeared that Ezra Stone had indeed found some sort of lead, and made note of it in the final pages. Nathaniel worried his lip between his teeth. Adair sat quietly by his side, but Beith soon lost interest in the quiet, thoughtful atmosphere and went to assist Síol patrolling the tree line.

Tucked between the pages, secured with a tiny bead of glue was the bloom of a single flower. It was dried, pressed flat, and Nathaniel hadn’t recognized it the night before—the color having faded almost to nonexistence from age. In the light of day however, there was no mistaking it.

“Is this one of the Nightshade flowers?” Nathaniel asked, turning the book around to show Adair.

“It looks to be, doesn’t it?”

“This says that my father learned of the ancient mistress of these plants, and thought she might have knowledge of a ritual that would help him in his search.” Nathaniel looked up. “Would that be your friend Clíodhna?”

Adair stood, turning away. “Clíodhna is dead.”

Nathaniel startled. “You didn’t say.”

Adair twitched a shoulder. “I found her dead when I was hunting for the Beast. She was torn to shreds.”

By my father, Nathaniel thought. He went to Adair, pressing his face to the valley between Adair’s shoulders. “I’m so sorry,” he said, wrapping his arms around Adair’s waist to squeeze him tight. “She was so kind.”

“Yes.”

Nathaniel kissed Adair’s skin, hesitating, deep in thought. He did not want to seem heartless in the face of his faun’s grief. However, Adair spoke before Nathaniel could break the silence.

“I don’t think that Clíodhna is the one of whom your father writes,” he said.

“No?”

“She is—was—younger than even I,” Adair said. “She merely had a deft hand with tending the plants, and a keen instinct for brewing.”

As much as he didn’t want to, Nathaniel thought back to his time in Atropa’s lair. It was full of the Nightshade flowers. They grew out of the cracks in the stone, bloomed where Atropa had placed her feet. The flowers had appeared by his family’s back garden when he’d been taken, where before they’d only grown in a very specific part of the forest.

“We thought you began to change because of the Heart-eater,” Nathaniel said.

“Yes.”

“I’m not so certain any longer.” Nathaniel took a vial from the sideboard, full of a fine blue powder. He’d made it from the dried and crushed blooms of the nightshade flowers.

“Clíodhna had mentioned that in recent months her yields had been greater, the compounds more potent.”

“While Atropa was gathering her power,” Nathaniel said, almost to himself. He made another note on his parchment.



The rest of the day passed much the same. Adair didn't have much to contribute besides the occasional comforting touch as Nathaniel read, and re-read his father's journal.

Around midday, Rory arrived from Iron Gall. He pulled Nathaniel into a crushing embrace. "Didn't think I'd be seeing you again, lad," he said, his voice overly gruff. When he pulled away, he held Nathaniel at arms' length for a minute, clapping him on the shoulder.

Despite being happy to see that Nathaniel had returned alive, the man looked quite grim.

"Two more turned up," he told Nathaniel's mother, and Adair watched the color flee from her face.

"Two more what?" Nathaniel asked.

"Bodies," said Rory.

"The Heart-eater?" Nathaniel asked, before adding, "the Beast, I mean?"

"We don't think so," Rory told him. "Not really any wounds to speak of. Nothing like Sean or James at any rate, just a little puncture on the neck and the bodies were—"

"Drained," said Adair. "Drained of blood."

"Yes, exactly," said Rory.

"Gael," Adair said, making the name a curse. "We've got to put a stop to this."

Adair, Nathaniel, and Rory stayed up late into the night, desperate for any sliver of information to help them. The rest of the family had long since gone to bed.

Nathaniel massaged his temple, thin legs flung over the arm of the sofa, a book braced open against his thighs. His head rested in Adair's lap.

Rory paced by the hearth, the light from the fire threw the lines on his face into sharp relief. "She said it was—how did she say it?"

“She said it was a ‘finicky sort of curse,’” Nathaniel said in a tired voice.

Adair did not like to see the red in his eyes or the puffy skin like bruises below them, but he knew any pleas for Nathaniel to rest would fall upon deaf ears. Instead, he slid his fingers through Nathaniel’s hair, scratching lightly against his scalp. For the most part, Adair stayed mute, allowing the other two men to exchange ideas, answering only when asked a direct question. His role at the moment, he knew, was to keep his hands anchored to Nathaniel while they discussed what had happened to him. He knew Nathaniel well enough to know that he was decidedly not alright with this conversation—yet there was nothing for it. If they were to stop Atropa, they had to lay Nathaniel’s pain bare on the table before them and dissect it, painstakingly examining every clue.

So Adair stayed still and silent and sturdy, knowing this was his place. His purpose. He brushed his fingertips over Nathaniel’s brow as if he could smooth out the tension he found there. Nathaniel grabbed for his fingers, clutching them against his own shoulder as he continued to read.

“I have nothing in any of these books about a Heart-eater,” said Rory. The man was weary, the deaths in the town weighing heavily on him. “There must be some sort of alternate name for him.”

There had been a book at Iron Gall called *The Bestiary*, but according to Rory the frightening and grotesque volume barely scratched the surface. It was pulp, Rory explained, meant to entertain rather than inform.

The true volumes of *The Bestiary* from Rory’s private collection were flat out terrifying, and there were just so many. They cross referenced names and descriptions with Nathaniel’s father’s journal and Adair’s knowledge. With a muscle twitching in his jaw, Rory allowed Nathaniel to annotate the margins of the books, crossing out incorrect passages and adding information here and there—but they were still no closer to the true nature of the Heart-eater.

“*Ríascaire*,” Nathaniel said suddenly, almost to himself. His finger had lit on a page in front of him, and Adair looked down, watching his brows knit together. The word itched at Adair’s shoulder blades, like he’d heard it before but his brain shied away from the memory.

Nathaniel sat bolt upright, pulling his legs under himself and staring at the page in front of him with frightening intensity. Adair scooted behind him, wrapping his arms around Nathaniel’s middle. “There’s no picture,” Nathaniel said in frustration. “But the description ...”

Adair read over his shoulder.

The Ríascaire are made, not born. They come from a person of the faire folk who suffers a wound that never heals, and when it kills them, the Ríascaire can be summoned, an undead thrall. A Ríascaire can only rise from the heart of one so in love he is lost utterly to sense.

Nathaniel dragged a finger across the page. “That tracks with what she told me. ‘The one you kill must be stupid with love,’ she said.” He shook out of Adair’s grip, jittery, and ran to the kitchen. Rory hastened to follow him, leaving Adair behind on the sofa. He exhaled. This was not where he thrived—puzzles, mysteries; he had very different talents.

Reluctantly he stood, shaking out his stiff limbs to join the others around the table.

“—this doesn’t make any sense,” Nathaniel snapped, reading further down the page. “It says here the person has to let himself be killed. Why—why would he?”

Rory frowned down at the page, eyes seeming to blur as they flicked over the words. “The killer has to empathize, to feel the same love. It says that in the truth of that kinship the victim places trust in the killer.”

“My mother.”

The other two startled, turning to look at Adair like they’d forgotten he was in the room. “What?”

“She—Atropa—she loved my mother.”

Nathaniel pulled his father's journal, flipping to the last few pages that discussed the final lead he had intended to follow. Adair watched a little muscle go in Nathaniel's jaw. "She tricked him," he said suddenly. "He believed her when she told him she was in love, too—because she was—and he allowed her to do something to him. He trusted her."

"Does it tell us how to stop it?" Rory asked.

Nathaniel glared. "Him."

"Pardon?"

Adair placed a hand on his shoulder, hoping to steady him, but Nathaniel shook him off. "Him," he said, with some more heat behind it. "He was my father, not an 'it.'"

Under Nathaniel's furious blue gaze, Rory dipped his head in apology. "Does it tell us how to stop him?" He said, more gently.

Nathaniel's eyes darted back to the open book on the table. "By selfishness is a Ríascaire raised, only by sacrifice can it be freed."

"Freed," Adair echoed, "Not destroyed?"

"Freed is what it says here."

None of them spoke for a while.

"What sort of sacrifice?" Rory asked.

Nathaniel slammed the book shut. "It doesn't say."

If Adair didn't know better, he'd think his Minnow was lying to him. He made a grab for the book but Nathaniel slid it behind himself.

"Come," Nathaniel said evasively. "It's late. We should get some rest."

Now Adair was certain he was lying—Nathaniel would be the last one to go to bed with a puzzle half solved. He feinted to the left, then dodged around, much too fast for Nathaniel, and snatched the book from behind his back.

Holding it high out of his reach, he flipped back to the section on the Ríascaire, reading as fast as he could, ignoring Nathaniel's protests.

"Freed by ultimate loss of self to protect one so loved," Adair read out loud. He almost dropped the book. "*Minnow*."

"We don't know what that means," Nathaniel said, but instead of sounding decisive the words were like a plea.

"You can't be serious," Adair said, casting the book on the table and stepping forward to seize Nathaniel by the shoulders. "We both know what this means—"

Rory cleared his throat. "Er, perhaps you two wish to discuss this in private?"

Nathaniel chewed the inside of his cheek and shot the bookmonger a look and a curt nod. Rory retreated out the door.

"Minnow—" Adair began.

"Adair," Nathaniel interrupted him, clasping both hands to the side of his face. "You need to calm down. I'm not about to go charging off to my death without having all the facts."

He blinked. "You're not?"

Nathaniel dropped his hands to brace them on his hips. "Of course not. Would I die for you? Without question. Would I die for you based on the vague implications in a book—in which most of the entries are only about half correct to begin with?" He cocked a crooked grin. "Maybe. But not without doing more reading." He stood on tip-toe to kiss Adair's cheek.

"Then why did you hide the book?"

"Because I was hoping to keep *you* from charging off to your death without all the facts." He punctuated his point with a quick jab to Adair's chest.

Adair was not convinced. He eyed his *Minnow* shrewdly, searching his face for signs of a deception. All that he saw were the same earnest, lively blue eyes he loved so well. He sighed. "Alright."

They settled into Nathaniel's bed.

"There's something I don't understand," Adair said suddenly.

"Oh?"

"I've been wondering—Atropa killed your father."

Nathaniel took a shuddering breath. Adair gave his shoulder a squeeze in the dark.

"He's been dead for eight years."

"Yes."

"So ... why now? Why raise the Ríascaire now?"

Nathaniel tensed on the mattress beside him, rolling away to face the wall.

"Minnow?"

"It's me." Nathaniel's voice was muffled into the pillow.

"What?"

"She—she hates that you love me. You're supposed to be a proper prince," Nathaniel said. "I'm an unfit consort. She hated my father, too, for loving a human."

"Minnow—"

"Goodnight."

Nathaniel wouldn't say another word.

Adair curled behind him, holding Nathaniel as tight as he possibly could. Long after the slow, steady breathing of the man beside him indicated that Nathaniel had drifted off, Adair could not sleep. The thought that this foul woman had made Nathaniel think he was unworthy was almost worse to Adair than the injuries she'd caused.

He turned things over in his mind, considering what he'd learned. He considered his long, lonely life, changed so by a chance encounter. He considered the absence of years in the man lying beside him. He considered that while, yes, Adair himself was no scholar, he knew things of the fae folk—things no one had told him, things no one spoke aloud, but things he

felt deep down in his bones like he'd always known them. This wasn't something he could explain, even to himself.

Regardless of what the book said, of what other things they might learn, Adair knew the truth of this Ríascaire. The book may have been penned by human, fallible hands, but when he read the words Adair had *known*. He had known what the book meant when it talked of sacrifice.

For the Ríascaire to be free of Atropa's thrall, someone had to die.

XXVIII

Sacrifice

Adair did not sleep well that night, and eventually rose with the sun to pace the Stone family's land. Something stirred beyond the trees, and Adair lifted his head. Immediately, he recognized the form of Síol moving just beyond the tree line. She burst out of the brush. "Adair," she called. "Come quickly!"

He jogged to the edge of the trees. "What is it?"

"Some of our people have made it to the sea's edge. Your sisters have had contact with the little fish girl."

"Sáile?"

"The very same." She paused. "A lot of them are hurt."

Adair glanced over his shoulder at the house, where he knew Nathaniel was still asleep, safe. If he strayed beyond the walls Atropa could seize him again. If he strayed beyond the boundary line of their land, the Ríascaire could gut him. Inside the house he was protected by his father, whose hand guarded his family even from the grave—all while his shade sought to destroy them. A strange thought.

"He is needed," Síol said gently, taking Adair's hand. She knew him almost as well as Beith did, could read his thoughts in every small gesture, every glance. "You know there is no one else with the skill. No one else we trust."

With a sigh, Adair nodded. He knew she was right. He also knew there was no way in hell that Nathaniel would stay hidden away while others were suffering. With his arm around Síol's shoulders, Adair allowed her to steer him back toward the house.

Every single conversation seemed a battle these days—though for once Adair found himself able to stay out of it entirely. This fight was between Nathaniel, Moira, and Thomas. The three Stones stood by their hearth, all with fists clenched and eyes screwed up in anger. Adair, Beith and Síol sat silent in the kitchen, watching. Adair had dispatched his sisters to scout the river, so only the fauns remained to bear witness to this ugly row.

The three fought out of love, over who should remain safe at the house, and who would attend the wounded fae folk in the forest.

“After I watch my husband disappear from my arms forever into those accursed trees,” Moira was saying now, “you two boys suggest I watch my sons go as well?”

“Nat has only just returned,” Thomas said, determined to be part of this despite his youth. “He’s still hurt. He can’t go. *I’ll go.*”

“You don’t know anything of healing,” Nathaniel said.

“I know what you’ve taught me!”

“It’s not enough to help them.”

“Excuse me,” snapped Moira, interrupting her sons. “I lived with a man of the fae folk for years. I know more of their ways than both of you!”

In the end, the whole family decided to follow the fauns into the forest, and all three were unhappy with that result. Adair was also unhappy with that result. The only thing he dreaded more than Nathaniel coming to harm was one of his loved ones coming to harm under Adair’s watch.

So as they entered the trees, Adair found himself a nervous wreck. To be honest, it was a foreign feeling. He had known fear, surely, but nothing like this—like being pulled in a hundred directions at once. He glanced at Minnow, wondering if this was a glimpse into his ever anxious mind.

Each noise in the trees had Adair feeling like he might vomit up his heart, sure it would be the death of someone he held close. When they finally reached the shore he felt his

pulse slow, just a bit. Nathaniel dropped a hand to the small of his back, giving his hip a squeeze before moving off toward the worst of the wounded.



Nathaniel moved toward the cluster of wounded fae folk on the beach, feeling a surge of guilt. It was his father that had done all of this.

He crouched beside the person nearest him, eyes only for her gaping, vicious wounds. Nathaniel was so focused he didn't realize he was being approached until someone seized him by the collar and hauled him to his feet.

Nathaniel pulled back, but the man who'd grabbed him was far stronger than he was. "Who the *hell* are you?"

Nathaniel recognized the man with the translucent white wings he'd seen across the clearing the day he went to court with Adair. "I'm sorry, I just—"

"Don't *touch* her," the man snarled. His face, which had seemed ethereal and delicate the first time Nathaniel had seen it, was twisted in rage. He flapped his wings like an aggressive bird, tightening his grip on Nathaniel's collar.

"I'm only trying to help," Nathaniel said, trying to squirm out of the man's grasp.

"And why would we need *your* help?" Asked another voice, behind Nathaniel, a shrill female one.

He whirled toward it, only to see that many of the fae folk were crowding around him. Panicked, he searched for Adair, but couldn't get his attention. "I know how to help them," Nathaniel said, frantic. "Please!"

The angry eyes of the group closing in told Nathaniel that the effects of Atropa's growing power were not limited to the fauns. "Things didn't start getting strange until the prince started bringing you around," the man with the wings said.

"A coincidence—"

"We know what you are," someone else spat, voice dripping with venom. "For all we know it's your twisted

mongrel mind that made this beast.”

“That’s *enough*.”

Nathaniel glanced up to see Beith, glowering at those assembled. He rested a meaty hand on Nathaniel’s shoulder.

“You all just sat around letting our people suffer because you know fuck all of healing.”

“We’ve never—“

“Oh, and you think he has?” Beith indicated Nathaniel.

“Well—“

“How old are you?”

The winged man startled at the question. “What does that have to do with—“

“And how old do you think he is?” Then, Beith jerked his thumb toward Thomas, hovering anxiously outside the scrum. “Or that little one, there?”

“How is that—“

“This man here saved my life,” he said, louder now. “And the life of your *prince*. His brother helped, and you would all do well to show them some damn respect. Or, I can escort them home where they’d be safe, and leave you lot to bleed to death.”

Nathaniel opened his mouth, but he found himself rendered speechless by Beith’s defense of him.

“Shut it, Human,” Beith snapped. “And get to work. Anyone else gives you trouble you just send them my way.” He cracked his enormous knuckles to punctuate his point.



Watching Nathaniel, ensconced in the camp, faced with so many wounded to help, Adair wracked his brain, trying to come up with another solution, another way to dispatch the Ríascaire.

Though the last thing he wanted was to see his people suffering, he was relieved that Nathaniel was needed, here

with dozens of watchful eyes so that he couldn't very well go off into the trees with a half-cocked plan in mind. Nathaniel's brother followed him like a shadow, and Adair smiled fondly to see the two working together.

Before they reached the beach, Adair had reasoned that perhaps they had time to come up with an alternate plan. However, now that he was here, seeing the camp looking like the aftermath of some great battle, he realized he didn't have time to waste. People were dying, his people, ancients who had walked among these trees since they were saplings.

When he inquired after those missing from the camp, Adair had learned of more deaths. To his immense dismay, Adair had also learned that Gael was not the only one seduced by Atropa's promise of greater power. She was gathering more allies to her cause, and Adair could not waste any more time debating.

If defeating Atropa hinged on a sacrifice, Adair would be the one to make it. He could not allow anyone else to suffer.

The sun was at its peak. Adair wondered how he would be able to slip away absent his Minnow's notice. He flexed his scarred palm, thinking it would be next to impossible. As Adair watched Nathaniel tipping water and medicine down someone's throat, he began to form a plan.

With Nathaniel so focused on his work, it was an easy thing to slip something into the cup of soup Adair handed him as afternoon faded to evening. He felt badly tricking Nathaniel, but the leaves crushed in his broth wouldn't cause any real harm, and Adair couldn't think of another way to get away from the camp. Nathaniel drained the cup, frowning down at the dregs. Realization crossed his shrewd face before his eyes rolled up in his head and his body swayed dangerously. Adair caught him as he fell, Nathaniel's lips forming a tiny pained, "No."

Adair guided him to where Nathaniel had set up a small tent, tucking him snug beside the fire. He kissed Nathaniel's temple, letting his lips linger, just as Thomas approached behind him.

“What happened?”

“You know him,” Adair lied easily. “He hasn’t taken a real rest in days. Sat down to have lunch and dozed off against my shoulder.”

Thomas nodded absently, knuckling his own dry eyes. “Everything seems quiet for now, anyway,” the boy said. “He should rest.”

Adair watched as he wandered off, presumably to search out something eat himself, or to find his mother. When he was certain no eyes were upon him, Adair crouched behind a rock and made his way from the water’s edge back into the trees. Adair paused, watching the bustle of the encampment to make sure no one had noticed his exit before turning his back on them and taking the lonely path that would lead him to Abhain’s grave.

He walked for a while, feeling the setting sun hot on his shoulders. Adair tried to enjoy the solitude, but leaving Nathaniel without a proper goodbye made him feel cowardly. His stomach twisted in knots as he walked, and to steady himself he decided to think instead of Nathaniel’s smile, his eyes, the tender touch of his fingers. He’d had love enough for ten lifetimes.

As he made his way further into the trees, Adair found himself thinking of Nathaniel’s father, and how he’d so desperately feared outliving his wife that he’d gotten himself killed. Moira still had long years ahead of herself, alone. Adair frowned, wondering if he were condemning his Minnow to a similar lonely existence. The more he thought about it, the more he tried to convince himself that Nathaniel would find someone else, in time, that he wouldn’t be lonely. The thought gave him comfort but also made him ache with longing so acute that it took him a moment to register that he was hearing delicate footfalls ahead of him, coupled with sighs and a soft voice cursing. Adair stopped dead, squinting into the trees. He saw a petite form stopped several yards ahead. He approached on quiet feet.

A snapping twig, another curse—louder this time.

“Moira?”

She turned, and he saw that she was clutching her son’s map of the forest. “Adair,” she said, not seeming surprised to see him.

“What are you doing out here alone? It’s not safe.”

She glanced down at the map in her hands. “I would see my husband’s grave,” she said.

Adair sighed. In some ways, Nathaniel and his mother were just alike: loving and stubborn beyond sense. “Now is really not the time for—“

“I don’t recall asking for your permission.” The obstinate jut of her jaw was identical to her son’s, and Adair found himself powerless to deny her.

Adair weighed her request. The barrow was his own destination, and trying to send her back to the camp would increase the risk of his own plans being discovered. Besides, said a small voice in his head, returning to the camp would also increase the risk of him losing his courage. He could watch over her, and if this all went to plan, the Ríascaire would no longer be under Atropa’s control, and surely Moira would be safer as a result. “I will take you there,” he said.

Her face clouded over. “I would rather go alone.”

That struck him as odd. “It’s far too dangerous,” Adair told her. “I’m sure Nathaniel would skin me alive if he knew I let you go on your own.”

They stared at each other for a while before she finally relented. “Fine.”

The pair walked side by side, glancing at each other from time to time. It seemed as though there was something Moira Stone was not saying quite loudly. Adair opened his mouth several times to ask her, but the hard, determined look on her face stilled his tongue each time.

“I am grateful,” she said suddenly.

Adair startled; by this point he thought they would make the entire journey in silence. “Pardon?”

“You brought my son back to me, alive and whole.” She looked at Adair with a smile and a raised brow. “Though I told you not to risk your life.”

“I couldn’t help it,” Adair said, his voice raw. “I couldn’t stay away knowing he was suffering.”

“As he would have done the same for you,” she said. “Also against my permission.”

Adair grinned. “I’m very fortunate.”

“Yes.”

He met her eyes, seeing something shrewd and calculating there. For the first time, he noticed that her hand was buried deep in a bag at her side, muscles tense in her arm. Adair let it pass without question, and they spent the rest of the journey in quiet.

Adair’s hackles raised as they approached the barrow, and he saw hot tears flowing fast and silent from Moira Stone’s eyes. They descended together to the little tree and the stone marker, and Adair noted the thing was entirely rent in two, black lichen spilling from it, threatening to overtake the entire glade in a sooty explosion of darkness. A tiny sob escaped between Moira’s lips, a sound to break Adair’s heart. He moved to take her hand, thinking to offer comfort, but she jerked away from his touch.

He looked down to see her hand finally removed from the bag at her side, clutching a knife. She stepped away from Adair, toward her husband’s grave. “What—?”

“You’ll take care of my sons,” she said. Her voice shook but it was not a question.

“You cannot do this,” Adair said. He made a grab for the knife, seizing the blade. An immediate, hellish burn flared where his skin touched the metal and he released it on instinct. “Iron?”

Moira smiled ruefully. “Apologies,” she said. She raised her blade high, exposing the pale skin of her opposite wrist.

Clutching his smoking, blistering hand, Adair opened his mouth to protest, stepping toward her again, but before he could make a sound a slim blue hand closed around Moira's arm, and Adair's own mother stepped out from the shadow to join them.

"I don't think we've met," she said, twisting Moira's arm until her fingers twitched open and the knife fell from her grasp. "You are Nathaniel's mother."

Moira twisted from the queen's grasp, stooping to reclaim her blade, but Adair was much too quick for her. He encircled her in his arms, lifting her from the ground. She struggled against his grip. "*Unhand me!*"

The Aster Queen crouched, gingerly lifting the knife—the hilt was wrapped in leather, allowing her to touch it. "Put her down, Little One," she said gently. "We should discuss this."

"Discuss what?" He said, putting Moira back on her feet.

"Not you," the queen told her son. "Moira and I."

"Who are you?" Moira asked aggressively. She braced her hands on her hips.

"My name is Gliona," she said, and Adair startled. His mother never went by her given name. "Adair is my son."

Adair's eyes flicked toward hers, uncertain. She hadn't introduced herself as queen, or offer any sort of title, aside from mother.

"I knew your husband," she told Moira.

"Well?"

"As well as any of our people," Gliona said. "He preferred the company of the trees, and of course, you and your sons were the ones he held closest to his heart. However, I buried him."

Moira closed her eyes, steadying herself. "I'm glad he wasn't alone, at the end."

The two women sized each other up in silence for a while, seeming to speak volumes between them with only their eyes.

Adair had no idea what was happening.

“It seems we came here with the same purpose,” Moira said finally, and Adair whirled to face his mother.

“What?” He said.

“Hush, Little One,” said the queen. “This does not concern you.”

“It most certainly—“

She silenced him with a ferocious look, and he closed his mouth, backing off a step to listen to the mothers talking, and to sulk against a tree.

“My son tells me this beast came from my husband’s bones,” said Moira.

“He is correct in that, I’m afraid.”

“I would see his shade lain to rest.”

“As would I,” Adair’s mother agreed. “Seeing his memory dishonored like this ...”

Moira sighed. From within her bag, she drew out Abhain’s journal, touching the cover with loving fingers. “It seems only a sacrifice can remove him from the thrall of—“

“Atropa,” the queen said softly. “Her name is Atropa.”

Adair’s skin prickled with revulsion.

“Whatever her name,” Moira Stone said, her voice fierce. “She killed my husband. She would have killed my son.”

No, Adair thought, closing his eyes. *She would have had me do it for her*. The thought still raised bile in his throat. He opened his eyes again in time to see his mother gazing at him, grief beyond measure on her face.

“Blame for that lies with me,” Gliona said, taking Moira’s hand in her own. “A shame I carry close to my own heart.”

Nathaniel’s mother frowned. “How do you claim this woman’s misdeeds as your own?”

“All the folk in this forest are under my charge,” she said. “I have had the honor to be named queen here.”

Moira raised her brow in surprise. “I didn’t know the fae folk had a queen.”

Gliona shrugged. “Most days it is merely an empty vanity—yet, the responsibility is there. My lapse in judgement in regards to Atropa is inexcusable.”

Adair’s breath hitched in his throat as he watched his mother toying with the knife.

“My doing this—“

“Mother—“

“Little One, be *silent*.”

Adair crossed his arms over his chest with a snort, feeling in that moment like he was entirely helpless.

“My doing this,” his mother continued, “Won’t destroy the Heart-eater risen from your husband’s bones. Nor will it put a stop to Atropa. It will merely free the Heart-eater to its own passions.”

Adair very much wanted to ask what on earth the point was, then, but he also felt that he’d pressed the limits of his luck.

“All the more reason for me to do it,” Moira countered. “My power is minimal. Yours would help them fight.”

“Are you so eager to leave your sons behind?”

“Are you so eager to leave yours?”

Gliona smiled indulgently. “I have walked this earth for a dozen centuries, you not even a dozen decades. My son has his whole family, all the folk. Your sons have only you.”

Adair was not one bit pleased with the trajectory of this conversation. Either he had to allow Nathaniel’s mother to end her own life, and face Nathaniel when he returned alone to the camp or—Adair felt sick to his stomach. He looked at his mother, uncertain. She was a constant, like a mountain. Like the wind, like the sun—a world without her simply did not make any sense. He felt a tightness growing in his chest, threatening to stop his breath.

“I loved her,” Gliona said, and her voice shook. “I had hoped that when she left the forest that she felt guilt over what she’d done in the past. My ... my feelings for her blinded me.”

Moira frowned at the other woman.

“Your husband paid the price for my mistake,” Gliona continued. “Your son almost followed him to the grave. I must make amends for that.”

Adair watched as Moira looked into Gliona’s eyes before giving her fingers a squeeze. They stood like that for a long moment before Moira gave a near imperceptible nod.

“Wait—“

But Adair’s mother gathered him into a hug, squeezing tight. “It’s alright, Little One,” she said, her voice soft. Adair felt like he’d been transformed into the boy he’d been hundreds of years ago. “I have lived a very long time. I’m ready.”

He found that he couldn’t speak—or breathe, or move.

“I know you’ll do so well, Little One. I know you’ll take care good care of our people.” With a sad smile, Gliona settled herself on the ground beside Abhain’s marker, baring the pale blue flesh of her thigh.

“Come here, Love,” said a voice. Adair felt a pair of hands close around his arm. “Come on, don’t look.”

But he had to—he had to look. He had to hold his smother’s hand. He reached for it but she drew away. “I have to do this,” she said gently. “And I won’t have the courage if you’re here. I’ll want to stay.”

“Then stay,” Adair said.

“No,” she said. “I have to go. And so do you.” She pressed the iron blade to her skin.

Moira pulled Adair down, down against her chest, wrapping him in her arms and he felt small. He felt small, tiny and powerless and foolish, unloading unrestrained sobs onto this little mortal woman he barely knew.

“It’s alright, Love,” Moira Stone said over and over, “I’ve got you.”

He let Nathaniel’s mother stroke his hair and hold him close, tiny steps tugging him clumsily from the clearing. Adair couldn’t help but look over his shoulder, looking for one last glimpse of his mother, but she had concealed the entire glade with a glamour, and all he could see was a silvery shimmering haze, pale as moonlight.

Sniffing, foggy, and lost, Adair didn’t know how he moved from being held to merely being led by the hand but the warm press of Moira’s palm guided him stumbling through the trees. It was odd, he thought numbly; he was older than Moira by almost two centuries, yet she was a mother and to her he was only a son—a lost little boy whose own mother was now gone.

She squeezed his hand and led on as the sky darkened above them.

By the time they reached the place where the trees began to thin, they’d shifted again. Moira’s arm was around Adair’s waist, her head resting against his arm, the highest part of him she could reach. As they neared the edge of the encampment, Moira reached again for Adair’s hand.

“Love, why don’t you go get some rest?” Her eyes searched his face.

Adair spoke for the first time in hours. “I have to—I have to tell them.”

“Not tonight you don’t. It’s alright for you to grieve on your own for a little while.”

He swallowed a lump in his throat and nodded. As they approached the edge of the camp, a ring of torches greeted them, and Beith standing alert by the perimeter.

“Where the hell were you?” He asked, blunt as ever.

Adair opened and closed his mouth like a dying fish.

“I wanted to see my husband’s grave,” Moira said, glancing sidelong at Adair. “I knew Nathaniel would never let me into the trees alone so Adair offered to help me slip away.”

Beith nodded. He turned to Adair. “He woke up, you know. He’s livid.”

Moira gave a final pat to Adair’s arm and turned to Beith, asking where she might find her youngest son. Adair’s watery eyes combed the beach, finally finding a fierce blue gaze staring back at him from beside the small tent Nathaniel had erected at the water’s edge. His breath caught; when he’d left the seaside he had truly thought he’d never lay eyes upon his Minnow again.

Wordlessly, like a sleepwalker, Adair crossed the beach, watching Nathaniel’s angry frown soften as Adair came closer.

“Hey—”

Adair launched himself into Nathaniel’s chest, crushing him close, hard enough to hear his breath hiss out in a startled whoosh. Nathaniel’s hands fell awkwardly to pat Adair’s back, and Adair clung to him like his life depended on it.

“What happened?” Nathaniel asked, plainly terrified. “What did you do?”

Adair found that words had failed him; he merely fisted his hands in the front of Nathaniel’s shirt, shaking his head frantically.

“Alright,” Nathaniel said, his voice going soft. “Alright.”

With soft kisses to tear strained cheeks, Nathaniel coaxed Adair into the tent. Adair curled in on himself, as small as he could be, and let Nathaniel wrap Adair’s body in his own.

“What happened?” Nathaniel asked again. “You’re scaring me.”

Adair pulled Nathaniel’s hand to his lips, kissing his knuckles. “The book was right,” he said, his voice a hoarse croak.

Nathaniel sat bolt upright, “*What?*”

Adair only pulled himself into a tighter circle of limbs.

“What do you mean?”

“I went looking for your father’s grave,” Adair said in a tiny voice. “Because I knew the book had been right. But I met your mother on the way and she—she had the same idea I did.”

“*What?*”

Adair rolled over to face him, watching Nathaniel’s eyes like he could see the cogs turning in his mind.

“But—she came back with you. I saw her!”

“We weren’t the only ones with the same thought.”

The frown on Nathaniel’s anxious face deepened, the cogs grinding harder against each other. “Your mother,” he said softly. “The queen?”

Adair nodded. He turned away again, pulling his knees up to his chest. Nathaniel settled back around him immediately, kissing his hair and murmuring wordless comfort into the back of Adair’s neck. He scrabbled frantically for Nathaniel’s hands, pulling them close to press against his heart.

XXIX

What She Wants

M*innow.* Adair's voice was far away. Sad, afraid. Nathaniel squirmed. *Minnow.* He groaned. He'd been dreaming, a nice dream. His family was whole and he was introducing Adair to his father.

Minnow.

In the dream, Adair turned and looked at him. His voice was urgent, though the evening was alight with the soft glow of summer dusk, and all seemed pleasant.

Minnow. A sharp jab at his forehead.

Nathaniel sat up, the happy fog of dream receding as he took in Adair's worried face. "Huh?"

By the bruised black stain of the sky through the thin fabric of their tent, Nathaniel knew it to be before dawn. Nathaniel saw Adair's eyes were wide and afraid.

"What is it?"

"He's here."

Nathaniel's belly twisted with an unknowable combination of dread and hope and he scrambled to grab for his clothing, his boots. As he followed Adair out of the tent, Nathaniel saw his brother and mother approach from the adjacent tent, hand in hand. Thomas looked petrified—Moirra, haunted. Adair looked lost. Nathaniel wasn't certain which face gave him the most worry, and he could only guess what his own features betrayed. He gripped tight to Adair's hand, and with the other arm pulled his brother close. Their mother remained attached

to Thomas on the other side. Together, the four approached the trees.

Nathaniel felt his father.

Before he could even frame that sentiment in words in his mind, his heart swelled and his skin felt like he'd stepped from shade into a sunbeam.

It was his father. His father. He heard a tiny gasp from his brother, and wondered for the first time if Thomas shared the same sense as he did. Could his brother feel the fae folk too?

The warmth in Nathaniel's chest was so strong that he let himself forget. He let himself be the twelve year old he'd been when his father disappeared—hoping against hope that when he lifted his lantern and rounded the corner he'd see his father: skinny, laughing, crooked smile. Warm brown eyes looking at his mother with dopey love you'd never question, looking at *him* with pride, looking at Thomas with the watchful optimistic fear a parent gets when a young child tests their limits.

When the tremulous light of his lantern met the dark seam of the tree line and the coast, however, all Nathaniel saw was blackness.

His mother's breath hitched audibly. "Ezra?"

A shape moved. It was the same angry shape that had watched Nathaniel being beaten by Atropa, but the seeming of him was different now—warm and sad, instead of hot and angry. The eyeless face of the Ríascaire, of his *father* shone in the darkness beneath the trees.

Nathaniel watched as his mother moved forward, hand outstretched. The being before them was like a sentient void, and it reached an impossibly black enormous clawed hand toward Moira's small pale one. Nathaniel, Adair and Thomas held back, watching with fearful eyes as the two moved closer together.

What if we were wrong? Nathaniel thought, suddenly afraid. Moira reached her other hand out and laid her palm against the face of the dark thing before them. She murmured

something to it, to him—something quiet, private and beautiful, not meant for the ears of the three boys behind her.

She stepped away, and turned back to her sons, gazing at them with moist eyes.

Nathaniel stepped forward, a strange feeling in his guts like he didn't know if he was overjoyed or disgusted but he kept moving. He wondered if the Ríascaire could speak. A wave of regret, of sorrow, of shame powerful enough to choke Nathaniel washed over him, so strong it took him a moment to realize it hadn't come from inside himself.

“It's alright,” he told the shape. He could only just make it out in the darkness. “It's alright.”

The feeling backed off, just slightly, enough for Nathaniel to breathe again.

“Do you think he'll help us?” Adair stood against Nathaniel's shoulder, and he could feel the tension in his faun's arm. Whatever the origin of the Ríascaire, he'd still almost torn Adair apart. He'd killed. Nathaniel shivered and took a step away as the feeling of shame intensified, radiating through the air, coupled with a blistering hatred, a need for revenge.

Nathaniel took Adair's hand. “He will.”



They began to form a plan. Nathaniel talked through his thoughts in the manic, circular way he had, almost like he didn't need Adair to participate in the conversation.

That suited Adair fine. His throat was raw and his heart ached. He was perfectly content to sit, pressed against Minnow's back, feeling the vibrations of Nathaniel's voice and nudge his forehead between his shoulder blades.

He'd told the folk that morning, that his mother was gone. Told them that she'd given her life to help protect them all.

The folk mourned the way they did everything: raucous, wild, too much, and when Adair had felt the warmth of

Nathaniel's hand in his, tugging him away from the hot, overwhelming press of his people's grief, he'd gone willingly.

Now, they sat in a little tent at the water's edge, crowded in with Moira and Thomas who'd felt they shouldn't intrude on the wild, violent expression of sorrow still raging on outside the thin wall of fabric.

"Do we think Atropa can sense that the connection between herself and ...?" Nathaniel fumbled for the words. It seemed none of them knew what to call the thing that had been his father.

"Dad?" Thomas supplied, with the bluntness of youth.

Nathaniel cringed. "Yes."

"I don't think there's any way to know," Adair mumbled into the back of Nathaniel's shirt, joining in the conversation for the first time.

"Well, if we assume that she can't sense the connection was severed," Nathaniel said, shifting against the weight of Adair on his back, "that's all to our advantage."

"Could he kill her?" Moira's voice was soft and fearful.

Adair peeked out, resting his head on Nathaniel's shoulder. "I don't know. He's powerful, surely—"

"But so is she. And she has been gathering allies."

"I can fight," Adair said, and Nathaniel craned his neck to look at him.

"But how can we draw her out?"

Adair set his jaw. "By giving her something she wants."



"Absolutely not."

"Minnow—"

"No," Nathaniel said. "Don't you 'Minnow' me, don't you dare."

"It'll work."

Nathaniel threw him a withering stare. “Oh *please*.”

“It will.”

“That’s not the point,” Nathaniel snapped. They stood with their feet in the ocean, cool water lapping their ankles. Deciding this was a proper private spat, they’d left Nathaniel’s mother and brother behind in the tent and come outside to argue.

Adair was certain that if he allowed himself to succumb to Atropa’s influence again, she would be pleased enough to become careless. The notion was a smart one. Nathaniel knew that if they could fool her into thinking she had won Adair over to her cause they could turn the tables on her and the Ríascaire would betray her and help them finish the job.

It scared Nathaniel out of his wits.

“Nathaniel,” Adair said, his voice gentle. “I can do this. We can beat her.”

Nathaniel shook his head. “No.”

Adair reached for him, but Nathaniel dodge his hands. “You can’t just say ‘no’ to a perfectly reasonable plan.”

“Like hell I can’t,” Nathaniel said. “After what happened —“

“It won’t be the same.”

“How can you possibly know that? How can you expect me to just let—let that happen to you again?”

“*It won’t be the same.*”

“How do you know?” Nathaniel asked again. He crossed his arms over his chest.

Adair approached him, a fierce intensity in his gaze. Nathaniel tensed but allowed him to close his hands around Nathaniel’s upper arms. Adair gave him a little squeeze. “This time I know you’ll be able to bring me back.”

But Nathaniel didn’t know. He didn’t share that same blind faith in *anything*, and certainly not in himself. However, it was hard to look at Adair’s beautiful, earnest face and doubt him.

“You did it before,” Adair reminded him. “And you didn’t even know you could.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Nathaniel said, his voice rising to a hysterical fever pitch. “I had no idea what to do.”

“And yet,” Adair said, brushing his lips to Nathaniel’s forehead. “Here we are.”

“This is insane,” said Nathaniel. “You have absolutely nothing to support this idea.”

Adair cradled Nathaniel’s face in his hands. “I don’t need anything. I have you.”

Nathaniel did not look away. He searched Adair’s eyes for any tremor, any sign of wavering and found none.

“Do you trust me?”

“Of course.”

“Then let me do this.”

Pushing himself up on tip toe, Nathaniel bumped his forehead against Adair’s. He sighed. “Alright.”

They stood quietly in the water for a long while, trying to extract what moment of calm they could.

Nathaniel and Adair spent the remainder of the night breathing each other in, silent in the little tent. Nathaniel spent hours touching every part of Adair’s face. He was doing his best to have faith in Adair’s plan, in the strength of his own love, but in truth he was terrified. He did not say out loud that he wanted to spend every second of this night memorizing Adair’s face in case he didn’t return—return to himself, return to Nathaniel. Adair merely lay still, letting Nathaniel explore his skin with soft fingers, understanding that Nathaniel, on some level, needed this.

He hadn’t even realized he’d fallen asleep until Adair nudged him awake in the morning. They decided it would be best to keep as few in on the plan for a few reasons. Firstly, with the exception of a very small number, the fae folk were not fighters. Second, many of them still mistrusted Nathaniel and his family—and had suffered personally under the foul

claws of the Ríascaire. Third, the fae folk were at their core *hopeless* gossips.

Atropa had won Gael to her cause with the promise of blood, and others had slipped away from the beach in the night after hearing of the queen's death, perhaps hoping to sever ties to what they now felt might be the losing faction in this conflict. Atropa could have other allies, too, and it would not do for their plan to get out. As it stood, the dawn found Nathaniel, Adair, Síol and Beith gathered just inside the trees, deciding who should go and who should remain behind.

“Síol should go with you,” Beith said, taking everyone by surprise. They all turned to stare at him. He set his jaw. “This won't be a brute strength sort of fight. I'm better served hanging back and looking after everyone here.”

Síol did not need convincing. Among the fae folk she, Adair and Beith were some of the only true fighters. “So, how are we to draw her out?”

Adair turned to Síol and clapped a hand on her shoulder. “We're going to succumb to what she wants us to be—at least in part.”

“And what is that?”

“Monsters.”

XXX

Why You're Here

Nathaniel was an observer, an intellectual. He was curious by nature—poking, prodding, examining. He wanted to watch Adair transform.

Adair did *not* want that. The look on Nathaniel's face—the fear Adair had smelled coming off of his beaten body, the terror in his pretty eyes—all of that added up to something Adair never needed to experience again. To do what needed to be done he had to take the leap; he had to dive headlong into the wild and trust his instincts. He had trust in his bond with Nathaniel so that he would come back to himself when the time came, and he wasn't certain he that would be possible if he had to watch in real time as his sweet, innocent Minnow bore witness to his transformation into a grotesque.

"If you can't do this with me by your side," Nathaniel had said flatly, "then I'm not letting you do it at all."

Adair could have pointed out that there wasn't much Nathaniel could do, physically, to prevent him from following through with the plan. However, that wasn't really the point. The point was that they'd come together, they'd agreed—after no matter how many arguments—that this was the proper course, and Adair knew if they couldn't progress as team then he, Adair, would ne unable to progress at all. He absolutely, unequivocally needed Nathaniel at his side.

Nathaniel was his courage, his heart. "Minnow," he said. "You're right. I can't do this without you."

"Of course you can't," Nathaniel said, matter-of-factly. He gave Adair a playful pinch and a crooked smile that couldn't quite eclipse the worry in his eyes.



The three of them walked for hours through the forest. As they walked, Nathaniel checked that he had everything he needed in his bag. While Síol and Adair had their strength and speed—not to mention deadly weapons growing out of their heads—Nathaniel felt next to naked. So, he'd consulted his father's journal, considered the things he'd learned from the books at Iron Gall and armed himself as best he could.

"You think there's a rip in that bag of yours, Minnow?" Adair asked him.

Nathaniel flushed. "I'm just making sure I have everything."

"For the tenth time."

"Hush." Nathaniel rummaged through the bag, brushing his fingers over the hilt of his iron knife, the sharpened spike of yew, a small pouch of salt, and a bundle of mint leaves. It was all there, of course, but having his hand in the bag helped conceal its shaking.

The further they walked through the trees, drawing closer to the place at the base of the mountain where Atropa made her lair, Nathaniel could feel Atropa's presence growing. He would have preferred to press his body against Adair's for courage, but he knew their ruse was predicated on Atropa believing the fauns were coming on their own, so he kept his distance.

However, now that they were out here, the fact remained that they didn't know how to instigate the transformation.

"This is not working," Nathaniel said finally, watching Adair's tall, wiry body moving unchanged through the trees. "There must be some sort of catalyst."

Síol grabbed his arm. "It's you."

"Pardon?"

"Do you trust me?"

Nathaniel reflected upon how many times that very question had passed someone's lips in recent days. "Yes," he

said, because what choice did he have?

“Know that I love him as a brother,” she whispered, urgent. She flung out an arm, halting Nathaniel and allowing Adair to get several paces ahead. “And know that I’ve come to care for you, as well.”

“What does that—“

But Síol let loose a snarl, seized Nathaniel by the shoulder and yanked with all her strength. Startled, Nathaniel stumbled and fell to the dirt, sprawled on his back. In less time than it took for Nathaniel to blink Adair dove for her, teeth bared eyes wild.

“*Stop—No!*” Nathaniel called, still not quite caught up with whatever Síol had been planning.

Adair’s bony knee braced firmly between Síol’s shoulders, and his strong hands gripped her horns. Nathaniel noticed that already Adair’s entire body seemed to pulse, and he watched in awe as his horns shook and swelled. At last, Nathaniel understood her ploy.

Adair’s eyes burned like nothing natural as he growled at Síol trapped beneath him—even a perceived danger to Nathaniel had sent him into a spiral of territorial rage. Without hesitation, Nathaniel laid the flat of his palm on Adair’s shoulder.

A wild snort like an unbroken horse, a growl, eyes rolling mad—but Nathaniel did not move his palm. Adair’s entire body quivered, his chest heaving, and as he tossed his head, Nathaniel thought he could actually see the fine, near translucent golden hairs on Adair’s upper arms spike and bristle as the faun sought to control himself.

“Let go,” Nathaniel urged. “It’s okay.”

Adair stood, releasing Síol, and his body shook. Nathaniel took a step away, mesmerized. Adair tossed his head back and roared, actually *roared*, and the sound of it shook Nathaniel’s bones.

Nathaniel’s doubts clawed their way back to the surface as he watched in mingled awe and horror at his faun twisting in

on himself, convulsing, the noises from his throat full of suffering and wild anger. Nathaniel hadn't considered until this very moment, watching Adair wracked with spasms of pain, that the physical aspect of this transformation must put an awful lot of strain on his body.

All at once it was over—the little clearing echoing with deafening sort of silence. Nathaniel thought he was going to faint. There he was, the same terrifying beast who'd come for him in Atropa's cavern. He stood, trembling, waiting for Adair's unnerving familiar-but-foreign wild green eyes to settle on him. When they did, he couldn't help but take a step back. He bumped right into Síol and almost fell over—he'd entirely forgotten she was there.

Adair took a step forward, scenting the air, staring into Nathaniel's face. Nathaniel made himself stay still, forced himself not to flee. Adair sniffed the air between them, moving closer step by step. He was *huge*. Somehow, Nathaniel had forgotten. Certainly, Adair was taller than most anyone Nathaniel had ever met, but now he was just enormous, the bones in his hunched shoulders cracking like they had grown at a different rate than his skin, and his flesh was still struggling to catch up.

Steeling himself, finding some untapped well of courage, Nathaniel closed the distance between himself and Adair and reached out a shaking hand to touch the side of his face. As he'd expected, Adair's skin was burning up, feverish and sweaty, but when Nathaniel pressed his palm to Adair's cheek, the faun closed his eyes and made a throaty sort of sound that was almost like a purr.

Nathaniel's doubts vanished. Adair could do this. He knew it. He *felt* it. Adair was strong, and wild, and he could do this. He turned toward Síol and nearly jumped out of his boots. She too had changed. Adair's aggression had set off her own transformation. She was taller, broader, with thick thighs and fingernails like the claws on a mountain lion. It all made her look terrifying, especially with the massive spread of her horns.

Feeling vulnerable and exposed, Nathaniel allowed Adair and Síol to flank him as they moved further into the thick press of the trees. They approached a clearing near the base of Atropa's mountain, and Nathaniel watched in surprise as with near practiced synchronicity, Adair and Síol stilled. As one, they lifted their chins, sniffing the wind. Síol dropped into a crouch, and wordlessly Adair scooped Nathaniel up under his arms and boosted him up the side of a tree trunk. He didn't need telling twice, assuming Adair was encouraging him to hide. Nathaniel scrambled up into the boughs, doing his best to conceal himself. He pulled the yew spike from his bag and clutched it to his chest.

Adair and Síol crouched side by side, legs poised to spring, ready to fight. Nathaniel could have sworn he felt bile rise in his throat as he felt the approach of Atropa. His palms were slick with sweat, and he found himself shamefully terrified to see her pale, glowing skin shine through the trees. As she broke through into the clearing he saw the impossibly dark shadow of his father hovering by her shoulder. Obviously, she did not know he had been freed from her influence.

Another silhouette moved in the shadows, and he stepped into the light to stand at Atropa's elbow. The last time Nathaniel had seen Gael he'd looked like a corpse. With the freedom to feed on the people of Myrna he'd grown stronger, larger. His sunken cheeks filled out; his eyes gleamed with life, and he had a healthy blush to his skin.

Nathaniel felt sick to his stomach watching the slow, sinister smile break across Atropa's face as she took in the sight of Adair and Síol in their basest forms. "I told you he'd come back," she said to Gael. She looked Síol over from her horns down to her feet. "And look at this absolute beauty."

They said nothing, staring blankly into the middle distance as she walked in a slow circle around them.

"I would have loved for you to have brought a few more into the fold, Little Prince," she said appraisingly, "But this is certainly a start."

Nathaniel squeezed the yew stake so tightly that he lost feeling in his fingers. It took everything he had not to fling himself between Adair and Atropa, especially when she reached a vile hand to touch the side of Adair's face. Nathaniel knew that he'd barely make it two steps into the clearing before she gutted him, and he'd ruin their plan besides. So, he stayed where he was, paralyzed and disgusted that this foul woman had her hands on *his* faun.

"Now," she said, her voice dripping with honey-tongued malice. "Kneel."

Adair and Síol hesitated, eyes flicking toward each other, before they lowered their ungainly bodies to the forest floor. She moved toward them, her eyes glowing with triumph, fixated entirely on those kneeling before her. Gael, however, narrowed his eyes. He parted his lips, his single fang glinting as he tasted the air. "This isn't right," he said, "Where is that dim witted brute, Beith?"

"No matter," said Atropa airily, fixated on her prizes as they knelt in the grass.

Nathaniel's breath caught in his throat as the *Dearg-due* squinted into the trees.

Gael's black eyes widened, locking onto Nathaniel's where he sat in his tree, before he could open his mouth to raise the alarm, the *Ríascaire* turned to him and sank its teeth into the place where Gael's neck met his shoulder.

Gael's warning turned into a screech as the *Ríascaire* tore a great mouthful of flesh from the bones of his shoulder. He fell to the ground, twitching, as Atropa turned toward them in shock. Repulsed, Nathaniel saw that the wound, gruesome thought it was, did not bleed. Below the skin, Gael's exposed bone was dry and dusty.

The moment Atropa's focus split was all the opportunity Adair needed to brace his feet on the ground and ram his horns directly into her stomach. The bony spikes plunged deep into her skin, and she screamed. Nathaniel would have been lying if he said that the sound of her agony wasn't one of the sweetest he'd ever heard. Adair's golden head was almost

flush with her stomach, and she clawed the flesh of his back, desperate and scrabbling, leaving long rents in his skin with her nails. Atropa's blood was bruise-blue as it mingled with the hair on the faun's head. Adair threw his weight into her, his shoulder colliding with her hip. They fell to the ground in a frantic tangle of limbs, and it seemed Adair's horns lodged in the mud beneath Atropa's writhing body.

Síol moved forward, lowering her antlers and catching them in Gael's chest. They grappled, and to Nathaniel's eye Gael seemed not even to feel his wounds as he shoved Síol against the trunk of a tree. She tore at his skin with her claws, but despite the flesh falling like ribbons, he did not slow. The cords of muscle and skin flapped from the wounds, rustling like dry grasses and he wrapped his fingers around her throat. With a cry of triumph, Gael lowered his fang to puncture Síol's neck.

If human blood had such an effect on his strength, Nathaniel did not like to think what powers fae blood might grant him.

Gripping his yew spike, Nathaniel dropped clumsily from the tree, throwing all his weight behind the strike as he drove the stake between Gael's shoulder blades. Blood burst from the wound—exploding over Nathaniel's hands, the hot gush hitting him in the face with a sickening splatter. The stench was unbelievable, choking Nathaniel as the blood pulsed from around the spike. Gael crumpled to the ground, eerily still, and the place where the yew spike pierced his flesh was the only one to bleed.

With a hiss and a foul shriek, Atropa pummeled the side of Adair's head with small but powerful fists. He struggled to free himself to make fresh attack, but the blows dazed him and he was stuck upside down and disoriented. Síol seized Adair's shoulders and yanked, pulling him off Atropa as the Ríascaire seized its chance to move over her and plunge its claws into the skin of her chest.

The sound she made was nothing human, and even Nathaniel—who had a sick, twisted desire to hear and see Atropa suffer—felt his stomach heave and churn as he wiped

Gael's blood out of his eyes. Though it was now three on one, though they'd gotten the jump on her, Atropa still plainly had some fight in her. There was a flash of light and burst of blue smoke, choking thick and opaque. When it cleared Atropa was on her feet, clutching her stomach as blood oozed between her fingers.

"Little Prince," she said, with ragged breath and blood on her smile. "You are a disappointment."

Adair said nothing, shook his head and prepared to launch another attack. With the fingers of her left hand, Atropa toyed with a whip and Nathaniel's heart zoomed up into his mouth—the same hateful instrument she'd used on him over and over and over, the thought of it hitting Adair, of hurting him too when she'd already done so much harm was enough to choke the breath from Nathaniel's lungs. Before he knew it he was up and moving, jumping in front of the strike from the whip, shielding Adair with his left arm. The lash coiled around Nathaniel's wrist, burning against his skin.

"You," she spat. With a yank on the whip she had Nathaniel on his knees. "After all that, and he couldn't even summon the proper pride to kill you. He's as weak as I had feared."

Nathaniel had the iron knife in his right hand, and with a grunt of pain he jerked the whip across his body and sliced through the leather to free himself. Atropa dropped the whip to the ground, stepping forward. Adair seized Nathaniel by the arm and tossed him unceremoniously to the ground behind him. He stood shoulder to shoulder with Síol, but before they could frame an attack the Ríascaire seized Atropa's head, one massive smoky dark palm thrust up under her chin. He lifted, twisted, jerked. A deafening crack split the air and he dropped her body like a sack of flour.

Silence filled the clearing, heavy and thrumming. Atropa's body pulsed dark blue blood, twitching feebly on the grass. The Ríascaire crouched over her and dug his clawed hands into the wounds Adair had started with his horns, getting purchase on Atropa's flesh, and tore her apart with a wet, squelching rip.

Nathaniel had to look away. He fell to the ground, shaking, trying not to heave up the contents of his stomach. Adair dropped beside him, warm strong arms surrounding him. Feeling the vibrations against his back, the cries of pain and exhaustion muffled into the nape of his neck, Nathaniel did not have to open his eyes to know Adair was returning to himself.

Finally, Adair moved, hauling Nathaniel unsteadily to his feet. He saw that Síol was similarly returning to petite, wiry, freckle-faced self. Taking in the scene, he watched in horrified fascination as through Atropa's wounds, delicate vines began to grow. The evidence of violence was plain as day, but the beauty of the vines and budding flowers gave the wounds an eerie sort of loveliness.

Nathaniel crouched by her head. He found he couldn't help himself.

"Tell me," she croaked. Her eyes rolled and her tongue lolled out of her mouth. "Tell me."

Nathaniel took her hand. He couldn't help it—she was repulsive; she'd beat him, starved him, tried to convince the love of his life to kill him. And yet, a person convulsing, bleeding, a person so in love it had warped her—Nathaniel truly felt that he could not deny her now. He could not deny hearing her last words.

"Tell you what?"

"Tell me wh—what Gliona thought."

"About what?"

"You spoke to her—she told you about me. What did she say?"

He summoned his courage and compassion in equal measure, looked her in the eye and said, "Gliona took her own life so that we could put a stop to you."

She laughed, and hiccupped. A bubble of blue-black blood burst at the corner of her mouth. "C-coward."

Nathaniel's lip curled, but he could not bring himself to disrespect this ancient. He wiped the blood from the corner of

Atropa's mouth. Tender, reverent. His other hand carded through her hair.

“She knew—she knew you had it all wrong.”

Atropa's face screwed up as she coughed, and more blood slipped from her wounds and from her mouth. Nathaniel cradled her head, brushing the sweaty, blood soaked strands of hair from her forehead.

“Gliona is truly dead?”

“Yes.”

Her frantic, twitching eyes searched Nathaniel's face. “Did she—did she love me?”

Nathaniel worried his lip. This ancient goddess in his lap, who had caused so much pain—he knew he could eviscerate her in her dying moments with a tiny lie. But somehow, he couldn't force himself to say the words. “She did.”

A smile like spring time broke over Atropa's face. She had smiled at Nathaniel so many times. She'd smiled while starving him, smiled while beating him. She'd smiled as she struck him with a whip and smiled as she sliced him open with a knife. She'd even smiled when Adair had come to her cavern, when she'd hoped Adair was capable of raping Nathaniel to death before her very eyes.

He'd seen a lot of her smiles. This one was different. As Nathaniel looked at this smile, he saw what must have caused Adair's mother to love her.

Nathaniel could have fallen in love with a smile like that. It was one he felt in the pull of tiny muscles in his own jaw. He smiled back at her. “She loved you so much,” he told her. He wanted her to know the truth of it. He wanted her to feel the suffering she'd caused, but he did not want to lie. “You betrayed that love. You felt it, but you did wrong by it.”

The rattling breath, the fluttering of her eyes told Nathaniel the end was near.

He again took her hand. “That's why you're here now,” he said.

Atropa laughed a sick, wet, sad laugh. “That’s what I told your father.”

And then, she died.

XXXI

Your Radiance

Nathaniel gingerly moved Atropa's body to lay prone on the ground, watching as the Nightshade flowers crawled up through her body to cover her entirely in delicate blue blooms.

He stood, and Adair moved forward to pull him into a hug. "Come, Minnow, let's get away from this place."

Nathaniel nodded, slipping his hand into Adair's and pressing their palms together. He found that he couldn't speak. Síol walked on unsteady legs by Nathaniel's other side, and he threw an arm around her shoulders. The warm presence of Nathaniel's father hovered behind them, following at a distance as if he wasn't certain he would be welcome.

The silence between them all stretched and strained, and they walked for hours in the quiet. None of them could summon strength to break it. There was relief knowing the danger had left this world, but it came with a bizarre sort of melancholy as the grief caught up with them.

When they were close to the beach encampment, Nathaniel finally spoke. There had been a pull in his chest, and as they walked along it grew stronger and it wasn't until he vocalized it that he realized it was coming from his father. "Adair," he said gently, "Do you think you could go fetch my mother and brother?"

Adair nodded, leaning into kiss Nathaniel's cheek before dropping his hand and beckoning Síol to follow him onto the beach. Nathaniel stood alone with his father, waiting. He didn't say anything else.

Moira and Thomas appeared after a while, hand in hand. When they saw Nathaniel they pulled him into a hug, the two of them pressed close against him, thankful he'd returned from the fight unharmed.

"It's alright," he told them both. "It's alright. She's gone."

It was some time before they broke apart to see the Ríascaire standing silent behind them. It was remarkable how this ancient force could actually seem awkward as it waited for them to acknowledge its presence.

Nathaniel cleared his throat and beckoned the Ríascaire closer. It shuffled forward, a hulking shadow looking somehow contrite as it approached.

"What will happen to him now?" Moira asked, looking at the presence that used to be her husband, the father of her children.

"I think he will go," Nathaniel said with a surprised frown. The words had come from somewhere in his brain he couldn't always find, but as he spoke them he knew them to be true.

"Go?"

Nathaniel gestured. "Go," he repeated. "*On.*"

"When?"

Nathaniel stared at this thing that had held so many names: Ríascaire, Heart-eater, Beast. Thing. Father. Husband. Ezra. Dryad. *Abhain*. "He's just holding on so that we can say goodbye."

Thomas approached timidly, and the Ríascaire placed an enormous clawed hand on the boy's head. Thomas did not speak, merely let his father drink in the sight of his youngest son. They stood like that for a while before Thomas extended his hand, solemn as always, and let the Ríascaire shake it.

Nathaniel approached next, and opened his arms to embrace his father. The touch of the Ríascaire's flesh was not what he expected. He was firm, but soft—like solid smoke. Warm. Nathaniel thought he could feel a heartbeat somewhere in there.

When they broke apart, his eyes stung and burned, and he retreated off a step to let his mother say her own farewell. Nathaniel stood beside his brother, watching as their parents said goodbye.

The Ríascaire wrapped Moira in his shadowy arms, pulling her close. Nathaniel watched in amazement as the smoky form seemed to roil and expand, swelling as it entirely enveloped the woman standing before it. Thomas gasped and started forward, afraid, but Nathaniel seized the back of his jacket. “Wait.”

Silent as snowfall, the Ríascaire burst into a thousand thousand black fragments. To Nathaniel’s eyes they appeared as leaves, or feathers, floating and swirling on the evening wind. Moira stood smiling as they moved around her, smiling and crying as the wind tugged her hair and her skirt, the dark petals flying in a gentle sort of swarm around her before scattering toward the sky. The three Stones stood and watched until long after the last fragment was utterly lost to view.

The following weeks saw the fae folk tentatively return to their previous territories in the forest. Of the ones who had showed signs of supporting Atropa and her claim over the dominion of the forest, most returned. Gael of course, was dead, and some decided to try their fortunes elsewhere. For some, it was like waking up from a trance—others merely returned because the wind had shifted, and wished to adjust their sails to stay afloat.

Nathaniel finally declared the last of the wounded to be fit again, and in general the aggressive tension Nathaniel had felt in the forest lessened with each passing day.

It was replaced with something else, however, a thought that Nathaniel truly could not shake. Adair’s coronation was fast approaching, and every time they discussed it Nathaniel found himself with a deep, prevailing sense of finality. Something about seeing their enemies thwarted and things returning to “normal” had Nathaniel wondering if perhaps their time together was ending.

As the coronation drew nearer, Nathaniel grew more certain. Adair spent more time in the forest without him, and Nathaniel figured that as king his responsibilities would only increase over time. He wouldn't be able to split his time as freely and he'd have to prioritize his people over his own pleasures. Nathaniel did his best to enjoy the time leading up to the new moon—the date set for the ceremony of Adair's coronation—but could not shake the feeling that the end was near.

The day of Adair's coronation dawned beautiful and crisp. Nathaniel had agreed to meet him in the forest, at an ancient, sacred place where Adair was meant to ready himself for the ceremony. Nathaniel was jumpy, as nervous as the very first day he'd gone into the trees.

“Your Radiance.”

Adair rolled his eyes, embarrassed at the honorific, but to Nathaniel's gaze he was indeed radiant. The sight of Adair preparing for the ceremony to come stole Nathaniel's breath. He stood tall, glowing soft and golden in the morning sun. His horns shone, seeming polished, and his hair fell in a silky tumbling mop around his ears—still wild, but shining curls clean and bouncing with every puff of wind. His eyes, green like lush moss, had never seemed more beautiful, though the rational part of Nathaniel's mind suspected that was merely a trick of the heart knowing the impending parting between them.

He feasted his eyes, hoping to memorize every line and curve as Adair stood, a giant—a gorgeous Titan of tanned muscle and sweet freckled flesh.

Adair shifted awkwardly from foot to foot. “What?”

Nathaniel realized his lips were parted, eyes wide. He closed his mouth and averted his gaze. “Nothing.”

Adair approached, taking Nathaniel's face in his large warm hands. “It's not nothing.”

“Just amazed to lay eyes upon a king,” Nathaniel tried, giving a playful smile to hide the sadness he felt.

Adair grinned, his teeth poking out in a sheepish, jittery sort of way. "I'm not king yet."

"True," said Nathaniel. "But you will be, soon enough."

Adair's sisters had garbed him in a robe of sorts, a beautiful thing woven from tiny leaves and the petals of flowers. He took Nathaniel in his arms and pressed him close, and the leaves tickled the skin of Nathaniel's cheek. Adair kissed the top of his head, lips ghosting over his skull as he whispered, "And what would you have of a king?"

Nathaniel shivered, tiny muscles along his spine pinching and pulling. If this were to be goodbye, should he not enjoy it?

Nathaniel moved his lips to Adair's collarbone. "One asks nothing of a king," he murmured against Adair's skin. "One merely awaits his command."

Nathaniel took a step back, his stomach full of heat. Adair's fingers clasped his jaw, holding his face up to the light of the dawn sun, and Nathaniel delighted to see his eyes simmering with want.

"What sort of game is this, Minnow?"

"No game, Your Radiance," Nathaniel said with a wink. "I seek only to serve."

By way of response, Adair's gaze positively smoldered. Nathaniel could swear he saw his shoulders roll back, his chest puff out slightly. "Your demeanor gives lie to your words," Adair said, and Nathaniel could see him tasting command, the tone foreign on his tongue. His fingers tightened on Nathaniel's jaw, an iron squeeze before Adair released him in favor of using his hands to spin Nathaniel's body and yank him backward.

Nathaniel willfully stumbled, his back colliding with Adair's chest. He could feel the faun's heart beating against his back and could not contain his grin as Adair fisted an eager hand in Nathaniel's curls. The faun tugged on his hair, pulling Nathaniel's head to the side, exposing his neck. "So bold," Adair whispered. His hot breath on Nathaniel's skin was

intoxicating. “You say you await my command and yet you lack any proper deference.”

Yes. Nathaniel’s breath hitched as Adair’s teeth scraped the exposed cords of his neck before nipping the edge of Nathaniel’s jaw.

“Strip,” Adair hissed. “And kneel.”

Nathaniel thought he could feel all the blood in his body rushing straight to his dick as he divested himself of his clothes, tossing them in an untidy pile beside him. Without taking his eyes from Adair’s face, Nathaniel knelt before him on the grass, soft against the bare skin of his knees. Adair walked around him in a circle, and Nathaniel forced himself to remain still, eyes forward. Adair dragged a warm fingertip across the expanse of Nathaniel’s shoulders, sending more shivers down his spine, raising gooseflesh despite the warmth of the morning. “Am I to your liking, Magnificence?”

Adair returned to stand in front of Nathaniel, eyes steely. “More so if you hold your tongue,” he said, but Nathaniel could see him trying very hard not to grin. “And spread your knees.”

Nathaniel did as he was bid, already achingly hard, resting his hands upturned on his thighs. His breath came in discordant gasps, and he found himself pleased with the unexpected trajectory this morning had taken, opting to forget that this may well be their last time together. Adair turned appraising, predatory gaze on Nathaniel’s bare body before slipping the robe from his shoulders and closing the distance between them as it fluttered to the ground at his feet.

He again took Nathaniel’s chin in his strong fingers, tilting his face upward to look deep into his eyes. With his other hand, Adair brushed his knuckles over Nathaniel’s cheek, sent his fingers to trace the outline of his lips.

Nathaniel felt this moment would last a lifetime, Adair exploring his face with gentle fingers, though the promise in his eyes was anything but gentle. It took everything Nathaniel had to keep his hands still; the desire to take his throbbing cock in hand was a fierce one. After what seemed an eternity

Adair breached the crease of Nathaniel's lips with his thumb, and Nathaniel parted them eagerly, sucking the faun's hot fingers into his mouth to taste them with shameless tongue.

"Enough," Adair said, withdrawing his hand from Nathaniel's face to grab hold of his own dick. He gave it a few lazy strokes, looking down at Nathaniel like he hadn't quite decided what to do with him yet.

Finally, Adair seized Nathaniel's head by the hair and pulled him forward, and he opened his lips wider to receive the faun's cock, groaning happily as Adair thrust into his mouth. The movement of his hips was hesitant at first, and Nathaniel hummed around his mouthful to encourage Adair to take his pleasure. He tasted the head of his cock, feeling Adair come further unraveled with each pass of his skilled tongue. Adair fucked Nathaniel's mouth, snapping his hips harder and bringing his other hand to tug on Nathaniel's dark hair. Glancing upward, Nathaniel saw his head drop back as he moaned to the sky.

Normally, Nathaniel would bring his hands into the sweet torment of Adair's length, stroking his shaft and cupping the sensitive skin of his balls, but this game they were playing was a different sort, so he remained still, working only lips and tongue and willing throat. Adair pushed deeper than he ever had, and when he felt the muscles of Nathaniel's throat swallow around the head of his cock he pulled himself out with a whimper.

"Fuck, Minnow," he said, voice weak, steadying himself with his hands braced on Nathaniel's shoulders. Nathaniel grinned, panting, pleased to have shaken Adair's adopted demeanor. The faun shook himself in a clear attempt to regain his commanding presence. He straightened up, taking in the sight of Nathaniel still on his knees, lips parted, eagerly awaiting Adair's next order.

Adair meandered over to where he'd been readying himself for the ceremony, a collection of small bottles stood beside a polished glass mirror on a flat stone table. Nathaniel watched as Adair considered the bottles before selecting one and popping off the stopper. He returned to where Nathaniel

waited for him, following Adair with his eyes. Adair handed him the bottle and sat beside Nathaniel on the grass. He leaned to the side, propping himself up on one elbow, stretching out his long legs and looking at Nathaniel with hooded eyes. "I'd like to watch you prepare yourself for me," he said in a level voice.

A flush rose up Nathaniel's chest; this wasn't something he'd ever done before. He took the bottle of oil with trembling hands, covering his fingers and inhaling the scent, like roasted almonds and cloves. His pulse quickened and he set the bottle down on the ground. Nervously he ran his hands over each other, slicking up his fingers and feigning confidence as he raised up tall on his knees. With one hand, he took hold of his dick, squeezing the base. The faun swallowed, and the desire on his face made Nathaniel bold. Nathaniel locked eyes with Adair, put his hand between his legs, and sat on it.

Adair's mouth fell open as he watched Nathaniel rock his body up and down, working himself with his own fingers, stroking his cock, thrusting his hips back and forth. As he fucked into his slippery fist, Nathaniel slid out his finger with a breathy moan and teased his balls instead. He let the fingers of both hands flutter, finding what he liked, knowing he was driving Adair wild. He trailed his fingers back to his rim, dipping two of them inside himself, taking his time and seeing to his own pleasure while he waited for Adair's composure to snap. The hand around his dick pumped faster, and Nathaniel dropped his head back, closing his eyes.

He heard a growl, and opened his eyes in time to see Adair lunging toward him. He barely had time to gasp before Adair claimed his mouth in a kiss hard enough to bruise. Adair seized Nathaniel's hands to still them, holding them in a punishing grip and moving to sink his teeth into Nathaniel's neck. "Seemed like you were trying to come just now," he said, pushing kisses to Nathaniel's throat. Nathaniel trembled to hear his voice gone soft and deadly. "I don't remember telling you to do so."

"I'm—I'm sorry," he said, his voice high and breathy as Adair sucked the soft flesh of Nathaniel's earlobe between his

teeth, biting down to make Nathaniel whine. He struggled fruitlessly against Adair's grip.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"I'm sorry, Your Radiance," Nathaniel gasped.

"Better," the faun purred. Though clearly relishing the game, Adair took care to be gentle with his movements as he maneuvered Nathaniel to lay back on the grass. His eyes bored into Nathaniel's as he shifted his grip, pushing Nathaniel's arms above his head and pinning his hands to the earth with one of his own. "Perhaps I'll let you come after I've seen to my own pleasure."

Nathaniel could no longer summon words, so instead he surrendered. Adair's free hand cupped his cheek, and the faun leaned down for a kiss, biting down hard on Nathaniel's lower lip. He kissed the corner of Nathaniel's mouth, down along his sharp jaw toward his ear.

"You alright, Minnow?" Adair whispered, pulling away, cocking his head to the side.

"More than," he breathed.

Adair grinned, lowering his lips again, maintaining his fierce grip on Nathaniel's hands as he kissed down his chest. He rolled Nathaniel's nipple between the thumb and forefinger of his free hand while teasing the other with his tongue. The uneven pace, the contrasting sensations sent electric jolts straight to Nathaniel's groin, and his dick twitched eagerly, leaving a smear of pre-come on Adair's belly where it pressed down on top of him.

Adair sat up, straddling Nathaniel's hips. He took one of Nathaniel's hands in each of his own, holding tight, watching hungrily as Nathaniel tried to hump up against the soft skin of Adair's thighs, desperate to get some contact on his aching dick. Adair watched him struggling for a moment. "I think I'd like to fuck you now," he said baldly.

Contrary to his words, however, Adair released Nathaniel's hands and moved off of him. He raised a brow, kneeling between Nathaniel's legs, and gestured toward the discarded

bottle of oil. Nathaniel hastened to seize it, covering his hands and slicking up Adair's cock, taking his chance with his hands free to touch every part of it with eager fingers. Adair groaned, eyes falling closed as he allowed Nathaniel to touch him for a moment.

"Enough. Lie back down."

Obediently, Nathaniel laid back, the moss and grass so soft against his back, the sun shining bright in his faun's golden hair like a halo as he loomed over Nathaniel. Adair pushed Nathaniel's thighs against his chest and entered him, slowly, with Nathaniel's calves over his shoulders. He took him like that for a while with shallow thrusts, twining their fingers together, pressing Nathaniel's hands to the ground beside his head, and returning the attentions of his lips to Nathaniel's neck. Nathaniel was just beginning to find a rhythm, rocking his spine gently and enjoying Adair's teeth nipping the tendons of his neck when the faun snapped his hips, plunging his cock in to the hilt.

Nathaniel yelped, his eyes rolling back as Adair moved harder, digging his knees into the grass and fucking Nathaniel as if he meant to split him like a hunk of firewood. Nathaniel found himself spiraling, crying out each time Adair sank in to the root. "I'm—I'm, I'm," Nathaniel stuttered, the crown of his head falling back, feeling like he was about to burst.

"You're what, Minnow?" Adair said, grunting between his words. He released one of Nathaniel's hands and seized his cock, pumping it with a loose fist.

Nathaniel couldn't answer, so he closed his eyes, and just as he was about to come, Adair slid his dick out, slow, and did not thrust back in. Adair's grip on his cock retreated to a slow whispering of fingertips, the soft touch delicious and distinctly *not* enough. Bewildered, Nathaniel opened his eyes. "Huh?"

"I recall saying you weren't to come until I was finished with you," the faun said, chest heaving. He backed off, teasing Nathaniel's rim with the head of his cock.

A needy moan slipped out of Nathaniel's mouth, his legs twitching as Adair released him, rocking back onto his heels.

Nathaniel's hand flew to his dick, but Adair grabbed his wrist.

"Oh, I don't think so," Adair said, and his voice was a threatening whisper. The faun mounted him again, pinning him once more and rolling into him with slow little circular movements. His cresting pleasure stolen from him like breath from his lungs, Nathaniel wilted to the forest floor, unsure how to react or what to do, letting Adair work him up again with soft, delicate thrusts. The faun showered kisses on his brow, holding him close and fucking him gently for a while. When he began to build speed again, Adair latched his lips onto Nathaniel's neck, right at the juncture where his throat met his collarbones, creating a seal with his lips and drawing Nathaniel's skin against his mouth with unprecedented force. "Going to mark you," the faun slurred, voice thick with desire.

Even in his hazy state, Nathaniel tried to counter. "No one will see once I'm dressed."

"Nuh-uh, Minnow," Adair said. He sucked the skin of Nathaniel's neck. "I dressed for your people enough times, now you'll dress for mine."

Nathaniel opened his mouth to protest, but his brain seemed to tilt over a cliff face and tumble into a sea of pleasure, and in that moment he was certain he'd agree to anything this fae king asked of him. He noted dimly that Adair was moving his hips faster again, the velvet covered iron bar that was Adair's dick the only thing on which Nathaniel could focus.

"How are you feeling, Minnow?"

"Unnf," Nathaniel managed, canting his hips, trying to angle his body to allow the faun's cock to hit where he wanted it, stroking in and out of his channel with an increasing velocity.

Adair grinned before butting their foreheads together—an affectionate, albeit slightly painful, gesture. "I know your body," Adair said, "I can tell that you're close."

Nathaniel found himself unable to do anything but nod, trembling as Adair fucked him harder and harder. Like a white hot wire being tugged from his dick to his brain, Nathaniel felt

his muscles begin to slack, electrified, beginning to fall over that edge when—

“Not yet.” Adair stilled himself again, but this time leaving his cock fully sheathed in Nathaniel’s body.

Nathaniel would have thought he had more pride, but here with Adair who knew him better than anyone, he couldn’t pretend to control. Nathaniel whined, begging, trying to move against Adair’s body. He clenched around the faun’s cock, trying to will him to let loose and fuck him like he meant it, but Adair had found a self-restraint in this game that Nathaniel had not known possible. Adair was usually relentless in chasing his pleasure, and Nathaniel happy to just hold on for dear life and ride out the waves of the faun’s desire, easily finding his own climax in the resulting whirlwind.

However, Adair was a king now, and kings demanded all.

Pinned on his back, completely filled with Adair’s cock but unable to get himself over the edge, Nathaniel was afraid his body might actually combust. “I need you to—”

Adair immediately withdrew, and Nathaniel’s words dissolved into a needy groan. The faun maintained his grip on Nathaniel’s hands. “I told you to hold your tongue.”

Nathaniel struggled to catch his breath, feeling an ache growing deep in his balls, and with enormous effort he forced himself to be still, to wait for Adair to decide what to do next. The faun seemed to decide that kissing Nathaniel’s rebellious mouth to silence would be the proper course. Nathaniel loved kissing, usually, but all he could think in that moment was how badly he needed to come, crossing the threshold of delirious pleasure into physical pain as Adair moved lazy lips over his electrified flesh, releasing Nathaniel’s gasping mouth to travel down his neck and return to his nipples.

Nathaniel whimpered as Adair’s tongue flicked over the hard little buds, just barely connecting leaving Nathaniel trying to arch his back into the faun’s mouth. Adair let out a frustrated grunt and sat up. “I need my hands,” he said, “Can you behave if I release you?”

Nathaniel was not certain he could but he didn't care. He nodded.

Adair was not fooled. "I can tell when you're lying, Minnow," he said. The faun seemed to consider him for a moment. "But I suppose we'll see." Adair released his hands and Nathaniel used every ounce of will power he contained to remain still. Adair lowered himself again. "Hold onto my horns," he commanded. "If you release them, I will stop."

Nathaniel obeyed, relieved to have something phallic to clutch, and Adair immediately tested the limits of his obedience by pinching both of Nathaniel's nipples, hard. He cried out, but maintained his grip on the faun's horns as he did it again, and again. Adair then softened his touch, barely whispering his fingertips across Nathaniel's overly sensitive skin, drawing little circles with the pad of his thumb and allowing Nathaniel to catch his breath. Adair met his gaze, pupils blown wide with desire, and Nathaniel sincerely hoped that Adair's own resolve was finally cracking. As the faun stroked his nipples, flicking against them and pinching just hard enough for Nathaniel to feel a little pain, Nathaniel watched Adair's pink tongue dart out, licking his own lips as he watched Nathaniel unravel. Changing the angle of his torso, Adair locked his lips around one nipple, sucking it into his mouth and biting down, gentle, with just a slight pressure from his sharp teeth. He moved to the other side, giving it the same treatment until Nathaniel's eyes burned and his grip on Adair's horns was so tight he thought he'd bruise his own palms.

When Adair moved his mouth away with a final kiss to the nipple he'd been tormenting, he returned his fingers to the task and said, "Do you think I could make you come just like this?"

Unable to form answer, Nathaniel nodded wildly, thinking at this point a stern look would have him coming all over himself. Adair stilled and with a final twist of each of Nathaniel's aggrieved nipples he sat up, taking Nathaniel's shaking hands in his own and holding them tight.

"I suppose I should stop then."

Nathaniel didn't care what happened then, feeling tears shamefully collecting at the corners of his eyes. He opened his mouth to beg but before he could make a sound Adair impaled Nathaniel on his cock, fully sheathing himself and remaining still for a moment.

Completely joined, Adair growled, pressing sweaty forehead to Nathaniel's shoulder. "Can't decide what I want, Minnow," he said, the endearment slipping from his lips with more ease as his brain lost control of the situation. "I love to see you fall apart, but you're so beautiful when you spend around my cock."

And Nathaniel had two minds then—the animal part of him that would do anything to come, and the part of him that wanted his faun to seek the pinnacle of his own desires—a very difficult intellectual position to occupy while he found himself a quivering mess being fucked absolutely insensate. So, he said nothing. Rather—he said nothing articulate, sounds and syllables were yanked from his throat under Adair's attentions as the faun pushed him toward his climax for a fourth time.

"I want to see you come," Adair murmured into Nathaniel's hair, "But I need to hear you beg first."

"Please," Nathaniel acquiesced immediately. "Please, *please*."

Adair picked up the pace, his thighs quivering as he held Nathaniel down and fucked him so hard he screamed, screamed shameless and high pitched and loud, and at this point Nathaniel didn't even care if anyone heard him, or saw him, as long as the faun kept his beautiful cock pumping inside him at this pace, at this precise angle. At last, Nathaniel arched his back, graceful and animalistic, throat nearly tearing as he roared, spurting over them both as he came harder than he'd come in his life.

Adair pulled out at the moment of his own pleasure, towering above Nathaniel, fist frantically milking his cock, and coming all over him, the mingling of their seed on Nathaniel's chest hot and filthy. Nathaniel's moans coupled

petered off into heaving breaths, tears streaming free as he finally found his release. Adair held him, wrapped him in long sinewy arms and pressed him close, rolling so that Nathaniel came to lie against the faun's chest. In his wildest fancies, Nathaniel would never thought he'd find himself here, body falling limp and spent between the thighs of a king. Adair disentangled one arm, pulling the delicate robe to cover them both as Nathaniel shivered in his arms.

They stayed like that a long while, breathing each other in, draped in soft leaves and petals. Nathaniel rested his cheek on Adair's chest, wanting never to move from this spot. The faun stroked his hair, his back, with soft fingers and Nathaniel found himself quite content to allow himself to rise and fall with each of Adair's gasping breaths. The skin of their chests stuck together, adhered by their shared release, and he knew it would be uncomfortable when they finally moved, but Nathaniel found it very difficult to care at that particular moment.

"Tears?" Adair asked, sounding concerned but unable to form a complete question. Adair's usual tenderness had returned as they basked in afterglow. His hand stroked Nathaniel's cheek, fingers brushing through the damp trails he felt there.

"It's nothing," Nathaniel lied, turning his lips to kiss Adair's chest.

"Did I hurt you?"

"No," he said, smiling sadly against Adair's heated skin. In truth the tears had come against his willing as Adair had pushed him into a pleasure so acute it was painful—but they continued with his knowledge that this moment was drawing swiftly to a close. To change the subject, Nathaniel said, "You'll have to wash again."

"A worthy reason," Adair said, nudging Nathaniel to sit and brushing a soft kiss to his lips. Adair stood, shaking out the robe and hanging it from a nearby branch. He padded naked across the clearing where a little spring fed pool waited,

looking cool and clear and inviting. Adair sank into the water, and turned to beckon Nathaniel over. "Come, Minnow."

Nathaniel reclined back on the grass. "I don't think I can summon the strength to move just yet."

With a sigh, Adair hopped from the pond and returned to kneel at Nathaniel's side. He slipped one arm beneath Nathaniel's shoulders and the other around his knees, lifting him easily and carrying him back to the pool. Adair lowered him into the crystalline water and sat beside him on a smooth, submerged stone. Humming quietly, the faun collected a soft sponge from beside the polished mirror, dipping it in the water and straightening Nathaniel's arm to scrub it clean with gentle strokes.

Nathaniel closed his eyes, allowing Adair to bathe him, and the faun seemed quite happy to do so. Tiny kisses accompanied his soft attention on Nathaniel's over stimulated skin, and though Nathaniel couldn't see himself, he imagined Adair was pressing his lips to the marks he'd left on Nathaniel's neck.

"Are you nervous?" Nathaniel found himself asking.

"For what?"

"The ceremony." Adair hadn't explained much of what the whole affair entailed.

Adair shrugged a shoulder, turning the sponge on himself, giving the skin of his chest a good hard scrub. "There's not really much to be nervous about," he said. "In truth the last coronation was long enough ago that hardly anyone remembers what it's supposed to be like."

Nathaniel frowned. He placed a hand on Adair's shoulder. "I'm sorry," he said quietly.

Adair's jaw twitched but otherwise he didn't reply, he merely reached to wash the skin of his shoulders.

"Here, let me." Nathaniel took the sponge and moved it gently over Adair's flesh.

"I miss her," the faun said quietly after a while.

“I know.”

“She was ready to go, I think,” Adair said. It sounded a bit like he was talking to himself more than Nathaniel, so he held his tongue and continued washing. “I just wasn’t quite ready to let her.”

Nathaniel abandoned the sponge and wrapped his arms around Adair’s middle, pressing his face against his back, kissing between the blades of his shoulders. “I’m so sorry.”

Adair’s hands clutched tight to Nathaniel’s arms. “Thank you.”

Further words were not needed; Nathaniel merely pressed his cheek against Adair’s back, feeling his heat and committing it to memory. When they were both clean and could delay no longer, Adair helped Nathaniel from the pool, and shook himself dry under the sun. He shrugged into his robe, and Nathaniel saw a smile spread over the faun’s face.

“What?”

“It smells of you now,” he said.

Nathaniel flushed, turning to reach for his clothes.

Adair seized his hand. “I was serious before,” he said, eyes glowing with mischief.

“Oh?”

Adair passed his fingers down to grasp Nathaniel’s hip. “I’d see you dressed in smiles and sunlight.”

With a grin, Nathaniel raised his hands in supplication. “Of course you know that I can’t deny you, especially today.”

Adair took his hands. “Close your eyes.”

Nathaniel obeyed. “What must I do?”

“Just quiet your mind, and think only of wild things.”

A prickling, tingling warmth spread from their joined hands, and Nathaniel allowed the warm press of Adair’s fingers aid him in clearing his head of errant thoughts. Only one wild thing occupied his mind. They stood silent for some

time, and Nathaniel was unsure what he should be expecting, until he heard Adair's booming laughter.

"What?"

"Minnow, I swear, you never cease to amaze me," the faun said. "You do not believe in half measures, do you?"

Nathaniel opened his eyes, gazing down at himself. Swirling and shimmering around his hips was an opaque darkness, changing shape as he watched, curling around his upper thighs—and yet, the darkness shone like polished onyx, and glittered with familiar winking turquoise lights.

"The pools in your cavern," Nathaniel said, laughing. "Reflecting the lights from the ceiling!"

Adair dropped Nathaniel's hands in favor of wrapping an arm around to crush him close. "I love you so," he said softly before offering a small kiss to Nathaniel's forehead.

XXXII

The Aster King

Despite what he had told Minnow, Adair was nervous. He knelt alone in front of the oldest tree yet living in the forest, a willow with bark so pale it seemed almost silver. The first part of the day was solemn; Adair had kept silent vigil for many hours before the trunk of the tree, his lively morning making itself felt in the muscles of his thighs and back. The ache was a sweet one.

Adair gazed upon the tree, the pale expanse of the trunk covered in red-brown stains. Each ruler of the fae folk had left their mark here, a small offering of blood to honor those who came before. The thin vining branches of the tree stirred with the wind, rustling quietly as Adair closed his eyes and thought of his mother, and her sacrifice. He felt the sun climb higher; at midday it beat upon his head, and he remained still and silent as it traveled across the sky, down his shoulders and back, now glowing on the bark in front of him. He thought he knew which handprint was hers, looking at those collected on the bark, and not because most of the marks had faded with the passing of centuries.

He was alone in the glade; apparently this was the custom, to keep silent lonely vigil—though for how long seemed to cause no end of argument. Some said two days, some said one. Others seemed to think it was merely a short time for quiet reflection. In the end, a compromise was reached: Adair would rise and prepare himself at dawn, and reflect at the ritual site until sundown.

In truth, he was already growing restless. He said a silent prayer of thanks for the diversions of the morning, and the fact

that the folk weren't insisting he remain here on his knees for two whole days. He examined the edge of the robe that his sisters had made. Inhaling the scent of sex now clinging to it—that surely was *not* part of the traditional accoutrements—Adair considered his morning with Nathaniel. It had been passionate, explosive, an intoxicating game that they had played, but what Adair couldn't shake was the sad stare on Nathaniel's face when he'd first arrived in the clearing, nor the silent tears he'd shed after they'd concluded their loving. It made him feel guilty and soiled in a way he couldn't quite put to name. He hated thinking he had caused Minnow pain, but with a frown he recalled that he'd already seemed distracted and upset upon arrival. Perhaps there was something else weighing on his mind—in fact, there usually was.

The evening sun warmed him through the thin weave of the robe and he hoped sincerely he would have a chance to find time alone to ensure that Nathaniel was well before the impending bacchanal grew too wild to break private conversation.

As the sun set, Adair stood. He turned his back to the tree to watch the folk, his people, arrive at the clearing. They filed in, in pairs or small groups. He saw Síol, her usual tangled nest of auburn hair brushed to a soft, burnished shine. Beith also looked groomed and handsome. Adair smiled to see that someone had affixed some wildflowers to the jagged place where his horn had been snapped off. His sisters, lovely as ever, approached him to stand at his side, proud smiles on their faces. As he scanned the crowd, Adair saw Minnow off to the back, almost in shadow. The glamour suited him, Adair thought—and not just because he thought Nathaniel looked best wearing next to nothing—it matched his dark hair and the glittering lights seemed to make his icy blue eyes shine all the brighter.

There were no speeches, no words. All told, it was a very short, informal ceremony. Beith came forward, a knife in his palm, and knelt before Adair. Adair took the knife, slashed his palm, the opposite one he'd cut to bind himself to Nathaniel. He watched as the blood welled up, covering his palm, before pressing his hand against the trunk of the tree to join all the

marks of those who'd come before him. When the mark was left, he offered his hand to his sisters and they bound it with a strip of white silk. Adair knelt, and Beith lowered a circlet of purple aster blooms over his brow, the bound stems set in some sort of silver while the leaves petals stirred in the breeze.

Those collected waited with bated breath as Beith backed away to stand at Adair's side. When Adair got to his feet, one by one, those assembled knelt, gazing up at their new king. Finally, Adair raised his hand in a sheepish sort of way, signifying that everyone could stand. Whoops, cheers, laughter and song filled the woods. Immediately, Adair was converged upon by his sisters and closest friends. He gave himself to them, laughing and reaching out to touch their hands, to offer hugs and simple touches, all while his eyes scanned over the tops of their heads, searching for Nathaniel.



Wearing a glamour was peculiar. Nathaniel felt naked—in fact, he was naked. Every time he moved, or felt a stirring of air, he would look frantically down at himself as if to make sure the enchantment was still there. He had a sneaking suspicion that it wasn't as impenetrable as Adair would have lead him to believe, but he tried not to let it bother him, and stood behind rocks or bushes whenever he could.

Nathaniel found himself quite tipsy, though he'd promised himself he'd keep his wits. After what had happened last time he found himself drunk around Adair's kin, he was terrified of a repeat experience. However, absent the Nightshade wine most of the libations offered were of human variety—stolen or swindled or sweet talked over the passing years by the collected fae folk and offered up to toast their new king.

The worst thing that had befallen him thus far had been Beith hoisting Nathaniel bodily over his shoulder and roaring to all and sundry that he, Nathaniel, was the only one present with cock enough to keep a king in thrall—after which Nathaniel had wished to evaporate on the spot and enjoyed many large goblets of mead to drown his embarrassment.

As the evening waned he meandered to the edge of the clearing, searching out solitude and a calm breath of air, watching his faun, a king now, pressed on all sides by loving touches from his people. It left Nathaniel feeling sad and proud in equal measure. He backed slowly into the trees, his final drink in hand, thinking to slip off home soon, and leave the fae folk to their celebrations, which would surely extend past the rising of the sun.

His heart ached to leave, but he didn't think that he could stand a goodbye, and didn't want to dampen Adair's spirits that evening. Nathaniel leaned against a tree, sipping from his goblet, watching Adair through the hazy shimmering light and thinking he had never seemed more beautiful. As he drained his cup, Nathaniel turned his eye from the celebration toward the path that would lead him home, to his mother and brother and away from this strange world. The notion came with a hollow feeling in his chest.

When it was empty, Nathaniel hefted the goblet from hand to hand. It was roughhewn but beautiful, carved from some ruddy wood and polished to shine. He debated for a moment taking it, setting it on the shelf in his bedroom in remembrance of the love he'd found within these trees, but he decided against it. He set it down on a stump and started his path home, steps a bit sluggish from drink, wondering what his chances were of locating his trousers. He thought he'd left the revels far behind, but a tingle down his spine gave him split second warning before a warm hand seized his upper arm.

“Minnow?”

Nathaniel stopped. *Dammit.*

“Why are you sneaking off?”

He turned back toward Adair, and at a glance Nathaniel knew him to be staggering drunk. Nathaniel had hoped to avoid this conversation, and even more did not intend to have it when Adair would most likely forget the details by light of day anyway. “Just searching out some quiet, and cool air.”

Adair stepped toward him, reaching hands to grasp at Nathaniel's waist. His touch was clumsy, but soft and gentle—

not so his forehead crashing down against Nathaniel's, which connected with a painful bang. "I feel badly," Adair whispered.

"About bruising me with your massive goat head?" Nathaniel said with a wince and a laugh. He couldn't resist kissing the tip of Adair's nose.

"No." The faun frowned. "Yes, but no. About earlier, I meant."

"Earlier?"

Adair crowded into Nathaniel's space even more so, and his back bumped against the bark of a nearby tree. The faun braced his hands against the trunk, on either side of Nathaniel's head. He pushed sweet kisses to Nathaniel's cheeks. "I teased you so," he breathed, mouthing along Nathaniel's jaw.

Nathaniel laughed again. "You did," he allowed, "but it was a game I enjoyed immensely."

"I would have you enjoy this immenser. Immense...lier." The faun drew away with the look of one trying desperately to focus. He pressed their foreheads together once more, offering a kiss sweet with the taste of honeyed wine. "I'm going to suck your cock, is what I'm getting at."

Nathaniel's laugh became a gasp as the faun sank to his knees on the grass, pushing strong hands again to his waist, holding him still against the tree. Without his permission, Nathaniel's hands flew to the faun's head, fingers tangling up in his silky golden hair. Adair pushed hot kisses to the bones of Nathaniel's hips before drawing back to gaze up at him with loving, albeit unfocused, green eyes—eyes that Nathaniel should have known would be the end of him.

Nathaniel opened his mouth to say something, but Adair gave a flick of his hand and Nathaniel found the glamour he'd been wearing vanish. With an embarrassed squawk he sought to cover himself.

"Oh Minnow," Adair said, kissing the skin of Nathaniel's thigh and trying to pry his hands apart, "No one is here to see."

Though definitely drunker, Adair was also far stronger, so in lieu of grappling to keep his cock and balls covered Nathaniel sank to his own knees to face this conversation head on, since it seemed the only choice. With a pout, Adair lifted his hands to Nathaniel's cheeks, cradling his face and scrutinizing it with as much care as one lost to sense could muster.

"You have a sad face," he stated. "Why?"

Looking into Adair's eyes, so open and guileless, Nathaniel's courage fled. "Not sad," he equivocated, "merely tired."

That drew a smile to Adair's face. "To bed with you, then," he said.

"Yes."

With speed and strength surprising for one so intoxicated, Adair stood and Nathaniel found himself once more thrown over the shoulder of a drunken faun. "I'd see you safely to our bed," Adair declared, giving Nathaniel's bare ass a loving pat.

Nathaniel struggled. "Put me *down*," he snapped.

Adair stopped immediately, swaying, and set Nathaniel on his feet with a confused look. "You are upset."

"Yes," Nathaniel said, mead bringing to the forefront a frustration that he would have more easily subdued with a sober mind. "No. I'm not certain I—wait," he paused. "Did you say 'our bed'?"

Adair blinked dolefully at him under the light of the moon. "Of course," he said, "In what other bed would I deposit you?"

"That's not—"

"To be sure, plenty would find themselves happy at my mistake," he allowed, unabashedly staring at Nathaniel's naked body.

"Oh for heaven's sake—" Nathaniel turned away, throwing up his hands.

Adair was still prattling on. “My sisters of course, would be delighted to find such an offering—I’m certain Beith would also not turn up his nose—”

“Oh my *God*,” Nathaniel said. “Stop.”

Adair blinked. He looked hurt and confused.

“*Our* bed,” Nathaniel repeated, turning back and stepping close. “Is there such a world where that exists? Not my bed, in Myrna, and yours—here in the forest with your people?”

“Nathaniel,” he started.

“It’s alright,” he said, laying his palm against Adair’s cheek. “I understand.”

“No,” the faun shook his head. “No.”

“You have a responsibility,” he went on, “To your people, to your mother’s legacy.”

“Minnow,” Adair said, his voice lowering to a growl. “Stop this.”

“It’s alright,” Nathaniel said again. “I’m grateful for what we have already shared. You never expected to be named king in my lifetime.”

“You—you said you’d love me for always,” Adair said, eyes burning with the sting of betrayal. “Whatever that meant.”

“I did—”

“Was that a lie, then?”

“Of course not—”

“Do we both still breathe?” The faun seized him by the shoulders, still a bit unsteady on his feet.

“We do,” Nathaniel allowed, looking at the ground, none too steady himself. This conversation may yet kill him, though, he thought.

“Then truthfully I do not see a fucking problem.”

“I can’t spend all my time in the forest,” Nathaniel began, “I have my family, and the people in the village.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Adair seemed angry now. “You think I don’t love you all the more for your work? Your healing?”

“Then—”

“I have done more for this world, our shared world, to be proud of by your side than my mother ever accomplished.”

Nathaniel blushed and looked away. “You would have always done so,” he said.

Adair seized Nathaniel’s chin, hand perhaps a little more aggressive with drink. “No,” he said. “I would have lived alone, empty and broken.”

“I don’t believe that,” Nathaniel said with a scoff.

“Then let me prove it,” Adair said, voice still a bit thick. He moved close to kiss Nathaniel’s neck, slipping a hand down to cup his ass. “By loving you tonight in our bed.”

Nathaniel struggled to keep his wits. “You keep saying our ___”

“You think I didn’t have anything prepared for us both?”

That stopped Nathaniel in his tracks.

“I wanted to share this night with you, only you. And you, what—were you just going to sneak off and never speak to me again?” Adair dropped his hand from Nathaniel’s face, like he was just now realizing why Nathaniel had been alone in the trees. “You weren’t even going to say goodbye?”

Put like that it did seem rather heartless. Nathaniel avoided Adair’s eyes. “I don’t know.”

“How could you do that?”

The question and the heat behind it were like a knife to Nathaniel’s heart and he felt shame swoop through his body, so acute it stole his breath. How *could* he have done that? Nathaniel found himself gaping like a fish on land, the hurt in Adair’s eyes like nothing he’d ever seen, and thinking that it had been him who’d put it there—

“You wish to know of what other things my mother spoke, the day I first brought you to court? Besides to tell me of your father?”

Surprised at the abrupt change of topic, Nathaniel swallowed, unsure if he truly wanted to hear this.

“She told me I must bring you among us,” Adair said, eyes fierce. “She told me that I had to blend our worlds. She already had accepted you as my mate, accepted that you would be by my side.”

Nathaniel’s eyes went wide, but Adair was not finished.

“Even then, before we had spoken love between us,” Adair crowded into him again, slipping desperate hands over his hips, pressing close against him. “Before we had loved together, in your bed, in my cave. She knew.”

“I just don’t see—”

“Minnow,” Adair interrupted. “Do you really imagine that there’s all that much I must do each day to rule the fae folk?”

With a frown, Nathaniel realized they hadn’t ever discussed what the actual day to day governance of the forest looked like.

“Aside from the occasional argument over lovers or territories, there’s really not that much that goes in here.”

“Truly?”

Adair smiled, looking at Nathaniel like he was trying very hard to not to laugh at him. “What were you imagining?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I assumed you’d have to pass laws, or hold court every day—”

This time Adair did laugh. “Minnow, you’ve *been* to court. Nothing happens at court except drinking, fucking and gossiping.”

Nathaniel gulped, hardly daring to believe this might be true, that he could keep this love he’d found. “The past few weeks you’ve been so distant,” Nathaniel said. “You’ve barely had any time for me.”

Adair let out an exasperated sigh. “First of all, I had to listen to everyone argue about the coronation ceremony, since none of us remembered the last one all too clearly.”

Nathaniel grinned in spite of himself, making a mental note to document what he’d seen today for future generations of Adair’s kin.

“Second of all,” Adair added, “I was preparing something for you, for tonight. I wanted to show you how much you mean to me.”

Nathaniel looked at his feet, feeling like a fool. “Oh.”

“Yes.”

In the tense silence between them, a swell of laughter and music rose from the clearing beyond the trees.

“Now,” Adair said, stumbling off a step. “I’m drunk. I’ve just been crowned king. And I’d like to fuck you stupid in the bed I have made for us.”



Leaving the rest of his people to their raucous celebrating, Adair lead Nathaniel by the hand through the trees, farther and farther into the forest.

“Where are you taking me?”

“You’ll see.”

“I thought we were going to bed,” said Nathaniel, and Adair was quite pleased to hear that his voice had dropped low and eager.

“We are.”

He watched as Nathaniel twisted his head around, trying to get his bearings. “This isn’t the way to your cavern.”

“No it is not,” Adair agreed cheerfully. They followed a narrow path, all the more challenging in the dark of night, especially considering neither one was much too sober. “We’re almost there.”

“I hope so,” Nathaniel said with a small yawn. “Or I’ll be asleep by the time we get there.”

Adair pinched his side playfully. “You better not be.”

They walked in silence, save for the occasional curse as Nathaniel stubbed his foot on a stone in their path, and the subsequent giggle Adair couldn’t hold in.

“Here,” Adair said. “We’re here.”

The path before them was lit with fireflies, seeming to mill about on either side of the little goat track they’d been following. At the end of the path, a roughly made wooden ladder ascended toward what Nathaniel at first blushed thought was a gnarled old tree. In fact, however, it was more like a nest—a nest in the shape of a sunburst made entirely of woven branches and thick vines, twisting over each other into an elegant, cone shaped hollow with a bed inside. It was like an enormous cornucopia. Candles and twinkly little lights winked at them from every crevice, casting flickering shadows on the blankets and pillows inside.

Adair slid an arm around Nathaniel’s waist. “The day we went to the beach, and met Sáile, you said you regretted that you couldn’t find a place for just the two of us. So, I made us one.” He steered Nathaniel to the edge of the little glade, where all of the bordering trees had been carved with the same sort of brand. Nathaniel reached out to touch the grooves in the bark and drew his hand back as the symbol glowed upon contact with his fingers.

“What is this?” Nathaniel asked, turning back to look Adair, who seemed quite pleased with himself.

“I’ve warded this place,” Adair told him proudly. “No one will be able to find this part of the forest, ever, except for us.”

Nathaniel couldn’t even speak. “Why—?”

“Believe it or not, Minnow,” Adair said drily, “I know you. I knew as soon as there was talk of my taking my mother’s place that you’d retreat into that incredible mind of yours and tie yourself all up in knots.”

Nathaniel grinned. “I’m sorry.”

Adair took Nathaniel's face in his hands and squinted at him. "Sometimes I feel like I can actually see your thoughts whirring as you puzzle something out. You do not conceal your feelings very well."

"Well, I suppose that's a good thing, in this case."

"A very good thing. Now," he said, gesturing toward the ladder. "Go on."

"After you, Your Radiance."

Adair groaned. "You're going to have to stop calling me that."

The blankets inside their cornucopia were lush and soft, and somehow the space was warm despite the fresh chill of evening. Adair had laid out a bottle of crisp apple wine and two crystal flutes for them to share. They sipped their wine in pleasant, comfortable silence for a while, and when they'd both drained their glasses, Nathaniel cleared his throat. "So," he said. "Have you given any thought as to what you'd like your first act as king to be?"

Adair grinned, wicked, and pulled Nathaniel close for a heated kiss. "Minnow," he said, "I've thought of nothing else."

The End.

Acknowledgements

In the beginning of 2020, like so many people, I was laid off. I was adrift, and had quite a bit of time on my hands. It had been a long time since I'd done any writing, and when I discussed this with a like-minded friend (similarly laid off), we decided to challenge ourselves. For the month of April, we gave each other a list of daily prompts, and for my part, *Crown of Aster* was born. So, Kendra, you deserve a lot of credit (or blame) for inspiring me to write this novel. Though this story has changed a lot from its early days, she gave me so much of the original meat. Snippets of dialogue, story elements, tropes, settings, and even some of my favorite side characters would never have existed without you. You even helped me settle on asters as the titular flower. Not only that, but you were with me as I wrote each draft, as I agonized over every scene, and you helped me line edit with your discerning (see also: infuriating) eye. I don't think I could ever thank you enough.

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About the Author



Emmaline Strange is the author of *Crown of Aster*. She loves to write and read about smooching. She lives in Boston with her husband, dog, and cat, all of whom she loves to smooch. When not smooching, she can usually be found dotting on her plants, baking, or watching far too much television. Ms. Strange is a lover of all things nerdy, from *Dungeons & Dragons*, to *Lord of the Rings*, to the MCU.

She enjoys iced coffee, long walks on the beach, complaining about her feet after long walks on the beach, and long sits on the couch to recover from long walks on the beach.

For updates on upcoming projects, come say hello on Twitter (@EmmalineStrange) where she's always talking about writin', readin', and... well, not so much 'rithmetic.

Wondering what Adair and Nathaniel get up to next?

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