Changelings

By

Carly Bryann Young

© Carly Bryann Young 2010
Registered with the Writer's Guild of America West, #1433454
Justonthehorizon@yahoo.com

Prologue

Miranda's Journal, Entry #1

I've never kept a journal before – I always figured that in the future, the planet would be an overcooked wasteland ruled by leather-clad anarchists, and we'd all be fighting for the remaining food and water. In which case, nobody's gonna care about my teenage dramas – except maybe to remember the good ole' days.

And even then, future historians sifting through Twitter could find more of that stuff than they'd ever want to know.

But suddenly, the future is here.

And it's not quite what I imagined: dangerous anarchists are moving to conquer, but they're not just simple thugs – they're not even from this world.

They're not alien invaders either – at least, not in the way you're probably thinking.

They're brilliant, charming, and wield powers so great that no human being stands a chance against them.

So if you find this book while scavenging for supplies, maybe it will help explain a few things.

My name is Miranda McConnell, and this is my record of the Fae Invasion.

Chapter One
"Circle"

When Gordi came to, he was in a different world.

He did not consider the Otherworld his home, despite having spent most of his life there. Yet this place was as foreign to him as the Otherworld had been, when he was taken there as a young boy.

There was a feeling of warmth on his face and his shaggy hair, which for years had been unacquainted with brushes, scissors, and soap. He had not awoken fully, so he did not question the sensation until a moment later. His eyes snapped opened and he bolted upright at the same time, mind suddenly alert and racing – he was no longer in the cold and cavernous chamber, he realized. He was not in the '*Other*world' at all. He was in THE world.

Gordi blinked against the harsh light that assaulted his eyes, which were accustomed to the dim, pale glow of the plants, gems, wisps and even people that populated that dark world he had left behind. This type of yellowish light illuminated all of his oldest memories, but he could not recall its name or source – and it was too strong for him to locate it here in this new environment, at least not until his eyes adjusted.

Small pale flowers, the blossoms of a Hawthorne tree, covered him. The dirt and grime from the Pits caused them to stick to his tunic, boots, hair, and skin. Grinding his teeth, Gordi brushed them off with disdain. Hawthorne trees were native plants of the Otherworld, and only grew in places where the veil between worlds was weak. When the veil has been rent asunder to allow passage, they spring up overnight. This tree had not been there until Gordi's arrival.

The tree had another name, deemed derogatory by his former captors. 'Faery Thorn'.

There was something smooth and metallic underneath Gordi's left hand. He looked down to see the face of a worn iron shield, barely covered with the brittle remnants of age-old paint – white, with two intersecting bands of crimson, the center one running down the length of the shield and the other horizontally, near the three sharp points crowning the top. The Redcrosse Shield.

Gordi was glad to see that it had followed him, for he had risked the success of an already unlikely escape in order to procure it from the wall of the treasure room. This shield had protected a fabled human hero, the Redcrosse Knight, from the fires of his enemies. As Gordi slid his left arm through the ancient leather strap and grasped the rusted handle, he prayed that it would do the same for him.

Finally able see clearly around him, Gordi noticed that he was sitting in the middle of a circle – a ring of closely-grown toadstools surrounded him like hostile, diminutive soldiers standing guard. Like the Faery Thorn, this was the mark of unnatural forces at work – but circles of this kind were even more ominous, steeped in mysterious lore. They were once used as a trap to ensnare unsuspecting prey like a magical net. "*Great*," he thought, "*a damn fungus circle*."

Gordi stood up, wary – the last time he saw a ring like this was the moment just before his life changed, and he was taken away from all he knew.

Trepidation gave way to something else – there was no one around as far as Gordi could see. That was not their way – in the Otherworld they would have descended upon any human in the same moment of their transgression, for they had the help of their uncanny senses to alert them when something was amiss.

There was an old rhyme, a song of warning, which they would sometimes sing to intimidate children like Gordi – it contained most of what Gordi knew about the circles. He smiled, eager to put its accuracy to the test.

"He what tills the Faery's green, nay luck again shall have," Gordi recited aloud, mocking the vicious sing-song tones of his childhood 'caretakers'. He kicked at the grass where he had just been sitting, upsetting the turf and sending it flying in clumps.

There was no sudden change to indicate Gordi was doomed or cursed for all eternity for what he had done. No host of angry magical beings came to admonish him, let alone dole out the punishment he had earned.

Encouraged, he went on.

"...And he what spills a Faery's Ring, betide him want and woe...." he stomped on the heads of the toadstools, feeling them squish under his tattered boot. He worked them into the mud. "...For weirdless days and weary nights are his til his dyin' day." Having routed the toadstool's paltry line of defense, he stepped out of the circle. "And he what goes by the faery ring, nay dule nor pine shall see."

Gordi finally lifted his gaze upward, to see the source of the light – it was coming from somewhere above, filtering through the intertwined tree branches and autumn leaves. Now Gordi was fully convinced that the rhyme meant nothing. Most likely the Fae devised it to protect their portal doors from being vandalized by the humans, who were naïve to the limitations of magic.

Humans used it to warn their children against going near Circles – hearing these words repeated by the children they kidnapped, the Fae twisted it to their own purpose: it made the children afraid to go near the Otherworld Circles which were, in fact, the pathways home.

Gordi looked at the broken Faery Ring. "And he what cleans a Faery Ring..." There was a tree branch nearby, and he picked it up, preparing to break one final taboo. "...An easy death shall die."

He placed the end of the branch at the stem of the nearest toadstool, and uprooted it, ploughing underneath and through the next one, and the next, drawing a circle in the mud where the toadstools once stood. Within moments, the Circle was destroyed. His objective complete, Gordi flung aside the branch.

"Well?!" Gordi yelled loudly, recklessly. "What are you waiting for?!" There was no answer save the echo of his voice. Gordi laughed, – the triumphant, manic laugh of a prisoner set free. The sound was foreign to his own ears, and sounded almost insane.

Perhaps he was. But he was free.

Gordi breathed in deep, filling his lungs with the slightly damp and heavy forest air, and let it out with a feeling of satisfaction. He was no longer afraid, and knew what needed to be done.

He needed to find home. His family.

Ice-cold fear stabbed his gut – the reprieve had been short-lived. He did not know where he was, let alone how far away his parents might be. He could not say where his home was located, and even if he were to find it, he could not be certain that was still their dwelling.

He didn't know if they were still alive.

Gordi quickly brushed away the thought – he would not learn anything wasting time in pondering the dark possibilities. He needed to get moving.

Years of training and numerous war-games made it easy for him to traverse the woods and undergrowth without producing too much sound. Gordi knew he was not the only one who had entered the portal – he could not afford to be caught unawares. This yellow-orange light, while warm and pleasant, made him uncomfortably visible.

It was about to get even worse. The trees and foliage was starting to thin, letting him see more of the sky. He was making his way, instinctively, out of the forest, and into a much more open terrain. In this openness, he could also see a road, made out of a hard surface of solid grey. Along this road were parked cars – he remembered cars, both riding in them and owning a few toy versions – and many of them were halfway submerged in water. In fact, Gordi had to walk on lawns or trudge through murky water, for debris of various kinds had

plugged the drains and turned the roads into rivers. Lining either side of the road were tall trees with all their branches cut off, replaced with metal brackets that had long black cords strung between them. In the distance, he could see the faint outline of buildings. These things were familiar, if only in a hazy, dream-like way.

Gordi left the cover of the tree-line and stepped onto the road. It was painted and decorated with shiny objects along the sides and through the center. As he traversed it and saw the road branch off into other paths, he saw that some were painted differently. Sometimes the lines were yellow and sometimes white. Occasionally there would be a painted 'bridge', or strange symbols, or a depiction of a helmeted man riding atop a mechanism with two wheels. He could only guess what any of this meant.

It was very quiet. He could not see or hear anyone – which had been reassuring when he was concerned about recapture. Now that he was searching for some sign of his human kinsmen, he found it unnerving. The state of the buildings caused equal concern – they seemed to show signs of recent damage. Fire damage, primarily - some of the remains were still smoldering. There were also fissures running through the ground, pulling houses down into uneven crevasses and absorbing some of the water. There were unnatural holes where earth had clearly been uprooted, and where there had once been doorways there were now gaping cave-like wounds in the front facades of building, like they had been blasted through. But when Gordi glanced inside, he saw earth and rocks piled in the entryways. Many of the large boulders were far too heavy for the average person to lift, let alone throw against such flimsy things as wooden and glass doors.

Gordi hoped that he had not arrived at the scene of a recent battle – it would not help to be caught up in a conflict, for he did not know the players nor would he understand the situation. However, if his parents were involved, he might not have much choice – if he was to survive, he needed to ascertain their condition, and who their allies might be.

A large symbol-covered sign, propped up with pale stone pillars on either side, appeared before him. It read 'Welcome to Hawthorne', which the illiterate Gordi had no way of knowing, but the meaning was not lost upon him, for what he did know was that he had seen this sign before, and recognized the area beyond it somewhat – there was a building that was unmistakably his old school, because of its distinctive and familiar playground equipment. This was the town he lived in before he was captured. Relieved, he walked past the sign and into town.

There was a large yellow vehicle in the middle of the road, obscuring his path. Gordi remembered this too – he had ridden it to school. He approached the door and peered inside. In the driver's seat was a charred and mangled human body.

He backed away, more because of the putrid stench of burnt flesh than out of horror. Gordi had seen all forms of death, though this scene was disturbing for other reasons. The driver had clearly not had a chance to rise from his seat when he died – his charcoal-skeleton hands were still clutching the wheel. The bodies of the children in the back were all seated. While the outside of the bus was damaged here and there, it was nothing compared to the completely burnt interior. Gordi had seen this sort of thing before, but it was never the work of humans.

The buildings were becoming increasingly familiar. Gordi could feel that he was getting close – this was a residential area, full of suburban homes. He looked at the street signs, and at the first one that seemed familiar, he turned the corner.

And that's when he saw it. His home.

Gordi approached the front yard, crouching down to about the height he would have been, an afternoon long ago when he was playing catch with his father. The glove was too big for him at the time – so too was the ball. Gordi was not as dexterous back then as he was now, so he would fumble the ball and go running after it, trying to catch it before it could roll into the street. As the daylight waned, his mother appeared in the open doorway behind his father, beckoning at them to come in for dinner. After that, his memory of that afternoon faded.

Gordi considered his options – he could try the door, but it was closed and most likely locked. Besides, he wanted to be sure first that his parents still lived there – he did not want to cause unnecessary confusion and alarm if he could help it. Gordi walked across the lawn to the front window, peering inside, hoping to catch a glimpse of the occupants.

Instead, what he saw was a girl of roughly his own age, which he guessed to be about eighteen – though he couldn't be certain, since he had not celebrated a birthday since he was five years old. She was dragging a large trunk chest into a ransacked living room. It was his trunk chest, where he once stored all his most prized possessions. The girl threw open the lid and began rummaging through it aggressively.

There were smudges on her hands, face and neck, and travel-worn clothing. Her boots, pants and jacket were already made of brown materials, which made the dirt less apparent, but underneath the jacket was a low-cut, tight-fitting tank top of a dark greenish color with a gold sheen, which seemed incongruous with the practical nature of her other garments.

The girl looked weary, with wind-blown chestnut hair and dark hollows around her eyes. She was huffing and muttering to herself, throwing things out of the trunk... one of which was the same leather glove from his memory, which she carelessly tossed over her shoulder. A gasp escaped Gordi.

She heard it. Gordi ducked just in time to elude her sight, but could feel and hear the footsteps of her boots as she approached the window to investigate. He had made a foolish mistake, giving away his presence, and it was time to correct it – he moved around the corner, and made his way to the back of the house.

There was a wood fence around the back yard. Without a moment's thought he grabbed on and swung his legs over the top, landing on the other side without making a sound. Gordi approached the back door, and looked under the mat. Sure enough, the key was there. He had followed his mother's advice to him, about what he should do if he should ever need to enter the house without their help, and it still applied after all these years. Gordi quietly slid the key into the lock, and opened the back door.

He moved past the kitchen and into the house, picked up the discarded baseball glove, and slipped it on. His hand had grown, and no longer swam inside it – the glove was a perfect fit.

Meanwhile, the girl had given up on seeing anything outside the window, shrugging it off as a false alarm. She closed the drapes anyway, and turned around to resume her search – but when she did, she saw Gordi there before her, crouched with the glove in hand. She stiffened.

"It is surprising the back door key was still under the mat," Gordi announced, by way of explanation. He gave her a smile. "Greetings." Her reaction is not what Gordi anticipated. She backed up, her laurel-green eyes wide and her face pale. Gordi realized she regarded him as a threat, and was about to flee. "Wait! I must speak with you!"

She shook her head, gaping, like she could not believe her ears. "We are in the middle of the *apocalypse*," she seethed, body and voice shaking with rage, "and *now* you want to *talk*." And with that, she bolted for the front door.

As she passed, Gordi grabbed her shoulder, hoping to turn her around and prevent her from leaving. But before he knew it, the girl jerked her shoulder out of his grasp, spun around, and kicked him in the gut.

The kick forced the air out of Gordi's lungs and caused him to crumple down to one knee – something that would never have happened if he had been prepared for such a violent reaction. It had not occurred to him that he might be considered a trespasser in his own home.

Through pain-narrowed eyes, Gordi could see that her expression of hostility had melted away, replaced by one of confusion. She drew back slightly, looking the boy up and down. "You're... you're a *human*."

"Yes," he groaned. She assumed he wasn't human – that meant she somehow knew about the trespasses of non-humans, despite their best efforts to keep their activities covert. "And you must be a warrior."

She let out a relieved breath. "Not really," she said, a bit sheepishly. "I'm not even that great at martial arts. I only got to a green belt, before... well, before all of *this* happened." The girl offered Gordi a hand to help pull him to his feet. He took it. Her eyes passed over the shield, and her face took on a queasy expression. She let go the moment Gordi regained his footing, shuffling slowly backwards to distance herself from the shield.

"You thought I was a Fae. I forgive you," Gordi reassured her. "By what name are you called?"

"Miranda. Miranda McConnell."

"What are you doing here?"

"W-What?" The question caught Miranda off guard. Gordi thought it was a completely legitimate question, considering the state of the room and the urgency of her demeanor. But to Miranda, the idea of a shield-wielding boy in a tunic having the gall to ask her what *she* was doing was beyond belief. "I...I live here." There was no reaction from Gordi, but she could tell that he wasn't convinced. She exhaled. "Unofficially. I was looking for something to fight the invaders, but it isn't here."

"Invaders? There was an invasion?"

Miranda blinked at him, confused. Gordi advanced on her and grabbed her shoulder with his shield-free hand, imploringly. "The Fae crossed the barrier! Is that why all the humans are gone?!"

Taken aback by his sudden intensity, and not wanting to be close to the nauseating shield again, Miranda squirmed away. She regarded him with puzzlement. "You knew about the Fae, but you didn't know they invaded?"

Gordi closed his eyes and swallowed – she had just confirmed his fear. He turned away from her, holding his head. "That is how I escaped the Otherworld. It all makes sense now." He looked back at her. "This used to be *my* home. Before I was taken-"

"I know."

"What? How would you know?"

Miranda bit her lip. She moved to a nearby shelf, and lifted up one of the framed pictures. She carefully offered it to Gordi.

What he saw was a photograph depicting three people: one was his father, greyer and a little stouter than he remembered, with an uncharacteristically guarded expression – he had his arm around his wife, Gordi's mother, similarly changed and giving the camera a strained smile. To his mother's left, standing about a step away, was a teenage boy with his dark hair gelled into spikes. He had his hands thrust casually into the pockets of his long jacket of black leather, a red shirt hugged his torso underneath, and a silver pendant of a winged drake glinted against his chest.

His gold irises shone from within dark-lined eyes. His chin was turned down slightly, giving the impression that he was peering from under the frame of his dark eyebrows. The corners of his mouth were turned up in a subtle smirk – his demeanor indicated a reluctance to be in the picture, and that he had only obliged due to the insistence of whoever was behind the camera.

But there was only one detail that came to Gordi's attention.

The boy in the picture... looked *exactly* like him.

After a second of shock and disbelief, Gordi startled and let go of the picture frame like it was red-hot. The picture frame fell to the floor, and the impact sent a hairline fracture through the front pane of glass, right over the images of his parents – the fracture stopped short of Gordi's doppelganger.

"That's not me!"

"No, it's not. Before the invasion, they left members of their kind here to infiltrate our society. Like sleeper-agents, I guess."

"A Changeling," Gordi whispered.

Gordi stomped on the picture crushing the glass completely. Miranda flinched, causing Gordi to take a deep breath to calm himself. "You know him?" he growled, his voice still tight with anger. "This... *Fae*?"

She lowered her eyes. "Yes," she said softly. She had an unreadable, faraway expression. "Axel."

Gordi lifted up his foot and glared at the now-broken picture on the floor. "*My* name was Axel," he said quietly. He turned to Miranda. "But that name is no longer mine. Not after the Fae took me away to their world, when I was a child."

"They abducted you to steal your identity." She shook her head, sadly. "I'm really sorry. What would you like me to call you?"

Gordi shrugged. “All I have left is my slave name,” he answered, resigned, “You may call me Gordi.”

A corner of Miranda’s mouth twitched upward, in a half-hearted attempt to smile. “It would make things less confusing,” she said, dryly.

After a moment of silence, Gordi’s demeanor changed, taking on a militaristic terseness. “Where are my parents?”

Miranda stiffened, finding his tone almost accusatory. “The Fae took human captives,” she admitted, “but I don’t know where they’re being held.”

“Then we must begin a search.” Gordi marched, with resolute purpose, out the back door.

Miranda grabbed the door before it closed, frowning indignantly. “*Begin*? What do you think I’ve been doing?”

Suddenly, the sound of a key entering the door lock caused Miranda to glance behind her at the front door.

She saw the handle turn, and the front door open, followed by a teenage boy clad in black leather stepping into the house – Axel. He looked just like he did in the picture, save for the silver dragon sword in a silver scabbard that now hung at his side, connected to his belt by a chain.

His eyes locked with hers. His face registered surprise and recognition.

Miranda rushed out the back door as fast as she could, letting it slam behind her.

Outside, she ran past Gordi at break-neck speed, and he wondered at her sudden panic. He didn’t have to wonder long – for just as Miranda approached the backyard fence with the intention of climbing over it, she was stopped in her tracks by a sudden burst of flame that appeared before her. It burned away the fence and forced her to retreat a few steps.

From out of the inferno Axel stepped out, casual and cool as if he had simply walked through a door. The flames rapidly contracted and folded into themselves behind him, as if sucked into a vacuum, and then ceased to exist.

Axel stopped very close to her. “Miranda,” he said, in a bright and friendly tone. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you.” He reached out to her, as if to affectionately brush a strand of hair from her face.

She swatted his hand aside, baring her teeth. “Don’t touch me!”

Axel shrugged and gave her a patient smile, as if he was dealing with a child who was angry over something trivial. “Listen babe,” he said gently, “I know you’re upset-” Infuriated, Miranda threw a punch – he caught her fist in his palm, just before her knuckles could reach

his face. He grabbed her hand tightly, and forced it downward hard, painfully. "...But you really need to calm down."

Gordi slammed his shoulder into Axel's side, knocking him to the ground.

"What the *hell*?" demanded the surprised Axel, who seemed not to have noticed Gordi's presence until that moment. Now that his doppelganger had gained his full attention, Axel's eyes widened, and his pupils narrowed to pinpoints. "YOU. What're *you* doing here, Fetch?" he said, making the last word a curse.

Gordi placed himself between Axel and Miranda. "Miranda, run."

"Don't be a hero! He *will* kill you," warned Miranda.

Axel frowned, an indignant little-boy pout. "I don't *kill*." Getting to his feet, his eyebrows and chin lifted snobbishly as he brushed himself off. "But stick your nose where it doesn't belong, and it will backfire." Axel's palm lit with a small flame – he flung his arm in a sweeping and dismissive motion, sending a blaze of magical fire at Gordi. Axel seemed confident that would be the end of it, but Gordi raised his shield and blocked the flame from reaching him. Gordi lowered the shield and stared at Axel, defiant.

Axel regarded him a few moments, coolly – apparently he would not be rid of this nuisance so easily. "What do you want, human?" he asked, with a hint of exasperation. "Revenge?"

"Something like that."

"Hm." Axel raised an eyebrow contemptuously. "Well, I'm afraid you're under-equipped." To demonstrate, he placed a hand on the silver dragonhead sword hilt at his side, and drew it from its scaled sheathe. "I prefer evenly matched duels," he continued, like a mock aristocrat from a previous age. He inspected his blade – not because he needed to check its condition, but rather as a chance to display its wickedly sharp, gleaming edge to Gordi. "If you need time to locate a suitable weapon, I'll be free this Saturday."

As an answer, Gordi charged forward with a battle-yell. Axel smirked, amused by what he saw as a human eager for death. He raised his sword for what he assumed would be a fight-ending stroke.

He assumed wrong.

Gordi raised his shield at the last moment, and used it to parry aside Axel's sword arm. He then pushed forward and drove the shield against Axel's torso. The moment the shield touched Axel, he sucked in air like a man about to drown – a painful coldness seared through his torso and his parried arm, causing him to drop his sword – his hand convulsed, tightening

into an agonized claw. Nausea radiated sickeningly through his entire body. Shivering from the chill, Axel bent over, holding his stomach with his unaffected hand.

"Iron," he said, with dread. "An iron shield. Heh." He smiled ruefully. "More evenly matched than I thought."

Gordi raised his shield over him, preparing to bash Axel's skull in – but Miranda grabbed his arm, trying to restrain him.

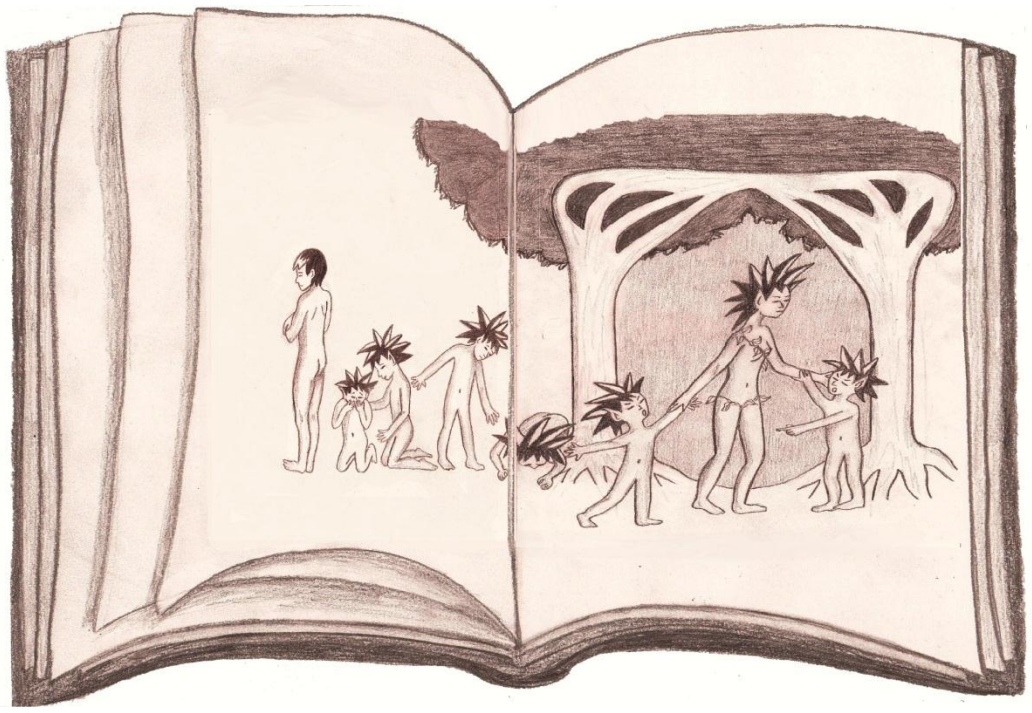
"Gordi, stop! There's already been too much death!"

Gordi turned sharply to stare at her, a bestial look in his golden eyes. Meanwhile, the pupil of Axel's eyes narrowed to slits – he decided to take advantage of the moment by dissolving into flame. The flame disappeared, and Axel was gone.

"NO!" yelled Gordi into the empty air, though it was too late. "GET BACK HERE, DAMN YOU!!" Once again, he received only an echo. Miranda tugged at him, urging him onward – she was anxious to leave this place as quickly as possible. Crestfallen and head hanging, he followed her.

Axel watched them travel toward the setting sun with unblinking eyes – he was in the upstairs of a ruined home, looking out through a gaping hole in the wall and ceiling that made it look like an open dollhouse. He was leaning on the wall on the edge of the opening, in shadow.

"Well Miranda, it seems that you have a very specific taste in men." His pupils returned to slits, and his eyes glowed. Two curved, talon-like spikes emerged from the back of his leather jacket, through holes that had already been punctured through. They rose, and then grew a branch-off that descended downward. Leathery skin flaps unfurled in the space between like a ship's sail, creating bat-like wings – he stretched, working them out like cramped limbs that had fallen asleep. "But soon enough you'll see... he's no replacement for me." With one flap of his wings, he took to the air, and was gone.



Miranda's Journal, Entry #2

Fae & humans are sibling races same father, different mother. Humans descend from Adam and Eve. Fae descend from Adam and Lilith.

Lilith was an angel, a gardener of Eden, until she became Adam's forbidden companion... and she was banned from heaven. Adam and Lilith had many children: the Fae.

The Fae did whatever they wanted – because their souls were bound to the Earth, they would never experience heaven or hell. This bothered Adam, who confronted Lilith. What followed was the 1st divorce. Lilith took off with the kids, leaving Adam alone in the Garden.

Over time, the Fae evolved into five distinct magical bloodlines – four still thrive to this day, but one is all but extinct.

Lovers of the air and skies took on bird and insect traits, manipulating the weather and creating violent storms according to their whims. They were the sprites, pixies, harpies, vilas, giant birds, and all winged creatures of lore such as gryphons, perytons and pegasi. They became Sylphs.

Lovers of mountain caves were solid like their dwellings, creating earthquakes and avalanches in order to protect the hidden treasures they so highly prized. They only ventured out when the sky was dark, hunting like animals in the wild. They were the golems and gargoyles of stone, the giants, the trolls, ogres, orcs, minotaurs, goblins, gremlins, animal kobolds, centaurs, hulders, grimalkin cats, and barghest dogs. They became Gnomes.

Lovers of water mimicked the creatures they swam with, controlling the turbulent seas, and could even melt into water itself. They were the selkies, the kelpies, the sirens, mysterious Mer-people of lore – tricksters who drowned unlucky sailors for fun. They became Undines.

Lovers of heat morphed into cold-blooded, scaly reptiles with fangs of poison and wings like a bat. They were known in ancient legends as gorgons, vampires, jinn, ifrits, basilisks, demons, and... dragons.

They were the lindworms, the wyverns, the hydras, the dracs, the monstrous fire-breathing beasts of the West, and the great flying serpents of the East. They were the Salamanders.

Chapter Two
"Fetch"

Salamanders dressed predominately in black and red, form-fitted outfits lounged about on fancy pillows sipping wine, or moving gracefully past red gauzy curtains in order to partake of the decadent spread on the feast table. Most of the Salamanders allowed their iridescent scales to show around their brows and curve around their dark-lined eyes, creating an elegant mask.

The partygoers were indistinguishable from human punk-goths, but the official guards and attendant staff members were dressed in the traditional armor-like garb of their culture, which included breastplates of red scale, loose-fitted red pants, black boots, and of course a weapon or two – which varied from daggers to long blades.

Where they were gathered was once the lobby of the town's most upscale hotel and casino, built in an old-fashioned style that evoked early twentieth-century glamour. After the invasion, the Salamanders needed a place to crash that would suit their purposes and life of leisure, so they spent an entire month remodeling the building to be their new lair. All the wood fixtures were removed, and the walls were stripped down to the red brick. They hired Gnomes to transmute all the fixtures and tables into a reddish-gold metal.

To human eyes, it would have looked like an interior decorating job commissioned by the lord of hell.

The room was mostly dark, filled with thick smoke that smelled like a combination of sulfur – the Salamander's natural smell – and burning incense lamps placed on nearly every table, for they could breathe smoke better than regular air. The power stations were shut down during the invasion, and the Fae did not bother to turn them back on. They left the ornate light fixtures, but threw out the electric light bulbs, replacing them with will-o-wisps – small ghostly flames, the souls of deceased Salamanders, that dimly lit the dark, smoky interior. The Salamander wisps were usually red or orange, giving the impression of torches in a dark cave that echoed with the sounds of gambling and tinkling glasses.

A center fountain that was designed to display cascading water was now filled with blood-red wine, flowing down into a pool where the new inhuman tenants could refill their glasses and goblets. Around this fountain waited three beautiful Salamander girls, who stood out as the only ones who didn't seem interested in talking, flirting or interacting with anyone else. They seemed to be guarding a black, jagged electric guitar placed between them, balanced on the fountain's edge.

Sitting primly beside it was Etheline Seraphino, a sour-faced girl in a long skirt that showed off one leg, her feet shod with black stiletto heels. Across the front of her black leather corset a bandolier strap was slung, containing vials of glowing liquid. She was engrossed in a dusty tome that she held in her lap with her gloved hands – as she read, she ran her tongue along the edge of her fangs in a habit of concentration.

Bindi McCay was sitting on the ground in front of the guitar, dreamily braiding her impossibly long hair and humming some eerie tune. Her dress had a fancy lattice-lace collar that turned into a slinky dress with waist-high slits on both sides that showed off her legs. On her feet were gold gladiator sandals, around her wrist were gold serpent bracelets, and at her waist was a coiled whip.

On the opposite side of the guitar from Etheline, reclining length-wise on fountain edge, was the eternally frowning Tanis Long, wearing a sleeveless drape-collared top, tight-fitting capris and small curved-toe shoes. Her eyes were half-closed, bored, her temple propped up on the palm of her hand – which looked like a dangerous thing to do, since her fingers were capped with long, razor-sharp gold claws. She was the most aggressive and tomboyish of the three, which was probably in reaction to the fact that she was the smallest and the most cherubic. Her hair was bobbed, with two pieces tied into pigtails, the ends gelled into spikes.

Gold-colored eyes with slitted pupils watched them and the other Salamanders. Lord Drake was the oldest Salamander in the room, and used to be the most powerful of his kind. Now, he was too tired to be able to change back and forth between his true form, that of a humanoid dragon, and the appearance of a handsome man that he had used to guile and charm the humans of a bygone era – when he was known as Sir Francis Drake.

It did not matter anymore. Only the Salamanders mattered, and they were an unruly and rebellious lot by nature. It impressed them far more to see him as a dragon, bearing the wickedly curved horns that only grew upon the heads of royalty, sitting in a throne shaped like the gaping mouth of a dragon. The red cushion upon which he sat was supposed to represent its long forked tongue, the two prongs of which supported his feet.

But it was all theatrics – back in his Changeling days, in the court of Queen Elizabeth, it would have been called 'pomp and pageantry.'

He watched Salamanders at the bar drinking flaming cocktails of green absinthe – they were able to drink straight from the glass, due to their natural imperviousness to fire. Behind the counter, a scantily-clad female bartender holding two cups breathed fire onto one and began making a Blue Blazer, passing the flaming alcohol between the two cups to create an

arc of blue-tinged flame. He felt a sense of envy watching her manipulate the fire that he could no longer produce with his raspy, laborious breath.

A dinner-bell rang, and the low, hissy murmurs of the Salamanders ceased. Suddenly, the center fountain burst into flame – to the delight of the trio of Salamander girls at its base, who were now on their feet and bubbling over with energy. Out of the flames, Axel stepped out with a goblet in hand.

"We left behind our homes, and we defeated the human infestation – it's time we celebrate," announced Axel. All of the Salamanders applauded and cheered, but none so enthusiastically as the trio, whose high-pitched, fan-girl screeches shattered the glasses of several perturbed bystanders. "But first," he continued, once the noise died down, "a toast – to my father, Lord Drake." The Salamanders who did not already have a drink crowded around the fountain and scooped up the flaming wine in their cups.

Axel raised his goblet, and they raised theirs in return, crying "Hail!" Axel watched as his father was offered a goblet by a female attendant – she brought it to his lips and tipped it up carefully, but he coughed as it went down his throat. He waved her off. Axel tried to keep himself from wincing – he didn't like seeing his father like this.

When he was first reunited with Drake seven years prior, the old dragon lord was still in excellent condition. Axel admired him so much that, despite having been raised to believe his father was Hawthorne's twice-elected human mayor and his mother was the no-nonsense principal of Hawthorne High, he took to being Drake's son immediately.

Now, his beloved biological father was falling apart before his eyes, due to the toxic effects of iron. Drake had already exposed himself to the world of iron too much in his youth – Axel had insisted he stay in Orbis Alia. But Drake refused, for he did not believe Axel was ready for the throne. Besides, this return to their homeland was the culmination of a lifetime's work, and Drake was not about to miss seeing the future he had created for his people.

Axel drained his cup, sincerely wishing for the old dragon's health to somehow improve. Tanis slinked up from the bottom of the fountain, smiling at him seductively. Axel nodded at her with polite acknowledgement, and passed the empty cup to her. Tanis admired the cup for a moment, before Bindi and Etheline pulled her down, clawing at it – she hissed them away, baring her fangs.

"And now, it's time for some music," said Axel. He beckoned toward the Salamander girls, who stopped fighting over the cup, only to fight over who would give him the guitar. Somehow, between the three competing efforts, it managed to be successfully passed upward into Axel's grasp. He slipped on the shoulder strap, and struck the first rumbling cords.

And then, he began to sing. His voice appropriately eerie, he sang an original rock ballad of his own making, a love song. His voice echoed over all of the Salamanders in the lobby.

"*Like shining glass, but not as clear*
Gave off light, but lived in the dark
Where you made others pay your price
O beauteous queen, it ends tonight."

The Salamanders began to move, slowly twisting and swaying to the music like entranced snakes to a charmer's tune.

"*You made the Undine dance on shards,*
Surrounded by your laughing guards

From the Sylph you took her heart
Yet trusted him, that wasn't smart

Dragon-maid crowned with fire true
She tamed the wolf, to escape from you.

Now she's gone, the queen of ages past
The power remains, but its waning fast."

Satisfied that he had them within his control, he launched into the more intense, raw part of the song with gusto, ramping it into a higher gear. The Salamanders roared in unison with every mention of 'her', the hated Mad Queene Glorianna.

"Her blood
Inside your veins
Her mirror
It's the same pale face
Are you really
going to take her place?"

His Salamander audience had gone wild – their dancing became frenzied, as the light of the wisps flickered like a strobe light. The Salamander trio, easily the best dancers in the room, were lifted up by male partners over the mosh pits. They grew their wings out, twirling from one upraised hand to another, letting their wings fan out and slice the air elegantly, like the fans and skirts of Spanish dancers.

Axel stopped strumming the guitar, his voice becoming softer and more sincere.

"Must we dance on shards of broken glass?
You have my heart, will you give it back?
Will you lock me away, or make me run,
Or burn me like the blinding sun?"

Far from the building, Axel's voice was heard – by the girl he had written the song about.

She wasn't within earshot – in fact, she wasn't yet awake. But the words filtered through her dreaming mind, making it like a receiver for a signal that only she could hear, and see – for in her dream the hazy form of Axel appeared, looking straight at her. She could not look away from those eyes. She wanted him to go away and leave her be, so she could dream of her parents, her sister, the way things were before, in peace. Instead, he kept tormenting her every night, turning every possible dream into a nightmare...

"*Miranda...*" dream-Axel whispered, voice drawn out like a snake's hiss.

Axel's hair and clothing changed - so did the environment around him, which began as smoke and shadows, and now had a faint pinkish-gold hue.

"Miranda." His voice had changed too – it was less cajoling and more terse, almost a rebuke.

"GET AWAY!" she yelled in frustration.

This new Axel blinked at her, puzzled, and backed away a step. It took Miranda a moment to realize that she was looking up at Gordi, and that she was now awake.

She pulled herself up and turned to sit on the park bench she had been sleeping on, rubbed her aching temple with a groan. Now that there was room, Gordi placed a plastic shopping bag full of food and drink on the bench beside her.

"I thought it would be best to locate supplies, before the fire-orb in the sky returned," he said, in his dry, matter-of-fact way.

"Wha...oh, you mean the *sun*?"

"Sun." A small smile flickered on Gordi's mouth – he finally knew a name for the golden light. "Yes, that's what I meant – the Otherworld doesn't have one. Everything glows over there." Gordi set his shield down against the bench and sat down. She groaned, holding her stomach.

"Something wrong?" asked Gordi, concerned.

"Just a stomach-ache. I hope you remembered to bring me the T n' T ..." she searched through the bag and was relieved to find a can of green tea, and a container of Tums. Removing them, she happily jumped to her feet and took off down the sidewalk.

He picked up the bag and followed her, taking out a beef jerky package and biting at the plastic top. Miranda smiled, noticing his difficulty, and removing it from his mouth – she found the small indentation on the side, tore along the perforated edge, and popped open the ziplock before handing it back to him. Gordi, who had been watching this process intently, smiled sheepishly and ate the jerky in silence for a few moments.

"This food was very easy to get," he said, in the process of chewing.

"A perk of the end times," she said, popping a couple Tums into her mouth, "nobody around to ask for money." She washed it down with the tea. "It's weird, the first day was chaos. I mean, one day magic doesn't exist, and the next day you're getting attacked by an entire horde of armed fairytale creatures throwing lightning and fire at you. A lot of people didn't believe it at first. They didn't fight back or even run, they just kinda stared, or ran around in a daze, like they thought it was a big prank or something. The Fae were able to just cut them down... or worse. Then the police and the military ran in, guns blazing – but the bullets didn't work, because they were made of lead and not iron. So it was over in no time."

Gordi offered her piece of jerky. She wrinkled her nose. "Mm-mm, I don't like meat." Instead, she reached into the bag and found a chocolate snack cake.

Curious, Gordi lifted the green tea can out of her grasp, and took a sip. He made a sour face. "I don't know how you drink that."

"Mm, Roxie says that. *I'm* the one who always asked to play tea-party."

"Roxie?"

"My little sister." Miranda beamed with pride. "She's not a pest, like most are. You'll like her."

Gordi looked away, focusing on the road ahead with a downcast expression. "You are certain... that I shall meet her?"

Miranda stopped and turned toward him. "Yes," she said, with utter conviction.

"I assume you knew my parents," said Gordi quietly. She nodded in response, and he asked "What were they like?"

"I saw a lot of them, actually. Your mother was the principal of my highschool, and your father was the mayor of Hawthorne. They were the most normal people I knew – strict and sort of traditional, but very kind." Then she added, softly "We'll find them, Gordi."

Just as she said these words, a shadow seemed to pass over them. They looked up, to see billowing clouds covering the sun, and moving in unison to cover the skies in grey.

"Weird," murmured Miranda.

Gordi frowned. "The Sylphs." Miranda gave him a puzzled look, so he explained. "They control the weather."

"Why would they want to turn a nice day into a stormy one?"

"They are trying to block out the sun."

Little did Miranda and Gordi know, as they stared up at the sky with silent indignation, that Tanis the Salamander was glaring at the same sky and feeling the same way, peering out of a hotel window only a block away.

"Damn Sylphs," Tanis hissed under her breath. Not only was this a sign that the flighty Fae of the air had just trespassed into their turf, but they also had the audacity to change the weather in order to accommodate their passage. She needed to inform the prince that their sunbathing sleep around the hotel pool, which they had all been enjoying for the last month, was going to be spoiled. She turned to see Axel, who had just completed his performance, to the applause of the now-sleepy Salamanders. They were starting to clean up, and close down the bar. The other two-thirds of the trio were lavishing affection on Axel, but he barely seemed to notice.

Instead, he was noticing with concern that his father had risen from his throne in what seemed to be a bad temper, and was not going outside to sunbathe – he was indicating to the attendants that he wanted their help to reach the hotel elevator, which meant he was going to sleep inside the royal luxury suite on the top floor. Axel ran up to him, sliding in front of his face and cutting him off from the elevator.

"Checkin' out early, old man?" Axel grinned at him, hoping there was nothing amiss.

Drake gave him a hard, sidelong glance. "If only it were permanent..." he growled, "so that I would be spared your foolishness."

Axel's face fell – he hadn't anticipated that his father would have reason to be upset with him. He leaned in close, asking quietly "What's wrong? What did I do?"

"That *Eldritch* girl you were singing about," he spat venomously, annoyed at having to explain something that he felt should have been obvious. He raised the jeweled scepter he had been holding, a silver rod twined with ivy. "Realize that should you fail to subdue her, I shall be the last Salamander to sit on this throne." He punctuated his sentence by jabbing Axel in the chest with the jeweled end of the scepter. Even this was too much for him – he started into a coughing fit. Axel took hold of the scepter just as it fell from Drake's grasp – he watched as the attendants led his father into the elevator. The doors closed.

Axel looked at the scepter in his hands, and sighed wistfully – just a month past, this scepter had been in the hands of the one girl in the whole world who could unlock its power. And under his direction, she did exactly that. It was no wonder that his father was in a bad mood, for he had just stood before the Salamander court acting like he had accomplished something. It was Miranda who had opened the portal, and allowed them to return after five thousand years of life in exile.

Where was she now? She was hiding amongst the wreckage of Hawthorne, like a weak and frightened animal during a storm.

Like a human.

He was singing for the love of a girl who was so afraid of her own Fae power and birthright that she wanted to avoid it altogether. He remembered, just before she ran away, how she had been so freaked about her *human* parents and her *human* little sister. What did they matter? Didn't she understand that they were not her real family? That she no longer had to live by their rules, or bow to their insufferable ignorance, or worry that she would slip up and reveal her superior strength? Wasn't this what she wanted, to live in a world where she *didn't* have to hide who she was?

Didn't she say she loved him, and wanted to be with him forever?

And did he not help her make all those dreams come true, right before her eyes? Perhaps she had lived with the humans too long, without knowing the truth – he had learned at ten years of age who he really was, six years before the manifestation of his powers. Miranda, on the other hand, had assumed that she was just an unnaturally strong girl with some sort of rare iron allergy – until she met Axel.

A message had come to Axel in the form of a waking dream, the method of choice for the Fae communication. The projection told him he could find the scepter at the home of two human archaeology professors, who had unearthed it from a hidden underground tomb. He wasn't sure who the message was from, but he was grateful for it the moment that he saw the daughter of the two would-be treasure hunters.

He knew at once she was a Fae – his eyes could see through the glamour disguise that made her look like the human girl whose place she took. Her true form was unfamiliar – he had never seen a Fae that looked like her. It was also apparent that that she did not comprehend at all that she was a different species than her friends and family, which was strange. Why had none of her Fae family members tried to contact her? Usually Changelings were placed by family, for the purpose of protecting royal heirs from assassination. He decided to wait to break the news to her, until after her sixteenth birthday, when she would inherit her powers. Then he would have a better idea of what to tell her.

A week after her birthday, he witnessed her beat a school bully senseless. This was actually hilarious to Axel, because the bully, Connor, was actually a Barghest Changeling. He had been hounding Axel for weeks, insisting that he and his siblings had to stalk Axel's every move – for they had been hired by Axel's father, Lord Drake, to be Axel's bodyguards.

This wasn't unusual, since Barghests were typically employed in such a manner. They were one of the lesser sub-houses of Gnome, who had taken on canine traits to the exclusion of others common to the bloodline, sacrificing powers such as terrakinesis in order to gain heightened animal senses. Their loyalties went to their chosen Master rather than to the rulers of Gnome, and they seemed to have no prejudices concerning members of other bloodlines.

Axel had relented, and as a cover story for why the group needed to spend so much time together, he agreed to be the lead singer of the Barghest's band (which had the conspicuously tongue-in-cheek name of the BarGuests, both a pun on their family name and the fact that they were too young to drink at the venues they played). But there were problems immediately. Connor considered Drake, not Axel, to be his Master. Drake did not want his son to grow attached to any of the humans at school, and tasked Connor with ensuring this did not happen.

Axel had carefully built a sterling reputation amongst the student body of Hawthorne High as the punk rocker with a heart of gold. He would often intervene with his mother, the school's principal, to help kids get out of trouble (in truth, he had nothing but contempt for all of them). But Connor and the rest of the band made it a daily mission to cause as much misery as they possibly could. The beleaguered students were shocked that a guy like Axel would associate with such a brute.

Axel was perturbed by their behavior and told them to knock it off, particularly now that he had Miranda to impress. But Connor had his orders, which he was forced under pain of fire to reveal to Axel. Axel had no idea until then that Connor's loyalties belonged to Lord Drake, and that these 'bodyguards' were functioning more like spies for his father – a way for

Drake to exert influence over his actions from afar. Axel could have dealt with the breach of privacy, but he hated to be controlled.

Axel told the band he was inviting the 'new girl' at school to see their show – assuming she was a human, Connor confronted her with the intention of scaring her off. That mistake ended with a thrashing from the newly-powered Miranda, though when he brought news to Drake that a live Eldritch had been found, Connor was well compensated for his troubles.

That's when Axel explained to the confused Miranda why all this was happening – and the danger that loomed, now that his people knew she existed.

As for Connor, he was 'sent to boarding school'. His siblings, whose cover identities were not related, disbanded and stopped speaking to Axel. But they reappeared during the night of the invasion... Axel shuddered, jumping off that train of thought and letting it pass on by. He didn't want to think about what happened that night. That night was when everything went wrong, beyond what any nightmare could have predicted.

He'd caught sight of the Barghests, briefly, during the first wave of the invasion, but hadn't spotted them since. Axel wondered what happened to them.

While Axel was lost in thought over the events of the past year, Tanis made her way through the crowd of Salamanders to alert him about the Sylph storm clouds covering the sky. But just as she was about to tap his shoulder, the doors of the lobby opened. He turned around to see a motley group of Fae enter the hotel lobby, the smoke clearing before them. Axel recognized the uninvited guests as fellow students from his high school – from the style of their dress, he gathered that they were the leaders of the great houses.

Approaching foremost was, of course, a Sylph – Clair Hathoway, a pale young girl of about nineteen years of age, with a ballerina's body, a long elfin face framed by white wing-ears, and imperious eyes of light blue surrounded by feather-motif makeup. She hovered just above the ground, occasionally fluttering the four small white-and-brown wings on her back that were more decorative than practical, for they had nothing to do with keeping her aloft. She wore silver feathers around her neck and a few were woven into her hair wispy, platinum-blonde hair – the rest of her was also dressed in shiny silver, from her tunic to her gloves, leggings and sandals, strapped to feet that hovered in the air, not making contact with the ground. In her hand was a slingshot, and strapped to her silver belt was a pan flute and a blowpipe.

Axel remembered that she had mostly kept to herself in school – except on Earth Day and zoo trips and anything to do with nature. That's when she would become passionately vocal. Her human 'parents' held powerful positions at local companies, yet their biggest

detractor was their own supposed daughter, who had no qualms about setting up protest campaigns whenever she caught wind of an environmentally unhealthy practice.

Not far behind her was a pleasantly smiling Jaron Lamar, an affable young man who had been well-liked by his human classmates. Axel wasn't sure how popular he'd be if they saw him now, with fin-ears, blue swirling tattoos, and wielding a bident, a two-pronged spear made of the reddish-gold metal orichalcum.

But Jaron had held back on his visage. Jaron was too proud of his bronzy complexion, and the overall good looks his Fetch had been blessed with, to discard them for the slick blue skin, shiny eyes of solid black, and hair of seaweed green his true form should have given him.

Behind him were three men dressed in plaid shirts and wearing red headgear. By blood they were triplets, but you'd be hard pressed to find similarities between them, as they too had grown accustomed to the aspects of their human guises. But some traits they had chosen to display – for example, they all had the protruding furrowed brows and the blood-red eyes of the Redcaps, the clan of goblins to which they belonged.

Sammy was a snarling man with a scraggly beard and a double-bladed axe strapped to his back. He wore a knit cap of red as a symbol of his clan. Sonny was a smirking, foxlike fellow with red hair underneath his red ball cap, fingering daggers sheathed in his belt. Sully towered behind them, a tall and strong badger-like man with a red miner's cap and a gauntlet with protruding, claw-like blades.

Salamanders eyed these Changelings with restrained hostility. These intruders were not only unannounced, but they were armed. But the Salamanders would not make a move without consent from Axel. So they kept one eye on the Changelings and one eye on their prince – and the ones who had chameleon-eyes did so quite literally.

"Hello, Axel" said Clair in her strange, distant-sounding tone that sounded like a whisper carried on the wind.

Her approach was impeded by Etheline, who slid in front of her with wide, baleful eyes.

"That's highness to you, birdie**!**" growled Bindi, uncoiling her whip as she hid behind Etheline.

"How dare you barge in here**?**" rasped Etheline, baring her fangs.

Tanis jumped in front of Etheline, crouched low with claws raised. "Drop your weaponsss, or we use *oursss***!**"

Not all the intruders had yet made themselves known – for a tiny older woman in a red cap, red dress over a plaid shirt, and red high-heeled shoes stepped out from behind the three Redcap Brothers and quickly made her way past them. She made eye contact with no one,

focusing all her attention on knitting a white cloth as she walked. It was because of her deceptively unassuming and oblivious demeanor that Tanis had no idea what was about to happen.

Mother Redcap, for that was her name, stopped just in front of Tanis, took one of her knitting needles, and stabbed Tanis in the shoulder.

The Salamanders roared, all of them producing whatever weapons they possessed, and got into battle stance.

"Ooh, thank you dearie..." Mother Redcap's saccharine voice oozed, as she withdrew the now blood-covered needle. She wiped the needle on the white cloth, the corners of her mouth stretched upward into a cruel smile. "It looks so much prettier in *red*..."

"You psycho!!" Tanis screeched in anger and pain.

"Hey! Don't you insult our Mother!" bellowed Sully Slice, placing his large frame protectively in front of her.

Jaron and Clair, realizing a fight was about to begin, raised their weapons up defensively. Jaron was wondering how this meeting got off to such a bad start already, and was not looking forward to having to fight his way back out. Clair was inwardly kicking herself for inviting the Gnomes – she should have known that the hot-headed Salamanders would be trouble enough, without bringing the Redcap family in to stoke the flames.

"That's enough." Axel's voice was a firm command, and all the commotion stopped in accordance. Axel moved into the midst of the crowd, with hands upraised in a gesture to the Salamanders to cool down. The Salamanders back off, begrudgingly, and not without a few hisses of disapproval. "We must show courtesy for our fellow royals," he continued. He turned to the other Changelings with narrowed eyes. "Even when they show *us* a discourtesy, by disrupting a celebration in honor of our king."

Jaron lowered his bident. "Aw dude, didn't mean to crash your party."

"Your dad invited us to come and talk business," explained Sonny Stab.

Axel rubbed his forehead, sighing. Of course his father wouldn't see fit to tell him these things. "Be sure to schedule a meeting next time. My father has retired to bed. You may tell me your concerns." The leaders of the Fae Houses exchanged dangerous looks with one another, daring someone to go first.

Tanis had been carried by Bindi to one of the nearby pillow-piles, with Etheline bandaging her wounded shoulder. Mother Redcap, deciding that was where she would like to sit, shooed them away with her needles, and flounced down herself. The Salamander girls stared, appalled by her audacity.

"We have so many humans, we don't know what to do," chimed Mother Redcap in a casually sing-song voice. She grinned again. "Such fine, red-blooded humans too..."

"Interesting," mused Axel, who seemed to be the only one unfazed by Mother Redcap's odd behavior. He turned to the Changelings. "What're your thoughts?"

Clair's eyes flashed. "Kill them!" she cried. "They cut down the forests, and pollute the air, and slaughter the animals!"

"Whoa, chillax," urged Jaron, disturbed by her sudden vehemence. He looked at Axel earnestly. "Dude, humans have done some brutal stuff – I mean, just take a look at the oceans. But we can't just wipe 'em out."

"The oceans are *poisoned*" insisted Clair, "and the sea creatures are sick and hunted-"

"-like animals?" chuckled Sammy Sever, darkly. He licked his snarling lips, fingering his axe. "Meat tastes bad. Too much iron! But it's fun to watch them die."

Clair's wings fluttered in a disturbed panic. Sonny decided to intervene, before Clair could run off on another tirade. He raised his hand to call attention to himself. "House Gnome volunteers to take responsibility for the humans," he announced.

"For what purpose?" asked Axel.

"To aide us in the task of collecting iron waste, so that we can process it into the non-toxic metal orichalcum." Sammy took out a bottle and rattled the pills inside. "Oh yeah, thanks for reminding me bro – it's the main ingredient of our anti-iron supplement-"

"What a load of *bogus*!" exploded the usually even-tempered Jaron. "Go ahead, give 'em humans! They'll need to dig more caves to store all the *bodies*."

"Let the grown-ups talk, will you?" drawled Sonny Stab dismissively.

Jaron turned to Axel. "On Day One, they hunted down and murdered humans, even gorgeous girls and cute little kids, *for fun*. These guys are *thugs*!"

"This is war, Jaron," said Axel, patiently. "Things happen in wars that are... unpleasant." He watched as Jaron turned his face sharply away, trying to bottle in the mixture of disappointment and frustration, for he knew then that this was not the same Axel he had known in school. Perhaps that Axel never existed at all – and if that was the case, then Axel was someone to handle with great care.

His reaction was intriguing to Axel. Axel had not known that the school slacker – who routinely skipped school and never did his own homework – harbored such strong feelings of justice. Especially for a weaker, slower species barely related to him at all. Jaron's conviction and feeling reminded Axel, painfully, of Miranda. "Focus on our common goals, rather than making enemies of our friends," Axel told him, before turning to Sonny. "I actually like your

proposal. Pardon the phrase, but it sounds very... *humane*." He glanced back at Jaron, who was doing a poor job of hiding his disgust. "I will inspect the camp myself, to make sure of it. Everyone satisfied?"

As a matter of fact, no one was satisfied except for the Gnomes, who were well pleased with themselves and surrounded Axel to talk further. Clair rolled her eyes, waving off their stupidity for not getting rid of the humans once and for all.

Jaron clenched his jaw tightly, grinding his teeth – something had to be done to stop this. But what could possibly deter the Fae, when the only thing they could agree on was destruction of the human world?

Clair and Jaron left, with the members of their entourage in tow, to return to where their Houses had set up temporary camps of their own. Before Clair made her exit, however, she overheard the fuss among the Salamanders about the loss of sunlight. With a wave of her hand, she made sure the clouds parted just over the hotel. This appeased the Salamanders – the hotel emptied as they slinked outdoors and settled around the pool, which they had remodeled into a pit of boiling lava, and proceeded to sleep contentedly in the sun's rays.

The Redcaps returned to the mines they had created in the mountains of Hawthorne, and they brought Axel with them.

From the outside, Axel could not easily tell that there was anything different about the mountains, save for the new lift that allowed him to scale up its sheer face to an inconspicuous entryway shaft, which could have belonged to any mine tunnel in existence. There were numerous signs posted around the entryway, warning of danger and toxic waste – which, because they were meant for the Fae's benefit, meant copious amounts of iron. As Axel followed the Redcap Brothers into their home turf, he could feel the iron's curse pushing against him.

Inside, Axel stepped on to another lift, this one headed down – Mother Redcap parted ways with him there. As they descended, he could see that the mine was enormous. Lit with floating yellow will-o-wisp flames, it could pass for a rough-hewn cathedral with a vaulted ceiling far above them. There were multiple levels – the top level was the throne room, although 'throne' was not the first thing one thought of when looking at the mechanical orichalcum chair that served that purpose. Mother Redcap seated herself upon it - above the throne was a giant, clear beaker full of liquid, molten orichalcum that dazzled the eye with its brilliance, and lit the entire cavern. She threw a lever and the throne raised to a platform - this platform led to burrow-like caves, which served as the royal quarters. Mother Redcap retired to

hers, sparsely furnished with raised stone platforms for a bed and nightstand, the shelves hewn into the rock walls. All of the Gnome rooms and facilities were made completely of stone, with fixtures of polished orichalcum – comfort was an unknown concept for the Gnomes. They believed it promoted weakness. The only decorations they believed in were things that celebrated their lineage or their accomplishments in battle – suits of armor were commonly placed in the corners of rooms, while weapons, shields, tartan-like flags, and tapestries depicting the deeds of their forefathers hung from the walls. Mother Redcap's room was no exception – indeed, being the royal chamber, it was filled with more heirlooms than any other.

Axel passed the second level of the mines, which was built like a balcony, with pathway halls leading out from this central area like spokes. There were orichalcum-armored Gnomes passing in and out of this area, past the grey-skinned and white-haired Gremlin engineers, who were busy trying to expand the unfinished pathways by operating strange drilling machines.

Ragged humans, covered in a mixture of sweat and dirt, shoveled the excess earth into large metal buckets, carried on conveyor belt cables that carried it upward through open hatches in the cavernous ceiling – the only small sources of daylight and ventilation. The air that the human laborers breathed was stale and heavy, pressing against them and causing pain in their inner ears. The pressure was caused by the vents pumping air in from above. It mixed with the ever-present clouds of dust, and collected in their lungs. For the Gnomes this was not a problem, for their lungs were made of stone already – they inhaled it like Salamanders inhaled smoke – but it was suffocating for the humans.

There was an abundance of wheels and pipes and valves of steam – the clicks and clangs and thumps and hisses wove together into a strangely hypnotic percussion arrangement, interrupted only by the coughing and wheezing of humans.

The lift stopped at the third, lowest, darkest area. In the center of the massive hollowed-out dome was a pit, sectioned off by a chain barrier. Paths lead down into the pit, filled with monstrous piles of debris – mangled cars parts, pipes pulled from underground, bent propellers and exploded engine turbines from the jet planes that so valiantly came to the defense of Hawthorne, only to plummet toward the earth like a volley of fiery arrows. The Gremlins used their powers of magnetism to attach themselves to the planes mid-air, allowing them to work the acts of sabotage for which they were famous.

And rummaging through this heap were more human captives, filling buckets with pieces of iron scrap, even as Gremlins driving dump-trucks unloaded more trash onto the heaps for them to sort through.

One of these humans was a little girl of about ten, her blond tresses done up in drooping, ratty pigtails. The humans had not yet been given replacement clothing to work in, so she was wearing the same outfit she had been kidnapped in –a stained pink blouse over a black–and–white striped shirt that matched her tights.

It was Roxie, Miranda's sister. Once Axel spotted her, he ignored the sickening pressure radiating from the iron, and made his way down into the pit.

Roxie numbly carried her bucket past a tough–looking Gnome woman with folded arms and a stern gaze, carrying a large claymore sword at her back. The young girl approached a smelter and threw the contents of her bucket into its red–hot, gaping mouth. This smelter took the molten metal through a pipe up into a large tank.

Suspended from a chain above the tank was a large cage, full of Gnomes strapped to dentist chairs, with plastic tubes in their arms. They were criminals, transgressors, cowards – all of the Gnomes stationed in the basement tier were undesirables, whose punishment was to wallow amongst the toxic iron and to help to purify it – with their own blood, which was carried from the plastic tubes and into the tank of iron. The tank pumped the transmuted orichalcum up a pipe, and into the giant beaker in the top throne–room tier.

Roxie made her way back from the smelter to find more iron, but a piece of it twisting dangerously out of the dirt found her first – it caught on her pink converse shoe, and she pitched forward. She would have fallen, had someone not been there to catch her.

"Careful there, kiddo," an older girl's voice said. It sounded familiar. Roxie turned around, astonished to see the person picking up the metal piece, and pitching it onto the heap.

"Miranda?" asked Roxie, hesitant. It sure looked like Miranda – even though it seemed that she was in disguise, wearing a black ninja–like suit with Salamander design, her hair pulled back in an uncharacteristic ponytail. But at the name 'Miranda' the girl blanched.

"Who are you?" asked the older girl, dark–lined eyes wide. That was the other thing – her eyes were stormy–blue, not laurel–green like Miranda's.

"Roxie McConnell," sighed the younger one, her heart aching heavily – her sister had not come to rescue her after all. Maybe nobody would. "You look kinda like my sister. Are you, um... one of *them*?" Roxie wasn't sure what her captors were, but she knew they were something other than human.

The Miranda–doppelganger in black knelt down beside Roxie, staring at her with amazement. "No," she said, the answer accompanied by a bittersweet smile and the blinking back of tears. "No, I'm like you."

"Could've fooled me," rumbled a voice behind Roxie that was also familiar. "...Darcy."

Darcy saw Axel first, and her expression hardened. “Highness,” she said, without feeling, “What brings you here?”

“Ruling from a chair just doesn’t cut it. I’m making sure my operation is running smoothly.”

“Is it?”

Axel smiled, and crouched behind Roxie, making the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. “Hey Roxie,” he said casually, like he had always done. “How you doing?”

“I’m fine,” she replied, mimicking the Miranda-doppelganger’s guarded emotionless.

“You hungry? Thirsty? Anybody here giving you a hard time?” Despite the answer being ‘yes’ to all three, Roxie shook her head – she wasn’t sure what he was getting at, and mainly just wanted him to go away. Axel seemed satisfied with her answer, nodding approvingly. “But you’d like to go home, I’m sure,” he pressed. Roxie hesitated, then nodded – she instinctively dared to hope that he would let her go, but there was something in his voice that indicated it would not be so simple. “Of course you would.” He glanced away from Roxie to look pointedly at Darcy. “You want to live happily ever after with your sister.”

Roxie looked at the doppelganger, trying to determine from her reaction what this was all about – but Darcy’s face betrayed no emotion.

In downtown Hawthorne, Miranda and Gordi noticed that the thick, stormy clouds had parted only over one particular spot across town, creating a pillar of sunlight that contrasted against the grey landscape. It seemed fairly obvious to both of them that there was something important about whatever it was highlighting, and indeed it was difficult to look anywhere else. They made their way toward it, and got within a block of it, when they heard a scream pierce the air.

Axel watched from above, perched on the ledge of a building with his wings shielding him on either side and creating a personal shadow – had Gordi and Miranda seen him, they might have thought he resembled a malevolent gargoyle. He smiled as he watched Gordi, running forth with Miranda to investigate the sound. “*Good boy*,” thought Axel gleefully, “*go fetch*.”

Miranda's Journal, Entry #3

After leaving Eden, the Fae built an island society. It was ruled by Lilith, whose law boiled down to two rules – don't harm one another, and don't go near humans. The Fae followed rule one, making it the most peaceful society in history – though when you can bend the natural world to your whims with hardly a thought, it leaves very few excuses to fight except sheer boredom. Besides, if one of the Fae died, their soul would float around as a disembodied, glowing will-o-wisp, free from physical limitations and able to follow their enemies anywhere. Murder was just about the dumbest thing anyone could do.

But humans were easy prey – *too* easy for the Fae to resist. This was the age of the Gnomes, the most powerful and aggressive of the Fae, who built monuments of gigantic stone in order to glorify themselves and prove to the humans that they were nothing. The other houses did their part too – Salamanders ravaged the countryside as dragons, demanding young women as tribute. Sylphs captured humans in their toadstool rings, forcing them to dance until they died with bloody stumps for feet. Undines would seduce humans with eerie songs, then take them for a nightmare ride into a frigid and watery grave.

They would drive humans mad, strike cruel bargains, steal their children and livestock, and even keep humans as pets or mind-wiped lovers – only to tire of them, sometimes years later, and turn them loose. These humans would wander back into their villages, psychologically

fried – their loved ones either dead and gone, or not willing to accept them back into their homes.

The island, by the way, was called Atlantis. So you can guess what happened.

Lilith got pissed when she found out her children were leaving the island to go torment humans just for the hell of it. Lilith stood on the tallest peak of Atlantis, raised her scepter, and called forth a massive tidal wave. The Fae watched as it towered over the island, and came crashing down upon them. But it was not the end – Lilith built a prison for the Fae. She bound them to it, threw away the key, and cursed the iron of the Earth to prevent their return. They woke up in Orbis Alia – the Otherworld. Lilith, however, did not get to see this tiny, dark new dimension she had created. The spell took every last drop of her life-force to cast.

Chapter Three
"Secrets"

"Run run run, as fast as you can!" chuckled Sammy Sever, swinging his axe around in his hand.

"Or the Ginger will catch you, Cookie!" bellowed Sully Slice.

The red-headed brother Sonny took offense and elbowed him in the arm. "Hey, stay focused on the job."

Darcy stopped running. The Redcaps were faster than she was, and they weren't even really trying. It was easy to tell the difference – the more inhuman a Fae looked, the more threatened they were. These guys only wore the brows and red eyes, and that was mainly for effect – if they took her seriously, they'd have the grey rock-skin. But then, Darcy was bare-handed and wearing only the black tank top and shorts she had changed into as she left the mines, so that wasn't surprising.

"You ready to come home, my dear?" oozed Sonny, who was the fastest of the three and had moved behind her.

"I think she wants to get dead," were the words formed by Sully's dark, low rumble, as he blocked the sun and threw his large shadow across her small form, "like her mom and dad."

The Redcaps surrounded her, weapons drawn, circling like predatory animals. Darcy had no weapons, but the gaze she gave them was steely and unwavering. Due to her time in the Otherworld, there were certain things that came easily to Darcy – perhaps even more than the untrained Redcaps, who had lived comparatively sheltered lives – and one of those was an acute awareness. She knew where precisely where each of them was and what they were doing without needing to look, and wouldn't make a move until after they made theirs.

The first move was Sully, which didn't surprise Darcy, for he had least amount of patience and the fastest weapon. But his bladed claw had very short range – even with his long limbs, he needed to get up close and personal to do any damage. By the time he got within reach, Darcy had rolled between his legs, avoiding the slash intended for her face, and punished his recklessness with a kick to the groin.

Sonny came up behind her and tried to stab her in the back – she turned just in time to parry aside his wrist and grab it, did the same when he attacked with his other blade, and then kicked toward his abdomen. He jumped back, evading it.

But Darcy had not bought herself much time. Sully, after standing bent over for several moments, pulled himself up and around, swinging his arm with him as a reactionary revenge hit – the metal covering on the top of his hand connected with the side of her head. Darcy stumbled, pain and shock momentarily disorienting her – as she struggled to clear her mind, she inwardly cursed herself for letting herself get hit. Technically she was aware a strike was coming, but she was so busy fending off Sonny's blades that she missed the time to duck.

Darcy looked up and saw Sammy's snarling face, an axe poised over his head and swinging down toward hers, ready to take advantage of her moment of weakness with a killing. This time she would not be caught off-guard – she threw herself into a roll that removed her from danger's path, letting the axe blade spark against the pavement.

Sonny Stab launched a type of assault that earned him his name – a flurry if lightning-quick stabs with his dual daggers. With difficulty, she evaded the blades, but soon found herself backed against a wall. Sonny laughed as he prepared to plunge his blade into her gut, but a hand roughly grabbed him and pulled him back. Sonny craned his head back to see the face of Axel – or so he thought, for a confusing moment.

"I do not know what you find humorous..." Gordi began, ramming the shield against Sonny's back, pushing him against the wall as Darcy vacated the spot. "...about pain," Gordi finished, harshly. Sonny cried out as if a hot iron had been pressed against his back, rather than the cold and ancient iron shield that now pinned him.

"Give'm to me! I'll have him in *stitches*!" cried Miranda, with adrenaline-induced enthusiasm.

"You-!" began Sonny, before Gordi shoved Sonny toward Miranda – practically pushing his face into her fist. Miranda followed it up with a barrage of attacks.

While Miranda took care of Sonny, Gordi and Darcy could focus their attention to the other two threats.

Sully swiped at Gordi with his claw, which scratched only the surface of the shield instead of flesh. That same shield then bashed the side of Sully's face.

Gordi turned toward Sammy, who was busy swinging his axe at Darcy. Darcy saw Gordi switch targets, and ducked. With the turn, Gordi struck the shield against Sammy's exposed back, pushing him right into a kick from Darcy, the toe of her boot sinking deep into his gut and forcing the air out of his lungs with a sound that resembled a howl.

Sammy lurched forward and shoved Darcy away, swinging his axe at Gordi behind him. It was all too slow – the blade landed harmlessly on Gordi's shield.

In the next moment, he felt Darcy's right arm lock across his throat, her other hand assisting in the hold and pulling in tight against his airway.

Miranda danced around Sonny, evading his daggers and leading him off of the road and onto the grass. He angrily charged her, but felt something snake around his ankle. He fell heavily forward. Lifting his face from the turf and spitting out a blade of grass, he looked over his shoulder to see a thick plant stem wound around his ankle, thorns stabbing his skin like fangs. The rest of the lawn was freshly mowed and immaculate – this thorn bush was without any nearby companion. Though it had no blossoms, Sonny identified it as Hawthorne.

Satisfied that Sonny was neutralized for the moment, Miranda turned to Sully – just in time to see his blades claw across her face. Seeing her thus wounded, Gordi ran to her side and placed himself between Miranda and her attacker, raising his shield. Sully backed off, sickened by the iron.

"Well, this is a bloody mess," Sonny declared, as he extricated himself from the thorn and rose to his feet. "Guess it's time to rethink the plan."

"Might want to think fast," muttered Sully, with a casualness that belied his real concern, "Sammy don't look so good."

Sonny followed his brother's gaze to red-faced Sammy, struggling and choking against Darcy's neck-hold, and had to concede that he was right. Sonny licked his lips. "Okay, you win. Let Sammy go, and we'll leave you guys alone." Gordi, Darcy and Miranda each gave him their own form of dubious expression. Sonny turned to Miranda. "I give you my word," he told her pointedly.

Miranda's eyes widened. "Let him go."

Darcy turned her stormy blue eyes onto Miranda. "Wow, what a great idea!"

"Miranda, I fail to see your logic," Gordi concurred.

"A Fae cannot break their sworn word," explained Miranda, and then with less confidence added "At least, that's what I've heard."

Gordi nodded, approvingly. "You heard correctly. They cannot."

Darcy sighed, exasperated – she had just met these two, yet she was already out of patience with them. But she would humor them, for now. "Okay, fine. But here's how this is gonna go down – you guys head to the park, and I'll release Sammy."

Sully and Sonny lowered their weapons, and Sonny nodded. "We'll be waiting." The two Redcap brothers walked away down an alley.

Miranda waited until she could no longer hear their footsteps. "That was close," she said quietly.

"Let me go, I can't breathe!" Sammy whined, thinly, through his constricted air pipe. Darcy let him go – for a moment. Then she grabbed his head and jerked it, hard and fast, to one side. Sammy's neck made a sickening popping sound, and his struggles ceased. Darcy let go of his head and let him fall to the ground, limp and lifeless as a test dummy.

Darcy wiped off her hands and arms. "That's better," she said, picking up Sammy's axe. Miranda stared at her with uncomprehending eyes and gaping mouth, as Darcy sauntered over to them with a satisfied smile. Gordi simply looked uncertain, awaiting an explanation. "I'm Darcy. Thanks for the backup. I thought you were nutjobs at first, but that was sharp! How'd you know they couldn't break their word?"

"What the hell is wrong with you?!" burst Miranda, overcoming her initial shock.

Darcy blinked, with the innocence of a kitten. "What?" Darcy followed Miranda's pointed look, aimed at Sammy's body. "Oh c'mon! You're not gonna get all weepy about a Redcap goblin, are you? It's not like they're *human*."

Miranda started forward with clenched fists, ready to do some damage to the face that she had not yet realized resembled her own.

But Gordi held out his arm in front of her, barring her way. He addressed Darcy. "You have put us in grave danger. You broke the agreement, and thus freed the Redcaps from their word."

"Then we better get going," answered Darcy, completely unfazed. "You're looking for family, right? If so, I'm your girl – I'm fresh out of the slave camp for human survivors."

At that, Gordi and Miranda exchanged hopeful looks. They had been wandering Hawthorne for hours, walking toward a beam of sunlight because it might be a clue. Now, it seemed, they finally had both a guide and a destination. The thought was exhilarating.

Darcy strode past them, her stomach burbling loudly. "But first... I'm starved. So let's get some chow, and then gear up."

Gordi smiled as he followed Darcy. Above and beyond the fact that she was a human, his first impression of her was a good one – she was strong, smart, practical. Everything that he admired in a soldier. And she had not hesitated to kill a Fae when she had the opportunity, which greatly endeared her to him. Where he came from, those who hesitated to take sensible action were the ones who died, and it never made sense to grow too attached to the soon-to-be-dead. But a strong companion was something valuable beyond measure. He glanced at Miranda, who was wearing the most sour expression he had seen on her face so far. She was watching Darcy ahead – it was clear that her impression of the girl was far less glowing than his own. As far as Gordi was concerned, they were both fairly competent warriors – Miranda

seemed to have more raw strength, while Darcy had the advanced training and the dexterity. He worried, though, that Miranda felt intimidated or threatened. He wanted to make sure that his curiosity about this new girl would not be taken the wrong way. "You fought well," Gordi told her. It was the only compliment he knew.

Miranda's face brightened a bit. "Oh. Thanks." Miranda turned back to face Darcy, and resumed her previous expression. Gordi was a bit surprised – it did not appear as though she was comparing fighting ability at all. But then, fighting was all that mattered to the humans in his world, especially in the Pit.

The Fae never gave their slaves much time for socializing – the only time there was interaction was when they were working on the same task, or when they competed for rewards from their Fae masters. And those rewards were usually basic things, like food, clothing, or better sleeping quarters – there were a few masochists who seemed eager for Fae approval, but their efforts usually resulted in bringing more misery upon themselves.

The Fae delighted in being worshipped – but to reward a mere human with anything resembling affection would have been scandalous. Instead, the Fae masters would laugh about what they could convince a human to do – for nothing but flattering words, empty of feeling.

The difference in manner and dress between Darcy and Miranda caused Gordi to completely overlook the more obvious reason for Miranda's unease – namely, that Darcy's face and form was identical to Miranda's.

Having filled a quota known only to her, Darcy ended the scavenger hunt for food with arms full of packages and cans. She made an end of a beef jerky package, and passed the rest off to Gordi and Miranda. The sun had fallen low behind the curtain of dark clouds, so they found a place in the park to settle in for the night. It was a convenient spot, full of shaded concrete benches and nearby public restrooms. Darcy abruptly told them to stay put while she picked out equipment from the army surplus store. She asked if they wanted anything in particular.

"Digging and fire-making tools," answered Gordi.

"A bag," was Miranda's response, resentfully eyeing the pile of cans. "Like a backpack or something. *Several* backpacks. Blankets and some..." glancing at Gordi, she paused to find the right word, "*hygiene* products would be nice too."

Darcy smiled, nodding, and bounced off to the army surplus store. She came back looking like Lara Croft – a small combat vest that housed rope and other light equipment, a utility belt strapped across her waist, a hunting knife strapped to her thigh, and sturdy combat boots.

"Hey look, I've got goodie bags," she said, dropping two large backpacks in front of them.

Gordi found a shovel inside his, and began checking the ground and the wind direction for a suitable spot. Miranda dumped out her pack, which like Gordi's was full of guns, crossbows, and ammunition. Of the non-requested items, she kept only a small Swiss army knife and filled it back up with food cans.

"You guys really don't want any of this stuff?" Darcy asked.

"I am unfamiliar with the equipment," answered Gordi as he commenced digging.

"I don't *use* that stuff," was Miranda's curt reply.

"You like a pacifist or something?"

"No. I just don't like weapons." Miranda bit her lip.

"Yeah, okay...but there's kind of an invasion going on. I'm just saying."

Miranda rolled her eyes. "I saw people armed to the teeth who didn't survive the first few hours. These weapons do nothing but *tickle* them, believe me."

"We need more iron. Surely there is a place where they keep iron tools," suggested Gordi.

"I would say the hardware store, but it's cleaned out," said Miranda. "They've been trying to dispose of the iron."

"The Gnomes are keeping it at their base," Darcy explained. "Along with the humans they're using to handle and sort it. That's where we're going."

Gordi had completed the fire-pit, so Miranda moved the firesteel and the tinder toward him – but to her puzzlement, he began digging another hole nearby. "Gordi, what are you doing?"

"The pit will keep the glow from being seen, and this tunnel will disperse the smoke." A howl somewhere in the distance made Gordi look up from his work.

"It's just a wolf," she reassured him.

He stared at her, raising both eyebrows. "*Just*?"

"I have plenty of stuff here that takes care of wild animals," piped Darcy helpfully.

"Barghests are the most dangerous Fae I know of," Gordi stressed, confused by their lack of concern.

"How do you know it's a Barghest?"

Gordi shook his head. "I have to adjust to this world. Where I lived, there was no distinction between wolf and Barghest."

"You mean there were no animals? Only Fae?" asked Miranda. Gordi nodded. "Wow. That must've been strange. If I knew that every squirrel or bird flying overhead was watching, listening... making judgments... I'd be *paranoid*."

Darcy squatted in between them. "If you're going to tell a story, start at the beginning."

"I am curious to hear yours," said Gordi, deftly changing the subject. He could not yet bear to recall the world he left.

"Yeah, so am I. I don't remember seeing you at the school," said Miranda, trying to sound casual.

"I didn't go all that much." Darcy's chipper demeanor seemed to dissipate instantly, becoming defensive.

"Too cool for it, huh?"

"Definitely. For a while I was in a boarding school. It was kinda like being in prison."

Miranda nodded. "I would get through the day by reminding myself 'it's not the end of the world'," she said, wryly.

Darcy chuckled. "I kept being promised that I would be able to get out and travel with my parents. They were top notch explorers."

"Were?" asked Gordi.

Darcy had brightened speaking of her parents, but now she looked away, serious once more. "Yeah. Until they dug up some Fae relic. A scepter." Miranda's eyes lit up, but she said nothing.

Miranda's parents were archaeologists, who moved to Hawthorne after finding evidence of the lost Sir Francis Drake settlement, Nova Albion. They found lots of things during the excavation – but the most impressive was a jeweled scepter. There was only one reason that Darcy would know all of this, and claim Miranda's parents as her own. But Miranda could not afford to confront her – not without revealing potentially dangerous information to Gordi. What was Darcy's motivation for keeping it a secret? What game was she playing?

As if in reaction to her interest, Darcy said toward her "The Fae killed them for it." Miranda took a sharp intake of breath, her face falling. Gordi was surprised that she was so empathetic about this girl's loss.

"It must have been Lilith's scepter," Gordi said, after a respectful silence. "The key to the barrier. I am sorry." The question of how the Fae crossed the barrier was finally answered for Gordi. The claiming of the scepter by the Great Dragon, Lord Aillen the Burner, pervaded almost all Salamander art and iconography. But the scepter had been spirited away to the human world by the current ruler, Lord Drake, for reasons unknown.

The weighty silence lengthened, until it became too much for Darcy. She looked at Miranda. "So. What's your story?"

"Me?" Miranda asked, shaken out of her thoughts. "I don't have one."

"Sure you do," Darcy pressed.

"Not really. My life was pretty average, just going to school..."

"...beating the snot out of bullies, dating the school hottie," Darcy finished for her.

Miranda stared at her, disquieted for a moment. "I didn't know I'd been the topic of conversations."

Darcy smiled. "You were *the* topic."

"I assume they didn't know about her romantic involvement with a Fae," interjected Gordi, flatly. Miranda's eyes met his. He had kept all emotion from his voice, purposely making it hard for her to determine what was behind his words. In truth, his feelings on the matter were not yet developed – he just wanted her to know that the nature of her relationship with his double had not eluded his attention, so that he could observe her reaction.

Darcy looked between them. "Seriously? Is that why she gets all squeamish about killing them?" Miranda stood up, and walked away. In no particular direction it seemed, other than toward the cover of a trees. "Wow. Must've hit a nerve." Darcy turned to Gordi with a smile. "Well, that leaves you. Where do you come from?"

"I don't wish to talk about it," answered Gordi, with finality.

Gordi later spent the night battling the specters of old memories within his dreaming mind. To an outside observer, they would have seen him fidgeting and growling, as if he were fighting to be free of his blanket – while Darcy slept nearby him, rolled up and serene. There was a sound, like great flapping wings. Darcy's eyes snapped open. She sat up, and reached out to tap Gordi on the shoulder. Free from the supervision of his conscious, Gordi's limbs flailed at her instinctively, until he woke up a moment later and realized that he had passed from dream to reality. Darcy was, as always, unfazed. She whispered as he tried to focus his bleary eyes on her dimly-lit form.

"Hey. She's been gone a long time. I think we better check up on her."

Gordi picked up his shield, which had never left his side. "Yes. Good idea." They followed the path that they saw Miranda take, into the more foliage-covered area of the park. When they found Miranda, they both ducked behind a hedge, for she was not alone.

Miranda and Axel, bat-like wings unfurled, were standing together in a clearing, talking – Gordi's mind went numb at first, failing to register what he was seeing. Miranda's posture did not indicate she was threatened by his presence – rather, she was standing close to him,

looking demurely up at him with one leg bent, coquettishly. The realization sank through the space between Gordi's ribcage and stomach, feeling suddenly heavy, cold. His lungs felt constricted, unable to take in the accustomed amount of air.

"Yikes," Darcy whispered, giving voice to Gordi's stunned reaction, "I guess she wasn't over him."

As if to confirm, Axel took Miranda's hand in both of his, and she made no attempt to remove it. Instead, she smiled gratefully.

"Bear with the human a while longer. I want him watched," Axel told her. "*A spy*", thought Gordi, "*She was spying on me*." They had not been avoiding Axel. Axel had been following, lurking in their shadow the entire time.

Was it an accident that he met Miranda at the house, or was she waiting for him? She certainly seemed confused to see him, and was believably expecting Axel – but if that were true and not part of an act, how did Miranda know what Axel planned? Was she truly that smart, or know him well enough to anticipate his intentions? No. Gordi knew what the answer was.

Humans could not read or share thoughts, at least not directly from mind-to-mind.

But Fae could.

Miranda was not a human. She was a Fae.

Gordi's mind raced, adding up the multitude of supporting facts. She knew to call the invaders 'Fae' even though magical beings had not openly walked the Earth in four thousand years.

She spoke with confidence about Changelings, though she later confessed that they had been deemed fictitious by humans some time ago.

She had prevented him from killing Axel when he had the chance.

She refused the weapons Darcy offered, which were not pure iron but probably more than she wanted to handle.

And she had known with a certainty that Sonny could not break his sworn word, even though all the information humans had about Fae behaviors and customs were vague at best, filtered through generations of forgetfulness and changing trends. The inability to tell falsehoods could have been one of those fictitious elements added to the myth, for all she should have known.

He should have seen this sooner. It was right in front of his face, had he thought to question it.

"This isn't what I expected when I opened the portal," Miranda confessed to Axel, her words coming out just seconds after Axel's – that was how fast Gordi's thoughts flooded him, and now his brain swam atop a sea of nausea. Not only was she a Fae spy, but she was the one responsible for the opening of the portal. Her own words condemned her – she was guilty for what amounted to mass murder and enslavement of his people.

"I know," Axel answered, speaking now in irritating, dulcet tones, stroking her face as he had tried to do before, "But don't worry – once the humans have been dealt with, you will take your rightful place at my side... as the Faerie Queene." Miranda threw her arms around him, and Axel embraced her with both his arms and his wings.

Gordi tore his gaze away, a flash of rage threatening to overtake him. He fought it down in order to make a quiet retreat back to camp.

Darcy would not leave just yet – she watched as Axel released Miranda, who placed her arms slowly to the sides and stood there in place, like a mindless mannequin.

Axel sighed as he gazed at the Miranda illusion before him. He could conjure every detail of Miranda's appearance to appear before him at a moment's notice, but he could never get close to capturing that undefinable collection of traits that made him so drawn to her. This puppet was too perfect – an idealized memory, a person from a dream. She represented only the aspects he remembered, and that did not include any flaws, or damage that had been done since he studied her last. And as for the personality, that was impossible for him to recreate – Miranda usually did the opposite of what he wanted, while this doll could not operate without his express command.

Gazing at his own reflection in her unseeing eyes, he was surprised that Gordi so easily fell for his hollow, puppet-show performance. Even considering Axel's advantage of knowing Miranda a year rather than two days, surely making her act like an airheaded bimbo would have tipped him off that something wasn't right.

Of course, he also thought he was hidden from sight behind those bushes. Stupid human.

Axel snapped his fingers, and the illusion of Miranda faded out of existence.

He looked toward Darcy, who stood up from behind the bushes to receive confirmation that her mission was complete. He nodded, and she promptly returned to camp.

Miranda, the real one, had spent most of the night wandering around the park gathering dry twigs for the campfire and trying to sort out herself out, but the more she tried the more conflicting thoughts and feelings seemed to swirl around inside her, building pressure. Head

hurting, feet tired, but too wired to sleep, she was now sitting next to the duck pond, eating a chocolate cupcake and looking rather miserable.

She had just found out her adopted parents were dead. And the one who had informed her of their passing was their true, biological human daughter.

The Fae killed them for it. Those words played over and over again, like a film clip stuck on endless repeat, grinding away at Miranda's sanity.

At first she thought that perhaps the girl was lying. Miranda had, through no fault of her own, stolen the girl's life – so it was possible that Darcy was just being vengeful. After all, Darcy had not seen her parents since she was very young, and therefore probably didn't have much memory of them. They were strangers.

But Miranda could not quite convince herself that it had been revenge on Darcy's part. Darcy seemed genuinely disturbed about her parents' death – though she did make it very clear who she held most responsible. Darcy might not believe that a Fae could truly love humans, which would mean that she had simply been putting Miranda on notice. Miranda couldn't blame Darcy for blaming her. Miranda had already tried and convicted herself as guilty on all counts –for the invasion, as well as any calamities that occurred as a result.

How did Darcy know that her parents were dead? Did she see them die? Did she find their bodies? Where were they?

Only Darcy could answer these questions – and now would be the time to ask her, if she could manage to speak to her privately while Gordi slept. Miranda threw the last crumbs of her cupcake in front of the swimming ducks, and retraced her steps back toward camp.

Once she made it past the row of trees, she found Gordi staring into the campfire, with Darcy seated beside him. Darcy's eyes flicked up to meet hers, but Gordi did not acknowledge her approach.

Miranda felt a tense vibe surrounding them "I thought you guys would be asleep."

"I bet," snarked Darcy.

Miranda was puzzled by her biting tone, and wondered if her absence had caused more upset than she expected. She sighed. "I'm sorry about storming off."

Gordi stood up, glaring. She was determined to play her role to the very end. Very well – he would end it. "Come here."

Miranda hesitated, unsure of what to expect. She took small, cautious steps toward him. Gordi didn't move, and made no indication of how close he wanted her to get. When she was within an arm's reach, he raised his shield. A wave of nauseating pressure emanating from the pure iron shield crashed against her, forcing her back a few steps with a gasp.

"You played me for a damn *fool*!" yelled Gordi, advancing on her. Miranda found that Darcy had slinked behind her.

"I'm sorry," Miranda said with desperate sincerity. "I needed protection, and I knew you wouldn't help a Fae." Darcy must have told Gordi. When Darcy didn't 'out her' as a Fae right off the bat, Miranda had assumed she had some reason for keeping that knowledge to herself.

"Protection from what?" he growled, unconvinced.

"From *Axel*!"

He could have killed her right then. It took all the willpower he had not to strike at her – the only reason he held back (for he had never been taught to avoid violence toward anyone) was because his fury was tempered with the strange urge to laugh. Of all the things she could have said to offer an excuse... was she really this foolish? Did she not understand yet that her late-night meeting with Axel had been witnessed?

"With that shield," she explained, "he couldn't get near me!"

"Enough! No more of your lies!" Gordi raised his shield and came at her, forcing the iron's invisible aura against her. Miranda let out a small sob, more out of despair than physical pain. It had only been a month since she had lost her home, her family, and her unquestioning love for her boyfriend. Earlier that night she had lost the hope of reuniting with her parents. And now she was losing her only friend.

"Hey," Darcy urged, approaching him from the side and entering his field of vision, "let's just go."

Gordi regarded Miranda for a few tense moments. "You are right," he murmured, lowering his shield. He turned away from her. "She is not worth it."

Gordi walked away. Darcy packed up their gear and supplies, handing Gordi his pack. Not so much as a word passed between them, as they left Miranda, her backpack, and the dying campfire behind them.

Miranda watched them disappear into the night, forlorn.

Axel watched her from behind a tree. He felt a sense of satisfaction at seeing the narrative he devised being played out to such perfection before his eyes. And now that the heroine of his play had been left distraught and abandoned by her fickle champion, he would make his entrance. But first, he needed to dress the part.

He closed his eyes, and imagined that he was a dirty, ill-mannered and less evolved version of his usual form.

He opened his eyes to see that he had become Gordi – or at least the image of him, courtesy of an incredibly useful type of Fae magic known as glamour.

There were different types of magic for making something appear other than it was.

Shape-shifting was what allowed Changelings to perfectly resemble the human children they replaced, save for the occasional glitches involving eye color – the kidnapped children were usually taken during the night as they slept, so eye color was often overlooked. It was an actual, real change to their physical structure, a morphing of their skin and bones. However, they could only change their bodies, not their clothing or inorganic material.

Then there was glamour. Basic glamour was illusion magic, like the 'Miranda' projection he had created, existing only in the minds of those he targeted.

His Gordi disguise was a more advanced form, whereby the laws of physics bent to maintain an illusion around an object, allowing it to interact with the rest of the world exactly as though it had the desired characteristics. A sponge could smash through a window like a brick, a flimsy curtain could be as impassable as a stone wall, and a toy sword could cut flesh.

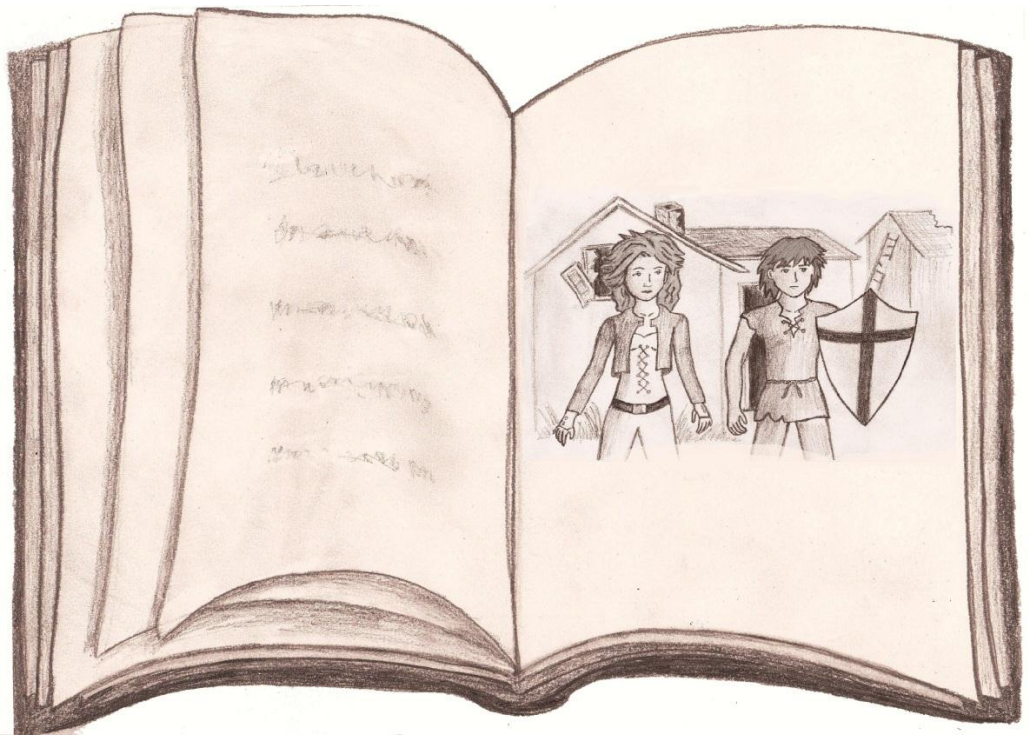
The glamoured object itself could be anything, though the more disparate it was in size or shape from the illusion, the more energy it took to cast – it would be supremely difficult to, say, turn a mouse into an elephant. But the spell itself was nothing more than a concentration of willpower around the object. Programmed causality.

Only an Eldritch like Miranda, channeling and amplifying her power through the scepter, could create formations of atoms from scratch. But that power came at a premium cost – the caster's own life-force.

Glamour spells were not nearly as pricey, but they were a real pain to cast – it was a good thing he'd prepped this spell well in advance, otherwise he might have knocked himself unconscious. And because it was not a shape-shift, he would have to keep concentrated on maintaining the illusion.

Axel looked over his disguise, pleased with his work. But then he shuddered, realizing how gross and uncomfortable he felt – the scratchy tunic, purposely made out of rough brown fabric for the discomfort of prisoners, sandpapered his skin with every motion, his hair an unwashed mess. His 'boots' – if shapeless russet fabric, secured around the feet with coarse yarn, could be called such – let the soles of his feet feel every twig and pebble underneath him, and threatened to fall apart altogether.

Oh, the things he did for love.



Miranda's Journal, Entry #4

If you looked at the dates, you might have noticed that there's been a large gap between my last entry and this one. I was so focused on getting you caught up on all the history that I haven't even started on the present. It was a nice mental retreat to talk about stuff I had no involvement in, talking about the Fae as if they were 'those bad people over there' who screwed everything up. But now it's time you knew about me and my current situation.

I met a human boy named Gordi, while I was searching for the scepter – Lilith's scepter, a soul repository that amplifies certain magic, and brought the Fae through the barrier. I figured it was also the key to sending them back, like an 'undo' button.

Gordi was a 'Fetch' – a human who had been taken by the Fae, alien-abduction style. He was the first one I ever met – humans taken to the Otherworld tend to stay there. We were starting to become friends, but he took off after learning what I am.

Though I answer to the name 'Miranda McConnell', that name belongs to a human child, stolen long ago. I am a Changeling.

A Changeling is a Fae, smuggled into the human realm. The Fae cross over via a small tear in the barrier between worlds, accomplished by using the magical equivalent of a nuclear bomb. The escaped Fae kidnaps a human child, leaving a Fae child in its place – 'changed' via magic to resemble the human one.

You might be wondering why they go through all this effort. For that I will have to go back again, to what happened after the fall of Atlantis.

Trapped in their new prison, the Fae abandoned all Atlantean ideals. Over time, they turned the beautiful garden of Orbis Alia into a desolate battlefield, filled with fear and death – or as close to it as the Fae could come.

The world started out as little more than a big, flat game-board, covered with plants and vegetation to be used for building and clothes and food, with nothing but a black void for a 'sky' overhead. Each Fae clan wanted a different environment suited to their needs, but there was not enough space to go around – so they began to compete for their own little corner of the world. As they killed one another, their glowing will-o-wisp spirits multiplied. They settled on objects, like stones, weapons, plants or buildings, or positioned themselves up in the sky like makeshift stars. Before long, everything was aglow.

With the finding of Lilith's scepter, Eldritch Fae were capable of blasting a door into the human realm – yet because iron was so deadly, they could not stay long before returning.

But spells are like legal documents, and Lilith missed a loophole in hers – she proclaimed iron the bane of Fae *men* and *women*, but no mention of *children*, allowing Fae children to live in the human realm without any harmful effects. It also works in reverse – a human *man* or *woman* can't enter the Otherworld, but a *child* can.

The monarchs of Orbis Alia were under constant threat of assassination, either by enemy clans or rival kinsmen wanting to usurp the throne. The Fae protected their royal heirs by swapping them with human children. Before they died of iron poisoning, they'd be taken back to the Otherworld.

At least, that's the way it used to work. Now they've broken free, to invade the human realm.

And I helped them do it.

Chapter Four
"Redcaps"

"You came back!" said the unbelieving Miranda against his shoulder as Gordi hugged her. She was surprised how attached she had grown to Gordi in the short time they had been wandering Hawthorne together. When she ran away from Axel, she had no fear of being alone – if she had discovered that Roxie was safe and happy in someone else's care, she would have been quite content to continue her self-imposed exile. But emotion seemed to be bubbling to the surface, now that she was embracing Gordi.

Except she wasn't.

"Of course, darling," he whispered back.

"Huh?" Miranda pulled back to look at him.

He cleared his throat. "Sorry. Trying to sound more human."

"Please don't – you sound like *Axel*."

"Mm. I would not wish that." Damn, that was close. Too many missteps like that and his cover would be blown, much sooner than he wanted. He hated speaking like such a deadpan simpleton, but if it meant getting Miranda back, he would do it. He only had to play Gordi until they got close to where he had stationed Tanis, Etheline and Bindi, who were waiting to capture her. He was sure Miranda would not be happy to be tricked, but at this point he had no choice – the stability of his rule, and the dominance of the Salamanders, was at stake. Her ability to wield the scepter unfortunately made her a threat – he had to contain her at the very least, and convince her to use the scepter for their benefit. Not a difficult task – though the method he would have to use would not be ideal.

He peeked behind Miranda, to see a cake wrapper caught on a breeze further back. "You have been following us?"

She nodded. "Darcy is the only one who can lead me to my sister. I wasn't lying–"

"Shh, I know. I should not punish you for being a Fae. It is a gift, not a curse – your power will help us greatly."

"That was a fast change of heart."

"Yes, well... being alone with Darcy was more than I could bear."

Miranda laughed. "Speaking of which, where is Darcy?"

"She told me where the camp was and took off. She did not want to go back there."

"Ah. I can't say I blame her."

"So, shall we?" he offered his arm for her to take. She blinked at him, quizzically. "Trying too hard again?" She nodded, with a smile that seemed one part amused and one part disturbed.

He bit his lip – another mistake. He sighed and tried to make it look like he was 'relaxing' into the frowning, slouching mode of Gordi. Miranda seemed satisfied with it – she relaxed and gave him a look that said 'that's better' and followed him, trustingly. Miranda had no idea that she was now veering off the path to the mines where her sister was being held, and was headed into a trap.

Meanwhile, the real Gordi was bringing supplies back to Darcy, just like he did with Miranda. They had more food than they needed, but Gordi did not know how to open the cans and they were out of everything else. Darcy pretended to wake up when he arrived, even though she had been awake since sunrise. Even with the thick clouds overhead, she wasn't used to this much light – during the night she found herself bothered by the moonlight that filtered through the grey curtain, preventing her from getting much sleep at all. Light in the Otherworld meant will-o-wisps, which meant that you were being watched – something to be avoided at all costs by a person in her profession. Darkness and shadows were protection – they allowed you to move unseen.

But when Darcy rummaged through the bags, she frowned.

"What's this stuff?"

"I thought it was a standard diet."

"Well...it is. If you're a Fae." She examined the bottle of Tums. "She was trying to block her iron absorption." She pulled out the tea, chocolate bars, and bag of nuts. "Look – this stuff's full of tannin."

Gordi did not know what she was talking about, and honestly he did not care to ask. He would prefer not to be reminded about Miranda whatsoever. He sat down next to Darcy, but as he did, she sniffed and made a face.

"You smell kinda...ripe. When's the last time you washed that tunic?"

Gordi lifted his arm and sniffed the armpit. "The Fae never cared about smell."

"Well *I'm* not a Fae." She handed him a bottle of drinking water.

He took it, smiling. "I know."

Darcy was horrified. He had probably been filthy most of the time in the Otherworld. Her experience had been different – she belonged to a group of assassins and thieves, humans who would be sent on dangerous missions where they had to be capable of blending in with

Fae. They could not afford to be ill-kept. She watched Gordi walk to the drain in the side of the road, and eyed the shield that he left behind.

"So the Fae like their servants to be dirty? I thought they were snobs."

"I was not a servant." Gordi poured the water bottle over his head.

"Oh? Then what were you?" No answer came. Darcy turned around, in time to see Gordi strip off his russet tunic. His back was crisscrossed with grotesquely raised scars, welts that spoke of repeated whippings, the skin forced to heal over and over again.

Gordi wrung the water out of his tunic, like it was the neck of an opponent. "I was their pawn."

Darcy pulled her gaze away, unnerved. Even though she had lived in the Otherworld as long as Gordi, she had never witnessed abuse on that level before. How did Gordi manage to earn so many lashes? Was he really that rebellious? And if so, how did they not break him? Her comrades were only whipped if they had disobeyed or failed in some way – and she had been very careful to avoid doing either, regardless of her feelings.

If she didn't want this to be her first failure, she needed to stop letting her curiosity get the best of her. From a utility belt pouch, she removed a small pill bottle. She'd swiped it from a storage cave in the Gnome base, where they used such tranquilizers to calm captured humans or their own unwilling blood donors.

Darcy opened the bottle and lifted one of the pills out between pinched fingers. She regarded it a moment, hesitating. She had never done this to a human before, and she was finding it harder than she anticipated. An open water bottle sat on the ground before her, waiting. She could hear Gordi's footsteps coming toward her from behind – she needed to act.

She dropped the pill in the small bottle opening, just before Gordi sat down.

"The Fae stopped fighting wars a long time ago," he explained. "These days, the Fae send out their human grunts instead. We bleed, so they don't have to."

She thought she might have to give him the water bottle, or tell him that it was his to drink, but Gordi was thirsty and picked it up without a moment's thought. She watched as the little pill dissolved in the bottom of the bottle as he drank.

He stopped, wiping his mouth on his arm. "Humans care about their fellow men and women. That is why we humans must stick together." Gordi frowned. He blinked, rubbing his eyes and forehead, frowning.

"Darcy," he said, sounding distant, "I feel...tired..."

Darcy hugged him, feeling his head fall limply against her shoulder. "Me too, Gordi" he heard her say, "It's tiresome, being a pawn."

He felt her lay him back against the ground as his vision clouded over. He caught a glimpse of Darcy picking up the Redcrosse shield. Then he saw no more.

Sully Slice concealed his hulking form in an alley. He breathed in the scent of their blood through his nostrils. He could detect their scents from a mile off. He knew Miranda's scent was a fake one, a perfume given off by glamour magic to mimic the smell of human blood. But he enjoyed it nonetheless. As a Fae, the iron-rich scent should have been repulsive. But as a Redcap, it was in his nature to be attracted to things that were dangerous. It was also in his nature to take those things and destroy them.

Without glamour to mask the scent, Fae smelled very different to a connoisseur of blood like Sully. Their blood changed the recipe – instead of iron, the main ingredient was orichalcum. Most Changelings were orichalcum-anemic, and had to let the iron from human food pass through them – but Sully and his Gnome brethren, with their affinity for metal, had a natural defense. Their blood continuously produced orichalcum. And due to its angelic origins, it negated enchantments such as the one Lilith placed on iron.

He waited for them to pass by him, oblivious – that little elf-princess and her pet human. He raised his claws, his fingers tightening around a rope. His brother would still be alive if that shield-carrying prick hadn't shown up. Sammy was strong. He would never have succumbed in a fight without iron to weaken him. They found him with his neck twisted – that wasn't how the Fae killed. Only human pawn-soldiers killed that way. "*You'll pay for killing my little bro, human*," thought Sully, as he silently emerged.

He threw a large shadow over the two of them. They noticed, and turned, just in time to see his claw arcing across Gordi's chest. Miranda yelled out his name. But even as the sound still hung in the air, it became apparent that it should have been a different name. His form flickered, distorted, like a malfunctioning hologram, and faded away to expose Axel.

"Axel**?!**" exclaimed both Miranda and Sully, in shared surprise. They exchanged looks, forgetting momentarily about the confrontation – but then Sully remembered his goal and grabbed Miranda in a bear-hug before she could get away, pressing the blades of his claw against her throat. She struggled, to no avail.

"Release her**!** I don't want her harmed," Axel called out, perturbed.

"I don't care what you want."

Axel was taken aback. He squared his shoulders. "I *command* you**!**"

Sully snorted derisively. "You have no authority –it's *this* pipsqueak who's the heir."

Something was wrong. Axel didn't know why the hell Sully would rebel against him, but clearly now was not the time to argue. "Fine! Then I beg you, as a Fae and a fellow royal, do not harm her! You and I have the same enemy, and I will help you defeat him!"

"You know what happened, after you left the mines? A human brat escaped. We went after her, and she killed my little bro."

Ah. That explained it. Darcy took liberties with her mission – she was supposed to play the damsel in distress, defending herself just enough until Gordi could 'rescue' her. She was skilled enough to have handled it, easily. Assassinating a Redcap royal on her way out wasn't part of the plan. Damn – now he had a mess on his hands.

Axel furrowed his brow, a look of appropriate concern on his face. "I'm sorry to hear that Sully," he said, not betraying any sense of guilt or responsibility. "My sincere condolences for your loss. But what does that have to with–"

Sully crushed Miranda against him, bringing his arms in tight. Miranda cried out. "Don't gimme that load of crap!" bellowed Sully. "Somebody let the little witch out, and I think that somebody was *you*."

Axel fingered the hilt of his sword – it had been glamoured to be Gordi's shield, but was now returned to its true shape. "Having just committed treason, I would be begging for my life – not trying to wring out a confession."

"I don't need your confession."

"Then what?"

Sully unwound the rope from around his own hand and tied it around Miranda's wrists. "I'm gonna do what you've failed to: I'm gonna find your Fetch, and I'm gonna *kill him*. In the meantime, I'll have *her* to keep me company."

Sully laughed. Axel's pupils slitted. He raised a hand at Sully – but Sully let go of Miranda and drove a claw into Axel's solar plexus, accompanied by the wet sound of knives cutting through raw meat. Axel choked as the blades slid underneath his ribcage.

"Hotheaded Salamanders," Sully grumbled. He pulled his blades out, and let Axel fall to the ground. His red shirt grew darker around the chest and stomach in a spreading stain, as the puncture wounds dripped blood onto the ground. Sully flicked the blood off of his claw, onto a horrified Miranda behind him. He turned to face her. "It's time a *Gnome* ruled instead."

Across town from where Axel lay dying, Darcy ran, adrenaline pumping, as it always did during a mission. She had the shield on her arm, ready to be delivered to Axel, unaware that the shield was the least of his concerns at the moment.

She spotted a red Jeep with an open hatch-back parked outside a convenience store. Perfect. She hopped through to the front, placing the shield on the passenger seat. She searched underneath the floor-mats and the sun-flap, hoping that the owner who had abandoned the vehicle had also left the key behind. She couldn't feel anything. She sighed, looking at the ignition – she would have to do it the hard way, hot-wiring it – a skill she'd only just learned since coming to this world. She searched in her utility belt for her screwdriver, until a whistled tune caught her attention.

The whistler came from a sturdy-built young man in a red flannel shirt. He was coming out of the convenience store, downing pills with a can of tea. She didn't have to see any more to determine that he was a Fae. She slipped into the back seat before he could catch sight of her.

Emerson Pearce was already in an apprehensive state of mind as he approached the unlocked car. For the last month, he felt as though he'd been thrown into some surreal alternate dimension, a Twilight Zone episode in which his parents and everyone he knew was suddenly gone. He'd been working since his mother took ill. He'd worked his way up from carpentry to helping his old man fix people's houses. His father was a contractor who gave up on everything after the passing of his wife, and died before he got to see his son graduate highschool.

Having no money for a funeral and not wanting to be taken to a foster home for the six months before he came of age, Emerson built a coffin and buried his father himself in their favorite spot, the woods behind their house where they had pretended to go camping. Emerson thought he would have to keep his father's death a secret, until unknown 'relatives' showed up to claim Emerson as their own - three men and an older woman, all wearing red headgear.

Now there was no job to go to, no school, no nothin' – which didn't sit well with his industrious nature.

He opened the unlocked door and slid into the front seat of the Jeep, fumbling in his pocket for his key. But as he brought it out and placed it into the ignition, he realized that he was nauseous, sick to his stomach. He followed the source of the energy in the passenger seat – a red and white shield.

"*What the*"- Emerson thought, before an arm snaked across his throat and pinned him against the seat. "Whoa! Sheez!" he gasped. The other arm came around and held a knife in front of his throat. An iron knife.

"Don't. Move."

The knife glinted at him. He gulped. "Wasn't planning to, sweetheart."

"Are you a Redcap?"

"Do you *see* me wearing a red cap?" Darcy wasn't amused by his feeble attempt at humor – her grip tightened on his airway. "N-No! Yes! I'm Emerson. I'm the one they sent you to kill." He sighed, closing his eyes. "It's okay. I'm ready. Do it quick."

Darcy was utterly confused by his reaction. "You weren't looking for me?"

"Huh?" Emerson opened his eyes. Why would I *look* for an assassin? Hell, I expected my brothers to do it themselves, but this is better."

"I'm not an assassin!"

"Seriously?"

"If I were, you wouldn't be asking me. You'd already be dead."

"Oh man..." he breathed a sigh of relief. "Wait. Then why did you attack me?" There was silence for a moment as Darcy thought that over. "Oops. My bad." She didn't sound particularly regretful.

"Well? You gonna let me go now?"

"No."

"What? Why?"

"Because now you'll kill *me*." Was this guy just stupid? Did he think *she* was?

"I will not," he assured, matter-of-fact. "That's why I don't have a red cap."

"What are you talking about?"

"When you asked if I was a Redcap... the answer is, I *should* be. My brothers like killing. I don't. It's why the family disinherited me, and it's why they want me dead. They thought I'd killed my father, like they'd done to their human parents. It was like a rite of passage. But I didn't, and when they tried to make me kill someone during the invasion I ran off."

Darcy huffed, shaking her head in what would have been disbelief – but honestly, she wasn't surprised. "Only Fae could be that twisted."

Emerson turned to look at her behind the seat. "And uh, if you kill an innocent, unarmed guy right now, what do you think that makes *you*?"

Darcy considered that a moment. She didn't like having a Fae question her morality, but he had a point. Yet she knew better than to trust a Fae to follow their own rules...wait. They did have to follow one. "...Do you give me your word?"

Great, he thought – this girl was tricky. He certainly didn't blame her for being cautious, but he wondered how she knew so much about the Fae. Emerson sighed. "Yes, I give you my word not to harm you. Even in self-defense." He felt her arms loosen, releasing him.

Darcy sheathed the knife. "I'm Darcy."

"Nice to meet you," he said, stretching and rubbing his neck. "Now," he said, gesturing at the shield with his thumb, "can you get that away from me? Otherwise I'm gonna hurl."

The transition between sleep and alertness was a longer process for Gordi than usual. He awoke in a stupor, his mind hazy and slow to get going. Where he was and what exactly he had been doing before his slumber he could not immediately recall. As he staggered to his feet with bleary eyes, he saw that there was very little around him to clue him in.

There was a distinct lack of weight on his arm. The shield. He remembered Darcy lifting it up.

"D-Darcy?" he said, his tongue almost forgetting how to do its job. There was no one around. And the gear. She had taken that too. Which could mean only one thing.

Darcy did not intend to return.

Before Gordi could ponder much further about why Darcy should want to flee with his shield, the sound of a foot crunching on a leaf reached his ear. He did not need to look at the encroacher to know who it was.

"She is no longer here, Redcap."

"I can see that," replied Sonny, "But neither is your shield."

Gordi's arm muscle stiffened involuntarily, like a wince. Unarmed combat was not a problem for him, so he had not realized how comforting the old iron shield had been, nor how exposed he would feel not having it. "I did not kill your brother."

"Maybe not. But you helped her."

"Nobody regrets that more than I."

Sonny scraped his daggers together, relishing the high-pitched metallic sound they made. "Well," he rumbled, "you won't have to live with your guilt for long."

He lunged forth at Gordi, knives and eyes flashing.

Miranda's Journal, Entry #5

My sister Roxie loved Faeries. To her, they were tiny winged people with wands, dancing on flowers and drinking from dew drops, and able to make people fly with one shake of their glittery dandruff.

She had a fairy doll that she carried around everywhere. When I went back to the house after the invasion, I found it lying face-down on the charred living room floor, its hair all tangled, candy-colored wings and petal-dress smeared with ash. My parents and sister where nowhere to be found. I spent the night on a broken couch, drinking water from a broken pipe hanging and dripping overhead, staring at a broken doll underneath the coffee table as I listened to gunshots and screams from areas of town not yet finished off. I picked up the doll, and felt a grim sense of irony – here I was, a Fae, hiding from faeries, comforted by a little winged doll. I thought about carrying it with me, as a keepsake to remind me of Roxie. But Roxie's captors were Fae, so the idea seemed perverse. At dawn, I stuffed the smiling doll into the broken water pipe, and walked away from my ruined house for the last time.

I never liked fairytales, even before I knew that they were a sugar-coated misrepresentation. But the older stories about the 'Fair Folk' that Roxie had me read... those were way more true than I ever would've believed.

One of them was 'The Faerie Queene'. It's about a human knight, a faerie princess, and a dwarf, who go on a quest to rescue the King and Queen from a dragon. Standard stuff... if it were a fairytale.

The dwarf was a Gnome prince, an explorer and hunter named Pellinore. You might recognize him from the Arthurian stories – he was the guy hunting down the Questing Beast, like some sort of medieval version of Captain Ahab.

The dragon was a Salamander lord named Aillen, ancestor – or I should say, granddaddy – of my ex-boyfriend Axel.

The knight was the famous dragonslayer, St. George, whose shield my former companion Gordi now bears.

And even though Roxie was the one who wanted to be a fairy or a princess, it's me who's descended from Lady Una. Which makes me...a faerie princess. Ew.

If only I'd known that stuff was history... maybe I'd be reading to Roxie right now. I think that's the first thing I'll do when I find her, read her a book. I won't complain this time.

But it sure as hell won't be about Faeries.

Chapter Five
"Heir"

Miranda tripped on the uneven ground. Sully lifted her up roughly by the rope binding on her hands, straining her arms and making the orichalcum edges bite against her already chaffed skin. Miranda yelled in frustration, pulling away, but Sully's grasp was inescapable.

"Hey, you better behave," he told her, unfazed by her struggles. "I'm taking you home to meet Mother, and I hope for *your* sake she likes you."

Miranda looked at him in horror. *Mother*. He was taking her to Mother Redcap.

Her personal exposure to the Fae was minimal – Axel was the only Fae she was aware of prior to the invasion. But he had tried to get her up to speed about the important players, and the woman known as Mother Redcap was one of them.

Her real name was Gothel. She had been beautiful once, a Goblin princess from the house of Gnome who beguiled the normally clear-headed Pellinore and became his wife. But theirs was an unhappy marriage, with Pellinore unable to deal with Gothel's wild mood swings and fierce temper. He found any excuse to get away, volunteering for every heroic quest that came up. Meanwhile, Gothel was left in her castle, alone and with nothing to do.

She dabbled in the arts of the Gnomes, such as smithing and engineering and chemistry, but soon found it too boring. Pellinore disappeared after the Questing Beast – after a decade passed he was presumed dead by most. Gothel believed it was an assassination. She began to believe that everyone around her, from servant to noble, was jealous and plotting against her. As her sanity left her and her malice grew, she developed a morbid taste for violence and suffering. Torture and blood-sport became her main source of amusement, until she finally discovered a way to combine her skills with her passion.

She took a page from the playbook of Mad Queen Glorianna by experimenting on the blood of her own people. She invented a system for mass-production of orichalcum and instituting the practice of transmutation-as-punishment, all within one fell decree. Because of her bloodlust, and for the murder of her own stepdaughter Rampion, she became known as Mother Redcap. The kind-hearted Pellinore would have been horrified to see what his wife had done – but he never got the chance to return home and set things right.

Based on these tales, Miranda knew that Sully was dragging her to certain doom. "That crazy witch**?!** She'll kill me**!**" Miranda exclaimed.

Sully kicked her. "Shut yer mouth**!**"

"What do I care?! I'm dead anyway! HELP!!! SOMEBODY HELP ME!!!" she screamed into the forest, not caring if she sounded like a damsel in distress. She didn't know who would be able or willing to help her at this point, but it was worth a shot.

Minutes before her cry for help, Jaron Lamar was surveying the town. Hawthorne had very little in way of natural lakes and rivers – the water now there was due to the invasion, and it was not only shallow, but contaminated and suited only for the breeding of mosquitoes. One of the Undine's main concerns was making it habitable, by purifying the water and constructing permanent dams – this effort was to be spearheaded by their young Changeling prince.

Instead, he was regaling a pair of Undine women with tales of 'his life in the human realm' for 'educational purposes'.

The Undine women had blue seal skin, fin ears, wavy tattoos, and armor made from the shells of their deceased ancestors. They had lived in the Otherworld all of their lives and had spent the last century as Undine infantry, so they were certain that their prince was a warrior of some renown in this strange land. And Jaron was not about to disappoint them.

"And that's how I saved the town," he said, wrapping up a ridiculous saga about a monster wave overtaking the land-locked Hawthorne.

"Amazing," said the one... was it Meriel, or Urmila? It was impossible for Jaron to tell them apart, for the only difference between the two was that this one had slick, straight, shiny green hair so dark as to be almost black, while the other wore hers in cascading curls of the same color. Maybe they were twins. He always wanted to date a hot pair of twins.

"You are a hero," said the woman with the flowing curly hair, her voice low and cool, rippling like an echo through an ocean cave. She was Urmila, and in her opinion, she looked nothing at all like Meriel.

Jaron looked down, the image of modestly, and sighed. "Yeah, I guess so," he said, seeming to be unconvinced as he sadly fingered a hook-shaped necklace. "But I didn't save the totally bodacious – I mean, *beautiful* – chick who gave me this."

They nodded, gravely, feeling his pain. "Did she die in the tsunami?"

"Yeah. It was one epic wave, and I surfed it all the way to her house... but I was too late. As she lay dying in my arms, she told me to wear this. To remember her."

They both 'awwed' in unison – a strange warbling sound, like a babbling brook mixed with a pleasured sigh. It went right to Jaron's head, among other things. He tried not to ruin the sympathetic effect of his story, but when one of the Undine girls grasped his arm with webbed fingers and the other laid her head against his shoulder, he almost lost all self-control.

A human guy might have been turned off by their cool, slick touch, but to him it was more natural than any other kind. "Will you ever fall in love again?" one of them softly burbled. Jaron kisses her hand as a response, and she giggled.

That was the moment that Miranda's scream reached their ears.

"Whoa. That's creepy," said Jaron. He stood up, overcome with a real protective instinct that was not an act for the adoring Undine girls. Well, at least not altogether. "Please excuse me, ladies," he said in his best superhero impression, picking up his orichalcum bident and rushing off toward the source of the scream.

Past the tree-line, he saw a young girl with tied hands fleeing into the woods, with Sully Slice on her heels. Jaron could see movement in the woods – thorn bushes springing up from the ground like barricades to impede Sully's advance. Branches whipped at him and coiled around his arms, but he broke them with a twist of his massive shoulders and carried on. It was nothing more than a nuisance to him.

Miranda was tiring fast. She had never used this much magic before – her survival instinct had kicked in and was fueling her spells with the will to live, but there was only so much she could learn to do on the fly. Before now, the most she had ever done fast-forwarded the growth of a flower, or wiped away bruises and scratches like they were a dry-erase board. But even those small feats had left her drained. And it was impossible before the invasion to practice magical skills in the presence of humans due to Lilith's Law, the clause of Lilith's Curse that protected humans from exposure to magic, and was as immutable as the laws of physics – until it was nullified, along with the barrier, by Miranda herself.

Sully caught up to her, and Miranda stumbled in fright.

She stumbled right into someone's arms. Jaron. She looked up at him and saw a white smile gleaming in contrast to a dark tan face.

"Hi," he said brightly, incongruous with the urgency of the situation at hand. He took the sharp edge of a bident prong to cut the rope binding her hand. "Go!" he told her, more seriously this time. "I'll take care of this." Miranda wasn't sure how or why, but her prayers had been answered and she was in no position to question miracles. She smiled gratefully and made a run for it.

"You stay outta this, Sardine, if you know what's good for ya!" Sully thundered.

Jaron's eyes narrowed. "Ran out of human girls to pick on, eh Sully? Wonder how Axel's gonna excuse you this time."

Sully's mouth twisted into a cruel sneer. "I don't think he will. He's too busy being dead." Sully chuckled.

Jaron stiffened, not believing what he was hearing. Would Sully dare assassinate a royal himself? And a *Salamander* at that? Had things gotten totally fubar, or what? If the Fae royals were this out of control, they were all screwed. Anarchy and lawlessness would reign supreme.

Jaron gritted his teeth resolutely, and lifted his bident, realizing the upside to this news.

"Then there's no one to stop me from killing you."

There was no one to stop the battle between Gordi and Sonny Stab either.

If a battle it could be called – without a weapon offense was near impossible for Gordi, and defense was similarly limited due to a lack of armor and shield. Gordi evaded and countered Sonny's attacks, throwing in a strike or a kick when he could – it was all he could do to keep the blades at bay. If it had been one blade, Gordi would have tried to grapple him and wrest away his weapon, but Sonny's dual blades made that a deadly proposition. Sonny punished his blocking with cuts to his arms – superficial wounds, but there was always a chance he would get lucky and nick an artery. At this rate, it was only a matter of time until his exhaustion caused him to make a fatal mistake. Sonny knew it, too – he was waiting him out.

Gordi made a tactical retreat, searching for something to use to his advantage. Sonny followed him, grinning. Gordi did not like running from a fight, especially against a Redcap. Pursuit of fleeing prey appealed to their predatory, animal nature. It provoked their bloodlust, kindling it into a strengthening madness.

Gordi turned sharply around a corner.

When Sonny followed, he couldn't see Gordi anywhere in the dead-end alley.

Gordi came up behind a trash can, brandishing a metal lid and trying to bash Sonny's head. Sonny grabbed the handle and wrested it away from him. Gordi overturned the nearby can and kicked it at him – Sonny jumped atop the can and yelled as he plunged his daggers at Gordi. Gordi rolled, but when he came to his feet, Sonny was gone.

Gordi scanned the alley to find where he had gone. A clinking sound. Before Gordi could turn, he found himself in Sonny's grasp, a chain twisting across his throat. Sonny had combined the daggers end-to-end with the chain to form bladed nunchucks.

"Silly human," Sonny gleefully mocked, "tricks are for Fae."

"Turn left at the next exit," commanded Darcy from the passenger seat of Emerson's Jeep.

"For a girl raised in Faerieland, you seem to know your way around," Emerson remarked as he turned the wheel."

"Don't call it that."

"Why?"

"It's offensive."

"Patriotic, are we?"

Darcy's eyes narrowed. "No. It's just not accurate. 'Faerie' is a demeaning term, so of course they wouldn't call their land that. It's the Otherworld. They like to call it Orbis Alia, but that's only when they're talking official – so that it sounds like an actual place."

"It isn't a place?"

She laid her head against the back of the seat. "It's a box. A floating box in the middle of nothingness."

"Like a Phantom Zone for the Fae?"

"Yes." His face registered surprise. The questions to follow were not even formed fully in his mind, but they were obvious and expected, so she decided to save him the trouble. "I was specially trained. They put me in a magic simulator and had me run practice ops in a construct of Hawthorne. I was tutored in current human vernacular, and watched a shitload of movies and TV."

"They get TV in the Otherworld?"

"Yeah. The reception's pretty bad though."

Emerson saw her smirk. She was joking. "Where are we going?" he asked.

"I've completed my mission and must report to Axel."

"Axel? But he's... a Fae."

"Yes." She shifted uncomfortably. He waited for her to elaborate, but she didn't.

"So where'd you dig up that shield?"

Her voice flattened. "I inherited it."

"Ah. Somebody in your family was a collector?"

"Both my parents were collectors. But the shield is from a friend."

"A friend died and left it to you?"

"I took it from a friend who is going to die." She gave him a sidelong look, warning him against asking more questions on the subject.

"Nice," he said, sarcastically. "I'm guessing the shield is for protection?"

"No. It's proof that I've completed my part of the deal." Darcy looked out the window, and for a long while there was silence. Until she noticed a dark form crumpled against the sidewalk's edge. "Hey, STOP!"

Emerson stomped on the brakes. He could see it too. It was Axel, inspecting his bleeding wounds. Axel placed a trembling hand over them, and caused his hand to glow red

hot like an ember. It was an attempt to cauterize the wound. He yelled, seizing with self-inflicted pain, and then flattened against the ground.

Darcy never expected to see a prince of Salamander in such a miserable state. Axel ruled by intimidation, yet here he was, sitting along the sidewalk like a wounded animal. Darcy unsheathed her knife. "Stay here." Darcy unlocked the door, but before she could open it, Emerson grabbed her wrist.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm gonna go kill him," she said, as if that was the only sensible thing to do. He didn't release his grip. She struggled. "Let go-"

He looked at her imploringly. "He's wounded."

"Yeah, I can see that," she snapped, "it's why I think I can take him."

"We should help him out, not put him down."

"*Help* him?" she squeaked, the word catching in her throat. "Are you nuts?"

"Well, you screwed over a fellow human to get that shield for him," Emerson quipped. "Seems like a waste to switch gears now."

Darcy paled, not expecting such biting words from Emerson. She swallowed, trying to find her own. "If I kill that jerk, I'm free. No human will ever have to be his pawn again."

Emerson glanced at Axel's motionless form. "He's dying anyway, from what I can tell." He fixed his gaze back on Darcy. "Question is... are you sure your friend has to die?"

Darcy stopped trying to pull away as she let that sink in. She felt frustrated to the point of tears over this new line of moral thinking. Axel was bad news. Axel needed to die. It was just that simple. In Darcy's experience, the worst enemies usually had the best knack for survival. And the age-old advice holds true as much for the bad guys as the good – what didn't kill them often made them stronger.

Mercy, in her world, made no sense. Mercy was akin to laziness, a dangerous self-assurance that fate was on your side. You don't leave an enemy to fate. You take care of it, once and for all, and sleep better for it afterward.

But Gordi was not an enemy. Gordi was a friend, the truest friend that she'd ever had. Even the humans she'd known in the Otherworld, people she trusted her life and well-being to on a daily basis, were not friends. They were cohorts, nothing more. If they did not have a common goal, given to them by their captors, they would never have associated with one another. Or they would have backstabbed each other to further their own ends.

Gordi was probably dead by now. The Redcap brothers would be hunting him, now that he didn't have the shield to keep them at bay.

But what if he wasn't? Sure, the Redcap brothers had a natural ferocity and were better equipped for violence. But Gordi was a sort of gladiator-mercenary in the Otherworld...

Darcy's heart thumped a little more intensely inside her chest, the imaginary battle taking place in her mind like a live feed. She looked at the shield in the back seat, wondering if it could be the key to Gordi's survival. Maybe she would show up just in time...

Darcy faced forward again in her seat. "Alright. Turn around."

Emerson smiled, and did just that.

Axel didn't notice the car making a U-turn in the road and speeding off. He was almost delirious and something more urgent had caught his attention – namely, the small rivulet of blood still flowing over the sidewalk and into the storm drain. With great and painful effort, he twisted to see his back – blood had seeped out and was pooling on the sidewalk. He pulled on his black leather jacket to see the ragged holes.

The claw had gone right through him. Axel fell back to the ground, exhausted. It would be impossible to cauterize his back in this condition. He was done for. He stared up at the sky, wishing he could see the sun one last time. Among other things.

He heard footsteps on the grass. He turned his head, to see Miranda abruptly stop mid-run and stare at him. He wasn't sure at first if she was really there, or that his dying mind had granted his wish.

She looked at him with uncertainty. She didn't realize she had retraced her steps back to where Axel had been stabbed, and frankly she had been so preoccupied with her own peril that Axel's fate was not the foremost thought in her mind. Now, her instinct to get as far away from Sully as possible fought with her obligation to render aid. But then again, did she have to? Did she want to? Miranda chewed on her lip. Axel brought this on himself – not to mention everyone else. And he had shown nothing in the way of true remorse, had done nothing to set things right – why would he? According to him, he did nothing wrong – and if anything, he seemed to have become more determined to see his plans through. Maybe this was a fitting and necessary end.

Even without the mental-emotional connection they shared by blood, Axel could see the hardness in her gaze, the rigidness of her shoulders as she braced herself to walk away and leave him to die. She didn't forgive him, even now. He should have expected as much, seeing as how he'd brought her so much misery. He closed his eyes and turned his head. If this was her revenge, then so be it. Hopefully his death would bring her peace.

She bit her lip. His look of resignation tugged at her heart, anchoring her to the ground where she stood. She sighed, and finally started running again.

To his side.

Axel's eyes blinked open, to see Miranda's frowning face.

"Okay, just so you know," she said harshly, "this does *not* mean I forgive you."

He felt her hands as she placed them over his wounds. Her eyes and hands glowed yellow. It brightened and shone through her, like she had a sun inside her that was about to explode the outer shell of her body. The energy was leaving her hands and coursing into his chest, spreading through his veins. He could feel things twisting inside, with a painful ache – a month's worth of mending and tissue regeneration compressed into mere seconds.

The intense golden light overtook his vision.

Gordi was turning blue, clawing at the chain pulled tightly around his throat. He purposely stumbled, forcing Sonny backward until his back hit a wall. Gordi rammed him against it, driving an elbow into his side. Sonny was stunned for a moment, his grip loosened by the shock – taking advantage, Gordi pulled down on Sonny's arm as he ducked, throwing Sonny over his shoulder.

If Sonny had been a human, he would have landed like a big sack of potatoes on the ground, and the fight would be over – but with his inhuman grace, Sonny landed on his feet without seeming fazed at all. He turned and lunged at Gordi with both daggers.

Gordi ducked and rolled, letting Sonny's daggers hit the wall. The moment of humiliation was brief – as Gordi regained his footing, Sonny tore a wicked gash between Gordi's neck and shoulder, and kicked him back down. Sonny raised his dagger for the last, fatal stab.

The Redcrosse shield appeared in his face. He gasped and stumbled back.

Darcy had slid between Sonny and his prey, with the shield upraised. Gordi could not believe what he was seeing – Darcy had returned to him. And she had brought the shield.

Darcy turned to look at him over her shoulder and smiled. "Sorry I'm late."

Sonny chucked a broken TV from the trash at Darcy, forcing her to raise the shield again to deflect it. As it crashed against the pavement, Sonny sidestepped her, trying to get at Gordi.

There was a broken pipe jutting out from the destroyed wall – the end of it was barely hanging on. Gordi grabbed it and pulled it off. As Sonny came at him, he swung it with all his strength at Sonny's kneecap.

He felt Sonny's kneecap crunch and give. Kneecaps were not supposed to bend backwards like Sonny's was now. Sonny screamed, holding his leg. Darcy slammed the edge of

the shield into Sonny's throat. The touch of iron from the pipe and the shield immediately drained Sonny of all ability to fight back.

Gordi swung the pipe down and bashed Sonny's skull in.

Or at least, he would have – if someone had not caught the pipe in his hand, stopping its downward arc.

It was Emerson. He yelled out and cradled his hand, wincing as if he was burned. Gordi stepped back in surprise, but Darcy came forward with clenched fists.

"Emerson, I swear**!**"

Emerson looked at her with a look that infuriated her – the defiant sort of expression you'd expect from a martyr suffering for a cause. She pointed at Sonny, who was kneeling from his busted knee and shaking, swaying like a drunkard as he tried to stay upright. "He's *psychotic***!** He wants to *kill us all***!**

"He is still my brother."

Emerson looked over at Sonny to see his reaction, hoping perhaps to see some hint of gratitude. But instead, they all realized that Sonny was gone.

"Great," complained Darcy, throwing her arms up. "I hope you're happy, cuz from now on we're all gonna have to sleep with one eye open..."

Gordi stared at Emerson, then at Darcy. "I am not sure which of my questions to ask first," he admitted with a smile.

Jaron and Sully's fight was a strange one.

Sully fought to decrease the distance, and Jaron fought to keep him at bay, since the former had a short weapon and the latter a long one. Sully was subject to pokes from Jaron's bident at long range, so the large man moved, twisted and evaded much more than he was usually accustomed to in a fight.

Jaron, on the other hand, could do very little when Sully got in too close – the head of his weapon was the death-giver, with its sharp barbed points, but also a bit weightier and therefore slower, whereas the other end was faster, but its bluntness could only be used to bruise and annoy.

Ideally, Jaron wanted to knock the air out of his gut, or hit his temple and knock him out altogether. But Jaron had to spin and turn the bident wildly to react to the whirling, bladed dervish he was facing, one whose hands were free to grasp his opponent's weapon and render it immobile.

Sully did just that, taking hold of the bident with one hand and driving his other claw toward Jaron's throat, but Jaron kicked him and shoved him backward with a punishing thrust of his bident.

Both fighters put up a vicious fight, to the point that an outside observer would have been able to discern nothing of it besides the flashing of orichalcum blades as the two combatants performed their violent dance.

Until a flash of bright light, like a supernova, washed over them and blinded them for a few seconds and then disappeared as abruptly as it had arrived. Sully and Jaron both blinked. All at once, their duel was forgotten – inconsequential in comparison to, and replaced by, their curiosity about the strange light. Sully ran toward the source, and Jaron followed him.

What they found was a mahogany-skinned, wild-haired female clad only in leaves, crouched over the prone form of Axel.

"What the...?!" Sully began, his mouth too dry to finish the question.

She stood up with an eerie slowness, and turned to them with large, round glowing eyes like headlights within a dark brown mask of bark. Her ears were long, pointed, reaching up into her wispy mane. Running down the entire length of her limbs were green veins.

It was Miranda – or rather, the Fae creature who had stolen that name and form – now revealed in her true visage. Unlike humans who cower when exposed, Miranda did not seem vulnerable. Rather, she looked like a powerful demon, freed from its mortal host and unleashed upon the world.

Axel, barely conscious, tried to sit up and raise his hand to release a blast of fire at Sully – but Miranda easily pushed Axel back down, with one hand. She walked forward, her expression alien and unreadable. If walking it could be called, as it did not require the use of her legs. Instead, dark roots descended from the base of her spine, branching out and sinking into the ground. As the roots grew, Miranda herself was lifted upward. The roots uprooted and re-rooted themselves into the earth, like so many spider-like legs, crawling. From out of her wrists, vines grew out into whips, twisting like snakes.

Sully sneered. "Oh you wanna play now, do you Eldritch..." Sully charged toward her, clawing at the vines which attacked him. He reached her thin foundations, and slashed at them. Miranda calmly raised her own hand, and her palm glowed yellow.

Sully was barely able to let out a scream before it was cut short by a deafening explosion.

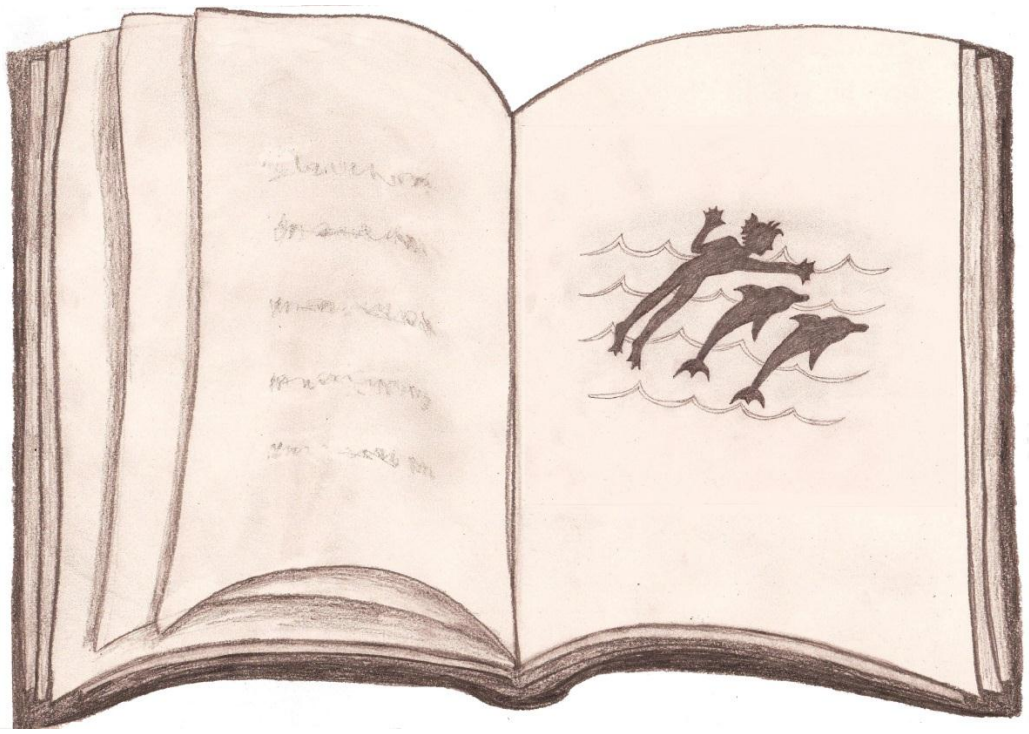
Jaron shielded his eyes from the searing light. The inside of his eyelids were orange for several seconds. He waited for them to fade to black before cautiously opening his eyes. Right

before him was a wisp of smoke where Sully stood just moments before. That was the only evidence of him that remained. A little bit further ahead, Miranda stood with her feet on the ground once more – she was surrounded by ash, having burned her own supports in the blast. The glow of her eyes dimmed, like a dying ember. She weaved, dizzy and unstable on her feet. Jaron rushed forward, catching her in his arms before she fell. Her eyes returned to its laurel-green shade, staring blankly at the sky.

The Undine girls – who had chosen to glide along the flooded roads rather than rough up their unshod, webbed and slick-skinned feet on the ground – caught up to Jaron, panting.

"Who is she?" reverberated Meriel, a touch of jealousy in her liquid voice.

"I think... it's her," Jaron answered. He looked down at Miranda's unconscious face with wonder and awe, and whispered a name which, he'd been told, was treasonous to utter in the presence of Salamanders. "The Faerie Queene."



Miranda's Journal, Entry #6

As Europe fell into the Dark Ages, so did the Otherworld. After the death of the beloved Faerie Queene Titania, who was beloved by all except the Sylphs, the scepter was passed to her younger sister, Glorianna – my grandmother. Glorianna, however, was a strange girl who spent most of her time tending her flower gardens, a disciple of the deranged Woodwose guru known as Johnny Magory. She was obsessed with King Arthur, who spurned her advances, and caused her to settle for marrying one of his vassals, the Fae knight Gawain. In his absence, the newfound power corrupted her fragile mind, and sent her spiraling into a full-on psychosis.

She became obsessed with reflection – she thought that if she made a castle out of glass and filled it with enough mirrors, she could turn the scepter into an artificial sun that would shine rays of light throughout the dark world of Orbis Alia. She dubbed herself the Lady of Light, but became known to everyone else as 'Mad Queene Glorianna'.

The Eldritch power was the closest match to Lilith's own, and therefore it was the most powerful. But it was also the most dangerous. Eldritch power could create and destroy, but to do either one required fuel. Life-force. Trouble was, it did not have to be the life of the caster. Glorianna was vain, and did not enjoy the prospect of aging herself in order to accomplish her goal of lighting Orbis Alia. First she absorbed the will-o-wisps, introducing a horrible new form of death to the Fae... a second death, in which their soul could be snuffed out of existence.

Then, she began spying on her citizens through their household mirrors and capturing those she felt were 'deviants and rebels' – i.e., whoever she took a disliking to, which happened to include anyone with beauty to rival her own. Those arrested were used to fuel her spells. Of course, even the Mad Queene could see that this was not sustainable – she would soon have no subjects left if she kept killing them off at that rate – so she began to import humans into the Otherworld and absorb their life-force as well.

The world, ironically, became darker as a result. As Ellydan, the territory belonging to House Eldritch, became filled with trees and light, the others began to die. Their lands became fallow and barren, turning to dust, and spells became much more difficult to cast. Glorianna was literally sucking the life-force out of Orbis Alia itself.

The Salamanders had always been known as the most inherently destructive of the Houses, while Eldritch had been known as the most inherently constructive – but now, Sylph and Undine and Gnome were showing up on the Salamander's doorstep, begging for the heat and light their fire produced. The Salamanders decided that enough was enough. They besieged Castle Eldritch, and Aillen used the power of his singing voice to lull all the soldiers and inhabitants therein to a deep, enchanted sleep. Without hardly any resistance, they put the entire Eldritch population to death in a frenzied, genocidal massacre. The ensuing destruction earned Aillen the epithet of 'The Burner.'

One member of the Eldritch royal family survived – Una, my mother. The daughter which Glorianna, whose jealousy spared no one, imprisoned inside a mirror and placed on the wall of her highest tower. Every day, Glorianna would admire herself in the mirror, and Una would shower her with compliments and tell her anything she wanted to hear.

Taking part in the siege was the Salamander princess Morgan. She was an outcast and an alchemist, the illegitimate daughter of Aillen the Burner and a Undine warrior-princess named Vivien. Morgan found the mirror containing Una. Morgan took pity on the imprisoned girl, and claimed the mirror as part of her chosen spoils.

Thus rescued, Una was still in need of a champion. Morgan held conference with her fellow rebellious royals – her mother, Vivien the Undine, and Merlin the Sylph, a scholar. The three of them were bent on fighting the establishment and bringing peace to Orbis Alia.

Before the fall of Atlantis, the human Sigurd killed the powerful Salamander, Fafnir. The blood burned his finger, which he stuck in his mouth: afterward, he spoke Fae and was slightly flame-retardant. His kids were the same. Merlin related this tale, and it was agreed that the three of them would go to the human realm and track tracked down Sigurd's heir.

The heir was the old, childless Uther Pendragon. He wasn't going to be of much help, so they got him laid – with his best friend's wife. Uther was glamoured to look like his friend Gorlois, and in this disguise he knocked up the unwitting Igerna.

This created Arthur, who proved he was the Chosen One by pulling Sigurd's sword out of a rock. But Arthur refused the mission – he wanted Merlin to help him build a 'human Atlantis', Camelot, instead. Merlin saw the boy as a son, and defended his young pupil. But Vivien and Morgan were pissed off. Vivien lured Merlin back to the Otherworld, and away from Arthur. Once he stepped through the portal, Una sealed him up in a magic tree.

Morgan seduced Arthur to conceive Mordred... the scourge of Camelot. Mordred and Arthur ended up killing each other over the throne of Camelot.

Meanwhile, Gorlois died of old age, allowing Uther to marry the widow Igerna. They had another son, a half-brother to Arthur named George. Vivien kidnapped George to train him in the Otherworld. He had become their 'plan B'.

Chapter Six

"Wounds"

The roar of waves folding onto the shore echoed in Miranda's ears, bubbling foam on the sand even as it retreated once more. The sound of a water drop, echoing through a large, empty space. A cool breeze danced gently across her face. There was a rustling of leaves. Leaves brushing against her skin. As these senses awakened, pain soon followed. It was a dull, heavy ache, yet she felt strangely hollow on the inside. She was listless, no energy to move. She groaned, trying to break from the paralysis by turning her head on... a pillow. A blue pillow, with a wave-like design.

With great difficulty, she forced herself into a sitting position, propping herself on shaky, numbed-out arms. A blanket fell away from her upper torso, and underneath her seemed to be a reed mat. Her eyes blinked open. She was resting in the mouth of a seashore cavern, just on the edge of a pool.

"Jaron!" she exclaimed, recognizing the tan-skinned guy reclining on a sculpture of a Loch Ness monster in the middle of the pool. Its long neck and tail curved to create arm rests.

"Hey princess," he said brightly. Watching Miranda display her true form powers inspired Jaron to do a bit of showing off. He slid off the back of the Nessie-throne and dissolved in the water, re-appearing on the other side of the pool. Miranda watched as clear water rose up and formed a mask, filled in with color, and then with substance, to become Jaron's grinning face. "Good morning. Looks like I've rescued you again."

She remembered what he was referring to – it was the previous summer, when Roxie got pulled under by a wave at this very beach. Miranda had run out and grabbed her, and got in trouble too – until Jaron pulled them both out and onto his surfboard. He'd teased her for 'trying to pull a Baywatch' when she was such a weak swimmer, and volunteered mouth-to-mouth if she needed it. She didn't take the bait. He was undeterred by her lack of gratitude, making a point to stop and talk to her whenever he caught sight of her around school. "You're a Fae," she said, wonderingly.

"Yeah, and you are too! Who woulda thought, right?" he rested muscular arms on the rock edge, like it was a swimming pool. "I mean, it was crazy enough to hear I was a Fae, and that I was something called a Kelpie. But then they tell me I'm not just some regular grunt Fae... nah, I'm the freakin' *ruler*, man! Check out my throne back there. Pretty sweet, huh?"

Miranda felt like someone had hacked into her mind and deleted the last few entries. She knew Jaron had helped to rescue her from Sully, and she knew that she'd found Axel bleeding to death on the side of the road... but after that, her memory was like a blank sheet of paper. "What... what happened?" she asked, feeling stupid.

Jaron got a wicked gleam in his eye, rubbing his chin for effect. "Hm. Well, first you went all leaf-covered Terminator..." Miranda finally had the presence of mind to look down at herself, and realized that her modesty was only sparsely covered by a growth of ivy-vines and leaves snaking around her body, originating from her spine. Her skin tone was also a lot darker than she remembered, webbed with veins of green. She drew the blanket around herself, and Jaron gave her a teasing look. "And then," he said, changing the subject, "you let out this *sweet* energy blast thing-"

"I *what*?" Never before had Miranda done anything with her powers except promote plant growth. She didn't even know she was capable of anything else. It was even weirder to hear it described by someone else, when she didn't remember it at all.

"Yeah!" he said, bursting with bright-eyed enthusiasm. He proceeded to act out the events with animated gestures and mock-voicing. "Sully was like '*you wanna play, little girl*?!' And you were like *'talk to the hand*!' KA-BOOM! Right in the *face*!"

"Oh my god," she whispered. "Where is he?"

Jaron blinked at her. "Uh, nowhere. You nuked him right out of existence." Miranda looked down at the turquoise blanket, clutching it tightly. She'd killed someone. Even though it still didn't seem quite real, the very thought was horrifying. It buzzed through her overheating brain, and made her gut feel heavy and in motion, like a see-saw of churning waves.

Jaron sobered. "Sorry," he said. "You really don't remember, do you?"

She shook her head, eyes brimmed with tears. "I never should have used my powers."

"Hey, what're you talking about? You did awesome. There's no way any of us could've defeated him so quick."

"*I* didn't defeat him. This... *thing* that was unleashed when I healed Axel did it for me."

"Okay, so you were 'under the influence'," said Jaron with a shrug, "So what? It was still you, just... uninhibited. Free. When you faced Sully... that 'thing' was *you*. "

Miranda winced. For some reason, his statement seared through her chest as sharply as Sully's claws had torn into Axel's. He'd just confirmed a fact – she wasn't human, after all. But her whole life, being a human was always painted as a privilege – an elevated status above all other living beings on Earth. Intelligence made humans superior to animals, but 'humanity' was

treated as a synonym for virtue. That word carried with it the idea of fostering life, of empathy toward other beings.

But there was also a word to describe a powerful, violent creature that lacked empathy.

Monster.

There were a few moments of tense silence. "...Thank you for saving me," she said in a hollow voice, not looking at him. She rose with the blanket wrapped around her, walking out of the cavern and onto the beach outside.

"Yo, wait up!" Because she'd been so cool and collected in her powered-up form – and because Sully had so richly deserved an ass-whipping – it hadn't occurred to him that Miranda might regret being the dispenser of justice. Come to think of it, Jaron himself was strongly against killing – he didn't even support the death penalty. Wow. Did watching the Redcaps pillage Hawthorne change his moral perspective that much? And in only, what, a few weeks? He was feeling a bit rotten watching Miranda almost cry over the death of a guy who'd kidnapped her, beat her, and probably had worse in store for her at the Gnome mines... while he, the live-and-let-live surfer, danced on the bastard's grave.

Miranda walked along the beach, looking at all the bamboo-and-netting tents, passing Undines dressed in in clothing made of shell, fish scales, and coral. They flexed their ear-fins as they took notice of her, like a dog whose ears perk up at the sight of their master. They nodded at her, respectfully... or maybe even with deference.

Miranda brushed at her wispy hair, embarrassed, and her hand brushed against her ear. She was suddenly aware that it was longer than they were before. She felt them, realizing they were pointed, leaf-shaped like the ears of an elf. But even though they were a different shape, they undoubtedly felt like *her* ears – the same sensitivity, the same cartilage feel, the same skin.

The sun was setting, and tiki torches were being lit outside each makeshift shelter. Many of the Undines seemed busy gathering seaweed and cooking it over campfires, along with pots of rice.

She waded into the cold surf, letting the water rush around her ankles as she stared into the misty horizon. At first it looked like sea-creatures of various sorts were frolicking together in the water just offshore – turtles, seals, dolphins – but the Undines on the beach made clicking noises at them, and they began to rise out of the surf, morphing. They were all Undine children of various ages, running past Miranda to their parents.

Jaron watched Miranda, and was joined by his lieutenants, Meriel and Urmila.

"What's wrong with her?" asked Meriel.

"Ah, I think she's just kinda psyched out. She's never gone into a full-on power rush before."

"Has she ever been in her true form?" asked Urmila.

"Nope. I think that was the first time she's ever dropped the human act."

Meriel shook her head. "I cannot imagine living in an illusion for so long."

"The Otherworld was an illusion," Urmila pointed out. "Jaron... what are we going to do, if Axel comes looking for her?"

"I dunno."

"We will fight for you, if need be," said Urmila, and Meriel gravely nodded in support. "We will unleash a tidal wave and drown the Salamander flames."

Jaron frowned, turning to face them. "Nah see, that's the problem – you guys from the Otherworld get way too amped about these turf-wars with the other tribes. It can't all be death and destruction twenty four-seven. We need to loosen up, have some fun."

"...Fun," repeated Urmila, dubiously.

"Yeah, *fun*," he said. "I've got an idea – could one of you ladies grab the volleyball and net out of the cave?"

The two exchanged looks with each other, then looked at Jaron with uncomprehending eyes. "Volleyball?"

He sighed. "No worries. I'll get it."

Miranda heard a "Head's up!" and caught a volleyball right before it would have hit her face. In the process, she lost the blanket in the water.

"Ya know we can't see anything, right?" Jaron said, as she considered retrieving the soggy blanket. "There's this thing the young kids are wearing these days called a *bikini*, and it shows *way* more than you are now."

Miranda smiled, relaxing. "Maybe I'll set a new trend. The leaf-kini." She noticed that Urmila and Meriel were struggling with the net behind him. "Do they need some help?"

Jaron rolled his eyes. "You have no idea," he said.

"What is this for?" asked Meriel, spreading the net. The other Undines were gathering curiously, obviously wondering the same.

"It's a game," responded Jaron, loudly enough for all to hear.

"But we have no humans," protested Urmila.

"No – *we* are gonna split into teams. The goal is to hit the ball on the ground of the other team's turf. The one who scores the most hits wins."

"What do the winners get?" burbled Meriel excitedly.

"A sense of accomplishment."

"I see," said Urmila, nodding. "Who is in charge of killing the losing team?"

Jaron hung his head. He looked up at Miranda imploringly. "See what I mean?" Miranda helped explain volleyball to the Undines, and demonstrated with Jaron until they had the idea and were ready to break off into teams. As it turned out, beach volleyball was a sport at which the Undines innately excelled.

Within a couple hours' time, Miranda was already feeling less like the team captain and more like the weak link preventing her team from winning. The Undines were enjoying themselves, clicking and whistling like dolphins, or barking like seals.

The volleyball rolled down the beach and into the water, causing the Undines to rush after it. Miranda took the opportunity to catch her breath on the sand. Jaron sat down with her, taking the opportunity to talk with her again now that she was more relaxed.

"You look beat," commented Jaron

"Yeah," Miranda sighed, looking up at the grey clouds above. "I think the blast knocked a good year off my life."

"Oh right – I forgot that your magic used up life-force. What a bummer."

"I miss the stars," she said, choosing to ignore him.

"Is that why you won't fight Axel?"

"Why would I fight Axel?"

"No reason... 'cept he's a *usurper,* and you're the Faerie Queene."

"What are you talking about?"

"You don't know?"

"Drake is the King of Fae," answered Miranda, puzzled. "Even if I'd married Axel, I wouldn't be Queen."

"Oh man," he said, shaking his head. "Axel really did a number on you. Miranda, the Otherworld has never been ruled by a King. The King's basically just the Queene's husband. The first Queene was a Undine, Fand, back when we lived on Atlantis."

"I thought Lilith was the Queene of Atlantis?"

"No. Lilith was something higher than Queene." He paused, smiling, before he continued. "When she locked the Fae up in the Otherworld, Mab the Sylph took over – the one who was married to Oberon. And then the scepter was found, which made Eldritch the most legit – so we got Titania and her sister Glorianna. But when they got whacked by the Salamanders, things... got weird. Queene Aynia of the Salamanders couldn't use the scepter, so nobody wanted to accept her as the new Faerie Queene."

"What happened to her?"

With a grim expression, Jaron drew a line across his throat while making a slicing sound. "*Shck*. Same as Marie Antoinette. Ever since then, all the Salamander babes have said 'no way in hell' to marriage proposals from princes. They set up harems to make new little royals, and left the whole Queene business alone. But they've still had a gnarly mess on their hands trying to stay in power, when the only House that anyone respects is Eldritch. That is, until Axel found out about you."

"Axel can have the throne. I just want my sister back."

Jaron shrugged. "Like it or not it's your turf. And Axel's not the guy to leave it to."

"You think I would be any better? Remember, *I'm* the one kicked off a genocidal invasion."

Jaron waved that off. "As if! Axel's idea. His foul."

"I killed a man."

"Well, nobody's cryin' about that–

"...On *auto–pilot*," Miranda stressed.

"On instinct," he corrected, just as firmly.

Miranda exhaled, frustrated. "Point is I can't even control *myself*, much less anybody else."

Jaron smiled, watching the Undines attempting to surf offshore. They were struggling with it – using a board to do something that they could do naturally was strange to them, as was the concept of cheating – and the temptation was strong when water was so close, and magical aid could be so subtle. He nodded his head at them. "You think I *control* these guys? I'm a total newb compared to most of them."

"They'd follow you anywhere, Jaron. They like you. They don't like me, and to be honest the feeling is mutual."

"They follow me cuz I've got passion and guts. And so do you." Jaron took her hand, pulling her up. He turned around, taking both her hands and placing them on the back of his shoulders. Suddenly, he liquefied, morphing – the water rose in front of her to create a horse head, and pooled around her legs until it became an equine body.

"Jaron, you know I can't swim!" she yelled. He didn't listen to her. The creature he had transformed into was taking solid shape underneath her – a spiny–plated, gold–skinned creature. A sea–horse with legs. It bolted forward, and she held on tight as it plunged into the water.

She opened her eyes to find a world of blue, illuminated by streaks of pale moonlight. The water-horse galloped along the sandy bottom, with its eerie stepped pattern created by the tides. Dark silhouettes cast shadows across the sea floor. Undines floated all around in their Merrow form – half human, half sea creature, their elegant dolphin tails moving back and forth as they glided. Some had manta ray fins for 'wings', or in place of tails maintained eight independent, sucker-lined arms like an octopus. Their dark blue skin blended in with the surrounding ocean, slick and covered in tattooing, and their hair looked like seaweed waving gently in the ocean current. The hair of the women, normally slick down their backs, billowed around their heads, straightening only as they darted forward in play or to collect a pretty shell. Men with dark spiked shoulders patrolled the water, bidents at their sides, observing with dark, shiny, alien eyes that glowed electric blue when they found the water too deep and dark to see through.

Some of them let fall their spears and chased after the women, who led them through treacherous rock and coral formations along the bottom. Like a smoky breath, black ink passed from their lips to cloud the waters and obscure the path. Once caught, the Mer-maids kissed their pursuers, twirling slowly in a suspended embrace as they both shimmered the electric blue of bioluminescence.

The water-horse swam upward toward the undulating glass of the water's surface, passing by a bloom of flirtatious female Undines swinging on the tentacles of jellyfish. The water horse broke through, and Miranda gasped air back into her starved lungs with such force that she choked. She looked down, and realized that the water-horse was running along the top of an enormous, roaring wave. Miranda screamed, laughing with exhilaration.

Jaron morphed back into his humanoid form, turning around to take her hands. "What do you think?" he asked.

"They're awesome," she said, breathless.

"They're yours to command as much as mine. If you become Faerie Queene."

She thought it over, watching the Undines swim beneath them. The Fae could be frightening, it was true, but they could also be beautiful, as they were now. They weren't monsters, she realized. Perhaps she wasn't either. "What do I have to do?"

He grinned, beaming. "That's my girl." He skated with her down the back of the wave, further out to sea.

Later that night, the Undines warmed themselves by dancing to the beat of drums and chanting, in the light of campfires and torches. After they ate, she announced her intention to take back the scepter from the Salamander stronghold. She worried that Jaron's confidence

might be misplaced, and that the Undines would not follow an Eldritch to what could be their doom. But instead, there was much cheering, and the dancing was renewed to celebrate the return of the Faerie Queene. This time she joined in, abandoning herself to the dance, and let all dark thoughts of death and loss wash away.

Climbing into the back of the Jeep, Darcy offered a water bottle to Gordi, seated with his back against the door as he silently stitched his shoulder-gash closed. His eyes narrowed at the sight of the bottle, and moved upward to glare at her through dark strands of hair.

"What did you put in it this time?" he asked bitterly.

She withdrew it, realizing what a bad gesture that was, and sat down beside him. She anxiously opened and drank from it. The feeling of goodwill between them, forged by Darcy and Emerson's rescue at the eleventh hour, had completely dissipated.

Gordi went ahead and asked the question that loomed over them like a dark cloud. "Why did you do it?"

"Axel swore to free my sister and let the two of us go. He was going to give us immunity from the Fae, if I helped him separate you and that iron shield from Miranda."

"Sorry to ruin your plan."

"No. It's over. Axel's dead." He shot her a questioning look. "I didn't do it. Somebody else got there first."

"And Miranda?"

"Gone."

"Hmph," was his response, looking out the open window at nothing in particular. "Figures. I guess duplicity is a universal trait amongst females."

Darcy threw the water bottle at him. It bounced harmless off his shoulder, and didn't make him so much as flinch. But it did get his attention. "Don't you dare say that!"

Gordi grabbed the seats, coming forward into a crouched position. "Why not?" he roared.

Darcy stood up on the seat. "Cuz *I* saved your *life!!*"

"Hey, could you guys keep it down? Thanks," came Emerson's voice, from somewhere outside the vehicle. There was a metallic clinking sound coming from where Gordi could see Emerson, huddled nearby. Gordi climbed out to investigate, followed by Darcy.

"Yes, you did," admitted Gordi in a whisper. "But my life was only in danger *because* of you. Therefore, I owe you nothing."

"Maybe I should have let you die," retorted Darcy. "Since, you know, all guys are jerks."

By this time they were close enough to Emerson for him to hear, and look over his shoulder at them. "I beg your pardon," he commented indignantly, before returning to his task.

Gordi and Darcy looked over Emerson to see that he was pouring bottled water over a pile of jewelry and metallic objects – coins, watches, screws, fasteners, doorknobs, and other random junk. Emerson picked up a necklace and scrubbed at it with a handkerchief.

"What's that?" asked Darcy.

Emerson dropped the necklace, startled, and stuffed it into his pack. "N-Nothing!"

Darcy crouched down, reaching out for a bracelet. "I didn't know you were into bling."

"Darcy-" began Gordi, warning.

Too late. Emerson snatched it out of her hand. "MINE!" he shrieked viciously. He cradled the bracelet against his chest protectively, back hunched over, gnashing his teeth. "MINE MINE MINE MINE!!!" Darcy stared dumbly, mouth agape, not sure what she was witnessing. After a moment, Emerson relaxed. "Sorry," he said, shamefacedly. He uncoiled his arms and offered the bracelet back to her. "Here, you can have it. It's not like I'm going to wear it or anything."

"Then...why collect it?"

"He is a Gnome," stated Gordi, "naturally greedy."

"But some of this stuff is *plastic*."

"It's shiny. We like shiny things. I dunno why."

"...I'll keep that in mind."

"I know why," said Gordi, ever the source of knowledge. "Goblins and Gremlins live underground. They liked to steal things from the above world and hide it in their tunnels." Then he frowned, tilting his head at Emerson quizzically. "But the attraction to shiny objects and washing them seems like a Kobold trait."

"My father was a raccoon," said Emerson dryly with a somewhat pained expression, fully realizing how ridiculous the words sounded – but Gordi only nodded his head, not finding any humor in it whatsoever.

"Kobolds were in charge of domestic work and overseeing the human slaves in the Pit. I know them well. Some Sylphs like reflective things too. Especially the Magpies and the Ravens."

Emerson hung his head. "Gremlins and Goblins..."

Darcy noticed that Emerson's eyes were still following the plastic bracelet in her hand. Not wanting the thing anyway, she gave it back to him.

"Emerson," Gordi began, his voice stiff and his body language awkward, "I do not understand why you intervened." Emerson looked a little lost by the sudden change of subject and the abrasive tone of voice, so Gordi explained "...with Sonny. But, I thank you." Gordi punctuated it with a sharp head nod, feeling relieved of his strange, uncomfortable urge to express gratitude to a Fae.

"No problem," returned Emerson, with a smile, "It was the right thing to do." Gordi looked taken aback. "Not all of us are jerks," Emerson pointed out calmly. "Hell, our princess threw away her cushy life, after seeing the way humans were being treated–"

"Princess?"

"Miranda," Emerson clarified, "Axel's runaway betrothed. She's some sort of tree-nymph. Really rare, last of her kind I think. I hear she's a chip off the ole' block – Lilith's block – as far as her powers go."

Gordi listened patiently. It was beginning to make sense now – Miranda had fooled all of the Fae, just to set a trap for an escaped human and impress the Salamander to whom she belonged. "You are mistaken," said Gordi. "She did not run away."

Emerson jumped up. "Wait, you guys saw her? Do you know where she is?"

"I met her after I escaped from the Otherworld. She led me to believe she was a human, and hostile toward Axel after learning he was a Fae. We were traveling together, until I caught her with him the other night. They were conspiring together while I slept."

Emerson frowned. "That doesn't sound right. The breakup was a big PR disaster for the Salamanders – that's why he's been chasing her. If they were back together, I would've heard."

He shot a questioning glance at Darcy, who stared back blankly.

"What?" she said. "You saw them with your own eyes."

"Yes – after you awoke me, and suggested I go to find her," Gordi pointed.

"And just what are you implying?"

"I have seen the Fae conjure many things to fool the eye."

Darcy shrugged. "I wouldn't know."

"I think you do," insisted Gordi, pressing her, "You helped to steal the shield from Axel. I cannot imagine that you were unaware of his plans – or what he could do."

Darcy winced, shifting uncomfortably. "Um," she said, messing with her hair.

Gordi stared at her with wide eyes. "Tell me everything," he said, in a low and dangerous voice. Darcy hesitated, groaning plaintively. She didn't want to have this conversation, ever. "*Now*," he insisted.

Darcy sighed. "Axel wanted to get you away from Miranda, so he made you see an illusion of her. Okay? With that iron shield, he couldn't touch her." Darcy looked at him imploringly. "But, Gordi–"

Gordi turned his back on Darcy. Gordi was not interested in hearing anything more – her excuses and reasons meant nothing to him. His sole concern was that he had made a terrible mistake, and someone innocent had paid the price. Miranda was probably Axel's captive now, and he could not bear the thought of anyone suffering imprisonment the way he had suffered. Even a Fae. Gordi slung his bag over his shoulder and equipped the shield.

"Hey, wait! Where are you going?!" Darcy called after him.

"To find Miranda," he answered.

Darcy pulled him back, alarmed. "You don't get it! She let them invade! She destroyed our protection against Fae magic! *It's her fault our families are dead*!" she cried. Darcy spun around, covering her face. She hadn't meant to say all of that. She didn't like to blurt things out, or feel her emotions running away from her.

Gordi was bewildered. Emerson reached out toward Darcy to offer comfort, but Darcy pushed his hand aside.

Gordi stepped closer. "Are my parents dead?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. Just because mine are gone doesn't mean yours are."

"Was Miranda the one who killed your parents, to acquire the scepter?"

"No. But she might as well have."

"You believe Miranda wanted your parents to die."

"I dunno." Darcy turned around slowly, composing herself.

"I do not know what to believe either," admitted Gordi. "That is why I must speak with her."

"I get it. I've got a few questions to ask myself. Let's get going."

Emerson sucked air through his teeth. "I...don't think that's a good idea." Darcy frowned at him. "Sorry," Emerson told her.

"Agreed, said Gordi. "Darcy, we will meet again." As he turned, he felt her arms clasp around him. He instinctively tensed.

"Don't," she whispered softly, her voice slightly choked. "You're all I've got."

There was a long silence. Gordi was conflicted. He did not trust Darcy. Though she returned to save his life, her betrayal still weighed heavily on his mind. Now it seemed that she

might have a vendetta against Miranda. There was still something about her that was not quite right. He had questions for Miranda, but he had never thought to question Darcy.

"Why you?" he asked.

"What?" Darcy asked, a tiny voice against his back.

"Why did Axel send you, a human, to retrieve my shield?" he said. Darcy let go of him, not answering. He turned around to face her. "Who are you, Darcy?"

Darcy stared at the ground for a few moments. "I'm from the Otherworld," she said.

"You didn't tell him that before?" asked Emerson, surprised. She shook her head.

"Which House took you?"

"Salamander."

"I do not remember you."

"I wasn't in the Pit. I was a Cloak & Dagger."

"And you are loyal to the Fae, even now?"

"No," she said, her eyes flashing. "Axel had leverage on me. My little sister Roxie was in the mines, and he told me he'd let the both of us go if I did as he asked."

"Roxie?" Gordi repeated. "That is the name of Miranda's sister." She didn't say anything, just twisted her mouth. "You are Miranda's Fetch."

"Took you long enough," she said.

"Then... your parents..."

"You're not the only human to go back to their home hoping to have a big happy reunion, only to find out that somebody who looks like you has been living there. With your name. Here I was, thinking that my parents were distraught wondering what happened to me. That perhaps they'd never stopped looking, even if there was no trail for them to follow. But instead, as far as anyone here was concerned, 'Miranda' never left."

"Did you find them?"

"Sort of," she answered. "I didn't come through the portal with the others – I came just a few hours before the betrothal party. Axel brought me through so that he could give me back to my family – he said it would make it an easier transition for Miranda, if she knew that she wouldn't be missed by her family. He also wanted to retrieve the scepter from them – Miranda was going to demonstrate her commitment to him and his family during the betrothal party by breaking down the barrier and bringing his father through. I don't think they meant for all the Fae to rush out of the portal at once – Axel made it sound like it was just going to be a gesture of good faith, so that he could marry her with his father's consent and they could get the resettlement started. That's what he called it – resettlement." She shook her head,

and hesitated before continuing. “But when we got to the house, my parents seemed to know what was going on. They knew he wanted the scepter, they knew he was a Fae and they knew Miranda was one too – they’d been tracking down the Fae conspiracy already. They came at Axel with some sort of dagger, from their archaeological collection. It was probably pure iron. Then these Barghests showed up out of nowhere, and they...they ran at them, and...” she stopped, shaking with horror at the memory. “There was blood...everywhere. After it was over, the Barghest leader bowed and handed Axel the scepter. Like a dog playing fetch,” she described bitterly, as tears escaped her eyes and flowed unhindered down her cheeks. “Axel was angry, but more because they’d acted without his permission and he’d have to answer to Miranda for why her parents were gone. He had the Barghests take me to Mother Redcap, while he... dealt with the mess.” She paused again. “And then went to his betrothal party where Miranda was waiting to do his bidding.”

“Wow,” said Emerson, stunned, voicing a reaction shared by Gordi.

She shrugged, looking distantly at the ground. “People die. No use dwelling on it.”

Gordi and Emerson exchanged looks. Her casual attitude did not seem appropriate after the story she had just told. But then, what could possibly follow such a revelation? There was nothing that either of them could say besides condolences, which they had given to her already. Perhaps Darcy was wise in sparing them the trouble. She was waiting for someone else to speak, and it was clear she wanted it to be on a different subject.

Emerson decided he would be the one to break the silence. “I guess I have some idea what the Princess looks like now,” he said, trying to play along and hoping he didn’t sound callous. Then a thought occurred to him, and he frowned at Gordi. “You were hanging out with both of them, at the same time, and you seriously couldn’t tell that they looked alike? Really?”

“They seemed very different,” Gordi retorted, a tad defensive. “Miranda had different eyes, and style of garments.” He looked at Darcy. “I meant the other Miranda.”

“I know. Don’t hurt yourself,” she said. “I don’t think the name fits me anyway – funny enough, I like the one the Fae assigned to me.” She paused, and looked as if a thought just crossed her mind unexpectedly. “Speaking of names, where did ‘Gordi’ come from? Doesn’t sound like something they’d pick out.”

He flushed a shade. “...They called me *Georgie*,” he admitted, with something between a quirky smile and a wince of remembered shame. “I hated it. When I became a gladiator, the fighters often had names that were meant to be intimidating. I chose *Gore*.”

She smiled, through the tears. “That’s...really awful.”

He nodded. “Nobody liked it. My opponents kept chanting ‘Gore will die’ and somehow that became Gordi. After a while, I chose not to correct them.” She gave a short laugh, and he smiled – with an exhale of breath that could almost be considered a laugh as well.

“So what now?” asked Emerson.

Gordi sobered again. “Darcy can come. But she must promise not to behave rashly toward Miranda. I do not yet know if Miranda is a friend, or a foe.”

“Don’t worry about me,” said Darcy, wiping her eyes.

“I think Miranda is in trouble,” Gordi continued. “We should look for the Salamander base if we are to find her.”

“Not necessary,” said Emerson. “We saw Axel on the side of the road. He was hurt pretty bad, and Miranda was nowhere in sight. I’d say she got away from him.”

“Then how do we proceed?” asked Gordi, troubled.

“I can track her by scent,” answered Emerson. “Her smell should be identical to Darcy’s.” Darcy gave him a strange look, so he quickly went on. “We should go to the last place we figure she was.”

“That would be ‘standing over Axel’s corpse’,” said Darcy.

Emerson picked up his own bag, and headed for his Jeep. “Then that’s where we’re going.”

As it turned out, Axel was not yet a corpse, and he was nowhere near the spot where he had almost become one. His barely-alive – and only just now awake - body was reclining in a hammock, in one of the first traditional Sylph tree-houses to be built in the human realm in several thousand years.

The tree-house was suspended high in the branches of a tall tree, in the woods that surrounded Hawthorne, and was built like a birdcage with pillars– including the supports of his hammock - designed like winged totem-poles. The walls were pale, sheer curtains drifting hypnotically on the currents of the air.

The sharp, silvery tones of a wind-chime announced the presence of Clair as she swept past the curtains, silently and swiftly, and landed in front of Axel. A teapot and two cups were following her as if on invisible trays of air.

“I found blood all over your shirt,” she said softly as she offered him a cup – by simply extending her hand, the cup moved toward him. He gasped the handle. “But there was no wound.” He felt the air move under his arm, urging him to move his free hand upward. The teapot settled on his upraised palm. Understanding her purpose, Axel sent intense heat through

the bottom of the pot, turning his hand into a red-hot stove iron. Within seconds, the tea within the pot boiled, sending out a plume of whistling steam. "You'll be able to walk out of here within the hour."

"So eager to be rid of me?" he said with an arched eyebrow. His lack of a shirt and the hammock she set up for him seemed to suggest otherwise. Sylphs did not need beds of any kind.

The teapot poured its boiling contents into Axel's cup. "I apologize if it seems that way," she said, her tone and expression betraying no emotion. She wasn't looking directly at him, but she arched one eyebrow. "Salamanders have burned our homes so many times, I think the wariness is encoded in our DNA."

"Ah," he said, smiling without humor. "But you brought me here. That's encouraging."

Clair tilted her head to the side, blinking with a sort of mock innocence. "You're the prince. It's my duty."

"Duty," he repeated, examining and turning the word over in his mind. It was a word his father used a lot, but Axel wasn't quite sure what it meant beyond, say, military service. It sounded strange coming from the mouth of a Fae naturalized to the modern human world. Such an old-fashioned, archaic word – too dignified to utter in a world of convenience and fragile relationships. It meant commitment, and Axel knew all too well what that was worth these days. Miranda made a commitment to him, and to her people, and then she ran off the second things didn't go according to plan. But then again... he remembered her hands against his ribcage, and the light that surrounded them, and he realized that there was a problem with this line of thinking. He laid his head against the back of the hammock, frowning. "I wonder if that's why she did it."

"Who?"

"Miranda. She healed me, at great cost to her own life."

She lifted her chin, incensed at the very notion. "No," she insisted. "She abandoned her duty." She poured her own cup of tea, and with a wave of her hand the empty teapot flew out between the bars of the cage. It was 'caught' by the wind-power of a winged attendant with a spear made of talons and beaks, who had been perched on the branch of a support tree waiting to be needed. Clair paid no heed to him. "If I had to guess," she said, sipping her tea, "I'd say it was love."

"And I still love her," he sighed, rubbing his hand over his face. "If only I hadn't made such a mess of this re-integration process..."

"Why don't you talk to her? She has had some time to collect her thoughts. Perhaps she is able to think clearly now, and truly listen to what you have to say."

"It's too late," he groaned, pressing both hands over his eyes with vexation. "She's attached to my Fetch now, simply because he looks like me. But he *isn't* me." He removed his hands and bent forward toward her. "And Clair, he's horrible. Like a rabid animal."

"Hm. I might have a way to help."

She turned over her shoulder to look at a shelf nearby, where all sorts of trinkets were displayed. One of these trinkets was a box, which a current of air lifted up and brought to Clair's waiting hand.

"Why would you help me?" he asked. He'd hoped to endear himself to her by confessing his troubles with Miranda, but he didn't think the ice-princess Clair would be so easily charmed. Clair was more of a romantic than he had suspected.

That thought was dissolved a moment later, when a horrible scream pierced the air. It was followed by another, and another.

"What is that?"

Clair shuddered, but refused to answer. Axel rose from the hammock, painfully, and looked out into the Sylph clearing to see a grisly scene unfolding.

Armed butterfly-Sylphs stood on guard in a circular formation. A screaming female Undine, covered in bloody slices and puncture wounds, was in the center. She was trying to evade a flock of Vulture-Sylphs flying about her, stabbing her with spears.

The Undine girl was Meriel, Jaron's lieutenant.

"Jaron sent her," Clair explained to Axel. "Apparently the Undines want an audience with me."

"Have you ever heard of 'don't kill the messenger', Clair?" asked Axel.

"It doesn't matter if you warn someone in advance, you don't just show up on someone's doorstep uninvited. If I wanted to meet with them, I would have sent for them. That is just how things are done," she insisted, anxious and trembling.

"I think the Undines will be even more offended when they see what you've done to one of their own," Axel pointed out. He shook his head. "This isn't like you."

"The council decided her fate," she confessed, in a low, quiet voice. "Not me."

"Aren't you the Princess?" he persuaded.

She paused. "It isn't wise for me to fight them," she said, trembling. "I've seen them do much worse to their own. Jaron and his fish-people won't be given a pass, just because they decided to make Miranda the new Faerie Queene."

Axel's eyes lit up. "Oh? Have they?"

She sniffed. "Yes – as if I'm supposed to bow down to some girl I went to highschool with, just because the local beach bum says so."

"Interesting..." he mused.

"I swear, those Undines are as bad as the Barghests," Clair ranted, not caring that Axel was only half-listening, "they'll follow anyone around and call them their master. But they're *fickle*. If they really cared about supporting their ruler, they wouldn't have been the first to jump on the Eldritch bandwagon when they caused trouble for *us*, and they wouldn't be the first ones to rebel against the Salamanders now. I think they're always in favor of change, for its own sake."

Axel leaned into her. "And what is it that you want? For the Sylphs to rule again?"

Clair sighed. "The Sylphs are not interested in controlling this new world," she answered primly. "They want these silly wars between us to be over. And if that means that an Eldritch must rule again, so be it."

She lifted the lid of the box, and revealed its contents to Axel. It was an alien flower with iridescent leaves and a glowing stigma of translucent purple that radiated glowing veins through the petals. It was a flower that grew only in the soil of the Otherworld. He had never seen it with his own eyes, but he knew what it was – and what it could do.

"Whether she likes it or not," added Clair. He looked at her with uncertainty. "She made a promise to you," she said more firmly, pressing the box into his hands, "and now it is time she kept it."

Miranda's Journal, Entry #7

I don't remember who I was forced to be in my school's production of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'. Good ole' Will Shakespeare gave both girls names that start with 'H'. But I remember the basic gist of the story.

Fae king Oberon sees a human guy being a jerk to one of the H-girls. Being the romantic hippie that he is despite his own marital problems with Titania, he summons his minion, Puck. Oberon tells Puck to go find a purple love-drug flower and get Demetrius high with it. But see, there's another guy in the picture, and Oberon didn't exactly give Puck a detailed description. So Puck doses the wrong guy, and the soap opera unfolds.

But this is what actually happened.

Titania was a chieftess of the Eldritch clan. Oberon was a King of Sylph, the ruling house at the time, and a widower mourning the death of the Queene of Air and Darkness, Mab.

Lilith's scepter washed up on a Mediterranean shore, during an ancient Greek beach party organized by four runaway teenagers – two girls and two boys. One of the teens picked up the scepter, and all four got swept away to the Otherworld.

Oberon stole the scepter from the humans while they slept. They woke up, and the one of the boys berated one of the girls for losing the scepter – which was, as far as they knew, their only prayer of returning to the human realm. Oberon felt guilty, but didn't know what to

do about it – so he called up representatives from each of the different Fae clans, and summoned them to his home territory of Ellydan, where they sat around a table staring at the scepter and debating, Lord of the Rings-style.

Each took turns examining the scepter, which apparently still contained power if it could send humans past the barrier. But no one could find the 'On' switch. Until it got passed to the Eldritch delegation. Now you must understand – Eldritch at this point were considered nothing more than a cult of Lilith-worshippers. They did not have their own quadrant territory, like the Big Four Houses did. Instead, they lived in Ellydan, and worked for the Sylphs as gardeners alongside servant-Fae, such as the Kobolds who worked as domestic serving staff, and the Barghests who were designated as guards. The Sylphs' reign was more hierarchal than the dynasties that ruled before and after. Even the amongst the Sylphs themselves, there was a certain caste system in place. Some birds were considered too dull, common or ungraceful, such as turkeys or chickens. Amongst the insect-Sylphs known as Pixies, the butterflies and dragonflies were most highly revered, bees, beetles, spiders and ladybugs were respected... but ants, flies and mosquitos made up the common laborers of the Sylph's second-class.

Only Titania proved capable of wielding the scepter, creating 'Love-in-Idleness', a flower with love-inducing juices. When used, a person would feel an overwhelming affection for whoever they saw first after taking it. Titania gave Oberon the flower as the cure for his guilty conscience. Just like in the play, Oberon gave the flower to Puck – a donkey-Kobold who served as emissary, jester and general lackey to his master – with instructions to get the human boy high on love.

But Oberon was greedy. He was envious of the Eldritch ability to wield the scepter, and feared that Eldritch would use this newfound power to elevate themselves beyond their current station... maybe they could eclipse the great Sylphs. If he couldn't control the power of the scepter, he would settle for controlling Titania herself. So he kept some of the flower juice for himself and tried to drug Titania while she slept in a guest wing of the Sylph rookery. He waited beside her, so that his would be the first face she'd see.

But things didn't go according to plan. Puck came in to tell Oberon that he had completed his mission, and woke Titania. Instead of turning to her right, where Oberon was perched, she turned to the entering visitor on her left and instantly got the hots for the donkey-headed jester.

Feeling like an ass himself, Oberon surrendered the scepter to Titania and never bothered her again. But as Oberon feared, the Sylphs were soon deposed in favor of the newly-powerful House Eldritch.

Chapter Seven
"Snare"

Blood. Emerson could smell it – it wasn't the sickeningly sweet scent of human blood, either. It was the smell of sulfur that accompanied Salamander blood, mixed with a hint of orichalcum. Emerson followed his nose, like a bloodhound, eyes closed so that he would be free of all distractions. He didn't need to see – even though he had night-vision, his other senses were so highly attuned that he could pinpoint his location and that of everything within a several-mile radius in absolute, pitch-black darkness better than most others could do in broad daylight.

The smell was becoming stronger, creating a trail that was as clear and accurate as a compass pointing true north. He heard and felt Darcy pass him by and crouch down, which was no small thing considering that Darcy was as lumbering as a stalking housecat. On the ground in front of her was where the smell was concentrated. Emerson opened his eyes, and saw that she was staring down at a bloodstain on the withered grass.

"They must've collected Axel's body," she announced, grimly. "I was hoping he'd be left to rot." She was right, of course – there was a bird-like smell that was apparent now, laced primarily with estrogen – a female Sylph, accompanied by several female attendants and a few males – had carried off Axel. But that wasn't Emerson's primary concern – he smelled something much more familiar and distinctive, a mixture of skunk spray and testosterone. He kept sniffing the air until he came across a miner's cap and a claw on the ground. Sully. That was who he was smelling. That son of a badger with whom Emerson shared a common genetic tie, namely, their mother. He picked up the helmet and claw, confused – Sully's scent trail came from one direction only, and got fainter as it led to this spot. It was older than Axel and the Sylphs' scents by several hours, meaning Sully could not have retraced his steps. What the hell?

"That was careless of your brother to drop his equipment," commented Gordi.

Emerson shook his head. "He didn't... it's weird, his trail stops cold, right here." Emerson pointed out the spot, musing.

"We're *trying* to track *Miranda*," Darcy's voice rang out, irritably.

"Hm?" Emerson blinked, losing his train of thought. "Oh, yeah, I smell her...along with another scent." Emerson sniffed, confirming. "Undine."

Emerson stood still, eyes closed again, furrowing his brow as he concentrated on the soles of his feet. He could never have done this before – there were too many people, animals, machinery making vibrations against the ground that he would not have been able to easily discern what was what. But now, he could feel that there was a very large something moving toward the woods. It felt like a pounding waterfall, or the flow of river rapids.

"What's he doing, meditating?" Darcy questioned Gordi in a whisper.

"He is sensing earth vibrations."

A moment later, Emerson opened his eyes. "They're headed straight for the Sylph camp."

"How many?"

"I dunno. Lots. It's a parade of them. And... I know this sounds weird, but... I think they're bringing a whole *river* along with them."

"The Undines are not known for their subtlety."

"Great," said Darcy. "Why can't we just rescue the humans from the mines like we originally planned..."

"We will," assured Gordi, calmly. "Miranda might help."

"Maybe the Undines are transporting her to the Sylphs as a prisoner."

"That's what I'm thinking," agreed Emerson. He pointed ahead of them. "If we keep going this way, we'll run right into them."

Emerson was suddenly aware that both Gordi and Darcy were staring at him guardedly, stealing glances at each other. Gordi lowered his head, his expression one of grave concern. "Emerson, we are humans. And you will not fight."

With a hand resting between her lip and chin, Darcy ran narrowed eyes up and down Emerson's frame, making him feel very exposed and uncomfortable. A once-over usually preceded a degrading comment of some kind, Emerson had found. But Darcy wasn't looking to antagonize. She was trying to look at him through the eyes of someone who didn't know that he was a nice guy and a pacifist, and what she saw was a well-built young man, with a miner's cap and a claw. And she knew that underneath his big eyes and dopey expression hid his true face – the dark visage and glowing red eyes of a Redcap Drow. "Maybe we don't have to fight," she mused.

Miranda was riding the seahorse Jaron. It was the only way to keep up with the procession now making all haste toward the Sylph camp in a torrent of water. The Undines liked to swim,

not to walk, especially since most of them had delicate webbed feet that were not suited for contact with the rough ground, and slick skin that blistered when it was too dry.

It weighed heavily on Miranda's mind that Meriel, the messenger they'd sent to warn Clair of their arrival, had not returned. She hoped that Jaron was right about Clair – he assured Miranda that he was absolutely certain that Clair would welcome them with all the grace and dignity of her kind, and would be likely to give them support – for the Sylphs had no great love for the Salamanders. However, Miranda thought it likely that the Sylphs might have even less love for the Eldritch – the house of servants, who unexpectedly rose up to become their masters. The humiliation could not have been forgotten by the proud bird-people of the sky.

Miranda was wearing a suit of Orichalcum armor. The glistening shoulder pauldrons were a little too big on her, or so she felt, and she's had to poke some new holes in the back leather straps to make the corset fit. It was not made of shell or coral or anything that indicated that it had been made by the Undines – in fact, from the style of the armor and the rather large symbol stamped into the metal like a maker's mark, she guessed it was armor made by the Gnomes to be worn by one of their female warriors. She didn't want to ask how it came to be in the Undine's possession.

They slowed – ahead of them was a Redcap man. He had a miner's cap and claws like Sully, though he wasn't anywhere near as tall, and those clawed hands grasped the handle of the hatchet that Sammy was known for. He was pacing around Gordi and Darcy, who were sitting back-to-back, bound together with rope.

"Shut up, you human filth!" they heard the Redcap yell, red eyes blazing in the raccoon-like dark mask of his face, lined with the rocky protrusions of stone-grey skin. "Not another squeak, or I'll...well, I'll give you something to squeak about!"

The seahorse liquefied and re-formed into Jaron, wearing the spiked pauldrons of the Merrow warriors upon his shoulders, looking confused and concerned. "*Emerson*?!" he called out. Emerson startled and looked up at Jaron, responding to the name.

"Yo, what gives?! I thought you were all non-violent and stuff, man!"

After a quick and uncertain glance at Darcy, who gave him an encouraging look, Emerson faced Jaron and squared his shoulders. "Times have changed!" he bellowed – or as close to it as he could get. "I'm turning in these prisoners for the bounty Axel has offered. I'll split you right down the middle – 50/50!"

Jaron, completely mistaking Emerson's intent, looked alarmed and raised his bident threateningly. No Redcap would share his spoils that easily, so it didn't occur to Jaron that was

what he meant – when a Redcap spoke of splitting you down the middle, they usually meant it quite literally. "I'd like to see you try, Redcap! Bring it!" he yelled.

Miranda stepped out in front of the excitable Jaron, arm extended in front of him in a gesture for him to stop. "We will not help you," she explained to Emerson calmly. "We are on a peace mission to see Lady Clair."

At the exact same time, all three in front of her – Gordi, Darcy, and Emerson – looked dumbfounded and exclaimed "Miranda?!" They of course saw Miranda astride the seahorse, for her reddish-gold armor was polished to such a shine that it was hard to miss. But the ears, and the green veins, and the darker, mahogany-brown skin tone prevented them from identifying her. It was not until she spoke that they realized who the tree-elf was.

Emerson threw up his hands in surrender, his false bravado gone. "Oh. Uh...listen, we thought-" He did not get a chance to finish, because in the next moment he saw the sharp prongs of an orichalcum bident rushing straight at him, accompanied with blazing electric-blue eyes of bioluminescence and a terrifying battle-roar. Emerson dropped the hatchet as he jumped aside to evade Jaron's line of attack, and raised his claws up around his head to protect himself.

Meanwhile, Miranda ran to tear the rope off of Gordi and Darcy. "Hope this makes up for not telling you the truth earlier..."

"No, Miranda – we thought you needed to be *rescued*!" interrupted Gordi.

"Emerson's alright! He's with us!" cried Darcy.

At that, Jaron looked up – he had Emerson pinned to the ground, flailing, the bident prongs on either side of his neck. "Huh...?"

Miranda looked at Gordi, comprehension dawning. He smiled, glad that Emerson was alright, and turned that smile upon Miranda. His eyes were wide and clear – there was not the slightest hint of the judgment that she had seen in them before, that expression of cold fury that so utterly destroyed her, prelude to the dismissive turning of his back that came immediately thereafter. Now she could tell that he was as happy to see her as she was to see him return. Relieved, she smiled back.

They exchanged tales until the sun went down, pausing only to make a camp for the night. They eventually caught up to the present, and the attempted ruse. After the explanation was complete, Jaron laughed as Emerson flushed – the shade of redness would have blended with the orange glow of the campfire, but the expression that went with it was visible to all.

"...It was Darcy's idea," he muttered, which spurred a new smattering of chuckles.

After those died away, Miranda looked at him with honest sympathy. "I think it's great you aren't like your brothers, Emerson. I never thought a Gnome prince would be on our side.

Jaron clapped a supportive hand on his shoulder. "Yeah, it's cool man."

Darcy played with the hatchet, which she had decided for the time being was hers. "We'll make sure you're more prepared next time," she promised, taking responsibility. She then directed a question to Miranda. "So. You said you were going to go see the Sylph Princess? Why?"

"According to Jaron, the Sylphs might support me as Faerie Queen," Miranda answered. "If I can make an alliance with Clair, others might follow."

Gordi's eyes flashed, and the judgment came roaring back into his face. "You want to seize power."

Miranda faltered. "Well...no, that's not really it..."

"I should have known," said Gordi, staring at the flames. He looked like someone who had offered an olive branch of peace, and got a slap in the face in return for his troubles.

"Yeah, she really cares about the imprisoned humans," sniped Darcy, fanning the metaphorical ones. "She needs them... for *cannon-fodder*."

Jaron, who had been reclining in his usual fashion, sat up abruptly with a frown. "Yo time out, you're way outta line!"

"Oh my, we failed to show proper respect to the 'Faerie Queen'," purred Darcy. She put her hands together in mocking entreaty. "Please spare me, O great and powerful Miranda!" she cackled.

Miranda stood up. "You know what? I've been beating myself up, thinking there was no way I could fix what I did. But if there really are those who oppose Axel's rule-"

"Axel? Why are we still talking about him, he's dead." She narrowed her eyes, scrutinizing Miranda's nervous face. "He *is* dead, isn't he?

Miranda fiddled with her hair, regretting her decision to stand up and thus make herself the center of attention. She wanted very much to sit back down and hide. "No, I um... I healed him."

The effect was immediate. Gordi's eyes widened. Darcy stood up to be level with Miranda. "You *what*?!" she screamed, outraged.

Miranda was struggling to find words of explanation, such as her guilt over killing Sully, or her mixed feelings toward Axel that included lingering affection, when Darcy tackled her.

Miranda had been in a few fights before, and instincts now took over. However, nothing quite compared to this. The other fights were schoolyard brawls with teenagers – most of

whom were at a severe disadvantage to begin with, because Miranda's Fae blood gave her an edge in the strength department. All she ever had to do was throw a few sloppy punches or kicks, and if they found their target all, the toughest kid on the block would be unceremoniously beaten down. But as they exchanged blows, Miranda realized she had no edge over Darcy, whose superior training over many intense years more than compensated for the lack of orichalcum running through her veins and muscles.

The fight carrying them away from the campfire. At first, the three guys at the campfire were dazed into a slack-jawed paralysis by the site of two girls fighting. But it was only a few a few moments before they came to their senses, and ran to stop them.

"I'm so sick of your crap!" shouted Darcy. "It was over, and then *you heal him*!"

"I couldn't just let him die!"

"Why not?" she growled. "Cuz you *love* him?" Darcy spat the word like it was a curse. Miranda huffed as one of Darcy's kicks connected. "Of course!" Darcy continued, "That's why you helped them invade, isn't it?! I wish I had your power, that night I found my parents... they didn't stand a chance after you broke the barrier..."

Miranda, her temper sufficiently roused, pinned Darcy down. "They were *my* parents too," she growled. The others heard this statement, though with the present crisis at hand it would take a while for the revelation to sink in.

"They were killed before my eyes – by people like *you*," Darcy spat. Her anger gave way to the emotion of the memory. Darcy choked on her own tears and held-back sobs. "I didn't even get to say hello to them, or tell them that I was their real daughter who had waited so, so long to meet them, let alone get to say goodbye before they were torn apart. *Torn apart*! No one deserves to die like that... no one..."

Empathy and horror filled Miranda, as the scene played out before her eyes. "Oh god," Miranda whispered. "Darcy, I can't imagine-"

"Don't worry," Darcy whispered back, sliding her knife from its sheathe. "I'll show you."

With a surge of concentrated strength, Darcy pushed Miranda off of her and slashed her cheek.

What came a second later was not a reaction of pain – instead, Miranda's eyes glowed like two miniature suns, her expression devoid of humanity.

"No!" yelled Jaron, realizing what was about to happen to the unwitting Darcy. "Miranda, get a grip!"

Things happened in rapid succession. Miranda stood up. Darcy charged forward at her, with a frenzied cry. Miranda raised her hand, palm toward Darcy.

Gordi pushed Darcy out of the way, placing himself in the middle of Miranda's aim.

That moment, which must have only lasted a split second, seemed like forever to Miranda. Dimly, she heard Jaron yelling, his voice barely audible over the pumping of orichalcum blood through her ears. She saw Gordi in front of her, his shield nowhere in sight. She felt like a machine that had just powered up – the energy ramping uncontrollably, drowning out her thoughts and emotions. That energy was already surging down her arm, concentrating in her palm. She felt nothing but a desire to release it, and destroy all that would seek to harm her – Gordi included. It was survival instinct, nothing more. A thought broke through the noise, a robotically logical thought that told her that she would regret killing Gordi once she was back to normal, even though at the moment she could see no reason why she should.

Gordi thought he was certain to die. He did not know what she was going to do, but it was clear she was not herself – and the light emanating from her palm indicated it was too late to reverse course. The light flashed, blinding him.

It took another long second for Gordi to realize he was not dead. The light dimmed, and Miranda lowered her hand. Her eyes fluttered back to laurel-green.

Gordi ran forward and caught Miranda, her head falling heavily against his shoulder. Meanwhile, before she could make another attempt on Miranda's life, Jaron and Emerson grabbed Darcy and wrested the knife away from her. She flailed and snarled like a wild animal, until she tired herself out nearly to the point of unconsciousness. Sufficiently convinced that the madness had subsided, Jaron and Emerson sat her down by the campfire and let her go. Darcy glowered as Miranda was brought to the fire as well – until finally Darcy stood up, grumbled something about needing some air, and took a walk. Though Emerson was a bit worried about this, Jaron assured him that it would probably be good to let her blow off some steam, alone, for a while.

Meanwhile, Miranda came around. She found herself in the crook of Gordi's arm, and he was looking down at her. She half-expected him to ask her if she was alright, but then she saw his expression of concern dissipate into neutrality, and realized that this was an absurd idea. Perfunctory questions were a human-realm practice unknown to Gordi. The fact that Miranda had awoken and seemed coherent was enough to satisfy him that she was alright, so he extricated himself from propping-up duty and lost no time in asking her the question that had been hovering like a dark cloud over him, since before the fight broke out with Darcy.

"Why did you destroy the barrier?"

Miranda took a moment to collect her thoughts. “The Fae were trapped in their prison. We were trapped in ours. It seemed like the right thing to do.”

Genuine surprise registered on Gordi’s face. He had not expected that Miranda would provide such simple explanation. “I see. And then it went wrong.”

Miranda was taken aback that he so readily accepted her answer.. “Yeah. It did.” She turned away with an ironic smile, amazed by the understatement. “Axel was the first person I met who was like me. But not as much as I thought.” She paused, wondering if Gordi cared to hear such personal things about Axel – but then she looked at him and realized he was rapt with attention. “He still remembered the Otherworld,” she explained. “He was older than most Fae children are when they are switched out, and the only Changeling to know his real family. He had to leave behind his Fae father, and his Aunt Morgan, who took over for his mother when she died giving birth to him. He loved them both, but had to pretend that he didn’t remember them. Whenever he talked about his real parents or the Otherworld, his parents – or, I should say, your parents – they thought it was make-believe, and didn’t understand why their son had gotten so rebellious toward them all of a sudden. They sent him to therapy and put him on medication until he stopped talking about another world or magical beings. In fact, he pretty much stopped talking to them altogether, and started playing music. By then he was in Highschool, so they thought it was some normal phase to go through or something. It was tougher for him in the end, I think – to actually know the truth, and grow up living a lie.”

“And he was lying to you,” Gordi asserted.

“I dunno,” she shrugged. “I don’t think Axel can discern fantasy from reality. He learned how to play the role of the artistic loner, and then the tragic lover, and now he’s trying to play the dutiful ruler. He just keeps hopping from one story to another, casting himself as the hero. But I’m not going to play along. I won’t let him cast me as his one true love, or the princess whose heart he needs to win, or whatever it is he and all his friends want me to be.” She took a breath, having run out in during her impassioned declaration.

Gordi thought a moment. “I cannot say it is what I would have done, or that I approve,” he began, slowly. He looked at her “But I understand why you healed him.”

Miranda smiled, feeling touched and strangely vindicated. “...Thank you.”

“You said that Darcy’s parents were yours,” he said, a question disguised as a statement.

Jaron and Emerson, who had been eavesdropping from the other side of the campfire and were content to give the two space until now, broke their silence.

“Yeah, what was that about?” asked Jaron.

Emerson was the first to piece it together. "Darcy is your Fetch, isn't she?"

Miranda nodded. "I can't believe none of you could tell. Don't we look alike?"

"I could tell," said Emerson.

"Ah, I dunno man.... I don't think they look anything like each other," dismissed Jaron.

"Except that we have the same face and body," Miranda pointed out. "I would've thought that you'd studied mine enough to recognize a twin, Jaron."

"Hey, that's not fair – you look *way* different right now."

"And you've already forgotten what I looked like in human form? Emerson hasn't even seen me before, and he figured it out."

Gordi was abashed. "Well... your eyes are different colors," he said, lamely. "You wear your hair differently. And she is paler, and dresses in different attire, and wears cosmetics like the Salamanders–"

Miranda laughed. "It's okay Gordi, don't hurt yourself." Miranda laid back against one of the blankets that had been laid out for sleeping.

Gordi followed her example, thinking over all the things she had said about Axel. He had hated Axel since he first saw him standing next to his parents in a photograph, this boy who stole his life and ruined it before Gordi could have a chance to reclaim it. And when he learned the truth about Miranda, he hated her by association.

It never occurred to him that the smirking villain would have a tale that would so closely resemble his own. It was true, Axel's life was a luxurious holiday by comparison. Axel never had to fight to survive, never experienced true hunger, thirst, or the hellish extremes of the Pit, created along with the adjacent castle Falias out of lava, most of which cooled into hard obsidian glass centuries ago – breaking down over time into shards and eventually the black sand that characterized Axel's own homeland territory of Malamar.

But yearning for lost parents, or the experience of being an outsider trapped in a world that was not your own – these were feelings he was all too familiar with. So too was Axel's detachment and even contempt when it came to humans – he probably felt that same way toward them that Gordi felt toward the Fae. At least Gordi was never expected to pretend that he was anything other than what he was – or that he cared for the otherworldly beings who had appointed themselves his caretakers.

He actually had less in common with Miranda, he realized. Miranda grew up believing that she was human, unaware of the Otherworld next door to which she belonged. This was all new to her. Nothing in her previous experiences prepared her for what must be an endless flow of revelations. Lost travelers are unlikely to question the veracity of any guidance they

receive, especially from a native who knows the lay of the land – it was no great wonder, then, that she trusted Axel so readily, just as Gordi trusted her when he wandered back into the human realm like a naïve child.

Gordi's thoughts drifted off, as his mind prepared for sleep. But there was a sound, very close to him, like the fluttering of wings. But not the small fluttering of an insect or a bird – not that Gordi made any distinction yet between such creatures and Fae – it was the flapping of larger wings, was accompanied by a very brief gust of wind that seemed to come out of nowhere in the otherwise still and silent night. Gordi opened his eyes to see what had saw nothing but his sleeping companions and the tents of the Undines around them. Just as he was about to shrug it off as the delirium of an almost-asleep mind, he realized there was one companion he did not see.

Miranda was no longer lying beside him. He heard another scuffling sound – he cast his gaze about for the source, and saw Miranda on the edge of camp, restrained by several wing-eared Sylphs who covered her mouth with talon-fingered gauntlets to muffle her scream. The girl who he would come to know as Clair passed a wispy hand in front of Miranda's face – with a shudder Miranda's eyes rolled back and her struggles ceased. A cold, concentrated breeze rushed at Gordi's back in the direction of Clair, blowing thin pale strands of her hair up into the moonlight – he had triggered an alarm, and the fact that he had awoken was now known to the Sylph princess. Clair loaded the slingshot she carried with something he could not make out in the darkness, and fired it at Gordi.

Instincts kicking in, Gordi rolled and evaded what turned out to be a strange, glowing purple flower. The flower landed in the campfire, sending up a cloud of luminescent mist as it was consumed in the flames and turned to shriveled brown. The purple haze enshrouded the sleeping forms of Jaron and Emerson. Gordi did not stay to investigate, pausing only long enough to equip his shield and the iron pipe he kept since bashing in Sonny's kneecap, before making a dash at the Sylphs.

Clair gave him a coy smirk, and with one flap of her wings and a gust of wind she disappeared from sight.

That did nothing to deter Gordi. He knew where they were headed now, even if he was not altogether certain what he intended to do once he caught up to them. Leaving his sleeping companions behind, he entered the Sylph-infested woods.

Darcy returned to the camp the next morning, arms laden with food and supplies, without any knowledge of what transpired while she was gone. Indeed, she found little to raise her

suspicions. The Undines camped in the surrounding tents were asleep, in the manner of their kind – which is to say, there were buckets full of water in each tent. The Undines took their liquid form in order to rest, which is why Darcy took extra precaution whenever she bathed in the Otherworld. It was a wonder that there weren't more Undines in her line of business.

Jaron, unused to sleeping in complete liquid form, was sleeping with his face in a small puddle of drool, sweat-covered blankets in disarray underneath him. Disgusted, she kicked him in the side with the toe of her boot. He groaned. Emerson was nearby, loot pile emptied out on the ground before him

"Hey, slackers! Get your grub!" Darcy yelled at them, drill-sergeant style. There was no acknowledgment from Emerson. Jaron sat up, wiping off his face.

Darcy's image was blurry to his newly-awoken eyes at first, the sunlight illuminating her in a soft glow. He never realized how pretty her blue eyes were, like a stormy sea surrounded by the night sky of the kohl lining her eyes. Or how cute she was when she scowled, her brows knit together to create a tiny line in her pale skin, her lower lip drawn in.

"Wow," he breathed, rising as he smiled at her, dreamily. "Have I ever told you... how outrageously awesome you are, Darcy?" Jaron came toward her with arms extended, as if to hug her – but Darcy ducked out of his grasp.

"Tuh! Don't be a smartass," she grumbled. Jaron chortled drunkenly, tickled rather than insulted by her reaction. Darcy dumped out her bag, next to where Emerson was scrutinizing the reflection of a shiny paperweight.

"You know, I just realized something," Emerson murmured.

"Oh yeah? What is that?" Darcy asked automatically, not really caring or listening.

"I am a *stunningly* handsome man."

"Yeah, yeah..."

"I'm serious!" he said, not taking his eyes off the paperweight. "Look at this strapping physique! I'm smart, charming... where have I been all my life?!" He kissed the paperweight, then realized he left a cloudy mark and wiped it off so that it wouldn't obscure his reflection.

Darcy shook her head, wondering what caused the boys to wake up in such a weird, comical mood. Then she felt an arm drape around her shoulder.

"Phff! Whatevs," said Jaron by her side, uncomfortably close, "the hottest, most kick-ass chick ever is right here." He turned to smile with familiarity at Darcy, wrinkling his nose at her like one would to tease a small child. Darcy put her hand over his face and pushed him back, unwinding herself from his arm – but as she did, he took her hand and almost brought it

to his lips when she pulled it away, preventing the kiss but not succeeding in escaping his grasp entirely.

"What are you–?!" she began.

"Aw doink," he said, slapping his head. "What was I thinking..."

I dunno, that's just what I was going to ask, but–"

"I'm not worthy!" he proclaimed. "*Yet*." She gaped at him, uncomprehending. "But I'll prove it to you – I am totally yours, babe!"

With a final yank she got her hand back, stepping back and looking between shiny eyed, stupidly–grinning Jaron, and Emerson making out with his own reflection, with an expression of horror. "What is wrong with you guys?" she cried.

After being awoken by all the yelling, the Undines climbed out of their various water–containers and materialized, leaving their tents to investigate. They gathered on the edge of the camp site, as a strange scenario played out before them.

Jaron looked pale. "Darcy, I can't help it – it just hit me, like a monster wave, and I'm caught in the undertow of love. If that bums you out, take it out on me – not on the innocent. Please, let the fish go already."

Darcy impaled a wiggling fish on her knife. Jaron flinched. "You see?!" she cried. "Now I'm going to *eat it*. Some dream girl I am, huh?"

The Undines were disturbed by this – seafood of any kind was foreign to them, for in the Otherworld all sea creatures were Fae. But after some murmuring amongst themselves, it was quickly ascertained that the fish she stabbed was not, in fact, a Undine – it was a regular, dumb human–realm fish, taken captive by one of the children. The child had been greatly offended that the fish would not shift to his humanoid form and say hello, and no amount of explanation from his parents would convince him that this was not within the fish's power.

Jaron removed fingers covering his eyes. "You're way too hot to be so cold," he groaned. He came toward her with arms open. "But don't worry – I forgive you. We'll work this stuff out–"

Darcy threw down the dying fish. "Get it through your thick head – I don't date Fae. Ever. Especially when they are so into themselves that they don't even *care* that one of their friends has been missing for hours."

Jaron blinked. "Who? What?"

Darcy stamped her foot, screaming in frustration "Gordi!" she cried.

"Oh yeah... Gordi," Jaron said, slowly.

"Well? Do you know where he is?"

Jaron thought for several moments. “Uh...no. Huh. That’s weird. I wonder where he is...”

Darcy slapped him upside the head. “How could you? He might be hurt. Or dead.”

“I’ll find him for you if you want,” smiled Jaron.

Darcy exhaled. “Of course that’s what I want.”

“On one condition – you have to go out with me. At least once.”

Darcy made a frustrated snarling sound and walked off into the woods. “Whatever. I’ll do it myself.”

He chased after her. “Hey, wait up!” He passed Emerson, still gazing at his reflection, and grabbed him up. “Yo buddy, you’re coming too,” he said. “I need backup.”

“Okay,” said Emerson, not looking back at him. Emerson followed, though far more slowly.

Miranda had spent the first half of the night in a woozy doze, with only a vague sense of weightlessness as the Sylph man who carried her rocketed toward the Sylph camp. When she arrived at camp, she was placed in a giant round-bottomed birdcage suspended over the ground and filled with feather-down pillows – a guest room that was converted to a prison by the simple act of locking her inside.

Eventually the magic-induced hangover wore off, and Miranda saw the sun rise through the gilded orichalcum cage, accompanied by the call of a Sylph heralding the dawn. It was then that her captors appeared again, taking her out of the cage. This was an infinitely scarier prospect than the night before, when she had been on the verge of unconsciousness and only dimly aware that she was in flight, supported only by humanoid arms. She wasn’t all that high up – her cage was suspended on a branch of one of the medium-sized trees, in a forest that wasn’t populated by giants even by earth standards, let alone the skyscraper-trees of the Otherworld. But, as Miranda was acutely aware, she was high enough that a sudden drop would likely kill her. As such, she did not struggle as the bird-man pulled her from the cage – she gripped him and held on for dear life, squeezing her eyes closed as vertigo overwhelmed her. The bird-man’s arms looked rather strong and felt rather tight around her, but even if he’d strapped her in a secure harness she would have been nervously anticipating a mishap. She felt a sickening drop that seemed to throw her stomach into her mouth, and then it was over – tame even for a theme park ride, all things considered.

She was standing in the midst of what seemed to be the entire flock of Sylphs. They all stood with erect posture, atop what looked like totem poles of varying height that denoted

their relative status in the flock, with various winged creatures carved into the sides which matched their own visage – symbols of their clan.

On the tallest of them all, the totem of the merlin-bird, stood Clair, holding one of the glowing purple flowers. On poles a bit shorter than hers were beautiful girls with large orange, black, and white-spotted wings of a monarch butterfly – Clair's personal guards. Their skin, eyes and hair were of a solid ebony color, except for where orange streaks and white dots were painted, with short antennae growing from their foreheads. Like all the Sylphs, they were shoeless, but unlike the simple fringed tunics of the shorter-perch Fae these ladies wore elegant block frocks dotted with white, and the orichalcum plate gauntlets and greaves adorned with inset transparent jewels like giant dewdrops that distinguished the nobility from the commoner.

"Clair!" Miranda shouted at the top pinnacle. "What's this all about?" There was a fluttering motion, like a shiver throughout the flock of Sylphs – her manner of addressing their sovereign went against custom on many levels. Miranda had only just arrived, and was already ruffling feathers. "I came here in peace, to talk-"

"No," Clair cut her off, flatly. "You came here to cause strife. To turn me against our ruler."

Miranda lifted her chin. "I am the rightful ruler." If her flagrant and impertinent disregard of custom had insulted the traditionalist sylphs, this caused an uproar. There were screeches of hate, and irritated buzzing. Clair raised a delicate hand to quiet them.

"Oh really? Back in the Dark Ages the Salamanders took the throne from your house, who, if I remember correctly, took it from the Sylphs-"

"Who stood by while my people were massacred," Miranda snapped back. "I know my history, Clair. Axel filled me in." After the night she had, she was in no mood to play games, and this girl's attitude was pissing her off. Clair always was a spoiled brat, and now she had gained a new level of pretention.

Clair's eyes flashed. Her wispy hair rose in the air, crackling with electricity. "Then you should know better than to provoke the Sylphs."

"It wasn't you who destroyed us."

"Do you think the Salamanders would have been so bold as to attack the Eldritch, at the height of their power, without the support of the Sylphs? Really, Miranda, you're being very simple-minded. We may be subtle and patient, but make no mistake - nothing is allowed to happen that we did not desire, or set in motion ourselves."

"Lilith's scepter belongs to me."

Clair arched and eyebrow. “Yes. And you belong to Axel.” She crushed the flower in her hand and flung the droplets at Miranda in a whip-like flick of her wrist and arm.

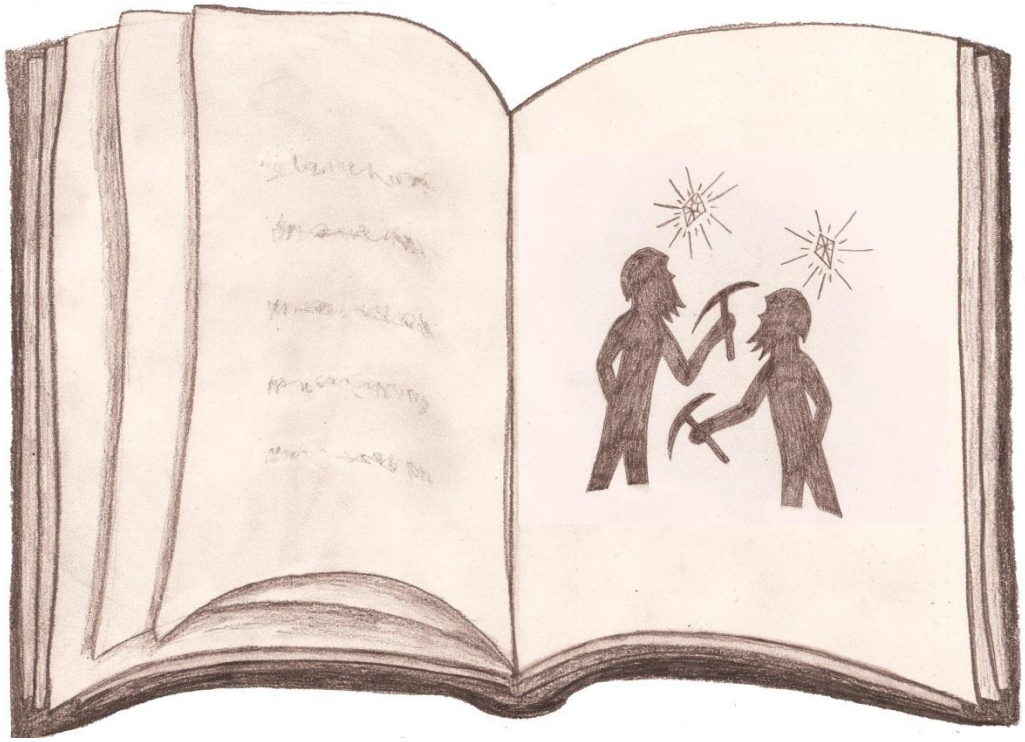
The drops fell on Miranda’s face. She flinched, squeezing her eyes shut and trying in vain to wipe the juice away. When she opened them again, she saw Axel standing before her.

“I hate to resort to this, but you’ve left me no choice,” he said.

Miranda stared at him, a familiar but overwhelming affliction taking over. She felt a warm, tight ache swell in her ribcage, making it hard to breathe – it was the same feeling that she had every time she thought about him or saw him, only amplified tenfold. It was that feeling of yearning for things to be different between them, to be like they once were. With it came a flood of unbidden memories, of late night band sessions and stolen moments together at school.

Hope kindled in Axel’s eyes, as he searched her expression for some reaction, some sign that the flower had done its job, curing her of her virulent mistrust and anger toward him. Miranda smiled at him. “Axel,” she breathed. Axel let out his breath, and embraced her tightly.

He could feel her arms just as tight around him.



Miranda's Journal, Entry #8

History is different depending on who's telling the story.

According to the poem, George faced the dragon and, with the help of a magic well and tree, was able to survive and kill the dragon. George rescued the King and Queen and, and married the princess Una. But Spenser's faerietale 'happy ending' isn't accurate.

Arriving at the usurped castle, George, Pellinore and Una found the Queene Glorianna and her consort Gawain murdered along with the rest of the Eldritch. George killed the Salamander Lord, and with the help of Morgan and Vivien, drove the Salamanders out of Ellydan. But the Salamanders retaliated.

Glorianna had created monsters out of her prisoners, and took them for their own. They locked Morgan in a tower of the castle in Malamar, placing the Ifrit as her guard. They trapped Vivien in a block of ice under the Undine sea, a spot marked only by a small island where the Nuckelavee slumbers. Una and George were on their way to free Merlin, when their party was waylaid by Salamanders. They killed Una, taking the scepter and the throne. She died in George's arms.

Though clinically depressed for the remainder of his life, George settled down in the human realm. Salamanders ruled the Otherworld. But they feared George's human bloodline.

They captured George's descendant and magical heir, making him a pawn soldier and gladiator who lived and fought in a cave-filled lava rock valley called the Pit. His only source of light and warmth were lava-pools that dotted the arena, lit only during a fight to the death.

Til one night, the portal opened.

He didn't know what it was, but it was an overwhelming, beautiful light. He saw the Fae scramble and trample to reach the light and throw themselves into it, the portal consuming them. Doors in the Otherworld were made of fire, so he knew exactly what it was – a way out.

During the chaos and confusion, the boy broke into the armory containing the one iron weapon he knew of, the Redcrosse shield, unaware that it belonged to his ancestor. The Fae, repulsed by the iron, made way for him. He jumped into the glowing light.

That boy was Gordi.

Chapter Eight
"Orichalcum"

After taking an entire night and most of the morning to work his way through muddy, cold, dense woods, Gordi finally arrived at the outskirts of the Sylph camp. Stalking through the underbrush, he surveyed the perimeter and found not a Sylph in sight. It was quiet, still.

To his knowledge, this was unusual behavior for Sylphs. True, they were furtive creatures who had a talent for remaining hidden when they wished, especially from foreigners – but amongst their own kind, they did everything possible to make their presence known, in order to establish the pecking order. Even if they were up in their tree-homes, the boisterous singing, squawking, chirping and buzzing should create the horrid din that they were known for, audible even to Gordi at ground-level.

His encroachment on their territory had not gone unnoticed – Clair must have correctly assessed his resolve to find Miranda, and told her sentries to expect him. As he made his way through the cluster of totem poles that comprised the Sylph court, he kept on guard, shield and iron pipe ready to defend himself from sudden danger.

Then he spied something he did not anticipate – Miranda, sitting in the central clearing on a short tree stump. Alone. His wariness evaporated somewhat, and he nearly called out to her – but he was glad that he had not given in to this impulse, for a moment later Clair alighted with a gentle flutter of her four delicate white wings. Gordi hid behind a totem pole, watching surreptitiously as Clair offered a cup of tea to Miranda. Miranda accepted it without a word of thanks, her expression speaking of begrudging tolerance. Clair smiled – Gordi assumed that she was amused by Miranda's attitude, until she turned to look directly at Gordi.

"Hello, human," came her silvery tone.

There was movement behind him – he did not need the confirmation of sight to know that it was someone poised to strike him with a spear. But when he turned to block, the would-be attacker was gone. There was a moment of utter confusion, then he heard a flutter behind him and turned just in time to receive a kick in the gut. Stars of pain clouded his vision in vibrantly-colored ink-blots obscured his attacker for the brief moment that he could have discerned them, before they disappeared with the unparalleled celerity of the Sylphs – though, he was fairly certain the black and orange belonged to the Sylph's visage rather than to the stars. *Flutter*. This time he was ready, but by the time he swung his pipe, his cheek was stinging from a sharp slap. Gordi's anger was roused. *Flutter*. Forgetting his years of training,

he swung the pipe around wildly, yelling like a madman. He hit nothing, and to make matters more humiliating, nothing came except Clair's silvery giggle. Clair covered her lips coquettishly with her pale hand – a perverse mannerism for someone without shame, thought Gordi.

"You think this is funny?!" yelled Gordi. Evidently they all did, for more laughing voices joined Clair's. Miranda, he noticed, was sitting and staring placidly. She was not joining in with the laughter, but neither was she objecting or looking concerned in the least. He wondered what they had done to her. "Enough games, faerie woman!"

Clair raised a loaded slingshot. "Oh, we haven't even *begun* to play games yet." She fired the silver pellet at him. He dodged at the last moment, ran to close the distance...but when he swung his pipe, he hit nothing. He figured as much – what he didn't expect was searing pain in his backside. In response to his involuntary exclamation, Clair cackled. He glanced behind him and saw her ready another shot.

This was futile – there was no sense in lingering only to be the quite literal butt of her joke. He made a dash for Miranda.

"Miranda!" he called out. She made no motion. "Can you hear me?!"

Monarch-pixie females, the ones who were toying with him earlier, now flew above him, firing bolts from small crossbows strapped to their arms. He kept his shield above his head, trying not to let the deadly hail slow him down.

Miranda stood up.

Gordi thought this was a good sign – but what was she waiting for? Why not run toward him, or run for safety?

Spear-wielding Sylphs alighted before him, blocking his way. They lifted their spears, and their leaf-shaped shields, like a phalanx of Spartan warriors. Armed only with his iron pipe and ancient shield, Gordi managed to break through their defense – only to find that both he and Miranda were now surrounded, spearheads leveled at them from all angles. Gordi realized that this was his answer – they had not actually tried to hold the line against his meager assault. It was a trap.

"Damn it," he growled to himself, regretting his impetuousness. But what could he have done? He was only human – but Miranda wasn't, and it was her turn to do something now. "Hurry!" he shouted to her. "Use your power!"

"No," came the flat refusal. "I'm not going anywhere." Gordi stared at her, dumbfounded.

"And neither are you," Clair's voice chimed in, as she stepped past the circle with Axel in tow. Axel took his place beside Miranda, wrapping an arm around her shoulder. In his other

hand was the scepter, which he held in front of him pointedly – his body language announced to Gordi that both objects of power, Miranda and the scepter, were now firmly in his possession. Miranda gazed up at Axel, adoringly.

"It's over, Fetch," sighed Axel calmly, like an adult gently telling a child they were too tired to play anymore.

"What did you do to her?!" demanded Gordi.

Axel smiled down at Miranda. "I found a way to turn the clock back to a happier time."

"Whatever you did, it is unnatural!"

Axel narrowed his eyes at Gordi. "For now," he conceded. He looked back at Miranda again, stroking her hair as she settled her cheek against his neck. "It's only a temporary solution. Until I can get things sorted out."

"Until you get her sorted out, you mean," growled Gordi. "She would not do what you wanted, so you enthralled her."

"I can't help it – I'm irresistible that way."

"That is not Miranda," said Gordi. "A person does not exist without their free will. You have turned her into a plaything – you, who claims to *love* her!"

Axel patiently waited, blinking listlessly. "Are you done?"

Gordi huffed, shaking his head with disbelief. "You have no soul."

Axel offered the scepter to Miranda – she took it, puzzled. "Babe, can you do something for me?" he crooned at her, in his characteristically condescending, pet-talking tone.

"For you? Anything," responded Miranda, with a quick and fawning sincerity that made Gordi feel queasy.

Axel locked his golden gaze on Gordi, and his lip curled into a snarling smile. "Let's say goodbye to the human."

All the Sylphs withdrew their spears and stepped back, revealing a toadstool ring around Gordi. Miranda raised the scepter, and the toadstool ring glowed. Gordi realized he had yet again fallen into a trap – he should not have stayed to exchange useless words with his enemy. He ran for the edge of the circle, but hit an invisible force field as solid as any wall. The Sylphs smiled, and disappeared – Axel smugly turned and walked away with Miranda.

Gordi could do nothing but watch, as the toadstools glowed brighter and hotter. He could feel the power revving like an engine, ready to explode.

Luckily for Gordi, Emerson had not only lived in those same woods his whole life, but he has the nose of a bloodhound. Jaron and Darcy managed to convince Emerson that his

reflection would understand if he took some time to find Gordi. Emerson led well, and Darcy was even more accustomed to traveling through woods than Gordi. Halfway through the journey, Jaron found a stream, and convinced the other two that they would make even better time if he used it to propel them forward. They agreed, and through Jaron used the water to push Darcy into his arms, even she was glad for Jaron's power – for the water really did send them through the woods at a frightening pace. So quickly did they travel, in fact, that they nearly rocketed right past the glowing toadstool circle in which Gordi was imprisoned. Darcy called out Jaron to stop, and jumped out of his arms.

"Gordi's in trouble! Pull him out!" Darcy ordered Jaron, pointing.

"No sweat! Your man is on it!" Jaron saluted her, and ran toward Gordi. Jaron thrust the blunt end of the bident through the circle – there was an almost electrical surge as the barrier resisted, but the orichalcum in the bident absorbed the magical power and could pass through it where human flesh could not. As Gordi grabbed the bident, Jaron pulled.

Light shot up like lasers from the toadstools into the sky, creating a tunnel of light.

Gordi's body barely cleared the perimeter of the circle. Once free of the barrier, he flipped completely over, tumbling past Jaron's head and landing hard on his back.

Jaron and Darcy pulled him to his feet, and they ran as fast as they could away from the Sylph camp. After what felt like an hour of running, they stopped and breathed a collective sigh of relief that no one appeared to be in pursuit.

"Whoa, dude! That was close!" panted Jaron. "In like another second, you would've gone 'beam-me-up-Scotty', right back to the Otherworld!"

"Thank you," said Gordi.

Jaron straightened, proudly twirling his bident. "Don't mention it. I don't get a chance to use this sweet Orichalcum weapon very often." He smiled and winked at Darcy. "Besides, I'll never pass up a chance to impress my girl."

Darcy rolled her eyes, and looked at Gordi. "He's been like that all morning. Both of them are acting weird."

"Miranda was as well," said Gordi. "She thinks she is in love with Axel."

"That's not weird at all," Darcy growled. Jaron snuggled up a little too close, and she pushed him back. She sighed. "It's Love-in-Idleness – a drug," she explained.

Gordi shrugged, wearily. "Great. Is there an antidote?"

"I don't know," admitted Darcy. "It's a pretty rare plant now that the Eldritch are gone. After going through that much trouble to procure it, none of my employers ever wanted the effects to be undone."

Gordi thought the matter over. “If you help me, we may use it to our advantage.”

After some discussion, they determined that their first objective was to penetrate the Sylph perimeter without being detected. Darcy offered the solution to this, and it was simpler than it first seemed.

“There is no back door, no way that we can go unnoticed,” she said. “So instead, let’s walk right past them – hiding in plain sight.” She explained they needed to create an opening by getting rid of one of the sentries, and that sentry would provide them the disguise necessary for Darcy to slip through. This proved the challenging part – even the weakest and most lowly of Sylph sentries had quicker reflexes than any other type of being, and could disappear in a moment. And they had only one shot at it, for if they failed, that sentry would alert all the others with one shrill, piercing shriek – and perhaps even kill the intruder on the spot.

Darcy explained that the main weakness for Sylphs were nectar-flowers, particularly honeysuckle. They found a patch of it in the forest, along the route of the sentries.

Sure enough, a female Sylph sentry passed, and she stopped to admire them. She was a pixie, and was considering whether to transform into insect-form for a quick snack, when Darcy grabbed her from behind, clapping a hand over her mouth and injecting her with a syringe filled with tranquilizer. The Sylph slept.

Darcy commanded a reluctant Jaron to go away, guarded by the more trustworthy Gordi and Emerson, as she removed the garments needed from the Sylph, and discarded her black clothes for the disguise. Years of covert ops in the Otherworld prepared Darcy for just these situations, allowing her to mimic the mannerisms of any Fae, perfectly. By the time she entered the camp, no one would ever have suspected that she was anything other than a Sylph.

Darcy found the Sylphs clustered in the central clearing, dancing in rings. The rings circled a pair dancing together, ballroom-style, in the center. The male was Axel, wearing his usual clothes, but it took a second for Darcy to recognize Miranda, outfitted with a lavish leaf-themed emerald dress, her usually wild hair plaited in a braid.

Clair, her monarch-ladies, and her hawk-eyed courtiers, were watching from their totem-perches.

Whether the crowded event was a blessing or a curse for Darcy was yet to be seen – they were blocking her way to the main structure, which was Darcy’s target. But then again, by blending in with the crowd, her movements would be obscured, and her unoccupied target would be less well-guarded. Darcy watched a few moments, analyzing their movements. It was

a simple dance, but she could not afford a mistake. She noticed a Sylph approaching Clair – they shooed her away, for she was not observing protocol. She was forced to start at the end of the line, with the lowest-perched courtier, who passed her message on to the next highest bird in the pecking order.

Darcy took advantage of their distraction to enter the dance. She switched rings as often as she could without drawing attention, and then, as she passed by Clair's tree, she slipped from the dance.

Clair took the message, then snapped her attention to the dance – what she had seen she wasn't sure. She narrowed her eyes, scrutinizing the dancers. Nothing seemed amiss – Darcy had disappeared behind the tree at just the right moment.

Darcy climbed the tree. There was no stairs or ladder, for the Sylphs needed no such thing. She moved as quickly as she dared, for if anyone caught sight of her climbing it would blow her cover.

Reaching the top of Clair's tree-house seemingly without incident, Darcy inspected the birdcage-like structure, looking past every winged totem-pillar and sheer, billowing curtain. When she was assured that she was alone, she scanned the abode for anything that might be useful. The shelf caught her attention immediately. She found a book, opened it, and saw a picture of the scepter – that looked important, so she stuffed it in her backpack.

She searched the contents of every container, until she found the little boxes with the purple, glowing Love-in-Idleness flowers inside. She grinned, mimicked the triumphant 'new item' sound from Zelda, and pocketed one of the boxes. The sound of wings – someone was coming. Darcy panicked. The room had a Japanese shoji-screen, but there was no time for her to figure out how to utilize it effectively. So she picked up a feather-duster from the shelf, and pretended to be cleaning the shelves. Her heart was pounding as she heard the visitor's feet touch the balcony – her mind raced to come up with excuses to the inevitable questions that Clair, or whoever was coming, would ask. She could not imagine any that would suffice.

The visitor was Axel, carrying Miranda in his arms. He folded his wings and placed her gently on the floor. They were too busy whispering to each other like they were back in the good 'ole times to notice Darcy – they disappeared behind the screen, and there was giggling from Miranda as clothes were thrown over the side of the partition. Darcy gaped, her face burning. She was grateful for the partition, for she realized that having Axel's clothes would be helpful. Fighting her overwhelming urge to flee, she approached the screen, gathering up the leather jacket and shirt which had made it over the edge, and slowly gathered the pants that were slung halfway over it.

"Hey, maid," said Axel, making Darcy's breathe catch. Oh no. She'd gotten too ambitious, and misjudged their level of awareness. "Could you get lost now, please?"

Never was she more happy to obey a command from Axel in all her life.

After the dance, Clair summoned a council meeting in the clearing. A clothed 'Axel' – in truth, Gordi – sat down in the circle beside her.

"Good, you are here," acknowledged Clair with a respectful nod. "We were growing anxious to begin discussion. Where is Miranda?"

"Sleeping," he answered. "Clair, I must speak with you alone."

The courtiers exchanged glances, not sure if this was a violation of protocol – but a quick turn of Clair's gaze toward them, revealing an imperiously arched eyebrow and pursed lips, warned them to be silent. "Of course, Highness," she told Axel. Clair rose. She stilled the air around them, preventing any sound waves from reaching the courtier's ears.

"Something strange has happened," said Axel.

"When does it not? Tell me."

"I thought I would be happy if I could get Miranda to love me again," faux-Axel confessed. "But instead, it has made me realize my feelings for someone else."

Clair frowned, completely puzzled. "Who?" Axel did not answer. He just stared at her.

Clair's eyes welled up with tears. "Axel...I..." she stuttered.

Axel gently wiped away the tears, from both of her eyes. The look in Clair's eyes changed – her pupils dilated, and she smiled at Axel dreamily. "There is something that I need you to do."

"For you? Anything," said Clair desperately.

"There is an imposter with Miranda right now," Axel explained. "The human."

Clair's eyes flashed. Banishing the silencing bubble around them, she turned and screeched a furious call to her comrades.

Axel – or, rather, Gordi – wiped the love-in-idleness juice off his fingers, onto his enemy's prized leather jacket.

The real Axel appeared with Miranda by his side – she was fully clothed and carrying the scepter, but all he was wearing was a blanket and his dragon necklace. "What's going on?" he demanded.

"And has anybody seen Axel's clothes?" added Miranda. "I think a Sylph maid took them somewhere-"

"You stupid hussy!" shrieked Clair. "Can't you recognize your own boyfriend?!"

Knowing a cue when he heard it, Gordi stepped forward. “Miranda, the man beside you is Gordi. You’ve been fooled.”

Miranda blinked, confused a moment, and shrank against Axel. “No,” she said, shaking her head, “No, you’re not him.”

Axel smirked. “She does know the difference.” He lifted the dragon necklace. “See this? I never take it off.”

The hawk-Sylphs looked at Gordi’s chest to see that there was, indeed, no necklace. With shrieks they flocked at him, grabbing him roughly with their talon-gauntlets. Clair gasped.

Darcy ran through the attacking flock, beating them off with the Redcrosse shield. She had led Jaron and Emerson into the camp. Emerson was wielding his brothers’ claw and axe, and both were defending her from the clawing and pecking and stingers of the Sylphs.

She placed the shield in Gordi’s hands. He ran, past a grinning Emerson. “Hey, that was cool!” he said as he fought. He spun around and hit another foe. “That was too!” Gordi grabbed Miranda and pulled her away from Axel, who roared and blasted fire from his palm at Gordi.

But his blast was knocked off-course by a gust of wind.

Clair floated forward, her hand outstretched toward Axel and her hair whipping about her. Her ice-blue eyes were wide, with pinpoint pupils.

“Clair, don’t!” Axel yelled into the gale. “He’s tricked you!”

Miranda raised her scepter, eyes glowing. Clair lifted her slingshot and shot a silver pellet at Miranda’s hand – Miranda yelped as it stung her, and she dropped the scepter. Gordi saw his opportunity, and wrapped his shield-arm around her. She whimpered as the shield drained her power – she stopped fighting, and he was able to drag her away at last.

Axel snatched up the fallen scepter, and disappeared in a burst of flame.

Darcy, Emerson, and Jaron were falling back to encircle and guard Gordi, who had his hands full with the nearly-unconscious Miranda. But by doing so, they were surrounded.

Suddenly, the fighting halted – weapons were stopped mid-swing. It was as if time itself had taken a pause - the air had stilled and compressed, preventing anyone from moving. Clair floated through the frozen battle, toward Gordi. She placed a hand on the shield, yelling with the pain of it as she held it there.

Then she stepped back with a satisfied smile. “There.” The air returned to normal, releasing them.

“What are you doing?” asked Gordi.

“Now we’re done for...” groaned Miranda.

"I am cured of the flower's enchantment," answered Clair. "Now I can pass my judgment with clear eyes." Darcy's eyes lit up – she yanked Jaron backward by the elbow so that he stumbled, his bare back touching the shield.

He yelped, and glared at her. "Yo, what was that for?! Aw man, I think I'm gonna hurl... thanks a bunch, Darcy..."

Darcy smiled and sighed, relieved. "No problem."

Jaron saw Emerson admiring himself in the blades of his claw, and pulled his hand onto the shield. Emerson gulped and came back to reality, looking bewildered. The curse was broken.

"I want you all to stand down," said Clair. Shock registered on all faces – except for Miranda, who was too queasy to be shocked, and it was her that Clair addressed. "I thought ending this nonsense between you and Axel would bring peace, and establish favor for the Sylph court. But it nearly cost lives, including my own." Her face turned abruptly toward Gordi. "And you. You tricked me."

"I am not proud of it," answered Gordi.

Clair smiled, and let out a silvery giggle. "No, silly! I'm impressed! Most humans I've met thus far have been dull and fearful. If humans can be brave and clever like you, perhaps there's hope for your kind."

Though not in the way that Miranda had intended, they had succeeded in gaining Clair's esteem and support. Clair listened as they told them their goal to rescue the humans, and offered her assistance. They were surprised that she was so readily agreeable, but she explained that it wasn't so odd – she hated the Gnomes, and always had a penchant for freeing any kind of trapped creature.

However, Clair assumed too much when it came to her people. The idea of helping Gordi, a *human*, rescue *humans* from mines belonging to the clan with the strongest warriors, ruffled a few feathers – quite literally. At her council meeting, no sooner had she uttered her preposterous plan to her courtiers than a horrible din arose, molting feathers all over the place. When humans refer to tearing their hair out with frustration, they mean it as a metaphor – but when hawk-eyed courtiers want to show their displeasure, their plumage pays the price.

Clair's face colored. "How dare you defy me! I am your princess!"

"Lady Clair, you were raised amongst humans," said a younger male hawk. "It is quite understandable that you feel some kinship with them-"

"That is not true," she insisted.

"...to the point," he continued boldly, "that you would sacrifice untold numbers of our own people to the blades of the Gnome warriors. But for us, we need a better reason to lay down our lives and risk provoking the wrath of those who could crush our loved ones."

"You are young," an old-timer cooed, trying to calm things down. "You do not understand the way things are done."

Clair stamped her foot. "To hell with the way things are done!" There was a collective gasp. "What is all this for?" she cried. "What's with all the bowing, and the curtsies, and the 'My Lady' drivel, if 'Your Lady's' orders mean nothing?" demanded Clair.

Someone whispered the word 'madness.' Clair's head snapped to the direction she thought she heard the sound. "Who said that?!" there was no answer. "So help me, if I hear one more treasonous word, I'll claw someone's eyes out of their sockets!"

That did not help sway their opinions one bit.

It was decided unanimously that if Clair wanted to go on this journey, she was more than welcome to it – none had the authority to tell her how to conduct her own affairs. But the Sylphs as a whole would wash their hands of the affair completely – when she was done, they hoped that she would come back in a better frame of mind.

"Aren't you worried that my participation alone, as a representation of the Sylphs, will provoke hostilities with the Gnomes?" she asked, bitterly. "And what if I am captured? What then?" The answer that came was appalling to her – if asked, they would tell the Gnomes that Clair acted on her own, against their wishes, and any consequences that followed would be borne by her alone. The Sylphs were nothing if not truthful.

Clair was insulted, but far worse was to come. Jaron asked her where Meriel was, and Clair was forced to admit that the Council had condemned her to death. At first, Jaron was too shocked to give much reaction – until she had the remains brought to Jaron. It was nothing but a bottle of collected sea-salt, the only remains of the girl after she melted into seawater. She was glad, at least, that he would not have to see Meriel's wounded body, the way it had looked during the execution – but it hurt no less for Jaron, who had a great fondness for Meriel despite only knowing her since the invasion. Jaron was the one who sent her as a messenger – he didn't even put much thought into the decision. Meriel was not the best fighter, but had the most bubbly personality of the Undines – it seemed obvious that she was should be sent on such errands, lending more sensitivity and grace than what was needed for a mere token gesture of courtesy. Or so he thought.

Jaron was left alone for the rest of the night. The rest of the party was allowed to sleep in the camp, but the Sylphs were not interested in being hospitable hosts - none of the Sylph

dwellings were volunteered for their use. The Sylphs were clearly encouraging their uninvited guests to vacate the premises as soon as possible.

At dawn the next morning, a brooding Jaron left to bring the salt back to his people. He dreaded having to tell Urmila, who he knew would be even more devastated than he was, since she had known the girl all her life.

Clair received nothing but a chilly silence from the rest of the group, as they left the Sylph camp on their journey toward the mines. Clair walked and struggled with the underbrush instead of flying, with a great deal of the supplies on her back, feeling that by doing so she was somehow doing some small penance. The air of the forest never seemed so damp and suffocating to her before – the branches overhead seemed like dark fingers closing in. Finally, when she could bear the tension no longer, she broke the silence.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"That's nice," said Darcy. Clair stopped – Darcy noticed, and faced her.

"It wasn't my fault," she said. "The Council–"

"You just told the Council to take a hike," Emerson pointed out.

"You realize what you did, right?" asked Darcy.

"I didn't try to save her. And it was wrong."

"It's not just that," whispered Miranda, sadly. "You coming with us didn't make it better."

"What do you mean? I'm trying to help–"

"There is not enough you can do to justify the price of your *help*," growled Gordi. Clair looked bewildered, so he went on. "We just traded a Undine *army* – for one spoiled, useless faerie!" he raged.

"I'm not useless!" Clair cried. "I'm the best shot of all the Sylphs!"

"We don't know how much damage was caused until Jaron gets back," reasoned Emerson.

"The Undines loved and respected Meriel," said Miranda in a hollow voice. "I do not know what they will do now." She looked at Clair with dark-circled eyes. "Clair, it doesn't matter who gave the order. You're the Sylph leader, and they will blame you. You being with us... they might feel that we're harboring a..."

"What?" she said, impatient even in her insecurity. "What am I?"

"...they might feel that we're harboring a murderer."

Clair gaped, blinking rapidly. "Wow," she croaked, "I've been called a lot of things. But I never expected that one." Clair looked at Miranda with teary eyes. "Do... do you want me to leave?"

"Yeah, go fly back to your coop," said Darcy.

"*No*," said Clair, horrified. "I won't go back there. I can't."

"Why not?"

"I made a bad move with the Council. They'll punish me."

"How bad could it be? You're their princess."

Clair shook her head. "You don't understand – by Sylph law, I'm untouchable. They can't do anything to me, directly – but they'll drag one of the lower-order Sylphs into the clearing of judgment, and make me watch as they suffer for my transgressions."

"Why do that?" said Emerson.

"It teaches her that when she screws up, her people pay the price," answered Darcy. "And it establishes the pecking order. Two birds, one stone."

"Not funny, Darcy," Emerson reproached.

"Sorry. Couldn't help it."

"You should ask Jaron, when he returns," Miranda told Clair.

Gordi exhaled like a release of steam, and forced his shoulders and fists to untighten. "If we truly have lost the Undines' support," he said, evenly, "we'll need each and every one of us."

Thus began the agonizing wait for Clair to learn her fate, in the very shadow of the mountain where the mines were located. Darcy and Gordi went to scope out the perimeter of the Gnome mines, taking notes on any possible exits, entryways, how well they were guarded, and if there were any times that would be best to infiltrate – say, at the changing of the guard, or during the delivery of goods. It was the same thing they'd done at the Sylph woods, but this would be much harder – the Sylph camp was open and visible, whereas the Gnome mines were the exact opposite.

Jaron made his rendezvous with the party much later than expected. He informed them that the Undines had returned to the beach, where they held a funeral for Meriel by returning her salt to the sea. He was very subdued, not his usual self at all – he didn't make eye contact with any of them as he spoke. When asked if Clair should stay or go, he shrugged.

"Might as well let her come along," he said. "The Undines will crash at the beach village until further notice. They gotta process."

He wouldn't say anything more.

Darcy and Gordi returned from reconnaissance. They found the lift that Axel had used on his visit, which was loaded up with iron scrap every day by human slaves. They were guarded, of course, but usually only by a few Gnome warriors. Once those were dealt with, the humans would help hide Darcy and Gordi in the iron heap. There was but one official way to enter the Gnome mines, and one way to come out again – it didn't appear that there was anyone guarding this path, but there would be plenty suspicious eyes upon them the moment they crossed the threshold. This ruse would get the two of them past the front door and into the iron pit where the humans were being held, without raising suspicion.

But using the lift, or hiding in iron, would be suicide for the Fae. Subtlety and stealth would be useless as far as they were concerned – they would have to scale the mountain by other means, enter through one of the top hatches, and hitch a ride on the dirt conveyor belt. They would be clearly visible to all inside the mines, so it was very likely that they would have to enter fighting. The only good news in all this was that the Gnomes had a distaste for long-range weapons, considering them cowardly – which would allow Miranda and Clair to snipe them all the way down, and for Emerson to use his kinship with Earth to cause destruction and chaos.

This did nothing to lift the party's spirits. There were too many things that could go wrong with their plan – especially since it relied heavily on Miranda and Emerson using skills that they had not yet fully mastered.

When this particular concern was raised, Emerson and Miranda were tasked with proving whether this was too much to ask within so short a window for preparation – for they had to assume, since the Salamanders were aware of their goal, that the Gnomes were as well. And there was no telling what move the Salamanders would make, if any – Sully's attempt on Axel's life made an alliance between the Houses unlikely, but the chance to capture Miranda while they were preoccupied with fighting Gnomes would surely be tempting for Axel.

So Emerson and Miranda practiced – Emerson with geomancy, and Miranda with harnessing her solar power. The results of Emerson's first tries to levitate small stones were unimpressive, while Miranda's blasts were unpredictable and inconsistent. Sometimes they dismally fizzled, and sometimes and they so powerful that they all had to run for cover.

"You'll bring the entire mine down on us!" trilled Clair, after one such explosion.

But after a few hours, Emerson was able to heft multiple rocks into the air and send them hurtling toward targets, and Miranda restrained her power to the point where she could fire off small laser-like blasts. Neither of them could do so without great difficulty, but with

instruction from Clair – who was anxious to display her own impressive marksmanship – their aim was deadly true.

The party deliberated, and decided that it was good enough – at least they would be able to do something before the inevitable battle at the bottom of the mineshaft.

It was time to rescue the humans at last.

Phase one got off to a rocky start. The three Gnome warriors guarding the humans were tougher than they expected. Their skin was rock–solid, and their temper was fierce. Their weapons were enormous – one wielded a heavy warhammer the size of a watermelon, while the other two wielded claymores broader and taller than Clair's entire body. Strikes from these weapons felt like being run over by a speeding truck.

Jaron was playing a parrying game with his bident – thrusts that would have pierced right through a normal opponent stopped short, bending the prongs. Emerson, too, found his bladed weapons sparking and dulling on the stone flesh. Gordi was on the defensive – his iron shield and pipe made him an undesirable target for the Gnomes, but getting within attacking range was impossible. Darcy was in the same boat, and mainly stayed close to Gordi – she silently promised herself a better arsenal, once they entered the mines.

Clair flew about, pelting the Gnomes with her slingshot. This seemed only to annoy them at first, and they swung their swords in the air to swat her away. But one of the silver pellets found their mark – a Gnome eye, the only part of their body left exposed. The Gnome man bellowed, holding his bleeding eye. Gordi finished him off with a blow of iron to the head.

Miranda did not want to use her sun power unless she had to, for penetrating Orichalcum armor and their hardened skin would require more energy than she could control. So she settled for tethering them to the ground with vines, rendering them unable to move. As the Gnomes were busy trying to cut and fight their way out of the snarl, Jaron switched tactics and tried blasting them with water. This moved most effective – their skin softened, cracking and finally crumbling under the pressure, exposing normal flesh underneath. Jaron, Gordi and Darcy dispatched the remaining two fighters with ease.

Miranda could not be dissuaded from healing the warriors after the battle, no matter how Darcy and Gordi protested that they did not have the time or energy to spare. Emerson supported Miranda in this, though he decided not be too vocal about it lest he be accused of an unfair partiality for Gnomes – but he did not need to, for Jaron was vocal enough in his praise for both of them. Clair did not feel in good enough standing with the group to comment one way or another.

Miranda had seen enough death in the past month alone to last a lifetime – she was directly responsible for one of them, and believed herself to be the root cause of all the rest. She was determined not to carry around anymore weight upon her conscience.

After the third healing, Miranda struggled to stand. "I'm fine," said Miranda, wobbling. But she did not look 'fine' at all. Her skin and hair had lost its color and become dry – her lips were chapped and bleeding, the leaves and vines surrounding her body were brittle. Even Gordi did not have the heart to reprimand her for not heeding his warnings, so disturbed was he by the terrible toll her benevolence had wreaked upon her body. "I just need to charge up a bit," wheezed Miranda.

Miranda stood in the sun a while, and it did indeed seem to restore her health somewhat. Whether it would be enough for a battle in the mines remained to be seen, and was a thought that disquieted the entire party. She still looked exhausted beyond measure, as she donned her armor once more.

The humans they had rescued were mostly soldiers, cops, firefighters and other able-bodied professionals that survived the first wave of the invasion – only to be captured, forced to use their strength to carry heavy metal pieces back to the mines. They were a bit leery of the Fae members of the group, and were not overly anxious to re-enter the mines, but they were eager to help smuggle Darcy and Gordi if it meant rescuing the others trapped within. They dressed in the armor of the unconscious, vine-tied Gnomes, which fit their muscular human frames remarkably well.

Unable to use the lift, the Fae were forced to scale the mountainside. But Emerson's power had grown, and he was able to tear chunks out of the cliff-face to create handholds, foot-holds, even rudimentary stairs for his own use as well as Jaron's.

Miranda didn't have to use her limbs at all – sinking her vines and roots into the rock, she climbed like a strange human spider. Emerson and Clair found this a bit creepy, while Jaron laughed and teasingly referred to her as Doc Oc.

Clair was able to fly directly to the top and keep a careful watch on both groups, prepared to intervene at the first sign of trouble. The lift had reached the top – the humans were rolling the wheeled iron-scrap cart containing the hidden Darcy and Gordi toward the entrance to the shaft. There were two rock statues on either side of the door, which came to life as two armed guards as the humans and cart approached. Clair caught her breath – so the entryway was guarded after all. Was this to be the first hitch in the plan? If discovered, nothing could prevent the humans from being thrown like rag dolls off the side of the cliff. She might

be able to save one or two of them if she was lucky, and assuming that none of the iron fell with them – but the rest would surely meet messy ends on the jagged rocks below.

When she saw the Gnomes wave them through, Clair thought she might faint with relief. These unpleasant deliveries were so routine that the Gnome guards did not care to make a thorough inspection – if there was one way to make the brave Gnomes flinch and turn their faces, it was iron. So far, so good.

The Fae reached the top only a few moments later. There were Gremlin workers on the roof, maintaining the drills and removing the dirt from the conveyor belts. Their reaction to was unexpected – rather than confronting the intruders, they began attacking the conveyor belts at once, in an attempt to mangle and sever them and thus close off entry into the mines. Miranda pulled them all away and strapped them down with vines, and jumped onto the conveyor belt with the others.

The will-o-wisps lighting the inside of the mines were snuffed out, making the entire shaft a pitch-black abyss. The wisps had been for the human's sake only – the Gnomes could see better in the dark than they could in daylight.

Miranda created a solar flare around her body, turning herself into a human lightbulb and blinding very Gnome in the shaft, causing them to cry out in pain as light seared their retinas. However, the ability to see did nothing to calm Miranda, Jaron or Emerson – they were each balanced on a scooped compartment no bigger than a wheelbarrow, attached to thick metal cables and chains. Though it was designed to carry quite a bit of weight, they did not feel secure – all three held on to the chains for dear life. Chunks of earth flew toward them, raining dirt and stone and rocking their baskets. Emerson was forced to let go of the cables in order to divert them.

Clair darted about, firing her slingshot as fast as she could. "A little help, if you don't mind!"

"You mean, you want us to be more *offensive*?" yelled Jaron.

"If you can manage it! Uggh! I don't know *how* you can be joking at a time like *this*, Jaron!"

Level by level they descended, and they began to develop a working pattern – Emerson threw the rocks back at the attackers to distract them, Jaron hosed them down, and Miranda finished them off with an arrow of concentrated light.

As the they drew and occupied the attention of the warriors, Gordi and Darcy were able to make their way into the pit without much obstacle. They removed the chains from the humans, yelling for them to lay down their loads and follow them. Gordi scanned the faces,

hoping to see his parents' faces somewhere among the crowd. He could not find them – yet he tried not to worry, for they could be covered with dirt, or unrecognizable in some way.

They found little Roxie.

Roxie stared at Gordi. "You aren't him, are you?"

"No. My name is Gordi." As he spoke, he felt a sinking feeling in his gut – if his parents were here, they would have seen him by now. They would have called out to him, surely.

She grinned and put forth a little hand. "I'm Roxie."

He shook it, and smiled.

"Come with me, Roxie," said Darcy, taking her hand – but to her surprise, Roxie pulled away.

"Yes, I know I'm not Miranda," said Darcy, "But you must trust me. She's fighting to get here, even as we speak."

Roxie shook her head. "No. You must help them."

"Who?"

Roxie pointed to the cage suspended above them, connected to the iron-smelter with pumps and tubes. "There's people up there. They need help."

"Do not fear – we shall free them," assured Gordi.

"We will?" asked Darcy.

"*You* will," he corrected. "I cannot climb with pipe and shield."

"There aren't any humans up there, you know. That's where they keep the Gnome prisoners, and siphon off their blood for transmutation."

The other humans rushing for the lift out of the pit. "There is no time, Roxie," Gordi stressed. "We will come back for them later."

The lift was en route to the pit, and it carried with it a Gnome guard, fully armored, sword ready for battle. Gordi looked up, and saw their companions descending the shaft. He realized that by the time they reached the pit, they would find all the humans slaughtered by a single Gnome.

He waved at them, yelling.

The sound carried to Clair's ears, drawing the attention of her keen Sylph eyes.

The Gnome warrior charged. The humans cleared out of his path, and Gordi ran at him with shield upraised.

Something darted past him at the Gnome warrior. It was Roxie. She screamed and kicked as high as she could – an attack which landed lower than the Gnome warrior would have liked.

Before the bellowing warrior could retaliate, a blast of water came from above. The Gnome warrior screamed, his armor crumbling off, helpless as Gordi struck with his pipe.

"Let me through!" he cried. He grabbed Roxie's hand, pulling her toward the lift. He was losing her in the crowd – so he scooped her up in his arms and carried her into the lift.

Miranda, Jaron and Emerson could see the bottom of the pit now, going down as Gordi and Roxie's lift traveled up the walls – there was a moment when they were level, with only a large leap's distance between. Miranda's heart skipped a beat as she saw Roxie wave at her. Miranda waved back.

"Uh-oh..." came Jaron's voice. Miranda turned, to see him staring at the conveyor belt cables. They were rusting, before their very eyes, creaking and straining.

"Looks like the Gremlins escaped!" shouted Emerson. He placed his hands on the cables, concentrating. He was rapidly transmuting the cables into stone, to counteract the rusted metal.

A moment later, all the cables and chains snapped.

Miranda felt a horrifying plummet – Roxie saw what was happening and reached out to her, but the lift carried her out of sight. The severed cables and chains flailed through the air like tentacles as they fell.

Something pulled her out of the falling bucket – it was Clair.

Clair had Jaron with the other hand – or rather, she had the end of his bident. Jaron himself was dangling from the other end.

Clair could have let them go altogether, holding them aloft on pockets of condensed air – but that required a greater confidence in her powers than she possessed. She felt more confident having a grip on them, and Jaron and Miranda, if asked, would have supported this decision.

Clair took them to the mine's exit, shining with the pale light of day. She dragged them through the crowded humans trying to exit, out into the clear air, and deposited them at the base of the mountain.

They sat there, windblown and out of breath.

Jaron whooped with exhilaration, followed by a crazed laugh. "*Duuuude*!!" he exclaimed, "What a RUSH!!"

The adrenaline had a different effect on Miranda. She had a hand on her chest, over her thumping heart, trying to convince her unbelieving mind that she wasn't dead.

"Thank you," she breathed at Clair.

"Look at my gnarly hands," Jaron said, showing off his bleeding palms, "these are some battle wounds, huh? Am I gonna get scars? Cuz that would be *sweet*! You know what I'm talking about, right man?" Jaron turned to fist-bump Emerson, only to find he wasn't there. He looked around, alarmed to see he wasn't anywhere in sight. "Dude, where's Emerson?"

Miranda looked at Clair, who stared back with wide eyes. "Did you see him?" asked Miranda. Clair shook her head. Jaron sobered, processing this new loss with dawning horror.

A tremor went through the ground, like an earthquake.

Out of the base of the mountain came an explosion, sending forth broken stone that hurtled through the air.

When the clouds of dust dispersed, a vaguely spherical stone rolled forward. It crumbled, and uncurled into Emerson. He coughed.

"Good," he wheezed, "I was worried you guys didn't make it out." Miranda and Jaron ran toward him, both throwing their arms around him – much to Emerson's bewilderment.

Gnomes were looking out of the new hole in the mountain, and were busy blocking it up again.

"Do not worry, they will not attack," Gordi called out. "They do not leave the mountain when it is occupied by their Queen."

They turned to see Gordi coming down in the lift. With him was Darcy – on the way out, she had managed to snatch from the Gnome loot a weapon known as the Salamander batwing – it had two razor-sharp blades curving in opposite directions from a center handle, which she now grasped proudly.

And beside her was Roxie.

"Miranda!" cried Roxie, running toward her. She smiled and threw her arms around her big sister.

Miranda squeezed her tightly. "Roxie," she whispered, through teary eyes.

Gordi felt mixed emotions watching them embrace. He was glad that Miranda had found her little sister at last – but his chest tightened with an envious ache, wishing that he had found his way into his own family's loving embraces. If his parents were not in the mines, then his hopes that his yearning would ever end had dwindled. It was possible that they had

escaped town, but somehow he doubted it – and the only one who might know their fates was his Salamander doppelganger.

Clair zipped in front of him. "Not so useless, am I?" she said, right into his face.

"No. You saved our lives, Clair. We owe you a debt of gratitude." Clair nodded, pleased, and hovered away. He sighed, and felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked behind him and saw Darcy.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly.

"At least I know. It is over now."

Darcy shook her head. "No." She placed an open book his hands. "This is a book I got from Clair's stash. It's the way to end the war."

Gordi looked down at the book. On one ancient page, were foreign words transcribed by hand with ink and quill. On the other page was an illustration, depicting the scepter of Lilith.

Miranda's Journal, Entry #9

So now you know who to blame, and what this is all about. I kicked off the apocalypse by letting a horde of magical beings invade. And I'm one of them. But I'm cleaning up my mess. I've made allies, human and Fae, who support me in overthrowing the Salamanders and becoming Faerie Queen. When I have the scepter, I'll break Lilith's spell by destroying the Otherworld, and purifying the iron of this realm.

There will never be another Changeling.

But there's major hitch: I'll have to take the throne from my ex-boyfriend. And, truth be told... I still kind of love him. I know, sounds like idiotic girl crap. But you weren't there when my incredibly *un*-super powers manifested.

Within a single day, I went from being a fairly shy girl with less-than-noteworthy athletic prowess, to beating up the strongest bully in school without a moment's hesitation. But weirdly enough, I didn't feel strong. I felt sick. I ran into the bathroom, looked in the mirror, and saw a zombie's face staring back at me.

I was pale . Not 'go and get a tan' pale – it was the ghastly, greenish shade of someone about to die. I was thin and gaunt – I had never been able to eat enough food, because I couldn't keep down anything with meat in it, or fortified with iron. My worried parents got me iron supplements one time, and it very nearly killed me.

Yet underneath my skeletal hands, the sink gave way, falling away from the wall. Water gushed out of the pipes and flooded the girl's bathroom.

Plants grew wild around me – vines would crawl and cascade through my bedroom window, and even broke the glass one night while I slept. A class project to grow a beansprout in middle school got out of hand, when the plant grew in a single day more than it should have been able to do over the course of a year. I couldn't touch iron without fainting, a habit that had been diagnosed as some sort of OCD neurosis by the shrinks.

Then I met one of my kind. Axel. Our clans were enemies, so he couldn't take me to the Otherworld. Yet if I stayed in the human realm, the iron would kill me. The solution: I would free the Fae. The Gnomes would cleanse the iron, by transmuting it into Orichalcum. We'd rule a Fae utopia on Earth.

I didn't know that I was handing over a fifty percent share of my own stolen birthright... and signing the human's death-warrant.

We are now camped outside the Gnome mines, anxiously waiting out the night. My parents are gone, but I have my sister Roxie back. After thinking that I might never see her again, I cannot stand to leave her side for even a moment... but I'm afraid that I have one last thing to do. I must make the world safe for her again.

This is my last entry. Once I finish writing this, I will wrap the journal with an iron chain and give it to Roxie for safekeeping, so that she can pass on the true story of the Fae invasion to the humans that survive. It contains all the things I might not live long enough to tell her myself.

After we go to sleep tonight, Darcy will use her skills to find and enter the Salamander base. And then, tomorrow morning, we will go to war.

Chapter Nine
"Scepter"

There were tensions in the air, as the humans realized that more than half of their rescuers were Fae.

Emerson offered them food. Though most of them were emaciated, they turned up their noses or even spat in contempt. One of them was a police officer, wearing the tactical gear that he had worn during the invasion – stolen back from the Fae as he fled the mines.

"We're surrounded," he muttered to a nearby family, which consisted of a father, two teenage girls, and a mother. The family had retrieved various items as well – the father wore his trusty baseball cap, the girls clutched the rackets that had failed to serve as weapons during the invasion, and the mother was busy redoing their ponytails. They had been captured together at tennis practice.

"You got a play we can follow?" the father asked of the police officer. He was the local highschool football coach, and never failed to talk like one. He believed sports contained everything one needed to know about life, and thus continually mined it for inspirational metaphors.

Emerson passed by him, offering a food bowl. "Coach?"

The coach recognized the kids from school, but it was only Emerson he knew by name, since he was on the football team. Emerson had a strong arm, he remembered – strong as an ox. He could have been one of their star players, if only he hadn't been so timid about tackling other players. The coach shook his head at Emerson, who passed on with a disheartened look. It was damn shame, how Emerson had gotten himself body-snatched by faeries. But the coach wouldn't let himself be tricked into eating their food, and turning *him* into one of those things, no sir.

The police waited to respond until Emerson was out of earshot. "Always," the police officer whispered, confidently.

"Then how is it you got captured?" asked the mother, who could best be described as a soccer-mom even though her girls quit soccer before age ten. She licked her thumb to go after a smudge of dirt on her daughter's face, producing a squeak of complaint. Her daughters were always immaculately coiffed before the invasion, and the soccer-mom's habits had not yet had time to die. She seem to understand the futility of erasing a single mark, when her daughter's overall state could only be noticeably improved by a bath and a change of clothes.

"I didn't know what I was up against," excused the police officer. "Now that I've had time to observe the enemy's behavior–" he stopped short when Gordi and Darcy sat down with them to eat.

"It wouldn't kill you guys to relax," said Darcy.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you Fae?" the police officer growled.

Darcy put her bowl down, jumping up and brandishing her dagger and batwing weapon. "I. AM NOT. A FAE."

"Whoa hold on, time out! We get it, now put the weapons down!" yelled the coach, in his usual authoritative tone.

Gordi put a hand on Darcy's arm. She sheathed her weapons. "We are humans, like you," assured Gordi.

The soccer-mom looked Gordi up and down. "I doubt that," she quipped.

Gordi did not respond. He watched, forlorn, as the mother drew her daughters in close to her. Behind them, Miranda sat with Roxie, and gave her the journal wrapped with iron chain. His heart felt like it was being strangled.

Then he felt hands slide onto his shoulders. Clair leaned in close to his ear.

"I require your undivided attention for a moment, Gordi," she purred.

Gordi nodded. "Certainly," he said, excusing himself to the others. Darcy watched them go uncomfortably, thinking how amusing this would be if it wasn't so sad – Gordi had a naiveté that was comparable to complete blindness. Oh well. It was time she got going anyway – she had a Salamander base with her name on it.

Gordi followed Clair to her private campfire, built so that she could avoid both the wary humans and the Fae, who said they accepted her... but she didn't believe them. Clair sat down.

"Yes?" Gordi asked, impatiently. "What is it?"

Clair grasped his hand and tugged on it, urging him to sit beside her. "I'm cold," she pouted.

"I will get you a blanket," Gordi offered chivalrously, rising.

But Clair would have none of it. She pulled him back down roughly. "No need," she said in a syrupy tone, "If you would lie your head in my lap, I'd be quite warm."

Gordi took his hand back, scowling. "Explain yourself," he demanded.

Clair straightened, taken aback. "I could say the same thing!" she said, fluttering her wings and eyelashes at the same time. "Here I am generously helping your cause, and you treat me like a leper!"

"Your words suggested no such price," muttered Gordi, resentful. He understood that she felt like an outsider, but if this was the only reason she had agreed to help in the first place, he wished that she had forced them to fight their way out of the Sylph camp instead.

"Price?" Clair repeated, incredulously. Then she lifted her chin, arching an eyebrow. "Oh no, if I expected *payment*, I'd take your wits, your memories, or your remaining lifespan."

"You have learned much in only a month's time," Gordi snarled. "You are more Fae than the Sylphs who serve on your council."

"That's not fair," she said, stung. "And you know it. My love for you is proof."

"I thought the iron cured you of your love for me."

Clair leaned in. "It did," she said softly, "But it didn't cure my *pre-existing* fondness for the one that you resemble..."

That was the wrong thing to say, and Clair realized it even as the words escaped her lips – Gordi growled, and left Clair at the campfire.

He found seclusion behind a large boulder, and slumped against it. But his solitude was not to last long, for Miranda found him minutes later.

"Are you alright?" she asked, peering around the edge of the boulder.

He startled. "Yes, I am fine."

Miranda was apparently not receiving the 'go away' signals of his bristling posture and avoidance of eye contact – either that or she was purposely defying his communicated desire, for she sat down right next to him. "I'm sorry we didn't find them," she said delicately. "Maybe they're still-"

"Stop**!**" he said with a reflexive vehemence. He had not meant to sound so angry. He tried to calm down and explain more softly, but as he did, the words caught in his throat. "No more. I cannot..."

"I know. You can't keep hoping," Miranda finished for him.

There was a short silence. It was not an uncomfortable silence, but rather the sort of silence between two people who are conveying more understanding to each other than words or even actions could accurately express. Eventually, however, Gordi decided that to change the subject, and tell her that Darcy had found information regarding the scepter of Lilith.

"I want nothing to do with it," Miranda said, firmly.

Gordi was surprised – he thought Miranda would be glad to know information regarding the next day's objective. "This war will continue as long as Axel has it," Gordi reminded her.

"Yes. But I'd rather just destroy it. Cast it into the fires of Mount Doom, or something like that."

"Lilith's soul is inside. That would be akin to murder."

"Yeah... I dunno." She sighed. "I'm happy that I saved Roxie, but this whole Faerie Queene business... I don't know if I'm strong enough to handle it."

"That is what the scepter is for. To make you stronger.

"And what about *getting* the scepter?"

"For that you have enough. And you are not alone."

Miranda smiled at him, gratefully. Neither one of them realized that Gordi's hand had found hers, holding it tightly.

Inside the royal suit of the Salamander-occupied hotel, Axel's hands were clasped over his father's wizened, clawed fingers, which overnight had turned a dull grey as the orichalcum in his blood was finally overcome by iron's curse. In Drake's other hand was the scepter, which he clutched more tightly than the son who knelt by his bedside.

Except for the weeping of the Salamander girl trio, it was quiet.

Darcy watched from the corner of the room, dressed in Salamander garb, wig, and eye make-up. Finding the Salamander base was easy – Drake's room was the only lighted place in town, shining like a beacon for all to see in the upper floor of the hotel.

She entered without obstacle as well, for the trio, who would normally be on guard at the doors, were absent. None of them were at their posts. The bar, the dance-floor, and the gambling tables were eerily empty, and dark – their King lay dying, and all of them, even the will-o-wisps of the dead that normally lit the base, were crowded in or just beyond the room to witness his momentous passing.

Sonny, with ragged breath as loud and laborious as the dying Drake, limped behind Axel with a goblet of wine in his hand. Sonny had a bandage around his throat and his knee, both damaged by Gordi's iron pipe and shield. His mother, upon seeing his wounds, cast him out of the mines – having nowhere else to go, he had taken refuge with Axel. Sonny tried to do whatever he could to be helpful, in return for his room and board.

Annoyed by Sonny's noisy intrusion on the somber moment, Axel swatted the goblet off of Sonny's platter, causing Sonny to let out a whimper of surprise. Groaning, he sopped up the red wine with a white cloth. He stared at the stain – it reminded him of the handkerchiefs his mother used to hang in his room at home, white clothes she knitted herself and stained with drops other's blood. He cradled it against his face, sadly.

"I did not think my body, and my dynasty, would die on the same day," rasped Lord Drake, bitterly.

"It won't. I promise you," assured Axel.

Drake let out a harsh laugh that turned into a cough. "I would say 'we shall see'... but then, I do not know if a wisp of soul maintains the gift of sight. They must, though... look at how many are gathered, for no other reason than to watch me die. Or perhaps they only wait for me to join them..."

Drake turned on the bed to face his son. With a frail, trembling arm, he handed Axel the scepter. His eyes stared intently into those of his son, and then the narrow slitted pupils widened, dilating to the very rims of his gold irises. His arm went lax, and he sunk against the bed.

An orange and red wisp of soul-flame lifted out of his chest and hovered in the air. Axel watched through wide, tear-filled eyes, as it came toward him, settling on his dragon-pendant and disappearing inside it. A moment later, it glowed like a red-hot coal.

"Father!" Axel yelled, bent over with grief. He slowly stood up, choking back the tears as he grasped the necklace tightly. Sonny laid a comforting hand on his shoulder, but Axel shoved him back.

"Do not touch me! Get out!" roared Axel. "Get out, all of you!!" The Salamanders obeyed. Sonny followed them, but at the doorway Axel pulled him back inside and turned him around. Sonny flinched, expecting more yelling or perhaps an attack – but instead, Axel simply placed the scepter in his hands. "Take this into the chamber," he rasped.

Walking toward the elevator with the crowd of Salamanders Darcy watched covertly over her shoulder and took careful note as Sonny limped off down a corridor with scepter in hand. She was tempted to follow Sonny – he was weak and vulnerable at the moment, an easy target. She could corner him, take the scepter, and go back to camp with the prize. But she restrained herself – it was too risky. Besides, she knew that Miranda would postpone a showdown with the Salamanders if she had the scepter, and Darcy didn't want that.

She wanted Miranda and the others to decimate the Salamander population first. It was for Miranda's own good – and the good of Emerson and Jaron. If things went according to Darcy's plan, the would-be Faerie Queene would be unwittingly complicit in sending all the Fae, including herself, back where they belonged. Permanently. If the Salamanders were too many, they would most likely kill her and her friends on the other side.

Darcy relished the thought of living in a world entirely free of the Fae, forever. She could get to know her sister Roxie, the sister Miranda stole and claimed as her own. She could

establish the sisterly bond that she was denied when the Fae captured her, and imprisoned her in the Otherworld.

Sure, Roxie might be upset at first when she learned that her fake, faerie sister was gone. But she would get over it... as long as Gordi kept quiet, and didn't interfere. It worried her, how attached Gordi had become to Miranda. Would he have the stomach to go through with it? Had he gone soft toward the Fae? When the elevator landed Darcy hurried out, hoping no one noticed her. She was anxious to get back to camp, and make sure Gordi was still on board with tomorrow's plan.

But in her haste, Darcy had forgotten something – at the moment of a Salamander's death, it was customary to have a dance to honor the deceased.

Participation was not optional.

The music started and Darcy cursed herself for forgetting such a crucial detail. Tanis of the Salamander trio broke away from her cohorts, eyeing her.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Forgot where the ballroom was," Darcy replied, trying to keep her head low – both to avoid Tanis realizing she'd never seen her around before, and out of embarrassment. She could lie better than that. But she was caught off-guard.

Tanis took her hand delicately with her clawed fingers. Bindi grabbed the other hand, pulling her along, while Etheline had somehow ended up behind her, stalking her as silently as her own shadow. Darcy wasn't sure if they were surrounding her out of suspicion, or if this was their attempt to be friendly and include her. It certainly made Darcy nervous.

Axel joined the crowd. He was not his usual smug self – an invisible dark, brooding cloud seemed to completely envelope him, blinding him to everything around him as he internally boiled. His anger was clearly conveyed by the rigidity of his stance and muscles, and it was palpable in the toxic vibe he broadcast to the rest of the room like a radio signal.

He danced along with the others. It was not at all like the slow, simple Sylph ballroom dancing, nor was it the style the Salamanders were normally accustomed to – it was a fast-tempo pair dance, with very difficult steps and timing.

But Darcy was very familiar with this dance, as well as very skilled. She blended right in. Perhaps too well – for somehow she found herself dancing with Axel.

Darcy cursed her rotten luck. The Salamander girls were casting envious glances her way – she realized what had happened. They were attempting to partner with Axel, but other Salamander boys took hold of them. Darcy, being in the middle of their group, was left face-to-face with Axel.

Axel was a good dancer. More experienced than she was and better trained, but Darcy was used to learning fast. She did not want to compete with him and thus draw attention – she wanted him to stay brooding and distracted, until they switched partners. But Axel seemed to realize that he might have finally met his match on the dance floor. To test her, he increased the difficulty. A stumble or a fall with the prince wouldn't keep her incognito, so Darcy was forced to keep up.

The song ended. Relieved, Darcy slid away – but Axel kept a tight hold on her arm.

"Surely you didn't expect it to be that easy," he hissed in a dangerous, low voice. "I know her every detail, and they have not left my thoughts for a moment. How could you possibly think I could look you in the face, and not recognize you?" She tugged away, but he held firm. "Don't make a scene."

She'd blown it. The next song began to play, and still she was his partner. "Why not?" she said, trying to sound cool even as blood pumped fearfully through her ears. "Would it spoil the show afterward? What will it be, Axel? Will you feed me to the fan-girls?"

"There's an idea," he rumbled. "You're rather flip, for someone whose life is in my hands." He dipped her. "Lucky for you, I'm in a benevolent mood."

"Are you?"

"Yes. There's already been one death tonight, and it's bad manners to kill someone at a funeral."

She sighed. "Torture, then. Lucky me."

"That would be merciful, not benevolent. I'm very exacting about word usage. I always say precisely what I mean to say."

"You can't be thinking of letting me go."

"No. You're staying here. I want you to guard the scepter – that was what you were sent to find, wasn't it?"

"That's a pretty way of saying you're imprisoning me."

"As you like."

"Forever?"

"Come now, let's not pretend that Miranda isn't planning to lead her little band of misfits here for a siege. You're here for reconnaissance, not to steal the scepter. Otherwise the girls would have found you in the chamber, instead of trying to leave in a hurry."

"I don't get it. Why not just kill me?"

"I don't kill," he said.

"What are you going to tell the Salamanders?"

"Nothing. It's been reported to me that the Undines abandoned you guys, and went home." Darcy looked away. "The Sylphs are neutral, so that was a fail," he continued, rubbing it in. "The Gnomes are still loyal to Mother Redcap, who hasn't yet made her move. What firepower do you guys have? A few Changelings and some humans? There's no reason for me to worry about my warrior's safety. And they've been through enough already, and so have I. My father just died, and my girlfriend is going to show up, ready for battle, on my doorstep tomorrow morning. I need the distraction."

"Ex-girlfriend, you mean," Darcy corrected.

Axel shrugged, and laughed nervously. "You're right – I guess her desire to kill me does make her my ex."

"I thought you always used the right word."

"I'm not up to my usual standards tonight." Axel looked so weary at that moment that Darcy almost felt sorry for him.

Almost.

They danced in silence until midnight, when Axel escorted her to a room just down the hall from the scepter, and set Sonny to watch the door. The Salamander girls were relieved to see him return so soon, without the girl they assumed to be a new romantic rival.

At dawn, the Salamanders were stretching out in the rays of sunlight, preparing to sleep around the gated pool or already snoring.

The armored warriors were out front, doing the same thing on the pavement. The three Salamander girls were back at their posts, guarding the front entrance doors. Tanis stood with arms crossed at the top of the concrete steps where Etheline sat, reading a book and letting poison drip from her fangs into a thin glass vial, which she intended to add to the vials strapped on the bandolier across her chest. Bindi twirled idly by on the lawn, practicing with her whip. She heard the buzzing of a fly, and with a crack of her whip, the buzzing stopped and the fly fell to the ground, dead.

"Sylph spy?" asked Tanis.

Bindi picked up the fly, and placed it in the palm of her hand to peer at it closely. "Nope," she said. "Just a bug." She let it fall back to the ground. The sun's rays fell upon her hand, so she held it there, smiling. "It's so warm. I could just curl up and go right to sleep-"

"Don't even think about it," snapped Tanis.

"Why not? Can't we take turns?" Bindi pleaded. Etheline tried to talk, but the vial muffled it. "What was that, dear?" asked Bindi.

Etheline lifted her mouth off the vial. "Any true devotee would not sleep while Axel is in pain."

"You're one to talk, Etheline," sniped Tanis. "Distracting yourself with books when you should be on watch."

"I am doing important research."

"Oh yeah? On what?"

"Human biology. All the ways their life systems can be terminated."

"Why? Your ancestors could make slaves of them with a single bite."

"I don't want human flesh in my mouth," said Etheline.

"Yeah! Eww!" exclaimed Bindi.

"Well the only one I want to terminate is that Eldritch skank," announced Tanis.

"Tanis! She's a Fae, and Axel's true love!" protested Bindi.

"And our rightful Queen," added Etheline. "Unfortunately."

"Rightful slave, more like," Tanis hissed.

There was a sharp, rushing wind sound shrieking through the air. Then another, and another. Tanis instinctively changed into her Basilisk form – a chameleon-humanoid – so that she could camouflage herself with her surroundings.

Etheline crept forward, noticing something feathery sticking out of a sleeping Salamander warrior's neck. She bent down to pluck out a poisoned bolt.

"Impressive," she murmured.

"We're under attack!!" cried Tanis, to alert the sleeping Salamanders in the back. Etheline slid three vials from her bandolier, and offered one to Bindi – who wrinkled her nose and stepped back, repulsed. "Is that your fang poison?!"

"No. A different potion. For inoculation."

Tanis grabbed a vial and drank. "I hope you labeled them correctly." Encouraged by Tanis' bravery, Bindi accepted her potion as well.

The attackers emerged from hiding. They were newly equipped with items stolen by Clair from the Sylph camp – Gordi was now outfitted in armor plates, Miranda had a leaf-shaped orichalcum sword, and Clair traded her slingshot for a crossbow. Jaron was fully armored and wielded his trusty bident, while Emerson was outfitted with his helmet, claw and axe.

The sun shone like a spotlight directly on the hotel and nowhere else – even without Darcy's help, it was impossible to miss.

The roar of a coming tidal wave precipitated the arrival of the Undines, armor and helmets glistening as they surfed the crest of the wave. Jaron's eyes swam with tears of pride when he saw them, as his friends cheered the unexpected reinforcements. Emboldened, they charged at the front entrance.

But it was too soon to celebrate.

The Salamander girls let fall their glamour. Bindi traded her legs for the giant constrictor's tail of a Lamia. Etheline's hood of black hair transformed into the distinctive shape of a cobra, the chosen shape of the Naga.

Without hesitation, they darted at the Undines. Every second was punctuated with a Undine warrior at the base of the wave falling to the vicious assault – claw swipes, cracks of the whip, and a barrage of acid vials, which Etheline placed in her mouth and spat at them with the velocity of a bullet. Salamanders poured out of the hotel, joining the fray.

The tidal wave crashed against the hotel, breaking the doors and windows. For a few moments, all except the flying Clair were submerged under the water.

And it was in these moments that the Undines showed their true prowess, as they transformed into their undersea forms.

Nets ensnared the Salamanders, drawing them together so that they could be stabbed with spears and bidents. The spindly, slimy green arms of the frog-like Grindylows grabbed them, preventing them from reaching the surface for air. Crab and lobster claws belonging to the Shelleycoats snapped like a vice on Salamander necks. Tentacles of the Krakens wrapped around multiple foes, bashing them against the concrete ground. Smelling the blood that darkened the water, shark-finned Adaros opened their jaws wide, revealing rows of razor-sharp teeth as they fed in a frenzy.

Miranda fought the Salamanders and swam toward the hotel entrance. The waters subsided to let her pass. But as she grasped the handle, Bindi's whip struck her hand, sending pain up Miranda's arm like searing fire.

"Not so fast, Eldritch!" screeched Bindi.

Miranda's path was blocked when a vial shattered against the doorframe, sending up a smokescreen. Miranda coughed, and was grabbed from behind by Etheline, her long curved fangs poised over her neck. Miranda elbowed her in the side, flipped her over her shoulder as she learned in martial arts, and punched her – Tanis had come to help Etheline, and slashed with her nails at just that moment, and caught Etheline instead. Etheline shrieked.

"Oops," said Tanis. She took swipes at Miranda, who parrying the long nails with her sword. Bindi whipped Miranda's exposed back – the pain caused Miranda to misses a parry,

allowing Tanis a swipe across the face that covered it in thin red marks. Miranda tackled Tanis, grappling on the ground. Bindi saw another opportunity to whip Miranda's back, but miscalculated – Tanis rolled Miranda over, so that she was on top, and the strike hit her instead. Tanis roared. Miranda threw her off, kicking her, before charging at Bindi. She evaded one crack of the whip, but for the second one Bindi changed tactics – she cast it horizontally, and the whip coiled around her foot, tripping her. Bindi pulled her closer. Two could play that game – Miranda summoned vines from the ground that wrapped around Bindi's torso and neck, yanking her the other direction.

Roots descended from Miranda's back, lifting her up – sharp thorns cut the whip away from her, freeing her sword arm. She pointed her sword at Bindi's throat – Bindi put her hand up in surrender, smiling sheepishly.

From her elevated position, Miranda fought off Tanis and Etheline, until the others, battle-weary, joined in.

"Go," said Gordi to Miranda, as they held the Salamander girls off.

Miranda entered the Salamander's lair.

The hotel carpeting, wet from the tidal wave, squished under the soles of her boots. In the silence and the darkness, all the sounds were magnified. Water dripped from the ceiling. The banquet table was overturned, food on the floor with shattered wine glasses. There was a very slight scraping noise as she passed – Miranda thought nothing of it, assuming it to be the shifting of objects as gravity took over for the subsided wave. But then there was another sound – this one sounded like something dragging on the wet carpet.

She spun around with her sword, which came to point at Sonny – he froze, a platter from the banquet table poised above his head, ready to strike hers.

"Where is the scepter?" she demanded. Sonny moved his mouth, soundlessly, and let out a frustrated snarl. Thinking he was refusing to speak, Miranda threatened him with the sword. Very slowly, he lowered the platter, and pointed at his throat. It was then that she noticed the bandages – not only around his injured voice box, but also his leg.

She reached out toward him. He flinched, hissing. "Don't worry," she reassured him, "I won't hurt you." She placed a hand gingerly on his throat. Golden light surrounded her, enveloping Sonny and the entire room.

Sonny found himself kneeling on the ground. He ripped the bandage from his throat, feeling it – the bruising is gone. "Really?" he said, disbelieving. He looked up at Miranda, standing over him in her Eldritch form. Miranda was not quite as exhausted this time – the spell had taken Miranda's orichalcum armor as part of its toll, mitigating the damage to her

person. But she was still weak – weaker now than he was, now that he had received some of her life-force. Broken glasses with wickedly sharp edges lay all about Sonny within reaching distance, glinting at him alluringly. He eyed them, calculating – he could arm himself, grab Miranda, and cut her throat all before she could finish drawing breath.

But then Sonny surprised himself. "Down the hall, to the right," he said.

Miranda nodded in acknowledgement, and continued on her way.

Sonny tore the bandage off his leg, wondering at himself. Did he really just let her go? Seriously? He had never let someone go before –he had met some very good pleaders, very sympathetic, innocent people, and he had enjoyed watching them die.

Maybe he had been too prolific since the invasion. Yes. He needed a vacation. He peered into the sunlight streaming in through the door – it should be some place nice and relaxing, filled with sun. Not the grey, stormy, depressing light of Fae-occupied Hawthorne – no, he missed the sun of his childhood. A warm sun, like Miranda's light. Somewhere, where he could let his bloodlust recharge. Or maybe retire altogether, and watch as the Fae took over the world.

Pleased with that thought, Sonny ran out – and collided right into Emerson, coming through the door. Sonny stopped and looked battle-gear Emerson up and down. "Hey now, look at you," Sonny mused, "you finally grew a pair, runt." Emerson put up his weapons, defensively. "What are you gonna do? Kill me?"

"Or we could make amends and be normal brothers-" began Emerson, before Sonny made a disgusted sound and pushed past him. "Wait! Sonny, where are you going?"

"A tropical island. Tell mother I'm dead, will you?" Sonny elbowed his way past Gordi, Jaron and Clair on his way out. "Pardon me, just passing through..." They looked questioningly at Emerson, wondering why neither brother was on the offensive. Emerson just shrugged at them. "Oh, and one more thing," Sonny said over his shoulder, "You might want to let Darcy out. The room's locked from the outside." Then he disappeared into the chaos of the raging battle.

Meanwhile, Miranda came to a vault. This was where the casino part of the business kept their money. The door was locked with a passcode, but Miranda didn't want to bother with that – she simply blasted it open. She stepped inside, and instead of money and valuables, she saw a pedestal – upon which lay the scepter. Lilith's scepter. The object that she had so foolishly used just a month ago, to rip open a hole in the fabric between worlds. She carefully lifted the scepter from its pedestal.

"Well, this is interesting," oozed an familiar voice that echoed through the hollow chamber. She gasped and spun around, to see Axel leaning in the vault's doorway. His face was drawn tight, ghoulishly pale, his golden eyes glowing in the shadows.

"After all the refusals and protests," he rumbled, "I wake up to find you in my chamber, barely clothed and fiddling with my scepter."

Her face flushed, heat burning her cheeks. "It isn't yours, Axel," she replied.

"That's a matter of opinion," he countered. "And I'm in no mood to argue."

"Since when?" she said, feebly attempting to banter in order to buy time for her friends to arrive. Normally Axel like to hear himself talk – but now he was silent, wearing an unfamiliar expression. A shiver of dread ran up Miranda's spine and constricted her chest. Something was different about him, and it was disturbing. There was a coldness to him now, a lack of emotion as he watched her that was completely unlike him. His eyes were distant, and almost seemed to look straight through her – like she was a stranger.

As if in answer to her thoughts – which it likely was, for she knew her thoughts were somewhat open to him, Axel spoke. "My father is dead," he said, flatly.

That explained it. Axel had spoken often to her of his father, the great privateer Sir Francis Drake who stole the scepter away from England and created the colony that preceded the modern Hawthorne. Drake was the father he knew from his childhood in the Otherworld, and Axel worshipped him as a hero. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"No you're not. He hated you," Axel snapped. "He would've killed you himself, if I hadn't pledged my troth to you that night."

Miranda stiffened, taken aback. He had never spoken with such an edge to his voice before, never laced his words with so much spite. Miranda lifted the scepter, gripping it tightly.

Axel straightened. "Are we gonna play this game again, Miranda?" he sneered, taking a step inside the vault. "You missed a perfect opportunity already. You could have walked away and let me bleed out, remember? Just like that. It would have been so easy for you." He took another step toward her. "No one would have blamed you – it wouldn't have occurred to them that you would trade your life for mine." He was very close to her now, squaring his shoulders boldly. She had never seen his eyes look like they did now – the pupils only thin, inhuman slivers. "So tell me," he whispered, "are you really going to take me out this time?"

"No," she answered, and real surprise and confusion registered on his face – until an iron pipe made contact with his skull, making his face go slack with unconsciousness. Axel crumpled, revealing Gordi behind him.

"I will. At least for a while." Gordi was followed by the rest of the gang, which included Darcy. She was covered in splatters of Fae blood, which dripped off her batwing and knife as she sheathed them.

Miranda indicated the scepter. "What do I do? Did the book mention an on-switch?"

Darcy attempted to wipe the blood off her face, and exchanged a look with Gordi.

"...Yes," he told Miranda. "We have the spell that will unlock the scepter's power, and focus your own."

Satisfied that he was following her script, Darcy reached into her backpack and retrieved the book.

"It's Fae writing," explained Darcy, opening it to the correct page. "You'll need to concentrate on the scepter, so repeat after me."

Miranda smiled, and took a deep breath. She could do this. It was time to bring an end to this war – or so she hoped. She could not guarantee the Fae would accept her rule, but it would be a start. At least she would take away all reasons for the Fae to fight, and hope that would draw out some of their venom. The survival of the humans depended on it – without the protection of iron, the humans needed the Fae to lay down their arms.

What she did not know was that neither Darcy or Gordi were willing to take such a gamble with the survival of their race.

Darcy read from the ancient tome. Miranda squeezed her eyes shut, and repeated every word Darcy spoke, concentrating on the scepter, infusing it with her willpower. The chant fell into a melodic rhythm, and seemed to be building an unseen power.

A glowing circle appeared on the ground in front of her.

Axel lifted his head as he drifted back to full consciousness. He recognized the words they spoke, and knew what they meant. He struggled, finding his arms held fast by Jaron and Emerson. "Let me go!" he yelled. "She'll ruin everything!"

"Yo, that's kinda the point. Get with it, dude," scoffed Jaron.

"No, you don't understand!" rasped Axel, his "She's sending us all back! Locking us in the Otherworld, forever!"

Miranda's eyes snapped open. She stopped chanting. "What?"

"He's lying. Don't listen to him," said Darcy.

"Miranda, look at what you're creating," he hissed, desperate, "Its a *portal*!"

Miranda turned to Gordi, worried. "You sure it's the right spell?"

Gordi hesitated. He could see in Miranda's face that she trusted him wholeheartedly. And why should she not? Never before had he deceived someone like this. He had been so

irate with her, thinking that she had betrayed him – and now here he was, lying to her face. But he could feel Darcy giving him a warning stare. He had agreed with her the previous night, when she made the case for exiling the Fae to the Otherworld. Miranda's plan would mean the death of the humans – she had too much faith in the Fae, who had already proven themselves untrustworthy time and time again over the centuries. He still agreed with her. But then, Roxie flashed through his mind. His stomach turned – Miranda would never see Roxie again. He inwardly pushed that thought aside, steeling his mind – he could not jeopardize humanity for the sake of one Fae who loved her human sister. Separating them was a small price to pay. "...Of course," he lied.

Miranda swallowed, and continued the chant.

Within the glowing circle, an image appeared – like a reflection on the surface of a pool of water. Through this hazy window, she could see a desolate grey wasteland, lit only by glowing trees, under a lightning-filled purple sky.

"Is that...the Otherworld?" whispered Miranda, her breath stolen by the wind now swirling through the room. Slowly, she aimed her gaze at Gordi.

The shock and hurt he saw in her eyes was unbearable. But it was quickly replaced with an Eldritch glow.

The portal began to draw the Fae toward itself, as if it had its own inescapable gravity. Darcy grabbed the scepter, but could not pull it out of Miranda's tight grip. Axel, Emerson, and Jaron slid into the portal together, disappearing beneath the undulating surface. Clair flew away as fast as she could, but was the next to go. Salamanders and Undines from outside flew helter-skelter like leaves on the wind, struggling as they hurtled toward the vault.

Miranda was being drawn feet-first into the portal – only her grip on the scepter kept her from going in, as Darcy and Gordi were unaffected. Gordi grabbed Miranda to pull her off the scepter – but the portal proved too strong, and all three tumbled into the portal.

As the scepter, the key to the entire spell, went through the portal, the portal closed shut, sparing all the other Fae.

Thunder rolled, like the roar of a mighty beast.

Gordi opened his eyes, and sat up. Darcy was by his side, and she looked afraid – he could see a her in a dim, pale glow coming from the ground.

There were other forms standing around them, silhouetted against an eerie purple sky, their faces in shadow. A flash of lightning illuminated Axel, as well as once-friendly faces that now stared at Gordi and Darcy, coldly.