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by
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EDITED BY
SCOTT GABLE
CAROLINE DOMBROWSKI
DORA WANG



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Cover design by Jeremy Zerfoss and Windy Meeks.

Interior design and editing by Scott Gable, Caroline Dombrowski,
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ISBN: 978-1-940372-04-4

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INTRODUCTION

CAROLINE DOMBROWSKI
& SCOTT GABLE

When you catch movement out of the corner of your eye but can't find the source. When an uncanny child looks at you, unblinking, and you forget where you are. These are moments that the dark side of the fae seep into your mind, overwriting those glittering pastel images and clap-for-life stories. Living among us but not of us, the actions of the fae may or may not make sense. Their motivations are opaque to us, and though they are capable of great kindness, they are also capable of enormous terror.

Welcome to these tales of the fae and their influence over us. There are tricks and traps, loves and temptations, and in some small way, they may help you if you have the misfortune of entering their world one day . . .

Volume One

“Faeries, come take me out of this dull world,
For I would ride with you upon the wind . . .”

—W.B. Yeats, *The Land of Heart's Desire*

SHIRO HEARS THE CICADAS

DAVE GROSS

At sunset on the southwest shore, the evening light paints the rock as the surf bathes the feet of basalt cliffs. Peasants and lords travel hundreds of miles to stand upon the precipice and listen to the song of the higurashi.



Shiro paused, axe held above his head. The sea breeze bent the grass along the ridge, every stalk pointing toward him, his humble hut, and the forest surrounding them on three sides. As the wind subsided, Shiro heard the hush of the surf and the barking of the dog.

He let the axe fall and left it quivering in the stump. He collected the logs he had split into quarters and placed them on the woodpile. His back ached as he stretched. He would not have to feign infirmity, as once had been his custom when greeting visitors.

He fetched his straw hat and tied it snug under his chin. He fixed the buckets to the yoke and set it across his shoulders. Leaning into the wind, he walked out to the coast trail.

The yellow dog greeted him at the crest of the hill, dancing around him once before dashing back toward the intruder.

The visitor was a young man. Most of his visitors were young. Shiro believed that was because they had not yet become hardened against life's indignities. Yet not all of his visitors were young.

Shiro stood beside the trail. He raised his hand against the sun and estimated

there was less than an hour before dark. It was not much time. He waited for his visitor.

As the young man approached, the yellow dog followed at his heel, looking up at him. Shiro bowed as low as his aching spine allowed.

“What are you doing here?” The young man spoke in a coastal dialect. Shiro noted the shape of the scars on the heels of his palms, the calluses on his fingers.

“I go to fetch water for my tea.”

The young man looked astonished. “Who would live in such a place?”

“My name is Shiro.” He bowed again.

“But what are you doing here?”

“Would you care for some tea? It tastes better when I can share it.”

“Share it? But no one comes here except . . .”

Shiro bowed, this time to acknowledge that he understood. “Help me fetch the water, and I will brew tea for you before you throw yourself from the cliff.”

“I did not say I had come to throw myself from the cliff.”

“As you said, no one comes here except . . .”

The dubious expression of the young man’s face gradually changed to one of pity as he looked down at Shiro. “Here, let me carry those buckets.” He took the yoke and set it across his own shoulders. The weight of the empty buckets did not bow his strong back.

They walked to the crest of the hill. Shiro said, “Have you traveled far?”

“Two days along the coast road.”

“You are from the village of the pearl divers.”

The young man opened his mouth to speak, but he choked and nodded.

Shiro pointed to the fork in the path. To the right, the trail wound up to the farthest point on the cliffs, a spot overlooking the rocky shore, where most of Shiro’s visitors wished to go. To the left, it clung to the side of the hill until it passed beneath a waterfall throwing itself into the sea.

“What is that sound?” asked the young man.

“My hearing is not so good.”

“It comes from the forest. Is it cicadas?”

“I don’t know how you can hear anything so close to the falls.”

Shiro took one of the buckets and showed the young man how to fill it without

stepping too close to the precipice. The fall would certainly kill but only after a dozen collisions with the rocky cliff face.

Shiro noticed the caution with which the young man filled the second bucket and replaced the yoke upon his shoulders. He followed carefully as Shiro led him back to the hut.

The young man set down the water buckets and rubbed his neck while the yellow dog settled beside the fire pit. Shiro fed the embers from the woodpile and stoked the fire to flame. Afterward, he fetched the dipper, filled a clay cup with water, and offered it to the young man. While his visitor drank, Shiro filled the iron kettle and hung it above the fire. Then he took a seat across from his visitor and waited for the water to boil.

“You live here all alone?”

Shiro nodded at the yellow dog. “Not entirely alone.”

“What do you do here, so far from the nearest village?”

“I chop wood,” said Shiro. “I carry water. Sometimes a visitor comes to help me.”

The young man looked at the woodpile. “You will need much more before winter.”

Shiro nodded.

The young man hopped up and plucked the axe from the stump. In his hands, it appeared no heavier than a switch. He split round logs in two blows, then halved and quartered them. After the first half-dozen logs, he slowed to a steady pace, the rhythm of his labor echoing through the trees.

As the young man worked, Shiro collected the split wood and added it to the pile. When the water boiled, he went into the hut and emerged with a pot and two covered cups on a carved tray. He poured a little water into the pot, swirled it, and poured it from the pot into each cup before splashing the water on the ground. He murmured a prayer and bowed to the forest, north and east.

The young man paused in his labors. “There it is again. What is that sound?”

Shiro tilted his head as if listening. He shrugged. “Come, have some tea.”

He poured a measure of tea into the pot and filled it to the brim, spilling water over the sides as he set the lid in place.

The young man finished splitting a log and laid its quarters on the woodpile. He untied the kerchief from his neck and mopped the sweat from his face before

returning to sit beside the fire. The yellow dog moved to sit near him, just within reach. The dog stared at the young man until he reached out to scratch the dog's jaw.

"I should go," said the young man. "It will be dusk soon."

"There is plenty of time before dark," said Shiro. He poured the yellow-brown tea into the cups, replacing the covers to capture the steam. The young man hesitated, watching as Shiro demonstrated how to hold the cup and move the lid just enough for a sip before covering the tea once more.

Mimicking Shiro, the young man sipped his tea. He frowned and nodded. "It has a strange flavor. But it is the best tea I have ever tasted."

Shiro smiled. He had felt the same way when he first discovered the tea growing wild at the foot of an ancient statue.

The young man sipped again. This time he smiled, and as he smiled, a yellow leaf that was not a leaf floated across the breeze to light upon his shoulder.

"What was her name?" asked Shiro.

The young man's smile vanished, replaced with an expression of feigned confusion. "Whose name?"

"The woman you lost."

"I did not say—" Another yellow leaf that was not a leaf skittered across the ground and clung to his shirt. There it swelled and breathed, as did the one on his shoulder. "Miyako."

"Tell me about her."

"I don't—" Two more not-leaves fell upon him, one in his hair, one on his neck. He did not notice. "We were to have married."

Shiro listened to the young man's tale.

The young man and Miyako had grown up together in the village of the pearl divers. The young man was not a diver but a fisherman. He did not fear the water, but he lacked the skill to hold his breath and force his body forty meters beneath the waves to gather oysters. Instead, he gathered fish all day and sang at night beside the fire with all the other villagers.

Miyako was the best diver in the village. She smoothed grease over her lithe, brown body and pinched greased cotton into her ears. She closed her nostrils with a tortoiseshell clip and leaped out of the boat with a heavy stone and a wide-mouthed basket in her arms.

Every time she dove, the young man watched her from his fishing boat,

holding his breath for as long as he could. He watched until he grew dizzy, his face flushed, and finally gasped for air. Still Miyako did not appear, and panic fluttered in his heart. He would hold his breath again, hoping that by some sympathetic charm the air he did not breathe would find its way into her lungs, filling her with his love. He swore he would not take another breath until he saw her.

And then she would reappear, her basket full of oysters, and he would breathe again.

For every fifty times Miyako dove, one of the oysters she retrieved yielded a pearl fine enough to sell. For every pearl, the young man held his breath a hundred times. A hundred times, he did not die for loving Miyako.

Until the time she did not reappear. The other divers searched for her corpse, but they never found it. She was gone, whether swept out to sea or embraced by the weeds deeper than any of the other divers could go, no one knew.

Shiro refilled the young man's teacup.

"If only I could have held my breath longer," he said. "She would have made it back."

"So you came here to join her?"

The young man nodded.

"What gift have you brought her?"

"What do you mean?"

"If you go to Miyako now, what gift will you give her? You carry only sorrow."

"What else do I have?"

"You must go back home and fetch her better gifts."

"What kind of gifts?"

"What would you have given her if she had lived? What did you dream with her?"

The young man shuddered, unable to voice his thoughts. Still he did not notice the creatures clinging to his arms and shoulders, glowing in the light of dusk. With every sob from his chest, they grew larger. No longer resembling leaves, they now seemed like wedges of golden fruit with chubby little fingers clutching the young man's hair and clothing. A steady susurrus emanated from their bodies, a chorus of weird harmonies that sounded almost exactly like the song of the cicadas who sing at twilight in spring and autumn.

“Go back to your village,” said Shiro.

“What will I do there without Miyako?”

“Do what you would have done with her. Live the life you promised her. Gather fish. Sing with your people. Choose another woman and make children. Raise them well. Teach them to gather fish and sing. Live that good life, and when it is over, you will take it with you to Miyako. That is the gift you should bring her.”

One by one, the not-leaf, not-fruit creatures dropped from the young man. Their song ceased for an instant as they hit the ground, chortling as they righted themselves on chubby little fingers and skittered over to climb upon Shiro. They hung on him, resuming their song. Its music changed tenor as their glowing flesh changed from vibrant gold to green, then to blue, and finally to violet.

Shiro sighed as the weight of the yoke settled around his neck.

“You are right,” said the young man. “I must—do you hear that?”

“What do you hear?”

“Nothing,” said the young man. “Only the sea breeze.”

“If you leave now, you can climb down from the hills before dark.”

“Thank you,” said the young man. “Thank you for the tea.”

Shiro stood, faltering. The young man rose quickly to take him by the elbow. Shiro thanked him with a wan smile. The young man seemed to notice the weird little creatures for the first time as they fell from Shiro’s body. The wind blew them back into the trees, where they clung to branches, now looking more like buds than leaves or fruits.

The young man stared at them, perplexed. At last, he said, “I forgot what I was saying.”

“You wanted to go down the hill before dark,” suggested Shiro. “If you hurry, you can reach home before the snow begins.”

“Yes, that was it. Thank you for the tea.” The young man hesitated. “But what will you do here all alone when winter comes?”

Shiro patted the young man’s hard, strong arm. His arms had been like those of the young man when he first came to the coast to hear the song of the higurashi. They had leeches the sorrow from his heart, but without a place to put it, they sang it back to him the following morning. Every day Shiro mourned his wife, their two daughters, and their grandson, all lost to the typhoon. Every evening, he stood upon the precipice, preparing to throw himself into the sea, until once more he heard the song of the higurashi.

Since then, he had learned to bear the sorrow, if only long enough to send away the others who had come to commit suicide. One of them had left behind the yellow dog, whose company consoled Shiro on the worst days. On the others, Shiro had learned to bear the yoke of his sorrow.

“What will you do?” repeated the young man.

“I will carry water,” said Shiro. “I will cut wood. And when visitors come, I will make tea.”

MIDWIFE AND THE APOTHECARY

JULIA B. ELLINGBOE

From the journals of Margaret Birch, the midwife, and Aelfdene, the apothecary.

MARGARET

September 17

Summer flew by. I haven't documented more than the names of the babies I caught. It is a day of sevens. A good day to reflect and forecast.

Today marks seven months since my mother's passing, and I have caught the seventeenth child of the year to be born in our town, Jane Crabtree's seventh daughter. They named her Eleanor. A robust child weighing seven pounds, she even gave a lusty cry that filled the room. May the sevens around this birth bring her luck in her first year. It is the sevens that reminded me of Mother.

In a few days, Mr. Aelfdene, the apothecary, will return to his winter cottage just outside the walls of the town—and not a moment too soon! I will not have to trifle with Mr. Raven, the sloppy and dirty apothecary in Second Village. His tinctures are notoriously weak and smell of mold, and his dried herbs are dusty. When I last purchased dried lavender from him, I found mouse droppings throughout, and he refused to refund my money. I should have purchased all that I would need before Mr. Aelfdene left in the spring, but I was preoccupied with Mother's passing and my new position as First Village's only midwife.

September 24

Mr. Aelfdene arrived in First Village two days ago. I helped him move his crates and chests from the carriage as I have done since I was twelve. As is our custom, though I am a grown woman now, Mr. Aelfdene remarked that I must have grown seven inches since spring. I replied that I had only grown six inches but that the ground still rises to meet my feet. The smile that he returned warmed my cheeks.

He rewarded our labor with a shared pot of barley tea and something he called “friendship bread.” The tea had a peculiar odor and hearty flavor unlike any barley tea I have tasted, but it restored my energy. The bread was sweet and rich with molasses and oats. Before I left for home, Mr. Aelfdene gave me two small, strange branches from an elder tree in full fruit (strange in that they look more like full trees than branches). When he handed them to me, he plucked the berries and promised to make an elixir for me. “A midwife must stay healthier than everyone in the town she serves,” he said as he placed two ripe elderberries in my hand and waited for me to eat them. They tasted unremarkable, which disappointed me somewhat because I expected them to be sweeter. I put the branches in a jug of water and set them on the table.

Mother found Mr. Aelfdene’s manners odd and at times disquieting, but she adored him. She called him the young man with an old man’s heart. He knows this region’s stories and superstitions better than the oldest among us. And he indulges them. He once told forgetful Mr. Hawthorne to place mistletoe in his cupboards to keep mischievous lobs—lubber fiends or brownies, as the older folks call them—from stealing his bread. All told, Mr. Hawthorne’s memory of his food stocks did improve.

Mr. Aelfdene still looks to be my age, as he did when I first met him. I was five and mother was the apprentice midwife to Mrs. Cope. For years, Mrs. Cope would not go near Mr. Aelfdene’s poultices and teas because she believed him to be from the Grove, but one year, nearly all the mothers in Mrs. Cope’s care came down with childbed fever and half the children under two fell ill with roseola. Mrs. Cope’s tried and true tinctures helped little. Mr. Aelfdene gently offered his own remedies, which proved to be more effective than what Mrs. Cope had been taught to use. All told, she didn’t lose a single mother or baby that year. After that, she praised even the whiteness of his teeth. She didn’t care if he came from the Grove.

The old people still talk about the Grove Folk and how they honored some ancient treaty to protect the seven unified villages from the Unseelie monsters that ravaged the villages, soured the milk, and stole the lives of our children. After the Unseelie were wiped from the area, the Grove Folk disappeared before anyone could properly thank them. Some of the old people still think Mr. Aelfdene is one of the Grove Folk. Mr. Aelfdene laughs about it and points out that the only known road to the Grove is overgrown with barberry and monkshood. It's not our custom to ask people from whence they come, so I leave it at that, as did my mother and Mrs. Copse. Mother said, "Trust the Aelfdene you see, not the one the townfolk think they see."

AELFDENE

September 25

I have finally settled again into First Village, and my seasonal position as local apothecary. This is my favorite village, and as much as I enjoy tending to my family in the Grove in spring and summer, I look forward to returning to the Seven Villages more each year. Margaret Birch, the midwife, aided me in unpacking as she has for the past fifteen years.

As always, her smile and laugh are the two things I realize I have missed the most. She is a radiant beam of what is good in humanity, and she grows more radiant each year. Unlike her mother, she cannot see the fey, even though she has a vast colony of devoted lobes dwelling in and about her property, keeping her house warm and free of dust and pests. She does not notice. Even more have moved in since her mother's death. They were fond of Mrs. Birch and promised to keep her daughter's house safe and clean. She looks at me and just sees a travelling apothecary who settles in First Village in the colder months. When she looks at me, I have to catch my breath. I don't think she notices that any more than she notices the lobes in her walls.

I gave her my branch-antlers as a gift and promised to make her elderberry elixir. (I told her it would help to keep her healthy.) I suppose I am taking advantage of her blindness, though her inability to see what I am carries some immunity to my attempts to enchant her. If anything, possession of my antlers may cause me to linger in her thoughts, and my elixir may simply warm her heart to my advances the way any token of affection might. However, I don't know if I have the fortitude to make advances on her without my tricks.

My brother and sister in Third and Fifth Villages warned me that a small group of bendith y mamau are travelling north through the protected lands of the Seven Villages. They suffered a dreadful blight this summer and came south to the Grove in search of an alleged cure, a mushroom they call a “salamander’s throne.” They even sought the Green Lady of the Grove’s help. No one could recall salamander’s throne growing in these parts. I’ve only read about it. My mother gave them permission to pass through the Seven Villages to return north. For their sake, I hope that winter kills off the sickest of them and the blight simply runs its course.

The bendith y mamau are generally among the least troublesome or malicious of the Unseelie fey. Most of them are squat, ugly things with wiry black hair and knobby knees. They can transform themselves into various types of beasts and can hold a reasonably accurate but unattractive mortal form for several days. They are notorious baby thieves, especially when their numbers dwindle. Given their misfortune and devastation, any stealing and swapping of human babies for one of their crimbils (sometimes called “changelings” around here) as they pass through the Seven Villages is of little concern to the Green Lady of the Grove. Bendith y mamau (“The Mother’s Blessing,” as the Seelie fey have long called them in jest) are remarkably loving and loyal parents.

The Seven Villages have had a fruitful year. I’ve seen several beautiful and healthy babies, bountiful crops, and scores of young livestock. Many families no longer believe something unseen could snatch their children and swap them for a shriveling, ailing crimbil. Miss Margaret’s disbelief is endearing, but I worry that her dismissal of what she calls superstitions and wives’ tales may invite trouble with the bendith y mamau.

MARGARET

October 1

I caught the eighteenth child of the year to be born in First Village, Maeve Pennyroyal’s fifth child (a boy—Maeve wanted a girl) with Calvin the blacksmith. The infant entered the world with a high-pitched cry. He was ten pounds and two ounces, sallow-skinned, hair as black as his father’s iron. He was eager for Maeve’s breast. His yellow hue will fade in the next few days, I hope. Maeve lost a great deal of blood. I gave her nettles and cramp bark for tea and told the parents to take the boy out in the sun as much as possible. Calvin, not known

for his expressive nature or oratory prowess, smiled and cooed at the baby while Maeve's older daughter Clementine and I cleaned and cooked. More words burst forth from Calvin's mouth tonight than I have heard since he and I were children. He insisted that I give Maeve my lentil soup recipe. She is not known for her skills in the kitchen.

They do not have a name for the baby and did not care for my suggestion of Heath. Mrs. Copse believed that an unnamed newborn would be swapped for a crimbil. I am not concerned about crimbils or changelings, but I am worried that Maeve's disappointment in not having a girl will affect her ability to get to know this gentle little boy. Calvin will fill in while she comes to grips. I'm sure she will come to love the boy as much as Calvin does, as much as she loves her four other children.

Mr. Aelfdene's elder branches have started to grow roots and leaf buds! I told him about it this evening when he stopped by to return a ladle he had borrowed. He said to plant them, which I did. I will be surprised if they live through the winter, but while they stand, they remind me of him whenever I look out the window.

When I told him of the unnamed blacksmith's son, Mr. Aelfdene's eyes widened and darkened, and he pressed his warm, soft fingers over my mouth. "Best not to speak of this aloud," he whispered. "Tell the blacksmith's wife to leave a bowl of milk outside the door, and may they leave her child in his cradle." Aelfdene's hands smelled of elderberries and I breathed it in deeply. I wished he had pressed his lips on my mouth instead of his fingers. The thought of that made me blush.

Then he asked me a dozen questions about the blacksmith's house. How close was his forge to the home? Did they hammer any nails around the cradle? I told him to visit the Pennyroyals' himself. He furrowed his brow and looked away out the window, ignoring the fire. We did not speak for a long time. I was tongue-tied and flustered; he seemed lost in his thoughts. I tried not to look at him, tried not to fidget, so I picked up my knitting and watched his shadow flicker and dance on the wall behind him.

At some point I dozed off, and when I awoke, Mr. Aelfdene had left.

AELFDENE

October 2

The blacksmith's son has been stolen and replaced with a crimbil. In years past, a bendith y mamau wouldn't be so bold as to steal the blacksmith's son.

I wanted to see for myself, but I've never been able to stand too close to any blacksmith's dwelling because of all the iron. So I put a slumber spell on Miss Margaret by touching her mouth and leaning in close enough for her to breathe my breaths.

Miss Margaret sat in her chair, knitting to fill the awkward space between us. I just sat there, filling that space between us with more awkwardness, wishing I had stolen a kiss when I cast the spell, and relieved that I had overcome the impulse. I mapped the trail of windows while I waited for her to fall asleep. Then, as her eyelids grew heavy and she dozed, I crawled out of my body and into the glass. This is a modestly prosperous town, and nearly all the houses have glass windows now, so the leaps from house to house were easy and short.

The blacksmith's forge is far enough from the house that the iron did not affect me. That was, unfortunately, the best of the whole situation. The unnamed son of the blacksmith had already been swapped for a sickly, if not moribund, crimbil. Worse still, the Unseelie bendith y mamau slaughtered every hob and lob in the home. The house is filthy and stinks of death.

A hundred years ago in this region, a new mother wouldn't have dared let her baby see the first hour of his life without a name for fear that a fey of any stripe might have replaced the unnamed infant with a changeling. Mrs. Copse, the midwife who taught Margaret's mother midwifery, had little love for the Grove Folk. To her, all fey were the same: tricksters at best and perfidious murderers and thieves at the worst. But she sought my help when the Faerie Rades passed through the town, and I aided her as best I could. These days, no family leaves so much as a bowl of milk on their doorstep, not even that simplest prevention for infant swapping.

There is little I can do beyond recommend to Miss Margaret ways to rid the Pennyroyals of the crimbil. I'm forbidden to take arms against fey or mortal and can provide only magical protection. I may be able to negotiate a return of their baby, but without a name, it will be difficult to convince the bendith y mamau that the Pennyroyals deserve him. In their eyes, an unnamed baby is an unspoken offer to swap children.

October 5

I paid a visit (in the flesh) to Sage Pennyroyal, grandmother of the blacksmith's unnamed son. She recognized me as a Grove Folk. I had not noticed before, but it seems that my antlers are growing in earlier than usual, probably on account of my growing feelings for Margaret. Or, I hope, because she looks at my shed antlers and thinks fondly of me. I will have to start wearing a hat or grow my hair a bit longer. At any rate, Sage Pennyroyal is prepared to resort to drastic measures, which I hear Miss Margaret promptly disallowed, but grandmother Sage asked if I thought it might work. I told her firmly that she must not torture or hurt the changeling in any way. A baby is a baby.

I actually spoke to the crimbil's mother myself. The pitiful thing and her husband came to Miss Margaret's door disguised as beggars while Miss Margaret and I happened to be having supper together. When the couple saw me, they fled. Miss Margaret sent me after them with a portion of food.

The bendith y mamau parents are Acorn and Tom Wormfingers, and their baby's name is Phing. The son has the blight that claimed many of their kind this summer. Mrs. Wormfingers assures me that the blacksmith's son is safe and well, living in the blacksmith's brother's barn, wearing the skin of a newborn goat and being nursed and mothered by one of the dams. Phing the crimbil's condition is beyond the help of any known mortal or fey balm. He will likely die soon. Mrs. Wormfingers says her people plan to return to the north in two days, and if her baby could be restored to health, she would return the Pennyroyal's son and claim her own.

As the Green Lady of the Grove did not specifically prohibit the bendith y mamau from replacing their sick and dying children, I shall allow fey customs to guide my actions in this matter. As such, I will not return the Pennyroyal baby to his mortal parents. He will go with his foster family and grow up a stolen child. It could be worse. The Grove Folk have found themselves in need of restocking their numbers, as it were. Unseelie and Seelie fey alike can offer a mortal child a life of happiness among people who love him. Some of the best Grove Folk were once stolen children.

I told Acorn and Tom Wormfingers that they ought to stay long enough to plant heather on their son's grave. He will be the first infant to die in this town this year. The whole town will mourn him for the next year. The Wormfingers

agreed to stay on and say goodbye to their child before they leave with their adopted baby. I asked what they would call the boy. Acorn said she liked the midwife's suggestion of Heath.

In the scant year Margaret has been the midwife for First Village, she's not lost a single child until now. One day I hope to tell her that the adoptive parents liked the name she chose. After I returned from meeting with the Wormfingers, Margaret and I finally dined together. I told her that they did not want to inconvenience us. Embarrassed, I said that I really meant "her." I meant "us."

As the stars as my witness, I'm in love with Margaret Birch. Eight hundred and seventy-eight years on the earth and I've never loved anyone as much as I love her. There, I've written it. I don't know what to do. She seems unaffected by my fumbling attempts to enchant her, and she is certainly not under my thrall. I suspect that she has feelings for me; whether they match my own, I don't know. My feelings for her are unenchanted. Human. I don't think I am able to enchant her, and without the veil of my tricks, I feel . . . naked. It's awful and terrifying and exhilarating. The uncertainty of whether she loves me as I do her worries me more than a roving band of sickly Unseelie, which is why I'm so concerned with the Wormfingers, I suppose. It's a simpler conundrum.

MARGARET

October 5

The Pennyroyal child, still unnamed, is unwell. He is paler and more sallow than he was at birth, gaunt and bent like an old man. The strangest thing is that he is now covered with a light coat of downy hair.

I consulted Mother's notes and journals and found five similar instances where children practically wasted away and grew this strange hair. Two infants wasted away to nothing and died within six days of birth. In despair, one such mother threw herself into the river. One baby's family took the child to another midwife in Third Village, who recommended that they leave the child on a hilltop overnight. Apparently they followed her directions, and needless to say, the baby froze to death. Superstition should not supersede common sense!

One baby—Samara Winterfield, the oldest daughter of Violet and Basil—made a full recovery. Mother gave them the following instructions, which she learned from none other than Mr. Aelfdene: they procured a black hen with not a single white feather, wrung its neck, and roasted it unplucked. As they roasted

the bird, they called the baby's name. As soon as all the feathers cooked off, Samara let out a robust wail, her "fur" fell away, and according to Mother, the color and fat returned to her body. Mother wrote that Samara was nearly a year old at the time, older than the others, and not as ill. Samara married a carpenter from South Harbor last summer.

Calvin Pennyroyal's mother believes the baby has been taken by the bendith y mamau ("The Mother's Blessing," as my mother called them) and swapped for a crimbil. She took Calvin and Maeve to task for not naming their baby, though she did not like my suggestion of Heath any more than Calvin and Maeve.

She advised that we hold the baby over the fire and threaten to cook him in order to provoke the real mother to claim her child. Calvin snatched the baby away and left. He had not returned by the time I left for home.

Mr. Aelfdene has visited the Pennyroyals, has seen the child, and agrees that the baby is not likely to live more than another day or two. Feeling bold, I invited him back for dinner. I made pumpkin stew and roasted the hare I caught in my pumpkin patch. Mr. Aelfdene brought his friendship bread, elderberry wine, birch beer, and candied violets. Where he acquired candied violets in October he would not say.

At dinner, I asked him about the advice he gave Mother in Samara's case.

"If I recall correctly," he said, "Samara's father was once a sailor. He had just returned home from his last trip when she fell ill. I think he brought something unseen and unseemly back with him." (At first I thought he said "Unseelie." I think I've had my fair share of faerie talk this week!)

Mr. Aelfdene went on to say that he indulges people's superstitions, if only to lift their spirits and give hope. He believed that Samara's greatest danger was that her parents were giving up. They needed to do something while she recovered from whatever ailed her, and recovery was up to her. She had taken all the herbs and tinctures anyone could give her.

Before he could continue, a strange couple wearing silken rags beneath fine wool coats came to my door. They said they were travelling north and seeking a hot meal. Naturally, I packed some bread, a bit of stew, and some hare, but when they saw Mr. Aelfdene sitting at my table, they fled. I asked Mr. Aelfdene to go after them to make sure they had a warm place to sleep (we're likely to have our first frost of fall tonight). When he returned, he said they took the food but did not want to inconvenience us—I mean, me. He said "us," then sheepishly

corrected himself. (I liked the sound of “us” but he was so embarrassed I didn’t tell him. Not yet.) He gave them enough silver to stay at the inn, though I later heard that Calvin’s brother Malcolm Pennyroyal met them further down the road, and he let them stay in his barn (he’s always kept it neater than his house). They gave him the silver and purchased three goats from him, a dam and her twins.

When Mr. Aelfdene and I returned to supper, he concluded the talk of superstitions saying that it would harm no one, least of all the blacksmith’s son, if the family did some traditional or superstitious ceremonial act if it helped them to feel that they could help their baby: “Your mother didn’t believe all the wives’ tales, but if she thought that they might brighten the home or ignite the spirits, those acts became part of the course of medications as far as she was concerned. Your mother could not teach you the palliative side of midwifery. The first baby or mother who dies in your care, through no fault of your own, teaches you that.”

Everything about his words brought comfort, from his lyric baritone, to the way he leaned into a whisper when he said, “ignite the spirits,” to the way his mouth opened to a sad smile when he finished talking. I don’t think he wanted to say “good night” any more than I wanted to hear it. He doesn’t seem to know what to do with his love, so he wears it around his neck like a charm. One of the things I love about Mr. Aelfdene—yes, love—is that his plainness seems magical. His quiriness is graceful. He brought violets in autumn.

But a baby that I caught is dying. My first infant death. I’m having trouble grasping Mr. Aelfdene’s affection while my own grief and sense of powerlessness weigh on my heart.

October 7

Mother once warned me that midwives, shepherds of life and death, must learn to abandon disbelief in the face of the unbelievable.

I have loved Aelfdene since I was fourteen years old when his hand brushed mine as he handed me jars of sarsaparilla and rosehips to deliver to Mother. I’ve loved him ever since Jenny and Bernice Larkspur complained that he was handsome yet aloof, and I knew that he was to them, but he always offered his awkward openness to me. I have loved him all these seasons and was blind to my (and his) feelings. This evening, I told Aelfdene that I loved him. He was

stunned and tongue-tied, and he stuttered and chuckled, looked away, shook his head, and then fell silent.

“I love you, too, Margaret Birch,” he said, finally.

The day did not start as joyfully as it has ended. The Pennyroyals buried their infant son this morning. He finally nursed again on October 6. Maeve handed him to Calvin, and the boy died peacefully in his father’s loving arms. They named the child Phinn. In addition to the Pennyroyal clan, Malcolm Pennyroyal’s odd barn guests Acorn and Tom Wormfingers, Mr. Aelfdene, and I attended the funeral.

Coincidentally, the Wormfingers have recently lost an infant. They wept rivers of tears with Calvin and Maeve and planted on the grave heather and some other herb the name of which I did not catch but which resembled deadly nightshade.

Maeve and Calvin thanked me for my counsel and care. I have felt ineffective from the moment Phinn was born, but Maeve said Phinn was the easiest and most peaceful of all five of her labors and she attributed that to my “calm, straightforward presence.” Calvin said he loved the lentil stew I cooked the night of Phinn’s birth.

We roasted the (plucked) black hen Mr. Aelfdene and I had bought but not been able to use for ritual. Acorn Wormfingers seasoned it with a spicy but uplifting herb that they called goose tongue. It looked like white tansy to me, the herb that accidentally poisoned my mare Quince two years ago. Mr. Aelfdene said his stomach was being disagreeable, and he did not eat the chicken. The Wormfingers also made some sort of dessert that they called fuzz-ball pudding. It looked wholly unappetizing and smelled like very old and sour milk and dirty stockings. Everyone except Mr. Aelfdene declined a single helping. He and the Wormfingers gleefully gobbled the whole bowl. Mr. Aelfdene said his mother made a variation of it and added honeysuckle nectar to improve the odor. I did not ask for the recipe.

To my delight, Mr. Aelfdene walked me home. I remembered that we still had half a bottle of his elderberry wine and invited him to have a glass with me. The sweetness was of little comfort to my sadness, which rose to meet me when I considered my own part in this week’s events. We buried the first child to die in my care. Mr. Aelfdene saw my tears and said, “Margaret, I’d like to tell you my secret.” This is what he told me:

The Green Lady of the Grove and her concubine, the Elder Tree Lord, have seven hundred strong and healthy children. Most are firmly rooted around their father in a forest that the Grove Folk call the Elder Lord's Crèche. Seven of their children, however, resemble their mother and walk on feet, wear faces, and eat with mouths. They like mushrooms the best. These folk are called the Protectors, and they live in the Seven Villages and serve as apothecaries, doctors, itinerant farmers, and bards. They have sworn to protect the region (from what, he did not say), though they never carry weapons.

The Green Lady shows no preference for any of her children, but she does enjoy the company and conversation of the offspring who look more like her. And if she had a favorite, it would be her eldest son, Aelfdene, the apothecary of First Village, known to the Grove Folk as the Elderberry Prince.

Though he spends most of his time in the protected lands beyond the Grove disguised as a young-faced apothecary, Aelfdene does bear characteristics of most Grove Folk who are not trees. During the warmer months, his skin is light green, and two elder tree branches grow from the top of his head like the antlers on a buck. In the spring, his branch-antlers sprout green leaves and sprightly white flowers. In the summer, his antlers grow the sweet black elderberries. He makes syrups, elixirs, and wines from the berries from his branch-antlers, and just one sip will give the drinker long life and health, among other things. He spends his "green time" on his brother's farm in the Grove, just beyond the border of Seventh Village, tending herbs and mixing his tinctures.

When the weather turns cold, the leaves on Aelfdene's branch-antlers turn yellow and fall off. When they are entirely leafless, he sheds the branches, and his skin turns from light green to honey brown. Then he dons clothes and hats in the fashion of the townsmen of the Seven Villages who dwell beyond the Grove and takes residence in a tiny cottage just outside our town.

It pleases Aelfdene to help the mortals through their illnesses. He's always made a point to stay on good terms with the midwives of First Town, his favorite village in the Protected lands. The Grove Folk have long abandoned the act of falling ill, though some still pretend. Fainting and vomiting, a game where players feign mortal illness by actually fainting and vomiting, is popular among the common Grove Folk. To my relief, Aelfdene said that he does not care to play. He sees enough real illness.

Aelfdene told me this story with such sincerity that I would have believed him had it not been such a preposterous fable. It certainly cheered me up.

“Come spring, you will see that I’m telling you the truth.” He said as he poured me another glass of elderberry wine. Then it was my turn to reveal my secret: boldness moved me to put my glass aside, to ignore the wine spilling on the table and the floor, and to draw Aelfdene into my arms and kiss him. In the initial shock of my action, he gasped and tried to say something, but I held on to him until we sunk into an embrace. His mouth tastes as I suspected: like elderberries and violets.

He purchased an acre of land around his home some years ago with the intention of settling there year round instead of staying with his brother. We’ll marry the first of the year. Come spring, we’ll move to his cottage outside of First Village.

I’m watching Aelfdene sleep. I’m sitting in my chair, wearing his fine blue silk shirt. He has a twig in his hair. If I were to pluck it out, I believe I might hurt him.

AELFDENE

October 8

Margaret Birch told me she loved me.

I told her that I was a Grove Folk. At first she did not believe me but assumed I was telling her a fanciful tale to cheer her up. Margaret then told me her secret, which cheered me up.

She said, “I’ve loved you since I was fourteen years old.”

I told her that I loved her, as well. I was relieved to say it and relieved to hear it reciprocated. She said, “Aelfdene the apothecary or Aelfdene the Elderberry Prince are all well and good. Aelfdene, Margaret the midwife’s husband is even better.”

So be it.

A NIGHTMARE FOR ANNA

JENNIFER BROZEK

The forest was dark, and Anna was scared. She tried to stay as close to Mother as she could while they walked deeper. Even though it was morning, the tall trees shut out the light, making it seem like dusk. Strange birds cried overhead as Anna, who had not yet seen nine summers, tried to huddle closer. She stopped before Mother's skirt dragged against her, though. Touching Mother was forbidden. Especially as she sang to her baby boy, Aiden.

"We're almost there," her mother cooed to the sleeping baby. "Almost to the best place to find the best mushrooms."

"I don't see any, Momma."

"Not yet. You will." Her mother stopped and looked around. "Here we are." She turned to Anna and smiled. "Are you ready?"

Looking around the dark forest with its giant trees, flickering shadows, and strange noises, Anna nodded, giving her bravest smile. Mother was happy and that was rare. Ever since Aiden was born, Mother had been short-tempered with Anna—even though she tried to be the best big sister she could.

"Do you know what to look for?"

Anna nodded. "The big white mushrooms with the caps, not the bowls."

"Very good."

"We're gonna make Daddy the best mushroom and turnip soup we can." Anna paused, seeing her mother's smile crack and disappear. "When he gets home from the castle, that is." She did her best to make her voice as smooth and happy as possible.

“Mother is tired, Anna.” She spoke to the sleeping baby rather than to her daughter. “We’re going to rest here. I want you to fill the basket halfway with the mushrooms before you come back.”

Anna bowed her head, still not sure what she did wrong. “Yes, Mother.” She picked up the small, grass-woven basket and turned to the dark trees. She took several uncertain steps before looking back, but Mother, without looking up from Aiden, waved her on. Anna nodded, straightened her back, and faced the scary forest. She would find Daddy’s favorite mushrooms, and all would be well once more.



Anna circled the small grove again. She hadn’t been gone that long. Not long at all. Mother had to be here. But she wasn’t, and after the third time Anna circled the two trees she’d marked with crossed sticks, she knew either she was lost or Mother had left her here alone in the Old Forest. Both possibilities amounted to the same thing: death. No children came out of the Old Forest once they went in. Not any child alone, that is.

She sat against the tree she was sure Mother sat against, and she muttered, “Think, child. Think.” She even used the same amused tone Daddy used when the answer was right there in front of her and she couldn’t see it. Just the thought of him made Anna’s throat close up. She missed him so much. She hated that he had to take such long trips away to the castle.

Sitting up, Anna knew that she needed to face the fact that Mother left her behind, and it was up to her to get herself out of this mess. Her heart sobbed at the abandonment while her mind set upon the task of finding her way home. She was her father’s daughter, after all.

Anna stood and turned in the direction she was certain would take her home. All she needed to do was follow their own tracks back the way they’d come. Simple. She looked at the ground and saw the trampled grass. She could find her way home. When she did, Mother would be so sorry that she had left her that she’d welcome Anna home with open arms.



By the time Anna found the ruins of the manor house, she knew she was well

and truly lost. Having lost the trail of footsteps—if there had been any to follow and not just wishful thinking—she had no way to know how to make it out of the forest alive. The discovery of the stone ruins with its partial roof raised her low spirits. It was something new and interesting, something more than just endless trees and loamy earth. Even the scent of stone cleared her senses. Best of all, a small opening in the treetops allowed the sun in.

Running to the shaft of sunlight, Anna could have cried with relief. In the warmth of the sun, feeling it against her chilled skin, it seemed like the forest creatures following her could not touch her. In her mind's eye, they were afraid of the light. As she turned back to the forest, she even saw some of them slink away. For the moment, she was safe.

Of course, Anna was too young to wonder what might frighten a predator away from an easy meal.



As night fell and the sky morphed from shades of blue into black, Anna huddled in the corner of the broken room. She wondered if the night creatures would come or if it would rain. Her tummy rumbled its hunger, but the mushrooms she had found were long gone.

The sound of something close by in the forest brought Anna to her feet. The following growl had her looking for a weapon. Scrabbling against the broken wall, her hand found a loose stone. She pulled it free and raised it up, ready to throw at whatever was coming. More stones fell to her side as she watched the large shape prowl the edge of the forest.

It was watching her. That much was certain.

Anna took two steps forward and threw the stone at the monster. “Go away! I’ll hit you! Go away!” She snatched three more stones from around her and threw them, too. None of them hit even halfway to the forest line, but the monster came no closer.

Moonlight glinted green and yellow off its eyes. Anna picked up the largest stone near her feet and threw it as far and as hard as she could. The glowing eyes disappeared, and Anna felt a surge of pride.

She backed up into the corner again and sat. Still watching where she last saw the monster, she searched out another stone. Just one to keep with her as guard.

Her hand found something that felt like stone but was warm. Startled, Anna looked down to see what it was.

Her hand was on a long, black stick that was as wide as her wrist and disappeared into the wall. The wall was actually two walls with a space in-between. Whatever the black stick was, the rest of it was still hidden. She would figure out what it was in the morning.

Finding a different rock to hold and comfort her, she settled in to sleep.



Anna knew she was dreaming, and that was a strange thing. Not the dreaming but the realizing that what she was seeing wasn't real. Something had just been happening. She frowned. Something awful. Something she couldn't quite remember. She reached for it . . .

"Do not do that, little one. I took it away because it would frighten you." The voice was as dark as the shadow it came from. "Do not look for it."

Anna tilted her head, looking up at the shadowed figure. It was so tall, as tall as one of the trees in the forest. Things moved all around it, but curiously, she was not afraid. "Was it a nightmare?"

"Yes, little one."

"My name's Anna." When it did not reply, she asked, "Who are you?"

"Sigis. You may call me Sigis." The shadow moved closer and shrank in size.

"Why are you here?"

There was a long pause. "I am old and alone. You are lost and afraid."

Somehow, that answered the question without answering it. Anna looked down at her hands, remembering her mother's abandonment and that she was lost in the Old Forest.

"Will you help me?"

She looked up again. The shadow was closer now and not much taller than her father. "What do you look like? Why are you hiding in the dark?" Anna knew she should be afraid, but she wasn't and didn't know why. But more than anything, she wanted to see who she was talking to. It was important.

The shadow shook its head. "I do not wish to frighten you."

"I want to see. Show me your face." Anna didn't know why it was important, but it was. "Please?"

Sigis nodded. He didn't move out of the darkness so much as the shadows withdrew from him.

Anna saw what she needed to see.



Waking with the first light of day, Anna knew there was something she needed to do. To remember. She sat blinking into the twilight, unafraid at her unusual surroundings. The glade and its broken rocks, rambling vines, and sprouting grasses all glistened with dew. The entire ruin looked like it was covered in little jewels.

Anna stood and stretched, realizing she was not cold. At all. Her little corner had remained warm throughout the chill forest night. She discovered it was only her little corner that was warm when she had to do her necessary. This little bit of magic made her smile. It had to be magic. There was no other explanation.

As she hurried back to her shelter, Anna saw what she needed to remember. There, in the left side of her shelter, part of the fallen wall revealed that the pieces of black stick were actually dirty pieces of a statue. Brushing at the stone, she saw that it was not just black. It had a red hue that reminded her of bloodstone. She could not make out the form, but from her dream, she knew exactly who she was looking at: Sigis . . . and he was stuck in the wall. She had promised to help him.

Without hesitation, Anna moved to the wall and pulled at the crumbling rock. Each stone that came loose showed more of the reddish-black statue beneath. Once the easy rocks were done, the wall seemed unbreakable. No matter what she did, she couldn't shift or move anything more. Only half of Sigis was uncovered.

Anna touched one of the spider-like legs, feeling its warmth, and sighed. "What do I do? The wall won't move." While a ripple of reddish light moved down the leg and over her hand before receding, there was no answer. She took that as encouragement to try harder. Sigis was trapped, and only she could free him.

After a moment's thought, Anna picked up a large rock and started beating the base of the wall with it. At first, it looked like nothing was happening, but then, the chips and cracks started. Harder and harder she worked until she

thought her heart would burst and her hands were bloody with the effort. At last, the wall started to crumble.

From that point, it was just a matter of time and diligence. If nothing else, Anna was a diligent child.

Anna was forced to flee when her efforts succeeded in the sudden breaking and tumbling and crumbling of the wall all around her. She barely got out of the way of the ceiling that had been her shelter as it crashed to the ruined floor. The noise of the falling rock startled all of the nearby forest into silence.

When the dust cleared, she picked herself up and faced the form she had met in her dream. He was taller than her father and made of reddish-black stone that was smooth to the touch. His fingers and toes were clawed, his head horned, his eyes solid black. The eight spider legs that sprouted from his back, four curling around each of his sides, were the most disturbing thing about him. Even though his face was twisted into a long-tongued leer, it was easier to look at than those legs.

“Sigis?” Anna moved forward and stopped at the sight of something glinting in the rubble around her. With a bloody, sweaty hand, she picked it up. It was a light-blue gem as fair as the summer sky. She looked up, and the statue began to move.

“Sigis?” she asked again, this time with a hint of fear in her voice.

The statue shifted down to one knee before her. “Never fear me, little one. By blood and bone, by sweat and toil, we have a pact, you and I. I am yours to command.” Sigis bowed his head to her.

Startled, she lifted the jewel up to him. “Is this yours?”

He nodded. “It is. Given in good faith to the wizard I had a pact with.”

“What pact?”

“I . . . protected him and his. Those who came to his home with malice in their hearts suffered the guilt of nightmares. Those who were true had no worries for their sleep.”

“Oh.” Anna thought about this. “Do you want it back?” She offered the jewel to him, her palm up.

Sigis looked at her. “I do. Do you give it to me of your own free will?”

“Yes.”

“Then I accept my freedom.” His large clawed hand engulfed hers. When she looked up again, instead of solid black eyes, Sigis now had eyes the color of the

summer sky. He stood and smiled at her. “But I do owe you, child. What do you want?”

“My name is Anna.” She smiled at him. “I want to travel with you for a while.” Her smile disappeared. “I want to know why Mother left me here in the Old Forest.”

Sigis looked around. “Is that what they call it?”

She nodded. “How old are you?”

“I was old when this forest was young and the manor house was but a dream.” He looked down at her. “I can take you with me. I have tasted your blood. You have tasted my dreams. We will walk the Dreamtime.” He offered his hand to her, and she accepted it.

“You’ll take me away from here?” Never had she wanted to leave a place so much.

“Wherever you wish to go, Anna. Even in freedom, I am yours to command.”

“Why?”

“Because there are rules that were old when I was young. You freed me. Also, I, too, am alone.”

Anna nodded, understanding the fear of being alone in a strange place.



“Are you certain you wish to know? To find out why your mother abandoned you?”

There was concern in his voice, and Anna heard it as she stopped to play with a creature that looked like a cross between a caterpillar and a puppy. “I think I’m going to name you Pupapiller,” she said, not answering him. She had her own fears as well. “Isn’t he cute?”

“Careful.” The concern in Sigis’s voice morphed into affection. “Here in the Dreamtime, names have power. What was once a passing dream for someone is now a very real creature. What will you do with him now?”

She stood and looked between them—Sigis as still as the statue he once was and Pupapiller cavorting about her feet. “I’ll keep him. You want to stay with me, don’t you?”

Pupapiller leapt to her arms and licked her face, wagging his whole body. She laughed. “See? Pupapiller wants to stay.”

What Anna did not see while holding her new pet was the nightmarish monster that appeared out of the ever-shifting landscape and Sigis waving a hand at it, forcing it away. Anna had no idea that she, as a human child, called to all of the creatures in the Dreamtime.

“We need to go. You are certain you wish to see your mother?”

Anna nodded, putting Pupapiller on the ground. “Yes.”

Sigis offered his hand once more. “Think of your mother. Think of home.”

Trying to keep her heart hidden, Anna smiled bravely. “I will.” She closed her eyes and thought of home with her mother and father and baby brother, Aiden. She missed all of them so much her heart ached with just the thought of them.

“We have arrived.”

Opening her eyes, Anna smiled wide. It *was* her home, the small but snug farmhouse on the edge of the wood. There was a fire in the fireplace, and her mother was standing over Aiden’s crib, humming the same song she had been singing the last time Anna saw her.

For a moment, Anna did not know what to do. She looked up at Sigis, who nodded and stepped away. Anna nodded back and stepped forward. “Hello, Mother.”

Her mother whirled in surprise and fear. “You shouldn’t be here. You can’t be here. I’ve already sent the letter to Niall that you’ve run away. He’s coming home!” She put her hand to her breast, looking like she had said too much. “You shouldn’t be here.”

Anna’s nervousness changed to sudden fury at the accusation of her running away from the home she’d loved all her life. “Why, Mother? Why’d you abandon me? I was lost and alone and scared! I’m a good girl! Why?”

“Stop calling me that! I’m not your mother.”

Anna’s fury faded, and she took another step forward in confusion. “But . . . you are.”

“No. I’m not. Your father brought you with him to me. I wet-nursed you. He and I fell in love. I never thought I’d have my own child again. I wanted to die, but Niall needed a wet nurse. One child died. One mother died. I needed a baby. You were it.” She glanced at the crib. “It never felt right. You weren’t my child. But until Aiden, my lovely baby boy, I never knew what a real mother’s love for her child was like.”

The woman looked at her with something akin to disgust. “You were nothing but a leech to me. One I thought I had to love because of the man I married. I

thought I loved you. I tried to love you. Thought maybe something was wrong with me . . . but there wasn't. It was you. Not my baby. Not worth the love of a mother. Not like my Aiden." She turned back to the crib. "Not like my Arthur before him. You were a poor substitute."

Tears spilled down Anna's face, her heart breaking all over again. She didn't understand. She didn't want to understand. Anna didn't want to know why she felt "wrong" to the only mother she'd ever known. She reached out a hand but could not make herself touch the woman who had already rejected her and let it fall to her side again. Then, a warm, clawed hand rested on her shoulder. Anna turned to Sigis, throwing herself into his arms. He picked her up and held her close with both arms and four of his spider limbs as she sobbed on his shoulder.

After an eternity of pain, Anna became aware of her mother's rising voice, panic clear. She turned to see what was happening but held onto Sigis's neck.

"Aiden, honey. Aiden, my love, where are you?" Her mother—for she would always be Mother in Anna's heart—dug through the crib, pulling far too many baby blankets from it. "Where are you?" She turned from the crib and looked through everything in the room that could possibly hold a baby. "Aiden!"

Anna was alarmed. "What's happened to Aiden?"

Sigis stroked her hair with a spider leg. "Nothing. Aiden is safe and sound. I will show you." He turned around, and there was Aiden in a floor crib with bright butterflies and flowers floating around him.

Anna wiggled to get down. Sigis allowed it. She hurried to him, kneeling to give him a kiss. Aiden giggled and grabbed for her hair. She smiled. "He's a good baby."

"He is. It is my experience that those who abandon the innocent do not deserve them. It is your mother's guilt that gave her the nightmare of losing her baby."

She looked up at him. "I've decided what I want."

"What is my command?"

"I want to become like you."

Sigis paused. "You wish to become a nightmare?"

"I want to become like you. I want to stay with you."

"You would have to leave all you love behind."

Anna looked at her mother sitting in the middle of the farmhouse, sobbing

for her lost baby. “She doesn’t love me. She doesn’t want me.” The words brought fresh tears to her eyes.

Sigis offered his hand. Anna accepted it, and he scooped her up into his arms again. “I know someone who does.”



Thirteen steps through the Dreamtime, passing through many strange and wonderful and frightening dreams, Sigis brought Anna to a familiar place, though she’d never been there. It was a castle with a drawbridge—one described to her in many of her father’s tales about his journeys to the castle. This was his dream. Sitting on the edge of the drawbridge overlooking the moat was her father. “Daddy!”

Sigis let Anna down and watched as the little girl ran down the bridge to her father, who grabbed her in a huge bear hug.

“Anna, my girl. What are you doing in the city?” He ruffled her hair. “I won’t be home for another moon.”

“I missed you, Daddy. So much.” She hugged him and kissed his cheek.

“I know it’s hard. But when the king calls . . .” He pulled back from his hug. “What are you doing here? How did you get here? The road to the castle is long and dangerous.”

She wriggled out of his arms and then sat next to him on the drawbridge. “My friend Sigis brought me.” Anna looked between Sigis and her father. “Daddy, why does Mommy say she’s not my mother?”

Her father looked like she had slapped him. “Oh, honey. Oh, darling. We were going to wait until you were older . . .” He looked sad.

“She’s not my mother?”

He shook his head, pain clear on his face.

“Who is she?”

“Your mother died. It wasn’t your fault. Birthing’s hard on a woman. You saw that with Aiden. But I love you. We both love you so much. You’ll always be our daughter.”

She smiled through the pain and nodded. “I know, Daddy. I know.” She stood again. “I’ve got to go. And I don’t think I’ll be back. Not for a while. Maybe not ever.”

He stood as well. “Where are you going?”

“Far away, Daddy. But I do love you. I’m going to miss you. I think this is the best thing for you and . . . and Mommy . . . and Aiden.” Anna stepped back from him. “I’m going to travel to new places and new dreams. I’ll see you sometimes. I’ll watch over you and Aiden. I promise.” While she spoke, he grew farther and farther away from her.

“No, Anna. Wait! Don’t go!” He reached for her and would keep reaching for her forever. Except for those rare times when she would visit him in dream.

As he disappeared from sight and sound, Anna turned to Sigis. “I couldn’t tell him. I couldn’t make him upset. Maybe now he’ll think I didn’t run away but tried to come to the castle and got lost.”

Sigis nodded. “You are certain you wish to be like me?”

The two of them did not walk the Dreamtime so much as watch it pass them by. Pupapiller showed up again and stayed by their side. The sound and color and sights were a kaleidoscope of dreams, nightmares, and the passing denizens of the realm.

“Yes. Do you promise to stay with me? To never let me go?”

He was silent for a moment. “Never is a long time. When you become like me, we will have all the time in the universe. I can promise that by blood and bone, by sweat and toil, I will be your nightmare father for as long as you will have me.”

She smiled up at him. “Then, yes, I’m certain.”

Sigis leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. Anna felt warmth like a hot bath spread over her, down from her head to her shoulders to her waist, arms, and feet. She watched as her pale, soft skin became hard and smooth and the color of bloodstone. Whole worlds opened up in her mind as her humanity died a quiet death, and she was reborn a nightmare.

Blinking eyes the color of the perfect summer sky, she asked, “What do we do now?”

“Anything you wish, my child.” Sigis smiled at her and meant every word.

As the two of them walked deeper into the Dreamtime, Anna’s small human form lay curled up in the corner of a broken room in the ruins of a manor house deep within the Old Forest. In her hand was a small gem the blue of a summer sky—a most precious gift of death and life.