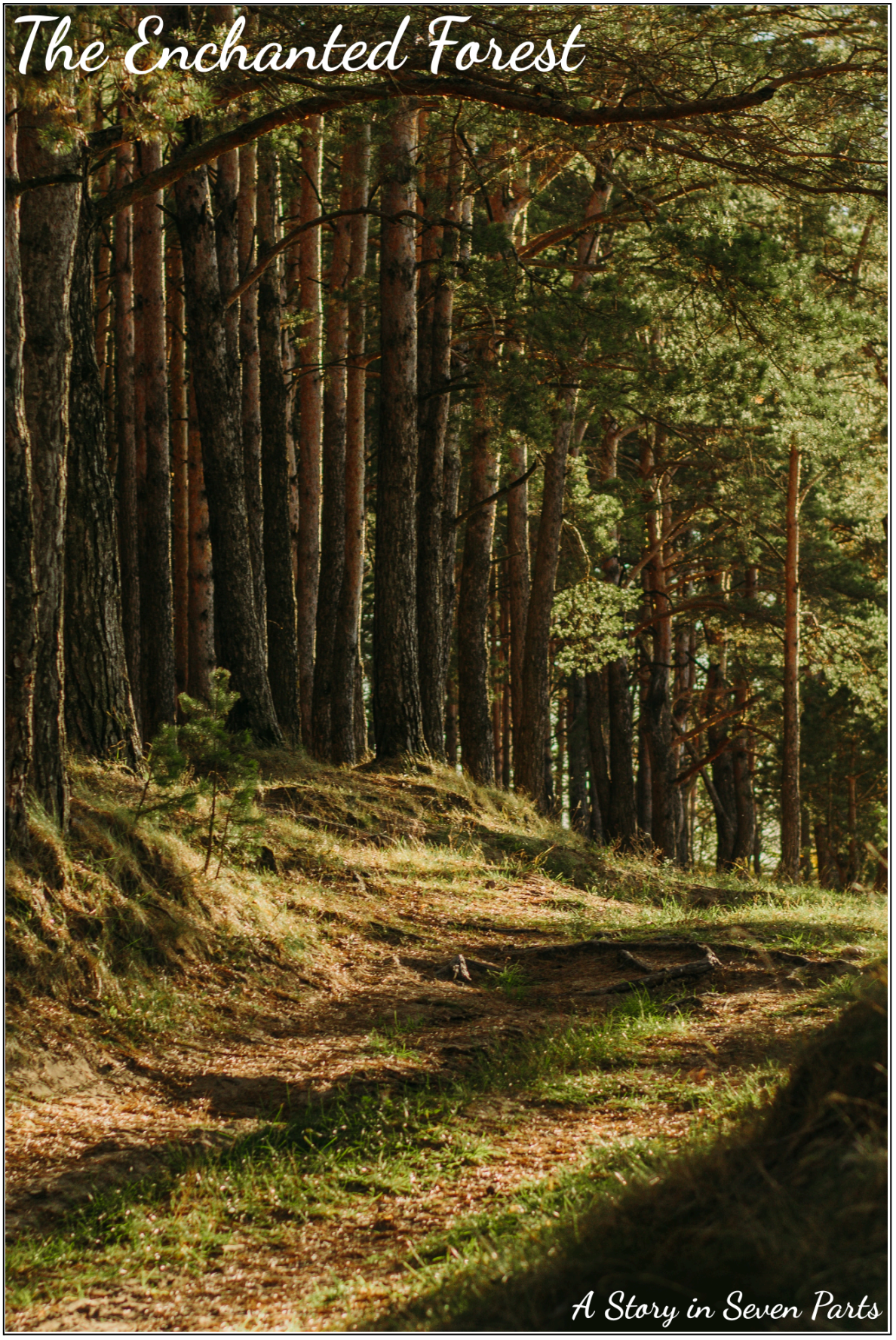


Title image adapted from a photo by Irina Iriser on Unsplash

Part the First: Heading Out

I wiped my mouth with a napkin. “This was delicious. Thanks, Mom.”

“Yeah, I agree,” my dad nodded. “It was great.”

Mom smiled. “My pleasure.”

“I’ll put some coffee on,” I said, getting up from the table. As I busied myself with loading up the espresso machine, my dad spoke up.

“So, tomorrow morning I have some free time, and I was thinking about doing some work on my car,” he said, giving me a significant look. “You wanna help out?”

“I’d love to,” I replied, “but tomorrow I can’t. I’m leaving just after breakfast; I’m going hiking with the girls, we’re spending a full week camping out in the woods.”

Dad frowned. “That’s news to me,” he said.

“I think I told you several times over the past few weeks,” I replied, as I started the coffee maker. “I’m pretty sure I did.”

“He did,” Mom interjected. “Multiple times.”

Dad’s frown deepened. “Must’ve missed it. Can’t you delay it? Leave the day after tomorrow instead of tomorrow?”

I shook my head. “I can’t, we’ve been planning this trip for a couple months now. Everything is booked and paid for, I can’t back out now.”

Dad held my gaze as I placed a cup of espresso in front of him, then slowly nodded. “Alright. But you know I don’t like it. Hanging around a buncha girls will make you go soft, son.”

I sighed exasperatedly. “Dad, we’ve been over this. Multiple times. All my friends are girls, yes. So what?” I gave Mom her cup of coffee, then grabbed mine and sat down at the table. “How am I going to go soft if I go hiking?”

“You go hiking with *girls*,” my dad said. “Not a man in sight. Seriously. Sometimes I wonder if you’re gay.”

I bristled a bit. “Okay, first of all, there’d be nothing wrong with that. And second: I’m going to spend a week out camping, alone in the woods, with three girls… and you think I’m gay because of this?”

Dad blinked. “Well, uh…”

“He got you there,” Mom said with a smirk.

“Don’t you start too, honey,” Dad said, raising a finger in warning. “I’m just worried, is all.”

“Well then, *stop worrying*, Dad,” I said. “I’m already eighteen, I can take care of myself.”

The look he gave me clearly meant ‘No you can’t, you’re still a kid,’ but I just ignored it.

“Listen… We’ll fix the car together next week, okay?” I conceded. “It’s only June, we’ve got plenty of time before summer is over and I have to leave for college. I’m on vacation. Let me enjoy it. Please.”

Dad reluctantly nodded. “Okay. Next week, then. I’ll hold you to it.”

I nodded back, then drained my coffee cup in a single gulp, and got up from the table. “I’m going upstairs to my room to pack,” I said.

As I reached the stairs, I stopped for a moment, listening to Mom and Dad talking.

“Come on, darling, he’s fine. He’s a good boy. Don’t worry,” Mom said.

“He doesn’t have a single male friend, Edith. Not one. All his friends are girls. What am I supposed to think?”

“That he’s a handsome playboy Casanova,” Mom replied, and I cringed at that.

“And that hair! Why doesn’t he cut it? It’s longer than most girls’!”

“Well…” Mom began, but I just walked upstairs and didn’t hear the rest.

So what if I only hung out with girls? So what if I liked having long hair – and taking care of it? There was absolutely nothing wrong with that.

And that… That *thing* about me being a Casanova? Yeah, as if. Truth to be told, I feared talking to girls about love stuff. I was afraid they would tell me I wasn't 'enough of a boy' like I, secretly, felt I was.

I punched a pillow in anger.

I didn't even like myself that much. How could *someone else* like me?

Well, except Hanna, maybe. She'd told me repeatedly she liked me, but she clearly meant it as a friend. While I, secretly, liked her as something more.

I sighed deeply. Ah well, no reason to keep thinking about this and make myself sad as a result. I just pushed it all out of my mind, and got to packing for the trip.

"Good Morning, Sam," my friend Hanna said as I joined her on the station's platform. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yeah," I said, rubbing my face.

She cocked her head to the side. "You sure?" she asked. "Because you don't look so good."

"I just had another discussion with my dad this morning, is all," I replied.

"Ah."

"Yeah, 'Ah' is right," I smiled. "He still doesn't like you. Or, rather, he doesn't like that I'm friends with you…"

"…Because I'm a girl, and boys should be friends with boys and girls should be friends with girls," Hanna concluded; we'd had this discussion many times before.

"Right," I nodded. "But I put my foot down – yet again – and told him to cut it out. I hope he does."

“You know he won’t,” Hanna said.

“I know, but what can ya do?” I replied. “Oh, the train is here.”

We climbed aboard the train and found some seats, and the conversation switched subjects from there, to focus on the trip. As we’d planned we’d be joined by Jodie, one of our classmates, and Jodie’s girlfriend Lydia; they boarded the train one and two stations after ours, respectively, and sat down next to us.

“Alright,” I said once we’d all assembled. “Let’s go over this again. We get off at the thirteenth station, and then we’ll get right to hiking. Jodie’s got the map and the compass,” Jodie nodded at that, “and we’ll make our way to our first campsite. And then, tomorrow morning, to the next one, and to the next one, and so on. A full thru-hike, over seven days.” I looked up at them. “I’ve done stuff like this a couple times before, and I warn you, it’ll be difficult. Last chance to back out, we can just stay in the first camp and hang out there for a week if you don’t feel up for it.”

“Nah, it’s fine,” Jodie said. “Lydia and I have trained pretty hard for this. We both have plenty of stamina, and our boots are properly broken in, like you said.”

“Okay,” I said. “Just checking. Then we can just sit back and relax, it’ll be like an hour before our stop.”

There was a chorus of agreement, and we started chatting about just anything. Meanwhile, I found myself looking at Hanna, stealing glances at her, and smiling.

Hanna was my childhood friend, we’d basically grown up together: we were in the same classes at school, had the same interests, and played the same games. She’d always been by my side, and because of that, it had taken me a while to realise I really, *really* liked her. I had, like, the hugest, stupidest crush on my friend.

But our days together were about to be over. We’d recently graduated high school, and we’d chosen different college tracks, so we’d be moving to two different towns for a few years. We wouldn’t be able to see each other as much as we did before.

So secretly, deep in my heart, I made a resolution: before this trip was over, I would tell Hanna how I really felt about her.

Part the Second: No, Your Other Left

"Are you sure this is the right way, Jodie?" I asked. "There's supposed to be a path over here, but I don't see it."

Guided by Jodie – who'd taken charge as soon as we'd disembarked the train, pulling out the map and compass – we'd been walking for the best part of the day, stopping for lunch (sandwiches brought from home) before resuming our hike in the afternoon. Slowly the path we'd been following had disappeared into the undergrowth, but Jodie was undeterred and fully convinced we were on the right path, so she'd guided us through an ever-deepening forest; now it was late afternoon, with no exit to the woods in sight. We were supposed to be at the first campsite by then, but we weren't.

"I... I *think* this is the right way? I'm pretty sure," Jodie said, though she didn't sound sure, not even one bit.

"Can I see the map?" I asked, and unlike the previous two times I'd asked her, Jodie conceded and showed me the map.

"See here?" she said, pointing towards a path she'd drawn on the map with a red pencil. "This is the path we took, here we stopped for lunch," she tapped the map, "and now we should be... here." She tapped the map again.

"Only we aren't," Lydia said.

"Yeah, we aren't," Jodie sighed. "I don't understand. Clearly I did something wrong, but I followed the planned route exactly. I followed the compass." She held it up.

I looked at the compass, and then at Jodie, and got a sinking feeling.

"Um. Jodie," I said.

"Yeah?"

"That's a topographic compass. It's different from the one you usually bring. Where's that one?" I asked.

"Oh, it fell and broke as I was unpacking last time," she replied. "But it's fine, I borrowed this from my brother." She noticed my look, and said, "Sam. Honestly, I know how to take a bearing, it's *fine*."

I took a deep breath. “Jodie. Topographic compasses work differently than normal ones.”

She blinked. “They do?”

I nodded. “They do. Show me how you took those bearings.”

She looked at me for a moment, then nodded back. “So you see, I hold the compass up like this… Then spin in place until the north needle matches this big arrow here… And then turn this dial until the little arrow points at my reference point, and I read the angle.” She looked up at me. “Simple.”

I facepalmed.

“Jodie… I’m sorry, but that’s the exact wrong way to go about that,” I said.

She looked at me, unsure. “It is?”

“Yeah. You need to point the big arrow at the reference point, and then align the small arrow with the north needle.” I sighed. “Basically you turned the dial in the opposite direction, and took the wrong bearing.”

Jodie looked down at the compass. “Oh.”

I sighed again. “Yeah.”

“So wait, what does this mean?” Lydia said. “Are we lost?”

Hanna nodded. “Yeah, it definitely sounds like we’re lost.”

Jodie looked like she was on the verge of tears. “I’m sorry, you guys. I really should’ve looked up how this thing works before leaving.”

Lydia placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “Jodie, don’t worry, it’s fine. Really. No one got hurt, and we can get back on track easily enough.” She looked up at me. “We can, can’t we?”

“Yeah, we can,” I replied. “Only, not this afternoon. It’s already too late, we’ll need to find a place to make camp for the night and start again in the morning. Hold on, I’ll call the campsite, I’ll tell them we’ll be one day late.”

I pulled my cellphone out from my pocket and turned it on, then frowned at the screen. “Weird. No reception. There’s supposed to be good coverage here.” I looked at my friends. “Try yours?”

They all pulled their phones out, and for all of them the result was the same: no reception.

“What do we do now?” Jodie asked.

“Like Sam said, we find a place to make camp for the night. It’s fine even if we don’t warn the campsite, worst case scenario they declare us overdue and send out search parties,” Hanna said with a smirk.

Jodie frowned. “It’s not funny.”

Hanna’s smirk vanished. “No, I suppose not.”

“In any case, getting here was easy,” I said. “Getting back will be just as easy, we just need to backtrack. Let’s just keep going a bit further for now, see if we find a good place where we can stop.”

My friends all nodded, and I took charge, walking ahead of them through the woods; it took a while, but soon we found the perfect place: a small clearing – flat, grassy ground, sitting right next to a tiny stream from which we could get water.

“This looks like a good place,” I said. “Let’s stop here.”

Hanna let her backpack drop to the ground, and stretched. “Alright, let’s split duties here. We three pitch the tents, you make dinner, Sam.”

I nodded. I knew for sure both Hanna and Jodie knew how to pitch a tent, and they’ll be able to teach Lydia; meanwhile, I was a pretty good cook – I liked cooking, it was one of my hobbies – so I could make up something scrumptious. “Alright,” I said. “Lydia, can you give me the camping stove?”

Lydia looked at me in surprise. “Huh? What? Was I supposed to bring it?”

“Uh… Yeah?” I replied. “You offered to do so when we had our last planning meeting last week. You said you had one at home.”

She looked at me for a few moments, and then swore. “Fuck. I *knew* I’d forgotten something. You know how you get this feeling in the back of your head, telling you, ‘You forgot something?’ Would be useful if it would tell you what exactly you forgot.” She sighed. “So, no stove. What do we do now?”

I shrugged. “No biggie, I’ll build a fire and cook on that. We’ll have to scrub the pans harder because of the smoke blackening them, but it’s not that different, really.”

“Alright,” Lydia nodded. “Can I leave you to it?”

“Yeah, sure. You go help the others. Shoo, shoo,” I said with a smile; she smiled back, and she was off.

I sighed, and set to build a fire: I knew how to do it, and I’d done it before, so I was done pretty quickly – I just had to clear the forest floor from any debris that could catch on fire and burn out of control, and build a ring of stones, and then build the fire itself, but it only took me about thirty minutes to do so. Then I placed the pot on the fire, and dumped the ingredients in.

“Dinner’s ready!” I called out; my three friends rejoined me next to the campfire, and we gobbled down the stew I’d prepared.

“So, how’s sleeping arrangements?” I asked. “Saw you only pitched up two tents.”

“No need in making an effort for more,” Hanna replied. “After all, we’ll be here only for one night.” I nodded in acknowledgment, and she continued, “So Lydia and Jodie are in one tent, and you’re bunking with me.”

I blinked. “With you? Are you sure?”

“Why wouldn’t I be sure?”

“Well, you know…” I hesitated; I always hated having to say stuff like this. “I’m a man.”

“You’re not *a man*,” Hanna chuckled, giving me a weird feeling in the pit of my stomach. “You’re *my friend*. And I trust you.”

I found myself smiling. “Thank you,” I said.

“Don’t mention it, Sam,” Hanna replied. “So, shall we get to sleep?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Just leave the pot and plates and cutlery in the stream, they’ll soak overnight. I’ll scrub them tomorrow morning.”

My friends nodded, and stood up. I gathered my things and placed my backpack inside the tent, then stepped right outside to enjoy the brisk air of dusk for a bit. It was late June, so it was past nine PM; the day had been a wash, but somehow I didn’t mind it.

“Are you coming?” Hanna asked; I looked inside the tent, and I saw that she was already tucked into her sleeping bag, clearly waiting for me.

“Yeah, I’m coming,” I said.

I started to turn around, but then I saw something out of the corner of my eye. Something small and white, darting between two trees, just at the edge of the clearing. I turned my head to look, and peered carefully at where I’d seen the movement.

“What is it?” Hanna said. “Did you see something?”

“Maybe? I’m not sure,” I replied. “If I did, it was probably just a critter. We won’t have to worry as long as we’re inside the tents.”

I knew for a fact there were no bears or wolves or other dangerous animals around those parts, and what I’d seen – *if* I had seen anything – was way too small anyway. It wasn’t anything that could give us trouble.

I stepped inside the tent and zipped the entrance up behind me; then I got settled in my sleeping bag, and tried to fall asleep.

Despite being tired from the day, sleep didn’t come easy; I kept hearing some rustling around the tent, like small creatures wandering about, but once again I pushed that out of my mind – even though we were lost, we were completely safe.

Though I did hear something weird right as I was falling asleep. It sounded like… giggling?

Part the Third: The Seelie Queen

I slowly woke up, though I waited a bit before opening my eyes.

Truth to be told, I was still very tired from the previous day, and I really wanted to lie in for a bit, but I realised we had to get moving: if I fell back asleep, it would be at least a couple hours before I woke up again, and we had to get going soon if we wanted to make good time. I wasn't sure if the girls would wake up on time on their own, so it was up to me to set the schedule.

I reluctantly cracked my eyes a fraction of an inch: the inside of the tent was still pretty dark, but I could see some light filtering in through the canvas. Apparently, it was already past dawn.

I tried to roll over so I could unzip my sleeping bag, but found that I couldn't; during the night, Hanna had apparently snuggled up to me, and I smiled at that. God, I was really in love with her. I once again resolved, before this trip was over, to tell her how I felt about her.

I slowly shuffled away from Hanna, who mumbled a bit in her sleep but didn't wake up; then I slid out of my sleeping bag and carefully, without waking my friend up, got dressed in my day clothes and tied my long hair back. Then, just as carefully, I stepped over Hanna and left the tent, walking over to the nearby stream.

As I washed my face, I thought about the previous day: we'd walked a whole lot, but ended up God knew where, nowhere near our destination. Today would be all about backtracking, so hopefully we could get where we needed to be while it was still light out. I sighed and stretched; ah well, no need to be mad about it – the past is the past, it's no use trying to change it. Let's think about breakfast for the moment.

Kneeling over the firepit, I quickly cleared away the coals and half-burned branches from the previous evening, and then just as quickly I built a pyramid-shaped fire, putting some paper as kindling at the heart of it. Then, absent-mindedly, I started patting my pockets.

"Where did I put my lighter?" I muttered under my breath.

"Here, use this," said a voice.

“Oh, thanks,” I said, grabbing the burning twig I was offered, and carefully using it to set fire to the kindling.

Then I froze.

What the…?

I turned my head, and found myself face to face with a girl. A *tiny* girl, barely four or five inches tall, who was wearing a form-fitting white dress; she was floating about two feet off the ground, lazily flapping her wings as she looked at me, smiling.

I blinked. Once, then twice, then three times, then I rubbed my eyes, but no dice: the girl was still there.

“Uh…” I said. “Hi?”

“Hi!” she exclaimed. “What are you doing here?”

I was so startled, I found myself replying almost automatically. “We didn’t plan it. We were hiking through the woods, one of my friends read the map wrong, and we ended up here.”

“So you’re lost? Oh, that’s a shame,” she said, frowning. “Hold on, I know who can help you! I’ll go call the Queen.”

Before I could say anything she flew away – surprisingly fast, given her small size – and vanished into the forest.

I just sat there, stunned, for a few moments; then I sprung to my feet, and ran towards the tents. “Girls! Girls, wake up!” I shouted at the top of my lungs. “Wake up!” I repeated, quickly unzipping both tents and letting the light of morning spill inside.

The girls sat up, still in their sleeping bags, and looked at me blearily. “Sam? What the hell? What’s the matter?” Jodie asked.

“Okay, I know you’re not gonna believe me, but I just saw a fairy,” I said.

“You saw *what?*” Lydia said. “Sam, are you still asleep?”

“I’m not asleep!” I protested. “I really saw her! She gave me a burning twig to get the fire started! Then she ran away – she *flew* away – saying she was going to call the Queen.”

By then, the three girls were climbing out of the tents; I saw Jodie and Lydia were giving me identical, bewildered stares.

“Sam, seriously,” Lydia said. “Is this a prank? Did you seriously think we would buy it?”

“It’s not a prank, I swear,” I replied. “I really saw her!”

“What did she look like?” Hanna asked sharply; I turned to look at her, and saw that she was giving me a really serious look – I’d never seen her like that before.

Jodie laughed. “What the hell, Hanna? Are you in on the prank too?”

“This isn’t a prank,” Hanna said, her voice deadly serious. “We could all be in terrible danger. Answer me, Sam: *what did she look like?*”

I blinked, taken aback, but tried to think back. “Uh… About this tall,” I said, gesturing with my hands. “She was wearing a white dress, and she had long hair and wings.”

“What kind of wings? Butterfly wings or bird wings? What colour was her hair, gold or silver?” Hanna asked.

“I’m… not sure? It all happened so fast,” I replied. “Bird wings, maybe?”

“Okay,” Hanna breathed out. “Okay, that’s good. Well, no, not good. But not terrible. Alright–”

She was cut off by a small, high pitched shout. “Hey there! Miss!”

We turned our heads to look at the source of the voice, and saw the fairy flying straight towards us; out of the corner of my eye I saw Jodie and Lydia’s mouths fall open, while Hanna was staring intently at the tiny girl as she approached us. I briefly wondered why she’d called me ‘miss,’ but then realised she could’ve been talking about any of us four; also, with my long hair (the longest in our group, actually) and lack of beard, I probably *did* look like a girl at a distance, and I didn’t mind her mistaking me for one – why would I? It was an honest mistake.

“Hi! I’m back!” the fairy said. “I brought the Queen!”

She turned and gestured as a tall woman strode out of the woods into the clearing, about twenty metres away from us: She had golden hair, same as the fairy, and She was wearing a white dress, too, only Hers came down to Her ankles. Her face had sharp features, and Her beauty was almost otherworldly; She didn’t walk towards us as much as glide, as if She was standing an inch off the ground.

“Crap,” I heard Hanna say under her voice. “Listen, y’all, *don’t say anything*. Let me speak, I know how to handle this. I hope.”

“You… You what?” Jodie asked.

“Quiet, I said!” Hanna shushed her.

The tall woman moved towards us, and stopped a few paces away; She joined her hands together in front of Her and smiled.

“Greetings, my ladies,” She said in a melodious voice. “We are Ainslie, Queen and Ruler of this Realm. May We have your names?”

I felt a strange draw, almost a compulsion to answer ‘yes’: I was about to, but then Hanna held up her hand, and I remembered what she said, so I remained silent.

“Greetings and salutations, Your Majesty, Queen Ainslie,” Hanna said, stepping forward. “My name is mine, and mine alone: I am Hanna of the House MacKenzie of Dùn Èideann. My companions and I offer our apologies for trespassing upon these grounds. This transgression was not intended; we have simply taken a wrong turn. We ask for Your forgiveness.”

The Queen inclined Her head slightly. “You speak well, Hanna of the House MacKenzie,” She said. “And We remember your House fondly; long has friendship flourished between our peoples.”

Hanna bowed deeply. “My companions and I thank you, Your Majesty, for Your kind words,” she said. “Always shall our homes be open to You and Your subjects, should You need assistance or just a place to rest.” She made a strange gesture, and suddenly a bottle of whisky – fine whisky at that, looked like an Islay – appeared in her hands: she offered it to the Queen, saying, “Please accept this gift as proof of our friendship.”

Queen Ainslie took the liquor from Hanna's hands, and bowed Her head. "We thank you, Hanna of the House MacKenzie, and We thank your companions; your gift is accepted with gratitude, and your trespassing forgiven. You are welcome in Our Realm for as long as you wish to stay."

She ran Her eyes over our group, then She turned around and walked away, gliding back into the woods, the tiny fairy following close behind Her.

Part the Fourth: Making Friends

After a few moments, Hanna's shoulders slumped, and she let out a deep breath, almost a sigh.

"Okay," she said, closing her eyes and massaging her temples. "That went… Well, that couldn't have gone better, honestly. She was clearly from a Seelie Court, and now we have Her permission to stay, so we won't need to watch ourselves from the Fair Folk until we leave." She turned to face us, and saw the look we were giving her. "What?" she asked.

"What the *fuck* was that?" Jodie exclaimed. "The Fair Folk? I mean, was that… Was that a Fae?"

Hanna sighed again. "Yeah, She was," she replied. "One of the nicest ones, actually. But you're still lucky I was here with you."

"How did you know what to say?" I asked. "And what was that thing with the bottle? Where did that come from?"

"Well. Um," Hanna said; she seemed suddenly embarrassed, and looked away, not meeting our eyes. "Well, you see, the bottle came from my backpack. Short-range object-moving spell. I was planning to share it with you guys on our last night out, but our survival is more important, don't you think?"

"Our *survival?*" Lydia said. "Do you really think She would've hurt us?"

Hanna shook her head. "Not deliberately, no. As I said, She's one of the nice ones. But the Fae tend to be mischievous, and have very different social rules than humans, so what amounts to a harmless prank to them could be really bad, even deadly, for us."

"How do you know all this?" I asked, bewildered. "How can you do *spells?* For that matter, how did you know what to say to Her?"

"Weeeeeell…" Hanna mumbled, drawing out the vowel, and looking down at the ground. "I'm kinda sorta… a witch?" When she noticed our startled reaction, she quickly waved her hands in front of her. "Not officially, of course, I chose not to continue the family business, I left that to my sister; but I still got some basic training as a kid, and

some stuff I learned from reading my parents' books and hearing stories as I was growing up. Never thought I'd get to use any of it." She chuckled. "And then we just had to go and wander into an Enchanted Forest completely by accident, what are the chances of that?"

There was a moment of silence as we digested what she'd said, then Lydia asked, "So what you're saying is... magic is real? Witches and wizards and fairies and dragons and stuff... everything is real?"

"Yeah, it is," Hanna replied. "And I'll be grateful if you'll avoid speaking of it. Because it's a secret, you see. Very hush hush."

"And what do we get in return for keeping silent?" I asked; Hanna's head whipped around to look at me, but when she saw I was smirking cheekily, she smiled in turn.

"Well, we're already behind schedule, thanks to someone I won't mention," she replied, and Jodie hmpf-ed at the barb, "but I was thinking we could just do some tourism around here today, and then we'll get back on track tomorrow. It's not every day you get a chance to get a guided tour of an Enchanted Forest. What do you say?"

"Sounds good," Lydia nodded. "When do we start?"

At that, Hanna's and Jodie's stomachs growled in unison.

"Right after breakfast, I'd say," I said with a laugh. "Come on, you three go change, I'll fry up some bacon and eggs."

As the girls walked back to the tents, I made my way to the firepit: the fire I'd started earlier, left forgotten in the chaos of the situation, was still smouldering, not having gone out completely. I added some fuel and got it started again, waited a few minutes for the flames to die down, then placed a frying pan on the embers; after it had heated up, I carefully placed several slices of bacon in it.

"What are you doing?"

I turned around; the fairy I'd met earlier was perched on a log, a couple metres away, and she'd brought friends: about half a dozen tiny winged girls were looking intently at me.

"Hi again," I said with a smile. "I'm just making some food."

One of the small creatures took flight, and began hovering in circles above the frying pan, where the bacon was happily sizzling away. “This is food?” she asked. “Where are the flowers?”

“You eat flowers?” I said.

“Sort of. They eat nectar from the flowers. They call it ambrosia,” Hanna’s voice said; I turned around again, and saw her, Jodie, and Lydia walking towards me, fully dressed and ready for the day; Lydia and Jodie were looking wide-eyed at the fairies.

“Hello there,” Lydia said, crouching next to the log and smiling. “What should I call you?”

The fairies looked uncertainly at each other.

“You don’t have to tell us, little friends,” Hanna said. Then she turned to us and continued: “Rule number one: never ask someone magical for their name. Rule number two: never give a truthful answer when *they* ask you for yours, unless you’re absolutely certain you can word it in a way that won’t accidentally give ownership of your name away. And even then, think twice about it.”

“Noted,” Jodie nodded.

“Food’s almost ready,” I said, as I removed the bacon from the pan and cracked a few eggs in the hot fat. “Grab your plates, y’all.”

In short order the eggs were cooked, and we sat down cross-legged on the ground; the fairies took flight from the log and settled down on our shoulders as we ate.

“I like your hair!” one of them said. “It’s so smooth and shiny, like eagle feathers! And it’s so long!”

I blushed at the compliment. “Thank you.”

The tiny girl glanced off to the side, then looked back up at me. “Can we braid it?” she asked.

“Uh…” I replied, taken aback. They wanted to braid my hair?

“Please?”

I looked at their tiny faces, looking up at me pleadingly, and I sighed. “Alright,” I said.

As one, the fairies cheered, and then they practically swarmed me, getting to work on my hair as I ate; out of the corner of my eye, I saw Hanna smirk, but I just ignored her.

Though I had to admit, having someone braid your hair felt really nice.

A few minutes later we were done eating, and as I gathered the dirty plates and walked to the stream to wash them, I sported an elaborate braid which was wrapped all around the crown of my head, and then descended over the nape of my neck, stopping just above my shoulders: the fairies really had gone all out.

As I walked back to the tents, I noticed Hanna stealing a glance at me and smirking. “What?” I asked.

“Oh, nothing really,” she replied. “It’s just that you look really cute with your hair like that.”

I felt my cheeks redden in a blush. “It’s not what I would’ve chosen, but it’s practical. It keeps my hair in place, and away from my face.” Then I lowered my voice and added, in a low mumble, “And there’s nothing wrong with me being cute.”

“Never said there was,” Hanna replied with a smile. “Come on, let’s get the plates stashed away, and then we’ll go exploring.”

Part the Fifth: The Lady and the Unicorn

"Okay, I've told you the first two rules, the ones about names. Don't forget them," Hanna said as she walked through the woods ahead of us, and the three of us made a noise of acknowledgement. "Good. Rule number three: no pictures. Sorry, but as I said, magic is still secret."

"A badly-kept secret, if you ask me," I said. "I mean, we've all heard stories and legends and stuff about magic and fairies and the Fae…"

"Yeah," Hanna said. "But those are just that: stories and legends, no hard proof. Let's keep it that way."

The three of us nodded.

"Good. Now, rule four: touch *nothing* in here until I've taken a look at it and told you it's safe to do so. Many things that look innocuous can instead be dangerous."

"Like mushrooms?" Jodie piped up.

Hanna stopped, and turned back. "Mushrooms?" she asked, quirking an eyebrow.

"Yeah, you know. Like some mushrooms are very tasty while others are poisonous, but they can look very similar and it takes an expert to tell them apart," Jodie replied.

"You know, that's a pretty apt comparison," Hanna nodded. "Yeah, like mushrooms. What brought that to mind?"

"If I may hazard a guess," Lydia said, pointing. We all turned to look: across a few bushes, in a clearing, several huge toadstools were standing; they were quite big, about as tall as my waist, and they had what looked like doors and windows carved into them.

I blinked, and then laughed. "What *is* this, a Smurf village?" I said.

"Smurfs live in mushrooms?" Jodie asked, turning towards me. "I thought they lived in, like, pineapples."

"No, that's Spongebob. How are you getting the two mixed up?" I replied. "Still, the point stands. Who lives here?"

“We do!” a tiny voice exclaimed, and a fairy fluttered into my field of vision. “This is our home!”

“Oh, cool,” Lydia said. “Can we take a closer look?”

“Yeah, this should be fine,” Hanna said. “Go ahead.”

With a nod, Lydia started walking across the clearing towards the mushrooms, followed closely by Jodie and a small swarm of fairies; they started inspecting the tiny toadstool town, and chatting with the small girls. Hanna and I, on the other hand, sat down on a log at the edge of the clearing, being content to just look.

“You know, for someone who’s only had a few lessons and read a few books, you sure know an awful lot about this… *This*,” I said, gesturing vaguely at our surroundings.

Hanna blushed a bit. “Well, maybe I did some more studying on my own.” I gave her a sceptical look, and she giggled. “Okay, maybe *a lot* more studying. I mean, can you blame me? This stuff is fascinating.”

“It is,” I agreed. “And I just love seeing you so enthusiastic about something.”

“Yeah, like… This is honestly a dream come true,” she replied. “I’ve read lots of stuff, but I’d never imagined I’d actually get to explore an Enchanted Forest. It’s great.”

“I’m happy for you,” I said; then, suddenly feeling bold, I reached over, grabbed her hand, and gave it a squeeze.

Hanna turned her head to look at me, and our eyes met; she smiled, and her blush seemed to deepen.

I took a deep breath.

“You know, there’s something I’d been meaning to tell you,” I said.

“Oh?” she said, her eyebrows rising slightly. “What is it?”

I gulped nervously. Hell, was I really going to do this?

Yes, I was.

“Hanna–”

“Look at that!” Lydia exclaimed suddenly.

Startled, I turned my head to look at her: she was pointing excitedly at something, and as I followed her finger’s direction with my eyes I felt my breath catch.

At the other end of the clearing, barely a dozen metres away, a unicorn was walking calmly out of the woods.

He was a magnificent sight: he was a bit smaller than a horse, but his mane and tail were long and flowing; a pearly horn extended for about two feet from his forehead, and his skin was brilliant white, almost shining.

He was beautiful.

“Whoa,” Hanna whispered as she rose to her feet, and I did the same. “Amazing. Unicorns are super rare, almost extinct, for one to be here…” She shook her head. “Okay, girls, remember rule four? You can approach him, but walk slowly, and keep your hands raised to show you mean no harm. Sam…” She sighed. “It’s better if you stay back.”

I frowned. “What? Why?”

She turned to me. “Don’t you remember the stories? Unicorns don’t like men.” She smiled sadly. “I’m sorry.”

I looked at her for a few moments, then sighed. “Alright, I’ll be satisfied with just looking,” I replied. “It’s a shame, though.”

“Yeah, it is. And it’s a bit sexist if you ask me. But what can you do?” Hanna replied, and shrugged.

I nodded, and watched as my three friends slowly approached the unicorn, who by then had made his way to the middle of the clearing; each of them in turn walked close to him, one at a time as to not frighten him, and let him smell them and nuzzle their hands a bit.

Then the unicorn turned his head, and looked directly at me.

His gaze was mystifying. I felt like a deer in headlights, completely fascinated by those deep blue eyes; I almost didn't notice it when he started walking towards me, tilting his head this and that way, as if studying me. I blinked in surprise, still glued to the spot.

"Uh... What? Why is he coming closer, Hanna?" I asked.

"I don't know," Hanna replied in a whisper. "He shouldn't be doing that."

"What do I do?" I said, putting a bit of urgency in my voice and raising my hands to show the creature I meant no harm, like Hanna had said.

"I don't know," Hanna repeated. "Just... Don't move. Stay there. Try not to startle him."

I nodded, just a tiny bit, and gulped as the unicorn walked closer and closer, still looking at me as if he was puzzled. After a few moments he reached me, and just stood there, eyeballing me.

Then he leaned forward, and gave one of my hands a deep sniff.

He whinnied softly, snorted, and, seemingly satisfied, he stepped closer and nuzzled his nose against my chest. I slowly reached down, and caressed his mane: the hair felt silky under my fingers.

"I... I thought you said unicorns didn't like men," I whispered.

"I did," Hanna replied. "According to everything I've read, they don't even let men get close, let alone approach them themselves. This doesn't make any sense."

I smiled. "Even if it doesn't, I'm still glad," I said. "Oh, goodbye," I added, as the unicorn turned around and began walking away from me; my friends walked around him, giving him a wide berth, and stood by my side. "This was an amazing experience."

"It really was," Jodie said, and Lydia nodded in agreement. As for me, I just turned my head to look at Hanna; when she met my eyes, we both smiled warmly.

"What did you want to tell me?" Hanna asked.

“What?” I replied.

“You know,” she said. “Before the unicorn showed up.”

Suddenly remembering I’d almost confessed my love for her, I blushed. Alright. I gulped. “Well, I was about to say–”

“Hanna, why’s it rearing up?” Jodie said.

My head snapped around, and I looked at the unicorn; sure enough, he was rearing up on his hind legs, facing us. As I looked, he put his front hooves back on the ground.

And charged.

“Sam, look out!” Lydia shouted, but it was too late: the unicorn’s horn struck me right in the chest, impaling me, and lifting me off my feet. I flew through the air from the impact and landed heavily a few metres away.

It was the weirdest feeling. It barely hurt; instead, I felt light, almost as if my soul was leaving my body. I found myself completely relaxed, feeling nothing, thinking about nothing, *being* nothing.

I briefly wondered if this was what death felt like. I felt light. I felt *right*.

Then, suddenly, as if from far away, I heard someone shouting, calling for me. It was… three voices? And they sounded really worried. Why would they be worried about me?

Oh, right. The unicorn. The horn.

Realising that brought me back to the present, and my eyes flew open: I found myself staring at the forest canopy, high up above, and below it my friend’s faces – Lydia, Jodie, and Hanna – were looking at me in worry.

I took a deep, gasping breath.

“Sam!” Jodie and Lydia said in unison.

“Sam! Oh my god, Sam, are you alright?” Hanna shouted.

"I…" I began, then coughed. "I think so? I *feel* alright, at least."

In fact, I felt the most alright I'd ever felt in my entire life. I felt great.

"What the hell happened?" I asked, pulling myself to a seated position; then I paused. "What's wrong with my voice?" My voice sounded weird to my ears, as if I'd never heard it before. It was… high-pitched? Almost melodious? What?

I looked around the clearing: the unicorn was nowhere to be seen, but my three friends were staring at me.

"Sam…" Lydia began, then stopped.

"What?" I asked, still in that weird, alien voice.

"Sam, you're a girl!" Jodie exclaimed.

"I'm *what?*" I said.

I looked down at myself; my body was still wrapped in my tight-fitting hiking clothes, and I could see it had changed a lot since I'd last checked myself out – my legs were more slender, my hips wider, and most importantly, what definitely looked like a pair of breasts was outlined in the fabric of my shirt.

"I'm… I'm a girl?" I said, bewildered. I patted my body, pinched my cheek: it hurt, so it was definitely not a dream. "I'm a girl!" I looked up at Hanna. "How the fuck did this happen?" I asked.

Hanna frowned. "I don't know. I have no idea how something like this could even happen. I don't remember reading anything about this." She paused. "But I know someone who can probably tell us. We'll get to the bottom of this. Come on, let's get you back on your feet, up you go."

Helped by Lydia and Jodie, she pulled me to my unsteady feet – even my balance was different. This felt *weird*. But good. Weirdly good?

Hanna turned right on her heel, and walked to the toadstool town: the fairies were perched on top of the mushrooms, looking at us. She picked one, apparently at random, and marched right up to her.

“I need to talk to Queen Ainslie. Please bring us to Her.”

Part the Sixth: In the Hall of the Forest Queen

“We welcome you, Hanna of the House MacKenzie, and We welcome your companions,” Queen Ainslie said as we walked inside Her throne room – a magnificent hall apparently grown out of oak trees, the walls solid, living wood, the branches intertwining to form a ceiling high up above us. “We have been told you wish to speak with Us; what is the matter? Are you not enjoying Our hospitality?”

“We are, Your Majesty, Queen Ainslie,” Hanna said, bowing her head. “However, there is something we have to discuss with You. Something has happened to one of my companions.” Hanna stopped talking, looking expectantly at the Queen, as if waiting for her permission to continue.

“Please, do explain,” the Queen nodded.

Hanna gestured at me. “You see, Your Majesty, my friend has been turned into a girl.”

Queen Ainslie tilted Her head slightly, and took on a puzzled expression. “We are sorry, but was she not a woman in the first place?”

“No, *he* was not,” Hanna said pointedly.

“Our apologies,” the Queen said. “We sometimes have trouble distinguishing one from the other, especially because of Our True Sight. It’s hard to perceive the inside and the outside separately.”

I was puzzled; what did Queen Ainslie mean? The outside and the inside?

I had no time to wonder, though, as the Queen continued immediately: “But do tell Us, how did this happen?”

Being careful not to leave out any details, Hanna recounted the events of the morning, ending with us meeting the unicorn and the resulting transformation.

“And as soon as we realised what had happened, we also realised we should seek Your assistance, Your Majesty, for we do not know how this could possibly have come to pass,” Hanna concluded. “Do You happen to know?”

“Yes, We do know,” the Queen said. “It is simple. The Gift of True Form.”

“The what?” I asked; Hanna held up a hand, and I remembered what she’d told us before we entered the hall – it was best if she was the only one to speak.

“The Gift of True Form,” the Queen repeated. “It is a boon, sometimes granted by the unicorns who roam Our Realm. By touching mortals with their horns, they have the ability to make one shed their… *disguise*, so to speak, revealing what lay within. Their preferred form. Their *true* form.”

There was a moment of silence. A long, *long* moment of silence; Hanna, Lydia, and Jodie all turned slowly to look at me.

I gulped.

“Uh. Um. I’m really sorry,” Hanna said. “I… I never noticed it.”

“Yeah, me either,” Jodie said. “You?” she asked Lydia, who shook her head.

“Hold on a second!” I protested. “I know what you’re thinking, and you’re wrong. Just because my… My *true form* looks like this, it doesn’t mean that…” I trailed off, looking at the three of them.

“Doesn’t it?” Lydia asked. “I mean…” she gestured at me.

“Right,” Hanna said. “You’re telling me you’ve never, ever thought about…?”

She let the question hang in the air, and I shivered. “Well, you know… I mean…” I said. “Maybe?” I conceded, in a tiny voice.

“Indeed,” the Fae Queen nodded. “So, you see, what happened to young…” She paused. “We are sorry, but We didn’t quite catch your name. May We have it?”

“Oh, sure, it’s Samuel,” I replied.

I suddenly felt a sense of loss, as if something had been taken from me and left a void in its place.

“We see. A nice name,” the Queen smiled.

There was another moment of silence, much shorter this time.

It was broken by Hanna swearing.

“God! Fuck!” she shouted, and turned to face the Queen. “Why the *fuck* would You *do* that!?”

Queen Ainslie’s smile widened. “We do not approve of using such words in Our hall,” she said.

In response, Hanna just gave a wordless scream of frustration. “Come on, we’re leaving,” she said, grabbing my hand and dragging me away; Lydia and Jodie followed closely behind us.

We’d reached the doors before Hanna stopped, took a deep breath, and turned back towards the Queen. “My companions and I thank You for Your hospitality, Your Majesty. May this be only a momentary farewell.”

“By all means, please do come back any time. We would be delighted to have you as Our guests again,” the Queen replied.

Hanna made sure to slam the doors behind us as we left the hall.

“Okay, this is far enough. We’re out of Her Realm,” Hanna said.

“Time for a rest, then,” Jodie said, as she slipped her backpack off and sat down on it.

Without even bothering to take off my own backpack, I sat down heavily on the ground, and sighed, putting my head in my hands.

“What the hell do I do now?” I muttered. “How can I even begin to explain this to my parents?”

“Just tell them the truth,” Lydia said. “I’m sure they won’t mind.”

“Yeah, right,” I said bitterly. “Can you even picture it? ‘Hey Mom, hey Dad, it turns out I was a girl all along! And during my trip I met a unicorn, who changed my body to match how I really feel! Surprise!’” I gulped, feeling tears starting to find their way to my eyes. “If I’m lucky, they’ll just throw me out in the street; if I’m not, they’ll have me

locked up in a mental hospital." I picked up a small rock off the ground, and angrily flung it away straight in front of me. "We should've left as soon as we realised we were in an Enchanted Forest, then none of this would've happened. For that matter, I shouldn't have come on this trip in the first place, I should've stayed home and helped Dad fix his *goddamn car!* I should–"

"Hey. Hey," Hanna said, crouching down in front of me and putting her hands on my shoulders. "Stop, okay? *Stop*. You're kinda spiralling here, and you're not thinking straight."

"*How can I think straight?*" I shrieked. "I mean, look at me! I'm a girl, for Christ's sake! And I don't even have a name, that *bitch* took it!"

In response, Hanna just wrapped me in a hug; she squeezed tight, and even though I struggled a bit, she didn't let go.

"I know it's difficult to see anything but dark right now," she whispered. "But we're here to help you. *I'm* here to help you. We'll think carefully about it, we'll ask my sister, and we'll find a way to fix this." After a moment, she added, "Well, maybe not *all* of this."

"What... What do you mean?" I asked uncertainly.

I felt and heard Hanna sigh into my shoulder. "I mean..." she said, and released me; she took a step back, and gestured at me. "I mean, do we have to fix *this?*" she asked. "This whole thing with your body? I'm really sorry for being blunt, but Ainslie called it *the Gift of True Form*, so I'm asking you to be honest here: do you actually *mind* being a girl?"

Her question gave me pause. It was actually a really good question: *do I mind being a girl?*

Everything had happened so fast, first my close encounter with the unicorn, and then being all but dragged in front of the Queen and listening to her explanation, and then making best speed to leave, that I hadn't had time to think about it. How did I feel about having a girl's body? How did I feel about *my body being a girl's?*

And when I thought about it carefully, despite the fact that I'd never even considered the possibility before, no matter how many options I ran into my mind, there was only one answer that felt like the correct one.

“I…” I began, and then gulped. “I… I don’t, actually.” I felt a tear roll down my cheek, and sniffled a bit. “I kinda like this, in fact? It feels right. What does this say about me?”

“It says that you’re a girl,” Hanna said, wrapping me in another hug. “And I’m really happy to meet you again.”

“Same,” Lydia said, and Jodie nodded in agreement. “And she looks really cute if you ask me.”

I blinked. Wait, what?

“I am not cute,” I replied automatically.

Jodie chuckled. “Yeah, you are. It’s no use denying it.”

Hanna nodded. “I mean… Phwoar, girl. You’ll have to beat the boys back with a stick.”

“And the girls,” Lydia added. “If Jodie and I weren’t already a thing, I’d seriously make a pass at you. Such a cute thing cannot be left alone.”

I looked at each of them in turn, and I blushed and pouted. “Don’t you be mean to me. I’m new to all this. I may cry.”

“I think you’re blushing, rather than crying,” Jodie said. “And Lydia is right, I too would *definitely* try and date you.”

I felt my blush deepen. “Stop it, you guyyyyyys,” I pleaded.

“Oh, this is great,” Jodie said. “We’re gonna have so much fun. Though I do think we’ll have to find you a new name, we can’t just keep on calling you ‘you,’ ‘she,’ and ‘her.’ A girl needs a name.”

I giggled. “Yeah, I kinda do, don’t I? After all, I can’t very well keep using my old one.”

“Especially because it’s not really yours any more, you gave it away,” Hanna said, letting me go. “You forgot rule number two, you dum-dum.” She gave me a light-hearted slap upside the head.

“In my defence, I was kinda put on the spot there,” I replied. “The question caught me by surprise, and I answered automatically.”

She nodded. “Yeah, that’s how they do it. Remember what I said? Mischievous.”

“I can’t even remember your previous name in the first place,” Jodie said. “I guess that’s magic at work?” Hanna nodded in confirmation, and Jodie continued, “So what do we call you?”

“I don’t know. I kinda feel it has to be something significant, you know?” I replied. “Something that has meaning, not just a random name thrown out there.”

“I get it,” Hanna nodded again. “After all, this is a turning point in your life. You don’t have to tell us now, think about it carefully and–”

“What about Sylvia?” Lydia asked.

We all turned to look at her, and she shrugged. “You know, it would be thematic.”

I felt my eyebrows rise in surprise. “Thematic?”

“Yeah, you know, like… Hold on, let me see if I got reception here.” She fished her cellphone out from the top pocket of her backpack, and tapped the screen a few times. “Yeah, two bars. And… here it is. ‘Sylvia’ is ultimately derived from ‘silva,’ which is the Latin word for ‘forest’ or ‘wood.’” She lowered her phone and looked at me with a smile. “See? Thematic.”

“Oh, that’s cool! I didn’t know where it came from,” Jodie said. “And it’s a nice name to boot.”

I was quiet for a while, turning the name over in my mind. Sylvia. Latin for ‘forest.’ Like the Forest we’d just come out of, the Forest which changed me. Which made me realise who I really am.

Yeah.

“Yeah,” I said with a nod. “Yes, it fits. I like it. Sylvia.”

“Well then, nice to meet you, Sylvia,” Hanna said, and she smiled warmly at me. And the world seemed to brighten up a bit.

Part the Seventh: Do You Believe in Magic?

My hands were trembling slightly as the train trundled to a stop into the station. Well, there we were: home again, five days earlier than planned. Because of everything that had happened, we'd decided to cut our trip short – we'd make it up for it some other time – and hike back to town, to catch the first available train. Jodie and Lydia had already gotten off at their respective stations, and now it was our turn.

End of the line.

"Do you think you're going to be alright?" Hanna said, looking at me worriedly as we got off. "You look scared."

"I *am* scared. Scared shitless, to be exact," I replied. "I mean, it's just a short walk, all of twenty minutes, and I'll be ringing the doorbell. And then… what? What if they don't accept me? What if they don't *recognise* me?"

My friend reached over and grabbed my hand, squeezing it tight. "Want me to come with you? I can help explain."

I nodded. "Yes, that would be helpful, even if I don't know how we'd even *begin* to explain."

"I'm sure we'll think of something," she said with a smile; I looked at her and, despite everything, found myself smiling in return.

We made our way back to my home, walking together, hand in hand. That, at least, was one positive thing resulting from my transformation: no one looked twice at two girls holding hands, it was a completely normal display of friendship.

In short order, we found ourselves standing outside the gate; despite always having been indecisive, at that moment I suddenly felt bold, and ran the bell right away, without hesitation. It took a few minutes before the front door opened, and my Mom emerged.

"Yes?" she asked, then her eyes widened when she saw us standing there. "Hanna! Sylvia! What are you doing here?"

I blinked in surprise. "Uh, what?" I asked.

“What do you mean, ‘what?’ I should be asking you that, you weren’t supposed to be back for another five days,” she said, walking down the short path to the gate and opening it. “Come in, come in! Did something happen?”

I stared at her, then exchanged a glance with Hanna, then resumed staring at Mom. “You mean… You mean you recognise me?” I asked, bewildered.

She paused, giving me a weird look. “No, Sylvia, I don’t recognise my own daughter. After all, I’ve only given birth to you and raised you for eighteen years, it’s easy to forget that.” She scoffed. “Honestly, what is up with you today? Does this have something to do with why you came back so early?”

“Well, actually–” Hanna began, but I cut her off.

“No, it doesn’t,” I said. “Except for the fact that I’m a bit tired. Let’s just go in, and we’ll tell you about it. Is Dad home?”

“No, he went fishing with his buddies,” Mom replied. “He’ll be back later in the afternoon.”

I nodded, and we followed Mom inside the house, where she made some tea; we sat down at the kitchen table, and Hanna and I recounted the events of the previous days. Carefully abridged, of course: we made no mention of anything magical, we only said Jodie had read the map wrong and we’d ended up lost and having to sleep in an unknown place; that, plus Lydia forgetting to bring the camping stove along, prompted us to just call the whole trip a wash and return home.

After that, Mom resumed doing her housework, while Hanna and I moved upstairs to my room, which we carefully explored, inch by inch. It was clearly a girl’s room: it wasn’t really that different from before – girl me was clearly still into the same things boy me was, namely hiking, sports, but also video games – but all my male clothes were gone, replaced by a selection of female clothing, mostly trousers but also including a few dresses and skirts. (And underwear. I blushed fiercely when I realised my boxers and undershirts had disappeared for parts unknown, and panties and bras and camisoles had taken their place.)

“I don’t get it. It’s as if the boy I used to be was never here, but I clearly remember being him,” I said. “I remember *him*.”

Hanna nodded. “Yeah, I do too. Not his name, of course, but my memories are apparently still intact. And yet, have you noticed the pictures in the living room?”

“Yeah,” I nodded in return: I’d given them a glance as we passed by on our way upstairs, and in every one of them I was a girl. “Is this normal?”

“It’s magic, Sylvia, it’s not even remotely normal,” she answered with a laugh. “But hold on, I know who can tell us.”

She grabbed her phone and dialled a number; after a few moments, someone picked up.

“Hey, Hanna!” said a girl’s voice. “What’s up? Why are you calling me in the middle of the afternoon?”

“Hi sis,” Hanna said. “You know, yesterday I went hiking with some friends.”

“You did? Good for you. What about it?”

“Well…”

In short order, Hanna had once again explained what had happened over the previous two days – the unabridged version, this time; I provided some input, clarifying a couple things, and in the end the first thing that came from the other end of the line was a deep sigh.

“Okay, first thing first: you are *so goddamn lucky*, holy shit, girls,” Hanna’s sister, Mary, said. “Seriously, there are lots of people, myself included, who’d give an arm and a leg to spend a day in an Enchanted Forest, let alone meet a Seelie Queen in person. Can I come along on your next hiking trip? I swear I won’t complain about how the boots give me blisters.”

Hanna laughed. “Yeah, sure. But I doubt we’ll find our way back there easily.”

“No, I suppose not.” Another sigh, and this one was definitely wistful. “Okay. Second: Sylvia, I think the unicorn hitting you basically rewrote reality.”

I blinked at the phone. “*Rewrote reality?* Seriously?”

“Animal magic is wild and unpredictable, so I can’t be a hundred percent sure, but from what you’ve told me it sure sounds like that. No one who wasn’t present for the event will even remember you as a boy – I sure as hell don’t, and I’ve met you a few times,” Mary explained. “And even for those who were there, ripple effect means girl you will soon replace boy you in their minds.”

“Uh… Um. Does… Does this mean I will forget who I was? I will forget myself?” The thought of it was really scary.

“I don’t think so,” Mary said. “You are you. You will always remember being, well, you. Only, you’ll have two sets of memories, the girl ones being dominant, but you’ll always be able to recall your boy self. Probably. Again, wild magic, not a hundred percent sure, but I’ve heard of it happening a few times, and it generally goes like that.”

“Okay,” I breathed out. “Thanks.”

“Thank you, Sis,” Hanna said. “You’ve been really helpful.”

“If you wanna thank me, bring your friend around my place for a visit,” was the reply. “I would love to run some tests, take a look at her. See what kind of magic we’re dealing with.”

“You have a mad scientist streak, you know that?” Hanna said with a chuckle.

A matching chuckle came from the other end. “Mad *witch*, thank you very much.”

“I’ll try to convince her, but no promises. See ya.”

“See ya, sis.”

A click, and the line went dead. Hanna sighed.

“Well,” she said. “Doesn’t seem like anything bad is gonna happen, so we can breathe easy.” She looked up at me. “How are you feeling?”

Yeah, that was the million pound question, wasn’t it? And again, like earlier that morning, there was only one answer. And I was even more sure of it this time.

“I feel fine. I didn’t think this would happen, of course, and I didn’t ask for this–”

“Say it again, but in a really deep and gruff voice,” Hanna cut me off with a smirk; I swatted at her.

“–but yeah, I’m okay with it. More than okay, in fact. I’m glad it happened.”

I locked eyes with her, and we both smiled.

“And I like you, Hanna,” I continued.

Her eyes widened. “You… What?”

“I like you,” I repeated. “Not as a friend. I *really* like you. I’ve been trying to tell you these past two days, all those times we were interrupted was me trying to say how I really feel.”

She just sat there, looking at me, stunned.

“So the question now is… How do you feel about me?” I asked.

She looked at me for a few moments more, then shook herself; she smiled.

“Well… You know how earlier today I said your new hairstyle made you look really cute?” she said.

I reached up, touched the elaborate braid the fairies had weaved out of my hair – which, somehow, was still intact – and nodded. “Yeah.”

“And how I said I thought you make a cute girl?”

I nodded again. “Yeah…?”

“Truth is… I thought you were cute way before that,” Hanna continued. “I’ve always thought you were cute. You were cute as a boy, and you’re cute now that you’re a girl.” She nervously bit her lip. “And I like cute people. I like *you.*”

She locked eyes with me, and her smile became even wider; I smiled too, my expression matching hers.

We leaned towards each other.

Our lips met, and we kissed.

And out of everything that had happened over the previous two days, that moment was the most magical of them all.

The End