

# when nothing lies at the end

Characters: [Maera](#), [Owain](#), [Isobel](#), [Naoise](#)

Date: 24 Rains 8294

Setting: Iadlain

Mae had checked and double checked her bags. She'd made sure to stuff every bit of equipment that would keep her safe that she could carry, and the pack was heavy but not impossible. She had on her warmest insulating gear enchanted to retain heat between the layers. She had *meatless* provisions and water, pocketfuls of salt, silver and iron charms, her wand and her staff. This was it, the other Atros Favored she had called were at her side, and it was time to go try to find the Nothing once again. It was probably getting sick of her visits by now; the thought made her smile wryly. "Everyone ready? Owain, you take the lead; you're the one who knows where to go, vaguely... right?" It was their last chance to turn back...

Owain made a noise that could have been a positive or a negative response to Mae's inquiry.

The journey wasn't going to be pleasant. Atros' gift of frost immunity was only conditional and it was impossible to keep up while sleeping, and it was more than a day's journey to the crevasse where the voice lived- or had dwelled, while the body of Atros had loomed over them. The sun hadn't risen in nearly a month now and the unnatural frost compounded with the infinite night to bring dangers more deadly than the creatures that had run off after their god, frostbite, starvation, hypothermia and more. They could *die*, cold and alone not twenty kilometers from their starting point without realizing it.

A frown crossed his features as he pulled up his pack, shoving the thoughts of their horrible and quite painful deaths to the back of his mind where he compartmentalized much of the very literal apocalypse that was turning the world into a frozen hellscape.

His accent, a mixture of Relan and Iadlish, made the Common that he answered quite harsh. "Uh, yeah. I guess. We aren't going to get *anywhere* standing around."

"Let's just get a move on before we start regretting it." Bel figured it *could* be worse. She could have died long before she'd even had the chance to *consider* traversing the man-eating forest. She could be eastbound with Him now, mindless, soulless, memoryless, leaving Sorcha alone to cry herself to sleep. Least she was doing that, but *alive*.

...Yeah, this fucking sucked. Having company didn't make it less so, but it at least increased their collective chances at survival. In fact - she snuck a glance to her right, where Naoise was looking cheerfully ill - without them, this whole thing would be a moot point.

Adjusting her pack with a terse inhale, Bel glowered at the forest and tried to think of it like this: even if they didn't do anything, they'd all probably die anyway. Better make it count.

Naoise's staff jingled in the wind. He never liked the sound of silver much, and he was hoping everything else in the forest shared the sentiment. This was not the way he wanted to reacquaint himself with the Wispwood, because he really hadn't wanted to ever come back, but there wasn't much to be done now, was there? Heavens, and he didn't even have anyone to pray to for help anymore. Why'd he come along? Good question!

Because he didn't want his friend to die!

And now, they may both die! Alongside their new companions! Which was great. This was great, everything was *great*. His knuckles pinched at the skin - if worse came to worst, he could at least set it on fire. The worst, that is.

The 'edge' of town is not as far as it used to be. Chains hung with iron and silver charms run between gutted buildings that used to form the outer districts but are now abandoned to the forest. The path that leads out to the Red Road and northern woods is overseen by a few ragged but alert battle mages, who glance towards the four travellers as they approach. They look puzzled or dubious at everyone except Mae. "Maera," one of them greets her, tilting his head at the others. "Where you heading out to and when you coming back, abouts?" It's the standard question to ask those venturing out these days, to make sure they know when something is amiss.

As the party approaches some of the battlemages watching the road, she nods back at them in greeting. "We're heading towards a large chasm of sorts... About a day's journey from here, I hear." She glances at Owain briefly for confirmation. "We'd *like* to be back as soon as possible... and hopefully not empty handed. Um... wish us luck I guess?"

Owain grimaced at the estimation, Mae was lowballing the journey and overestimating their own skill level. "Best case scenario we'll be back in three days, worst case-" He paused, mulling over the worst case of them dying horribly, and then decided against vocalizing it. The world was grim enough right now. "...Just expect around four days."

Mae stands back and nods like she totally knew those were the numbers all along... good thing she packed for like a week.

Bel returned the guards' stares in kind, her temper flaring with unwelcome adrenaline. She slunk closer to Mae instinctively. Naoise's trill laugh was brittle besides her. "Wouldn't it be fantastic if one of you lads joined us?" He was running his mouth - which meant he was nervous. Or scared. Guilt pecked at her stomach; she'd dragged him into this. So she turned to the guards to do her reluctant part: "...Any tricks we should know about to stay alive in there?"

"Four days. Alrighty then." The mage blinks at Naoise's rambling and Bel's question, doubt clearly crossing his face at whether they should be venturing out. He holds back whatever tactless comment is on his tongue though and glances instead at the other guards, deferring. An older human that Mae might know as Mairenn chips in. "A little green, ain't'cha? And not just 'round the gills." She nods a little at Naoise but her tone is kindly enough. "Well, the woods don't hold up much for tricks but... I suppose just keep as calm as you can - stop to breathe and sing a song if you must - and definitely run when you gotta." She shrugs with one shoulder. "Knowing when to call it quits is a lifesaver." The comment is a little directed (*if you're not up for this, don't do it*) but ultimately open to whatever they decide.

"The forest could use a little green, since we missed summer..." Mae muttered. A joke, but not of particularly good taste. She wasn't too thrilled about what they'd be facing on their way to the Pit either. But Naoise, Bel and Owain had already made it through the woods just to get to Iadlain; everything should be fine... she hoped.

"So, try your best not to die... It's nice to see that the advice *never* changes no matter how long you're away." Owain didn't hide his bitterness as he slunk past the guards. This day was going to be long and hard and the same tired platitudes that he'd heard when he was a child made him miss the frozen hellscape of Reluir. At least *there* the advice was more than the unhelpful tripe that anyone could tell you about the deadly woods.

His hand found the worn handle of his lantern as he tromped forward, leading the way into the woods.

Wrinkling her nose at Owain's sourness to the border watch, she made to follow him but not without a polite nod of farewell to Mairenn and the other guards. "Stay safe..." She at least wanted to have positive relations waiting for her if - *when* - they returned.

"This is so hopeful," Naoise chipped in as they filed into the forest. He waved at the guards with an unconvincing smile; at least Bel was looking a little less stormy. Maybe it was the bit about the song - her pride had probably been feeling the pressure the whole journey there. "So...how does this Atros' chosen thing work? Are any of you feeling unexplainable compulsions right about now? Asides from wanting to run, or maybe that's just me." Or maybe he should stop talking. Maybe they hear fear - had Criosaidh ever said something about that?

"Mostly it means we aren't going to freeze to death, and that I can tell Atros is over thataway." Owain jerked his thumb over to the east. He welcomed Naoise's chatter, it helped to distract from the horrors that awaited them in the depths of the woods. "I'm with you on the running, though."

That was an interesting point Naoise had though. Mae wasn't sure how this was supposed to work either; after all the last couple of times she'd found this spirit was by accident. She clasped her hands together and muttered a quick colloquial prayer, hoping for some kind of response. "Hi Atros, o Father of Darkness please give us pointers on which direction to go in, thy blessing be done, amen." Praying was just holy words and talking to a god, right?

Mairenn simply raises an eyebrow at Owain's sourness - nothing anyone could do about that - and nods to Mae in return. "We'll be waiting for you."

The road meanders through the ruined buildings and a small clearing before reaching the forest's edge. The eternal darkness makes lanterns necessary the moment they enter the trees - the glow of the town's lights off the snow isn't enough to show the way. This road is easy to follow though, thanks to the centuries that have broadened it.

Mae's prayer disappears into the night without any seeming effect. She is, perhaps, a bit less cold, but they haven't been trekking in the ice long enough for it to really seep in yet either.

This was nice... everything was infinitely spookier at night, and it was always night now so that was great. She couldn't lose her nerve yet though, they'd barely begun. She sighed at the silence that answered her prayer and shook her head. "Nothing from that... unless Atros speaks in silence.... maybe we should pick the quietest path." She joked. "Do you remember where the pit was, Owain?"

The wrought iron of the lantern felt heavy in his hand as he unhooked it from his belt and spoke the ignition word, his most trustworthy companion bursting to life with a bloom of dry heat that brought some feeling back into his fingers. "Deep into the woods, past a river... there were no

roads that lead to it. It was crowded by trees and the crevasse slashed across the land, multiple gashes across the land and deep inside-- at the bottom of this system of crevasses was the pit where the voice lurked." He frowned, the unpleasant feeling that the woods were watching him building in his chest. "Just north now, so the road will be our quickest way forward. ...We'll be very exposed."

Bel's breath frosted in the air as she tried to listen to both Mae and Owain around the thunderous thrum of her own heartbeat. "Right now would be a good time to prove you chose us, Atros," she muttered darkly, watching as a small flame bloomed in Naoise's palm. It twisted into a hare and pranced around the group in slow circles, hoping to distribute the warmth. "You're the one who knows his way around," he shrugged at Owain, half-wondering if he should ask about the crevasse and pit and all the things that made so little sense to him.

The forest feels terribly quiet around them, or perhaps their footsteps in the stiff snow are just relatively loud. There are enough little rustles and creaking of branches to indicate it is a normal kind of quiet though. It is impossible to see much ahead or between the trees.

The sound of running water approaches faintly. There will be a river ahead, spanned by a small bridge. It is a familiar spot for the Iadlish to veer off the road and collect herbs along the bank - before the current cataclysms, it was a relatively safe landmark to do so.

Mae's eyes jealously followed the cute bunny flame hopping around the group; she didn't have that kind of finesse with her magic but she could make a *great* explosion if necessary. When the sound of rushing water filled her ears she got a bit nervous as she remembered her run in with the damhaisce... but there were other things in the water too. She began muttering riddles to herself, trying to refresh just in case and followed whatever path Owain decided to take.

Owain's gaze remained level on the bridge ahead, the pit in his stomach only growing deeper as Naoise added a friendly, warm, and above all noticeable flame to their little party. He didn't like the innocence of the woods. It unsettled him deeply. At least when it was throwing monsters at them it was *obvious* about what was trying to kill them but here... it just seemed like every little thing around them was a trap just waiting to be sprung. He shuddered, drawing in a breath to calm his rapidly beating heart. Not even twenty minutes out and he was already paranoid. At least that feeling of danger hadn't left.... when he relaxed, then they'd be in trouble.

He had to *always* be alert otherwise they'd be dead. No, not dead. Killed.

Shaking his head to clear the thoughts of death and despair that had seemed oh-so-common since their patron god had decided to reveal who he was, Owain extended a finger toward the bridge.

"I don't like it but we don't have a choice... there are things that lurk in the river and we need to cross it to get deeper into the woods. If something grabs you, scream." He paused, before adding: "If it makes it so you can't scream, grab someone else."

Upon Mae's muttering, Bel squinted and knocked a gentle elbow against the girl's arm. "...What're you doing?" Two Iadlaine natives by her side, and she felt like a fish out of water. Except this was life and death, and Bel was very determined not to inch any closer to the latter than she already was. "If you're preparing for us to get mauled, tell me so I can do some chanting too." Would it help? Probably not. Would it ease her mind? As much as was necessary, given Owain's warning. She glowered at him, swallowing a curse that would do neither of them any good. "Oh, good."

Beside her, Naoise piped up again - hushed, this time. "Water, I can handle water. Hopefully just as well as anything that might jump out of it. I can't imagine screaming would do us well, it's already so deathly quiet." The hare returned to his hand; she could see its snout flickering, as if it had picked up a scent. "This would be a nice ambiance anywhere else."

"It would." Owain's murmur of agreement to Naoise's cheery comment belied the tension freezing his body in place as he scanned the treeline for any eyes looking toward them before carefully putting one foot in front of another toward the bridge. "I won't say don't worry about the monsters but... just be careful of ice when you cross. Slipping and falling in is deadly in this chill and I don't actually know if any of you can swim."

The bridge is encrusted with frost - their circle of lantern-light glimmers along its edges as they reach it. The sound of the water below them is hushed, trapped beneath a sheet of ice that covers the river. There doesn't seem to be anything of concern nearby but you can never really tell, especially in this darkness.

The old wood of the bridge creaks noisily beneath the feet of whoever crosses first.

Mae blinked as she was judged by Bel, expression becoming sheepish as she remembered the Relan native had no idea what to do. "I've heard about spirits that riddle those who cross bridges... but if you can riddle it back enough to stump it, it'll let you pass." She explained. "Math problems apparently count, I have some scribbled down if you need it. Just stay close to me and

you'll probably be ok." She was trying to be reassuring but honestly she never played in the woods much, for good reason. She just had to hope that she actually knew what she was doing.

She peeked at Naoise as he seemed *relieved* that there was water at all. "No, no, no... water is *bad*." She stressed. There were things in the water that would not die. "Okay... Here's what we're going to do: Owain you go first because you're the guide. *Do not scream* if something appears - it will most likely attract something else. Don't attack unless it attacks, just calmly prepare a riddle and be polite. I'll go last in case something comes up behind us. We'll put the Relans in the middle so they're less likely to get grabbed. Sound good?"

"...Sure, whatever floats your boat." He didn't spare much brainpower to respond as he came up to the bridge, setting foot on it carefully.

Bel scrunched her nose at the prospect of deflecting ghouls with *math*, but she didn't protest. Meanwhile, Naoise chuckled weakly at Mae's warning, but sidled ahead of both girls. "It's all bad, I know...but I can probably do something with these magic hands if it comes to it. Maybe. Yeah..."

The bridge is slippery underfoot but designed to be ridged, so there is enough grip if one doesn't rush. Damp mist rises gently from the river ice, making the air even colder as they cross.

Owain is almost at the other side when he hears, very briefly, a soft voice murmur *oh* from somewhere nearby, yet from no particular direction. The pitch of it belongs to a small child - unlike any of his companions.

The others, following behind him, don't hear or see anything out of the ordinary. The only movements seem to be their own and the road ahead stretches silently on into the dark.

Mae hovered close to Bel as they crossed, both to watch out for her and also for her own comfort; anything related to water creatures was never her most favorite thing in the world... Much less so in these woods. With no signs of anything coming up behind them, she wanted to hurry away from the water as soon as possible.

Owain stopped breathing.

Golden eyes scanned the treeline as he held up a hand to halt his companions. He figured Mae could handle herself but the Relans... he'd rather not take chances.

He turned so the rest could see his face as he held a finger to his lips, cocked his ear, and listened.

Bel was wondering whether her cloak could swallow Mae whole if the other girl were bundled into it when her nose crashed into Naoise's neck. She barely held back a curse as he slipped her a quick hiss of "Sorry," and inclined his chin towards Owain with a quirk of the brow. It might have been her imagination, but he looked half a shade paler. Motioning for Mae to follow suit, Bel craned her neck to listen - for a sound that never came. Nothing but the muted gurgling of water below them. She raised both brows at their lead, sharply gesturing to the frosted river for emphasis - nothing. Nothing, and she would really like to get the hell off this bridge, so *what* was the holdup, exactly?

The forest is silent, save for the sighs of water and leaves. The lantern-light doesn't reach far but for what it does, there is nothing to see.

There is no sign of the voice Owain heard.

Owain held onto the faint hope of hearing anything else for a moment longer before letting out his breath with a low curse and a puff of white air. He couldn't hold them up on the bridge for just a voice, not when nastier things lay in the black depths beneath. He'd explain further when they had time but for now they had to keep moving.

He dropped his hand and led the way forward once again.

Mae peered around the line of people stopped on the bridge, expression equal parts annoyed and unnerved. <<I'd really rather not stay on this bridge much longer, if we can help it.>> she mindspoke to Owain. <<Did you see something?>> but he'd lowered his arm and motioned for them to proceed so... must have been the wind playing tricks. Still, she kept an eye out as the shadows closed in behind them. It would inevitably only get worse from here.

Naoise had read his stories. The moment Owain stopped, he'd been ready to get mauled - and he might not have even put up a good fight, which was terribly depressing. Imagine his relief when the arm dropped, and they were free to cross once more. He barely contained a sigh of relief, but Bel went ahead and huffed gently behind him anyway. They were all ready to step off the water, Naoise was sure, and while he hadn't liked it either, straying once again away from a potential source of power fed his unease. He sucked in a breath, and hoped that whatever they came across - if they did, Atrios have mercy - was very flammable.



They each step off the bridge and, pace by pace, leave it behind. The sound of the water fades and their footsteps become, once again, the main sound in the quiet. The darkness gradually deepens the further they go, as the trees grow taller and more crowded. Whatever Owain heard doesn't seem to come again.

They are not at any particular landmark when all the lanterns suddenly go out.

Mae's first reaction was to grab onto Bel, who was closest to her to make sure that the next time she could see, she wasn't going to be *by herself* separated from the party. Her second reaction was to start praying to Atros again, mostly out of fright rather than for the sake of avoiding cold. Her next reaction was to try to spark two small flames, one behind them and one in front of them as far as she could reach with her magic to try and light up the area again.

Naoise's first reaction was also to grab Bel, followed by a sharp tug at what he could only hope was Owain's shoulder. Through his harried breathing, he managed to mimic Mae and spark two flames to the left and right so that they might have, at the very least, a perimeter of light. He could feel Bel rummaging for something behind him, shaky but overall calmer than he. The salt, probably? She'd packed a lot of it, thank the gods.

Owain's muted curse was cut short as something fell on his shoulder and he drew back his elbow to jab whatever was holding onto him before he remembered Naoise was the one behind him. He reached down to his thigh and unstrapped the silver knife from its sheath, the blade whisper-quiet as it came free of the well oiled leather as he held it underneath his cloak, the thick wool hiding his form and hopefully the naked blade from prying eyes.

"...Is everyone still here?"

The flames spark on either side of them, flickering a few times before becoming steady enough to illuminate again. Within their shaky circle of light, Owain stands there on edge and Naoise still grips partly at Bel. He is the only one gripping at Bel.

Mae is nowhere in sight.

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The flames flicker in front and behind. The cloth in Mae's hands feels thinner, more gossamer, than the material of Bel's cloak. In front of her, unperturbed at being seized by its lacy collar, a human-like child with no eyes turns to look at Mae.

None of the others are around.

Mae immediately knew something was off when her hands seized cloth that was much lighter, almost summery. Too thin for the weather, and definitely not Bel's cloak. Her prayer faltered and died as the flames she conjured were allowed to provide dim lighting and she could see, merely a foot away from her face because she was *holding onto it* was a pale, ghastly child with deep pools of void where its eyes should be. She bit her lip to keep from screaming, and of course none of her allies were in sight. *Of course!* This was how the wispwood worked... Slowly and very calmly she tried to let go of the child's collar and take a step back for some breathing room. Please let it be a riddler... at least the riddlers would *leave you alone* provided you got their riddles right. THEY HAD A SENSE OF HONOR.

"*Fuck,*" was the only thing Bel could say when she realized her cloak had been relinquished. Sure enough, a quick glance back confirmed that Mae had disappeared - spirited away? Is that how this shit worked? Where'd she go? What happened to her? Of all the *motherfucking* days- Naoise was staring at the empty space behind her with wide saucer eyes, white as the knuckles of his hand, still firmly locked on her arm. She could see Owain in the front - good. They were still mostly intact. She didn't like to think about Mae being...not that. *Atros, your blessing best be worth some shit right about now.* "What happened?" was her sharp bark to Owain, the only one who could have a clue. She sure damn hoped he had a clue.

Owain shook his head in response to Bel, reigniting Mister Lantern with a word. He slid the silver blade back into its sheath as he held out a hand to Naoise, something for the Relan to hold onto that wasn't the death grip on his shoulder, and finally replied with something other than a simple motion.

"A creature took her- and it's one of the tricky ones as it didn't physically tear her away from us. My best guess is she's stuck until she pacifies it or... doesn't." He sounded a hell of a lot more calm than he felt, his heart beating a mile a minute and a scream building in his throat. "We should wait here for her, in case it dumps her back where it found her when she... finishes."

The child-thing stares silently at Mae as she slowly lets it go, never turning away from her. Then, it takes a step towards her, its own hands reaching up for Mae's collar this time. Or-- perhaps for her face--

Its fingers are blackened as if with frostbite. Something dark and glistening oozes from its eye sockets, like congealing blood. It doesn't speak in the way a riddler does - instead, a rattling

breath escapes it and it trembles, as if in a sob or immense pain or both. A single raspy word emerges: "Eyes..."

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The words are barely out of Owain's mouth when there's a sharp rustle in the underbrush to one side. A ghostly-white face stares at them for an instant from the foliage, before letting out a shrill giggle.

"Lost something?" it says with surprising clarity, then laughs again and holds up what looks - for the instant it is visible - like a piece of Mae's cloak. It waves it playfully, mockingly just once before abruptly turning and running off back into the woods.

Without even a blink or a second thought, Owain hurls the nearest and heaviest thing he can think of at the back of the creature's retreating head. In this case, it's an ignited and iron-reinforced Mister Lantern.

Bel stilled. "What the fuck-" she began, shrill, before Owain flung something at it. The *lantern*? In front of her, Naoise gave a hysteric little chuckle. "Here's to hoping this works." He released Owain's shoulder and made a flicking motion with his wrist. The fire from the lantern popped, then increased in size until it was long and serpentine. It started after the figure.

Mae's eyes widened in realization as the child ghost reached towards her and she quickly took another step away, drawing her hood up and turning slightly so it couldn't see her eyes. This wasn't a riddler... but it sounded so sad. "I'm sorry," she whispers. "They are mine and I need them still. But... there are greedy creatures in the woods who have stolen many eyes. I know where they sleep; you can find eyes if you go there. Beneath the roots of hungry trees, down into the dark earth - follow the wind until you find them watching from the floor. They have so many, they've discarded the spares. You can choose whichever color you like from them - they only sleep when it's light out so they shouldn't be there now..." She didn't know *why* she had been possessed to try and reason with this ghost but something in the way it cried pulled at her heartstrings... Honestly anything to keep it from taking *her* eyes. But that was how people died here, and so she stayed tense and ready to move quickly; just in case.

Mister Lantern hits the bushes where the ghostly child had been with remarkable accuracy but doesn't hit the creature itself, as it dashes off nimbly. The surrounding frost keeps the lantern fires from spreading through the leaves - until Naoise takes hold of it. The flames brighten, focus, and then cut a burning path through the underbrush. There is a sharp gasp from the creature as the flames touch it, and then it vanishes completely.

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The ghost in front of Mae pauses as words spill from her, as if trying to concentrate on what she is saying. It seems to have difficulty though - its head tilts, then shakes. A distressed whine draws out from its throat. "Need..." it rasps, breathlessly, and then the whine grows gradually in volume until it is almost a scream. Its body jerks as it reaches for her again, more adamantly - more desperately, perhaps. Ice-cold fingers grab at the front of Mae's cloak and drag, as if it can barely support its own weight.

Owain gave the bush a very rude gesture and sneered at where the thing used to be, darting over to retrieve his precious lantern as he used his free hand to give Naoise a thumbs up. "Well that worked-!" He flashed the first honest grin he'd had since arriving but it quickly faded as he looked deeper into the woods, his face falling as he remembered their last party member. "...We can't go looking for her, she has to signal *us*."

Well *that* certainly hadn't worked. Just like all other kids whose expressions slacken with disinterest when adults talk too much... On the verge of panic, and adamantly praying to Atros for a miracle she yelped and dodged backwards again. "God-- Atros, please-- gotta find this kid some eyes--" dodging around, she tried to find some smooth round pebbles to warm slightly with her flames and then shove into its empty eye sockets. "There! Eyes...!" And she began frantically looking for landmarks and an easy way back to her friends.

"Oh," was Naoise's small reply as the creature winked out of existence. Silence languished in its wake, and he was distinctly aware that now they had no lead at all as to what happened to Maera, or if they could even get her back. Owain appeared optimistic, but Naoise couldn't share his sentiment. "I only hope that didn't make it angry," his laugh was a half-hearted imitation. Suddenly, Bel piped up - this time, with a hum. He felt his muscles relax as the song glided through the air.

The ghost child stops as Mae shoves something towards it. Its voice quietens and head tilts again as it takes the pebbles with a new air of curiosity. While it examines its new possession - turning them over and over in its hands, like a child with a puzzling new toy - there is a moment for Mae to look around.

Though the ground beneath is hard-packed dirt and frost like the road, there seems to be nothing around them but shadows. The road and its edges simply disappear into shapeless darkness, without even the silhouettes of trees. This isn't the forest... or is it? The road feels familiar but nothing else...

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In the wake of the vanished creature, Bel's humming eases the silence. There are some crackling sounds from the disturbed, charred underbrush as if disconcerted critters are moving around it, but otherwise there is no more sign of the--

On the other side of the road this time, too far within the trees to be visible, there is a shrill scream.

Okay... she was on a path. That was a good sign... Most of the paths she knew of eventually wound towards a main road. If she walked long enough, hopefully she could find her way back to the Red Road... She picked a direction that seemed the most familiar? the most correct? - familiar was good! - and *very quickly* started walking into the dark, trying to put as much distance between her and the ghost as she could before it realized what she gave it were definitely not eyes. "Thanks for the road Atros but where are the trees~?" she sang nervously, quietly in no particular tune. "Please give me more signs that I'm going the right way, thank you, amen---"

"No." Bel stopped humming, and glared into the trees. "No. We're not going towards that fucking thing. Didn't sound like Maera - we're not going." Naoise closed his eyes with a deep inhale and massaged the bridge of his nose - trying to disguise the fact that he had jumped, likely. "I...would agree, in most situations. We *are* missing one, though. What say you, guide?"

The humming wasn't angelic, by any means. It was obviously mortal in origin, with all the ticks of a normal girl humming a song and that was what made it so calming. It wasn't jarring against the dark world. It was just- there, and it felt nice. Up until the scream, anyway.

"Bel's right." Owain tromped back over to the party, reigniting mister lantern for a third time in a half hour. "...That sounded close enough that we *should* move. Maera might not be able to find us but... if we die, she won't be able to find our corpses either." He drew his cloak around him. "I'm not going to let either of you die here."

Mae's quick pace eats up the distance quickly, or seems to - it's hard to tell when there aren't any distinguishable landmarks to show the passage. She soon reaches a part of the road that is washed in blackness, as if deep shadows have somehow pooled there. She can see that the path continues on beyond it, but she would have to cross through this mysterious dark portion to reach it. Behind her, the ghostly child doesn't seem to be pursuing... where should she go?

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A moment or two after the scream, there is a sharp rustling and then loud crack of a branch from the direction it came from. It's hard to tell if it is approaching or staying put, but *something* seems to be moving around rather chaotically in there.

Mae is immediately suspicious of this dark patch, as she should be of anything new the forest presents to her, honestly. She never knew whether all the wraiths from last winter had been hunted down or otherwise destroyed.... this could very well be one lying in wait, dormant until someone disturbed it. She resolved quite happily to *not* disturb it, and sought to quickly find a way around it. While she did that she tried to appraise the nature of this darkness. Did it reflect the firelight she held? Was it wide enough to leap over if all else failed? What about the sides of the road, did those simply fade into this same oppressing dream-blackness that would deter her from going around it via stepping off the path?

Was his morbid curiosity worth being target practice for their new questionably-friendly tree monster? Naoise decided with action; trying to make as little noise as possible, he began to speed-walk in the opposite direction. Bel was quick at his heels, nudging him along faster with an urgent elbow. Unlike the last time they had gone on an adventure some forty-odd years ago, this...was not fun. Less than an hour in and they had already lost a person to Atros-knows-what, and why hadn't he done some proper Wisewood research *before* they headed out?

Bel had begun singing again - though jostled by her movement, Naoise could tell it was some kind of prayer. Scripture, maybe? He should have paid more attention to that kind of thing too. "O Father, lead me through the land, take me by your hand..."

Owain stalked after his two remaining companions, the harsh blue light of mister lantern giving his features eerie sharpness as his own prayer found its way to his lips. It was... far from something to sing about.

"Alright you great big bastard you sit on your high throne with your perfectly sculpted ass and your fancy-ass veil and ramble at us from on high and now you decide to go eat up one of our mates with your dumbass monster woods if we die I'm going to use the power you're granting everyone to haunt your ass til the end of days, which at this rate will be next week."

The darkness seems to swallow the light, making it truly formless - simply a swathe of void. While it isn't huge, it is definitely too broad to leap across. The darkness on either side of it seems similar - quiet, lightless, shapeless. In its own way, it's peaceful, as nothing seems to move within the shadows.

---

The noise in the forest is clear enough to tell that it is getting closer, now. There is the brief sound of a voice, as if beginning to yell but being abruptly cut off.

An unnatural silence suddenly falls. Then, with the faintest sigh, something dark like a tide, a cloud, rushes out from the trees.

The gap was far too wide for her short little legs to leap, curse them. She still wasn't sure whether she should touch it yet, but it was starting to look like she'd have to. Taking a chance, she extinguished her flames to let the darkness rush in and began to try to perceive whether or not that changed anything.

If all seems quiet and peaceful still and nothing has changed she'll start whispering to Atros again about why he would agree to let people have eyes if he doesn't want them to see anything... and then try to cross to the other side as she's praying in the dark.

Owain saw the cloud before it impacted, catching it out of the corner of his eye as it rushed toward the group. He would be *damned* if he let another member of the party die. Without a second thought he threw himself toward the other two, trying to knock them both down and under the cloud in a fullbody tackle.

This happened once that Bel could remember. Only then, it had been a cat, and it had missed. She knew this thing would not miss. She only had a split second to do the only thing she could: turn to face it, and give it a better target.

Extinguishing her flames doesn't seem to affect anything, except to make it - as expected - very dark around her too. A few quiet moments slide by and then she advances... one step into the dark pool, then another. It's hard to tell it apart from the rest of the shadows like this, and honestly everything seems-- the same-- she can still feel ground beneath her feet as she--

There is, abruptly, nothing solid to take her next step and she plunges straight down. It only takes a split second before she hits what feels like icy water.

---

Owain's tackle isn't exactly well-aimed but he does manage to smack squarely into Bel - knocking his skull soundly against her hipbone in the process but still, effective. The two of them

topple straight down into the ground as the dark cloud rushes over them. It feels terribly cold - a bitter, numbing sort of cold - but doesn't seem to harm them.

The same cannot be said for Naoise. With no prayers to arm him, the tide slams into his chest with a feeling like water and lifts him completely off his feet. The cold is so shocking that it robs him of all movement for a moment - in which he is swept along with the cloud as it surges across the road and into the trees on the other side.

The flash of white pain reverberating around his skull snapped Owain back to the horrifying reality as he shoved himself up, still huddled over Bel, his eyes following Naoise's sudden departure by the creeping black cloud that moved far faster than anything like that *should*. He swore, scrabbling to his feet unsteadily, trying to see straight as he grabbed up his lantern. He held out his free hand to help Bel up, but his words were harsh as he kept his eyes fixed on the treeline. "*What were you **thinking**? You can't help anyone if you're fucking **dead**, Bel.*"

The wind was knocked out of her; a second later, with an aching hip, she kicked at whatever was tangled around her legs and scrambled to her knees with sheer adrenaline.

Her hand was already outstretched before she realized she was too late.

Naoise didn't scream. Maybe she should be thankful because it might have been horrible, but not knowing whether he was dead or alive was worse. Bel heard Owain yelling, but her hands were shaking and the bile in her stomach was churning upwards. If she stood up and said in a very quiet voice, "Don't you *dare* lecture me," it was because boiling rage had nestled at the base of her skull. "We're going after it."

---

Naoise thought, *This must be what death feels like*. He thought it because he couldn't say it; he found he couldn't move any part of his body at all. For only a split second, he lost all motor function, and in the next, his teeth were chattering. It was *so very cold*. He couldn't see what was happening around him, but he knew that it was frigid, that he was not on land, and that he was moving very fast. *Fire*, he thought. *I need fire*.

Mae would have liked to say she kept her cool and managed to only gasp and brace herself for the fall. But that's not what really happened. Right as she was muttering "This isn't so bad," the floor dropped out from under her feet and she plunged into darkness with a startled squawk. Her voice cracked on the note and she was reminded of those horrible screaming goats some of the farmers had near the edge of town. But the thought was chased from her head as she plunged into frigid, inky waters. She spluttered, but luckily she had the foresight to have been praying



already so the shock of cold wasn't as deadly as it ought to be. "Really? Atros?? Right when I had almost grown comfortable?" She tries to find something to stand on and reignites her flames, looking around for a way out of this well as she continued muttering crossly to the dark god. She couldn't help but be struck by the familiarity though; she'd fallen just like this once before...

The dark tide rushes through and through the trees, a vast, unfathomable swathe of shadow. It leaves twisted, windswept spires of ice in its wake and moves so fast that within seconds, there are only ragged ends of darkness remaining, flowing past the two god-chosen elves.

Everything is pitch black in Naoise's vision. It's hard to breathe within this dark mass but it's mostly due to the shock arresting his lungs rather than any true smothering. Moving feels somewhat like swimming through thick oil - his limbs are heavy and the cold is repulsive somehow, like that of slime against the skin. He can hear branches snapping as he sweeps past them - at least they don't seem to hit him.

—

Mae's feet don't find any purchase within the water - she will have to swim if she wants to keep her head above it. Submerged like this, her flames can only hover above her head, casting reflections off the choppy surface. There is a current - the water is moving, actually quite strongly, in one direction, and it pulls Mae along. Broken sheets of ice floating on the surface occasionally bump into her, usually without warning - other than her fire, there is no light to see anything with.

Mae quickly registered that the water was too deep for her to stand in, and her crossly muttered prayers became nervous splutters as she also noticed, half a second later, that the water was sweeping her along somewhere. Quickly. "W-why? Why did it have to be *water*? Have you met me, Atros?" She tried desperately to keep praying; if she stopped now she would freeze to death in moments. Her winter cloak and gear wasn't making it any easier to stay afloat, and she was never a great swimmer to start with. But there was ice! Ice in the water! She flails her arms about gracelessly and tries to grab a large enough chunk to keep afloat on so she could look at the sides of the tunnel and determine if there was a bank she could make her way to. How wide was this waterway? Was she right in the middle of it? She didn't even want to know how *deep* it was... It could be thousands of feet; one couldn't tell with underground waterways... She had to think of something to get out of the water fast before the current decided to drag her under, or off the edge of a subterranean waterfall.

There is only empty darkness above the water and on either side of it; the firelight doesn't reflect off any walls or ceiling. The ice is too slippery and fragmented to hold onto but a broken branch

abruptly sweeps past her alongside it - and then another branch passes by overhead, narrowly missing her head. The light catches fleetingly on frosted leaves to one side of the water and there is a jarring shift of depth perception before it becomes evident that Mae isn't actually underground. There is a riverbank rushing by her, crowded with overhanging plants and roots. It isn't in reach - she is definitely in the deeper part of the river - but it is there.

Noticing the glint of the firelight on the icy leaves, Mae is filled with a sense of hope and determination as she realizes there is a bank to reach after all. It was farther than she bargained for, but she certainly wasn't going to give up now. Remembering when she learned to swim in Song Lu, she knew fighting to swim directly to the bank would take too much energy; instead she tried to go with the flow of the water in a diagonal direction, inching her way painfully slowly to shallower water and trying not to be dragged under by how heavy her clothes were. She'll discard her heavy winter cape to make swimming easier.

Naoise could deal with all these *sensations*, but he wished he could see. Breathing exercises didn't really work when you could barely catch a breath, but he tried to placate himself; at the very least, he didn't feel like he was being digested. He didn't know how well it would work, but he tried for a small flame, feeling thankful his frozen hand was still gripping his staff.

Owain's first gut instinct was to snap back something angry, spew forth some bile that he kept locked away and just repeat any of his and Bel's thousand and one arguments in the middle of the woods as their party members were picked off and killed far from home. It was on the tip of his tongue, his eyes flashing angrily as he wheeled to face her- but then, in his fury, something clicked.

"I'm sorry," his voice was quiet. "We will get him back." He placed a hand on her shoulder and used the other to press Mister Lantern into her chest. "We will but we need to be calm as we pursue, this wood- it uses anger. It makes people make mistakes and then takes from them." He took a deep breath, the last thing they needed was to snap their ankle on a root because of blind rage. " Take this, use it as a ward- Naoise can use it as a source of magic so tell me if it fluxates when we chase, that'll let us know he's near. You ready?"

It took everything in Bel not to swipe the offerings, because anger did not give easily to reason. Would she have fared better than Naoise, if she had been taken instead?

No. No, because this was not her turf, not her place, and she had waltzed in falsely believing that a *godly blessing* gave her power to conquer the unconquerable. Now, Naoise - if he was still alive - was alone in the man-eating forest instead of making ugly dragons with his tea and being with his family. Because he had been kind, and she had been a stupid friend.

She had done this. This forest, crawling with maggot-eating, life-sucking, repulsive *freaks of nature*, was making sure she understood that she was at its mercy - that she had been wrong. She took the ward, then the lantern, resisted the urge to smash it against a tree and set the whole damn place alight, and gave Owain a curt nod.

Shedding her cape allows Mae to move through the water better. It's still a struggle to stay afloat - her head bobs above and below the rushing surface - but she manages and eventually her hand brushes against some trailing roots along the riverbank. The bank here rises steeply for a bit before levelling out into the ground above. It will be a challenge to haul her waterlogged self out of the river and up this, especially after that taxing swim.

—

Naoise's flame flickers for a second but goes out quickly. It's so hard to concentrate in this numbing cold... in fact, the numbness is reaching past the point of discomfort and just becoming a feeling of... nothing at all. It's a little pleasant, actually. Like going from heavy to weightless...

The last trails of shadow around Owain and Bel are disappearing, sliding into the trees - soon, it will be out of sight. There is the trail of ice and broken branches it leaves behind though, making following it possible... as long as it stays near the ground. Their lantern-light doesn't reach as high as the canopy and the trees will only get taller the deeper into the woods they go.

Snagging the root in her hands, Mae clings to it for dear life, coughing and spluttering. Before doing anything she tries to catch her breath, tries to take inventory of her surroundings. What kind of tree is this? She floats her flames a little higher, wrapping her arms around the root and keeping an eye out for anything else that may be watching.

Owain nodded back, his eyes sliding onto the patches of ice and shadow- at least it was giving them a clear path to follow. He drew out his bow and pulled an arrow from his quiver, selecting one with a shimmering silver arrowhead. "Alright- stay close, hold onto my cloak, we've gotta move fast." He held out the tattered end of his cloak, pressed it into Bel's hands and then took off after the monster and Naoise, adjusting his stride to match Bel's.

There wasn't time to waste. Bel looked at the trail of ice, remembered what happened the first time Atros rose, and felt a disgusting mix of hatred and hope. If by some miracle it was the same kind of...thing, then even she could do something against it. Right? Yeah, and if she could, that Naoise most definitely...! She tried not to feel optimistic as she walked in stride with Owain, but she just wanted him to be alive. *Dammit, Atros...please.*

---

*This wasn't so bad.* The thought came fragmented, as he felt the flame snuff. An instinct told him that he should be alarmed, that *this* was the time to fight for his life, but it was difficult...

The tree roots are thin and numerous - maybe a willow? It's hard to tell. It seems like an ordinary tree, at least. As Mae's flames float higher, they illuminate the undersides of a canopy, but everything between the branches remains obscured in darkness. At this angle, she can't see the top of the bank either - only the steep side of it, filled with cracked stone and ice.

—

Ice and dead branches crackle noisily underfoot as Owain and Bel stride into the forest. The darkness immediately closes in around them, their lantern-light hemmed in by trees and scrub. The ground stays reasonably level for a while before starting to slope downwards - their fast pace is dangerous here, with the uneven earth and many roots hidden in the darkness. Yet they are still moving slower than the tide-like entity - the rustle of it through the trees fades steadily as it draws further ahead.

There is a loud snap right by Naoise's head and then a stinging sensation on his brow - another branch breaking in the tide's path, this time close and sturdy enough to graze him. The noise and pain are enough to jolt him out of his numb daze - even if he can't feel his limbs, he is still very much here. The unpleasant ooze of blood above his eye, at least, tells him so.

All seemed quiet enough for her and she really wanted to get out of the water anyhow... but if something unsavory showed up she could always jump back in and use it to escape... she looked around to see if there was a place she could drift to where it wasn't so steep... but otherwise she'll reach for her knives - her Sionnath's teeth dagger and her standard steel one - and use those to help her climb the bank. She'll try not to disturb the roots so much. "A-Are we done with the water now, Aros...?"

Owain swore, realizing that they couldn't make it in time- not if he had to keep pace with Bel and she *wasn't* a runner. She could also fix twisted ankles.... therefore.

"Bel." He halted, kneeling down and holding out his arms behind him. "Get on, I can move faster if I don't have to keep pace with you."

He'll take off if she gets on.

Bel gave him a look that she hoped communicated how much she wanted to throw *him* at the cloud, but she didn't have the time to waste on bruised pride. Getting on, she craned her neck for sign of the shadow.

---

*Not the face*, was his first groggy reaction. Something warm began traveling down the side of his temple; oh. *Oh*. That's right, he was about to die. But if he died...then what would happen to Bella and Owain? What about his family back home? Also, he didn't want to die? *No*, he thought shakily, *not now. Not here*. And with waked fervor, he attempted to cast once again.

Owain didn't respond, but instead took the chance to book it after the cloud as fast as he could go- eyes picking out parts of the trail as he booked it fast as he could toward the cloud, trying not to jostle his new cargo too much.

Owain takes off with surprising speed and, even more surprisingly, manages to keep it up. It's not a smooth journey by any means - the tangle of plants and roots underfoot makes leaping over them necessary to keep going at this pace - but with his concentration on his feet, he manages to notice each obstacle in time.

The ground grows steeper and the pull of gravity accelerates them dangerously. The racket of them crashing through the underbrush makes hearing anything else hard, but the entity ahead doesn't seem to grow more distant.

The trees open up, suddenly, and the ground ahead is too black, even in this darkness. There is a crevice in their way, its width impossible to tell at a glance.

—

The fire takes its time - Naoise can feel the heat on his fingertips. It struggles to grow in this dark mass but he pushes it and it suddenly bursts, with a bright crack.

He slips bodily downwards, as if this loosened the mass' grip on him. Another branch skims by him and he can feel-- wind, maybe? On his hair.

Owain skidded to a halt, looking down into the pit with a faint curse. Hopping from one leg to another nervously he glanced back at Bel, then at the pit. "Finding a way around will take too long- should we try and jump it?" He looked down into the depths... as a thought flickered

across his mind. There had been a pit before and all that was different in the depths was some sort of *movement*. He really hoped he wasn't wrong.

After having gotten smacked by some branches in Owain's mad dash, Bel was feeling even surlier than before. Still on his back, she barked a mirthless laugh at his suggestion. "You've got to be fucking joking." Ah, but... her laugh petered off instantly - they didn't have a choice, did they? It was that, or let the cloud escape. She kicked frantically for descent. "Do it. Do it, hurry up."

---

*What in the world was this thing?* The extra sensation was doing Naoise good; he could think properly, even if the cold now felt almost *worse* for it. Whatever he was trapped in though, didn't appear to want anything with him - for now. He didn't know for how much longer, and waiting around seemed like the worst idea he'd ever had, so he closed his eyes, and willed the fire to feed on whatever was holding him.

Owain nodded, hiked up Bel up on his back, took quite a few steps back toward the edge of the clearing and then took a flying leap

It's a good leap. Owain's feet push firmly off the edge and the two of them are launched into the air. Darkness rushes by - in the swinging lantern-light, they can see that below them is only gaping blackness. For a cold moment, as they reach the peak of their arc, it seems to stretch on forever.

Then, very abruptly, Owain hits the ground on the other side. The loose earth buckles beneath the force of the impact and his balance tips, knees smacking into the soil - and feet skidding out into sudden emptiness. He has landed on the very edge on the crevice, which is mostly dirt and frost rather than rock, and so is quickly giving away.

—

Now that his head is clearer, Naoise can really feel how awful the coldness is - borderline painful and close to debilitating. He pushes his focus into his fire though and again, after a moment of dense resistance, it flares into a single bright burst. The warmth from it is deeply, viscerally pleasant and suddenly, he is free-- loose-- *falling*--

He has no idea how high up he actually is but the crash of branches is loud around him and very sharp on his bare skin as he plunges past them.

*Shitshitshitshitshit-* Was it adrenaline, or survival instinct that allowed Bel to claw herself upward using only her arms? Didn't matter - either way, when she thought about what lay gaping behind her, she scrambled with haste, almost forgetting not to kick Owain below her. If not for the fight-or-flight in her veins, she wouldn't have had the strength for this at all, but best not think about that. *Cloud. Where's the cloud?*

----

*Shit.* Naoise really wished he knew air magic.

Owain grabbed at the slope, clawing his way up as he tried not to think about how *close* they'd come to death. He could feel the ground giving way beneath him and he knew he'd have to keep going up- and he didn't doubt that Bel was in the same position- with less strength. He hauled himself up as fast he could, pausing only momentarily to grab the back of Bel's cloak and trying to haul her up even further.

Mae's arms are tired from the swim and her clothes are heavy with water, but she manages to slowly haul herself slowly up and out of the river. Her knives give her purchase on the slippery rocks and, once her feet are on the jutting tree roots, it's not too much more effort to push herself over the edge.

While her focus is spent on the climb, her fires shrink and dim. By the time she is finally, safely on level ground, she is very out of breath.

—

Owain and Bel both scabble quick enough to avoid backsliding into the void. Owain finds his feet first, and then his feet find more solid ground. His yank at Bel's cloak pulls her further along as well and, within moments, the two of them are a safe distance from the gaping fall.

The cloud isn't visible through the darkness, but there are streaks of ice still marking its passage on the upper trunks of trees. It seems to be flying higher and higher, as the trees grow taller. If it continues like this, their lights won't be able to reach high enough to illuminate the ice marks anymore.

—

Naoise plummets. The branches that whack him on the way down slow him a little but not enough, and the longer he falls, the worse the prospects of landing are - gravity is not forgiving to organisms of his size and mass--

But water, perhaps, is. There is a huge, shattering crash as he plunges straight through the ice over a - lake? River? Who knows, but it's fortunate that Iadlain has so many of these. His breath is knocked entirely from him and a white pain bursts in his ribcage, but the water is deep enough to absorb all the force of his fall.

Mae huddles under this normal enough tree - a willow? - for a while, trying to catch her breath and take inventory of her surroundings. She laced fire through the enchanted threads of her clothes, against her skin to minimize the glow and begin attempting to dry herself out while she made the most use of Atros' given immunity to cold. She peers into the dark, praying that nothing was watching her, just one moment of peace and quiet please - really that's all she was asking for...! She looks up and downstream, trying to determine where she came from and where the river is going. She looks at the opposite bank, is there anything over there? "You know... that stardust stuff Sorcha had in that fairytale would be really useful right now... couldn't that one guy see in the dark because of it?" But of course, there was no answer from the silent god.

*Crap.* There just wasn't any time for them to resume the piggyback without losing the cloud further, so Bel began her own mad dash. It would have to do; as she sprinted, she hissed, "If you see it, *shoot* it!"

---

Ah.

That...that was a bone, wasn't it? Oh dear. Naoise blacked out for half a second, but when he regained consciousness, he almost felt relief. He'd escaped...the thing, and he was in water. Granted, freezing water, and Maera had been so concerned about things *in* the water before, so maybe this wasn't time to celebrate. Trying to not think about what was keeping him company, and also the fact like he felt like he was split down the middle, Naoise willed the water around him to still and burst upwards.

"Understood!" Owain threw himself into a full dash behind Bel, his attention split as he tried to pull out one of his arrows and affix pitch to it while he ran. Not his wisest move but also the quickest way to have a fire arrow ready.

The river looks the same as any in Iadlain, though Mae's vision doesn't reach very far in this darkness either. It runs with the downwards slope of the land, not steep enough to break into rapids but enough to flow strongly. The other bank is too far for her to make out anything - the



glimmer of firelight on the water's surface simply ends in blackness. There doesn't seem to be anything alarming nearby though, at least for the moment.

The rushing of the water drowns out smaller sounds but somewhere downriver, there is a faint, irregular splash. It sounds reasonably far away but still suggests that *something* there moved.

—

Naoise musters enough control to push the water beneath him upwards, and it lifts him bodily with it. In an instant, he bursts above the water's surface, droplets raining all around him - and though the water quickly thins as it falls back down, there is enough momentum to carry him further through the air. He hits the icy earth of the bank with a solid *thud* that sends a nauseating new spike of pain through his chest, but he is successfully out - not kidnapped, not falling, not drowning.

—

Running with arrows is indeed not Owain's wisest move. While his attention is on the pitch instead of his feet, the uneven ground throws one of his steps, and his balance with it. He trips right over and, hands occupied by equipment, doesn't catch himself before his cheek smacks the dirt and inertia flips him into a roll. With the slant of the land, he will keep tumbling downwards a fair way if he doesn't free his hands.

Mae breathes a sigh of relief; for the moment she was alone. She had to get moving though; that probably wouldn't last very long--- Just then she heard the sound of a splash somewhere downstream. With no real idea of where she was and no sign of her allies, she was wary she had two choices. She could follow the river, using it as a landmark and try to avoid whatever it was that made that sound or she could stumble aimlessly through the trees until she couldn't tell up from down in the unyielding darkness. She couldn't tell which one was worse; the forest wasn't what it used to be so everything she knew about it was hopelessly outdated now. Still, having the river nearby was more of a mental security; running water made her feel like she had a place to run if need be as certain things couldn't cross it before. She picked her way into the dense shadows of the tree-line and followed the river as quiet as she could. She gave it a wide berth, but peered carefully to see if she could determine the source of the splash, and whether or not she should put as much distance between herself and the sound as possible, her prayers long since becoming silent whispers in her mind. She minimized her light, trying not to alert whatever it was that she was there.

Bel watched Owain with frantic bewilderment. She'd just set him up for failure, and there was nothing she could do about it without tripping over *him* and becoming a live rolling pin herself.

All she could do was move out of the way, and let him figure it out himself...or let fate decide the rest.

-----

Everything hurt.

Now that he wasn't in immediate danger, Naoise *really felt* every part of his body aching. Also, he was freezing, and the ground below him was freezing, and really, he kind of felt like an ice sandwich. Christening his success with a groan into the dirt, he lay there for a few moments longer before turning onto his back and groaning into the air. Softly.

First order of business was getting the moisture out of his clothing. With bleary concentration, he drew the pointer finger of his left hand like a wand and attempted to collect the external liquid off himself. In his right palm, he opened a gentle flame.

"Shi-i-i-i-i!" His voice kept cutting in and out as Owain tumbled down the hill quite a bit faster than he had any intention of doing. As he passed Bel by, he tried to throw up his hands to toss the lump of pitch and the arrow into the darkness and grab ahold of anything to stop his descent and get his feet back on the ground.

The steady rushing of the river and her own footsteps crackling in the icy underbrush are the main sounds in Mae's ears as she heads downriver. Her small firelight only illuminates a step or two ahead of her - the darkness is deep and all-consuming otherwise.

As such, she barely sees what blurs towards her from the edge of her vision, and doesn't have any time to react before she is thrown suddenly off her feet. She hits the ground before anything sets in - something struck her in the left shoulder, there is a cold, sharp stinging of gouged flesh, she is on her back, *there is something moving very fast behind her*.

—

Owain's hands scrabble at the earth as he tumbles past it and he manages to slow himself before he breaks his neck entirely. He finally rolls into a small ditch in the ground and, thankfully without the momentum to roll out of it again, wedges there.

Less thankfully, there is something cold and wet in the bottom of the ditch, which he lands squarely in. It splashes thickly and he feels small, jabby pieces against his back. It smells, awfully, of rotting flesh, and though it's too dark to see what exactly this is until Bel's lantern-light reaches him, Owain could make a guess.

---

Naoise's clothes mist gently as he filters the water out of them. The flame by his right hand is blissfully warm, returning feeling to his fingers and distracting from the pain that throbs with each breath. For now, the forest seems to be giving him a much-needed respite.

It was quiet as Mae carefully picked her way through the trees. Eerily quiet, but then again, when was anything in Wispwood *not* eerie? Still, there was a difference between the remote quiet of the wilderness and the *absolute silence as creatures hid from something stalking them through the underbrush--*

Something slammed past her with enough force to throw her aside, and with the crushing darkness of the woods she couldn't tell up from down as she spun through the air. She landed with a resounding *THWACK* flat onto her back, too off guard to brace for impact and she swore and swore again as the burning sensation of a fresh wound made itself very known to her. She needed to get up, there was something, something there, too fast---

Shedding her heavy outer cloak had made it somewhat easier to scramble upright and she braced herself, grabbed her staff and took a running start towards the river. What was it? What was chasing her?? Whatever it was, she needed distance *fast*, and risky as this was she already knew she had little chance to escape otherwise. Bracing herself, she channeled raw ignether to a condensed point under her and then released, launching herself through the air over the rushing water with an explosion of bruising force. She uses her sturdy rowan staff to shield herself as she sails through the air, bracing for a rough landing and preparing to put as much distance between her and the booming crack of her magic as possible.

At the very least, Owain's tumble flattened the undergrowth for her. Bel's sprint slowed to a tentative trot as forest floor pitched downwards; she could see the ditch Owain had rolled himself into, and gripped a tree branch before holding out the lantern. She hadn't forgotten cloud by any means - for a moment, she had considered continuing ahead without her companion altogether, but she wasn't about to say it. Thanks to the adrenaline, she wasn't feeling hysterical about it - yet.

Yet.

"What'd you break?" she called, squinting against the light. ...Was there something else in there?

----

Ow. Naoise tore up, just a little. Whatever had happened to him *really fucking hurt*, and somehow, it had been worse than the wraith invasion. That wasn't supposed to be possible, he thought with a grunt, as he brought himself to one knee with his staff. Yep. Something broke. Walking would be a task, but he'd have to do it. Staggering up, he reeled for a moment before expanding the flame; he couldn't see jack shit.

Wherever he was, he needed to find Bella and Owain...however he would do that. *Really, how?* But he'd *have* to. Atros knows that they could be faring worse.

Owain didn't want to look down. He really didn't.

He hated the fact that he knew the distinctive smell of corpse, and he hated even more that the thing he'd landed on had squished and splashed.

Or the gritty disgusting thing he'd landed it was also *jabbing* him.

"J-just get me out." Owain's voice, surprisingly soft, trembled despite his best efforts as he refused to look down. "We h-have to keep moving."

Mae's explosion is well-placed and she is launched powerfully through the air. The surrounding forest lights up with the burst for an instant but there isn't a chance to look anywhere except ahead, or to do anything except brace for the landing. Consequences would have to come when they did.

She clears the river cleanly and hits the bank on the other side hard, rolling clumsily. Bushes both cushion and scratch her as she tumbles, and a tree trunk eventually slams her to a halt, knocking all the wind out of her. As expected, a rough landing. Physically battered too much in too little time, it will take a moment before she can stand again.

—

As Bel reaches Owain, there is a small movement in the sludge around him. The lantern-light glistens off something slick, round and translucent that suddenly pokes out - it looks like some kind of leech or maggot, but with a head the size of a fist and many tiny teeth.

There are several, encircling Owain on one side, but they aren't close enough to touch him and just peek curiously around at the disturbance to their home - for now.

—

Naoise is wobbly on his feet, but he can walk. As his flames expand, they illuminate trees around him - tall trees, rising up high enough that he can't make out the canopy. Some glittering ice marks are just visible in the upper reaches, marking the passage of the cloud that was carrying him.

What he fell into looks like a small lake, frosted white with ice except for the shattered hole he made. It is long and narrow and winds between the trees, out of sight. As he observes it, there is a sudden flash of light from where it disappears, followed a second later by a distant *crack* like thunder.

Mae crashes down on the other side - on *solid* ground and not in the water! - and tumbles squarely through a couple of bushes before she comes to a stop. For a heartbeat, she's staring up at the sky trying to determine if she's imagining the stars swirling around her vision before shaking them away. She was proud of herself for that actually *working* but the thought didn't last long as she realized how *loud* everything was with the silence of the forest; and that sound certainly wouldn't have been missed. With a quick wheeze of a prayer to Atros, she knew she was in the thick of it now if she didn't *get moving*. She scrambled up again, using her staff to steady herself and took off downriver again, her run wobbly as she tried to find her legs again but soon she was sprinting along the river through the undergrowth as fast as her feet would take her. Distance! Gotta get distance...!

*Oh for the love of-* At the sight of the things, Bel nearly retracted her hand in disgust. So many all in one place - a nest? *Great!* They didn't look like they wanted to make Owain their next meal just yet, though. As long as neither of them fucked this up, it would be fine. *Atros, all of this is for you. So help us out, goddammit.*

"Grab on, and don't splash for anything," she growled low, extending her hand until it hurt. Her free arm tightened around a sturdier branch, and for extra measure, she locked her leg against a root.

----

Naoise squinted, thoroughly aware of his labored breathing and hoping that he was the only one. As he thought about how he was going to find his way back to his companions, some kind of explosion blasted from the distance - the same way he figured he would have to go. He grimaced, and, spreading his arm so that the flame separated and encircled him, inched forward. *Please let it be flammable. Please, also let it be blind.*

The newfound monstrosities that the light revealed tripped a switch deep inside Owain's brain, some primal urge awakening with a faint hiss of escaping air as his golden eyes went wide and

his breath squeaked out. It took all of his mental fortitude to realize that Bel was saying something- and then it took another herculean leap to realize that she was offering her hand to *him* and not just extending it randomly.

Without a word he reached up, the corpse-slime sliding off his cloak in disgusting rivers, and took Bel's hand- pulling himself out of the ditch slowly as his eyes desperately searched for hers, trying to convey how much he was holding in a building shriek of pure horror.

Fast turns out not to be that fast at all. Still partly winded and with riverside shrubs tangling at her feet, Mae scrambles downriver for maybe a few feet before she stumbles. A full sprint is too taxing on her body right now - if she continues like this, she will collapse in a few seconds. Her left arm feels numb and heavy, and now that the initial adrenaline is fading, it hurts immensely. Should she look at it? Or can she put it off until she's further away?

—

With Bel's help, Owain eases out of the decaying sludge. The leech-like creatures inch a little closer but seem to just investigate the spot where he was. Slowly, Owain reaches the top of the ditch - bruised, coated liberally with muck, and covered in scratches that will probably turn bad if he doesn't clean the rot out, but otherwise intact.

Ahead of them, sounding very far away, is a very faint *snap* like something bursting.

—

Naoise inches along next to the lake. When he reaches the end he couldn't see before, it becomes apparent that this lake is fed by a river. The land curves gently upwards where the river comes from, shallow for now but growing steeper. There are no more disturbances he can detect - no sounds or lights except for his own. The river diverges from the path of ice left by the cloud entity though. Should he follow it? Would it be a shortcut back or would it draw him further away from Bel and Owain?

"...Thank you." Owain didn't even bother to hide the shakiness or the raw emotion in his voice. He was tired already, bruised, and the journey had barely started. This was going to be a long one and he could barely help keep one person safe and that wasn't even *himself*. He didn't want them to die out here but maybe his experience had dragged them on a fools errand to their deaths. *I want to hel-*

The bursting sound resounded from up ahead and he grunted in surprise, fumbling for his bow as he casually took a step forward to shield Bel from whatever monster was coming at them, then glanced back at her. "C-can you raise the lantern higher? We have to see to help Naoise."

She was doing great, she thought. She was running, successfully, putting distance between her and the disturbance she caused---

Then her vision cleared a little more. The combination of overexertion and vertigo had made her head spin and it *felt* like she was zooming through the woods but she was really only shuffling pathetically through the snow. She stumbles into a tree, trying to shake off the lingering dizziness because she knew, *she knew* things would be coming here soon but she was tired and aching and scared and she couldn't see and *damn* did her shoulder hurt...!

She decides to try and cover as much distance as she can before deeming it safe enough to pause to check on her wound. It wouldn't do to be leaving a trail of blood for the spooks to follow but she still felt *far* too close to the sound and the light and whatever that thing was that attacked her.

Bel alternated between curling her lip at Owain's injuries and glancing forward, ears alert for any other disturbances. Shitty, and probably dangerous, but now that she had a moment of respite, the anger began to crawl back to the surface. It's not like they had a choice - or, well. She wasn't going to offer one. The cloud hadn't appeared to know any *fancy maneuvers*, like moving sideways - so maybe they still had a chance.

"Don't need to tell me twice. You, on the other hand, need to dress that shit first." She stuck her free hand into her pouch, and fished out a bottle of clear liquid. "It's going to sting like hell, but grit your teeth. I can close it while we go." Tossing it to him, she turned - away from the glistening pile of Atros knows what - and hefted up the lantern. Once she saw any trace of ice, she began to move.

---

A conundrum was the last thing Naoise wanted, because that required him to use his brain, which took more energy than he probably had left. On one hand, there would be no way for him to scale the rest of that river without crawling, and his staff was *not* made for that, unfortunately. On the other, he recalled being whacked by many a branch while on (in?) that icy cloud-ship - more trees, more hiding places for things that may be deadlier than clouds.

He sighed, and decided to meet halfway - he would follow the icy cloud trail, making sure that he could see the river. Once he couldn't, he would stop to reassess. Yeah. Solid. *You've got this maybe-not-dying thing down, Naoise.*

Mae pushes onwards. Her shoulder throbs with each step and now that she's noticed it, she can't shake her mind from the sensation of blood oozing down her arm. She will be leaving a trail for sure.

She isn't sure how much distance she's covered when she reaches her limit, but it will have to do. A fresh wave of dizziness tells her it's time to stop before she faints. There is an alarming flash of movement near her feet for a moment, but it turns out to be a bloodwing butterfly - several, in fact, crowding to snatch up blood from her path and clothes.

—

There are no more sounds after the strange burst, and nothing comes towards them. Lifting the lantern higher doesn't reveal much more except the branches of trees. The ice trail is becoming steadily higher but is still within sight, for now. There is still a chance to find Naoise.

—

Naoise himself continues along the ice trail, with the river visible through the trees to one side. It draws steadily away the further he goes, until he is on the brink of having to make the delayed decision.

Something small floats past his flames, illuminated a rich red in the light. It's a butterfly. He doesn't recognise it but it's pretty and hopefully not deadly. It doesn't seem concerned with him, at least, simply passing by as it flutters towards the river.

Owain gave a grim nod and followed after Bel, jogging after her as he splashed the liquid on his scrapes and spat out a literal curse (His sister was a witch, she knew quite a few of them in Iadilic Canan) as he felt the distinct sting of alcohol burning away the infectious goop from his cuts. He began to speed up as he saw the sparkles of ice climbing higher- he'd be a dead man if he lost Naoise too- at least this one they had a chance to save.

He broke out into a run again, angrily gritting his teeth as the evaporating alcohol brought a chill to his veins that reminded him to swear out a prayer in between his loping strides up the trail.

When Mae determines she's reached her limit, she finds someplace relatively hidden to settle down in before she can fall face first into the snowy earth. She cringes as she sees the splatters of red in the direction she came; she'd felt the blood dripping down her arm but she didn't think it was *that* much... She'd have to address it quickly. She pulls some bandages out of her soggy pack to try and patch herself up until she can find the rest of her party and get help.



A flutter of delicate wings against her cheek makes her flinch - even the most harmless seeming things here can mean the difference between life or death--- In the dim firelight she casts, she sees the reddish tinge of its patterned wings and recognizes it. Cass was fond of illusioning these around him, to the point where witnessing groups of them at a time became synonymous with his presence in her mind. Wouldn't that be a stroke of cosmic luck, if he were to find her now...

But no. He'd been missing for some time. And he never worked in straightforward ways; he'd probably find a puzzling roundabout way to help her help herself and she'd never know he was there. These bloodwings were getting annoying; swarming around her arm and making it difficult to treat herself... She puffed up a gentle flame to ward them away, wary of what else might see those flames in the woods. If the swarm is persistent she might have to do it multiple times....

"Shoo," She hisses. "Go away!"

When she was sure Owain had doused as necessary, Bel began to hum low. She'd heard that animals could hear higher pitches - and the things here...were animals. Maybe. She hoped it would counteract her volumes. Busting out in choir excellence would kill them immediately, but she also needed Owain to be in working order so he could do the heavy lifting.

This was the last place she wanted to compromise, but this forest didn't care much about what *she* wanted, did it?

-----

The butterfly agitated Naoise. Not because it had fangs, or because it had suddenly begun cackling at him. It was just...so *normal*. He stared at it a moment longer before turning to the trees, deciding to succumb to a fate of being ambushed -

When he heard something.

Something that sounded very much like a voice. He cast another glance at the trees, deliberating - before gently singing a neighboring tree to mark his place and turning to the sound, cautious but hopeful. Placating himself with the fact that, worse come to worst, he had both *water and fire*.

The contents of Mae's pack are fortunately still dry, thanks to the usual proofing enchantments. She unfolds the bandaging clumsily, having only one fully functional hand, and presses it to her wound. Dressing it properly requires more strength and coordination than she has right now - stemming the blood will have to be enough until her stamina is more recovered.

The butterflies are persistent. They land on the hand over her wound, seeking the gouge to drink directly from. They flutter wildly away from her puffs of flame but continue coming back, some settling for the stains on the ground.

There is a faint crackle in the underbrush downriver, as if something is approaching. She can't see what it is though.

—

The compromise in her singing keeps Bel's healing from reaching full efficiency, but it slowly helps Owain's cuts to mend and purge. It saves her breath as well, as they forge onwards. Eventually, the trees open a little and they are greeted with a frozen lake blocking their path. Well, a mostly frozen lake. There is a gaping hole in its ice, as if something emerged from it. The ground around it looks a little trampled too, though they can't tell from what until they are closer.

—

As Naoise approaches the direction of the voice, he sees a brief, bright flicker in the darkness ahead. A flame? There are more butterflies here too, floating in the same direction he is going. He can't make out anything else though and, very faintly, he thinks he can smell blood. The metallic scent makes him feel a little more ill than he is already.

Mae couldn't manage much beyond pressing the bandage to her wound, and these butterflies were getting annoying. There was a fuzziness about her mind, however, and she knew she was losing too much blood. Her heart fluttered in panic, but even that felt dulled and all she wanted to do was rest...

But these *stupid butterflies* wouldn't leave her *a l o n e*--- She huffs fire at the aggressively, but her success is only momentary, especially as she hears something downriver. Unable to get up and run away anymore, she curls herself behind the cluster of rocks and trees to hide and pray because these bloodwings were like a beacon to anything looking for fresh blood....

A lake...a hole...huh. Bel held her breath as she inched closer to inspect the tracks with the lantern, feeling her anger subside as she realized that they were - or looked like they could very well be - feet. She exhaled thinly, mind racing - maybe? To Owain, she murmured, "Does anything in this place wear boots?"

---

Hm. Accosted by the stench of blood, Naoise was feeling a little worse about his previously excellent decision. Okay...so he and his trusty, hopefully not-fucked-with elf ears heard what

sounded like a voice. And, there was fire. And blood. And...butterflies, that appeared mostly normal. So: a person may be injured, and could be...trying to cauterize? Gruesome, but maybe not too far-fetched in these woods. Briefly, he thought about Maera, and the fact that the voice he heard had sounded feminine, but shrugged it away with a flat chuckle.

He'd go a little closer to check, but there was no way it'd be her - right? All the better if it were, but the chance of that...ha! Anyway. He drew his finger again, pulling the fire upward - bright, but also taller, in case the thing was *not* a person and came flying at him.

"Several things can approximate wearing boots but I've never heard of them living under the ice before... usually they do a better job of pretending to be mortal." He kept his voice similarly low and calm. "...but..." He glanced up, staring desperately for any sign of the icy trail before looking back down at the crushed undergrowth, still not quite sure what had made it. "...this is our best bet to find Naoise. Hold onto my cloak, we don't want to get separated now."

This time he took the chance to follow the crushed undergrowth slowly, nocking an arrow to bowstring as he led the way down the trail.

Owain's cloak is still sludgy from his earlier fall, but it will serve its purpose. The trampled trail leads along the lake until it joins with a slow-moving river, then continues up it. The ground gradually slopes upwards and the river flows faster. Here and there, the footsteps are clear enough to see that they are spaced quite close together - whoever, whatever is walking is doing so quite slowly.

—

The butterflies are making Mae's position quite obvious indeed. Still, she hides and waits. From the crunch of dirt and underbrush, she can tell that whatever is approaching her is getting closer... and closer...

Unexpectedly, a light that isn't her own flares nearby. For an instant, it illuminates what looks like a humanoid thing with fires instead of a head, and Mae's fight or flight reflex kicks in. Then it resolves itself into an elf who simply has flames in front of him.

—

Naoise's fire isn't as well-controlled as it normally is. It dims for a moment, then expands, and it takes a moment of extra concentration to mould it into the shape he wants. The stress of his injury is taking its toll. Still, once the fire is corrected, it shows him the huddled figure of-- a person, soaked in dark blood on one side. It's a horrifying enough sight that it takes him a second to realise who this actually is, and then it's-- worse, but also better.

Mae's breathing hitched as terror began to take hold. It was too close, and these damn butterflies wouldn't go away; there was no way she'd be able to escape—

She thought about her family, how they'd begged her not to go while she was convinced she had to. She thought about Xan; he would be angry, and he would despair. But, again, she was glad he was at home nice and safe...

A bright flash in front of her eyes startled a yelp from her and she scrambled backwards in the snow but she didn't make it very far before her shoulder twinged painfully. Her hand pressed the bandages harder into the wound and she used the rock to brace herself, shaking her head. The tips of her fingers were starting to feel tingly, and her gaze was a little fuzzy but she realized the light in front of her was an actual flame and not wisp light; she'd been found by a person!

"N-Naoise?" She's never been so happy to see another person. "Where are the others?"

*Oh my god.* Naoise blinked slowly, unsure of whether to panic or celebrate. Surely, a coincidence could not have been better timed; and he though such a thing would have been bullshit! "Maera? What in the world happened - where did you go? What - you know what, give me a second." Hobbling over to her with more than a few muted wincing of "ow" and "ouch," Naoise declined toward his relatively uninjured side to kneel.

"That...is bad," he hissed at her injury. The butterflies don't appear to be helping, either - were they...attracted to the blood? Yeah okay, why was he surprised? "To answer your question: I have no idea, because I was taken hostage by a cloud after you disappeared. I've been trying to get back to them...somehow. If Bella were here, she could do something about this..." He bit his lip, digging into his own pouch for the bandages and alcohol Bel had give him before. "But this'll have to suffice. Sorry, it's going to sting..."

----

Bel didn't even care about the literal crap she was squeezing out of Owain's cloak, squelching and oozing be damned. Yeah...these tracks were definitely feet. She pulled her companion's clothing impatiently, quickening her pace to a fast-walk.

Owain's slightly sticky squelching matched his own hurried pace- more than a little wary of such obvious tracks. Beasties could take the form of those missing or dead and he really wasn't looking forward to finding out if his other companions were either.

He increased his pace to a jog, arrow hanging loosely along the bow that he held by his waist. Whatever made these tracks they'd find out soon.

Mae's wariness lingered, but his panicked babbling and the warmth of the fire he held slowly began to soothe her. The woods played tricks at mimicking people far too often, but Naoise's breath made warm clouds in the frigid air, she could feel the ignether he pulled from the air thrumming into the flame and most importantly he spoke with *proper syntax*. None of the babbling speech mimicry bullshit she knew to expect.

She gripped his wrist urgently as he knelt down by her, pulling out supplies to try and begin dressing her wound. "Quickly, please! We don't have much time...!" She shoed the butterflies away crossly; more and more of them were beginning to deem drinking from the crimson puddle gathering at her side would be safer than risking the fire - but again they were butterflies and butterflies weren't very smart.

"Did you hear a loud booming sound just a few minutes earlier?" Pausing briefly enough to see the recognition dawn in his eyes she pressed on hurriedly. "Well, so did every nasty thing that may have been hiding in the area; and I was already being chased, obviously." She motioned to her wounded shoulder. "W-We need to get as far away from here as possible...!" But Mae was still weak, dizzy from blood loss, achy fatigue beginning to seep into her bones.

"Maera, I'm exactly the last person to say this to you, but take a breath," Naoise cajoled gently, directing his circle of flame around them. Yes, begone, foul bloodsucking caricature of previously harmless pollinators. What an uncanny ability the Wispwood had. "I'm as eager as you to get the hell away, but we can't afford you," he unscrewed the bottle and began to pour in rivulets, "losing any more blood." He appraised her in concern; her lids looked heavy. "So what happened back on the bridge?" Felt like days ago, now. Ugh. "Have you been getting chased the whole time?"

Mae appreciated the warm flame, appreciated him prompting her to talk, even if just to keep her focused and awake. She shook her head at his question but immediately regretted the action. "No... No I was spirited away to a dark clearing somewhere and there was a... well, it looked like a child. A dead, frostbitten child." She shuddered, remembering what she'd seen when she'd lit her flame. "I was *touching it*. Holding onto it; I thought I had grabbed Bel's cloak but... evidently not." She cringed. "It wanted to take my eyes for itself but I gave it some round pebbles instead and ran away while it was distracted. Then I promptly fell in a hole and landed in this river. I was swept along until I could swim for shore but I had to lose my cloak to do..." Pity... She'd liked that cloak and had been excited to use it on her adventure. "Then *something* ran out from the dark. It was so fast, and it's probably still coming; I didn't get to see what it was but it did *this* to me. I used my magic to leap clear across the river to get away; that's the sound

you heard." She was rather proud of herself for the impressive display of magic but... the application left a lot to be desired 9 v 6

"And you... said you were abducted by a cloud?" She asked dubiously. She'd never heard of anything like that before.

Naoise did *not* like the way the blood was seeping through the bandage. He applied more pressure as Maera spoke, grimacing as she described what would have probably been his worst nightmare. At least he only had to contend with a big mindless cloud. "Does that happen all the time here? The wild goose chasing, constant running, and pain?" Criosaodh had told him stories before he left, of course. Probably trying to scare him into *not* being stupid, but...well, listening and experiencing are two different things.

"Oh yes, my cloud friend. Not long after you disappeared, this scream comes out of the bushes. It was awful, shrill and piercing, so we smartly decided the opposite direction was our best course, but immediately this...dark cloud came rushing out. I think Bella and Owain collided and escaped, but I wasn't so lucky." He chuckled darkly. "Better for it, I suppose. I managed to burn my way out, fell into an iced-over lake, broke my ass and what I can only assume is a rib, got out, and now," he swept a dramatic arm, "We are here. Very hurt, and very off-trail."

"Oh yeah," she said. "That's totally normal; the vanishing, being hunted, not knowing what the hell is going on.... You just have to roll with it, or die."

She raised her eyebrows as Naoise recounted his experience to her, wincing as he described his injuries. Broken rib and possibly broken tailbone? Unless that was a figure of speech; her mind was a little fuzzy right now. Nothing she could do about either of those things... Those weren't exactly breakages you could set (plus Xan would definitely have a problem with her going anywhere near the dark elf's tailbone for any reason, she nearly snickered at the thought)

"At least it didn't have any teeth," she agreed. Or claws, for that matter. A dark cloud though, hm... Sounds like it could simply be a mass of moving dark magic; although it could very well be a spirit. How odd... "W-well... On the bright side, I got exactly this lost the first time I found the Nothing. Being snatched away from my mom and sister, chased by a skin stealing tree-" what was with monsters trying to steal her body parts? "-and ending up way off the beaten path. So maybe we're doing something right and just don't know it yet. Last time though, I was alone. I'm glad you're here with me now, at least. It's not quite so scary this way." She was trying to be optimistic and encouraging, but it was really hard to be encouraging about a situation like this.

Mae's bandages are soaked but the bleeding seems to be slowing - maybe, hopefully. As she and Naoise talk in low voices, there is a faint *crunch* in the underbrush from downriver. It sounds slow, deliberate and heavy. It comes again, a little closer - like footsteps, carefully approaching.

---

The prints in the ground lead Owain and Bel further upriver and then start to veer away from the water. It leads them back into the trees for a while, though the rushing sound of the river stays to one side.

At the same time their lantern-light catches on a dark, charred mark in the trunk of one tree, it illuminates the vague outline of something large and hulking, moving slowly through the trees ahead. The light doesn't reach far enough to tell what it is and, fortunately, doesn't seem to catch its attention - it continues on its path towards the river.

Less fortunately, the tracks they are following will soon change course towards the river as well.

Mae's voice dies quickly as she hears the distinctive sound of the footsteps of *something* approaching. <<Something's coming, we need to move. We've been here too long.>> she mindspoke to Naoise. Using her staff she's going to try and stand up slowly enough that she doesn't make her vision black out.

Mae wobbled as she stood, leaning heavily in her sturdy staff. She was glad she had the foresight to switch out her fancy decorative one for this one, despite how much she liked the fancy one.

The glimpse of the *thing* drove any thought of bravery from Owain's mind. He felt his knees go weak, his mind stop, his mouth go dry and the tears well up. They were going to die in these accursed woods. He reached back blindly, trying to feel for Bel- her hand, her wrist, her shoulder, anything warm that wasn't covered in hellish spikes or hungered for their blood. He took a glance back to make sure she saw what he was seeing, saw her eyes and-

"...We have to save Naoise." He sounded a hell of a lot more in control than he felt. "I can ambush the thing somehow so I'll get you close enough to him for you to figure something out." He swallowed hard. "You ready to run like hell?"

*Ohmygodwhatthefuckwasthat.* He hadn't been prepared for either of those things. Naoise gazed incredulously at Maera, just as concerned about what she? Had done? As he was about the thing coming toward them. Well! It's not like anything could have been done about that!

Except maybe he could have not jabbered so much, but then Maera might have fallen asleep, and that was worse than being wobbly and half-asleep. And telepathic! Oh boy!

At the very least, he could shut up now. Panicking would be bad. Yep. With a labored exhale, he gathered the flames back into his palm. But Maera wouldn't be able to walk like this. He winced as he rose, almost staggering, and grabbed her shoulder, slowly inching them backwards.

---

Oh no. No, this was *not* happening right now. Not when he might be wandering upriver or something, oblivious to whatever hulking vat of lard was moving in front of them. Oho. No, not now. It was *not* going to ruin everything.

Bel curled her lip toward the figure past Owain's shoulder, indifferent to the hand on her own. "There isn't much I can do *besides* run like hell," she muttered, mind racing. It's not like they had any idea where the fuck Naoise even was. Hopefully, he was further along than they expected.

Didn't feel smart to bet on hopes in this place, though.

"Not yet," she growled as softly as she could. "Not until we see him. *He's* going to have to save *us* if we start being fucking stupid."

The footsteps draw closer to Mae and Naoise. Steadily, inevitably. The low, quiet sound of breathing slowly becomes evident as well. Although it isn't moving fast, it is faster than them - perhaps simply by virtue of a larger stride. It will reach them in a moment.

—

The figure draws further away from Bel and Owain as they stand there, eyes fixed on it. The shadows begin to swallow it back up as it moves towards the river. If they don't follow it, they will mostly lose sight of it - but if they do, there's no telling how it will react.

There was nothing else Naoise could do but prepare to stand his ground. His staff jingled as a stale breeze blew past them; because of his sweat, it chilled him to the bone. He hoped Maera couldn't feel him shaking.

"It'll reach him if we wait!" Owain hissed, jerking his hand back after a moment's more reassurance that he wasn't alone in these woods, that another person with warm blood stood here. A reminder of what he had to protect- both of them. Those that were left. "Listen just- run past it when I get its attention. You *have* to trust me." He gave a grin that he really didn't feel,



and gave Bel a thumbs up as he drew an iron-tipped arrow from his quiver. "I'll meet up with you guys along the river when I get away, yeah?"

Without waiting for an answer he suddenly bolted away from her, pulling out and firing his bow at the beast in one smooth motion once he was several paces away and booking it into the darkness away from the lantern light.

"Oi! Ugly!" He bellowed, his voice cracking as he tried to hide the fear growing in him. "Look at me, I'm bait! Yoo-hoo! I'm fuckin' loud and I don't give a fuck, you aren't eating anyone else tonight you big-" He searched for a word, suddenly struck by a cold chill as he realized what he was doing. "-er, uh, tree-lookin fucker?!"

"That's asking a lot," Bel murmured, but she didn't have the chance for any more input before Owain bolted. Bel knew that if one thing wasn't going to go wrong now, another was. She didn't have the power to decide life or death in this forest like she did in Reluir, and it would be vexing if it weren't about so much more than just her.

There was no faith in this situation - only hope. Hope that, if Naoise was up ahead, that he could save them both. Hope that, if he wasn't, they could outrun this thing. Hope that even if not, it may be merciful. Hope beyond hope. Fucking crazy. Absolute batshit. But again, she didn't have a choice. While Owain was shouting, she dashed, and prayed.

Mae felt Naoise tense up beside her and she reached for his hand on her shoulder to squeeze it in solidarity. Whatever it was, she could hear it's footsteps gaining on them even if its gait was slow, meaning it had large strides. Too large... Atros below, what had she caught the attention of? She could hear it *breathing...*

Her other hand tightened on her staff and she prepared herself to be intercepted. With a single command word, she called her spellbook from its holster and it floated before her on a chain attached to her belt. The enchantments on it hadn't been cheap but she was glad she'd had them done. Her eyes began to glow with a deep red light and the air around them charged up as she pooled ignether to her, gritting her teeth and bracing herself.

Abruptly, the sound of shouting reaches Mae and Naoise. The words are unclear at this distance but it sounds swift, panicky - and a little familiar.

Then a face appears from between the trees - huge, dark and alarmingly close. It stares appraisingly at them with wide, saucer-like eyes, and a slow breath exhales from the long row of teeth splitting it. Then it moves forward, mouth opening, as if to seize them both with it.

Somewhere in Mae's mind, she knows what this is, but it's not common enough to recall in the heartbeat between seeing it and it reaching them. It's from the deep woods, is all her mind tosses up - or, well, it used to be, before they all came out.

—

Owain's arrow flies accurately and lands with a definite *thud* in the creature's flank. It stops moving, pauses for a moment, then a long neck swings around to look at him. It doesn't seem fazed by the arrow, and in fact seems terribly calm overall. But Owain has successfully drawn its attention towards him - or at least, half its attention, as the proximity suddenly lets him realise it has two heads.

It has two heads, humanoid in shape and lined with glimmering teeth that extends down its necks. Its hunched shape is almost humanoid too, but it walks on both hands and feet. More teeth line where its ribs could be. From all its jaws, whether on the face or body, something dark oozes or dangles.

Its movements look slow but this is only relative to its towering size - easily taller than buildings. The hand that reaches for Bel as she races past therefore looks almost ponderous, curious, but it catches up to her in seconds.



Owain jabbered some incomprehensible bastardization of Canan, Common, and a half-slurred mix of sounds of pure unadulterated terror in a long stream of expletives as he saw the hand reaching for Bel and knew, somehow, this was either going to end with them all dead or this

monster deterred- they couldn't run from this. It was too large, too monstrous, and too terrifying. It could barely be called a monster as much as it was a cross between his worst nightmare and a reasonably sized cathedral dedicated to the worship of dentistry.

So he did the only thing that made sense to try and prevent his fellow traveler from being grabbed- Shoot at one of the massive eyes with another arrow (this time silver-tipped) while he screamed and backpedaled.

As steady as she was trying to be for the inexperienced Relan holding onto her, she barely had a moment to shriek in terror as she finally saw what it was that was coming at them. She *knew* what that was, but it was too close, WAY too close---

She barely had a split second to fire an explosive pellet of condensed ignether at its face, aiming for its mouth. Accompanying it were several other smaller ones akin to firecrackers that she aimed at its eyes to try and blind it with light it certainly wasn't used to. "Go! Go, go, go, go! RUN!" She shoved at Naoise to get him moving. She didn't see where its other head went, but she had heard another voice yelling nearby. Scrambling away, she tried to think on what it was she knew about this creature.

There were very few times Bel had ever felt real terror. The first was when she woke up to find her bed cold and mother-less. When she realized it would *remain* mother-less forevermore. It had locked her up and made her into what she was. That was how powerful she remembered terror to be.

This?

This was like staring at her own corpse. This was like watching a nightmare break the bounds of reality to enter the waking world. This could drive someone mad. She was sure of it.

It was all happening very quickly, and yet somehow, very slow. When she looked back, and looked upwards, Bel processed two things: one, it was reaching for her with a hand so unfathomably large it could eviscerate her without trying. Two, it had two heads, and one was not looking at her. If Bel let out a shriek, it was gargled and not very loud. The next thing she knew, she was frantically waving the lantern at it - and then she threw. Once the lantern was out of her hand, she ran for her life.

----

Naoise had forgotten how to think before Maera shoved him. The only thing that broke him from his horrified trance, and the sharp pain in his ribcage. He won't be able to run very far like this,

despite what she was telling him. And there was no way they would win against this thing. Winning was no longer part of the question. They could only survive - somehow.

He fought for both ignether and marether - the flame in his palm, and the water raging beneath the frozen river. Whichever answered his call first - if at all. *Please, don't fail me now.* He needed a distraction. Something big, and something mobile. He looked at the monster's two heads, and had an idea. It might react to something that looked like it, right? Something that moved like it.

Owain's arrow doesn't hit its eye, but it lodges somewhere in its face - it's hard to see exactly where while he's backpedalling. The creature doesn't even flinch though - it just pauses again, as if pondering over what just happened, and then reaches for him with its mouth. A row of teeth longer than he is tall closes entirely over his bow - and his hand with it - and pulls.

The lantern thrown by Bel hits its grasping hand squarely. Flames spill over it and the hand pulls back slightly, but the creature doesn't seem hurt - just surprised, if anything. The respite is enough to allow Bel to race away from it though, through the trees, to the river-- where she sees a bright burst of fire and two figures, moving frantically.

Mae's fire explodes a bit off-target, to the side of the creature's face, but still close enough that it stops. It doesn't draw away though, simply weathering the bombardment of crackling flames. The fire does seem to burn it somewhat - its surface is distorted slightly beneath the attack - but the creature seems unhurt and undeterred. It peers briefly at Naoise's concoction, but the water hasn't coalesced enough to resemble much yet so the distraction only lasts a second. But a second is better than none.

A second of not dying and not being mauled is enough for Mae to recall what she has read about this before. A *bailitheoir*-- maybe, surely? She has never seen one for real - a deep woods creature that collects corpses - hanging them from its mouths like laundry - and may have two to four heads. Though it takes minor damage to most offensive magics, it has immense stamina, so it is best to distract, delay or bind it and run rather than fight.

Mae's eyes widen in realization as she seizes the second granted to dodge away from its grasping mouth. "B-bailitheoir!" she yelps. "Distract it and run! We can't beat it!" She calls to the companion she knows she does have there, and another one she thought she heard further off. She sees the flash of another flame somewhere in the dark; another companion? Could it be...?

Armed with some semblance of knowledge of what to do, Mae sprays large, dancing flares all over the space. They twisted and turned and floated around to cast moving shadows and obscure their movement as they tried to escape.

The scream that accompanied the faint crunch of bone and wood splintering only grew higher and louder as Owain was yanked forward, his arm dislocating with a sickening pop that he felt before he heard. The monster's casual movement yanked him off his feet, slamming him against gigantic teeth and knocking most of the wind out of him. Terrified thoughts of home, of his bed at home, of being safe and of the nightmare that seemed to be trying to tear off his arm at the socket filled his head and his gasping breath, choked with shocked sobs, made him feel light headed. The pain hadn't hit him yet, and that was perhaps the only reason he still had the sense to try and free himself.

Fumbling blindly as the distant shouting of some hysterical woman added to the surrealness of the situation, Owain's hand caught on something on his belt- and then he hurled at the beast's gigantic eye, up to his left. The glittering, silver-bladed knife hummed as it shot through the air, spiraling in a glittering arch.

"...and run! We can't beat it!"

Exhilaration and instinctual terror make for a reeling combination, but it is enough to propel her legs. Once Bel reached Naoise and Maera, she had the compulsion to hug them both, but now was not the time. The lantern was kaput, and the man she left behind may very well be too. "He's still...back there," she panted, a shaking finger to the creature. She swallowed her labored breathing and stood, feeling her legs wobble.

*Think. Think.* She fumbled for her pack, and withdrew a vial of salt - the explosive kind, the same sort she had used on the wraiths. And with everything she had, she threw it toward Maera's fire, and hoped the flames would lap it up and grow. Then, no longer needing to fear for volume, she began to sing as loudly as she could. A hymn of Atros - the one she sang when he rose and plunged them all into ice. It would heal her companions - she had registered Maera's bloody shoulder - and it might even confuse the monster.

---

He had been focusing so hard on Maera's voice that he hadn't seen the approaching figure until she was right in front of them. "Bella?!" Naoise barely had a chance to gasp out her name before she nearly barreled into him, skidding to a stop right before they made contact. She looked at him, wide-eyed in both horror and dawning relief, before gasping out words that turned his blood to ice. Owain was still back there? Oh no. No, nono, if all four of them had been here, they could have a chance to run, but if one was still stuck behind -

Bella had thrown something, and begun to sing. It cleaved through his panic, and for a single moment, he looked at the monster and felt still as the river surface. His tattoo tingled beneath his eye, and by the time fear crept back into his heart, Naoise was ready to try again. With all

his might, he raised his staff and imagined a tall, writhing column of magic; it had to be flashy. *Something that looked like itself...come on, dammit!*

Owain's blade thunks into the creature's eye. It rears its head back very slightly, slow and calm as ever, and most importantly its teeth loosen around his arm. Although it hasn't entirely let go, there is a brief chance for Owain to pull his arm out - though not his bow, which has splintered inside the monster's mouth.

Mae's twisting fires don't seem to interest the bailitheoir. Once the flames are no longer in its face, it moves forward again, jaws reaching for her bloodied shoulder. This time, its teeth close around her elbow and, with a tug that sends a tearing pain through her injury, it yanks her off her feet.

In the next instant, Bel's salt vial hits the flames and bursts with a deafening *crack*. The creature glances towards it, and then to the twisting tower of water rising by Naoise's side. It lets go of Mae's arm, dropping her unceremoniously back to the ground, to investigate the structure.

Bel's healing song reaches both Naoise and Mae. A wave of strength sweeps through them, momentarily diminishing the ache of their injuries. While it will take much more time to really heal them, it lends them much-needed stamina for now.

Mae wasn't quick enough to move away from the jaws of death a second time. A wounded, agonized wail cut through the darkness, and it took her a moment to realize it was coming from her. Luckily a moment was all it lasted for.

Bel threw some sort of alchemical reagent into one of her fires that exploded and Naoise's magic distracted it long enough to drop her. She gasped as she crumpled to the ground, pain shooting through her whole body; and what careful treatment Naoise had done to her wound was definitely undone. But it was a chance to get away.

Angry this time, she tried to wreath both of its heads in swirling flames, to obscure its vision and try to make it hurt a little bit. She set off another explosion behind it - away from them - and hoped it would go *that way* as she began trying to run away again, invigorated by Bel's song.

Owain felt his chance to escape rather than saw it as the incredible pressure on his hand loosened as the creature took a dull interest in the knife sticking out of its eye. He planted a foot against the broad teeth, took a single gasping breath, and yanked.

The pain was incredible. His dislocated shoulder ground against its own socket as his hand, fractured by the beast's jaws clamping down, came free with a tearing of flesh that left a layer of

skin on the teeth as he fell on his buttocks on the forest floor below. He didn't have enough air in his lungs to howl in agony- and he didn't have time, even he knew that much. Snot and tears dripped down his face as he forced himself upright, away from the creature and toward the river where he could hear the sounds of battle raging far more intense than his own.

Bel could do very little but increase her volume as battle waged around her. It seemed to only be attracted to magic; if nothing, she could give them the stamina they needed to keep casting for a while longer. All the better, as she saw a figure hurtling towards them. Relief washed over her; if all went well, they would soon be whole.

Then, they could run.

Naoise's ribcage throbbed dully; at least it felt like it were just cut now. Good, that was good. He squinted at the monster's shape, and his fingers danced as he tried to manipulate the top of the tower to look like its two heads. Then, he threw his arms out, hoping to lasso the creature. In the light of Maera's fire, he caught a stumbling shadow - Owain? It had to be. Okay...okay! They might have a chance after all!

The creature's attention doesn't move as fast as Owain's legs. With truly remarkable speed, he bolts straight to the river, escaping any grasping hands or teeth that might have come after him. Bel is the first person he reaches, and he near barrels into her with his sheer momentum.

Bel's song is a comfort the moment it's in earshot. It continues strong, supplementing everyone's stamina now, despite the struggle with the monster happening right before her - and despite her long-legged companion's appearance.

Mae's fires don't stretch far enough to reach behind the bailitheoir, nor its further head. The flames scorch the side of its closest head though - the one examining Naoise's structure - and it sways slightly to one side, the fires around it following--

There's a fierce hiss as fire meets water, and part of Naoise's lasso vanishes into steam. The farther head is successfully wrapped in water and halts as it is caught, but the nearer head slips out through the vapour and swings back down, in a ponderous loop, to search the ground for its prey again.

Everyone is together now, at least - the river behind them, the monster's vast body in front, its head sweeping in from upriver, and only trees - presumably - downriver for now.

Well that didn't work. Mae stuck to short bursts of warning pot shots as she began to move downriver - thank Atros for Bel's song, comforting even through how furious and terrified it sounded. Even if she missed, the condensed pellets of ignether would explode wherever they landed, hopefully pulling the monster's attention towards the noise as it sought them out.

<<This way!>> She only had enough focus to mindspeak to the person closest to her right now, who was still Naoise. She was leery of yelling in case the bailitheoir used that to seek them out again and trusted her companion to usher the others downriver after her now that Owain was free.

Naoise would never get used to that, but he gave Maera and her directions a curt nod. He elbowed Bella, who sung him a question before she caught sight of Maera's moving form and threw him the darkest look he'd ever seen. If he didn't know any better (he wasn't sure he did), he would think she wanted to break another one of his ribs. But he nudged her with a tired smile, and inclined his head toward Owain, whose arm was the definition of mangled. *Go ahead. You have to.*

Collapsing his hold on the head immediately would be a bad idea, especially as he caught sight of the other one breaking free. Ah - he felt just a tad more ill now. Okay...okay, okay. If he could give them just a little more distance... With both hands on his staff's handle, he pushed outward, hoping to throw the monster back even just a little, even just...by the head. Its long, long head. The minute his arms relaxed, he ran after the others.

Owain looked terrible. Bel saw that much, but she was so focused on the creature's movements that she barely registered what her companions were doing before Naoise nudged her. She glanced around, saw Maera, and glared at him. But there was Owain, and she of all people knew how bad the situation was. With grit teeth, she lingered only long enough for Naoise to raise his staff, then began after Maera, pulling Owain's uninjured arm over her shoulder. She quieted so that her singing could still heal, but hopefully not enough to be heard over the chaos behind her.

They were the most beautiful people Owain had ever seen.

Somehow, through the sluggishness of shock that was dulling his senses, he knew that he'd never again find a sight as truly wonderful as his slightly bruised companions fighting for their lives in the horrible woods against a terrible monster. He wished he could somehow communicate how much adoration he had for the glitter of flames in Mae's eyes, he wanted to write a sonnet to Naoise about how much he loved the curve of his slightly worried features in the flickering lantern and explosion light. He wished he could somehow look Bel in the eye and proclaim that her voice charmed Atros from below and soothed his pain.



He also slowly thought that was the shock speaking and that it was supremely fucked that he was realizing this *now* as he had nearly died. He also realized that attempting to give any one of them a hug would probably get him and them killed.

He opened his mouth to explain all these feelings rolling around inside as he stumbled up to Bel and she took him on her shoulder- and what came out was an extremely intellectual: "Yarshsoobeaut."

*Ah that's not a good sign.*

As the dangerous cocktail of shock, adrenaline, healing magic and idiocy coursed through him, Owain tried to gesture with his eyes- it was time to leave and he'd drag everyone he could with his good arm if he had to.

Mae leads the escape downriver, revitalised enough by Bel's song to run. Her injury can't be faring well but it can, at least, be delayed for now. Her fires burst willy-nilly around the bailitheoir and its free head peers around at them, searching. The trapped head remains in Naoise's water binding but slowly begins to move despite it. He can feel a growing strain that tells him the monster could tear free from it if it really wanted to - it is only its passive demeanour that keeps it caught for as long as it is.

But it's enough. The binding delays it, and as his three companions bolt away downriver, Naoise seizes his own opportunity to run. The last to escape, he falls out of range of Bel's quieter song and the pain in his chest returns - stabbing with each step - but for now, he can still run.

Despite his mangled arm, Owain runs with a powerful speed. The adrenaline combined with Bel's healing song, right next to him, eases the pain enough that he can ignore it for now. And so he and Bel keep pace perfectly with each other, running downriver after Mae.

The frozen lake reappears between the trees. It blocks their way forward but perhaps if they strike off to one side, they could circle around it. They could also turn away from the lake and head back into the woods, where the cloud entity came from - but this would veer them back in the direction of the bailitheoir. Or if they have the means, they could cross the lake. Either way, they are not nearly far enough from the bailitheoir to feel secure in stopping - especially when it has such a large stride.

"Gods I'm so glad you all found me! I've never seen one of those things in real life; I don't know what I would have done if I were alone," Mae gasped, half giddy and half woozy as she came off the edge of her panic. There was dizzying relief when it didn't immediately follow them as they ran, and they had precious few moments to gather their thoughts. Her shoulder still hurt like hell,

and it was bleeding all over again; they needed to gain distance fast before she had to stop again.

She took inventory over each of her traveling companions; Bel looked relatively unscathed, Naoise was certainly still injured from the way he was slightly hunched over broken ribs, and Owain....

"Shit, Owain," Mae hissed, eyes landing on his mangled arm. She'd been snatched up by the beast as well, but luckily not from too odd of an angle as to dislocate anything. "We need to fix that when we stop, but we're too close..." She glanced around, surveying what would be the best direction to go in. "I definitely don't want to cross the lake; who knows what's in there... Be warned though, there was something that attacked me on the other side of the river but at this point I'm willing to bet it's not nearly as terrible as facing down a *bailitheoir*. And we lived! Isn't that great?" The question might have been tinged with a bit of mania but *they were alive!* High emotions were allowed.

She began urging the group around the edge of the lake, glancing over towards Owain worriedly, trying to keep her mind off of her own injuries. She was no healer herself, but she knew they couldn't stop now even to treat his arm. "Bel... is there anything you can do for him?"

Bel continued to sing past Owain's weird mumbling, feeling a wave of relief wash over her as she heard frantic steps from behind. They weren't close enough for her liking, however, and she increased her volume just a little. At Maera's questioning, she sung a breathy response, "This is all I can do right now. The sooner we find somewhere to rest our asses, the sooner his bones can be reconnected." And, despite Maera's slight hysteria, Bel added with slurred haste, "Lead the way." Every option seemed just as bad to her, anyway.

Once, a younger Naoise had been in charge of walking someone's dog. He didn't remember whose, but it had been a big thing, taller than him on all fours. The fraying rope around its body had barely helped to keep Naoise from grinding his face into the road as he struggled to keep the excitable thing from running off. That time, he had been frightfully aware that he was the weaker one of the equation, and decades later, he felt it again.

He tried not to think about it and forced his legs onward instead, feeling wellness drain from him the further Bella and Owain ran - how on *earth* were they running so fast? He had to keep his eyes on them, had to trick himself into thinking that as soon as he caught up, he would be alright. That there was something humongous behind him, with nothing in between, was all the desperate motivation he needed.

Owain gave Mae an insane cackle as his only response to her pointed comment at his arm. There was a lot going on inside him chemically at the moment and he was feeling quite giddy, especially since he didn't quite have the brainpower to do the complex tasks of 'run' and 'understand basic language' at the same time. As an added bonus, he wasn't considering that the only reason he felt so high was because his injury was bad enough that his body decided to give him enough adrenaline to dose a smallish horse.

Those, in fact, were problems for *future* Owain and as far as current Owain was concerned, that guy was a hindsight wagging twatburger.

*Where did **that** come from? Current Owain has been spending too much time around Bel.*

He kept running forward as he had his oddly detached internal monologue, more than willing to cart Bel along by her shoulder if he had too. Fear and pain were a hell of a drug.

As Mae starts to skirt the edge of the lake, a wave of light-headedness sweeps over her. She sways but stays upright - Bel's song is still energising her enough to keep going for now, but it can't halt all the consequences of blood loss. In the back of her mind, the reminder lurks as well that her injury will only worsen the more she stresses it - and the same must be true for Owain and Naoise.

Bel and Owain catch up and follow right behind Mae. The run has taxed Bel's breath so she can't sing much louder than she is already, and her song flags momentarily after she responds to Mae. The awful sensation of dead weight hanging where he should feel his arm creeps back into Owain's senses, along with the numbing pain, and Mae's steps slow. But after a few deeper breaths, Bel can keep going, and so can they.

Naoise lags behind the others. He can still see them well enough but the gap between them isn't growing much shorter, at his pace. His legs can run just fine, really, but breathing is too difficult to go any faster - if he pushes himself more than he is already, that stabby pain might reach debilitating levels.

The lake, fortunately, doesn't seem to be a very big one. Its perimeter curves steadily inwards, allowing them to move around it. The underbrush along the bank, crusted with ice, grows thicker as they go, and occasionally gnarly tree roots extend into the frozen surface of the water, which must be climbed over.

Mae nodded to Bel, who as far as she was concerned could have been Atros' personal gift to Alva at this point in time; honestly they'd all have been done for long ago without her. She was right though, first and foremost they needed a place to rest. Just, maybe not so close to the bailitheir...

Now that all was quiet again, she began to calm down and the ebbing adrenaline left her woozy. No more than ten steps away from when they'd paused, Mae felt the world pitch sideways and stumbled to correct it, which only led to her realizing it hadn't moved at all and now she had to correct for that. She shook her head to clear the vertigo, glaring accusingly at her shoulder. She fished a handkerchief out of her bag and held it against the wound, wincing at the others.

"Sorry guys... I might need to stop for a breather soon... My shoulder's not doing too great," she explained, although she was still cringing at Owain's dangling arm. It was kind of gruesome to look at, and the way he'd laughed hysterically about it wasn't very encouraging either...

The direction they were going in made her nervous; she couldn't put out of her mind the creature that had attacked her in the first place. She hadn't seen it, so of course her mind was running wild with possibilities of what it could have been. And whether or not it might still be there. She kept her eyes on the darkness ahead, scanning for more threats and for a suitable place to hide so they could lick their wounds. Maybe there was a sheltered hollow among these roots....

So long as the trees weren't carnivorous. There was a pointed difference between a hollow and an open mouth, but who knew in these woods.

Naoise wasn't going to risk calling for anyone with the monster still behind him, but he had to slow down at intervals so his internal organs would stop feeling like they were clawing themselves to pieces. Returning to a hobble-run allowed his mind a chance to relax after the adrenaline, and through his creeping panic he studied his surroundings. In the front and to his sides, his companions and the natural obstacles - in the back, no new sounds from the monster. If luck be their lady, it might just lose interest altogether once they were far enough away. Surely, there were other more injured and more interesting living things lying around! Because if whatever had attacked Maera still lingered... He grimaced, and continued onward, trying to live - and not trip - in the present.

She stopped as Maera began to wobble and offered her other arm to steady the young woman. Her singing would only get them so far; they needed to be treated, but the forest wasn't going to let them just yet. Her temper flared dully - she couldn't even do her damn job. If she were Sorcha, this would be easier, but even so...Bel wasn't going to let anyone die on her watch. She was a doctor, dammit. "The sooner the better. You guys are bleeding out like slit-throat chickens." And beyond Maera and Owain, there was Naoise, whose steps had become uneven. She glanced over her shoulder - sure enough, he was still keeping pace, but he wasn't going to bridge the distance with a cracked rib. Hopefully, their short pause would give him enough time to stagger back to the group. She increased her volume what little she could for all their injuries - it should buy them more time.

At least, nothing else in the environment seemed amiss. She couldn't hear anything yet, although having to bear half of Owain's delirious burden meant she hadn't the best view of everything.

The clarity that came as Bel's singing faltered brought with it something that Owain couldn't quite put into words. His arm didn't *hurt* as much as his hand did but it did feel... off... just *wrong* somehow. He spared a glance as he winced at the sudden feeling.

*Oh.*

Owain's head snapped back to facing forward, taking a deep shuddering breath. Maybe if he ignored it it'd go away, that horrible, horrible image of his arm hanging loosely from its socket with fingers at odd angles just dangling at the end of it. He took another breath, trying to calm himself and failing miserably. Maybe he just needed to look around and make sure that thing wasn't following them or that they weren't walking into some monstrous trap.

"...I-I can walk on my own, go help Naoise and Mae." He disentangled himself from Bel, giving a faint but very fake smile at her to show how *fine* he was. His injury didn't make it so he couldn't run after all. "I'll make sure we're alone for now."

He took a moment to scan the bushes around them before raising his eyes to the treeline, looking for telltale signs of monstrous creatures that he heard of in his youth.

The darkness ahead seems still enough to Mae. The twisting roots of the trees look alarmingly like reaching limbs half the time, but when she peers at them properly, they don't move. Near to the frozen water, there is a knot of roots shaped somewhat like a large nest. It doesn't provide much cover from above but it dips into the ground enough that they could hide from floor-level things. Further ahead, there are some larger trees that don't look too suspicious. They aren't exactly hiding places but could shield them from one side at least, if they stop against the trunk. Those seem to be their rest options for now, unless she continues searching.

Naoise, at his lagging distance, can see the backs of all of his companions - and can thus see their paces visibly flagging as they go. They should really stop soon. Mae's walk is unsteady and Owain's arm is dangling in a very disconcerting way. All the gnarly roots along the lakeside aren't helping the travel - it feels as if someone will trip at any moment. But while it's hard to navigate, it also gives them some cover. At times, Naoise almost loses sight of everyone as they hop over the taller roots.

Bel doesn't hear anything amiss over her singing. The only crunch of footsteps behind them seems to be Naoise - who is a little nearer now but still more paces behind than she would like.

When she glances back for him, she doesn't see anything obvious following behind him either. Perhaps they are far enough from the earlier monster now - even in this obscuring darkness, she would surely have spotted such a huge hulking thing if it was after them.

The bushes seem quiet enough to Owain. There is quite a lot of icy scrub around the lake edge, thinning out further away from it. They would make better time away from the lake, but they are also a bit more covered-up here. His upwards glance yields gaping darkness at first - the canopy here is very high, too high to reflect their light - and then pale, thin streaks here and there. They are familiar and not uncommon - spider threads. They hang gently between trunks and seem to condense further into the trees, away from the lake. They look like travelling trails rather than properly spun webs, so there isn't enough shape for him to guess what kind of spider they belong to. Just, big ones.

Mae nudged the arm she was holding to get Bel's attention, then pointed out their options for a quick shelter. "There are those trees over there that'll keep us hidden from one way... and this dip in the roots here. It'll keep us hidden from things on the ground - which is my concern since I was attacked by something earlier - but if the bailitheoir comes back then we're royally fucked."

Speaking of which, she glanced back in the direction she came to check on Naoise's progress back to the group, and make sure the monster wasn't following him. Now that their pace had slowed considerably, he should catch up to them soon and Mae felt better when the group was all together. "I still can't believe you guys actually found me... I guess someone's looking out for us after all."

Bel curled her lip and stretched the shoulder she used to support Owain. "Barely. Who knew gods were a fan of doing the bare minimum? Skin of His teeth, really." Unless the thing they were looking for was lending a helping hand. Bel had nearly forgotten all about it.

Surveying their options, she stole another prolonged look in Naoise's direction. Yeah - seems they were alright for the moment. Atros knew they needed the respite. "You know if the balifucker's got a habit of chasing? If it's lost interest for good, I say roots - especially if you're worried about something else coming after us. Besides," she pointed at their injuries, "best to hunker down here and let me see if I can patch those up. You can catch me and the big guy up on what the hell happened to you." Unfortunately - she glanced behind her - Bel didn't have the capacity to stitch up bones like her aunt. A goddamned shame, but if she could encourage everything to heal faster, that would suffice. While she waited for consensus, she gave their environment a wide sweep.

Thank goodness they stopped. Naoise heaved as soon as he caught up with the rest, leaning against his staff for much-needed support. "You all," he gasped, "are very fast. I should have

kept up a better exercise routine." In another moment, he could stand up straight, and after a quiet moment of peaceful nothing-trying-to-chase-or-eat-them, he felt his knees shake. "I can't believe we survived," he muttered, mostly to himself. Without the others and some kind of miracle, he'd have been in one of the monster's mouths. Having missed the bulk of the others' conversation, he flashed a shaky grin and glanced around. "So, have we decided to make a stop here? I can't say I feel safe doing it, but I guess this place isn't made for anyone to 'feel safe.'"

Owain swore under his breath at the sight of the glimmering silk, more than a little frustrated at how poorly this trip was going. The rush of adrenaline was fading with Bel's song no longer anything more than a pleasant memory and he was starting to feel the horrible, sickening pain of bruised flesh over broken bones, and that combined with everything else made him want to sit down and cry for a while. It wouldn't help *anything* but it may make him feel better.

Sliding back toward Mae, Bel, and Naoise once more, he leaned his head closer to them so that his voice wouldn't have to travel. "...H-how-" He swallowed and cleared his throat, shocked at how weak his voice was. "-How comfortable is everyone with spiders? Large ones. Because if you aren't I suggest you don't look up."

The nest of roots is large enough for all four of them to fit, albeit rather snugly. The huddling helps stave off the cold, at least, especially for Naoise. Sitting down, the roots and bushes obscure their vision of the ground, but also obscures them from anything on the ground. The soil at the base is damp and icy to rest on, but it will do.

The spider webs aren't directly above them here, since the roots are right next to the frozen water and the webs travel away from the lake, but they are visible if they look up.

Naoise had half the mind to whisper an "*Excuse me what-*" before Bel looked up without further provocation. When she didn't jump, he followed suit with half a heart - the other was somewhere in his gut. Huh. He angled his chin this way and that, trying to figure out what he was looking at, before realizing that they were the biggest threads he'd ever seen. Now, Naoise wasn't afraid of spiders. He'd been a pest-stomper by the time he knew what pests were. But he very much doubted he'd be able to stomp on anything that big. That they were sitting in a nest-like structure didn't offer much comfort either.

"You scared me there, man," he chuckled weakly. Bel had already shifted her attention to disinfecting and bandaging up Maera's shoulder with some kind of salve, grumbling about "-least I won't find these in my stew"...wait, what? "I thought I'd be staring into eight eyes of pure evil."

Mae's gaze snapped up so hard she thought she heard her neck crack, and if she hadn't already been sitting in the nest of roots with the others she surely would have toppled backwards. Eyes wide, she scanned the darkness above only to see...

Nothing.

Well, not nothing. There were large trails of webbing stretching through the trees above but honestly? Nothing out of the ordinary for the fauna of the woods. And no spiders as of yet. She shot the dirtiest glare she could muster at Owain, dislocated arm or not. "Really, Owain? Phrasing helps a lot you know!" She hissed. The disinfectant being applied to her wounds didn't help her mood, and she grabbed a hand near her and squeezed for her own moral support. Just as well it happened to be Naoise because Bel's hands were busy and Mae was currently miffed at their archer. Still, it was good that he alerted them to another potential threat before they stumbled into it. "We'll just have to keep an eye on those webs and move on as soon as possible, before whatever made them comes back and finds us here."

Still, she blinked owlishly at Bel's muttering. "Excuse me... did you say stew? With spiders? Is... that's not a Relan thing is it?" Her nose wrinkled in disgust at the thought, especially when her head was filled with images of her poor spider, Kitty.

Owain at least had the decency to look sheepish through his rapidly mounting discomfort, as sitting huddled in this nest of roots was very much not what his shoulder needed. Although he'd be a liar if he said he wasn't enjoying the warmth coming off everyone's bodies in the cramped quarters. Mae's disgusted tone combined with the pain did rile him up a bit.

"It's an *ladlish* thing, thank you very much- just because you're *bourgeoisie* enough to not eat something doesn't mean we *all* are, Maera." Owain, part of Iadlain's nobility equivalent and a direct descendent of Relan nobility, turned up his nose at the thought of being so picky. "You've obviously never been on a spider farm."

He glanced at Naoise and his gaze softened again.

"Just a heads up, Naoise. Don't want spiders coming down on our heads."

"It most certainly is *not* an *ladlish* thing!" Mae snapped, appalled at even the thought. They didn't do that in the capital, and furthermore spiders were beloved pets! They wouldn't do that in the other cities then, right? Even if they were deep in the woods... and there was nothing else to eat..... They wouldn't..... right....?



Mae decided she didn't want to know any more than she needed to and leaned her head back on a tree root quietly, staring up into the darkness.

"They've got loads of protein in." Owain shifted to keep his arm propped up, his breathing coming hard and fast now. The pain was really settling in now. He needed a distraction. "Have to remove the venom bits but bigguns like our friends currently scuttling around up above are usually non-toxic to both humans and elves."

"Oh my gods Owain, *stop* talking please, I don't want to think about it!" Mae groaned, keeping her eyes fixed stubbornly on the spider webs. "And... that's false. At least in these woods. Some of the larger spiders I've heard about have poison so potent it'll literally melt your flesh off your bones." She added dryly. "So if you decide to go hunting for some spiders for... dinner tonight," she shuddered even just saying that, "...best to just not touch the poison glands."

In the silence that followed, Naoise offered his lightest, "You have a nice and sturdy death grip, Maera." Compared to a broken rib - which was still throbbing, if less so thanks to his non-exertion - bad circulation was leaps and bounds more preferable. "Hunting spiders would make them angry, won't it?" he mused quietly, as Bella finished her work with a soft huff. "It would be nice if things in this place weren't angry at us, for once. Being that we don't quite have a hunter at the moment also makes those dried rations more appealing..." He didn't bother hiding the face he made looking at Owain's arm and hand.

"Yeah, hunting's a no-go," Bella muttered, scrutinizing the arm. She glanced up for a moment to add, "This is going to hurt like a motherfucker," before reaching for her salve and bandages. Naoise winced in preparation; no doubt it was. Exposed flesh tended to do that - especially when doused with disinfectant - no matter the gentle handling. How Bella wasn't hurling as she wrapped Owain's fingers was beyond him, honestly. But twas the benefit of having a professional around. Especially given that no *un*professional else could say, "I'm going to shove your shoulder back right now, so grit your teeth," with the same confidence. Oh dear.

Owain shrugged at Mae's disgust- or at least he tried to. The rolling motion brought a shudder through his entire body as he muffled a scream- his dislocated shoulder had *not* liked that. Tears welled up- and he swiped at them angrily with his uninjured hand, he *refused* to cry in front of them.

More than he already had, anyway.

He tried to keep his sounds of discomfort to a minimum as Bel set his fingers into place. He didn't have a response to her warning about setting his shoulder aside from tugging off the

leather glove of his right hand with his teeth, bunching the thick fabric into his mouth before his golden eyes leveled on hers, and he gave a nod. He sure as shit wasn't *ready* but he knew it had to be done.

"Relax." It wasn't the most unfair thing Bel had ever asked of him, but neither were they on an island vacation. With care to keep her voice low, Bel hummed as she braced his uninjured shoulder against the tree root and bent the affected arm at the elbow. The more she rotated upward, the more insistent her singing became; at the very least, she should be able to convince the muscles to relax enough for a reduction to be less uncomfortable. Luck be her lady, it might even be painless.

Eventually, she felt his arm lock into place and slowly laid it down against the root.

Owain nearly bit through the leather of his glove.

The only reason he didn't scream out loud was because he blacked out for a few seconds after the ball of his shoulder clicked back into place. The *agony* that shot through his body, the white hot lightning bolts of pain that ripped their way through his nerves and burned sigils to long forgotten deities of torment along the inside of his bones, the leather being the only thing that prevented him from biting off his own tongue to choke and die on the blood rather than spend another second in that living hell-- was over in a moment.

What came next was an ache that made him rival the dead and made him uncertain that his shoulder hadn't simply splintered in Bel's attempts to fix it. Tears welled unbidden down his usually composed face- splashing along his features as he screwed up his face and turned away, a muffled, choking sob of pain forcing its way past the glove as he slumped back against the root.

Mae had to consciously release her death grip on Naoise's hand, but that proved to be futile as Bel got to work on Owain's shoulder. She cringed and squeezed again at the dull *pop* of his shoulder back into its socket, wincing sympathetically as he tried to hide how he'd begun crying. <<That.... really sucks.>> She mindspoke to Naoise regarding Owain. She was glad it wasn't her arm.

Well.

That didn't go as planned. Bel grimaced as Owain began to cry, and when she glanced over to Naoise and Maera for help the former could only give her a helpless wince. The arm itself was

no longer dangling by the tendon, but there was nothing she could do now other than keep up the song.

Ow. Was what Naoise though before he heard Maera's voice whisper again in his mind. After the quell of adrenaline, he jumped again, if less fiercely than before. Sucking air through his teeth, he nodded in response and rubbed his released hand, thankful it was in well-functioning order.

Mae still felt far too exposed here, and the bailitheoir wasn't all that far away, given the size of its strides. But for the moment, all seemed about as peaceful as it could get in the woods... Might as well break out the rations. "Anybody want a roll...?" She murmured, digging through her pack (and blessing the enchantment that kept it waterproof) for some food.

Owain glanced balefully up from his miserable ball against the root, swallowing the lump in his throat before he tried to say something around the glove, the throbbing pain fading slightly as Bel's magic took ahold of him- properly this time. He reached up with his uninjured arm and with a trembling hand, slowly extracted leather from his mouth before he dropped it onto his lap. The words refused to come as he swiped a few times at his eyes, trying in vain to clear the tears away. He gestured weakly at Mae's question.

He was tired, smelled like he'd slept inside of a corpse, had a broken hand and a recently undislocated shoulder. He really wanted that damn roll. He really wanted to go home, sit under the covers and just pretend the world wasn't terrible for a while.

But that damn roll would do for now.

Naoise watched Bella stare at Owain for a little longer before retrieving strips of some kind of jerky from her own pack. She broke song for long enough to murmur, "Eat and get some sleep while you can," as she held out a hand for anyone who wanted a piece. He took out a waterskin before taking both women up on their offers, grunting as he leaned against the trunk. It earned a sharp look from Bella, and he offered a weak chuckle; his wound would have to heal naturally, he knew. Sucked, but it wasn't the worst that could have happened. Frankly, all he wanted to do was close his eyes for a bit.

Mae placed a roll wordlessly in Owain's expectant palm. The roll wouldn't really make anything better except hunger but he looked so *miserable*... She handed out the rest of the rolls before settling into the small nest, keeping her eyes trained on the darkness above as she nibbled on the bread. Even after everything, she wasn't terribly hungry... But she knew she needed to keep

her strength up in order to make it out of this. She glanced down again as Bel began handing out strips of jerky. "'s probably a bad idea," she murmured. "Having meat provisions in these woods... It attracts things." But she didn't refuse the offering, opting instead to shove as much of it into her mouth as she could in one bite. Meat had lots of energy to offer... Although more than any of that, sleep sounded like the best option. She wondered who she would dreamwalk with if she nodded off for a little while...

Owain snagged both offers of food in a single hand before taking a moody bite, slumping back against the tree as he chewed and swallowed. He stared up into the canopy far above, eyes searching for the telltale shimmer of spider silk among the branches against the brisk night(?) air.

*...It had been night for well over a month.*

"...I'm not going to be able to sleep for a while." His voice was horse and thick, his nose too clogged for his words to come out clearly. "Let me take first watch, you guys huddle up and get some sleep."

"Not a good forecast for us *bags* of meat," Bel muttered, taking what was left of the jerky and tearing into it. Naoise's waterskin had bits of ice floating about, but the cold was a welcome shock to her system. She held it out for everyone else, observing that her friend was half-lidded and looking very slack-jawed already. On the other hand, she was fine. Sore in a couple places, but operational - and undoubtedly less tired than her companions. But after his crying, Bel wasn't about to try wrangling with Owain. It was the same apprehension she felt towards sobbing children, and this time, she didn't have the music box with her. "Kick me the instant a lid starts drooping," she warned, sliding downwards into her hood.

Naoise was quite aware that he was no longer chewing his food properly. Forcing down the last bits of his jerky-haphazardly-speared-into-a-roll, he leaned against the root and immediately felt the exhaustion claw at him. "I can take next...next watch," he yawned, eyeing Owain with hesitant concern. He could criticize Bella for her bedside manner all he liked, but he wasn't much better. All he could offer was a pat on the uninjured shoulder and a, "Don't force yourself *not* to fall asleep now."

Despite his physical exhaustion, Owain stays well awake. For better or worse, his fatigue hasn't reached the point yet that it outweighs the stabbing ache in shoulder. At least the longer he stays still, the more tolerable the pain becomes - though it easily returns the moment he tries moving.

There is not much need to move though, fortunately. The forest stays quiet around them, save for the usual sounds of settling earth and rustling leaves. Occasionally there is a snap of twigs in the canopy, and at some point a large, round shadow inches along a tree trunk and settles just out of sight, but it is distant enough to not be an immediate threat. From the way it moved, it is probably a spider minding its own business. The silken threads sway gently overhead, unoccupied. His companions rest.

Owain couldn't tell how much time had passed before he finally felt like resting- despite his tiredness. Listening to his companions sleep made him calm despite his discomfort and where they were. Perhaps it was just the warm of being trusted that kept him feeling emboldened against the terrors of the night, or perhaps it was the soft weight of the others on his arms.

Regardless of the reason he felt... glad that he came.

Stirring from his trance, he was gentle as he extracted his arm from his side to not disturb the sleeping others, and reached over to gently shake Noosh awake.

"Hwuh?" Naoise jolted, in the process yanking his staff a little too close to his torso. A thin exhale of pain later, he rubbed his eyes and gave Owain a short salute, taking up the responsibility he could just barely remember volunteering for. His evil plan had included forcing the torch onto Bella before he fell into deep sleep, but he couldn't tell how much time had passed since. Or how well he could function off of whatever amount of sleep he'd gotten...but it seemed like his ribs were holding up. At least, they felt no worse than before.

Careful not to disturb the others, he anchored his staff in the middle of their pile and began to comb their surroundings.

"Just lemme know if ya need me." Was Owain's only response before he slumped back against the root, his head lolling to the side as he gave in- finally getting the rest Bel had told him too.

Naoise is left to himself as Owain drifts off. The forest feels very large and very dark around their little torchlight. The surrounding sounds of crackling leaves or creaking trees aren't too good on his nerves but nothing jumps out at him.

At some point, he sees a more definite shadow shift in the distance. He can't quite make it out in the darkness but it shuffles down along a tree trunk and then disappears behind it. Comparing it to the tree, it's perhaps the size of a small deer. After a while, another one descends from a different tree, neighbouring the first and so still a fair distance away. He loses sight of it when it

gets close to the ground, due to their low angle in the root nest, and it doesn't make enough sound to track it by listening.

*Ooooooh* no. Ohohono, nope. Nah. Naoise was *not* having any of this nonsense today. You think he didn't see you, creepy crawlies in the night and or day?

Yeah, he kind of wished he hadn't, because now his mind was playing tricks on him. He could *feel* things brushing against his leg, pinching his arms, tickling his elbows. The reminder that he couldn't squash insects that large was big on his mind as he inches toward the center of the nest and peered over their root wall with bated breath. No need to panic...not even as Maera's mention of corrosive poison reoccurred to him. Keep calm and silent and more predatory than the predator...yeah...

There is still too much underbrush in the way to get a clear view of the forest floor, but he can see the lower parts of the tree trunks now. Nothing moves around them, though perhaps that blob of shadow on the earlier tree was the thing he'd seen? Or perhaps it was just a hollow. It doesn't budge, at least, no matter how he stares. The only sounds are the usual faint crackles of wind and wildlife in the leaves. Should he go out to investigate, keep watching from here or go back to where he was...

If Naoise was a predator, he'd probably be waiting for the gangly one with the stick to dumbly crawl out of his (less than desirably) protective nest. Curious killed more than just the cat, and Naoise hoped for the life of him that he wasn't going to be on the wrong end of guessing. He could wake Maera, but she needed blood and sleep...he wasn't going to disturb Owain, and Bella wouldn't know anything about it either... So he was on his own. Paranoia made him draw a couple glances at the surroundings just to make sure, but he didn't budge.

He hoped that, if anything was watching him, it would not decide to end their stalemate.

Moments crawl past and nothing leaps out at him. It's hard to tell just how much time passes but it begins to feel like maybe, perhaps, just possibly... there is no immediate danger.

He is finally rewarded - if it can be called that - by the sight of two more large, blobby shadows crawling up the first tree he spotted. They seem to be gathering in the canopy there rather than exploring anything on the ground. Nothing more descends the trees.

*Fuck yeah, good going Naoise.* With a swift vulgar gesture towards the retreating forms, Naoise kept watch for a couple moments longer before returning to his previous slumped position.

Resolute to make little movement or noise, he felt his lids fall a couple times along the span of what felt like half a day - which was the most unbelievable part of this whole ordeal. Peace, for that long? Only a couple hours, surely (unfortunately). He'd never been able to pull off all-nighters anyway.

When he felt that it would be more detrimental for the group to stay awake any longer, he reached over and gently tapped Maera's uninjured shoulder. "Are you feeling up for a watch, Maera? I can wake Bella if not - oh, but..um. They haven't done anything yet, but I'm fairly certain we have...company. Of presumably the arachnid sort."

There is, in that single moment, a feeling like the heart being wrenched sideways out of the chest. Naoise doesn't have a memory of blacking out, but certainly has one of waking up. It's a struggle to process anything at first, and then the sensations flood in: *cold*, snow piled up around him, frost stiffening his eyelids, *cold*, dark, the lantern light is gone, the smell of wet wood, *did his brain mention cold--*

There is a pleasant warm spot right under his jaw though, nestled against his neck. Long hair tickles his nose. When he finally opens his eyes, he finds he is hugging the back of Mae's head to his collarbone like a child might hug a bedtime plushie.

Truthfully, it keeps Mae's head warm too so she wakes up almost feeling good. Almost, because the rest of her body feels miles away with the numbness of the cold. A prayer could solve it quickly - and help her realise that she's been sleeping with legs sprawled awkwardly out, one foot smushed against Bel's cheek. At least her skirt has been acting as a semi-blanket for Bel too.

Bel herself has been shoved away thanks to the wayward legs. For better or worse, her unconscious self has found respite in the soft, warm and (why is it like this anyway) unclothed cleavage of Owain's chest. Despite everything, it's a good pillow.

Owain rests on his back, arms and legs stretched out in an almost normal sleeping position. He has managed not to squish anyone in his sleep. In fact, he's chilling a respectful few feet away from Naoise, like a bro in a tub.



Ow.

That was pain. The first sensation he'd felt in what felt like a year, before anything else- then came the bonechilling cold, slashing at his body and deep into his core.

"mmMRGH." It wasn't intelligent, or language, or even a voluntary noise. "Mrgh!"

*He couldn't open his eyes. Oh god he was in hell again oh god this was-* He felt the ice on his eyelids crack, and for a single, horrified moment, he thought he'd gone blind. Then he remembered that night was a thing. Maybe he was just dumb. Maybe he was still asleep. He looked down at the soft, nice smelling weight on his chest.

...

*Welp. He was definitely still asleep.*

"Mmmmmmmphhhhaaaackthisshit."

Consciousness seeps in slowly, leeching through the seams of his clothes until all his limbs feel as fragile as ice. His bones almost shiver, and one around his midsection screams for a reason he can't remember well - and why is it so *cold*? This is when Naoise's brain decides that this is frankly not worth it, and it is also when a snowflake drifts up his nose.

Suddenly he is awake, and frantically rubs at his nose with a hand that is strangely not as cold as the rest of him... On account of Maera, whose name takes him a second to recall but whose relation to him as being Probably Not Someone He Should Be Snuggling hits him like a baby's fist to the face. "Sorry," he whispers to her as his other braincells thaw, "im not a homewrecker, promise..." He trails off, and the memories begin reemerging with each kiss of a snowflake. They are in the Wispwood, he is in pain because he was dunked into a frozen lake, and- He stiffens. He shouldn't have been asleep, because he was the lookout.

...How long have they been asleep? And why is there so much snow?

Bel hears a beating sound and sees nothing. For a moment, she is nothing; then she becomes something odd and heavy. No matter how hard she tries to disappear, the feeling persists and she grows increasingly alarmed by every passing second her dream reality remains the same. Then whatever is beneath her shifts, and her eyes snap open.

Suddenly, nothing becomes something. Every sound feels bodied, and every image is sharper than its hazy dream reflection. She stares as a bit of snow dislodges from a branch and sinks



into the ground next to her face, kicking flakes onto her lashes. *No*, a part of her thinks. *You're not out yet*. But her mind is running along the veins of her whole body and reacquainting itself with sensation, and presence, and... She lets out a puff, and again and again as she remembers how to laugh. In that moment, she is genuinely happy to be alive.

Mae had spent so long in a time within time, following paths of starlight as she chased the shadows in her dreams. She saw impressions of her loved ones, of Daeris, Moriel, Blayne, and Xan... Bel and Owain she would find in moments of respite, huddled in a twilight meadow or standing upon the still, glassy surface of a deep lake. They offered substantial conversation and companionship, and she would cling to the moments they shared before she would fade again deeper into slumber. And throughout it all, Mae couldn't shake the feeling of being watched by a towering figure wreathed in darkness: the god who rarely deigned to answer her prayers.

The flutter of moth wings tickled her ear, and she turned as the shadows began to blend together into a deep, all encompassing chill. The feeling of being held settled at the forefront of her mind, and her heart ached again as she wondered what Xan was doing now. For a moment, she hoped, maybe the forest had returned her home like it had once before. But the chill deepened into the sheer cold of winter, and Mae peeked through frozen eyelashes once more to see that was not the case. She startled as Naoise, undoubtedly the one holding her, muttered an apology in her ear. The rest of her companions began to stir, and she offered an apology to Bel in turn, whose cheek she'd found her foot mashed against. A quick prayer to Atros solved her problem with the cold, though of course she received no answer, and she turned to the member of their group who couldn't so easily fix that issue. Placing her hands on Naoise's shoulders, she imbued his cloak with a sliver of her magic, enough to begin to try to thaw him out.

"What century is it?" Mae joked, eyes glowing a faint red as she held fast to her spell. "No one woke up with frostbite, right?"

Voices. Real, live, elvish-- he forced himself to glance down, past the worrying sight of Bel *laughing* on his... bare??? chest, before correcting himself - *and* human voices. He definitely was alive again. That pain was definitely real. The huge amount of snow was new, though. Licking his lips absently, he moved to prop himself up- careful not to toss his current passenger off. He genuinely didn't know what she'd do if she ended up face down in the snow. He was *absolutely* terrified to find out.

"--Well." He tried to order things in his head, taking a quick scan of their surroundings, muttering under his breath about how Atros had to be the worst father he'd ever had, and that was *something*, before swiveling back to respond to Mae's question. "Not frostbite. Hand's still broken, though. Down a bow. Out of knives. Still in this hellish wood."

They are extraordinarily calm about this. Naoise stares wordlessly at his companions as Mae offers him a little respite from the cold ("thank you," he chatters with frozen teeth), and feels that this is a little unfair considering *his* insides are a tumbling waterwheel. "Not yet...I think. And um," he says, hastily untangling himself from Mae, "I'm really sorry guys, I knocked out pretty hard." The words mist thickly, and he grimaces as the guilt nips at his mostly operable gut. "Is this normal in here? The snow and everything?"

A shoe in her face and the realization about who she is laying on would have ruined Bel's mood in a normal situation - but after being midwived from a terribly long and lonely dream, she can't be anything but gleefully dumbfounded. *Thank you Atros, you wank. You can have your key back.* The cold recedes as she rolls off Owain and onto the snow, eyes flashing. She breathes a soft, "We're still here," before sitting up and looking each of her companions in the face - Maera, wreathed not in starlight but a tangible cloak, and Owain, his neck free from chains. When she gets to Naoise's stupefied expression, her hand reaches to pinch his leg and complete satisfaction blooms at her fingertips when she feels the grit of his pants. Her visions blurs a little. "Even *you're* real." She could sing.

Mae sat upright, pulling all her limbs back to herself. The shift sent a twinge of pain shooting through her shoulder, and she cursed quietly as she remembered the physical world meant physical pain as well. It wasn't bleeding anymore at least, but it probably wouldn't take much to start again if she wasn't careful. As she finished taking stock of herself and her companions, she began to shuffle upwards to peek over the edge of their nearly-buried hide out for any movement in the dark.

"Snow's completely normal," she muttered, misunderstanding the intent of the question. So far so good... the *amount* of snow, however, was a little worrying. Perhaps a blizzard had passed by and none of them had noticed it? If that were the case, it was the shortest blizzard she'd ever experienced...

The question was where to go from here? They'd come here for a purpose, but it felt like they were no closer to finding any answers than when they started, and Mae was starting to get seriously worried she'd had them all sign their lives away for no reason. They had all known the risks, but there was supposed to be a point. There was that ravine Owain had been leading them towards, but did they even know the way there from here, much less the way back?

The height of the snow obstructs the view of the ground but the tall tree trunks around them look the same as before, albeit deeply veined with frost. Beads of ice stiffen the overhanging spider threads like strange necklaces. High above them, there is the occasional glimmer of a star

between the thick tangle of winter-bare branches. Otherwise, the only light is from the glow of Mae's magic.

The lantern that was being used for the lookout is completely dead. It doesn't look broken - just exhausted, as if it had been left on for too long. But the fuel was supposed to last a good few weeks...

If they wish to make any more sense of their surroundings, they should leave their nest of roots. Down here, half-buried in snow, there is not much to see. Right now, there is no sound of anything moving nearby - only the creak of branches and wind. The hours of rest have helped injuries to settle, but allowed the inevitable swelling to set in. Everyone except Bel feels very stiff around their wounds.

Unable to see anything from her current perch, Mae was forced to leave the illusion of safety provided by their hollow. She knocked over the empty lantern on her way out and just stared at it for a moment. Gods... this truly was like a terrible nightmare, waking up in the middle of Wisewood, lost, with no source of light. She whispered another quick prayer to Atros, more for safety than warmth this time as she studied the unyielding darkness surrounding them. Just because she didn't hear anything moving didn't mean there was nothing there... "Anyone else have another lantern?" she whispered. "This one's empty..."

Yeah, no - something is actually a little more wrong than it had been before. "Maybe not being real would be better right now, if I'm being honest," he replies incredulously, staring at the lantern Maera had disturbed. Wasn't that thing...supposed to last? Also, with due respect to the breadth of what might be considered (nice and) normal, that had been a decidedly odd comment, Bella - is there a place in which he is *not* real? His many questions die on his tongue as a more important conversation overtakes. "Not anymore," Bel is murmuring to Maera. "But I've got matches." She hands the other girl a stick before offering him one with an "I'll explain later. We should move." His midsection burns the moment he so much as shifts, but he makes it out from the hole with no more tears than he'd had within it.

Hoisting Naoise's frosted staff out after him, Bel turns to Owain and holds out another match with a steady hand. She looks at him and "Sorry I tossed your lantern," comes out stiffly, but without malice. Such is the power of pure relief...but she can't help the grimace she feels herself make. Apologizing still sucks, and such is the tangible world she has returned to. She gazes up at the dark canopy and feels her overwhelming gladness recede ever slightly in favor of dread-laced adrenaline for their overall terrible - and potentially fatal - circumstances. She remembers the balitheoir's face and clenches her jaw. Now is not the time to make merry and dwell on dreams of her reflection on a horned corpse cloaked in night. Once she turns and climbs from the hole, she strikes her own match and waits tensely.

"...s'all good. It was just a lantern." Owain took the match with slightly slurred words that he didn't mean, before following up with something that he did. "If it helped you stay safe, it was a worthy trade."

He was soggy, miserable, unarmed and in pain. And for the first time in what seemed like an age, utterly at ease with his situation. Sure, he didn't have a clue where they were anymore, but there was Bel's familiar scowl, and Maera's signature, laddish-tinted caution- and a shivering, still positive light in the darkness Naoise. He was as close to home as he'd ever been.

So in spite of the pain, and Atros' infliction of daddy issues on a global scale-- he grinned a big toothy grin, put on a brave face, and looked out to the dark depths of the woods- scanning the top of the treeline for any would-be ambushers.

The match light looks flimsy against the sheer depth of the darkness surrounding them, but it is something. In front of Mae and Bel, the snow stretches out in smooth, untouched slopes between the trees. There is not a single footprint in sight. A bit disconcertingly, there is not a single sound either - the clatter and crunch of Mae knocking over the lantern feels awfully loud. Both are familiar with the silence that comes with snow though, so perhaps it is nothing.

Facing back towards their little nest to retrieve his staff, Naoise glimpses the lake instead - or where it should be. There's a dip in the landscape where it sits but otherwise snow is piled over it as well, allowing only patches of its frozen surface to show through. It's difficult to tell now where exactly the winding waterway lies.

The spider webs above Owain glint faintly. The way they are frosted over makes it look like they haven't been used for a long time, and the quietness of the canopy has a similarly abandoned feel. The specks of starlight at least mean the sky is clear - if someone climbed high enough to see the stars and moon properly, perhaps they could glean something about their time and location.

The air is cold and very clean. So when Bel hoists her pack after distributing the matches, she clearly catches the bitter, yeasty smell of mouldy bread.

Mae bent down to pick up the lantern she had disturbed, squinting at it. It had tarnished, parts of it looked too rusted or frozen to move or come apart anymore. The glass globe was thoroughly scorched, so she could tell it had burned for quite a while... but they hadn't slept that long, had they? She sighed, laying it to rest as she lit the match Bel offered her. Using her magic, she dispersed little embers off of the flame farther than was naturally possible for just a little more

light. It wouldn't last too long, but she figured any magic she could conserve from sustaining her own flame - no matter how small - would pay off.

She shuffled over to retrieve her own pack, opening it curiously to take stock of the state of its contents and wrinkled her nose in disgust at the smell. Rooting around inside, she found the offending object had been the staple bread rations she had packed, and she flung them away in disappointment. Her thoughts were racing. "The bread's gone bad too..." She muttered, which by itself possibly wasn't that strange - there were plenty of things in the woods that could rot organic material with touch alone. But that *and* the lantern... She was trying to think of anything that could cause the bread to mold and the lantern to empty of weeks of flame *and* tarnish. She looked back into her pack to gauge the state of the rest of the contents. They were without a stable source of light, food... "What could have done this? It's like... each object has experienced time at an accelerated rate. I don't know of anything in the woods that quite has that effect."

Bel stares hard at the speckled rolls and strips of jerky decaying inside their compartment, mind racing. "So it's *not* normal for something to come over and fuck with our supplies, but leave us alone?" she mutters, tipping her pack to spill its spoiled contents onto the snow. "These should've lasted more than a week." She watches the flame of her match sway with the wind, mind tracing the lineage between their ruined rations, the snow piled enough higher than on an unattended roof in winter, and her long, long dream. Then she turns to Mae and Owain. "...So let's just say nothing in here can screw with time. Then how long have we been dreaming?"

The implications of whatever happened to them is a dull knock on his frosted head, inviting a numb panic into his body as he listens to the others articulate how well and truly fucked they are. He gives their dim surroundings a sweep, hoping it'll make him feel less like prey in an open field, and finds his gaze returning to the lake. Wait a minute, says subconscious Naoise, who is guarding all his synapses from becoming dry ice. Look. He stares, shivers, feels an idea burgeoning through the ice, and exhales when it forms in his mind. "Hey guys," he whispers, "I can probably follow the water - or uh, the ether - if we don't have any better ideas. About where to go, I mean." He dances around *if we're completely lost*, because saying it would only make it real (and no one needs that right now).

Without taking his eyes off the branches far above, Owain crinkled his nose at the sudden acrid tang of rot and filth slicing through air and smashing itself with force against his sinuses. "We... should probably take a look at what's around us, first," he sounded a *lot* calmer than he felt. "Because I wouldn't be surprised if Wispwood could slide us around in time." Letting the implications of what he said sink in for a fragment of a second too long, he clapped his hands together in order to move the conversation along- and as he was doing so, remembered as his

hands impacted each other that the big, horrifying monster had turned one of said hands into lovely collection of fractured bones.

Bent nearly double in wordless and surprisingly quiet agony, with tears starting to form in the corner of his eyes, he hoarsely continued to voice his plan. "...*Ugh...* ow... I-I'm going to climb this tree. See what's around." Time to see what three limbs and a willing spirit could do when he attempted to scale the tree they had been nesting under. (HE'S GOIN FOR IT)

Mae's embers shed a little more light into the darkness ahead of her. As far as she can see, the snow still looks pristine and untouched. It's kind of beautiful, if unnerving - it makes the landscape even more unrecognisable than it was before. Other than the food she tosses, all the contents of her pack are still there - twine, compass, medical kit, scissors, and so on. Her water flask seems fine as well, though the little purifying charm on it looks worn out.

As Bel dumps her spoiled supplies too, the practical question sits plainly in both her and Mae's minds: how long can they really travel without food? In that limited time, what should they do? Naoise's suggestion, to those who know about his wizarding specialties, sounds plausible. Waterways were landmarks, after all, so perhaps a sign or bridge could be found somewhere along it. Upstream from here though would also take them back to where they had battled the bailitheoir.

Owain's eyes are still a bit watery when he begins his climb. He quickly finds that unless he has incredible thigh strength, three limbs just isn't enough to grip the trunk reliably. He valiantly gets perhaps six feet up before he slips and crashes down - a powdery layer of snow cushioning his fall somewhat but hard frozen ice not far underneath it. The impact against his already-injured shoulder whites out his vision completely for a moment.

Mae was satisfied to find her inventory thankfully complete (even her water hadn't frozen solid, those charms were worth the money) and closed her pack with a sigh. Where to go from here? She'd gotten turned around several times on her way to reuniting with her companions, and was no longer sure she really remembered the way to town. She did know going back the way they came was *bad*, and she really didn't want to see if the bailitheoir was still waiting around for them.

Naoise mentioned he could lead on from here by following the aether of water, and Mae had to admit the idea piqued her interest. "That... isn't a bad idea. Especially since we don't have a point of reference other than the lake down here, and... that *thing* back there. Personally, I think we should take our chances with the lake, as long as we stay farther up the shoreline."

The dull thud of Owain's body hitting the snow and ice beneath startled her; if she were being honest, she hadn't really been paying attention to what he was doing. She shuffled over and

prod him in the side with her foot. Why had he thought it was a good idea to climb a tree with a broken hand? Perhaps she should save her energy in this aspect too rather than question such things any longer. "... Are you alive? Which way do you think we should go?"

He gurgled, a response as old as time, for a reason as old as he was- he was Owain Shiansach and ow everything hurt. Tears were welling in his eyes and honestly? Right at this instant? He wanted to go back to sleep, go back home to Reluir, crawl in bed, and go to sleep a dreamless sleep. No Atros bullshit. But...

...

He couldn't give up. People he actually liked were counting on him. He had to do his best- and that he would. "...Uhgh.. I am. I really wish I wasn't right now, but I am. ...I think we were headed north, before all this. To the border? I don't know which way is north. Hopefully along the river." He didn't get up from his position, grouchy eyes peering up from below at Mae. "Please tell me it's along the river."

Bel, who'd been maintaining peripheral attention on Owain's climb, catches his descent a split second before his body makes hard contact with the ground. His face contorts in an agony she has seen many times, and so many times has been able to fix - would have been able to fix now, *easily*, if only she'd been like her aunt. She kneels with hooded resignation. "Nothing's facing the wrong direction." She turns to the next least injured. "Help me get him up? On the less fucked up side."

Naoise's knees are a bit...crunchy as he kneels with a tired "Aye," and loops Owain's right arm around his shoulder. "Sorry for manhandling you, dude." Bel begins her song again, and he feels some of his tension in his already-crunched rib unwind. "I don't know about north," he looks to Maera for input, "but the monster is in the other direction, so I'm convinced." His laugh is brittle as he Activates His Third Eye/Ether Feelers, and gestures downwards from the visible lake body as soon as he feels the pull of waves beneath.

Mae's compass, like most of her equipment, is of typical ladlish make. Should she open it, the iron half will soon settle and show that the river, in the upstream direction, heads approximately south. It's hard to see where the lake, downstream, is meandering underneath all the snow, but from memory it was positioned northeast to the river. If they want to press on to the border then, downstream may be their best bet, while upstream may take them back towards familiarity and town.

The ether hums delicately in Naoise's senses. There is plenty of water beneath him - too much to tell how far it really goes. He could follow the perimeter of the lake and feel it out as he goes - or, since the perimeter is lumpy with buried shrubs and roots, he could walk on top of the flat, frozen water's surface instead.

Bel's song takes the edge off the sharp ache that was reintroducing itself to Owain. His whole left arm still feels utterly miserable but at least the pain isn't taking up every single synapse, so he can think about where they should be going. What *is* he searching for? How can he guide everyone to their mysterious goal?

The logistics of their location and direction are beyond Bel's scope - what is in her scope though is the condition of her companions. Naoise's stiffness around the middle, the purpled look of Owain's fingers, Mae probably needed stitches... it can't be helped (*she isn't her aunt*, echoes again) but the injuries sit like a tally in her mind.

For all the rotten luck they'd experienced upon waking up, so far they seemed to be spared the inconvenience of magical interference. The needle of her iron compass spun and held - no twitching, no extra spins. "Well," she mused. "I suppose there's good news and bad news. The good news is that Owain's right, north is that way." She pointed towards the frozen lake. "The border is probably that way too. The bad news is that means south is back the other way. Towards the *bailitheoir*. Which might now be between us and town, and we're out of provisions."

One by one her companions' eyes turned to her. All the doubts she had shoved down mere moments ago were clawing up her throat again, and her trembling hands tightened around her compass. Weariness settled into her spine, posture sagging and finally she hung her head in defeat. "I... I know I called you here to help me find the Nothing. You came all the way here to meet me, crossed the border from Reluir and everything! I asked so much of you, for strangers who became tied together in dreams. I'm afraid that... continuing on this path will lead us to our deaths; and based on what the Nothing said to me, about how no places can stay forever... I worry Iadlain doesn't have much time. I may not have a choice if I want to protect my family." She paused, dragging her gaze up from where it had settled on the snow, meeting each of the elves' eyes in turn. "But you *do*. You don't have sentimental ties to Iadlain - for the most part - and there's no solid proof to my theory. It's just a hunch! And so... I feel like... I need to give you the option, that i-if you want to turn back... I won't blame you. If I'm wrong, and the only one who dies because of it is me, then... That's my own fault. So... yeah." She cleared her throat awkwardly, shuffling her weight from foot to foot as she waited for her companions' verdict.

Bel watches the yolk sink into Maera's shoulders, and then stares at the dried blood staining the girl's cloak. The silence is weary. "I won't," her voice is quiet, but sharp as flint, "be able to save any of you if it comes down to it." Her remaining cheer slips away with the admission; she closes her eyes so she doesn't have to watch it go. She still wants to believe she can stand



between any one of them and Atros' door - but down to the wire, Bel never even had that much to barter. Sorcha does, she thinks bitterly, and if she can't be her aunt...then she is at a deficit with all of their lives. She doesn't say that, or *You didn't force me to do anything. I wanted something and borrowed what I can't repay.* Instead, "But we won't take another beating by that thing and live, either."

Naoise starts when Bel looks at him that makes him think the bigger portion of the hot potato is on his lap. Mostly because of the prolonged stare she aims at his ribcage. He offers her an uncomfortable smile with what he hopes is Lack Of Resentment because they are Adults Who Made Choices, if Poor Ones when the person in question Didn't Go To Church Enough to get a slice of grace. "Uh," he starts, "to be honest, I think aiming for town is...well, not smarter necessarily, because I clearly know jack about surviving in this place, but probably more hopeful for our continued wellbeing. Like, the existence thereof, haha...ha. But I agree with Bella about *that* and its friends, so we're probably better off staying together if it's as inevitable as it sounds. Chucking four rocks is better than one, yeah?" He then looks to Owain. *I am talking out of my ass, dude.*

Owain mentally cursed Naoise, *damn the land this empty-headed and big hearted fool stood on,* because being level-headed and not being fatalistic about their chances meant that 2/3 of them were already convinced they were dead and he'd simply said that dying together was better than dying alone. *Bugger.* He broke away from the wizard's hopeful gaze and tried to think, the dread and despair of his companions' words already tugging at the edge of his mind.

Owain was a coward, and he knew it. It was a bitter, ugly, horrible pill to force down but he knew it, deep in his soul- that he was scared, and tired, and that for the past sixty-something years of his life, he'd spent fifty of them running away. He hated being so deep in the woods, and he hated how fascinating and deadly they were. He hated that, realistically, he was going to die here with them and the only cold comfort that would be that the four headed monster that arose from their corpses would at least be a looker. He hated that he had to try and laugh to not think about how close to death they were, and how foolish they were.

But. *But.*

He *had* to try.

"...We're gonna have to move forward!" Owain flashed a grin at the rest of the party, winking at Naoise and giving a thumbs up to Bel and Maera. He sounded a hell of a lot more cheerful and calm than he felt. "What we *do* know is that the big, meaty, anti-friend-shaped monstrosity is back that way, and we don't have any guarantee that they're not wandering toward us as we speak. But- Something I recalled not moments ago gives us a reason to press on, my dear companions! The Nothing- the creature in the ravine- the thing in the depths- Whatever you

wish to call it, when I feel into its embrace... it offered to send me home, or... well. Wherever I wanted or needed to be." Another wide grin, and an airy chuckle. "Why don't we just press onward and get it to send us back?"

The tension melted out of Mae's shoulders, replaced with a sense of profound relief. They had agreed to stay... one way or another, this journey would end. She didn't think she would get lucky enough to escape death a third time, but at least she wouldn't be alone. "Okay," she breathed, glassy eyed and trying hard to brush off a snuffle. "Sorry, just... haha! Just felt like I should throw that out there. Ahem." She cleared her throat, trying to brush off the gooey feelings she didn't have time for right now. "Let's press on then, shall we?" She turned with a flourish and began trudging downstream towards the lake, the embers from her match light swirling with her lifted spirits. She got about 5 paces before she paused and turned sheepishly. "Right... Naoise was going to lead the way, wasn't he? Why don't you be our pathfinder and I'll just... watch your back?" *Dammit Mae, getting ahead of yourself again.*

"You were heading in the right direction," Naoise chuckles, thankful to be freed of the somber mood. "I'm sorry to exchange your intrepid leadership for my...lesser versions both." He trails off, looking the pulse of ether as it offers him two excellent options of a) tripping on invisible shrubbery or b) being hunted by whatever lurks beneath the water. "Bella, pray my share to Father dearest please," he mutters, and steps cautiously over the snow-covered bank. He breathes just enough flame onto his flickering match to light the path...hopefully ensuring he doesn't fall on his face or worse. "Watch your step, everyone. Also...how likely is it that there is something in the water that can hear us?"

Bel remembers the way Owain appeared out of thin air months (?) ago, and thinks only of that as she begins pace with a steely brow. *You're a god, Atros. Don't tell me you can't cover all our asses.* The empty response reciprocates an empty prayer - a little more than usual, somehow. (Probably just her imagination or dour attitude returning twofold.) She continues to hum her song while studying their lateral surroundings with the summation of magical and natural light.

"Well, as it's frozen solid-" Owain maintained his brave face, trying to save a little bit of Mae's dignity by politely focusing on Naoise's comments rather than the snuffle in her voice. "-so I'd say pretty likely." He finished lamely. Brave face or not, if he was asked flat out, he was going to be honest. But if nothing else, he could at least scan the treeline- keep an eye out for any pursuers or disturbances. "If we be careful and grab each other when things appear, we should be fine!"

The bank it is. As they leave their little nest behind, the height of the piled snow becomes more evident. It drags around their knees - or in Mae's case, a bit above - and makes the going slow, but slow progress is still progress.

It's a bumpy path as well, thanks to hidden roots and shrubs under the snow. Naoise's warning is a deserved one - the unstable footing can easily trip or misbalance someone. At some point, Naoise's foot plunges into an unexpected ditch that sends him waist-deep into the snow and toppling forwards. It's a harmless fall, fortunately, if undignified.

Their surroundings otherwise seem peaceful - if anything in these woods can be called that. The snow soaks up the ambient sound and the darkness shrouds any unpleasant sights beyond their modest circles of light. As far as they can see, there is only white ground, frost-streaked trees on the left and open space where the lake lies on the right. Sometimes it feels like something shifts in their peripheral vision but it always seems to be just the flickering shadows cast by their own firelight.

The lake's border meanders but curves gradually, consistently right. It eventually becomes a critical mass of thought: should they continue following it in a more eastwards direction, or break away to forge on truly northwards?

It was a welcome break to settle into an uneventful walk, and yet Mae couldn't shake the uneasy feeling of creeping paranoia - on account of their location alone. Still, wading through the snow took most of her focus at present even trying to be vigilant. She was glad Naoise was in front of her, because no doubt she would have toppled into the same ditch he'd found. "You alright there?" She called softly as he righted himself, and breathed a sigh of relief when it became clear he hadn't injured himself further.

As they continued their pace, Mae kept an eye on the needle of her compass, pursing her lips as the lake itself began curving to the east. She shouldn't have been surprised; water never cooperated. "If we wanted to continue north, we'd be heading away from the lake at this point." Not that she was particularly sorry to not have run into any water creatures, but visibility by the lake clearing was generous for the Wisewood. Heading away now would undoubtedly take them into Deeper Darkness. The matchlight would run out sooner or later, but if they could function with this amount of lighting, then she and Naoise were plenty sufficient - assuming they could stay together this time.

Thankfully, Naoise's pitfall claims damages only in pride and precious bits of lower body heat. He rights himself as gracefully as a tuna in a sink, gives his midsection a feather-light pat, and forges onward with a whispered "Thank you for your concern, my friends. I'm still mostly intact." At Maera's cue, however, he turns with mixed relief and unease; straying from the lake meant leaving its potential sea monsters...and a huge reservoir of power. His knuckles tighten around

his staff, but he manages to offer his companions a lopsided smile. "If north is our best bet, we should beat feet - whatever you seasoned forest explorers decide. By which I mean, please do."

Bel's hackles are up, and she doesn't know whether it's because of her nerves or because something's really been tailing them within the shadowy forest. She glares into the darkness, trying to tell whatever it is to Stay The Fuck Away. It is at this point that Naoise sinks into the snow and nearly causes her to jump out of her skin. Her dead-eyed stare is reciprocated when the topic turns to their next move. "What he said. But," she lowers her voice instinctively, "there might be something in the trees."

"Oh, don't worry about what's in the trees, Bel. Here, the trees themselves are what you want to worry about! A lot of them eat people!" Owain was trying, he really was, but he couldn't turn off the cheery attitude. It was the best defense he had now that he was down literally every weapon he owned. "-in any case.... Naoise is right, Maera! If we move quickly, the things that go bump in the dark will still have to get used to waking up. If they fell asleep at all!"

He fell quiet, still plodding along through the fresh snow as he began to lead the way into the depths of the woods, golden eyes flashing in the matchlight as he glanced back toward the trio behind him. He drew his cloak more firmly around him as he continued in a much more somber tone. "We don't have any more time."

Their veer northwards into the trees, Owain at the front this time. The depth of the snow lessens a bit thanks to the thick canopy of branches blocking the sky, but the ground beneath becomes more tangled with roots. Care must be taken not to trip.

It's difficult to stay exactly northbound since the terrain must be navigated around, but they manage a decent approximation of it. The ground begins to slope upwards and the trees crowd closer. At some point, the first of Bel's matches burn out and are replaced with more from her dwindling supplies. It's impossible to tell how much progress they have made but Naoise's stomach is just starting to make demands for more bodily fuel when a scent reaches him - and the whole group - that kills it completely.

It's the smell of rotting meat. The pungence is overwhelming for a second before the wind shifts slightly. It's not clear where it's coming from but the upwind direction is approximately northeast - that is, ahead and a bit to the right. Nothing looks amiss within their own little circle of light, which illuminates themselves and the nearest tree trunks. Should they proceed, stop, change direction, or...?

Ah...the lovely stench of carrion. Naoise stops to cringe and mutters, "...You know, maybe let's move a little further to the left," at the same time that Bel squints into the darkness and says, "We might as well keep going, if not that way. It's more energy to turn back now." She aims a deadpanned stare at Naoise's stomach (which chooses to hold its peace). "Who knows," she adds wryly, "maybe there'll be something to eat. Doesn't seem like there's anything around." She swings her match wide, just to survey the unlikely possibility there are harmless berries around.

"There's *always* something in the trees," Mae muttered. For the most part, Owain's sarcastic griping slathered in false cheer went ignored and unacknowledged. She just shook her head at how he spoke like he'd been living in the woods his whole life. Relans, sometimes... Honestly. Even if he'd originally been born in Iadlain, it *barely* counted, in Mae's *expert* opinion.

She carefully didn't call him out on it though, still just happy the three of them had decided to stay - for better or worse.

Her train of thought was derailed when a putrid scent overpowered the cold, clean air she'd almost been enjoying. She almost ran into Naoise as he paused and couldn't help but nod in agreement. Her head whipped around to look at Bel incredulously as she suggested they move ahead. "Definitely *not* towards the dead thing," Mae huffed in disgust. "Dead meat could attract all sorts of awful things... That's why all our festival food is vegetarian." Not that that was a super important point. "Anyway. If there *is* something following us, maybe it'll go that way..."

Owain stumbled to a halt ahead of the pack for a moment, eyes narrowed in the vague direction of the smell. His fingers tightened along the edges of his cape, a chill running down his spine despite his inability to feel the cold.

"Dead things aren't the only things that smell of rot, either." His voice was quiet, barely above a mutter to himself. It could be another bailitheoir, perhaps. They did like dangling dead bits from their mouths- or perhaps they'd run into the almost cute maggots again. Of all the horrible monstrous things that patrolled Wispwood, the disgusting little grub-like creatures were almost... innocent. At least they only ate you when you died. He began to walk again to get his mind off it, tromping away from the smell- forward, but to the left instead. "Then we'll go around... while still making our way north, right?"

They veer leftwards while still forging ahead - approximately northwest. The ground begins to curve upwards, making it more of an effort to hike along but not overly taxing for now. The wintery breeze continues to flow intermittently, bringing with it the smell of decaying flesh. While it doesn't seem to be getting worse, it doesn't go away either.

Neither does the feeling that the shadows may be moving on the edges of their vision. As ever, it's impossible to tell if it's just the imagination though.

Bel's glance around in the darkness doesn't yield any promising berries or fruit. At some point, however, she notices a generous frill of white on a tree trunk that looks like fungi. Naoise's stomach is tactfully silent for now and he doesn't exactly feel hungry but, whether he realises or not, it's more a lack of appetite than the reality. In truth, without the divine protection against the cold, his body is burning through reserves a lot quicker than the others' in order to stay warm.

In fairness, parental favoritism is inevitable across an entire race...but this is just kind of sad. *O Atros, wherefore art thou as helpful as a soggy towel?* Naoise considers his options - helpfully enunciated by the rot, he might add - with a snuffle. His being able to do some stuff with magic water is about a pinch of salt's worth of leverage, and measured against the party's optimistic-tablespoon? Gritting his teeth might just get someone - or ones - killed down the line. *I don't want to die here*, his brain adds somewhat numbly. But *want* is cloudy and nebulous - *can't* is much more doable.

Bel stares wordlessly. When Naoise's shoulders slack and his eyes turns glassy, her stomach curdles. Relief doesn't wash over her when he simply says, "Hey, guys - could we slow down for a bit? Inclines are my mortal enemy," with weary cheer. She doesn't feel better when she bundles her cloak around him, nor when she catches an undeserved appreciative smile. Bel nods at the tree growth with a tight, "Can we eat that?" to Owain and Mae, and knows she will never ever forgive herself if she watches him die.

Unfortunately, the rank smell of death lingered in the air as Naoise called for them to slow down. Pausing carefully, Mae decided to survey the darkness instead. She couldn't tell if they'd inadvertently wandered towards the source of decay or if they were down a very subtle wind.

Or perhaps Owain was right, and their latest source of inconvenience wasn't a stationary corpse.

She sent a few more harmless embers into the shadows as far as they would go before they burnt out in the cold, all but blind to the irony of the metaphor. She hummed pensively, glad Owain was alert and watchful as well; her eyes weren't quite as good in the dark as his. Nothing that she could see, at the moment, but she could have sworn...

Her attention was brought back to her companions as Bel pointed out something that may be edible. Mae frowned, moving towards it to study the mushroom. "I'm not sure, let me take a look at it. I used to collect mushrooms for Sionnath's Teeth as an apprentice, but never from this far in the woods..."

Mae seemed to have the whole white tree growth settled- and it was probably better that she took care of it, honestly. His usual rule for food in the woods was: 'if you boil the shit out of it or turn it into stew, it's bound to taste good at some point. Or at least not kill you immediately'. Shrugging, he turned his eyes back to the wooded treeline, searching for any disturbances in a vain attempt to keep his mind off of how Naoise's ribs must be feeling right now. It must be hellish to breathe... no wonder the inclines were his mortal enemy.

Gotta keep an eye out for now, that's the best way he can be useful. That and offer to give Naoise a one-armed piggyback ride if they need to run.

The extra layer of Bel's cloak helps, though it doesn't reach the bone-deep cold that has soaked into Naoise's core. As Mae detours to investigate the mushrooms, the group's pace is paused altogether so as not to leave her behind. It's a relief on Naoise's ribcage, though standing still knee-high in snow makes his numb toes less happy. Can't win, can you.

Mae needs enough light to see the colour of the mushrooms properly but fortunately her fire can provide that. It's a shelf fungi on some sort, beige-white with fine yellow streaks. Strangely, instead of a textbook, she recalls a picture of this from a cookbook. The memory is vivid - she and Diarmid had been excited to make a mushroom curry out of this, only to be disappointed when it turned out the mushroom was awfully expensive at the market. She had looked up why later: it only grew on old trees in blood-rich soil, which usually meant the nests or nurseries of beasts.

The good news, then, was that it was edible. The bad news was that they had wandered right into the home of *something*, which doubtless would not be pleased if it discovered the trespassing. The quickest way out, however, is unclear - forward, back, left, right?

Owain can see more frosted-over webs swaying gently above. They have not ceased, really, since leaving the lake behind, so by themselves they aren't much of a concern. They do seem to be gradually increasing as they go, however. Was it something worth worrying over?

Squinting in the dark, Mae let her flame flare just enough to be able to make out the details of the mushroom. She found it was slightly larger than it looked from so far away, and was entirely surprised when she found she did recognize it. "This is..." she trailed off as her memory caught up with her excitement, derailing her train of thought about how Diarmid would be jealous that she got her hands on such a delicacy *for free*.

But of course in the Wisewood, there were always blood prices to pay. She glanced around nervously, pulling her knife from her bag as she got to work hacking the mushroom from the tree

bark as quickly and quietly as she could. "Stay quiet and stay close," she hissed in warning to her companions. "Good news: it's edible! Bad news, it only grows in blood-soaked soil, like in monster nests. We need to get moving, quickly...!"

She shoved the shelf of mushroom at Naoise; he could either eat it raw or sear it himself, he had some capabilities with fire after all. Task completed, she killed her flame as much as she dared and moved closer to her elves, trusting their eyes more than hers as the oppressive shadows bore down on them once more. "If you see *anything* move, get ready to run. Whatever's here probably won't be alone."

Naoise drops Bel's match in favor of the funky disk, and his incredulous "it does *what* now??" fizzles away as they quickly assume defensive penguin huddle. He rips a small portion of the rind, pops it into his mouth, and takes a generous second to wonder about blood nutrients before stowing it away in his pack. Then he clamps both hands on his staff and tries to channel as much and as little warmth into his body as he can afford to help him move...if not at the speed of lightning, then the speed of saving his own hide.

"Then let's hurry," is all Bel says, her mind already juggling enough things that *aren't* blood tree babies. Distantly, she wonders if monster children could be as easily placated by music boxes and songs as elven ones, but perishes the thought before she perishes.

He'd only been paying half attention to his companions as the very icy and surprisingly beautiful mess of webs had pushed itself to the forefront of his mind, but the worry and *monster nests* snapped him back to reality with a chill down his spine that he should not have been able to feel. Oh no, then they must be--

"The spiderwebs have been getting thicker." Ow didn't take his eyes off the treeline, reaching behind him for something to grab on his companions so that he could get their attention while pointing up. "...They could be surrounding some bigger thing's lair but we might stumble onto spiders even bigger than we saw before."

The mushroom is slightly sweet and has a pleasantly loose, chalky texture in Naoise's mouth. He can feel his stomach kick to life over the offering and it makes him even hungrier for a second, but it will have something to soothe it soon.

Owain's blind grab finds the back of Bel's shirt - and misses, since it's not nearly as easy to grasp as a cloak, so it ends up as a sort of pat. Still, it's enough to get her attention. Almost on cue, a shadow shifts in the treetops - indistinct and soon disappearing behind some branches,



but with the smooth gait of a many-legged creature. It seemed to be moving away, but that isn't much comfort when the canopy could be hiding so much.

There is perhaps half a minute of quiet. Then, from nowhere and everywhere, the strange, long, *loud* toll of a bell vibrates through the air.

Bel is glaring into the treeline for additional spider (?) activity when the thunderous peal of something cold and strangely familiar causes her to flinch. Her eyes are wild as she turns her head in every direction to ascertain its source (while her stance mimics that of a friend under the sea), but the forest doesn't give her a chance to ask "What the *fuck* is that?!" before exploding to life.

Naoise is very glad he isn't holding the shroom; his staff's frosty metal adhesion to his gloves is the only reason it doesn't fall out of his hands. As the forest roars in response to the sudden, dreadful tolling, the canopy glows with a strange new light. It doesn't take a native to figure out that this...is probably not normal. He meets Bel's wide eyes with his own, and turn to his companions with what he hopes is consensus. "We," it's Bel's stronger voice that urgently vocalizes the call to action, "need to *move!*"

The looming, bell tolling threat of a monster sliding out of the depths of the blackest pits of hell and floating vaguely toward them over the treeline that even *he* could see flipped a switch in him. Monsters be damned. Owain was done.

He was so *fucking done*.

This was it. The limit. The endless dream, his hurting hand and shoulder. The bullshit snow, the lack of food, that fucking spider. And even before then, the stress of having a god summoned twice and successfully killing his homeland. This floating, terrifyingly huge white wad of bullshit was the *last straw*.

"You...", his voice was quiet, for just a single fragment of a moment as he saw red and whirled around, jabbing his finger to the sky as those bottled up emotions finally exploded out in literal curse laden stream of explicative and bile. "-GARBAGE-LADEN, LEGLESS SON OF A TWISTED DONKEYSHIT GOD! I'M GOING TO PISS ON YOUR GIANT TOES AND FILL YOUR BONES WITH ANTS. I'M GOING TO EAT YOUR HEART, AND STAND UPON A PILE OF YOUR CHILDREN TO WRAP MY HANDS AROUND THAT STUPID VEIL AND RIP IT OUT BY THE ROOTS-"

He didn't appear to be listening (srry bel).

No sooner than Mae had dropped the *expensive* mushroom into Naoise's hands did all chaos break loose. She looked up at Owain's warning to see the tail end of a much too large shadow skitter across the webbed tree tops when the deep toll of a bell pulsed through the air. A sound so loud she felt it behind her eyes, in her fingertips, the echo ringing through her bones. It sounded like it was everywhere all at once, and yet... had it come from the *sky*?

The very sky Owain had started screaming at, cursing Atros' name.

The bell had been loud, but Owain's screeching right next to her somehow seemed so much louder; especially in such close proximity to whatever had been up in the treetops. He was gonna attract everything in the forest at this rate! Whatever the hell that bell-sound was could wait, they had more immediate problems. Panicking almost as much as he was, Mae bodily threw herself at Owain in an attempt to knock him over and restrain him before she could get him to calm down.

It didn't exactly go as planned. Owain was as solid as he looked, and all she ended up doing was crashing face first into his chest. She did, however, succeed at jamming her hand halfway into his mouth. It wasn't what she had planned, but it stopped the cursing at least, if not the actual screaming.

"Shut UP!" She hissed, shaking him as much as she could. "Or did you forget we're *entirely too close* to a MONSTER NEST? On top of invoking the wrath of Atros - which is probably the only reason we haven't frozen to death! Get a grip, you'll kill us all! And I swear to Atros if you bite me at all I *will* tie you to this tree and set you on fire, so help me gods."

Right as Owain begins hollering about ant bones, Naoise checks out. *Okay*, he thinks, studying the twinkling canopy, *this is happening*. The back of his neck and his palms are clammy, but otherwise his panic is violently muffled by the cold, the sound, primal self preservation, or all of the above. *Sure is pretty. We can see better now, thank Atros*. When Mae pounces in periphery, he turns back to more of Owain's teeth than he ever wanted to see. For some reason this imagery is a hot coal on shot nerves, and adrenaline surges from his toes straight to his mouth. "Hey man, I get it," he whispers rapidly, not getting it and not caring to right then, "but I really think you should shut the hell up and start running."

It's a good thing for Mae's quick reaction, because Bel had been prepared to shove her boot down Owain's throat. A roar of "WHAT PART OF *NOT BEING ABLE TO SAVE ANY OF YOU DID YOU NOT FUCKING UNDERSTAND*" lodges in her own as Naoise beats her to it with wide eyes and no smile, and instantly she has no idea what to do next. She can't smush them into her bag and make a make dash for it, and she couldn't raze the whole forest to the ground if she tried. A helplessness sits in her hands that she tries to shake by yanking on Owain's cloak in

sharp, frantic sweeps toward their escape route, hoping it'd cinch his throat. She scans the darkness for signs of ambush with a startingly vulnerable (and equally pointless) *Atros deliver us*.

It was cathartic, almost. This most recent straw on an ever-growing pile of apocalyptic and personal distress was the final thing to crack open all that aggression, all that bottled up anger and emotion and hurt, to give a tangible threat to point all his woes and unfairly blame everything squarely on a literal god who was trying (and failing, for now) to kill him and his. It felt not good. He didn't even consider how it felt until his voice was *cut off by some halfie's grubby little fingers jamming down his throat*.

For a single solitary moment, his expression revealed his true age- old, hateful eyes of molten gold glaring out of a youthful face as that thick, black, bubbling anger that had just been building for the past sixty odd years lashed out at the new nearest target as his hand snapped out and he *yanked* Mae up to his eye level. A single, slightly muffled word boiled out from behind her fingers and his teeth that were pressed in *just* hard enough to indent skin.

"Try."

The sheer *hatred* he forced into the word shocked him, his eyes blinking wide with shock at how much bile and venom had spewed forth in that single syllable- at Mae, no less. He almost wanted to say something, to apologize- unable to quite vocalize his feelings and only being able to look at Naoise without comprehension- the words were coming out, but he didn't understand them and as his grip loosened, and he dropped Mae, he nearly fell over entirely as he felt what he assumed was regret grab at his throat to strangle him.

He was wrong, that was Bel nearly taking him out with his own cloak as he dumbly tried to right himself while the boiling emotions inside tried to right themselves once again as he stumbled the way she tugged.

Mae hadn't yet had a chance to actually look around and find the source of the accursed noise, nor see if anything had responded to Owain's answering cacophony. She was thusly startled when she was suddenly yanked up, nearly nose to nose with the elf as he managed to spit out a single word (rather impressively with half her fist still jammed in his mouth).

She felt like she had been slapped across the face with the sheer, cold fury in his tone, and she blinked several times in shock. Finally processing it, her eyes turned a bright, glowing red with her own barely restrained wrath as the temperature around the both of them went up several degrees. Her magic had always been quickest to react and hardest to control under her temper, and she had been proud of the years of emotional maturity that brought her to her current prowess as a wizard... but Owain really was going to test that this night.

**“Put. Me. Down.”** she said, slow and deliberate. She withdrew her hand from his mouth and grasped the collar of his cloak in turn, any metal present beginning to heat up uncomfortably. Her other hand went directly for his wrist, her crimson eyes boring into his in challenge. *She* was only trying to keep them alive. *She* was trying to help. If he was going to make himself an obstacle between them and survival, then despite any fondness she held for him, in true ladsish fashion she would—

Her train of thought was derailed again as he dropped her unceremoniously. She landed on her butt, and this only served to further enrage her as the ice melted with a hiss where she touched it. “Good. Naoise is right, we’ll discuss this later. Let’s go.” She set a brisk pace going back the way they came; whether or not it was the fastest way out of the monster nest, it was the most familiar.

Naoise gets a lovely view of the canopy when he gazes up at it. Countless tiny motes glitter like stars, their radiance cold and dim. Another sound follows the deafening toll - the chorus of many small chimes, their collective music cascading and blurring together until it becomes a shimmering white noise. It is both cacophonous and difficult to hear.

Between Owain's stunned stillness, Bel's unrelenting tugs and Mae striking out a path of retreat, the whole party manages to get moving again. They set a stumbling pace back southwards, the way they came. It doesn't take long, however, for the sharp crack of splitting wood to reach them. It comes from above, or maybe the side - the constant ringing and restless motion of wisps above makes it hard to pinpoint any one sound or movement. Through slightly muddled senses, they notice that the bark of nearby trees has shifted-- widened. Seams abruptly split open and it takes the sight of bloodshot eyes rolling within them to realise it looked exactly like eyelids opening.

The eyes' gaze is erratic and wild, darting up and down as if taking in everything. They don't settle on the travellers yet, seemingly more interested in the racket around them, but they are *everywhere* - on every trunk and branch in sight, ahead and behind. Sentient trees aren't exactly uncommon in these woods, but no one has ever seen this many in one place. Beneath their feet, obscured by the snow but palpable under their soles, the earth shifts as roots begin to move.

(Everyone rolled 1 or 2 on their knowledge checks, gg)

So apparently, everyone's (admittedly stressed) brain cells aren't functioning too well at this exact moment. Mae and Owain's thoughts are still partly blanked out from the fury only moments before, Naoise imagined his mentor's stories to be, well, A Lot milder than this, and

Bel's brain just throws up the helpful verdict of 'nope' on the whole thing. To be fair, she isn't wrong.

All that's left, then, is the fight or flight reflex - and not a moment too soon, as the ground lurches beneath their feet. The snow in front of them arches upwards as a root pulls free from the earth and Owain feels a sudden, gnarly pressure around his ankle. In an instant, one of his legs is yanked backwards, sending him face-first into the snow, and between that and Bel's death grip on his cloak, this might be what it feels like to be a rag toy yanked by two dogs.

More roots snake their way upwards from the ground, jagged thorns lining their sides like a centipede's legs. Although they don't seem intent on attacking the group, they have them completely surrounded and have no qualms about trampling them.

The pristine snow, undisturbed only moments before by anything except for them, exploded around them into a sea of sharp, roiling roots. Black and gnarled, they twisted about each other and whipped through the air, not yet reaching for them - a small mercy. Mae's eyes darted about for any means of escape, a narrow path, anything...! But all she could see were fanged roots and hungry eyes.

Blood still thrumming with adrenaline and fury, she set her jaw and reached for that barely-replenished well of magic inside her. She'd attempted to hold back for most of the journey, with the knowledge that it was indefinite, and she didn't know how long she would need to make it last. Now, however, seemed like the time for reservation was over.

Already at the front of the line, she thrust her hands forward, fire spilling forth from her fingertips. "Stay behind me!" She called over her shoulder. There was no finesse in the way she handled her magic this time, just sheer force and determination. The roots were strong on such old trees though... it was like trying to burn through steel...! "A l-little help would be appreciated, though...!"

Try as he might, Naoise doesn't think he's particularly successful at collecting his nerves, on account of the eyes on the trees and that barbed roots tugging at Owain like a chew toy. But, to be honest, this is still better than the bailitheoir. He stumbles behind them for a better vantage point and flexes harried fingers around his staff, trying to imagine that this is a work emergency he has been trained to handle. "I'll try to give you some kindling," he calls out, praying that his instincts haven't frozen over like the rest of him. Tendrils of flame circle about his ankles before slithering around the roots, hoping to spread the flame about the surrounding area like wildfire.

Bel maintains a vice grip on Owain's cloak. There is no weeping chasm to drag him into, but the roots can just as well harpoon him into the night or thrash him about until something breaks.

And she (her grip tightens until she feels a tear) will not be able to fix anything that breaks. "Take it off unless you want to choke to death - just *don't let go!*" She braces herself and belts a song that she hopes will calm the mages enough to magic at peak-ish performance root-burning efficiency.

Face down in the snow, he wished he could say that this was a new sensation. He really, genuinely did. The horrible pain in his shoulder was new though.

What was it that his mother was always saying?

*'Owain, you need to grow up, this is why nobody wants you around.'* Dully, he grimaced against the snow as his brain began to whirr to life once more. *Not incorrect, but not helpful right now- it was about the trees, what was it about the trees? ---oh right, air. He needed that to live.*

That's when he started to panic, and the fight or flight response *finally* kicked on and he began to squirm against the wooden tentacle that was trying to drag him to be eaten as he recalled what exactly his childhood nursery rhymes had been saying about the trees in the Wispwood: 'Don't trust firewood that can eat you.'

He cursed out loud, aiming a kick fueled by the passion of finding out that your childhood rhymes aren't even rhymes or helpful in any way at the offending root, his uninjured hand grabbing at the golden chain currently choking the life out of him so that he could drag in a few gulping breaths as he tried to get away.

Mae's flames sputter along the wet, frosted wood of the gnarled trees, staying alight through magical tenacity more than any natural burning. The roots beneath them twist and buck, as if trying to shake off something unpleasant, but otherwise don't seem greatly hindered.

Then the heat from Naoise's supporting fire joins in, helping to thaw the wood, and Bel's encouraging song pours fresh energy into the mages. The roots blacken and crack, bitter ash fills the air-- and the earth under everyone's feet suddenly lurches with new violence.

Owain's foot finds its mark just before this. He kicks the root latched around his leg with enough force for it to loosen and Bel's stranglehold on him to yank him slightly out of its grasp. Then the ground shakes, shifts and *slithers* - Mae and Naoise are physically carried by the earth in one direction, and Bel and Owain in the other. Visible beneath the broken snow, they can see now that the ground here was never really soil so much as a huge tangle of living tree roots. It is, quite literally, a monster's nest.

The mage fire has burned away a messy gap in the roots, enough perhaps to make a dash for the nest's edge. It is rapidly closing though, just like they are rapidly being carried away from each other, as the roots roil like waves - if they are to act, it must be now.

Horror. Horror and fear and trees. He couldn't say this was how he thought he'd die but given the last year of his life he wasn't surprised. But he'd be damned if he wasn't going to struggle to the bitter, brutal end.

Owain scrambled to his feet as quickly as he could (taking advantage of that scout-based class agility), sucked in a huge gulp of air, caught a glimpse of the singed hole in the wall of deadly trees, saw (and felt) the ground exploding, and finally realized that he and Bel were rapidly moving away from the mages. There was only one option, and he hoped that his fellow idiots-who-went-into-the-depths-of-the-fucking-*Wisewood* saw the same thing he did. He reached back for the hand on his cloak, grabbed her wrist, and with a single glance back to catch her eye, took off running toward the smoldering gap.

In the chaos that ensued, Mae became a creature of instinct acting upon a primal desire to *live*. As it seemed the earth opened up to swallow them whole, her eyes fixed upon the sole, transiently-serene patch of stable ground, still smoldering with firelight embers of a most inviting glow. Without hesitation, she sprinted for the gap. "THIS WAY!"

For a moment Naoise feels almost...relieved. The other shoe finally dropped! Nice. This lasts for about as long as it takes for a root to brush past his knee - much higher than one ought to - and oh right he should probably start running. As he gallop-slides his way toward the rapid-closing gap by channeling his inner waterbender surfer-bro, he...tries to help Mae by bunting her forward with his broad of his staff, like it's a cricket paddle or something (im sry mae

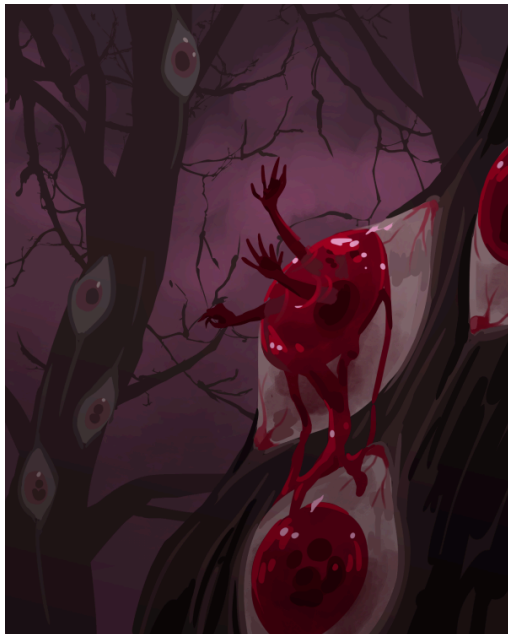
Meanwhile, Bel is pretty tired of fighting for her life (even though she did this to herself). She lets herself get dragged along for a second before the ever-faithful anger boils over, and she probably tears something once she takes sprint in earnest. The form isn't great, but the gusto is there. If only there weren't already a gap - she'd like to rip these trees a new one!!!

There really was, perhaps, no motivator quite like fear. Injuries and near-strangling aside, Owain manages to lurch to his feet without being thrown off by the undulating earth. His natural sense of agility lends him just enough speed to make it through the ashen gap before it collapses, dragging Bel behind him.

Mae and Naoise are several steps away - several steps too far. Each passing second tells them they just won't make it. But together, they can burn a fresh way through if need be--

Then two things happen at once. The roots beneath Bel drop away abruptly, sending her plunging sharply down. Her wrist tears from Owain's grip and she lands on a mass of toothy roots several feet down, hard enough to wind her. At the same time, Naoise is jerked suddenly and unnaturally to the side. A feeling like slimy fingers grips his elbow and collar - Mae, if she turns, can see translucent red tendrils attached to him, extending from the eyes of the trees. Within the glossy crimson pupils on the eyes, she thinks she sees a mass of hands clawing for a way out.

Mae and Owain have a choice between continuing to run and escaping, going back to save Bel or going back to save Naoise.



Visible irritation flashed across Owain's features. He was so. So *tired* of these traps and near death experiences but he'd be damned if he couldn't save someone who was just in his grasp a second ago. Well. He'd go out doing this, or die trying.

Without a second thought, Owain turns on his heel and jumps down into the root pit, reaching to help Bel up and out. He hasn't seen Naoise's predicament, and has no idea of the consequences of his actions if they were to save different people.



As his groove is interrupted, Naoise is stunned out of the moment 🙊 So when he feels *appendages* on him, he yelps something very crude and very unintelligible in Canan, haunted house meme upgrade-no-go-back-to-the-roots style. Bro just unspools at the worse moment lmfao. He reflexively yanks away and begins swatting in a way that might be super effective on the common mosquito, but probably not whatever this is 😏 As he catches a glimpse at what exactly is clinging to him...hm. Haha, yeah, this might be bad,

Bel's body is vibrating like a thoroughly harassed baby rattler, so Owain's arrival is met without grief...or much of a strong reaction at all. Then she hears whatever cursed thing Naoise just uttered and finds the *u fker i will end u* willpower to push herself up. This is likely all she can manage w her -3848374 gains tho

*We're not going to make it—* The sinking realization settled a weight of dread in the pit of Mae's stomach as she watched the gap narrow. Time seemed to slow down; Naoise a step behind her, firelight still sparking at his fingertips. Owain, several paces ahead, his body broken from the long trek. Bel, fueled by her rage yet possessing the gentler touch of a healer. These people *she* had summoned here. They had answered her call and agreed with her cause. And she had led them here.

She had that split second of horrible realization before the ground literally split open beneath Bel to swallow her up. "Bel!" She cried out, diving forward to help Owain pull her up. Too late did she realize that Naoise was being ripped away from her too. Was she going to lose them all?

The gap ahead of them all closes in a tangle of thrashing roots. But Owain's hand finds Bel again, grabbing her around the waist and yanking her bodily back up while the air struggles back into her lungs. With his other hand broken like it is, there's no way Owain can climb out of the root pit - but then Mae appears, jumping down to land next to them. With her fire, the three of them can still make it out--

The three of them. Where is Naoise? He isn't visible from here. Not much is visible, really - they are hemmed on all sides by snaking roots, with only a patch of dark canopy far overhead. They are shunted further down and sideways as the roots continue to move. They need to get out - *now*.

Naoise, meanwhile, is dragged across the nest with mortifying ease, towards a vast tree. He has enough time to register a huge, glossy eye embedded in the trunk, at least as tall as he is, and do one more thing - fight, yell, look for the others, anything his fried brain cells can manage - before he is pulled into the gloopy red iris. He can see writhing shapes within it, like hands grasping hungrily. This might definitely certainly absolutely be bad.

"Oh shit." Uninspiring last words! Naoise doesn't get the chance to hope for help before he's dragged toward the eye, where the do-or-die cooler part of his brain takes over. It has Criosaidh's voice, and reminds him that she made his staff this way for a reason. *Silver is anathema to them.* And more importantly, it has a pointy spearhead that he aims at the eye using whatever tattered adrenaline he still has left. Maybe he tries to cast a spell before he's glooped, but it can't save him now 😊

As Mae drops into the mosh pit, Bel mathlady-memes at her before realizing what is wrong - they're missing one. In an instant, she goes cold. "Where's-" She doesn't wait to finish the thought before she starts clawing at the roots with all the fury and desperation that has accompanied her whole tired life. She needs to get back up. There is simply no other option.

Owain didn't even blink as Bel shot to the wall and began her climb, brain still overloading with the stress of the situation as he dully connected the dots- She's right, they're down a Naoise, Mae's joined them in the digestion pit, and he could barely climb. He had to try *something* but- at this point, it was down to whatever was in his adventuring pack- perhaps he'd pull a bronze bell out, or some salt, or some iron- literally anything at this point, he was just going to guess. He reached into his wisewood prepared pack and pulled out the first thing his hand touched, brandishing/using it as soon as he could. Maybe it would drive the roots back.

In the churning, toothy chaos, it was hard to focus on everything. Mae's mind processed several simultaneous events sequentially: Owain attempting to smear the contents of his pack into the fathacrann roots, Bel frantically trying to scramble her way out of the hole, and the distinct *lack* of the person who had been right behind her. *Oh shit.*

In sheer panic and desperation, she turned back the way she had last seen Naoise and summoned every ounce of reserved ether she possessed. Mae had always struggled to pace herself. *You would be a fantastic student*, her teacher, Finn, had told her once, *if only you would learn to show **restraint**.*

Now was not the time for restraint, and she cast those lessons to the wind. Her technique was yet imperfect - inefficient with inexperience; raw ignether blazed from her eyes like firelight, her power sparked at her fingertips, the edges of her cloak began to burn as she pulled mana away from her preservation spells. The spell lattice tattoos on her back whirred to life, and for just a second she glowed like a star.

And then she released, and the howling cacophony of the Wispwood around them whited out to a moment of silence.


Owain pulls out-- a silver knife, which truthfully has a lot of utility in itself. But as it glances off the hard wood of the roots, leaving only a scratch, it becomes evident that silver is not effective against these monstrous trees.

Naoise learns the same thing at almost the same time. The eye doesn't flinch at his staff, but the pointed end does pierce directly through its iris with a feeling like puncturing a sack of water - elasticity, then give. Red liquid bursts from the wound, splattering him in something cold and gelatinous, and he feels the grip on him loosen. Then, as the eye sags and bleeds out, dark little hands tear ravenously out from it. They seize the front of his clothes with needle-like fingers that seem to burrow for his flesh. The eye may no longer be dragging him to a gloopy demise, but whatever it was holding has been freed.

The intensity of Mae's fire scorches the roots right through, leaving only smouldering, white-hot embers in its wake. The trees thrash backwards, away from the burning heat, and a way parts - showing them several immense trees ahead and Naoise halfway up one, struggling with something they cannot see.

Mae half-collapses involuntarily after such a fierce release of magic, her body feeling like it's just run a marathon. After a few breaths she can move again, though it will take longer for her to re-gather her ether. Bel, on the other hand, takes off at a remarkable sprint down the newly opened path towards Naoise, fast enough that she doesn't feel the residual flames on her soles or the ashes in her eyes. Whether anyone realises it or not, Bel is the only one in a state to climb right now - the only way to reach Naoise, some 50 feet above in the tree's branches.

Owain's cloak was quite literally on fire. At least, it was for a moment before the parts that were burning literally vaporized in the white hot explosion of raw power that slammed him against the rapidly retreating roots. Coughing out a curse in canan, he shot a glance back to confirm that everyone else was alright- to find that they were down another person. Panting, cursing, and more than a little crispy, he did his best to snag Mae around the waist and bolt after Bel. He couldn't offer much but his nice scout-class leggies so he's putting those damn things to use.

As he struggles to stop the literal hellspawn from gnawing off his face, it occurs to Naoise that maybe he should have tried fire...the follies of a water main  He's completely oblivious to Mae's majestic display (he would have clapped otherwise), since all his energy is devoted to trying to keep the staff between himself and the hungry hungry...babies? He's probably close enough to get a nice intimate look at it, which can't be helping.

For possibly the first and only time in her life, Bel is speed. She doesn't care that she hasn't climbed a tree since she was single-digit years old; once she finds purchase on the offending bark, she is trying to ugly shimmy her way up. There is no plan for what happens if (big if) she manages to reach Naoise, nor is there any sophisticated brain to body coordination happening tbh - she's just running on feral until her noodly constitution fails her

Owain catches Mae neatly before she can stumble too far and then, with the small mage tucked in his good arm, he sprints after Bel at an impressive pace. The charred roots are no longer moving, making it easier to run over them, and they catch up with Bel while she is partway up the twisted trunk.

The climb isn't easy, but Bel's sheer ferocity lets her claw her way up. A few fingernails tear loose but that's for her to deal with later - not now, with Naoise writhing bizarrely above as if something is wrong, as if trying to keep something away--

Something warm falls on Bel's temple, like a hot raindrop. Another lands on her cheek, next to her nose, and she tastes blood.

Naoise's staff has slipped. Maybe it was stench of the now-visibly rotting hands grabbing for him, maybe it was the sight of the live maggots within them, maybe it's simply his own flagging strength - but the hands reach past the defence of his arms and dig sharp fingers into his abdomen, like children grabbing fistfuls of sweets. There is a funny rupturing feeling, a distant pain as adrenaline rushes through his skull, and if he dares to look down - or if the others dare to look up - he is being, in a single word, disembowelled. It's his blood that is falling on Bel, in an increasingly heavy stream.

Mae, still dazed tucked under Owain's arm, squints up dizzily at the bloody mess the tree was grasping at. She reached weakly, futile though it was, and tried to summon even an ounce of strength she had left to help Naoise. Even just a little bit...! But Mae had no strength left, and what little ether she was able to gather sputtered like dying embers at her fingertips. Naoise...!

When the body crosses a certain threshold of pain, it knows it is in critical trouble. It is probably very fed up with Naoise, because suddenly he isn't in full possession of his faculties anymore. All he can manage is a strangled gurgle - every other fiber of his being is dedicated to just staying conscious. No matter what, he cannot pass out.

Bel makes a similar sound when she sees where the cursed fountain is spraying from. She knows what happens to people who lose this much blood. She doesn't stop climbing. She is screaming a terrible, rage-filled imitation of song, hoping it'll reach him before she does. She won't make it in time. *She has to*, because there is nothing on the other side of this failure - no recompense, no recovery, no forgiveness.

The splattering gore from so far up the tree shut down Owain's brain. He saw Naoise- What he refused to acknowledge was Naoise- as the hands pulled back and *something* come with them. The arm around Mae grew tighter as he prepared to do something incredibly unwise.

He jammed his broken hand inside his explorer's pouch, nearly blacking out as his shattered fingers rammed into something hard before forcing the few that *could* close to close. Howling some wordless gurgle of pain, loss, and desperation, he ripped the object out and *hurled* it up toward the bleeding mass that he could see all too clearly through his tears. He couldn't let Naoise end here. Even if he could do nothing else.

He had to do *something*.

Owain's broken fingers find his compass - it shatters against the wood of the tree, ineffective, and the blinding flash of pain takes the strength momentarily out of his knees. He stumbles, Mae dropping with him.

Naoise can hear Bel screaming something. He isn't sure what. The edges of his vision are whiting out, sounds are dampening, and he feels more cold than he ever has before. Whether Bel can acknowledge the thought or not, some part of her knows he has crossed the threshold for what a person can recover from.

The trees around them shift with a horrible, groaning creak. The embers of Mae's fires are cooling. The roots around them begin to move again.

The Sionnath's Teeth's mandate was simple: spread out in the Wispwood, save whoever they could, and drag them back to Iadlain. Novice squadrons were deployed nearer to the city, where they would have an easier time completing their mission. More experienced teams – including the grandmaster's – delved in deeper, ready to face the Wispwood's thirst for blood.

Nora's boots nimbly skim over gnarled tree roots in a breakneck sprint. She could vaguely make out Rowan's voice from afar (probably warning her not to get too far as usual) along with Uaithne's, the Conjurer in her squadron. Her focus, however, is on the gorey spectacle in the distance. *Can't have a fucking day without this forest going to shit*, she mused dryly before

diving into the fray. She throws her pair of throwing blades, carving her way forward and looks – disemboweled body, too late. Two at the base of the tree, they're safe – for now.

Her eyes – and the tree's – snap to Bel with the same thought: *She's next*. A sharp whistle, and her blades snap back to her hands. She uses them to deftly scale up to the dark elf, yanking her down by the leg as a root narrowly misses spearing her face. They both crash unceremoniously on the ground, but Nora is quick to get back on her feet. "Alright, situation report! Who between you all can still fight?!"

Nora always running headfirst into the nearest death trap-- Rowan makes an annoyed sound at her (admittedly very timely) recklessness but has better things to do right now. Like running over the burnt roots before they start moving too much again and seizing Mae as she slips from Owain's grasp. Was she--? No, it's exhaustion. She was still intact.

Unlike that unfortunate Relan in the tree. Rowan shoots Nora a grim look that indicates they don't like what they see so far - Mae and Owain are both in a bad state.

Horror, anger, and the oddest mixture of fear and confusion flashed over Owain's face as he stared at the two new figures, teeth gnashing at the air as he realized who these people must be. If they weren't mirages, or horrors sent from the depths- then they were too late. By mere seconds. But perhaps-

He bolted upright, freed from the weight of Mae and fueled by a mixture of pain and pure adrenaline, and thrust out his wounded hand. His words were cold, raw, and trembling with barely contained emotion as he kept glancing up at Naoise far above them. He'd run there himself if they didn't stop him. He was desperate.

"Save *him!* Give me a bow! Give me a knife, anything- I will- I-- Just! Save him! I'll fight- Just! Please!"

An odd gurgle escaped Mae as she was passed off from one person to the next, unsure of who was really holding her anymore. "Need... a minute..." she wheezed, screwing her eyes shut against the gut wrenching nausea of Bel and Owain both screaming and the image of Naoise's mangled body seared into her eyelids. She tried to get her feet under her, to stand up and be any sort of useful. But her knees buckled at each attempt; as sure footed as a newborn foal.

She had reached her mortal limits, and she spat out a glob of blood in disgust.

Bel howls indecipherably the whole descent, but not because she is afraid for herself.

*No, no, nonononono-*

As soon as she hits the ground, she is scrambling back toward the tree. Her gaze and movements are erratic, desperate; the reality of what has happened to Naoise is mentally unavailable to her. She isn't even entirely aware of her surroundings anymore - Nora or Rowan, not Mae and Owain, not the roots writhing beneath her feet. It is fragmented and not shaped like words, but her heart, or soul, or whatever the raw thing she has become, reaches to her god with a plea:

*He isn't ready to go, please don't take him, please, please, please-*

Nora only takes a split second to understand Rowan's look - not good. The howls of anguish from the strangers that fill her ears are nothing new to her. She's heard them enough to last her a lifetime. Please save my friend, please don't let me die like this, please remember me. Please, please, *please*. But never has the Wisewood responded to those wishes. She knew that better than anyone.

And so she pins a struggling Bel down, blocking her view from the gruesome sight. Her tone and eyes soften just a bit to tell them what they needed to hear. "Your friend is dead. There's nothing we can do for him anymore." And with that her gentleness is gone.

"ROWAN! YOU KNOW WHAT TO DO," she barks out. "UAITHNE!! BRING YOUR *SLOW ASS* OVER HERE OR WE'RE DONE FOR!" As for her... She glances at Naoise's body. There's one last thing she has to do.

Rowan doesn't even need to nod, they simply press a hand to Mae's back and pull ilether in. The others were still lively enough to kick and fuss; Mae, on the other hand, was in danger of going into shock if she pushed herself any further. Rowan leaves their other hand free - and sure enough, it's only moments before the roots around them begin to thrash again. They immediately switch to casting a shield, huffing a small breath - no point healing if they were all skewered. At Nora's glance towards Naoise, they snap an almost reflexive, "Don't do anything stupid." She wasn't wrong that they'd all be done for if they didn't *leave right now*.

Above them, a voice yelps, "Alright, alright! On my way!" A vivid swathe of blue flashes down next to them all, edges undulating - Uaithne's familiar, a creature that looks something between a frilly carpet and a sea slug. Uaithne is astride it, a tense look on their normally easygoing face. "Okay, up, up, up! Get on, get on!"

The cracking, groaning sound of wood continues overhead, underneath, all around, and everything seems to churn. The familiar wobbles as if the only thing keeping it from bolting is its

Conjurer's will. Above them, Naoise's now-limp body is dragged into the oozing hollow of the punctured eye, where the gouging hands are nested. His staff slips partway down the trunk, onto a lower branch. Both staff and wood are covered thickly in far too much blood.

Owain glared at Nora, unseeing, unhearing her *dismissal* of Naoise- Before glancing up and seeing what Nora's body had so kindly hidden from Bel. That final bit of stress, the horror of seeing the living, breathing person who had woken up next to Bel, and Mae, and himself not even an hour previously, so *limp*, so *gorey*--

Something snapped inside Owain, and he slumped over, the anger and bile gone. All that remained was a husk that let out a choked sob.

Bel has never lost anyone that didn't want to leave. So when Nora says "dead," her body lurches with physical repulsion. It is clear that she won't accept that; her struggling only intensifies. Amidst the anguish and frenzy, however, the sensation of snowflakes on skin and a promise of painlessness - of nothingness - suddenly blooms in the forefront of her mind.

Only this stills her.

After a long moment, but all too soon for it to be anything other than alarming, she becomes docile. As Nora's hold loosens, she rises like a swaying reed to gaze at the stained branches and staff. Her arms reach toward the latter almost hesitantly, with glassy eyes that don't betray the dark promise burgeoning, tumbling, within her. She's getting him back. It doesn't matter how, or whether or not this is up to her. If she has to traverse the bowels of Atros's domain herself to see it done, so be it.

Bel's slight movement immediately catches Nora's attention away from seeing Uaithne usher everyone onto their familiar. Her eyes quickly follow Bel's movement and she takes off without a second thought, yelling "Uaithne!", hoping they'd get the message. Get Bel and cover my ass.

Nora makes a mad dash for the staff despite Rowan's cry of protest and swiftly navigates through the monster's desperate attacks. Bloody staff in hand, all that remained was for Uaithne to swoop in.

In the same way the Sionnath's Teeth scarves were brought back to the deceased's family, Naoise's staff would be the least bit of comfort she could offer in this horrifying - and all too familiar - reality.



Rowan glances sharply at Bel as all the fight seems to go out of her too abruptly - but there's no time to really consider it. The trees are churning, the ground is caving, Nora's dashed off on some last-ditch honorable pursuit that they can't even disagree with. They will take whatever they can get at this point, and if the Relans' broken spirits will help them shove everyone onto Uaithne's familiar and save their damn lives, so be it.

While Mae, Owain and Bel are dragged hastily to the familiar, Nora's hand closes around the blood-slicked handle of Naoise's staff. She hears Uaithne yell something to their familiar, narrowly avoids a thorny root lunging past her eye, and then lands with both feet on the frilled back of the familiar. Perfect! Absolutely cutting it close, but - seeing everyone accounted for, minus the unsaveable one - perfect.

Rowan grabs Nora's elbow to yank her low enough for Uaithne's familiar to dash - as if they need to tell her - and in the next instant, they are racing between the countless branches and roots closing around them, nimble enough to escape them all by a hair. They fly out to the rest of the forest, break through the canopy to soar for a moment in the cold night air. They are out, alive, saved.

Behind them, the smear of red on the tree vanishes into the darkness.

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When they arrive back at town, Mae and Owain are taken straight to the Birchbird Clinic for surgery. Mae's shoulder is stitched properly. The small bones of Owain's broken hand are arduously re-aligned. Both of them stay in the clinic's beds, unconscious and recovering, for several nights.

Bel's hands receive healing and special bandaging to protect her torn nail beds while they re-grow. It's a day job, though - unlike the others, she is relatively uninjured and doesn't require strict bed rest. She is free to carry on with her life.

Naoise's staff is quietly cleaned and given to her by Sionnath's Teeth. The guild organises the report about casualties and fatalities. Further reports on their venture will be handled when Mae is well enough to talk to Ana. Rowan, despite being in-and-out with a few more forest dispatches, tells Bel that she can help at the clinic if she has nothing better to do. Fiachna timidly asks if she'd like to plant some flowers. This is how she learns that it is an lads' funeral custom.

The days aren't peaceful - far from it, with the near-daily defence against the woods - but there is a strange silence to them. It's the silence of absence.

End.

Characters: Maera, Owain, Isobel, Nora, Rowan

Date: 28 Arrival 8295