

Twins

Faolan had a difficult time paying attention during lunch. The meal had been delicious; it was the company he didn't care for.

There was a rustle behind him and he turned to see a chipmunk foraging in the early autumn leaves. A quick glance beside him showed his father heavily engaged in conversation with their guests, so the young elf subtly picked a blueberry from his plate and held it down by his side.

I wasn't going to eat it anyway, he whispered mentally to the chipmunk.

When he felt little paws on his hand, he let go and the berry was gone.

"Eavan's Mentor has spoken highly of her. As I understand it, she excels in the healing arts and sword play, is that right?" His father asked Eavan's mother.

The courtier brightened with the King's praise of her daughter. "Yes, she has proven herself to be a most advanced healer and remains top student under the Sword Master's training."

Her hand absently stroked her daughter's hair.

Eavan's face had a delicate beauty and her fair hair was artfully braided, but Faolan was too young to court. He had no idea why his father insisted on them seeking a match right now—or why he had to spend time with her when he was not even twelve summers. In truth, he'd much rather be at training or riding fae horses with his brother.

Merrick sat opposite him, repeatedly kicking the living bench he shared with Eavan and her mother. Every time his heel hit the trunk, the leaves on the branches rattled.

"Merrick," their mother said from beside their father. Her face was pleasant, but her tone was clear.

He stopped without looking up and picked at his plate.

Faolan went rigid when he felt his father's hand on his back. "Faolan here has quite a talent for healing as well, and sword play too, isn't that right, my son?"

Faolan nodded and pretended to adjust his embroidered jacket and vest.

"That's wonderful," Eavan's mother replied. "An excellent match, wouldn't you say, sweetheart? The two of you will have so much to talk about."

Faolan looked up and found Eavan smiling at him. He glanced over at his brother, who was making kissy-faces, and rolled his eyes.

"I am sure with time, and as they train and learn together, the two of them will find each other most agreeable," their mother added. Faolan sensed her trying to catch his gaze, but he kept his eyes down, not wishing for her to see him frown. He hated this.

A *dunk* caught his attention, followed by a shuffle, as his father stood up. Faolan looked up just as the King said, "Merrick, that behavior is unacceptable for a Seelie Prince. You will leave this table and reflect by the lake alone until your brother comes to retrieve you."

Confused, Faolan looked around until he spotted the purple stain on his father's white and green jacket. Merrick had tossed a blueberry into his juice.

Faolan couldn't help himself and exchanged mischievous smirks with his brother before he left the table, though once he was gone, Faolan looked at his chair and longed to go with him.



After lunch was over and their attendants had come to collect their empty glasses and plates, Faolan excused himself, bowing to Eavan and her mother before turning to leave. He couldn't wait to get his brother and get out of there, but before he could leave, Eavan caught up with him.

"Faolan," she called.

He stopped and turned to face her, seeing their parents watching them. The leafy crowns atop his father and mother's brows had turned copper and gold with the change in season, accenting their blond and auburn hair. A small leaf trickled down from his mother's crown until it landed gently on the forest floor.

Eavan stepped forward, her face rosy with a blush. "Here," she said and offered him a small green acorn. He opened his hand and accepted it.

"If you nourish it, it will grow, like my love for you." She turned and ran away, joining her mother and hiding behind her skirts.

Faolan felt a pulse of life from within the acorn. *Sleep now*, he told it, *and in the spring I shall wake you.*

He cradled it and then turned to fetch his brother.



He found Merrick leaning against a cedar by the lake. Faolan slowed down and crept up as slowly as he could, practicing the silent steps the Forest Master had been teaching him.

A sweet lullaby drifted toward him from the shore. It was coming from somewhere in front of Merrick. Faolan couldn't quite make out who was singing, but he paused, letting the melody wash over him. When the song finished, he decided to creep closer.

Merrick leaned forward and offered a piece of seasoned flatbread bread to a young merrow who looked about their age.

She had a dark fish tail with black stripes and an iridescent sheen to her scales. Her hair draped around her chest and shoulders in long black curtains.

The merrow raised a slender hand and accepted the bread. She sniffed it before taking a bite and then smiled up at him while she chewed.

Faolan was so taken with her beauty and the strange display of kindness from his brother that he stepped on a twig.

The merrow looked up, startled, and dove into the lake before he could apologize.

Merrick glanced at him, but didn't leave his seat. Faolan sat down beside him. "Do you have anymore?" he asked.

"Yeah." Merrick reached into his pocket, produced another piece of flatbread, broke it, and offered half to Faolan.

"Do you think she'll come back?" He asked his twin.

"Maybe," Merrick replied.

The twins sat silently together, one dressed in white and the other in green. They waited patiently and were rewarded for their stillness.

A black head of hair slowly emerged from the water, followed by large dark eyes.

I'm sorry, please, take this offering as an apology. Faolan showed her his bread.

The merrow swam cautiously closer, but didn't pull herself out of the water.

May I? He asked as he stood up.

She nodded and he removed his shoes and rolled up his pants. Stepping into the cool water, he handed her his flatbread. She took the bread and swam out a ways before nibbling it above the surface.

Faolan returned to where his brother sat. They watched her in silence for a time.

"How many more of these lunches will father drag us too?" Merrick complained.

"I don't know," Faolan answered.

"Do you even like her?" Merrick turned to look at him.

Faolan picked up a stick and began drawing circles in the sand. "I don't know that either."

“I don’t like girls and I don’t expect to like them any time soon, but... but I suppose she’s not so bad.” Merrick indicated the merrow who had slunk back into the water. Her thick eyelashes created an artful frame for her eyes as they floated above the reflective surface.

“We’ll like girls someday—at least, that’s what Liam says,” Faolan reminded his brother and then added, “And if I did like girls, I suppose she’s not so bad either.”

