

A person's silhouette is seen from behind, looking out over a vast, hazy ocean. In the distance, a prominent, jagged rock formation rises from the water. The sky is a soft, warm orange, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

Puckish
Wart Hill

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

PUCKISH

By Wart Hill

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

A man is sitting at a table in a café, working, a book open in front of him. He has tea and food as well. Another man is walking in.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

It's safe to say that if I had picked any other café that day to stop into, my life now would be completely different.

Different, saner, less dangerous BY FAR, and... less... less thrilling, less exhilarating, less intoxicating, less... alive... less... whatever it is that he is. The bastard.

He says it was random. That he just lucked out that the one café, the one table, the one seat that was chosen was mine.

I don't know if I believe him though. Of the few things that I've learned in the short amount of time we've been forced together (NOT my idea), it's that there's nothing random about him.

In my new turned-around world, he has become the most steadfast presence. The one thing that, no matter what, I don't want to lose.

Maybe if we survive through this... Maybe I'll tell him.

Yours,

ttg, a humble reader

P.S.

What I like: I love adventure romance—action, spies/detectives/magic/pirates/fantasy/urban fantasy/Romancing the Stone, and/or whatever and all of the above. So I would love it if you took this letter and went to town in whatever fun, creative, exciting, romantic way that you wanted. Would love some kind of happy ending (HFN, HEA, whatever.) Sexy times are fine, although not necessary, and up to you.

What I hate: Am not a fan of dark, grim, unhappy stories, and really dislike non-con and torture.

Thank you!!! :D

Story Info

Genre: urban fantasy

Tags: action/suspense/adventure, magic users, fae, fairytale/folklore, sweet/no sex

Content Warnings: character death

Word Count: 11,766

Author's Note

Along with the quote at the beginning, the titles for chapters 1, 3, and 5 come from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, the title of chapter 2 is from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and the title of chapter 4 is from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. All of these works are in the public domain.

Thank you to the moderators of the M/M Romance Group for hosting this event and doing such a great job organizing it, and thank you to the volunteers who made it possible.

Thank you ttg for your great prompt, I hope I did it justice.

A thousand thank yous to Maxime Deas-Mhumhain for the gorgeous cover he made! You, sir, are so ridiculously talented. Thank you.

Thank you to my beta readers: Gaelyn, without you, this would probably still be a mess. Love you, you noodnik! And Claire, thank you for pushing me and asking me questions I didn't ever think to answer, so I wouldn't leave my readers hanging.

PUCKISH
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In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was going to get out again.

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

Chapter One

Down the Rabbit Hole

This is how it started:

I was minding my own business, indulging my sweet tooth in a quaint little café downtown—where I only was because I had pulled jury duty. I had sat on an uncomfortable bench for *hours* before they declared they had found all the members they needed and the rest of us could all go home. I felt I deserved a treat after that, and I'm certain I wasn't the only one, so at the first nice establishment I saw, I ducked inside and decided to have something to cheer me up.

A cherry-cheese danish and a hot pot of Earl Grey later and I was a very happy man.

Like I said, I was minding my own business, grading papers (because there is no rest for the TA). It was shaping up to become a pleasant afternoon despite the atrocity that was the morning.

I should have known better.

When *he* walked in, I allowed myself a look. He was tall and clearly muscular under his well-cut suit. I might have let my gaze linger a little too long, but I felt I deserved to enjoy a bit of eye candy today—particularly since I had just finished red-penning a grammatically atrocious essay. So I took a moment to admire the view, and that was when everything took a dramatic tilt sideways.

First, he met my gaze *and held it*. When I let my eyes drift apologetically down, back to my work, I could feel his still on me. Then I watched the floor as his steps turned towards me, and I was certain he would find a chair and take up residence at my table, rudely interrupting my solitude all because I had allowed myself a moment to admire his assets.

I blew out a breath of relief when, instead, he passed my table and walked up to the decorative phonograph set up by the window. His back was to me now, and I allowed myself a quick, appreciative glance at my favorite asset—I have found, frequently, that being a gay man *and* an ass man is frustrating when bombarded by stick-thin white men with disappointingly flat gluteus maximi.

This man had no such shortcomings. His ass was as shapely and alluring as the rest of his well-toned body, and I had to avert my gaze quickly before the tightening in my trousers became embarrassing.

I kept my eyes glued to the next paper as he examined the phonograph—or whatever it was he was doing, as I was pointedly *not looking*. Moments later, a haunting, lyrical piece began to play, filling the small café with captivating, impossible music. I turned my head. Certain I wasn't the only one looking to see what was happening, I let my gaze linger on my fellow patrons, but none of them seemed to notice or care, going on with their meals as though nothing was different. Finally, my gaze settled on the man. He was standing at the phonograph, watching for a moment as it played. It simply wasn't possible. Even I could see from here that, restored though it was, the thing was no longer functional—the crank was gone, the needle bent. Yet the record turned and music played.

The man turned around, hands in his pockets, and caught my eye. He grinned, the boyish expression softening his chiseled features, then he winked at me and, much to my relief—not that the blood draining quickly from my face and taking up residence elsewhere was about to let me think so—he walked past my table and up to the counter where, in a loud, jovial voice, he ordered a cappuccino.

And that, I thought, was that.

Instead, tall, broad, and sexy did, in fact, find an easily moved wooden chair and pull it up across from me, settling himself down at my table, hands wrapped loosely around his mug. I felt his eyes on me, watching me, and it was an effort not to look up at him. I knew what I would see if I did: that goofy grin, those wide, brown eyes, that barely-tamed hair. And the shoulders. Don't even get me started on his shoulders. I was no longer working, but I kept my eyes fixed on the paper I was grading, pen poised and ready to write. Of course, if I wrote what was actually going through my head, I would likely get summoned to the Dean to discuss appropriate behavior.

Thankfully I had enough presence of mind to keep the pen off the paper, though it didn't help my ruse any.

“That cannot possibly be more interesting than I am,” the man said after a moment, interrupting my solitude even more. I tried to ignore him, to ignore the laugh in his voice, the strange, lilting accent that tugged just a bit at his consonants. Almost not there, but there enough that I could hear it. Pursuing a

graduate degree in linguistics, I was the type who was hard pressed to ignore language. And this was an accent I had never heard before.

I looked up.

He was grinning, his teeth vibrantly white against the tan of his skin. His eyes were much more striking up close than they had been from a distance, and I found myself staring. He winked at me and leaned forward. Instinctively, I crossed my arms over the papers I was grading, but that only made him laugh—a good-hearted chuckle that sent a warm rush through me.

“I certainly don’t find them interesting,” he said, shaking his head. Then, after a moment, he added, “You might want to hold on.”

I stared at him. “Hold on to what?” I asked. I hadn’t meant to, but it was such an incongruous comment that the words were out before I could decide if I was going to go back to ignoring him or not. He unwrapped his hands from his coffee cup—long, thin fingers and broad palms catching my attention quickly—and gestured at the edges of the table, then returned to his starting position.

“Just a thought. I’d ask you to move, but then I’d have to explain and you wouldn’t believe me anyway and we’d be right back where we started.” He shrugged and took a sip of coffee. “It’s easier if I just accept I’ll have a tag-a-long and adjust accordingly.”

I blinked, my gaze fixed on his, trying to decide if he was mad or I was. What was it Albert Einstein said? Something about *am I or the others crazy*... I was leaning towards this man being the crazy one and was thinking I would just pack up my things and either find another table or get the hell out of that café and never come back. Then the music on the phonograph changed to something more upbeat, but still as strange and haunting, and I remembered that that music was *impossible*.

“Why?” I asked.

He raised an eyebrow. Clearly this wasn’t the reaction he’d expected. “Why what?”

“Why should I hold on?”

“Oh.” He shook his head and blew out a breath. “Oh, that was supposed to scare you away.” He tapped his fingers on the ceramic mug in his hands, his nails ticking softly against the hard surface as he studied me with those shining,

piercing eyes. He sighed and shrugged, resigning himself to my staying, and leaned forward again. He closed my file folder, neatly collating the papers, took my pen and capped it before tucking it into my shirt pocket. Then, in a voice so quiet I almost didn't hear, he said, "You haven't learned to miss."

I was about to ask the next, and I thought fairly obvious, question when it happened. The floor beneath us disappeared, replaced by a gaping black hole. An impossible instant passed—there was a lot of impossibility happening today—where we hung in the air and, in that moment, I managed to get a firm grip on the edge of the table just before it, our chairs, and us with them, plummeted downwards.

I clenched my teeth as we delved into the darkness beneath us, my grip on the table tightening until the edges dug painfully into my palms. Though there was no visible source of light, I could still see the table and the man across from me. He was reclining in his chair, sipping at his coffee as if this were the most normal thing in the world.

"I always loved that," he said, nodding sagely like he was saying something profound.

"Loved what?" I managed to ask without unclenching my teeth—it wasn't very comfortable, but I felt it was safer. If there was a sudden stop at the bottom that didn't kill us, I didn't want to lose my tongue instead.

"That book, by that guy," he waved his hands vaguely in the air. All I could do was stare at him—what the hell was he talking about? He caught my look and sighed, leaning forward again. He set his cup down on the table, and though I fully expected it to tumble off the table immediately, it stayed where it was as if we weren't falling who knew how far. He looked at me and said, "That book where in order to fly, you have to miss."

"Miss what?" I asked. It was on reflex. I really didn't want to engage this man anymore than I already had. I had fully intended to give him the silent treatment because there was no way this *wasn't* his fault, but the words slipped out because, really, if it was his fault, he was the one with the answers. That and if I kept talking, I wouldn't focus on what was happening, which was a plus.

He shrugged and leaned back, picking his coffee up again. "It doesn't matter, that's not how flying works."

"And you would know." I rolled my eyes—about the only part of my body I felt comfortable moving at this juncture. We were *still* falling and it was still

black all around us and if there was a bottle labeled “Drink Me” at the bottom I was definitely going to throw it at this guy’s head.

“Of course I know,” he said. “I can fly.”

I nodded my head slowly, adding another check mark to the “evidence of insanity” tally.

He smiled. He could tell I didn’t believe him. He set the coffee cup down on the table again and shrugged out of his suit coat, draping it over the back of his chair. He arched his back, his eyes fell closed, and a moment later a pair of luminescent white wings unfolded behind him. There was no tearing sound of the wings pushing through the fabric of his shirt, they simply appeared, white and glowing.

All I could do was gape.

He opened his eyes and winked at me. “Look around you,” he said. “Think about what’s happening.” He gestured at his wings. “Is this really so unbelievable?”

“Who are you?” I asked, my voice quiet, barely a whisper. I was back to Einstein again, wondering—was I losing it? I had to be, if I thought this was actually happening. I must have still been in the café, probably raving. Unless someone had called an ambulance already. Or I’d passed out. But there was no way any of this was real.

Yet the table dug painfully into my palms. And my jaw hurt from gritting my teeth.

It didn’t feel like a hallucination. Not that I knew what a hallucination felt like. Perhaps they felt real. I suppose they must, if the person experiencing it thought it was. But was it supposed to be *this* vivid?

The man was studying me now, concern creasing his brow. “Are you all right?” he asked.

I blinked, staring at him for a moment. “I’m falling down a nonexistent hole that appeared suddenly beneath my table.” I shook my head. “Of *course* I’m not all right!”

“Ah, yes, that.” He set his coffee down again and clasped his hands in front of him, the wings disappearing as quickly as they’d appeared. “The hole exists, otherwise you wouldn’t be able to fall down it.” He said it matter-of-factly, like it was the most obvious thing in the world, never mind the fact that nearly everything that had happened since he walked into the café was impossible.

I shook my head. "This cannot be happening."

He shrugged. "I tried to scare you off. You refused to leave."

"I had a *nice* table! By the window, good light, comfy chair!" The words felt foolish—it wasn't like my prime seating mattered now, not since I'd been plunged into madness. Down the rabbit hole. Was this guy the Hatter? "Who. Are. You?" I asked again, punctuating each word, needing an answer.

He blew out a breath. "May as well. You've come this far." He spread out his arms as though to let me take a good look at him then, surprisingly, he managed a small bow despite his seated position. When he straightened up, he was grinning. "I am Charys of the Underneath."

I blinked. "Underneath what?"

His brow furrowed into a glare. "Are you mocking the Underneath?"

"How can I mock it? I don't even know what it is."

"Well, don't," he said, shaking his head. "Don't mock the Underneath because without the Underneath there is nothing Above."

I drew in a deep breath. My patience was running very, very low. "That doesn't answer my question. What exactly *is* the Underneath?"

"You'll see," he said. Then, after a moment. "I need your name, though."

"Why?" I was wary. In case this guy was a raving lunatic and we were experiencing some sort of shared hallucination, I didn't want him to have too much information about me lest he hunt me down once my faculties were restored.

I really needed to read up on psychology.

"So you can pass," he said. "The Ferryman won't let you on the boat unless you're protected, and I can only protect you if I know your name." He shrugged. "It's how magic works. Have to be specific or things go," he tilted his head to the side, "cockeyed."

I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts. "What exactly happens if I don't have permission?"

Charys turned his head and gazed out at the darkness. "You lose yourself," he said. His voice was low and quiet. Sad. He turned to look at me again, his brown eyes bright with unshed tears. "The River takes what it wishes, and often more than we are willing to give." He shook his head. "That is why the

Ferryman will not take you without protection. One unguarded soul, and we could all be lost.”

I was still convinced he was mad and dragging me into his insanity, but he sounded so sad and serious that I felt compelled to go along with it. Enabling, I think it's called. Still. It couldn't hurt. Worst case he was having me on, best case he was telling the truth and if he was I didn't want to lose myself... whatever that meant.

“My name is Minoru,” I said. I waited, hoping he didn't need more. He remained silent, watching me. I blew out a sigh. “Levinson,” I added. “My name is Minoru Levinson.” I waited for the inevitable disbelief. The amusement. Something. Instead, Charys only nodded and turned to watch the passing darkness again.

I suppose when your name is Charys, a Japanese Jew isn't terribly shocking.

“We're almost there,” he said. I looked at the darkness around us, wondering how he could possibly tell. It was all just black. There was no sign of movement, no hint that we had gone anywhere in the time that had passed—however long that had been, I wasn't wearing my watch. A decision made to ease the painfulness of jury duty. It hadn't worked, and now I regretted leaving it at home.

I was about to ask Charys how he knew where we were when there was a light thunk and we touched down on solid ground. I blew out a sigh of relief and loosened my grip on the table as I felt the floor connect with the soles of my shoes. “Thank God that's over,” I breathed.

Charys looked at me and shook his head, that sad look back in his eyes. “It's only just beginning.”

He stood, but I stayed seated. All around us it was still dark, as though only ourselves, our chairs, and our table existed in all of this world. Loath though I was to admit it, I was afraid of moving. I was afraid that entering the darkness would mean *I* would leave existence behind. And though there was no way back, I did not want to go forward, either.

“Minoru?” Charys asked, stopping a few steps away, right where the line of darkness seemed to begin. “You can't stay here,” he said, looking at me, worry creasing his brow.

I looked away, flicking my eyes first to the darkness, then to the table. “Where are we?” I asked.

“Underneath,” Charys replied.

I shook my head. Forced myself to meet his gaze, trying to ignore the vast unknown that stretched out behind him. “I’m going to need more than that,” I said, frustration and fear choking my voice. “What the hell is going on?”

“I have a meeting.” Charys stepped towards me and I let out a sigh of relief. He cocked his head, studying me. “I was summoned. This gateway was the closest to where I needed to be.” He shook his head and looked away. “You weren’t supposed to be here.”

“What does it mean?” I asked. “That I am. Here.”

Charys looked at the darkness again, and I started to suspect he saw something I didn’t. “You are under my protection for now,” he said. “Once we pass the River, it is no longer up to me.”

I swallowed hard, my tongue heavy in my mouth as I struggled to ask my next question. “Who is it up to?” I asked. I didn’t think I really wanted to know, but since he hadn’t offered to take me back to normality, I figured I couldn’t get back the way I’d come. And if I was going to go forward, I wanted to know everything I could.

Charys looked back at the darkness again, and I felt annoyance roiling in my gut. I clenched my hands and my teeth and stood. The sound of my chair scraping against the ground brought Charys’s attention back to me, and I took an unsteady step forward—I didn’t want to get any closer to the darkness, but I needed him to pay attention to me.

“I get it,” I said, when I was sure he wasn’t going to look away again. “I do, really. You’re late for a very important date.” I stopped. Shook my head, dismissing the Lewis Carroll as quickly as it had reared up. I wasn’t Alice and this definitely wasn’t Wonderland. And Charys was clearly not a rabbit. I drew in a deep breath and tried again. “I get it, I wasn’t supposed to be here, but I’m here now and the least you can do is tell me what the hell is going on!”

“This is the Underneath, I am a Fae, and I have a job to do,” Charys listed off quickly. “And,” he added, “I *am* late and I’m going to be later if we linger. It’s in your best interest to hurry up.”

He turned then and stepped into the darkness, but as he moved, what I could see moved with him and instead of standing frozen to the spot absorbing what he’d said like I wanted to, I forced myself forward quickly, staying in his wake as we walked along what was turning into a long hallway surrounded by

nothingness. “Why can’t I see anything?” I asked after a few minutes. The silence was getting to me—heavy and present, it felt *powerful*, like it was lying in wait for me to drop my guard.

“You aren’t Fae,” Charys said simply. I waited for him to continue, but he seemed to think that was all the information I needed. I was just about to ask what that had to do with anything when he came to an abrupt halt and turned to face me. Behind him, there was a river flowing swiftly, and beyond that... more darkness.

“You are about to enter a sacred place,” he said. “Mortals must tread carefully in the Underneath, especially beyond the river.”

“Why won’t you tell me anything?” I asked in a quiet voice, hating myself for how scared I sounded. How scared I was.

Charys shook his head. “I value my life, Minoru,” he said, not meeting my gaze. “There is no greater offense than sharing our secrets with mortals.”

I frowned at him, realizing what he’d meant before. About my not being able to see. “Everything’s hidden from me,” I said. He nodded, smiling, clearly glad I’d figured it out. I felt a little proud of myself, even though it probably would have been obvious to anyone. Or maybe it wouldn’t. I didn’t know anybody who had met a Fae—hell, I didn’t know anybody who even believed they existed.

I took a deep breath, allowing myself to accept everything that was laid out before me, despite my mind still clinging to the hope of insanity. I wasn’t sure which was better, but for right now, I had to operate on the assumption that I had not gone mad—the world had. “What comes next?”

“The Ferryman takes us across,” Charys turned back around and stepped forward, out onto the water. Except in the next second there was a boat—a gondola—beneath his feet. At the back stood a tall, thin figure, cloaked in black. His face was hidden. I went to take a step back, but Charys held a hand out to me and I took it and let him help me onto the boat instead.

There was no way to go but forward.

I stayed close to Charys as the Ferryman punted us across the water, unnerved by his dark, silent presence. He seemed to me to be all of my misgivings and fears brought to life and placed before me, and though it sent a prickle of uncertainty down my spine to turn my back to him, I could not bring myself to look, either. And so I spent the short trip across the steady river

gazing out at the further stretches of the unknown that awaited me, Charys a comfort beside me, strange though it was.

“What happens now?” I asked as we came upon the bank. Charys stepped out onto the crunching gravel and I followed, braving a glance at the Ferryman, who stood still and silent at the back of the boat. As Charys and I walked forward, onto a paved path I had not seen before, darkness swallowed the figure up and I felt in that moment that it was chasing after me, racing to catch me before I saw... whatever it was I could not see.

It was only as we turned a sharp corner and entered into what appeared to be a town—though I could not tell, not being able to see more than two buildings at a time, with the darkness ahead and behind, and I had no sense of any people being there—that I realized Charys had not answered my question. This fact scared me, as I worried that he did not want me to know because it was something bad. Perhaps the next destination for me would be the last—a death in this dark underworld, ensuring my silence.

I had to get an answer.

“I wish you could see it.” Charys’ voice broke through my thoughts. He was gazing all around us, seeing the world as I could not. “I haven’t been here in years. All my work is topside.” He shrugged and lowered his gaze, meeting mine. “I’m sorry about...” he gestured to the side. “It really is beautiful, but the Elders cling to the old ways. They think your kind will disrupt our world if they know about it, and we’ve lived the way we have for centuries.” He shrugged again and shook his head. “I really am sorry.”

“Yeah, well, next time sit at another table,” I grumbled, though I hurried my pace to stay beside him, and the look he shot me—his eyes dark, eyebrows raised—made walking a little difficult. It was a nice distraction, how attracted I was to him, but I knew I should focus on the matter at hand.

I blew out a breath and came to a halt, laying a hand on his arm so he turned back to face me, brows drawn together. “What happens next?” I asked, because here, now, in this unknown, ignorance was not bliss.

“I shouldn’t,” he muttered, looking down, scuffing his toe against the cobbled street beneath our feet. He looked back up, his brown eyes wide, his face pale. “I *really* shouldn’t.”

“Charys, please,” I said, my fingers tightening on his arm. I held his gaze, struggling to keep my own steady. “Please.”

After a moment and a quick glance around as though looking for eavesdroppers, he finally answered. "You will meet Obey and Roahn," he said. "They are King and Consort to Queen Tani. They handle all meetings of the council, save matters that require the Queen's personal attendance." He shook his head. "They're only telling me my job. I've no idea what they'll do to you."

My mind was reeling, thinking back to those advanced English courses I'd been encouraged to take in high school. "Oberon?" I whispered. "Titania?" I looked up to find Charys gazing at me quizzically, clearly wondering if his revelation had had an adverse effect on me. I shook my head quickly, hoping to assuage his fears. "Sorry, it's just..." I trailed off, not quite wanting to voice the question, afraid of what the answer would be. Finally, I took in a deep breath and just went for it—I was here already, things couldn't possibly get weirder. "Was Shakespeare ever here?" I asked. "William Shakespeare?"

To my astonishment, Charys laughed. It was a deep, hearty laugh, and the sound brought a smile to my face. It lightened the atmosphere considerably, and I felt things were not as bad as I had feared during the long fall from the café.

"Of course he was here," Charys answered when he'd caught his breath, grasping my shoulder and holding back more laughter, as though what I had said was some great joke. "How else do you think he learned to write such plays?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"He was a Changeling, Minoru," Charys explained. "We took him from his crib and raised him here, then returned him when the time was right."

I was wrong; it could get weirder.

"Right," Charys said, sobering in an instant. He let go of my shoulder and started forward again. I followed close at his heels, not wanting to lose the light. Not wanting to lose him.

We seemed to walk forever, but for all I knew, no time passed. For all I knew, there was no time here. Perhaps we'd slipped into Tir Na Nóg and when we returned, I would instantly age to death, having been gone centuries. I shuddered at the thought, not paying attention, nearly running into Charys's back where he'd stopped at the foot of a short set of steps. They led up to a looming white marble building that looked down on us like the Parthenon must once have done. Clearly we had arrived.

It was all I could do to keep my mouth shut, to not ask again *what happens now?*

This time I really didn't want to know.

I expected Charys to start up the steps at any moment, but he stayed still and silent at the base, waiting. After a few minutes of heavy silence, the doors to the building swung open and a booming voice rang out. "Enter, Puckish one," it said. "And bring the Mortal, if you must."

With a nod, Charys headed up the steps. I did not immediately follow, put off by the way the voice had been so dismissive of me. Charys paused at the doorway, realizing I was not with him, and turned back. "Minoru?" he asked. I shook my head, not sure how to voice my misgivings. After a moment, he came back, bouncing down the stairs with light steps. He held out his hand and flashed me a mischievous grin. "Come along, Mortal," he said with a wink. "Let's give the court a shock."

After another moment, I took his hand.

Chapter Two

What Goodly Creatures

The sight that greeted us inside took me so off-guard I stumbled, and had Charys not had a tight grip on my hand, I likely would have fallen. As it was, he pulled me up close to him, pressing his lips against my ear, and whispered, “Steady, Minoru, it hasn’t even started yet.”

I nodded, my gaze fixed on the vast room that lay before us. It was an open space, no tables, the only seats two thrones set upon a central dais. The one on the right was empty. A huge, looming seat, the wood carved with intricate patterns. Beside it on the left was a smaller throne, occupied by a lanky man with pale brown skin and a stern, unsmiling face. Behind him stood another man who was his twin in every regard.

And I could feel their gazes on me, and it was this that nearly sent me stumbling backward. They were not happy I was here. I could *feel* their displeasure, hot and prickling on my skin. It was almost impossible for me to walk forward, as though something in their wills was trying to hold me back. If I had not kept hold of Charys, I felt sure I would have been forced back out the door and into the street. And I would have been alone in a darkness, unwelcome in this world.

I clutched tighter to Charys as he led the way, stopping a few feet away from the dais. He gave a quick bow, pulling me down with him, then he straightened and grinned at the two men.

“Obey, Roahn,” he said, giving them a quick nod. “This is an unpleasant surprise.” He winked at me, as though drawing me into this little performance—I wished he wouldn’t—then turned his attention back to his... rulers, I guess. “What harbingers of destruction made you call on me?”

“Now is not the time to be a fool,” the seated man said—Obey, I thought. King. He leaned forward and looked down on us, his hair falling over his bright eyes and thin nose in a dark curtain. “Why do you bring this creature into our court?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I thought you had an important mission for me,” Charys said, sounding bored. I wanted to elbow him, bring what was likely my imminent demise back to his attention, but as I watched the cold, silent

creatures who were Obey and Roahn, I realized it was likely that Charys didn't care. He'd put up a good front on the way here, being kind to me, answering my questions. I'd thought... but, no. Maybe he had only done it to earn my trust so he could pass me off to someone else once he got this far. The thought made me shake, my stomach twisting. I tried to pull away, but Charys's grip tightened and he gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head.

"His Royal Highness asked you a question, Charys," Roahn growled, his voice deep and rumbling. "You will answer."

Charys shrugged. "If you insist," he said. "But I was led to believe this matter was *pressing*." He cocked an eyebrow, tilting his head to the side and studying Obey and Roahn. I drew in a breath slowly, holding it until my chest began to hurt as I waited for what came next. I was longing for the darkness outside, for the unknown. Here, faced with Obey and Roahn looking down on me, a small speck in a huge room, the fear threatened to overwhelm me. I missed my books, my DVDs. I even missed grading papers.

The thought reminded me of the table, sitting at the bottom of an impossibly long shaft that shouldn't even exist, covered in my work, and I spluttered out a laugh that turned quickly loud, gasping, and desperate as it continued.

"Why does it laugh?" Obey asked.

Charys was squeezing my arm as though the pain might bring me back to my senses, but I just laughed harder at Obey's question. It wasn't that any of this was all that funny—except maybe the fate of my students' papers—but at this point I was laughing more out of fear than anything else, and Obey's deep, commanding voice only made it worse.

"Minoru," Charys whispered, his voice anxious and harsh. "Minoru, what is it?"

"The papers," I said, gasping for breath. "The ones I was grading." Another round of laughter doubled me over, and I clutched at Charys. I was fully conscious of my hysteria, but I couldn't do anything to stop it. "Sorry, I couldn't finish grading your papers, they're in Tir Na Nóg."

The silence that fell over us was like a dousing of ice water, bringing my laughter to a stop. Fear took over in full, no longer hiding in mania. I looked up. Charys was staring at me, his eyes wide, his face pale. Out of the corner of my eye I saw that Obey and Roahn's attention had shifted fully to me. I was no longer an annoying curiosity. I had done something wrong.

“Sorry,” I said, not sure what exactly I was apologizing for. “Sorry.” Charys gripped my arm tightly, his fingers digging in as he tried to pull me behind him without letting go.

“How does it know?” Roahn asked. His deep voice rumbled, shaking the room. “How does it know? Our world is hidden from mortals.”

“What have you told it, Charys?” Obey asked.

Charys shook his head. “Nothing,” he insisted. “Do you think I am so foolish? This is my world as well.”

It took me a moment to realize what they were talking about, and I cursed myself for being so stupid. “Sorry,” I said again. “I mean. I was right?” I looked between the rulers and Charys, not wanting them to answer my question. “I was just spouting bullshit,” I said. “My mom teaches mythology at the university, so, I kind of... know stuff?” I finished with a shrug, hoping that would put them at ease, though I rather doubted it.

“This is unacceptable.” Roahn said after a moment. He stepped forward, coming around the throne and walking slowly down the steps towards Charys and me, one hand on the hilt of a sword that hung at his hip. As he approached, he drew it slowly, and the action startled me. Sobered me. I took a step back, my fingers digging into Charys’s hand. “It must be silenced.”

“Oh, please!” Charys said, rolling his head back and looking up at the ceiling as though asking some god for patience. “You really think he’s going to go back up to the world of mortals and tell anybody any of this? Do you know what happens to mortals who do that?”

Roahn continued forward, his steps purposeful, his gaze fixed on me, hard and dark.

“Please,” I whispered, my voice coming out hoarse as it caught in my throat.

A moment stretched before us, and I waited for the sting of the blade. It never came. As though in slow motion, Roahn raised his sword and Charys stepped between us, catching the blow on his forearm. “Leave it, Roahn,” he growled. “Just give me my task and we’ll get out of your hair.”

“It must not be allowed to leave,” Roahn said. He lowered his sword and waited, as though he expected Charys to move. But Charys did not oblige him, and I squeezed his hand in thanks.

“He will be labeled mad. Thrown into an institution. Studied. Laughed out of academic circles.” Charys shook his head. “You have been too long away, Roahn,” he said. “Times have changed since last you walked in the mortal realm.”

Roahn looked like he was going to just stab Charys and be done with it, but Obey stood, the movement drawing Roahn's attention despite making no noise. The three of us stood, staring up at the King. In a moment, I realized why he was standing, but only because he quickly dropped to his knees.

From behind the dais, through a door I had not seen before, came the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. She was tall and imposing, her bare arms well muscled, her figure full. Her skin was a pale brown, and her black hair shone in the strange light of the room. She fixed her eyes on the scene before her, then shook her head. Roahn sheathed his sword and slowly returned to his post behind Obey's throne. Obey, meanwhile, resumed his seat.

The woman—Tani, I assumed—strode down the steps and up to Charys, studying him with her hazel eyes.

“Did you not warn the mortal?” she asked.

“I did it all as it is done,” Charys answered, giving a low bow. His motion pulled me with him, which was good, since I felt frozen and as I was forced to bow, I realized it would likely have been a slight if I had stayed standing while everyone else honored the Queen.

My fate was already precarious, I did not want to slight anyone.

Once we'd straightened, I found the Queen's gaze fixed on me. She strode forward, stepping close to us, looking down on me. Her eyes were dark, her gaze steady and unblinking. I tried not to shy away from the intensity, clutching harder and harder at Charys's arm.

“Why did it come?” she asked.

It took a few moments of silence before I realized she was speaking to me, not Charys. I tried to focus; my mind had felt disordered since she had entered the room. “I, um. I was just. Working,” I explained. “And I liked my table. And Charys sat down and wouldn't leave and the next thing I knew...” I trailed off with a shrug, hearing how ridiculous it all sounded. Charys was right, if I ever tried to tell anyone what had happened, where I'd gone, they wouldn't even try to believe me. I had known, of course. But hearing the words for the first time, said out loud, in my own voice. I realized how insane all this was.

Forget someone else locking me up, I had half a mind to check into the psychiatric ward myself... as soon as I got back.

From Tir Na Nóg.

I bit back a groan, gnawing at my lip as I waited for Tani to say something. *Anything*. Just as long as she stopped staring at me.

She turned her gaze to Charys, and I forced myself to relax.

“May I have it?” She tilted her head towards me as she spoke, as though we’d forgotten what she was talking about in the past few seconds. Her eyes flicked to me for a moment, traveling my body, predatory. I did my best not to shudder and tried to discreetly shuffle behind Charys.

Charys shook his head. “He was not brought here in the proper way and must be returned.” He gave her a quick bow, then continued, “I’m sorry, majesty. I can bring him back, if you wish it, after my task is done.”

That gaze returned to me in full, and it was all I could do not to shrink back or let go of Charys’s arm and allow the force of Obey and Roahn’s anger to drive me out.

After a long moment, Tani nodded. “I may wish it,” she said. “I will inform you before your work is through.”

She turned and walked back up to the dais, taking her seat in the lavish throne. “Charys, Puckish son,” she said. “We have need of you.”

“I am ever at your service, my goodly Queen,” Charys answered, bowing low.

“Bricne has proved a problem. He must be returned to Tir Na Nóg for good, or eliminated.”

“Dare I ask what he has done?” Charys inquired, inclining his head slightly in acknowledgement of his task.

Tani shrugged. “He has gone mad,” she said. Then, with a wry smile, added, “Well, *madder*.”

She looked to her king and her consort, and Obey took up the explanation, his deep voice rumbling with his anger. “Bricne has killed a Changeling. One of ours, in its post. Bricne killed without mercy or remorse, and he refuses to give reason.”

Charys had stiffened beside me, his face was pale. “I understand, Majesty,” he said, bowing to his rulers. “I will bring the traitor to you.”

Tani flicked her fingers at us, looking bored. “Take the mortal away, Puck,” she said. “I weary of its presence. It reeks of humanity.” I felt a hot flash of anger, shocked that she could go so quickly from wanting me as her plaything to hating me, but I quickly quashed it and focused on my relief that I wasn’t going to be forced to stay here, a toy for the fairy queen.

Charys gave another low bow, then turned and led me back out into the cobbled street. I still could not see beyond our immediate vicinity, and I hated it even more now that I knew where we were. I longed to see Tir Na Nóg in all its glory, to lay eyes on something few mortals had ever seen—and even fewer had come back from. I wondered how Shakespeare had felt, glimpsing a reality few of us dream of beyond childhood.

But there was no majestic city for my eyes to feast upon, and out on the street, Charys stopped, pulling me close to him. “Close your eyes,” he whispered, his breath warm against my cheek. I obeyed, wondering what was next. A moment later, Charys let me go and stepped away, and I felt a cold emptiness at the loss of contact.

I opened my eyes. We were in the living room of my apartment. Charys was striding quickly and purposefully towards the door. In a few moments, all of this would be behind me, a bad dream that I could forget.

“Charys,” I called out. He halted, hand on the doorknob. “Charys, what the hell is going on?” The question came out harsh, demanding, as if I had a right to an answer. It was not my world; I should just let it go.

Instead, I walked slowly, cautiously up behind him and laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Please,” I said. “Tell me what’s happening.”

Charys shook his head as he answered. “It isn’t your concern.” And with that, he pulled open the door and disappeared through it. Literally. He stepped through the door and though it hung open in front of me, he was nowhere to be seen. The hallway was empty. The Fae was gone. And only then, once he had disappeared, did I think of all the things I should have asked—starting with why the hell we’d gone through all that if he could just close his eyes and blink himself to Tir Na Nóg.

I blew out a sigh and shut the door, relishing the normality of the sound of it slamming.

From behind me, there came a high pitched giggle. Slowly, I turned around.

Standing in the center of the room was a tall, thin man. He had a pale face with dark hair and gleaming blue eyes—*too* blue. They almost glowed in the

dim light the table lamp shed from beside the couch, shining up on his face. He crossed his arms over his chest and studied me with an over-exaggerated frown of disappointment.

“You’re still mortal,” he said, pouting. “There’s no fun in *that*.”

I stood in silence for a few moments, fear hot in my gut. I clenched my fists to keep them from shaking, but it didn’t help. All of the terror Charys’s presence had numbed in the throne room combined with the foreboding this man’s presence instilled in me, all of the fear of the unknown darkness of Tir Na Nóg rose up in me again. It was all I could do not to curl up in a ball and sob like a child afraid of what lurks in the darkness.

Because now the darkness had a face, and that only made the fear *worse*.

“Bricne,” I finally managed, my voice barely a whisper.

The man grinned and clapped his hands, bowing low before me. “At your service,” he said as he straightened up. He giggled again.

Chapter Three

We're All Mad Here

It made sense to walk away, Charys thought as he made his way along the darkening street, wishing the streetlights would go out so he could look up at the stars. He wasn't opposed to technological progress—humans had no magic, they had to do *something*—but he spent so much time in their world that he had gotten used to stargazing. As the cities grew and electric lights became more prevalent, they overpowered the night sky, and Charys missed the stars.

They reminded him of the old times, before Tir Na Nóg and the mortal realm had become separate. When humans and Fae passed between worlds easily and frequently. Times when humans were still children in the grand scheme of the universe.

Because children believed.

But having no stars to look at meant Charys was left to think as he strode down the street, and as he went, he thought only of Minoru. He *should* have been thinking of Bricne and his task and the atrocities Bricne had committed against the Fae, but instead he was wondering if it was right to leave without answering Minoru's questions. He had dragged Minoru into this—he could have easily gotten him away from the table, but something about the stubborn glint in his eye when Charys had sat down had endeared Minoru to him, and he had wanted to know more.

So he had let him come to Tir Na Nóg.

It was foolish, Charys knew. A rash and reckless action, but he couldn't bring himself to regret it.

Charys blew out a sigh and tried to refocus his thoughts. Minoru was home safe, his adventure with the Fae over and done, it was time for Charys to leave him behind and do his job.

He was just getting his mind focused, thinking on a plan that would draw Bricne out, when he heard the giggle. High pitched and echoing, it rang through the empty street and resounded in Charys's head, and he froze between streetlights, the darkness weighing heavily down on him as that sound sent a chill down into his bones.

Tani had been worried about him finding Bricne; it had never occurred to anyone to worry about Bricne being the one to find *him*.

To find *them*.

“Minoru,” Charys whispered, realization clenching in his gut. He turned and he ran. Streetlights went off as he passed them, plunging him into darkness, but there was no relief in this. No stargazing now. He was frantic, worried.

Afraid.

By the time Charys made it back to Minoru's apartment building, the streetlights were out and Minoru's apartment was dark save for a flickering light that could have been a candle, but knowing what he was up against, Charys had a feeling it was far more sinister than that. Why did it have to be *Bricne*? Charys wondered. And why did *he* have to be so foolish as to drag a mortal into this?

He tried not to focus on his guilt. Now was not the time, and he struggled to keep his mind on the fight ahead as he slipped into the building, the lock proving no more a challenge to him than it must have for Bricne, and raced up the stairs to the third floor. The corridor was dark, a deep, pitch black. No light from outside—bright though the moon was tonight—came in through the window at the end of the hall.

Charys hurried to Minoru's door and slammed into it, twisting at the knob, but it would not open. It wasn't locked, not by any mortal means. Bricne was keeping him out. “Damn it!” Charys shouted, pounding on the door. “Let me in, Bricne!”

“Why?” came a high-pitched, whiny voice. The door grew hot, and Charys pushed away from it, clenching his fists at his side.

“Leave him alone!” Charys tried, knowing it would do no good. Then a thought struck him. He hadn't given it much musing, not really caring about it beyond the disturbing nature of Bricne's actions, but maybe it would buy him time. Maybe he could use it to save Minoru. Slowly, tentatively, he reached out and laid a hand on the door. It was cool again. He pressed himself against it and spoke low and soft, using magic to project his words to Bricne. “He isn't a Changeling, Bricne,” he said. “He's mortal, he is no threat to you.”

Bricne giggled, the sound sending a chill through Charys.

“Oh, sweet Puck,” Bricne whispered, his own voice carrying on his own sickly sweet magic. “You don't understand. It isn't just about the Changelings, you know.”

“What is it about?” Charys asked, hoping Minoru was still all right. Hoping he was distracting Bricne enough.

“You wouldn’t care,” Bricne said, sounding lazy and uninterested. “Nobody ever does.”

“Tell me!” Charys called out. “Make me understand!”

There was quiet on the other side of the door, then, with a soft click, it began to swing open. Charys pushed it, hurrying it up, and slipped inside. Minoru was slumped in an armchair. Bricne stood in the center of the living area, playing fire across his fingers. Tossing it back and forth between his hands. Watching Minoru. Minoru whose skin was too pale now. Minoru who wasn’t moving. Minoru whose chest neither rose nor fell.

“No,” Charys whispered, taking a stuttering step forward. He halted as Bricne turned on him, the fire in his hand blazing up. “Why?” Charys asked, his eyes on Minoru’s body. The empty shell that was once so vibrant, so curious, so pissed off at Charys for dragging him into the unknown.

Unbidden, thoughts of what could have been, of what might have happened if Charys had been a mortal, if he had been just some flirt sitting down to talk to an attractive man, instead of *this*. Minoru would be alive. And someone else would have to deal with Bricne.

“Why?!” Charys shouted, his voice loud and cracking on his tears and anger. “Why the hell did you do it? He wasn’t a Changeling, why does it matter?”

“He’s seen Tir Na Nóg,” Bricne said with a shrug. “We’ve carried on as though nothing has changed, but it has. Mortals conquer, Puck, and we still let them come and go from Tir Na Nóg as though they wouldn’t try if they wanted.”

“Try what?” Charys asked, staring astonished at Bricne, trying to wrap his mind around this idea. “How could they possibly conquer us? We have *magic*, Bricne, we aren’t exactly pushovers!”

“It doesn’t matter if they could succeed or not,” Bricne said. “Though, the Changelings know our weaknesses, so if they wanted...” he trailed off, staring down at Minoru’s body. “It isn’t about that, though.” He looked up at Charys, eyes wide and bright. “It’s about them *trying*. Because they might. They might and even if they lost, we would have to fight... it could destroy the spirit of Tir Na Nóg.”

Charys drew in a deep, steadying breath, focusing his mind. “So you thought you would take things into your own hands?” he asked, distracting Bricne as he felt the tickle of ice in his fingers. “You thought you would save us from a threat that doesn’t even exist yet? By killing your own kind?”

Bricne turned to him, hands up, ready for a fight. “I will not let the secrets of Tir Na Nóg leak out. If I have to be the only one protecting our home, so be it. But I will not stand by and watch mortals gain the knowledge that could destroy us!”

“They think we’re a *myth*, Bricne,” Charys said, keeping his hands at his side. “They don’t believe in Tir Na Nóg. Not anymore.”

“They could,” Bricne said. “They will. One day.” His eyes were bright in the flicker of his flames, his face pale, his hair wild.

“You’re mad,” Charys said. “And it’s time to go home.”

He raised his hands.

Chapter Four

What Fools these Mortals Be

The battle ended as it had begun, in darkness and in silence.

Charys hated silence. It made him feel alone, and if he *was* alone, it only enhanced the loneliness. That was why he'd set the phonograph playing at the café. It was too quiet there. It was why he'd talked so much with Minoru, why he hadn't insisted the other man leave—at least, that was what he had been telling himself, that he was avoiding the silence he couldn't stand. That talking to Minoru would ease his loneliness—and it had. Not because it broke the quiet, but because Charys found himself drawn to Minoru. Found himself enjoying the company, the conversation. Pretending he was just a normal bloke chatting up an attractive man.

So he had not pushed Minoru to leave. He had kept quiet. And his own silence was the reason Minoru now sat, slumped and dead, in his own living room.

Silence and foolishness.

"I'm sorry," Charys whispered, staring down at the man whose life he had destroyed. Bricne was gone—not dead, never dead, but back in Tir Na Nóg awaiting his fate. There was nothing left for Charys to do.

Except.

Unless.

"I'm so sorry," he said again. He strode forward and scooped Minoru up—the thin body was heavy in its stillness, and even with his Fae strength, Charys had trouble getting a firm grip. Once he felt confident in his hold, he closed his eyes and stepped through the door he had opened for Bricne only moments before and was in Tir Na Nóg once more, the throne room opening up before him in an instant.

Bricne knelt before his Queen, arms bound behind his back, body bent double and wracked with pain. His clothes were torn and bloody, cuts and welts red and raised on his exposed skin. But Charys ignored him, ignored his torture, and strode up to the dais, laying Minoru's body on the ground at Tani's feet.

"What does my sweet Puck desire?" Tani asked, her voice hard and cold with her displeasure—he *was* interrupting Bricne's well-deserved punishment.

But for once, the matters of the Fae were less important to Charys than this one mortal's life.

"Please," he implored, his voice quiet and choked, his gaze steady on Minoru's blank, empty face. "Please, my Queen, bring him back."

She was quiet for a moment, waiting for him to look on her and make his plea. But he could not raise his gaze. She might be his Queen, but he could not look away from Minoru. Not now. Not after everything.

"Mortals are not like us," Tani said in a bored voice. "They live only one lifetime, and then they die. That is the way of it."

"He shouldn't have died!" Charys shouted, finally looking up at her. She blurred before him as tears stung his eyes. Where was all of this emotion coming from, all of this anger and despair? How could one mortal man bring all this out in him? "He shouldn't ever have been dragged into this!"

"That is no one's fault but your own."

Charys hung his head, shame heating his face. "I know, my Queen," he said. "And for that, I ask you only this: take my life, and return him his."

Behind him, he heard Bricne draw in a breath. Heard him start to laugh. Fought the urge to fight him again, to kill him this time. Instead, he stayed bowed over Minoru, trying not to listen. Trying not to care.

"Your precious puckish puppet has fallen in love with a mortal, my Queen!" Bricne called out in a hoarse, strained voice. It may have been moments for Charys, but clearly Bricne's torture had already gone on for a while. "He'll never want you now," he continued. "You know what they say, once Faes feast on mortal flesh—"

His voice was cut off in a grunt. Obey or Roahn had hit him again, silenced him.

"Please," Charys whispered. His body shaking with rage and fear and unshed tears.

A moment of silence passed, and Charys hated this more than any other silence he had ever been forced to endure. Then, he felt Tani's hand fall lightly on his shoulder, and he knew his wish would be granted.

Finally, he let out the sobs he had been fighting. He fell over Minoru's body, holding tight to the last feeling he would ever have of this man he had not

realized he wanted to know until it was too late. Clinging to what was lost to him forever.

Tani's hand tightened on his shoulder, and his world grew dark.

Chapter Five

Which Dreamed It?

In the end, I got my Happily Ever After. But it wasn't anything Disney would have written.

I woke up with a massive headache and cramped muscles, curled up on my tiny love seat, underneath a throw I'd forgotten I even owned. I think it was something my dad knitted for me when he went through his 'do it yourself' phase. I pushed it down to the end of the couch and sat up, stretching my muscles out carefully, racking my brain to try and remember how the hell I wound up sleeping on the couch.

I was fairly certain I hadn't been drinking. And as there were no bottles strewn about the living area of my apartment, I figured I could conclude that I was right on that front. But other than that and falling asleep watching the television—which was off, so that was out—I couldn't think of any reason why I would be on the couch.

The knock on the door was a welcome distraction from my confusion, and I got up and hurried over, ignoring my protesting leg muscles as they struggled to finish waking up from the strange position they had been forced into during the night. I pulled the door open and stared out at the man before me—tall and broad shouldered, with chiseled features and unkempt brown hair.

"Hi," he said, running a hand through his hair and mussing it up even more. "I, uh, just moved in across the way?" He said it uncertainly, like it was a question and it was up to me to confirm his living situation.

I blinked. "Charys?" I asked.

It was his turn to stare. He looked completely off guard, unsure what came next. Clearly I had gone off script. "You remember?" he asked.

"Was I supposed to forget?"

He shrugged. "Usually mortals have their memories erased after close dealings with Fae," he explained. "Unless they're Changelings, but that's different."

"Oh, of course," I said, nodding sagely, raising an eyebrow.

"I'm sorry," he said after a moment.

“For what?” I asked.

He looked relieved. “For dragging you into all that.” He gestured behind him as though the entrance to Tir Na Nóg was in the hall. For all I knew, it was. I shuddered at the thought, and a look of concern flashed across Charys’s features. He stepped forward, sliding easily into my personal space, looking down at me, studying me. I looked away. “Are you all right?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I assured him. “Yeah. I guess someone just walked over my grave.”

The silence fell heavily between us, and I looked up and met his gaze. His eyes were wide open, his lips pressed into a thin line. “Don’t say that,” he said, grabbing my shoulders and holding my gaze. “Don’t ever say that.”

“I... okay then,” I said, pulling back a little. “Are *you* okay?”

He smiled, but it was a sad smile. “Yes,” he said. “I am. Now.”

I didn’t ask what he meant by that. I was fairly certain I didn’t want to know.

“Did you want to come in?” I asked, stepping aside, gesturing for Charys to enter. He studied me for another moment before nodding and walking past me into the apartment. I had a flash of *déjà vu* as he stood in my living room, hands in the pockets of loose hanging jeans.

I closed the door and stepped forward.

“Charys?” I asked. He looked away and, against my better judgment, I pursued. “Charys, what happened?”

After a moment, he looked up again, meeting my gaze with a defiant gleam in his own. “You died,” he said. “Bricne killed you.”

I stared at him. “The afterlife is pretty boring, then.”

Much to my astonishment, he laughed, loud and low and infectious. I smiled, wondering what was so funny about my death. He shook his head, catching his breath and regaining his composure. “No,” he said. “You died, but you’re not dead.”

“You realize that makes no sense, right?”

“It does when you’re dealing with Fae,” Charys said. He blew out a breath and shook his head. “I didn’t expect you to remember me,” he said. “I thought we could start over and put all this behind us.” He shook his head. “I’m sorry.”

I stepped forward, reaching out to him. He hesitated a moment, then took my hand. "It's all right," I said. "I'm glad I remember."

"All of it?" he asked.

I thought of Bricne. I thought of fire and pain. I thought of the hope I had quietly harbored—that one day I would see Tir Na Nóg in all its glory, with Charys by my side. And, with a smile breaking out on my face, I nodded. "Yes. All of it."

I sat on the couch and pulled him down next to me. "Tell me," I said.

"I asked Tani to take my life instead," he explained, staring at my coffee table like maybe the massive coffee table book might tell him how best to break this news to me.

"You don't look dead," I said. I squeezed his hand. "You don't *feel* dead."

He laughed. A short, sad sound. Heavy after the mirth of earlier. "They took my immortality," he said. He blinked and turned to look at me. "They made me mortal. I can never go home."

I didn't know what to say to that. He had given up everything so I might live. I could only imagine how Obey and Roahn would have reacted to such folly—because I knew they would consider it folly. Tir Na Nóg was closed to him now, and he was going to have to figure out how to live as a mortal in a world vastly different from his own.

"Charys," I said, my voice quiet. "You'll find a new home. You'll *make* a new home."

He shook his head. "Where?" he asked. "This world is fine for visiting, but I never wanted to live here."

"Are you sure?" I asked. "There's nothing here that makes you want to stay." I held his gaze, keeping my expression steady, curious. After a moment, I leaned in closer, holding tight to his hand in mine. "Are you certain?" I asked again, my lips inches from his.

He only hesitated one more moment before closing the distance, pressing his lips to mine in a slow, tentative kiss.

The End

Author Bio

Wart Hill is a queer Trans man who hails from the wilds of western New York. In 2011, Wart graduated from his university Cum Laude with a bachelors in English and a minor in Classics, both of which have helped him grow in his craft. Writing has been Wart's passion for much of his life and he is thankful to have had the opportunity to participate in this event.

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