

The Quicksilver Faire: The Scions of Shadow Trilogy © 2011 by Berta Platas and Michelle Roper.
All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any matter whatsoever, including Internet usage, without written permission from Flux, except in the form of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

As the purchaser of this ebook, you are granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this ebook on screen. The text may not be otherwise reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, or recorded on any other storage device in any form or by any means.

Any unauthorized usage of the text without express written permission of the publisher is a violation of the author's copyright and is illegal and punishable by law.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. Cover models used for illustrative purposes only and may not endorse or represent the book's subject.

First e-book edition © 2011
E-book ISBN: 9780738729824

Book design by Steffani Sawyer
Cover design by Kevin R. Brown
Cover illustration by Derek Lea

Flux is an imprint of Llewellyn Worldwide Ltd.

Flux does not participate in, endorse, or have any authority or responsibility concerning private business arrangements between our authors and the public.

Any Internet references contained in this work are current at publication time, but the publisher cannot guarantee that a specific reference will continue or be maintained. Please refer to the publisher's website for links to current author websites.

Flux
Llewellyn Worldwide Ltd.
2143 Wooddale Drive
Woodbury, MN 55125
www.fluxnow.com

Manufactured in the United States of America



one

It was like having study hall on a roller coaster. Keelie Heartwood could hardly read the spidery lines of the *Elven Compendium of Household Charms* before her, thanks to the wild motion of the impossibly tiny airplane she was riding in.

Don't throw up, don't throw up, don't throw up. She swallowed hard. Her mantra wasn't working. The thick pages of the ancient book swayed back and forth as if she were reading on a swing, and the writhing letters jumped on the moving page. It seemed to be a recipe for a charm to turn flowers into weeds.

Pointless, except that the book was written by elves. Keelie was half elven, but she knew that a lot of what the elves did made little sense in the modern world. Case in point: Lord Elianard, her stuffy lore teacher, would be proud of her for reading Elvish writing but he would never stoop to tell her so. She wondered if she'd get extra points for reading on a plane that was staggering through the clouds like a kid in high heels on a sandy beach.

Her seat dropped a foot, roller-coaster style. She grabbed the book's thick covers to keep it from flying into the aisle as her stomach contents rose into her mouth. She swallowed hard and turned to look out the little window by her elbow, staring at a cloud landscape and the plane's silvery wing. She wished her boyfriend, Sean, was in the next seat, rather than the bulky carrier that contained Knot the cat. But Sean was sitting in the seat in front of her to allow Knot to stay near Keelie. She could just see the gilded top of one sun-bleached lock of Sean's

hair.

It was the stupid cat's fault. She had to keep an eye on Knot, who had a fairy's wicked and inappropriate sense of humor and the power to wreak havoc, a dangerous combination on an airplane of any size. Her old frenemy Elia, Lord Elianard's daughter, was also on the plane, even farther to the front thanks to their last-minute tickets. Keelie did not miss having her nearby.

The plane dropped again, and then a persistent chime sounded. Her heart pounded as a light began blinking above her head. Seat belt. She took a deep breath. The one thing she could ignore, since she'd never unbuckled hers. Her lips moved with the other words she'd chanted since they'd left Portland: *I am safe, I am safe*. But this mantra wasn't working either. She didn't believe it.

Keelie hated airplanes. They reminded her of her mother's death last spring, and this commuter jet must be a lot like the one in which Mom had spent the last moments of her life.

She closed the book and put it into her pack, even though it was her only source of distraction. She just couldn't concentrate. Instead of seeing the tiny picture of flower leaves in the Compendium, she'd envisioned Mom's plane breaking up in the sky, the passengers cartwheeling like Lego people into the fathomless Pacific. She shook her head, trying to clear it of bad thoughts, and wished once more that she'd checked inside her backpack before getting on the plane. Someone had dumped out her copy of *Hall Pass*, the novel she'd been dying to read and had finally snagged at the bookstore in town, and replaced it with the Compendium, a massive volume of spells and charms guaranteed to put anyone to sleep in five minutes.

"Someone" was probably Lord Elianard, since her grandmother was still in California, serving as the newly installed tree shepherd of the Redwood Forest.

It was because of her time in the Redwood Forest that Keelie was now headed to the Northwest Territories—to Big Nugget, a dot on the Canadian map, and to the Crystal Faire held there. Unlike the Ren Faires that her elven father, and now she, worked at every summer, which lasted anywhere from a week to the whole season, the Crystal Faire went on year-round, rain or snow. And from what Keelie had heard, they usually got a lot of snow in Big Nugget, along with seriously sub-zero temperatures. But that was months away; it was springtime

now. And apparently it had been unnaturally warm, too. Bears had not hibernated over the winter and were wandering the Northwoods, grumpy. Scientists were blaming it on everything from global warming to sun spots.

But Big Nugget and the Crystal Faire were just a stop on her journey. Keelie was really headed to the elven village of Grey Mantle, on Mount Faron, and from there to the fairy High Court. She was on a diplomatic mission. Someone had been giving humans access to magic, and the elves and the fairies were accusing each other of this dangerous deed. Allowing humans to use magic put both the elves and the fae at risk, since preternatural creatures were supposed to keep themselves secret from humans—who, like clumsy children, broke things that fascinated them and which they did not understand.

An angry yowl sounded next to her, and she patted the metal-grate door of the plastic cat carrier strapped to the seat.

Within the darkness of the carrier, large green eyes glowed. Knot the evil kitty pressed his face to the bars and yowled his displeasure again. When she didn't make a move to open the door, he drew back and the carrier heaved and bounced on the chair as if a monster was in it. The elderly woman across the aisle paled in alarm.

Keelie pasted on the fake smile that she'd perfected from dealing with the evil kitty and aimed it at the woman. "He's so playful."

"He seems upset. Is he old? I understand air travel upsets older cats."

Lady, you wouldn't believe. Aloud she only said, "Oh no, but then my dad says you're only as old as you feel."

The old lady nodded. "A wise man." She winked. "Of course, he's probably young too, compared to me."

Keelie upped the wattage on her smile. Her dad, Zekiel Heartwood, was over three hundred years old, so this seventy-year-old would be like a baby to him. A wrinkly baby with an expensive hair weave and a fleece top that read, "Watch The Skies, They're Coming."

She checked her watch. They should be only minutes from their destination. The flyer for the Crystal Faire crackled in her jeans pocket, and she fished it out and unfolded it on her tray table. The map of the area was marked in thick black pen in her father's angular hand, his stretched-out letters marking where their

escort would wait for them at the airport in Yellowknife.

The plane shook once more, then dropped a few feet like a clunky elevator slipping on its chain. Keelie imagined that this was what Mom felt in her last moments. She'd probably thought that the rough ride would soon be over and she'd be back home in Los Angeles with her feet up, sipping a hot cup of tea. Mom's trip had been over soon, all right, but not the way she'd expected.

Had she thought about Keelie in those last moments? The school counselor at Baywood Academy had told her that Mom didn't feel a thing, that she'd died instantly, but Keelie doubted it. She'd watched TV shows about planes going down. There were flames, and screaming, and stuff tossed around the cabins, crashing into people and seats. Mom would have been afraid, and maybe sad.

Her jeans pocket buzzed. She looked around; no one had noticed. She wiped her eyes and jimmied the smooth, oiled-wood cell phone out of her pocket.

This wasn't a real cell phone like her friends in California used. Nope, this was an elven-made phone, and it was charmed to connect all of the forests through the trees, making communications between the technology-phobic elves easier.

She answered cautiously, feeling sure that whatever magic powered the phone would not interfere with the plane's navigation instruments, but hunching over nonetheless. The flight attendant and other passengers wouldn't understand.

"Keelie, what's happening on that plane?" demanded her father's voice.

"Nothing, Dad. We'll be landing soon. Why'd you call? It's illegal, you know."

"You need to stop thinking sad thoughts," her father commanded. He hadn't been quite so bossy before, but he was Lord of the Dread Forest now and it seemed to have gone to his head.

"Dad, I'm on a plane," she whispered. "I'll call when we land and you can give me a pep talk then."

"Keelie, feel the forest—you're broadcasting your fears and grief. I can hear them all the way in Oregon."

Uh oh. Keelie opened her tree sense, the part of her mind that gave her a direct link to the forests. When they'd first gotten to know each other a year ago, Dad had been surprised that her connection to the forests was so strong—her mother was human, and Keelie had grown up far from the woods. But her connection to the trees had grown deeper with every moment Keelie spent with the elves. What

she'd thought, as a child, was an extreme allergy to wood turned out to be an affinity that allowed her to identify the origins and species of everything wooden, from toothpicks to doors and furniture. If it was wood, it spoke to her.

She connected to the forest thousands of feet below her, and jumped as she felt the wail of the trees. She extended her touch, then shrank back in her airplane seat as the full force of the trees' anguish flooded her. It seemed familiar, which made it even more horrible as she realized why. It was her grief for Mom, amplified, expanded, and infecting thousands of acres of forest. Not exactly the best way to make a good impression on the Northwoods elves.

"What do I do?" Her voice was hoarse.

"Relax, and link your power to mine."

A thread of green light seemed to wrap itself around her power. The familiar feel of Dad's magic fortified hers, and she let her darker-hued power sink, melting into the sparkling green.

A moment later she felt calm, adrift in peace. Below her, the trees relaxed, quieted. *Sorry*, she whispered in tree speak.

"Beg pardon?" The old lady leaned across the aisle.

"Just chatting with my cat." Keelie turned off the cell phone and put it away. The chime sounded, but there was no more turbulence.

"We are now approaching Yellowknife Airport," said the captain's calm voice. "Please fasten your seat belts as we start our descent." Twenty minutes later, they landed with a small, anticlimactic bump.

As soon as they were allowed to stand, Sean popped up over the headrest of the seat in front, his blond surfer hair flipped into his eyes. Except he wasn't a surfer. He was a joustier, riding horses for a living in a warrior sport that was old four hundred years ago. He was now the head of the Silver Bough Joustiers, his father's troupe, which had headed to the High Mountain Faire in Colorado without him. Keelie knew he resented coming here, but then, so did she. At least they'd get to spend more time together.

"I'll wait for you outside. Everything okay?" His eyes flicked to Knot's cage. The two of them had a rocky history.

"Yeah, now that we're on solid ground," Keelie said. "Where's Elia?" Speaking of rocky.

Sean turned and looked around. He shrugged, lifting an eyebrow.

Keelie and Sean waited until everyone else deplaned, leaving just the crew and someone in the bathroom—likely Elia. Keelie lifted the carrier and looked in at her cat, who stared back impassively. But he couldn't fake his reaction to flying—his eyes were dilated to the size of dimes.

“Poor widdle kiddy scared? Aw.”

Knot hissed a promise that she'd pay for making fun of him.

“Don't worry, we'll be off this plane in just a bit.” She scrambled out of the row and grabbed her carry-on bag from the overhead bin, then headed down the narrow aisle, making sure to bang the cat carrier against the back of each empty seat. No point wasting the opportunity. The contrary cat's purr filled the cabin.

As they passed the bathroom, Keelie wrinkled her nose at the sound of its occupant being very sick inside. Definitely Elia.

“Gross,” she muttered. At least it hadn't happened out where everyone could participate in the nausea.

Blue sky showed through the jet's narrow open door. The air was brisk, and instead of a Jetway to the inside of a concourse, a flight of painted wooden stairs on a wheeled platform led down to a pitted tarmac. Very classy. A colorful bus was being loaded with luggage, everyone from the plane crowding around it.

From the top of the stairs, Keelie saw walls of green forest. The hills and mountains surrounding the valley were densely wooded, a throbbing presence that made her itch as its magic skittered over her skin. Her work awaited her in these mountains—the mission she'd been sent on. According to her father and the Elven Council of the Dread Forest, the High Court fae were on the brink of war with the Northwoods elves over who had caused magic to leak to the humans, and the conflict could spread worldwide in very little time. Despite her inexperience, Keelie's part-fairy, part-elf blood made her father think that she was best suited for the job of arbitrator. Other elves disagreed, but Dad was Lord of the Dread Forest. On top of that, Lord Norzan, the tree shepherd of the Northwoods, had specifically requested Keelie. He'd been impressed with what she'd done to save the Redwood Forest.

“You'd think they'd send someone more qualified than a sixteen-year-old mall rat,” Keelie muttered aloud. She knew she'd proven herself to be more than a

kid, but had no idea where the extent of her powers came from. Knot meowed from inside the crate and she looked at him. “Not from you, furface.” The cat was freaky, but not telepathic. At least she didn’t think he was. His kitty lips spread in a smile.

“Right. Time to get started. I can’t wait to see who Elia’s family has sent to greet us.” Elia had come on the trip to meet her kin in Grey Mantle.

“Someone nice, I’m sure,” Elia said from behind her. Her hair hung in two tight yellow braids and her eyes were as gorgeous as ever, but the elf girl’s skin was greenish. She clutched the sides of the plane’s doorway.

“You look like you have chlorophyll poisoning, but I know it’s morning sickness.” Keelie tried to sound sympathetic. “Need some crackers? Maybe there’s a vending machine around here.”

Elia put her hand over the little swell that bumped out her embroidered tunic. “I swear it was dancing a jig,” she moaned.

“Maybe you should have listened to Uncle Dariel and stayed home,” Keelie said. Dariel was the Unicorn Lord of the Dread Forest, and he’d stayed behind, cross. Even though Keelie called Dariel “uncle,” she just couldn’t bring herself to start calling Elia “aunt.”

“Dariel wanted me to come,” Elia said sharply, her attitude resurfacing. “He wouldn’t keep me from meeting my people.”

“Yeah, he’s nice that way.” Keelie picked her way down the rickety steep stairs (pine, with lots of lead paint suffocating the wood).

Sean was standing in front of the long wooden building that occupied one side of the single runway. The bus had rumbled off, leaving them alone. It was like the set of a zombie movie. Keelie joined him, looking around. “I wonder if the elves keep their rescue helicopters here or up in Grey Mantle?” she said. The Northwoods elves were famous for their teams of Healers, who traveled far to aid other elves.

A figure, wearing the Healers of the Northwoods uniform, stepped around the end of the building. Keelie recognized the outfit from the Redwood Forest, when they’d evacuated Norzan. She’d been surprised to see the Healers lift off in a sleek helicopter, a reminder that elves had modern resources even if they sometimes seemed stuck in the Middle Ages.

No helicopter was in evidence anywhere around the airfield.

The Healer elf strode toward them, then bowed. "I'm Miszrial of the Stones, here to drive you to our village." She had thin lips, a beaky nose, and yellow hair scraped back from her face, making her look like a hawk in uniform.

Elia bowed back and Keelie dipped her head. She knew Elia was excited about this visit, a triumphant homecoming for the princess whose pregnancy was cause for celebration across the land. Most elves were infertile, and Elia's offspring would be the first child born to elves since Elia's own birth sixty years before.

Despite her advanced age, Elia looked only a little older than Keelie's sixteen years and probably would stay that way for the next fifty years. Keelie had no idea how long her own life could be, since her mother was mostly human.

Miszrial didn't seem impressed with either of them. She led the way to a strange vehicle, a compact SUV with a roof made up of glassy black solar cells. "Please sit in the back." She bowed, then glared at Sean when he reached for a suitcase. He backed away, hands raised in mock surrender as she started shoving their luggage into the back of the SUV.

Keelie reached across the gated front of the cat carrier and a clawed paw lashed out and snagged her sleeve. She snatched back her arm.

"A fairy cat. It rides in the back."

Keelie grabbed the handle of the carrier. "Knot rides with me," she said firmly.

Sean picked up the cat carrier and shoved it onto the back seat, then stepped aside to allow Keelie to climb in and sit next to it. He followed, taking the spot next to her and closing the door.

Keelie pulled out her elf phone. "I'm going to call Dad and tell him we're here."

Miszrial rolled her eyes and opened the front door for Elia, who held out an arm, silently asking for assistance. Miszrial helped her in.

Elia lifted her chin. "Call him if you wish, Keliel, but if I were you, I'd wait until we reach Grey Mantle. You'll be able to tell him about the unique Northwoods Ceremony of Welcome. I hope you don't feel slighted when they honor me."

Keelie gritted her teeth. "Don't start. We've managed to get along this far, and I'd hate to tell Uncle Dariel that I decked his pregnant wife."

The elf girl's chilly smile flicked up the corners of her mouth like tiny commas. "You wouldn't hurt me. You're too *kind*." She said "kind" the way others said "dog poop."

"You're probably right. I'd probably sic Knot on you."

Elia's eyes widened briefly before settling back to their bored stare. Keelie grinned. Score one for the half-elven mongrel. Sean poked her in the ribs, making her stifle a snort.

Miszrial drove toward the paved road, turned left, then pointed the SUV toward the forested mountains.

Unlike the Redwood Forest she'd just left, these woods didn't seem threatening to Keelie. She opened her tree sense a crack, then wider when she felt the welcoming green of the trees around her. All the anxiety she'd transferred onto them was forgotten. To think that just a year ago she'd thought trees were frightening, that she'd dismissed the magical buzzing that danced over her skin as an allergy.

Mom's fault, of course. Mom had tried to protect her from her otherness, from the half of her that was destined to be a tree shepherd like her father. And lately she'd discovered that Mom had other secrets, too. Mom's mother—Keelie's beloved Grandma Jo, whom she considered the ultimate cookie-baking granny—had fairy blood. This meant that Keelie's so-called "human half" was not fully human after all. Elia sometimes called Keelie a mutt. She was being deliberately mean, but she was right on target.

The green forest crowded closer to the road, and ahead, the black-asphalt ribbon wound around a hill covered with squat, slate-roofed buildings. They swung around the curve and there was the town of Big Nugget. Brightly colored pennants fluttered from peaked rooftops, and a ferris wheel towered over the shops, seats rocking in the morning breeze.

It was as if a big party was going on. They passed the first of the shops, with glittering mullioned windows and a wooden sign that read "Freat's Treats." A woman with wildly curling flame-colored hair was sweeping the sidewalk. She released the broom to drag her sign to the curb, and waved at them. Keelie gasped as the broom continued to sweep on its own.

"Did you see that?" Sean asked.

Two boys ran across the street, dressed in medieval-style, loosely woven trousers and belted tunics, caped hoods around their shoulders. They headed toward a bright blue maypole where other children danced, weaving silky, colorful ribbon streamers. The children's shoes hovered two feet above the ground. Their watching parents did not seem to notice anything amiss.

"Is this due to the magic leak?" Keelie asked.

"Yes, the humans have sensed the magic and are using it for their pleasure. The Shining Ones at the High Court have put us all in peril. This must be stopped." Miszrial's hands tightened on the steering wheel. "Big Nugget used to be a quiet village, but when the wild magic was discovered two years ago, it drew this carnival." The elf's upper lip curled. "Their so-called Crystal Faire." She sniffed, as if the humans were silly.

They wound their way through the town, passing even more examples of magic. Kites with no strings hovered around a vendor, and a dazzling flock of fantastically colored birds swooped, chattering, over the SUV on their way to a silver-haired woman who controlled them with a gesture.

"My father has long cautioned elfkind on the dangers of letting humans see us," Elia murmured, sounding shocked. "Many think that the Renaissance Faires are a clever way of hiding in plain sight, but Father would be appalled at the flagrant use of magic here, and by human beings." Lord Elianard was not fond of humans.

Keelie touched her very human, rounded ear. Even with her unusual elven powers, she had never been able to fly, or summon fairy birds, or make brooms sweep by themselves (although that last one could come in handy). There was definitely something wrong going on at the Crystal Faire.

As soon as she was able to, Miszrial picked up speed, shot out of Big Nugget, and headed up the mountain.

Keelie caught her breath. She thought she saw faces peering at them from the underbrush that bordered close by the narrow road. "Stop the car!" she said loudly. Had it been her imagination?

Elia covered her mouth. "Yes, please. I don't feel so good after witnessing that nauseating display."

"We can't stop. Our destination is Grey Mantle," Miszrial stated. Elia craned

her neck to look back imploringly at Keelie and Sean.

Keelie stared at the passing greenery, looking for more faces. Had they been animals? She started as they passed a gate made of twisted trees, the top of its arch decorated with the skull of a great deer. Even more startling was the sight of Peascod, the jester she'd last seen in the Redwood Forest. He waved at her, his eyes glittering behind his rigid, eternally smiling mask. They zoomed past, and then he was gone.

Keelie grabbed Sean's arm. "Did you see Peascod?" Fairies, elves, and now this. Had Peascod come here to take advantage of the leaking magic? Miszrial had called it wild magic. That was certainly fitting, if Peascod could use it.

Sean looked back, over her shoulder. "You're seeing things. It was probably a bear."

"No, it was Peascod," Keelie whispered. Her upcoming diplomatic duties were making her nervous, and she didn't need the added worry of the presence of the criminal jester. Dad needed to know.

"What?" Sean's eyes examined the blur of trees. "Maybe you imagined it. Maybe it was a strangely shaped twig."

"Bears and twigs don't wear masks."

He nodded slowly. "If it was really him, what does it mean?"

Keelie shuddered as she thought of what Peascod could do if he wielded magic. "He could take revenge on us. Bad things would happen that would seem like accidents."

Sean looked out the window at the seemingly endless forests, seeming as troubled as she was.

"What are you two whispering about? It's not polite." Elia glared at them from the front seat, still looking queasy. "I hope you're not hurt that the elves here may treat you with disdain. They dislike the fae even more than humans, and they *hate* humans." Elia looked at Miszrial. "Is there a place we can stop?"

"Don't listen to her, Keelie," Sean said.

"I'm used to it. Don't worry about me." Keelie felt Sean's warm hand envelop hers.

"That's why I'm here," he assured her. "I'll remind them that you are the daughter of the Lord of the Dread Forest." He smiled at her, making her stomach

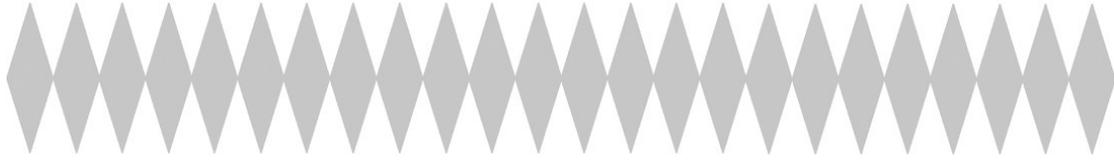
all fluttery. His smiles always did that to her.

“I’m not sure I can complete my diplomatic mission if I’m treated like a walking infection.” Keelie leaned closer to Sean, enjoying his strong, warm presence.

“And while we’re here, I will call you Keliel. My kin are so much more formal than the elves elsewhere,” Elia continued.

Did she ever shut up?

“Of course they are.” Keelie turned her face so that Elia wouldn’t see the smirk on it. She needed to get serious to make her father proud. He’d sent her to impress the Northwoods elf clan, to help them resolve their problems, and since their problem had to do with the fae’s High Court, she was glad she had fae blood no matter how much of a mongrel it made her in the elves’ eyes.



tWO

Keelie hoped the rest of the drive to Grey Mantle would be short and swift. She was squished in the back seat between the cat carrier and Sean, behind a queasy elf girl who was looking worse with every fast turn on the twisty road that wound through the mountains. Knot meowed louder with each stomach-churning curve.

Keelie felt a warm greeting from the local trees. She caught telepathic snatches of greetings as she passed them.

Greetings.

May your roots find comfort in our soil.

Let the sun bless you with many leaves.

The Great Sylvus bring you happy days.

Keelie sent a foresty embrace back to them.

After another hairpin turn, Elia slapped her hand over her mouth. “We need to stop.” She burped.

Keelie scrunched closer to the door because the sound of the burp wasn’t an I’ve-had-a-great-dinner-and-my-belly-is-full sound. It was an I’m-going-to-lose-the-contents-of-my-stomach sound.

“We need to stop.” Keelie used Grandmother Keliatiel’s commanding tone to get the elf guide’s attention and cooperation.

Miszrial shook her head. “Can’t. Need to get to the village.”

Surprised, Keelie snapped her mouth closed. Normally when she used her commanding voice, she got results. Quickly.

Ahead, she saw a “You’ve missed the Crystal Faire, turn around!” sign. Below this was the small word “Restrooms.”

Keelie leaned forward and pointed at the sign. “We need to go back.”

“No. Can’t. We need to get to Grey Mantle.”

“If you don’t stop, one pregnant elf and one cat might not make it there alive.”

Keelie studied Knot, who was staring balefully at Miszrial. His tail twitched, swishing sharply left, then right.

“Stop now,” Sean barked.

Brakes slammed, pushing them all forward, then back again.

Miszrial glanced out the driver’s side window and did a double take. Keelie watched her face in the mirror and saw fear slip into the elf woman’s eyes.

“Something’s out there,” Miszrial said.

Keelie peered out the window and thought she saw, once again, faces peeking through the underbrush. Maybe the *bhata* dwelled closer to the ground in this section of Canada; each region and area was different. She wondered if she could encourage a swarm to come and attack the SUV—then elf guide would be forced to listen.

If she were honest with herself, Keelie was nervous, too, especially about meeting with the fae. She shivered, thinking about being in a room full of fairies. She was used to the *feithid daoine*, who were bug fairies, and the *bhata*, who were mossy, sticklike creatures. What if she encountered a goblin? She’d pass. One encounter in the Redwood Forest was enough, thank you very much.

There was a definite change in the atmosphere around the SUV. It was as if a dark cloud had descended over them. She lifted her head and studied the sky. Puffy clouds floated in the air. Nothing ominous about them.

Keelie thought about the fairies. Perhaps she was sensing them. She’d been much more sensitive ever since restoring the Dread, the elven curse that kept humans away from her home forest. Or else she was just spooked from glimpsing Peascod.

Another loud burp issued from Elia, who then leaned over and threw up.

Keelie gagged, and pulled Knot’s cat carrier closer to shield herself from the

splatter.

“She can’t do that,” Miszrial shouted.

“Guess she did,” Keelie replied, with a touch of I-told-you-so in her voice. “Now you *have* to go back to Big Nugget to clean out the SUV, because there’s no way I’m going to ride in this smelly vomit car.”

“You’ll just have to wait until we reach Grey Mantle.” Miszrial bit her lip and glanced nervously out the window as if searching for something. Keelie wondered if fairies might be in the woods. Though the elves and the fae had never gotten along.

“We have to get to the village for dinner,” Miszrial added, clenching her jaw. “It’s four o’ clock. We can’t turn around—we’re going to have to drive straight through. It will only take an hour.”

Elia gagged. Perfect timing.

“Fine. We will return to Big Nugget, but it will be a quick stop,” Miszrial said. She pulled a U-turn and drove back toward town. When they reached Main Street, the Crystal Faire was still in full swing. Miszrial parked the SUV and they all clambered out.

Keelie was glad for the chance to get a closer look at the Crystal Faire. It was a strange combination of medieval faire meets Wild Wild West. Bright pennants snapped jauntily in the cool breeze, and the boxy buildings were painted in a variety of dizzying bright colors. It was as if somebody with ADD had opened a box of crayons and decorated the town.

Sean had read up on Big Nugget, and as they strolled, he told them about it. It had been a mining town back in the late 1800s. Legend had it that dwarves lived in the mines. There was even an entire city down there, according to some miners who had dug deep into the Earth seeking treasure, only to return to the surface with fairy-tale stories.

Another local myth said a dragon lived under one of the mountains. While the trees grew strong and tall toward the sky, the creature guarded its treasures from would-be robbers. Keelie started to laugh, then stopped. *There really could be a dragon.* She’d often wondered if Finch, the scary administrator at the Wildewood Faire, had some draconic relatives somewhere.

Knot was staring longingly at the Rollicking Mermaid Tavern. Keelie told him

to go ahead. “One mead. That’s it.” Knot crooked his tail and strode away—which meant *yeah, yeah, yeah!*

“Maybe I should go along to keep an eye on him.” Sean looked thirsty.

“Not a bad idea. Just one mead for you, too. We have elves to impress.”

Sean gestured toward his blond surfer hair, whose careless curls covered his pointed ears.

Keelie laughed. “Yeah, but you’re not from around here. We still have to make a good impression.”

Miszrial had returned to the SUV and gone on a quest to find a car wash. Good luck, Keelie thought. She hoped Miszrial became lost and had to drive to Grey Mantle without them. Maybe she would tell Norzan she’d lost her passengers in Big Nugget and they’d send another car for them.

Not a bad idea. There had to be a hotel here. They could hide out until knights came to their rescue. Or would that be cavalry, in this place? They might have knightly cowboys. Keelie surveyed the myriad of brochures at the tourist center welcome desk while she waited for Elia to return from the ladies’ restroom.

A middle-aged woman with curly blond hair smiled at them. She wore a purple tie-dyed sundress and a silver pentacle around her neck. “Hi. Is there anything I can help you with?”

“No, thank you.”

Elia stumbled back to the counter and leaned against it as if her legs couldn’t hold her up any longer. “You should’ve come with me. I needed you to hold my head.”

“I’m not your nursemaid.”

“You’re supposed to help me.”

“Holding your head was not in my job description.”

Elia scowled. At least her face was now a shade of sticky pale, not a funky sea green, and she was complaining, which meant she was over the worst of the car sickness.

“Do you have a café that serves herbal teas?” Keelie asked.

“The Crystal Cup.” The woman pointed across the street with her French-manicured nail. It looked like a fresh manicure. Maybe the town had a nail salon—Keelie could really go for a mani-pedi.

“I need some tea *now*,” Elia whined. She rubbed her stomach in circular motions.

Keelie sighed inwardly at her short-lived dream of beautiful nails. “Come on.”

They walked down the cobblestoned street. Sean waved to them from the opposite sidewalk, Knot at his feet. They both appeared to be sober, thank goodness.

“Did you boys have fun?”

Sean shrugged, but Knot’s green eyes shone brightly. No one seemed to think a tourist cat strolling down the street was odd. People waved at them. There wasn’t a thread of synthetic fiber on anyone; these people seemed to invite nature to join them. Keelie wondered what it would be like if elk, foxes, or maybe grizzly bears came walking into the village and admired the store fronts, went shopping, and ate scones.

She had been in the SUV too long.

There seemed to be a party going on at the colorful maypole they’d passed earlier. Laughing people danced to a fiddle tune, weaving maypole ribbons that echoed the colors of the aurora borealis, which was oddly visible in the sunlit sky above them.

Across the street was a row of shops. Keelie stopped to ogle a shop window that had a display of fairy wings. The wings ranged from silvery snowflakes to a woodland style that had jewel-toned leaves outlining the curve of the wing. These sure weren’t like the dollar-store wings her dwarf friend Sir Davey had to wear in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* last week. Those had been sad, but these wings were amazing.

Although Keelie had never been one to want a pair of fairy wings, these wings were like works of art and she was instantly in love. There was even a tiny version with leaves on it, probably for a baby. Or ... Keelie studied Knot. She wondered how he would look with a pair strapped to his back. For all she knew, he had a pair of his own, though he’d never show them to humans. Bet it would bring customers into the booths at the Ren Faires.

Knot rose up on his hind legs and pressed his nose against the glass.

Elia was leaning against the brick wall of the store, looking pale. “Are you through drooling?”

Keelie pulled herself away. She nudged Knot with her foot.

“We’ll come back and try them on later.”

The stores on either side of the Crystal Cup were crowded, thanks to the overflow of people in the streets. They walked past a mask store called Carnavale. Its window was filled with a variety of masks displayed against black velvet draperies: molded Venetian carnival masks, intricately feathered half-masks, leather masks, and decorative carved wooden masks. The variety was mesmerizing.

“That one looks like Peascod,” Keelie said, pointing at a full-face mask with a prominent nose and slyly upturned lips. This one was painted gold, unlike the bone-white one she’d seen Peascod wear. She didn’t even know what the jester’s face looked like anymore; for all she knew it was hideously scarred, disfigured by his misuse of goblin magic. She shivered, remembering the last time she’d seen him in the Redwood Forest. Peascod had spun in a circle, tunneling into the ground and disappearing—she’d hoped forever. But he said they would meet again.

Just as she was about to walk away, Keelie saw an intricately carved wooden mask. The face was that of the Green Man, the legendary guardian of the forests. Curled wood formed his beard, and oak leaves were intertwined in his beard. His carved eyes seemed to twinkle at her.

The artist had captured the spirit’s essence in his creation. She wished she could buy it, but it probably cost more than she could spend. Fascinated, Keelie drew closer, as if the mask were calling her. In her mind, she saw a horned man sitting atop a dark horse. He wore a cloak as black as a winter night sky, and she felt his eyes watching her from atop a hill. Rangy hunting dogs circled him, awaiting his command, and a hawk with black-tipped feathers soared in the sky above him, illuminated by an unearthly red light.

Dogs, hawk, and the elements of winter awaited his command.

Beware.

Keliel felt herself sink, as though the ground had melted, and she was suddenly aware again of the trees around her ... millions of trees, all connected to this being. He was real. He was a forest god, and the watching faces in the greenery were his. The Green Man was here, and she heard the unspoken promise that

they would meet. The thought chilled and excited her.

Sean's arm draped over her shoulder and his lips touched her rounded human ear. "I'd offer you a penny for your thoughts, but you look like you've left the planet."

Before she could gather her scrambled thoughts to answer, Elia's voice rang out.

"You two are disgusting. Hello? Pregnant woman in need of peppermint tea." She grabbed her middle and looked miserable. "I hope I don't hurl again." She disappeared through the door of the Crystal Cup.

Sean grinned ruefully. "Me too."

"No kidding." Keelie took his hand as they went inside. It was still thrilling to touch him. The crowded café was decorated with First Nations artwork, including a motif Keelie had never seen before—a stag with massive antlers.

She looked closer to make sure she hadn't mistaken it for a moose. Nope, it was a deer all right.

The server came up. "Indoors or out?"

"Outside, please. I need fresh air." Elia was gulping now, and looked a little green.

The server took one look at her and hurried them outside to a tile-topped wrought iron table. Knot took a chair, too, ignoring Sean's glare when he had to move around to the seat on the other side of Keelie.

A cheery waitress wearing a red gingham apron over jeans and a T-shirt gave them all menus, except for Knot. He meowed under his breath.

Elia shoved her menu over to him and closed her eyes. "Order me some tea and oatmeal."

Keelie ignored her. Did the elf girl think she was going to be her personal assistant?

She opened the menu for Knot, and was not surprised when he placed his paws on the fish section. At least he had an excuse—no opposable thumbs. The women at the table next to them did a double take. Keelie glared at them with a *what, you've never seen a cat order from a menu?* look.

"Where's Misery? Maybe we should order for her," Keelie said.

"Misery." Elia snorted and quickly covered her face.

Sean grinned and shook his head.

Miszrial seemed to appear out of thin air. “Saved a spot for me?” She sat down stiffly. “I will presume that you’ve made an idiotic attempt at making a pun of my name. Miszrial, Misery.” She looked at Knot. “It’s unfortunate that there are no laws in this town forbidding animals in eating establishments.”

Keelie pretended to be happy, since Elia still seemed too queasy to even try. “We’re so glad you could join us. I thought you’d still be searching for a car wash.”

Miszrial tilted her head. “There is a detail car wash on the other side of the parking lot.” If Miszrial had left the SUV, she must be anxious to keep an eye on them.

Goodbye “hiding out in a hotel” idea, Keelie thought. Maybe she could still check out the fascinating shops in the unusual town. She felt a hum of energy threading its way through the street. It felt like magic. She glanced at Sean, who didn’t seem to be aware of it.

“Is he really reading that?” The elf guide stared at the cat, who was staring at the menu.

“Of course,” Keelie answered.

Miszrial shook her head. “We need to hurry. We’re expected at Grey Mantle and I have to return to my work.”

“What do you do? Are you a Healer?” Keelie studied the elf guide. She had the disciplined look of a doctor.

“Yes. I’m working on an herbal tincture that will help my people endure the winter by strengthening their immune system. Now is the time to harvest the principle ingredient, the Hunter’s Moon flower.” The elf guide straightened, obviously excited by her work. “It grows on the south side of the mountain, and can only be harvested by night, so that the sun’s rays don’t dry out the delicate stalks.”

Keelie felt her eyes glaze over. It was like talking to Risa. A small part of her thought that humans might use the tincture, too.

The waitress returned. “May I take your order?”

Keelie scanned the menu and decided on oatmeal too, Sylvus help her. She was becoming more and more like an elf with each passing day. “Two oatmeals and

two cups of peppermint tea.” She handed her menu to the waitress.

Sean closed his menu. “A Crystal Cup special with whipped cream.” He turned to Keelie. “I’ve craved fancy coffee drinks ever since that trip to the mall in Los Angeles.”

“I was too busy wrestling a tree to drink mine, but I know what you mean,” Keelie said. They’d ended up kidnapping the sapling in the food court’s concrete planter and giving it a permanent home by a stream near Baywood Academy, her old school.

Knot meowed and placed his paw on the menu.

Keelie nodded. “Good choice. We need a kid’s meal of fish sticks and hold the fries.”

“Okay.” The waitress arched an eyebrow.

“I’m not hungry.” Miszrial handed the menu to the waitress, whose name tag said Hannah. “Just peppermint tea.”

“Thanks.” Hannah took the menu. “I’ll bring your drinks back right away.”

Keelie opened her napkin and placed it on her lap. She leaned toward the elf guide. “How is Lord Norzan doing?”

“He is better. His time in the Redwood Forest drained his energy, but here in his home forest he is healing. You will see him in Grey Mantle.” The elf guide placed dark sunglasses over her face and turned away from Keelie, who definitely got the message: *I do not want to talk to you.*

Knot washed his face, ignoring all the human drama.

Keelie smiled nicely, bit down on her tongue, and didn’t say anything—the excellent advice Dad had given her many times over the past months about dealing with cranky elves. She had a feeling she would be staying silent a lot in the coming days.



three

As they left the Crystal Cup to return to the SUV, Keelie thought of the Green Man mask and her eerie vision. Despite having witnessed walking trees, angry fairies, and magical unicorns, she'd never seen anything like the dark, horned figure who'd beckoned to her. Or heard a voice like that.

"Keelie, are you all right? You seem worried about something." Elia was wrapping a cloak around her shoulders, shivering in the cool air. Pregnancy was occasionally doing wonders for the elf girl's personality—as in, she'd developed one. Glimmers of niceness, anyway.

"I just zoned out." Keelie smiled at her, still worried about her vision.

"Well, don't daydream in front of my relatives. You'll embarrass me, and since we'll arrive together, I can't pretend I don't know you."

Keelie mentally crossed off the personality upgrade she thought she'd noticed. As they hurried to catch up with Misery the marching elf, they passed the mask shop again. Keelie stumbled when she saw the Green Man mask, and Sean steadied her.

"Something's up with you, I know it," he whispered.

"Later. I can't talk in front of the other elves."

He frowned, but said nothing.

The parking lot was gravel, and on the other side was the detail shop that held

their strange little SUV, now sparkling in the northern sun. No crowds here.

“Throwing up made me feel better, but I could use a nap.” A long golden curl had come loose from Elia’s braid and blew across her face. She turned her head so that the wind swept it back, and stared into the trees. “Do you hear that? Singing.”

Miszrial’s eyes widened. “Quick, into the car.”

Knot meowed scornfully, but Keelie thought that maybe the elf guide had noticed a moose or bear. Or an insane masked jester. She jumped into the back seat and didn’t relax when Sean slammed the door behind them.

Miszrial drove as if they were being chased. Elia held on, turning green again.

Sean leaned forward, resting a hand on the back of the drivers’ seat. “Do you want me to help with the driving?” His offer seemed to come more from self-preservation than a desire to help Miszrial.

The elf guide gritted her teeth. “No, I’m fine.” Her eyes kept checking both sides of the road.

Keelie’s thoughts circled back to her strange experience at the mask shop. She’d seen various kinds of magic in the year since her mother had died, but this vision of the dark rider had been totally different from any of them. Was the Green Man—the forest god—watching her now? His magic had felt deep, old, and very dark, and just the brief encounter had made her shaky. But it intrigued her, too ... a tremor ran down Keelie’s spine. She’d never dealt with a god before.

She needed to call her father, but she didn’t want to do it in front of Miszrial. She was here to help solve a problem for the elves, but it was beginning to look like the situation was more complicated than a simple disagreement over how the magic leak started. Maybe other creatures were involved. Really scary creatures. Whatever was going on, Keelie didn’t want the Northwoods elves to think that their ambassador from the Dread Forest was weak, or that she was drawing the attention of old forest gods who felt the need to utter warnings. She didn’t know what *Beware* meant, but it sounded alarming.

The elves might be able to tell her about this god, if they even knew he existed. The elves at home couldn’t sense lesser fae like the *bhata* and the *feithid daoine*, and they hadn’t known about Under-the-Hill beneath them. While it was hard to

believe that a being as powerful as the Green Man could be a secret from the local elves, Keelie decided that she wouldn't ask about him until Dad gave the okay.

Elia turned in her seat to look at her. "Are you going to pout all the way to Grey Mantle?"

Keelie made a face. "If being snarky makes you feel better, go for it."

Elia's mouth fell open. "I don't know what you mean." She muttered something.

"Did you just call me a Round Ear?" "Round Ear" was an insulting elven term for "human."

Miszrial snorted. *Laugh it up, Misery*, Keelie thought.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Elia said coolly.

Knot made a disgusting sound and the car filled with a noxious odor.

Elia covered her mouth, eyes wide.

Miszrial shot her a panicked look and swerved the SUV to a shuddering stop on the side of the road. She'd learned her lesson.

Elia flew out of the car and knelt in the tall grass at the road's edge, shoulders heaving.

Keelie sighed and climbed out after her, ignoring Miszrial and Sean, who were rolling down windows and fanning the air. Knot jumped down next to Keelie and trotted, tail held high, to where Elia was being sick. Keelie didn't want to get too close. Instead, she turned to the trees, huge robust pines that seemed to flourish here in the Northwoods. She opened her mind to the trees. Spruce, Frazier fir, and many others. So many.

Tree shepherdess, tales of your deeds precede you. The speaker was a small fir that was straining at the soil, as if it was ready to bound down the hill toward her. She smiled.

Good tales, I hope. I'm pleased to visit your beautiful forest. She might as well practice her diplomatic skills. So far, her visit had consisted of elf vomit and frightening visions. Maybe she could take a moment now to call Dad. She thought of their comfy home, back in the Dread Forest in Oregon. Their house was filled with his beautiful woodwork. She wished he hadn't insisted that she could do this job.

“I feel better, I think,” Elia gasped from behind her.

Keelie turned. “You look better.” More diplomacy. She was starting to figure out that “diplomacy” was another word for “big, fat, schmoozy lie.” The kind of lie that made people feel better, like “You don’t look fat in that baggy knit dress.”

A blur of movement caught her eye and she spun. She examined the trees, wondering what it had been.

“What’s the matter?” Mizzrial’s voice sounded panicky.

“Nothing,” Keelie called back. “Just thought I saw something.” She didn’t find the elf’s fear reassuring.

“Like a snake?” Elia eyed the forest warily.

“No snakes up here.” Mizzrial sounded calmer.

Then the creature buzzed down, and Keelie gasped in delight. It was a *bhata*, a woods fairy. Two rough-barked sticks held together with stringy moss, full of the spark of life and magic.

It skittered around the tree, almost like a kitten playing. She smiled, the scary mask at the Crystal Faire forgotten. She knew the *bhata*, and their presence made the forest seem more like home.

“Lady Keliel, we must hurry.” Mizzrial’s voice rang against the trees, and Keelie waved goodbye to the little creature, and to the trees, then hurried back to the SUV.

The rest of the trip sped by, as Mizzrial gunned the vehicle around narrow curving roads, climbing into the mountains. They pulled off onto a dirt road which entered the forest. A mile later, the unpaved road widened on the left into a graveled lot with eight cars in a tidy row. Mizzrial pulled onto the gravel and parked the SUV.

“Where are we? There’s no village anywhere near here.” Keelie looked out of the car windows.

“How do you know?” Mizzrial said tightly.

“The trees tell me.”

Mizzrial’s eyes widened. “You *are* a tree shepherd, like Lord Norzan. I had a hard time believing it.”

“Why, because I’m part human?”

The elf woman reddened and didn't answer. "Let's get on with it. A wagon will now take us to Grey Mantle. It's not far."

Elia and Miszrial exchanged angry looks, and Sean eyed them warily.

Before Keelie could figure out what had gone on between them, they were interrupted by the clapping of hooves. Two large horses pulling a wagon appeared on the road, the elaborate harness beautiful against their glossy hides. A tall, imperious elf held the reins, sitting high on the seat above them.

The horses stopped and the elf looked down over his axe-blade nose. "Welcome to Grey Mantle. Allow me to move your luggage."

He hopped down from the tall seat and started hauling suitcases out of the back of the SUV and tossing them into the wagon as if they didn't weigh anything. Sean had been ready to help, but instead he shrugged and gave Keelie a look of good-humored puzzlement. She smiled back in agreement. This guy had a serious anger problem.

Keelie grabbed Knot and held the squirming cat close to her chest. Elia stepped out of the SUV and beamed at the wagon driver as he finished loading the wagon.

"Greetings, cousin. It is I, Elia, daughter of Elianard and Cilene."

No expression crossed his face as he stopped and looked at Elia, then continued to pack the wagon. When the SUV was empty, he climbed onto the wagon seat again. Elia stood frozen on the gravel, shock on her face.

"Come on, we've got to ride in the back." Miszrial grabbed a rope that was dangling from the back gate of the wagon and pulled herself aboard. She turned and extended a hand to Elia, who didn't seem to notice her.

Elia wasn't her best friend, nor her worst enemy anymore, but Keelie couldn't stand to see her in pain. She didn't know who the wagon driver was, but when he ignored Elia, it had hurt her feelings.

"Let's rescue Elia," she said to Sean. "Something's not right here."

"I've been saying that since we hit town," Sean muttered. "This is not good, Keelie. Elia is correct in her expectation of a huge celebration in honor of her return to the forest of her mother's people. The baby alone merits much feasting and happiness."

Keelie dropped Knot and went over to the elf, who stared down at her. She

glared back, then ignored him as he'd ignored Elia.

"Come on Elia, I'll help you get in the wagon."

Elia lifted an eyebrow. "Why do you think I need your help?" She walked stiffly to the wagon, grabbed the rope, and struggled to get in.

Keelie wanted to give her a swift kick in the backside to help her up, but just watched as she wriggled and flailed her way into the wagon bed, finally accepting Sean's help.

Keelie looked down at Knot. "So do you need help getting in, or are you just going to snarl at me too?"

Knot grinned, showing impressive kitty fangs, then leaped lightly into the wagon. Judging from the distance between the ground and the wagon bed, he must have flown part of the way. Yet nothing surprised her about Knot. Keelie sighed and grabbed the rope and Sean's extended hand. He pulled her up easily, then motioned her to sit on a suitcase as the others had done.

The wagon lurched forward.

"This is fun," Keelie said brightly. "We're starting off with a hayride."

Silence from the elves shut her up. See if she would try to lighten the mood again—if they all wanted to sulk, great. Keelie could tell that this was going to be the worst trip ever. Elia was watching her, but turned her face when Keelie looked at her.

Keelie examined the passing forest. A huge beetle buzzed past, then swooped around and landed on the suitcase beside her. Knot looked at it curiously, but the others didn't seem to notice it. The beetle stood on its hind legs and nodded its insect head at Keelie, its feelers waving around. Keelie nodded back. The *feithid daoine* were secretive and although she'd seen them frequently, she'd only interacted with them once, when they'd attacked her at the High Mountain Renaissance Faire. She'd been a little leery of them ever since, but they'd left her alone.

This *feithid daoine* pointed up with one pincer-ended leg. Keelie looked up and was amazed to see that *bhata* were following them, leaping from branch to branch overhead. The forest was filled with them. *Whoa.*

"We're almost there." Elia's voice interrupted her. "I must say again that I hope you don't feel slighted, Keelie. As a daughter of the soil and, of course,

because of this”—she smiled down at her bulging baby belly—“I’ll be welcomed with utmost respect and joy.” She smiled at Keelie. “You are a tree shepherdess, of course, so you are due respect as well, but there’s that unfortunate, um ...” She touched her pointed ear and glanced at Miszrial, as if pointing out that one of Keelie’s ears was rounded.

Keelie rolled her eyes. “Fine. I get it. You’re the returning princess. I’m just the mongrel come to help out.”

Miszrial’s eyes widened.

“Don’t you guys watch movies?” Keelie asked. “It’s the mongrel who always wins in the end.”

“We destroy mongrels,” Miszrial said seriously. “Among our animals.”

Cold crept up Keelie’s spine. She knew she wasn’t being threatened, but the fact that Miszrial had said it so coolly meant that these elves were even less compassionate than the ones back home. She couldn’t wait to get back to the Dread Forest. This place was seriously creepy.

A deer leaped onto the road, startling the horses, which jolted the wagon. As everyone grabbed the sides to keep from falling over, the driver struggled to regain control of the horses.

The deer didn’t run away. He kept pace with the wagon, close enough that Keelie saw her reflection in his liquid brown eyes. His antler-heavy head bobbed with each leap.

Who are you?

The voice went through her head and into her bones, deep and rich like thick chocolate, and strangely familiar. She couldn’t move; her hand was frozen on the splintery side of the wooden wagon (pine, from the other side of this mountain). *Who are you?* she answered.

Herne. Herne. Herne. Herne. The voice echoed in her head. The deer sprinted to the edge of the road, then leaped into the forest and disappeared.

Herne. She knew that name. In mythology class she’d learned that Herne the Hunter was the Celtic god of the forest, the Master of the Wild Hunt.

The Green Man.

You've Just Finished your Free Sample

Enjoyed the preview?

Buy: <http://www.ebooks2go.com>