

Fairy Circles: A
Short Life

By Jennifer Campbell

CHAPTER 1

The light was slowly disappearing as sunset approached. Liam stood in the open doorway of his hut. He took a deep breath. The smell of wood smoke carried on the cool breeze. It rustled the leaves and blew his raven-black hair. Closing his eyes, he sighed.

Tonight's the night.

“Liam! Don’t forget your dinner!” his mother called after him. Liam turned around and took the sack from the stout woman, kissing her on the cheek.

“Thank you, mother. You’re the best,” he said, walking through the door.

“Be careful! Stay alert and watch out for elves!” she said.

Finally! It's my turn to keep watch and protect my village!

He had dreamed of this moment ever since he was a child. It may have seemed like a mundane task for most, but he looked forward to the patrols, especially of what he might encounter while on them. Many of the more interesting creatures came out during the night.

Maybe I'll see some dancing lights like father told me about! I could even see a rare owlbear or fight off some elves!

Liam shook his head.

“Like anything like that would happen to boring old me,”

Liam whispered to himself.

He soon made his way to the edge of the village.

“Liam!” A figure came from the west. It was a tall man, a little taller than Liam. He had gray hair speckled with black and his eyes were the same piercing blue as that of Liam’s.

“Father!” Liam said as they embraced.

“Are you ready for your first watch, kid?” his father asked, ruffling Liam’s hair.

“Yes, of course, Father.” Liam pulled away from his father’s grasp and began to flatten it down.

“Well, it looks like it’s going to be a quiet night. The moon is full, so there will be a lot of light. You should be able to see anything that approaches,” his father said.

His father took him by the shoulders and said, “Good luck, and don’t go wandering off too far from the village.”

“I’ll see you and Mother in the morning,” Liam promised. He embraced his father again and headed towards the beginning of the forest.

Liam came to a large stump and sat down. He started by scouting out the perimeter, constantly scanning and writing in his logbook. At every noise, he would jump, sword at the ready, only to realize it was a squirrel. The more time moved along, the more tired he became. He had given up doing the

logbook and had started to doodle in the page margins. He soon grew tired of that, as well. Looking up at the sky, he saw that the moon had reached its peak.

Midnight.

He stood and began to walk deeper into the forest. Liam wanted something to happen, to hear or see *something*. He didn't want to come home without a cool story to tell.

Maybe if I come home with an interesting story, I'll be able to fit in with the boys my age. They had always treated him like an outcast because of his interests. He liked to draw and tell stories. They liked to play with their swords and rough house. If I could tell a story where I fought off something that was going to attack the village, then I could be the hero for a while.

Liam did not pay attention to how long or far he had gone into the forest. His eyes were getting heavier by the minute. Lifting his feet to move forward was beginning to become a chore.

Looking up for the moon, Liam could not see it. It had gone past the treetops. It must have been close to early morning.

I should have just a couple more hours left of my watch.

Maybe I can get a few minutes of sleep in before I head back.

Looking around, he spotted a small clearing with a large stone, and next to it, a group of small fluorescent purple mushrooms.

He put his sword and belongings next to the rock. The tiny mushrooms formed a curious circular pattern in the grass, but Liam thought nothing of it as he set his head in the middle of the formation and fell into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER 2

Sunlight's gentle rays fell onto Liam. The light pierced through his eyelids and caused him to open them. The sun shone through the treetops overhead. He shot up from his place on the ground.

"It's noon! Father is going to kill me when he finds out I fell asleep!" he said.

It was not the matter of if, but *when* his father found out.

Brushing himself off, he realized something: the grass was as tall as he was.

"What is going on?!" he yelled.

"Sword," Liam said, breathing slowly in and out to calm himself. "I need to find my sword."

Liam remembered placing his sword on his right side by a large rock. He started to walk in the direction of where he last laid it down. It was a good half mile before he stumbled upon

it. It was gigantic! He walked the length of the sword and determined it was ten times his height. He tried to wrap his arms around the hilt. Try as he might, he could not put his arms around it, let alone try to wield it. Never had he felt so defenseless in his life.

I need get my bearings and find out what was going on.

Looking at the rock that was nearby, he realized the task would be a daunting one. The rock was now the size of a mountain! He sighed, searching the rock for handholds as he began to climb.

The sun beat down, rays scorching everything they touched.

The temperature of the rock itself was almost unbearable.

Liam dripped with sweat, causing him to lose his grip occasionally. After nearly three hours of climbing, he was at the top.

Liam laid down, spreading himself across the rock. Everything hurt. His hands burned from the heat of the rock. He took

some slow and deep breaths, trying to catch his breath. He closed his eyes, thinking of what to do next.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Liam sat up and looked around. What he saw made his heart stop. There, walking towards him, was a seventy-foot giant. Even worse than that, it was an elf. The elf's eyes scanned the surrounding area. His eyes soon fell upon Liam. Their eyes met and the elf's eyes widened with excitement. Liam knew the elf would soon be upon him.

Liam quickly looked for some sort of escape. He noticed a small crack in the rock. The elf followed Liam's gaze and saw it too. He reached for Liam, mischief in his eyes. Exhausted, Liam ran to the crack, pushing his body to its limit. He was almost there; it was only a short distance to the crack. He decided to use his last bit of energy to try to slide inside. Falling onto his knees, he began to slide. He came to a sudden stop. The collar of his shirt was caught. He felt himself rise

higher and higher. Liam was now eye to eye with the elf and he stared at the elf's deep green eyes, completely lost for words.

"Well, what do we have here?" the elf said, examining Liam.

"You're not a pixie or a fairy; no wings. Too small to be a gnome. What a strange creature you are!" he said mirthfully.

"What is your name?"

Liam kept his mouth shut. The elf may have caught Liam, but that didn't mean he would give the elf his name.

"A shy little creature, aren't you? Don't worry, I won't bite," he said, chomping his teeth together. He laughed at his own joke.

"You won't, but I will!" Liam said, biting down hard onto the elf's finger.

"Ouch!" he said, dropping Liam.

As Liam fell through the air, he thought, *Maybe I didn't think this through.*

He prepared for impact. Instead, he landed on something soft. It was the elf's hand. Somehow, he was quick enough to catch Liam before he hit the ground. Liam felt a sharp blow to his head as the elf flicked him with his finger.

"Ouch!" Liam said.

"It speaks!" the elf said.

"What was that for?" Liam said, rubbing the back of his head.

"That was for doing something stupid," he said, sitting down by the rock. "Now, let's try this again. My name is Elros.

What is yours?"

"Liam," Liam mumbled.

"Well, it's nice to meet you, Liam." Elros said, extending his finger towards Liam.

Liam shook it hesitantly and saw where there should have been a bite mark. It hadn't even broken the skin.

"So, Liam, what exactly are you?" Elros asked.

"I am a man!" Liam said, a little flustered.

“Ok! I’ve just never seen a man of your... stature.” he said.

“I wasn’t always this size!” Liam exclaimed.

“Oh? Did anything strange happen lately?”

“No! Well... I don’t think so.”

Liam racked his brain to think of anything out of the ordinary happened to him lately.

“I just fell asleep last night, and in the morning, I was like this!” Liam said, exasperated, coming to no conclusion.

“Where exactly did you lie down to sleep?” Elros asked.

“Right there where all the mushrooms are,” Liam said, pointing down.

“What mushrooms?” Elros said, confused.

Liam looked over the edge of Elros’ hand and sure enough, the mushrooms were gone.

Seeing Liam’s confusion, Elros asked, “Was there anything strange about the mushrooms? Like their colors or growing patterns?”

“Yeah, now that you mention it, they were a bright purple and grew in a strange pattern.”

“It didn’t happen to be in a circle, did it?” Elros asked.

“Yeah, why?” Liam asked.

Elros threw his head back in laughter.

“The fairies tricked you!” he laughed.

“What? Fairies?” Liam said.

“You, my friend, have been the unlucky victim of a fairy circle.” Elros laughed.

“What do you mean? What are fairy circles?” Liam asked.

“I forgot that your people have forgotten basic magic,” Elros said. “A fairy circle is where fairies come to dance and play. You must have been sleeping on their stage.”

“So, they just decided to shrink me?!” Liam said angrily.

“A harmless prank, I’m sure. Be glad they were lenient of your interruption to their merriment. The punishment could

have been much more deadly,” Elros said with a grim tone in his voice.

“Well, thanks for the magic lessons. I’ll be going now,” Liam said, looking for a safe way down.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Elros asked, chuckling.

“Home,” Liam said, trying not to reveal too much more to the elf.

“Oh, so you’ll be needing your sword,” Elros said, picking up Liam’s sword. He looked at it admiringly. “If anything good can be said about men, you are fine artisans.”

He held it out towards Liam. Liam could see Elros’ point.

How would he defend himself? Besides, it would take him ages to get to the village. What would the others do if they saw him like this? They would squish him for sure! Liam sat down grumpily and looked up at Elros.

“Well, what do you think I should do? Go with you?” he said jokingly.

“I thought you’d never ask! Of course, I’ll help you. Father’s sure to know a thing or two about fairy circles.” Elros grinned.

“That’s not what I mea-” Liam was interrupted as Elros unceremoniously dumped him into his shirt pocket. The landing was soft, and Liam felt Elros rise. He peeked his head over the top of the pocket.

Looking up at Elros, he asked, “Where are you taking me?”

“To my home, in the city of Elymanoris,” Elros answered as he began to walk.

“An elf city!” Liam exclaimed.

“Of course. Where do you think I live? In a tree?” Elros snickered.

With that, Liam grew silent.

What would they do with me there? Magical experiments?

Torture?

He had promised his parents he’d be back in the morning.

They were probably worried sick. But there was no way he

could explain to his parents what had happened. Exhaustion hit Liam's body like a pile of bricks. His hands burned, his arms and legs were sore. He could barely keep his eyes open. Laying down in the bottom of the elf's pocket, he fell asleep to the steady beat of Elros' heart.

CHAPTER 3

“Time to wake up, little Liam!” Elros said as he jostled Liam awake.

So, it wasn't a horrible dream.

“There's our little Liam!” Elros said, peeking from the top of the pocket. “How are we feeling this morning?”

Liam groaned in answer.

“Oh, come now, you must be feeling better by now!” he said cheerfully. “You've been asleep for nearly three days.”

“Three days!” Liam said in disbelief.

“Yes,” Elros said, pulling Liam out of his pocket and setting him on his knee. “Our little Liam was quite tired after his ordeal.”

“Don't call me little Liam!” Liam said angrily.

“Someone woke up in a foul mood today,” Elros teased.

“Maybe you’d feel better if you had something to eat.”

Elros offered Liam a small quail's egg on top of a rock. It smelled divine; the egg was cooked to perfection.

Liam stopped himself from diving face first into the egg. He looked at the bright yellow yolk and saw some small black specks on it. He looked up at Elros, who simply smiled back at him.

The elf has put something on it. Probably poison or some strange herb. That would be so like an elf to do something like that.

Liam set down the rock and pushed it away.

“Not hungry?” Elros said. He shrugged and picked up the egg, swallowing it.

Liam’s stomach growled in protest, and he instantly regretted refusing the egg. But elves were not to be trusted. Ever since he was little, he was told stories of the evil elves. Elves that

delighted in mayhem and mischief. They would use their magic to torture and trick men into getting whatever they wanted. They'd sooner stab you in the back than be your "friend." Liam was at an even bigger disadvantage. This elf also had the size advantage. However, that wouldn't stop Liam. He would never trust this elf! Somehow, he had to escape and find help.

"Alright, time to go," Elros said as he picked up Liam, placing him on his shoulder.

Kicking some dirt over the small fire, he extinguished it. Elros slung his bag over his other shoulder and began walking. Liam noticed something was missing.

"Why don't you have my sword? Not good enough for you?" Liam accused.

"No, no! Anyone would be fortunate to be able to wield such an exquisite blade," Elros said. "There's a couple reasons why I didn't take your sword."

“First, I prefer bows,” Elros explained, holding up a long wooden bow that Liam had failed to see before. “Second, if an elf was caught wielding a man’s sword, there would be questions of what the elf did to said man to get said sword. For no man would willingly give such a fine sword to an elf.”

That’s true. No man would be foolish enough to equip an elf in such a way.

“I did, however, pick up your sketchbook,” he said, rifling through his satchel. He pulled out a small, worn leather book. At first, Liam was glad to see the familiar tome, but then he realized what its appearance meant.

“My book?” he choked. “Does that mean...?”

Elros flipped open the book. “Your drawings are magnificent! I’ve never seen man’s artwork before, but your drawings could even rival some of our Elven artists!” Elros said, only stopping when he saw Liam’s face.

Liam had gone white, he couldn't breathe. No one was supposed to find this. He had hidden his talent for years, and now this elf had the gall to look at it.

“Did I do something wrong?” Elros asked innocently.

“Close the book,” Liam seethed.

“What?” Elros said.

“CLOSE THE BOOK!” Liam shouted.

Elros quickly closed the book as commanded.

“Was this a special book? Was it to be a secret or something?” he asked. “If so, I am exceedingly sorry. I shall not look any further without your permission.” He quickly put the book back into his satchel.

CHAPTER 4

It took a good part of the afternoon until Liam decided to speak with Elros again.

“So, what are you going to do with me when we get to your city?” Liam asked as he tried standing on Elros’ shoulder.

Liam imagined himself jumping through fiery hoops, while the Elven children laughed and clapped every time he performed a trick.

“Frankly, I don’t know,” Elros said. “I suppose I can talk to my father about the situation.”

Liam did not like the sound of being around more elves. He decided that he would escape tonight. As they walked in silence, Liam was busy plotting his escape.

“So, what is on your mind?” Elros asked. “Not planning on running away, are you?”

Liam jumped and then shook his head.

How did he know that? Could elves read minds, too? Quick, think of something and see.

Liam looked for something to think about. He noticed Elros' long, flowing hair.

You need a haircut!

Elros swept his hair over his ear. Liam jumped in surprise.

Did he hear me? No, his hair was just in his eyes.

“You sure are a jumpy little thing, aren't you?” Elros laughed.

“Are you always like this?”

“No! I'm just not used to being this small!” Liam said quickly.

“Oh, so you're braver than you look? Tell us, Oh Fearless One, of your many brave deeds.” Elros mocked.

Liam did not like this teasing. He sat down, folding his arms, and faced away from Elros.

“Oh, come on! Tell us a story as I walk,” Elros said seriously.

Liam remained silent and folded his arms harder.

He would not be pestered into telling this elf anything.

“Please?” Elros asked. “Pretty please? Pleeese?” he said, holding the word out for an annoyingly long time while moving his face closer to Liam.

“Ok, ok!” Liam said, pushing Elros’ face away from him. “It was on a day like this. The rumor around town was of a monstrous wolf. It would steal sheep and cattle in broad daylight. Nobody had seen the attacks, but they could see the aftermath. Everything was eaten except for the wool and horns”.

“All the men and boys wanted to catch a glimpse of the creature, myself being one of them. So, I decided that I would not leave the flock alone. I stood watch over the sheep, even longer than the shepherds. I watched them all day and night, but nothing happened.”

“It was the beginning of the afternoon, and the sun shone brightly. I was about to retire. When suddenly, a sheep was

snatched, right before my eyes. Wool was scattered around where the sheep stood. Then another disappeared, and another. It had downed five sheep before I saw it.”

“Standing before me was a wolf the size of a horse! Its gray fur hung desperately on its emaciated body. The eyes glowed an eerie red, and the teeth were as big as daggers. It stared at me, teeth dripping with fresh sheep’s blood.”

Elros was completely enthralled with the story. Liam smiled and continued.

“I reached for my sword. It lunged, I swung and buried it deep in its chest. Ice cold blood covered my hands as it slumped over. I watched its eyes dim and its breathing become shallow. The beast looked at me with a look of relief as it died. The body was then reduced to ash and was blown away, leaving nothing of the monstrous beast.”

“Wow. Did you really slay a Fenris?” Elros asked after making sure Liam was finished with the story.

“A what?” Liam said, confused.

“A Fenris,” Elros repeated. “The undead wolf you just described.”

“Of course not!” Liam laughed. “You told me to tell you a story, so I did.”

“You sure fooled me,” Elros sighed. “I wanted you to tell me a TRUE story.”

“About what?” Liam said.

“About you, your life,” Elros replied.

“Why? My life is so boring,” Liam said, kicking a leaf that had fallen on Elros’ shoulder.

“That’s not true. You’ve probably experienced things I never have,” Elros said.

“Like what?” Liam said.

“Sheep,” Elros replied.

“What!?” Liam said, surprised.

“You heard me. Sheep,” Elros said. “I have never seen or touched a sheep.”

“How do you know there are sheep?” Liam said slyly.

“I’ve read books!” Elros said, adjusting his pack, causing Liam to have to grab hold of Elros’ hair to steady himself.

“Ok, so you know that sheep exist. But didn’t you ever wonder where your clothes came from before now?” Liam said, deciding to sit down.

“I know where my clothes come from. Worms,” Elros said matter-of-factly.

“Worms!?” Liam said in disgust.

“Silkworms, to be exact,” Elros said. “They are worms that produce a substance like that of a spider’s silk. We gather that silk and weave it into clothes.”

Liam had noticed something different about Elros’ clothes while in his pocket. It was smoother and slicker compared to his clothing.

“Now your life sounds interesting!” Liam said.

“Tell me about your life and I’ll tell you about mine. True stories only,” Elros suggested.

“Deal.” Liam agreed.

CHAPTER 5

It was close to lunchtime when they spotted a bush loaded with bright red berries. The berries were big and juicy. Elros picked a few and offered some to Liam. Liam looked at the berries suspiciously.

Elros sighed. “I really thought we had a bonding moment back there.”

He took one of the berries and popped it in his mouth. He chewed it slowly, savored it, and then swallowed it.

“See? Not poisonous,” Elros said, offering the berries once again.

Liam debated whether to eat the berries.

What was that poem go about how to tell if berries were safe to eat again? White is alright, Blue is good for you, Red is...

Darn it! Why hadn't he paid attention?

His stomach growled loudly, making up his mind. He took one of the bright red berries that was the size of his head and took a small bite. It tasted delicious! It was tart like a raspberry and as sweet as a strawberry.

Enthusiastically, he took a bigger bite. Juices dripped down the front of his shirt. Elros smiled and picked another handful. After three berries, Liam was stuffed.

As they continued to eat the berries, a noise came from inside the bush. Elros quickly set Liam on top of his head, and with the same motion, drew his bow.

“What is it?” Liam asked.

“Dinner, if we’re lucky,” Elros said, notching an arrow and pulling the string back to his cheek.

He let loose the arrow. It flew with deadly accuracy and struck a small rabbit in its chest. Elros walked over and retrieved the rabbit.

“Should make a decent meal,” he said. “Let’s stop and make camp so I can properly butcher it.”

As the daylight began to disappear, Elros had a fire going with the rabbit cooking on a spit. The smell of roasting meat was making Liam salivate. He watched as Elros took a small bag out of his pack. He sprinkled some of the contents onto the meat. Elros saw Liam eyeing the bag with suspicion.

“Herbs,” he said, sprinkling some on his tongue and swallowing.

“I wish you would trust me. I’m not going to hurt you or anything like that. I would like to, if you’ll let me, be your friend,” Elros said, turning the rabbit on the spit.

Yeah, right. Me become friends with an elf? Like that would ever happen.

Soon, the meat was cooked. Liam received his portion with gusto. It had been cooked to perfection. The meat tasted like it had been roasting for hours. It was so tender it practically fell

off the bone. After he had finished, Liam stared into the fire. It had only been a few days ago, but he missed his parents dearly.

What would become of me? Will I ever see my parents again?

Will I ever be normal again?

These thoughts raced through Liam's mind as the fire crackled and popped.

Elros laid down on his side, holding his head up and leaning on one elbow. Liam sat on the ground within arm's reach.

“What are you thinking about?” Elros asked.

“Sheep,” Liam said wryly.

“No, really. What are you thinking of?”

“Nothing.”

Liam did not like this urge to share his feelings. He had to remind himself that Elros was the enemy. He was an elf. This must be his way of tricking Liam into telling him village secrets. Elves were not to be trusted.

Shaking his head clear of thoughts, he said, “I’m ready for bed.”

Elros hesitated for a moment, as if he wanted to say something, but when Liam said nothing else, he obliged. He sat up and picked Liam up, depositing him in his pocket. Liam laid still in the pocket and waited. It took forever for Elros to decide to go to sleep. Liam felt Elros lay down and his breathing slow before he dared to peek his head out. Sure enough, Elros appeared to be in a deep sleep.

Liam stood on the edge of the pocket. He looked down, spotting one of Elros’ shirt buttons. It was only a few feet down, but the timing had to be precise, otherwise he would fall the whole distance, causing himself serious injuries. Liam took a deep breath and jumped. He caught hold of the button, finding it quite slippery. His hands slid a bit, but Liam tightened his grip to stop his momentum.

He glanced up towards Elros. His eyes were still closed.

Dropping the rest of the way down, he lost his footing and fell on his backside. Liam thought he could hear a stifled snicker.

Must be the wind.

Liam got to his feet. He brushed himself off, looking at Elros.

Good, still sleeping.

Slowly, he began to walk away. He had only walked away a small distance before he felt a sharp blow to the back of his head. Grabbing his head, he looked behind to see what had hit him. Liam saw nothing. Elros was still in the same sleeping position, eyes still closed.

Liam heard the small snicker again, but this time he saw the corner of Elros' mouth turn upwards in a smirk. He had been caught! Liam tried to make a run for it, but soon felt the familiar sensation of being lifted into the air. Liam felt another sharp blow to his head.

“And where do you think you’re going?” Elros said.

“Away from you!” Liam said.

“Come now. Have I not been a good host to you? What have I done to offend you so?” Elros said.

“You’re an elf!” Liam shouted in exasperation.

“Yes, and?”

“And... elves are not to be trusted!” Liam recited.

“Who told you that?” Elros questioned.

“My father!” Liam said.

“And who told him that?”

“His father.”

“And him?”

“His father.”

“So, have any of your ancestors had any direct dealings with elves?” Elros asked.

“Of course not! My family would never associate with elves!”
Liam said.

“Then, how could they have known whether they could trust elves or not?” Elros said.

Liam hung there with his mouth agape, unable to answer.

“I’ll let you think about that for a little while,” Elros said, placing Liam back into his pocket.

Liam fell asleep with his head hurting in more ways than one.

A few days had passed. A couple of stories were told and a few more escapes had been foiled. One night, during an escape attempt, Liam had gotten farther than he had ever gotten before. Elros must have been in a deep sleep. Liam walked carefully, as if not to disturb Elros. Looking back to see if Elros was still sleeping, Liam forgot to watch his foot placement.

He stepped on a small branch, snapping it. It did not wake Elros, but it did get the attention of something in the trees. Two yellow eyes slowly opened at the sound.

A huge owl had spotted him. Liam watched as the bird took to the sky. The bird's shadow was outlined by the full moon. He stood there, frozen with fear. The owl screeched and dove towards Liam. At the sound of the owl, Elros' eyes shot open, but it was too late. Liam felt the taloned feet close around him. They ascended above the trees. The landscape shrunk as they flew higher and higher. Liam saw Elros, out of the corner of his eye, shoot an arrow up towards the owl. It must have hit the bird, because the next thing Liam knew, he was falling. Liam screamed for a long time, but he just kept falling. Soon, Liam couldn't scream any longer.

This was it.

Closing his eyes, Liam prepared for the inevitable. He wondered how it would feel to be squished. Would it be an instant pain, or would it linger? Liam didn't have much time to ponder that, for the next thing he knew the wind was knocked out of him. He had been stopped by something warm

and soft. Moonlight hit Liam's face as Elros opened his hand.

He had caught Liam before he had hit the ground.

“Are you ok? Are you hurt?” Elros asked, looking over Liam.

Liam just sat there and shook uncontrollably. After that, the escape attempts stopped.

CHAPTER 6

One day, as they were walking along, Liam asked, “Is it true that elves can do magic?”

“You mean like this?” Elros said, holding a leaf between his fingers. For a moment, nothing seemed to be happening, and then a flame slowly consumed the leaf. Liam watched in awe. Elros looked confused.

“You mean you can’t?”

Liam shook his head.

“Everyone can do magic,” Elros said as he held out his hand, palm facing up. Water began to form in his hand.

Rolling dew drops gathered, creating a small ball of water.

“How?” Liam said, clapping in excitement.

“Well,” he said, closing his hand, causing the water to dissipate. “Everyone has a certain amount of magic within themselves. Elves have a decent amount.”

“Who has the most?” Liam asked.

Elros shrugged, “Don’t know, probably wizards or unicorns.”

Elros held out his hand, fingers spread out. Little purple bolts of lightning danced between them.

“Can you teach me how to use magic?” Liam said excitedly.

“I don’t see a reason why not,” Elros said as the lightning disappeared with a loud crackle.

“We will begin with fire,” Elros said, stooping down and grabbing a dry leaf. “Fire is one of the easiest elements to call upon, but the hardest to control. So, we’ll start off small. Hold this leaf and in your mind's eye, imagine it to catch on fire. It should be simple with the leaf starting off dry.”

Liam didn't know what Elros meant by his "mind's eye", but he pictured the leaf on fire. The leaf began to smoke and a small ember caught on the edge of the leaf.

"Good! That was a lot more than I expected," Elros said.

"Now try this."

He poured a little pool of water from his waterskin into his hand. Concentrating on it, Elros caused the middle of the pool of water to ripple, like someone had thrown a stone in the middle. As soon as the water calmed, Elros urged Liam to try. The water wavered a bit. It didn't seem like a lot to Liam, but Elros was pleased.

As they continued to walk, Elros would show Liam something and he would try to copy it, practicing well into the night.

Both exhausted from the mental exercise, they rested in front of the fire. They shared a small cake from Elros' pack.

“Why haven’t you used any magic before on this trip? Surely it would have been easier to light fires with magic rather than a tinderbox,” Liam said, his mouth full of cake.

“Like I mentioned before, I have a limited amount of magical energy. Father taught me to always keep some in reserve.”

“What happens if you-”

Elros held up his hand, stopping Liam. He rose to his feet and listened intently.

“I have been foolish today,” he said, grabbing his bow and loading it.

“Liam, I need you to hide,” he whispered, aiming his arrow into the darkness.

Liam started to protest but was interrupted by Elros saying, “Now! Liam!”

No sooner than he had hidden behind a rock, the men appeared. Elros let loose some arrows, killing two instantly, but that wasn’t enough to stop them. Elros was quickly

captured and bound. Two of the men held Elros in front of the third, who seemed to be the leader. The man was short and stocky, with a shaved head and a black beard that came to a point.

“Now, what do we have here?” the man said, walking up to Elros. He grabbed Elros’ hair and pulled his head back in order to see his face. The moment he spotted Elros’ ears, he spat in Elros’ face.

“A filthy elf! This is my forest, elf, and in order to pass, you need to pay the toll.” He chuckled. “Search him, boys!”

The two thugs fought over the bag, causing it to rip, spilling the contents all over the ground. They quickly devoured the cakes and loaves of bread. Finding the bag of herbs, one sniffed it and gagged. He then threw it into the fire.

“Look here, boss!” a thug with one eye said, holding Liam’s sketchbook. “A pretty picture book!”

Elros tried to rise as the thug began to tear out the pages.

“Hold on there, elf!” the boss said, shoving Elros back to his knees. “Where’s the one you were talking to go? He hasn’t paid his toll yet.”

Elros remained silent. The man spat in his face again and threw him to the ground. Elros’ head barely missed the rock Liam was hiding behind. A trickle of blood ran down his forehead. Liam couldn’t run away.

Elros saved my life with the owl. Now, it’s like I owe him. But how could I help?

He looked at Elros’ bindings.

Maybe if I can find a sharp rock, I can cut the rope.

Finding a sharp rock, Liam snuck behind Elros and began to cut the rope. No sooner did he start, he felt himself being picked up.

“What’s this, then?” the man said, holding Liam up to his face.

Liam thought this man was ugly from a distance, but now that he was up close, he was a new level of ugly. His fat face had pox marks all over it. His greasy beard clung to his face with sweat and his breath smelled of rotting meat. Liam had to think fast.

“Oh, good sir, I thank thee for coming and saving me from my captor!” Liam said, pointing to Elros.

Everyone looked at Liam with confusion. Liam winked at Elros and continued.

“Good sir, may I know the name of my savior?”

“Bruno,” he said gruffly.

“What is it, boss?” the brute with one eye asked.

“I am a man like unto yourselves.”

“How come you’re so small?” the other thug said.

“An astute observation, my good man. The elf has used his dark magic to shrink me so he could keep me prisoner. Have you found his magic powder?”

“Yes, we threw it into the fire.” Bruno said.

“Good, good. Now he can’t teleport away,” Liam said. “What about his soul book?”

“Soul book?” asked Bruno.

“A book filled with pictures. You didn’t stare at it for too long, I hope.”

They all looked at the one-eyed thug.

“You are most fortunate, my good fellow. If you had stared too long, you would have become one of its residents. Trapped within its pages,” Liam said.

“Now, you should be fine as long as you didn’t eat any of its cakes.” Liam paused, waiting for the words to sink in.

The thugs looked at each other in terror.

“Why? What’s wrong with the food?” the one-eyed thug asked.

“Elf food is only made for elf consumption! If you ate any of the food, the effects could be dire!” Liam said with concern on his face.

Bruno smacked his thugs on the backs of their heads.

“What will happen to my men!? What can we do to stop it!?”

Bruno demanded.

“They’ll most likely become tiny like me and then they’ll be next.”

“Next for what?” Bruno asked.

Liam glanced over at Elros, who was now on his feet. Elros nodded and Liam answered, “For dinner!”

Elros slammed himself against Bruno, causing him to fall into the other thugs, releasing Liam into the air. He began to fall once again. Elros positioned himself under Liam and caught him in the only way he could, in his mouth. It was dark and moist as he landed on something soft. Elros’ tongue pushed Liam forward and away from Elros’ throat. Liam could hear

the muffled screams from inside. He chuckled to himself as he felt Elros begin to run.

Liam was tossed back and forth in Elros' mouth. He tried to hold on to something, but everything was too slippery. They ran for a good five minutes before Elros spat Liam out.

"What took you so long?" Liam said, wiping the saliva off himself the best he could.

"I wanted to hear more about these evil elves for myself," Elros said. "It's not every day you hear about the tricks of their trades."

"I was grasping at straws, really," Liam said.

"I loved the magic powder and the magic cake bits. But the soul book was my favorite," Elros said. His expression then darkened. "I'm sorry about your sketchbook."

"It's okay, I shouldn't have had it anyway."

"What do you mean?" Elros asked in confusion.

“I mean, a real man isn't supposed to be into things like that,”

Liam said. “I need to be free, to be more focused on manlier things like sword play, hunting, iron work and stuff like that.”

Elros sighed. “Let me ask you a question, Liam. Does drawing make you happy?”

“Yes,” Liam replied.

“If it’s something you like, and it doesn’t hurt others, then do it. I believe every man and elf should be free to do what they love.”

Liam thought about that, being free to do what one loved.

“Now, speaking of being free, can you please untie me?” Elros said.

CHAPTER 7

Too excited to sleep, Liam and Elros spent most of the night asking and answering questions.

“How was it that every time I tried to escape, you were able to catch me? I always checked to see if you were asleep and I hardly made any noise. What gave me away?” Liam asked.

“I guess you wouldn't know this, but elves don't sleep like men do.” Elros chuckled. “We go into a trance. We are aware of everything around us, even a little escapee.”

“But not owls,” teased Liam.

“Ouch, your words wound me, sir,” Elros said dramatically.

“But you're right, I think that time I was asleep on the job.”

Liam yawned loudly.

“I think it's time for you to get some sleep,” Elros said, slipping Liam into his pocket.

“Yeah, and you can do your trance thing,” Liam said.

The following morning, they continued their journey.

Elros announced, “We are only about thirty minutes away from my house. We should make it there well before lunchtime.”

Liam was both delighted and terrified of seeing his first elf family.

What would they be like? What would they think of him? And would they be able to help him?

They soon came within sight of Elros' house. It was a simple cottage, except for the sparkling exterior. As they drew closer, Liam could see several crystals hanging from every ledge. As the breeze blew, the crystals clicked together, making beautiful music. The breeze also carried the aroma of flowers of every kind that grew around the cottage. The smell was intoxicating. They stood in front of the door.

“Stay out of sight,” Elros said, pushing Liam's head down. “I need to prepare them before they meet you.”

Liam heard Elros take off his shoes, and they silently made their way across the room and up some stairs.

“Elros, is that you?” a woman's voice called out from another room. “Wash up and change your clothes. I don't want you tracking anything you picked up from outside.”

“Yes, mother!” Elros answered.

As Elros exited the cottage and closed the front door, Liam's head popped out of the pocket. Elros walked behind the cottage and entered a small white building, which was full of steam and very aromatic.

This must be the bathhouse.

Sure enough, he saw big tubs full of steaming water and some full of bubbles.

“You better wash up, too,” Elros said, placing Liam near a basin of water. “Mother would die of fright if she saw the state you're in.”

Liam looked down at his dust-encrusted, saliva-covered, berry-stained clothing and nodded. Elros left Liam behind a privacy curtain to bathe. Liam undressed and climbed into the basin. The water's temperature was perfect, not too hot and not too cold. He saw a large bar of soap by the basin and he scooped a large handful. He rubbed the soap all over his body, being careful not to miss a spot. The soap smelled of cherry blossoms. Feeling clean and refreshed, Liam rinsed the soap off his body. Climbing out of the basin and wrapping a large towel around him, Liam looked for his clothes... and could not find them anywhere.

I could have sworn I left them here, by the basin.

He heard Elros approach.

“Are you decent?” Elros said as he rounded the privacy curtain. He had bathed and was now wearing a fresh set of clothes. He held something behind his back.

“Where are my clothes?” Liam said accusingly.

“They are being washed as we speak,” Elros said. “In the meantime, you can wear these.”

He held out a doll dressed up in a prince's outfit.

Liam looked up at Elros and said, “No way!”

“It’s this or the princess's dress. Your choice,” Elros said, setting down the doll.

“Fine, but not a word out of you!” Liam said, practically ripping the clothes off the doll.

“Careful! That’s my sister's doll.” Elros said.

“That's my sister's doll,” Liam mocked.

Elros just smiled and left Liam to get dressed. The clothes were snug. The shirt had a big, fancy collar that prevented Liam from moving his head too much. The pants were poofy,

and the tights were uncomfortable. Elros came around the corner again and when he saw Liam, he stifled a laugh.

“Your majesty,” he said, bowing low.

“Shut up!” Liam said, throwing the crown at Elros.

Elros picked Liam up and put him in his pocket as they made their way back to the house. Liam could hear the door being open then closed.

“Elros! You’re back home early,” the woman's voice said. She must have embraced Elros, for the next thing he knew, Liam was squished between them.

“Did you find what you were looking for?”

“Not exactly,” Elros said. “Let's just say I met someone.”

“Who!? Who!? Is it anyone I would know?” she said.

“No, you wouldn't know them. But they very well might change my life forever,” Elros said.

“So, where are they? Will they be having lunch with us?” she asked.

“I’ll tell you more when Father arrives,” he said, sitting down.

Liam heard someone running down the stairs and yelling,

“Elros! Elros! You’re back!”

The voice sounded like a young girl.

A sister perhaps.

“Did you bring me anything?” she said.

“Well, I do have someone I would like you to meet,” Elros said. “But we have to wait for Father.”

She groaned and asked, “Can I have a clue?”

“Ok, you’ve never met anyone like them before,” Elros said.

“Is it a prince!?” she said excitedly.

“In a way,” Elros said.

Liam elbowed Elros as hard as he could, but he probably didn’t feel it. Smells of freshly baked bread and sweets filled the air. Liam was starving. His stomach growled loudly. Elros quickly muffled the sound by pressing his hand over Liam in his pocket.

“You must be starving,” Elros' mother said. “Have a sweet roll.”

The door opened and closed again.

“I am home!” said a man's voice.

“Sennin, look who's home!” she said.

“Ah, Elros!” Sennin said. “Couldn't stay away from your mother's cooking? Which, by the way, Nerissa, it smells delicious as ever.”

“Ada, dear, set the table, please. The venison is almost ready,” Nerissa said. “Sennin, Elros says that he has someone to introduce to us.”

“Well, bring them in!” he said.

“The thing is that they're already here,” Elros said.

“Where?” Nerissa said.

Liam felt himself being lifted out of Elros' pocket and being placed on the table. Nerissa shrieked with fright.

Liam covered his ears and fell onto the table.

“It's my dolly!” Ada said, reaching towards Liam.

Elros quickly picked him up and held him out of her reach.

“No, this is my friend, Liam. He is a man.”

“A man?” Sennin said, examining Liam. “A pixie, perhaps, but surely not a man.”

“It's true! I am a man,” Liam said.

“Liam, I believe, is an unfortunate victim of a fairy circle,” Elros explained.

Liam nodded in agreement.

“A fairy circle?” Sennin said. “I've heard of them causing trouble, but nothing like this.” He poked and prodded Liam to make sure he was real.

“Is it safe?” Nerissa said, still not sure of Liam.

“It should be, but we need to keep this to ourselves,” Sennin said.

“Do you think we can help him?” Elros asked.

“It will be difficult, but I think so,” Sennin said.

“Until then, he will be our guest.”

Liam smiled and said, “Thank you, sir.”

“I guess this is a good time to properly introduce ourselves.

This is my father, Sennin, and my mother, Nerissa.” Elros said, motioning towards them.

Liam bowed to them in greeting. A smile crept upon Nerissa's face when he did so.

“And I'm Ada!” Ada said.

“Hi, Ada, how old are you?” Liam asked. He expected the answer to be somewhere between six and seven.

“I'm only seven hundred years old. But my birthday is coming up very soon!” Ada replied.

“Seven hundred! That would make you?” Liam said, pointing at Elros.

“One thousand seven hundred,” Elros replied.

Liam's jaw dropped in amazement.

“Elves live longer than men,” Sennin explained. “We age slower and experience much more.”

“Lunch is getting cold,” Nerissa said.

“Yes, let's eat!” Sennin said.

CHAPTER 8

The smell from the meal was divine; the venison was cooked to perfection, as well as the stewed carrots and potatoes. Liam dug in as soon as he received his portion. The juice from the meat covered Liam. He was glad for the napkin he was wearing over his clothes.

Liam listened to Elros tell his family about the situation. He would speak up and add some things to the story occasionally, but otherwise, he let Elros tell it. When they were done with lunch and the story, they retired to Elros' room. Elros' room was like Liam's room, apart from a workbench. At the workbench were designs of different bows and arrows.

Liam was set on top of the workbench and Elros sat down. "How do you think they took the news?" Liam said.

“I think they took it rather well, all things considered,” Elros said.

“What now?” Liam said.

“Now, we wait and see what Father can come up with,” Elros said, grabbing a long branch that was leaning against the wall.

“Making another bow?” Liam asked, remembering how they had to leave Elros' bow behind. He nodded as he judged the piece of wood.

“Do you think I can make one?” Liam asked.

He hated how vulnerable he was and maybe a weapon would be just what he needed to help defend himself.

“Now, that would be a challenge!” Elros said. “Making a bow that size will be quite difficult. But with you to help craft it, we should be able to do it!”

Liam had never seen Elros this excited before.

“First off, we need to find a branch that is flexible enough,” Elros said.

With that, Elros put Liam in his pocket and began to head outside.

“What are you doing?” Ada said curiously.

“We are building a bow for Liam,” Elros said.

“Do you want to come with us? We can use all the help we can get.” Liam said.

Ada nodded and followed closely behind. It only took a few minutes to find the right branch. Taking it back to Elros' room, Elros showed Liam the first step.

“First, we need to remove some of the wood from the branch. We do that by shaving the belly side of the bow until it can bend,” Elros instructed.

Liam watched as Elros demonstrated it on his bow. Using a small, sharp rock, Liam began his work. It took them about two hours until they got it just right.

“Okay, now, we cut two notches on the ends of the bow,” Elros said.

After they did that, Elros instructed Liam on how to thread the bow.

“Tie a knot on one side of the bow and place it between your legs. Then, bend the bow back using your thighs.”

Liam did as he was told and tied the other end of his bow.

Looking at his finished bow, Liam was filled with pride. This had been the first bow he had ever made.

Elros looked at it and said, “Couldn't have done it better myself.”

Liam knew that Elros was being kind. Elros' bow was far superior to his.

“Now, how are you at shooting?” Elros asked.

“I would say I'm a fair shooter,” Liam lied, leaving out the fact that this was his third time shooting a bow.

“Good, let's go over the basics, just to be sure,” Elros said with a glint in his eyes.

Elros quickly made a makeshift archery target. He stood to the side of the target.

“Let's see what your baseline is. I want you to shoot three arrows.”

Liam took his first arrow, which was nothing more than a pine needle, and aimed. The arrow hit the outside of the target. The next arrow landed on the other side of the target. The last arrow flew and hit the middle of Elros' hand that he was using to lean up against the tree.

“Ouch!” Elros said as he shook his hand.

Ada, who was watching, began to giggle.

“That was partly my fault,” Elros said. “I should have been standing behind the shooter.”

“Sorry, I guess it's been a while since I shot a bow,” Liam said sheepishly.

“We'll start your training tomorrow,” Elros said, plucking out the small arrow from his hand.

They headed back home for the evening. Nerissa and the aroma of dinner welcomed them.

“Good evening, everyone! I hope you are hungry.”

The smell of pumpkin stew filled the air. They began to set the table when Sennin walked in.

“Good news! We have a room reserved at the library!” Sennin said excitedly.

“That's wonderful! It's extremely hard to get a room reserved at the library. Looks like your archery lessons will have to wait,” Elros said.

“So, what have you three been up to?” Sennin asked.

They sat down to eat and retold the day's events. Everyone laughed when they heard of Liam shooting Elros in the hand.

“Good, good. Next thing you can teach Liam is how to read elvish,” Sennin suggested.

“That would be great!” Liam said.

“Now, it's time for little sisters and Liam to go to bed,” Elros said.

Liam pretended to pout, which caused Ada to giggle. Elros picked Liam up and Liam waved goodnight.

They walked to Elros' room and Elros set Liam down on his workbench. He held up one finger and left the room. He came back holding a pink frilly bed and set it down next to Liam.

“Ada said you can borrow this,” Elros said.

Liam flopped down on the bed. It was feathery soft and smelled of lavender.

“Goodnight, sweet prince,” Elros said, blowing out the candle.

Liam took off one of his shoes and threw it at Elros. Elros chuckled as he closed the door. Liam got under the covers and began to relax. He could hear Ada in the next room.

“Mother, why do we hate man?” Ada asked.

“We don't necessarily hate men. It's more that we are in a disagreement with them,” Nerissa said.

“About what?” Ada asked.

“Well, a long time ago, men and elves were the best of friends.

We shared a lot of things with each other. One day, men wanted to know more about our ritual of rebirth. That is when we don our gift of longevity. Now, men thought our gift was immortality, so naturally they wanted it so they could rule over their kingdoms indefinitely. We refused to show them either way; they, in return, severed all the ties with us. We no longer shared with each other. They taught their children that we were evil and we're not to be trusted. We, too, teach our children to be wary of men,” Nerissa said.

“But Liam is a good man, right?” Ada said.

“Elros seems to think so, and I trust his judgment,” Nerissa said.

“I think he is good. He makes me laugh,” Ada said.

“Now, it is time to rest,” Nerissa said. “Goodnight.”

Liam slept fitfully. Could all this mistrust and hatred be a misunderstanding?

CHAPTER 9

The next morning, Liam woke to being poked and prodded.

“Wake up, Liam! We have a full schedule ahead of us!” Elros said, continuing to poke Liam.

Liam got out of bed.

“Here are your regular clothes,” Elros said, setting them down.

“Unless you want to continue being a prince.”

Liam snatched his clothes quickly and changed. They made their way down the stairs into the kitchen. Fresh bread and homemade jam was laid out for breakfast.

“Hurry up and eat your breakfast, boys. We only have a limited time in the library today,” Sennin said.

“Will we be traveling through the city?” Liam asked, his mouth full of bread.

Sennin smiled. “In fact, we are. The library is near the city's center. That will mean that we must be extra careful. Liam, no one can see you. Stay down and out of sight. We will keep talking to a minimum. Keep all your questions for when we are in our room, is that clear?”

Liam nodded, finishing his breakfast. Elros picked up Liam and placed him in his pocket. They waved goodbye and began the long trek into the city. Liam had never been to a city before, let alone an elf city.

As they walked on the path, Liam asked, “So, Sennin, what is it that you do?”

“I am a researcher,” he said proudly. “When an elf is curious about a subject, they pay me to research it for them. After I find a suitable amount of information, I report my findings to them.”

“So, this is up your alley then,” Liam said, relieved.

“Yes, luckily, you came to the right elf. Most elves are more into nature and music. More of the natural world. I like books and data,” Sennin said.

“Your job sounds so awesome!” Liam said. “My dad’s just a farmer...”

“Good, we need good men like your father. Else, we would all starve!” Sennin said. “I wouldn’t know the difference between a rutabaga from a potato if I were left in charge.”

They all laughed.

They had just made it over the crest of the hill that overlooked the city. Liam was awestruck; the whole city was made of crystal.

“There's the library,” Sennin said, pointing to the biggest and grandest building, nestled right in the middle of the city.

“Remember boys, stay out of sight and no talking,” Sennin said.

They continued walking towards the city. Before entering, they were stopped by two guards.

“Welcome to Elymanoris. Please state your business,” the one with raven-black hair said.

Liam sank into the pocket as low as he could while still being able to see out of it.

“We have an appointment in the library,” Sennin said.

“Reading about anything fun?” the one with silver hair asked.

“Fairy circles.” answered Elros.

“Oh! That sounds interesting! You'll have to tell me some more when you come back!” silver-haired elf said.

“Do you have any weapons on you?” the raven-haired elf said, getting back to business.

“No,” Sennin said.

“You won't mind if we search you?” the silver-haired elf asked.

“That is fine,” Sennin said.

What do you mean that's fine? Did he forget I was in Elros' pocket!?

Watching as the silver-haired elf approached Elros, Liam began to panic.

What to do?! What to do?!

He felt the pressure of the hands patting down Elros' pocket.

He was smashed against Elros' chest. Next thing he knew, he was in the hands of the silver-haired elf.

Liam could only think of one thing to do, he went limp.

The silver-haired elf tossed Liam from hand to hand.

“Aren't you a little old for dolls, Elros?” the silver-haired elf teased.

“Careful!” Elros said, trying to grab for Liam. “That's my sister's. She must have slipped it in when I wasn't looking.”

The silver-haired elf held Liam up high and out of Elros' reach.

“Enough!” the raven-haired elf said. “They have no weapons, they may enter.”

The silver-haired elf sighed and gave Liam back to Elros.

“Only messing with ya!”

Elros quickly returned Liam to his pocket. Liam felt like he was going to be sick with all the tossing around. He soon recovered, though, as they walked into the city.

The streets were lined with carts that sold everything you could imagine. Some vendors sold food, clothing and other essentials, while others sold more exotic things like magic potions and elixirs. Elros had to keep pushing Liam back down into his pocket because of how excited he was becoming. He had a close call when he and a small boy locked eyes.

“Mama, that boy has a moving doll! I want one, too!” the boy said, pointing at Liam.

“Not now, mommy's shopping,” the distracted mother said.

Liam decided to lay low after that. As they ventured deeper into the city, it became more congested. Liam never really cared for crowds of people and was glad Elros was navigating. After being pushed and shoved about, they finally made it to the library. Walking up the long staircase, they came to a wall, where there was no door, no keyhole... nothing.

“How are we-” Liam started.

Elros held a finger up to his lips to silence Liam. Sennin placed his hand on the smooth crystal wall. It took a minute, but the crystal glowed around his hand and then grew into the shape of a door. The glowing door then opened. They walked into a hallway, again, with no doors or windows. Sennin led them down a few feet and touched the wall again. The wall glowed and opened into a small study room. The room was empty, but Sennin and Elros began touching the walls. Chairs and tables shot out of the glowing sections. Elros placed Liam on the table, looking around the barren room.

Liam asked, “So this is a library.”

“Biggest collection of books in the known lands,” Elros said.

“Okay, so where are all the books?” Liam said, leaning on the wall.

A large book pushed out of the wall where Liam was leaning against it, knocking him off his feet and nearly falling on him.

Elros quickly grabbed the book.

“It would be best if you don't touch the walls.” Elros chuckled.

“Enough fooling around. We need to find out if this has ever happened before and what to do about it,” Sennin said.

“How do you find the book you're looking for?” Liam asked.

“You simply think of the subject, and it finds a book for you.

It's best if you know the title of the book you're looking for,

otherwise it will just give you a random book,” Sennin said,

studying a book. “Now, we need to hurry and learn as much as

we can. We only have six hours.”

Elros pulled out a book and began to read. All the books were written in Elvish, so Elros had to translate for Liam. It took them a couple hours before they found something relating to fairy circles.

“Fairy circles,” Elros began to read, “are groups of mushrooms that grow in a circular pattern. These circles are used for the fairies to perform their dances every full moon. The fairies are very dedicated to their performances and do not tolerate interruptions. If one is said to be caught inside the circle when the performance is supposed to take place, one is susceptible to punishment.

“The most common and favorite punishment is the Forever Dance. Just like its name suggests, one who is cursed with Forever Dance does that dance until they die. The only way to escape is for someone to pull you out. But then you run the risk of being turned into a pile of dust. The second most common punishment is being forced to spend the night in the

circle, being freed the next day. But if one eats food or touches metal thereafter, one becomes a pile of dust.”

“Boy, do they like turning things into dust,” interrupted Liam.

“You were lucky. Now, be quiet. There's more,” Elros said.

“The last form of punishment, the cruelest, is the Short Life.

One is shrunken down to minuscule or short stature, thus causing them to become vulnerable to the many dangers around them.”

“That’s no problem, right?” Liam said. “I'll just stick with you until we find a cure. Problem solved.”

“I'm glad you trust me with your safety, Liam, but there's more,” Elros said. “Even if, by some miracle, one is able to survive the many dangers, one is still not expected to live past one year. For when cursed with Short Life, it also shortens one's lifespan. There is no known cure.”

Liam sat there in silence, the words sinking in.

No cure. Not only was there no cure, but he would only live for one more year. What would he do? Go home? No, Mother and Father mustn't see me like this. Let them remember me as I was.

Liam must have had a blank expression on his face because the next thing he knew he was being jostled.

“Liam! Liam! I say, are you okay?” Elros asked with concern on his face.

“As okay as someone who just found out he has a year left to live can be,” Liam said.

“Chin up, my boy,” said Sennin “It said there was no KNOWN cure.”

“Yeah, we'll just have to find it,” Elros said.

With the remaining two hours, Sennin and Elros frantically looked through as many books as they could for a cure for the Short Life curse. Liam had lost all interest in the search. He had a pit in his stomach that grew with each passing moment.

He hardly noticed when Elros picked him up and put him in his pocket. Liam curled up into a ball and sobbed quietly.

CHAPTER 10

Liam did not touch his supper and went to bed early that night. Dark thoughts entered his mind. Thoughts of hopelessness, sorrow and of death. Many days he spent in that dark place. He ate very little, he slept longer hours, and he moped around when he was awake. This went on for a week. He began to lose weight and Elros began to worry about him.

“I know just what you need,” Elros said one day at breakfast.

“A schedule of activities. Ada and I put this together last night while you were sleeping.”

Elros placed the parchment on the table. It read: “Liam's daily routine, breakfast, reading Elvish lessons, writing Elvish lessons, nature walk, picnic lunch, archery practice, and magic practice.”

Yeah, like that's going to happen.

“Go on and have a bite of toast and we'll be on our way,”

Elros urged.

Liam looked at Elros and then at the toast. He pushed the plate of toast away.

“Fine, have it your way,” Elros said, picking Liam up and placing him in his pocket. You'll just have to eat extra at lunch.”

They went outside and around back where a large stump stood. Ada was there, waiting. Elros took Liam out of his pocket and set him down on top of the stump. The stump had parchment and books on top of it, as well.

“Okay, Teach,” Liam said, sitting down grumpily. “Lay it on me.”

Liam was ready to be the most difficult and stubborn student Elros had ever taught.

Elros chuckled and shook his head. “I’m not teaching these subjects.”

“I am!” Ada said excitedly.

Great. I could be mean to Elros, but not to Ada.

Things started off slow. Liam did not want any part of this, but with Ada's encouragement, he began to make slow progress.

After practicing reading some of the basic words, Ada had him start writing down the Elven alphabet. The letters were loose and flowed together when you put them together to make a word. It was like painting a picture.

After an hour of writing, they took a walk through the forest.

They came into a meadow that was filled with tiny flowers of every hue. Elros laid a blanket down and began to pull out freshly made bread and cheese. Lastly, he pulled out a small, sweet bread and offered one to Liam.

Just before Liam could refuse, Elros said, “Ada and mother spent all night making these special for you.”

Ada looked at Liam, and then at the cake, and then back to Liam. Liam took the cake and took a bite. It was still warm. The sweetness of the cake was just right, not too sweet. It was soft and puffy and melted in your mouth. Liam felt full, unlike he had felt in a long time. Next was archery practice.

“The key to a perfect shot is timing,” Elros said. “If your timing is off, your shot is off. Go ahead and shoot, Liam.”

Liam sighed and rolled his eyes, making Ada giggle. He aimed, held his breath, and let his arrow loose. It hit the side of the target.

“That's an improvement for you, Liam. It actually hit the target!” Elros smirked. “But your technique is all wrong. Watch me.”

Elros picked up his bow and held it at the ready.

“Inhale when you pull the string back,” he said while pulling the string. “And exhale when you release.”

He let his breath out at the same time as he released the string.

“Now you try,” Elros said.

Liam wasn't too sure about this technique of Elros', but he was tired of being bad at archery. He shrugged and drew back his bow. He breathed in when he pulled the string back. Exhaling, Liam released the arrow. The arrow hit right next to the bullseye. Ada and Elros cheered. Liam could hardly believe it himself. They practiced for the next hour, then moved on to magic.

“Okay, we're going to do some plant magic,” Elros said. He held out his hand and a flower appeared.

“So, we're helping things grow,” said Liam.

“And wither.” Elros said as his flower shriveled up and died.

“When will plant magic ever come in handy?” Liam said.

“Let's do some more fire magic! I want to blow things up!”

“As fun as that sounds, today, we're doing some plant magic.

But I like the enthusiasm!” Elros said. “Now, you're going to need one of these.”

He handed Liam a small seed, but compared to Liam, it was the size of his head.

“Now, I want you to put everything into this seed, your thoughts, your feelings, your willpower, everything, and command it to grow.”

Liam began to concentrate on the seed. He thought about his predicament, how it was unfair and cruel. Feelings of anger and sorrow boiled in his blood. He willed the seed to open and emerge as a fully grown plant. His seed sat still for a while. It shook a little and a small green leaf poked its way into the sun. “Great job, Liam!” Elros said.

Liam was proud of his little sprout. The day's activities had made him feel better about himself. They headed home after that. Liam was completely exhausted, physically and mentally. Nerissa was there waiting for them at the door, smiling.

“How was it?” she asked.

“It was fantastic!” Liam said.

“Wonderful!” she said. “Come in, supper is on the table. It’s nice to see you smiling again.”

Liam sat down and ate. He noticed the empty chair where Sennin usually sat and was about to ask where he was when Nerissa commented, “Sennin will not be joining us tonight. He is at the library.”

Probably looking for a cure for my curse.

Suddenly, he wasn’t as hungry anymore. Elros took Liam up to bed and blew out the candle, leaving Liam alone in the dark.

Liam, however, could not sleep. He laid there for a while.

Then, he heard a door open and close. Liam could hear some faint voices coming from downstairs.

“Any luck?” Elros said.

“No,” said Sennin. “I’ve searched everywhere I can think of.”

“Did you talk to the elders?” Nerissa said.

“They said that they would think it over and would meet with us at the end of the week,” Sennin said. “Elros, you need to prepare him to go before the elders.”

“I will, Father,” Elros said.

CHAPTER 11

“Liam, it’s time to get up!” Elros said.

Liam woke to the familiar poking and prodding. He got up and pushed Elros’ finger away roughly.

“Enough, already! I’m up!” Liam said grumpily.

“Good news, Liam!” Elros began. “We have a meeting with the elders to talk about your situation.”

“So, my life is in the hands of a bunch of stuffy old elves,” Liam said unenthusiastically.

“Don’t you see, Liam?! This could be our last chance to remove the curse!” Elros said, “So we need to make a good impression.”

“Ok, what do I need to do?” Liam sighed.

He didn't like it, but Elros was right. These elders could be his only hope. He should do everything in his power to please them.

"First off, you should call them by their titles. Such as Lady or Lord," Elros explained. "Second, you must let them do what they want with you. They might want to perform a spell or ceremony while you're there. And lastly, do not fight their final decision. Once they have made up their minds, that is it."

"So, when are we going?" Liam asked.

"Tomorrow," Elros said. "Mother is going to make you some more appropriate attire, so she'll need your measurements."

Elros picked Liam up and took him downstairs into the kitchen, where Nerissa waited for them.

"Good morning!" Nerissa said. "Liam, if I could have a moment of your time. I need to get some measurements so I can start weaving some robes together for your meeting with the elders."

Liam was set on the table.

“Alright, Liam, stand here and put your arms out,” Nerissa instructed.

Liam did what she said. She measured his arms with a small length of string. Then she measured his leg length, wrapped the string around his waist, measured a few other things, and then was finished.

When Nerissa was finished with Liam, Elros took him outside where Ada was waiting. She was wearing a princess outfit with an oversized robe over it.

“What’s all this, then?” Liam said as Elros placed him on the stump before Ada.

“Since Ada can’t attend the meeting, she wanted to help you in another way,” said Elros.

“And that’s Lady Ada to you!” she said.

“My apologies, Lady Ada, I did not know the meeting had started,” Liam said with a bow.

Ada giggled at the sight and said, “That’s better.”

“Oh, wise Lady Ada...” Liam began.

“You better let me, or father do the talking Liam. You are not to speak unless a question is directly asked of you,” Elros said.

Liam stuck his tongue out at Elros, making Ada laugh even harder.

“And you must mind your manners, Liam,” Elros said, shaking his finger at Liam.

“Fine.” Liam sighed and motioned for Elros to speak.

“Fair and wise Lady Ada, we come to you to ask for your counsel and help. My friend here has fallen under a curse, and we are in dire need.” Elros said.

“Very well. I, Lady Ada, shall cast a spell on the man and make him whole again,” Ada said. “Please step forward.”

Liam did as she said. Ada held her hands out, fists closed, and said some magic words.

“Hinkle, Twinkle, back to normal!”

She opened her hands and flower petals fell on top of Liam.

As soon as the petals fell all the way, Elros knelt by the stump and looked up at Liam.

“It worked!” Elros said. “Wow, Liam! You never told me how tall you were!”

“I’m strong, too, you know,” Liam boasted.

“Liam, please show us your strength,” Ada said, kneeling next to Elros.

Elros found a small twig and handed it to Liam. It took a bit of effort, but Liam broke the twig. Elros and Ada both clapped.

“So, Liam, what is the first thing you're going to do now?”

Elros said.

“I’m going to walk home myself,” Liam said.

Ada’s eyes began to well up with tears.

“You and Elros can come, too,” Liam told Ada. “I’ll introduce you to my parents and I’ll show you what sheep look like!”

“Do you think that is wise?” Elros said to Liam as Ada ran around in excitement.

“Let her have this moment for now,” Liam said.

Would I ever be able to show my parents my rescuers? Would I be able to convince them that they helped me instead of held me hostage? Maybe it wouldn't be such a good idea to bring them to my village.

The next day, Liam was woken up early. He was taken to the bathhouse and led to a basin full of pink water.

He climbed in, not complaining about the color.

“It’s different oils and fragrances mixed together,” Elros called from the other side of the privacy curtain.

Liam soaked in the warm water for a while and scrubbed himself clean. He got out of the basin and on the table next to it was a set of the finest clothes Liam had ever seen. Made

from the silk that Elros' clothes were made of, but of a finer quality. They were white and were lined with blue fabric. He tried them on, and they fit perfectly. Elros walked back to gather Liam. He, too, was dressed in a fine silk robe. His was white with green fabric.

“We need to hurry. The meeting will begin soon,” Elros said, picking Liam up.

Sennin was waiting for them at the front door.

“Come along, boys! We mustn't be late for the meeting!” yelled Sennin as he saw them.

They waved goodbye to Ada and Nerissa and began their journey to the city. They made it to the gate in record time.

Liam, instead of riding in Elros' pocket, now sat in a spacious box. The lid sat ajar so he could see outside. Sennin showed the guards a note and was instantly led to a grand building, second only to that of the library.

As they got closer to the building, there was more of a crowd around. Elros quickly closed the box's lid to prevent the onlookers from getting a glimpse of Liam. Liam heard the doors of the building open and shut, then silence.

“Sennin, I have not seen you for a while. And you brought your son, young Elros,” a man's voice said.

“Yes, it has been too long,” Sennin replied.

“Now, what's this about a friend needing help with a curse? Where is this friend?” a woman's voice said.

“Elros, if you may,” Sennin said.

Elros lifted the lid of the box and held it up high for all to see.

There was a collective gasp.

“What is it?” the woman with silver hair said.

“Yes,” said another man with black hair. “What is this, Sennin?”

“This is our friend, Liam. He is a man. He has fallen prey to a fairy circle.”

“A man?” said an elf with blonde hair. “May we take a closer look?”

“Of course,” said Sennin.

He motioned to Elros. Elros walked up to the stand where they sat and handed the box to the elf with the black hair.

The elf with the black hair picked up Liam and held him between two fingers. Liam winced; the elf’s grip was very tight. He examined Liam for a while and then passed Liam to the woman next to him. The woman with the silver hair held him by his robe. She looked at him with disgust and quickly handed him to the next elf.

The elf with blonde hair took him and placed him on his open palm. Liam just sat there as he raised his hand towards his eyes to get a closer look. Once he was done, he tipped his hand and Liam slid into the open hands of the elf with the brown curly hair. He stood in her cupped hands, and she looked at him with delight, as if he were a new toy.

She passed him onto the last elf who had bright red hair. Liam stood on the elf's palm.

“Well, what do you know? It *is* a tiny man.” he said, tickling Liam.

Liam fell in laughter. They passed Liam back to the elf with blonde hair.

“Does he speak our language?” he asked Sennin.

“Ask him,” said Sennin.

“Do you understand me?” he asked Liam.

“Yes, my Lord,” Liam replied.

“Ah, splendid!” he said. “Let us properly introduce ourselves. My name is Tharival. This is Lord Varis,” he said, pointing to the elf with the black hair.

“Next to him is Lady Xanaphia,” he said, pointing to the woman with silver hair.

“On my right side is Lady Valenthe,” he said, nodding towards the woman next to him.

“And finally, Lord Quarion.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintances, my Lords and Ladies,”

Liam said with a bow.

Most of the elders seemed pleased with this sign of respect, while others looked on with suspicion.

“Now, Liam,” Tharival said. “Tell us exactly what happened to you.”

“Of course, My Lord,” Liam said. “I was on watch for my village, and I began to grow tired, so I decided to find a place to lie down for a while.”

“Typical man's carelessness,” Lady Xanaphia said in what was supposed to be a whisper, but Liam could hear it as clear as if she had said it out loud.

Liam cleared his throat and continued. “I found what I thought was a suitable resting area. A clearing with a rock and a circle of fluorescent purple mushrooms.”

“Didn’t he notice the abnormal coloring of the mushrooms?”

Lord Varis whispered to Lady Xanaphia.

“The stupidity of man,” she replied.

Liam’s blood began to boil but he continued. “I laid down in the circle of mushrooms and fell asleep. I woke up, and I was this size. Then Elros found me before anything else did.”

“I always knew that there was something off about that boy Elros,” Lord Varis whispered.

“A bad egg,” Lady Xanaphia whispered back.

“He is not a bad egg!” Liam shouted abruptly.

Everyone looked at him in shock. Liam remembered that conversation was meant to only be heard between the two of them.

“...is what my father would say if he met Elros. You’re not a bad egg, Elros!” Liam chuckled.

“Is there anything else that you would like to tell us?” Tharival asked.

“No, my Lord,” Liam said, “That is all that happened.”

“Any questions for Liam?” Tharival asked.

“If we do heal you, what would you do next?” Quarion said.

“I would go home, back to my village,” Liam said.

“Would you tell anyone about our city?” Varis asked.

“Probably not. Who would believe me?” Liam said.

“How old are you?” Valenthe asked.

“Seventeen,” Liam said.

The room grew silent and after a few moments of silence,

Tharival stood up.

“We must discuss amongst ourselves,” he said, reaching for the box and setting Liam back into it. “Please wait out in the hall until we call you back.”

He gave the box back to Elros and sat back down. Sennin and Elros walked out into the hall. Once the doors to the chamber were closed, Liam felt the all too familiar flick to the head.

“What was that all about?” Elros said.

“What?” Liam said, rubbing his head.

“The whole ‘egg’ thing!” Elros said. “I nearly died when you shouted out that nonsense!”

“They insulted you!” Liam spat back.

“When?” Elros asked.

“When I was telling my story,” Liam said.

“I didn’t hear anything,” Elros said.

“Nor did I,” Sennin said.

“Well, that was because they were whispering it,” Liam said.

“I don’t care whether they were whispering it or shouting it from the rooftops, you almost blew your chance!” Elros said.

Liam looked down in shame. He had let his temper get to him.

They sat in silence for what seemed like hours, when finally, they were called back.

“We have come to a decision,” Tharival announced.

Liam held his breath, waiting for the answer.

“We have chosen not to help the man, Liam,” Tharival said sadly.

Liam’s heart stopped.

This couldn’t be real. Yeah, it’s just a nightmare! I just need to wake up!

Liam pinched himself to wake up. All that did was give him a sore arm. This was indeed real.

“Even if we knew how to end the curse, we will not go against the fairies’ judgment. It is in their rights to punish how they deem fit. We will not endure the wrath of the fairies just for a man,” Tharival said.

Liam was about to object, when Elros quickly closed the box.

Liam banged on the box and shouted at Elros to let him talk.

But it must have been muffled because no one responded.

“We thank you for your time, Lord Tharival,” Sennin said.

CHAPTER 12

The seasons came and passed far quicker than Liam would have liked. He could now read and write elvish fluently. His archery skills were exceptional, only second to Elros. Magic was still a little shaky, but he excelled in plant magic, to everyone's surprise. They were now in the middle of fall. The air was getting cold and crisp. Leaves had fallen from the trees.

Liam, Elros, and Ada sat in the meadow finishing up lunch.

“All right, now that lunch is done, it's time for magic lessons!”

Elros said excitedly.

Liam groaned, magic being one of the more difficult things for him to understand.

“What should we summon today, Ada?” Elros asked.

Ada scrunched her face up and thought and then said,

“Bubbles!”

“Bubbles?” said Liam.

“Great idea, Ada!” Elros said. “That will have Liam controlling two elements at the same time. Air and water.”

“Yeah, thanks, Ada,” Liam said sarcastically.

She just giggled.

“Now, watch me,” Elros said. He held out his hand and began to wiggle his fingers. Out of the end of his fingertips, little bubbles began to blow out and Ada giggled with glee as she tried to catch them.

“Okay, Liam. It's your turn,” Elros said.

Liam tried to concentrate as hard as he could, willing the bubbles to appear. He wiggled his fingers and instead of bubbles coming out, water just squirted out.

“No, no, Liam,” Elros said. “You're forcing the air out into the water too hard. It doesn't have time to form a bubble. Think of the water slowly filling up with air.”

Liam tried again, focusing on the air this time.

Wiggling his fingers, water shot out even farther.

“I give up!” Liam said, falling to the ground.

“That was only your second try, Liam,” Elros said. “You need to practice more.”

“That's what you always say!” Liam said. “I've decided that I will remain a magicless man.”

“Oh, come on, Liam, you can't be serious!” Elros said.

“You've trained for months now, you can't just give up!”

“It's not like I am ever going to use it in my life!” Liam shouted.

“What do you mean, Liam?” Ada said.

“I mean I'm never going to use anything you or Elros taught me in my life! In fact, I'm not going to be attending your birthday next year!” Liam said.

“Why not?” Ada asked innocently.

“Because, Ada, I'm going to be DEAD!” Liam screamed, all his anger and frustration coming out at once.

The meadow grew silent, not even the birds sang. The silence seemed to go on for eternity but was interrupted by crying.

Tears ran down Ada's face and she began to sob uncontrollably and ran into the forest.

"Ada!" Elros called. Scowling at Liam, he quickly ran after her.

The anger was gone, but the realization of what he had done dawned on Liam. Liam wanted to run after Ada as well but stopped himself. He wouldn't be much help at his size. Liam would probably just get himself lost, and then they'd have to waste time finding him, if they even looked at all. He decided to wait where he was, sitting down on the stump where they had left him. He waited and waited. Liam waited a long time before he finally saw Ada again. She was running towards Liam as fast as she could, but she was not alone. Galloping behind her was a large, very ugly ogre. Grabbing his bow, Liam got to his feet. He did not know how but he was going to

protect Ada. She ran up to the stump and grabbed Liam. She was sobbing, her face was red, and tear stained.

“He’s got Elros! He’s going to eat us!” she said. She was immediately lifted into the air by her long golden hair, causing her to drop Liam. Liam quickly grabbed the fabric of her dress and slid down into where her sash was tied around her waist.

“Who talk to?” the deep voice rumbled.

“Liam! Liam!” Ada screamed.

“Who Liam?” the deep voice said.

Liam poked his head out of the sash and saw the ogre, but the ogre did not see him.

“Liam is the one who is going to stop you!” Ada said. The ogre laughed, its large mouth filled with crooked and cracked teeth. His breath smelled of death and decay. Liam almost passed out from the smell.

“Where this Liam? Me squash!” the ogre said, stomping his foot.

“He's around,” Ada said, unsure.

“Ha! Me think you trick Azrog! Make me late for dinner!” he said with a snort.

Throwing her over his shoulder like a bag of flour, he said,

“We go now.”

The ride was uncomfortable, to say the least. Poor Ada, who was being carried by her hair, eventually passed out due to the pain. Liam watched as they left the familiar forest and approached the mysterious mountains. They came upon a particularly large cave and entered. The cave was larger than it had looked from the outside. A large fire and cooking spit were in the center of the cave.

One corner had a pile of stinking fur, which Liam assumed was Azrog's bed. Next to his bed was a pile of bones, all but picked clean. The last corner held Elros, unconscious and chained to the wall. There, Azrog threw Ada against the wall

and chained her up next to Elros. The impact of her body hitting the wall woke her up and she began to cry.

“BE QUIET!!” Azrog yelled. “Little girl cry too much. Make Azrog’s head hurt!”

Ada held back her sobs, her tears still flowing down her cheeks.

“We get lots of wood! So we have big cooking fire! Azrog eats good tonight!” Azrog left the cave.

Liam waited about five minutes until he made his presence known.

“Ada! Ada!” Liam shouted, trying to get her attention.

Ada stopped crying and looked down. “Liam, how did you get here?”

“Never mind. what happened?” Liam asked.

“After you yelled at me, I ran away,” she explained. “I wasn't paying attention to where I was running, and I must have ran into the ogre’s territory. Next thing I knew, I was face to face

with him. Elros wasn't far behind, but before he could do anything, the ogre smashed his club over Elros' head, so I ran away to try to find you. Only, I think he might be dead!”

“Calm down. I need you to be calm, Ada,” Liam said. “I'll go check on Elros.”

Liam climbed out from underneath the sash and slid down Ada's dress to the ground. Liam ran over to Elros; he was unconscious. His head hung limp, hair covering his face. Liam prepared himself for the long climb up Elros' body. The only problem was that Elros hung a foot off the ground.

How am I going to bridge that gap?

He rifled through his pockets, finding a small seed that Elros had given him.

“I hope this seed is still good,” Liam said to himself.

Liam held the seed in his hand and willed the plant to grow.

Soon, there was a tall, viny plant that grew next to Elros' boot.

Liam quickly made it up the plant and onto Elros. Liam had

grown a lot quicker at climbing up and down things, but it was still a great distance to climb. Liam had made it to Elros' shirt buttons when Azrog came in with an armful of twigs. Liam stopped and held still, hoping that the ogre wouldn't see him. Ada looked at Liam, then at the ogre. Then she had a moment of inspiration.

“Mr. Azrog, those sticks won't be enough to cook my brother,” she said.

“Why not?” Azrog said.

“You see my brother is a big elf and so he needs big sticks to cook him. Little sticks won't cook him the right way,” Ada said.

“You right! Me get big sticks to cook big elf!” Azrog said.

“You stay right there.”

Azrog left the cave again. Liam sighed in relief. He continued to climb up the buttons, still no movement from Elros. Liam was getting worried. Finally, he reached the shirt pocket. He

pulled himself into the pocket and sat there to catch his breath. After a few minutes, Liam pressed his ear to Elros' chest. He could hear the faint beating of Elros' heart.

Good, he's still alive.

Liam stood up and poked his head out of the pocket. He stared into Elros' motionless face. Somehow, he needed to wake up Elros.

“Elros! Elros!” Liam shouted as he poked Elros hard in the chest with his bow.

Elros did not react at all. Liam thought, then he got an idea. He concentrated and wiggled his fingers. Water came spraying out of them, into Elros' face. Coughing and sputtering, Elros' eyes shot open. Elros lifted his head and looked around. When he saw Ada, he sighed in relief. He looked down and frowned.

“Oh, it's you,” Elros said. “How did you get here? Ada, I thought I told you to run and get help.”

“I did! I brought Liam,” she said.

“Why did you bring him? He's the one that got us into this mess!” Elros said.

“Hey, that's not fair!” began Liam. “It's not my fault you ran into an ogre!”

“No, but what you did to Ada was not ‘fair’ either! You shouldn't have told her that way!” Elros argued.

“Well, I wouldn't have, if you hadn't been pushing me so hard! Let's teach Liam this, let's teach him that! He can't be sad if he's busy!”

“I wouldn't have to push you so hard if you weren't so lackluster about the rest of your life! I know your situation is unfair but is it worth giving up completely?” Elros shouted.

“Stop fighting!” Ada said, crying. “You two need to work together to get us out of this mess!”

They stopped their bickering.

“First things first, we need to get you guys out of these chains,” Liam said.

“If we could find something small enough, you could probably try and pick the locks,” said Elros.

Just then, Azrog came in through the cave entrance with arms full of logs.

“Me got big sticks to cook big elf with! Me start dinner now!” Azrog said.

“Oh, good! She told you about the big sticks,” Elros said. “But I see that you're missing a crucial ingredient when it comes to cooking elves.”

“What me missing?” Azrog asked.

“Well, you see, elves taste pretty bland without the right food to pair them with,” Elros said.

“What food?” Azrog hooted.

“Mushrooms,” Elros said. “The bigger the variety, the more delicious the elves taste.”

“More mushrooms, better taste?” Azrog said.

Elros nodded. Azrog clapped his hands together in delight.

“Okay! Me find many mushrooms!” Azrog eagerly ran out of the cave.

Liam looked around the cave for something that he could use to pick a lock with.

“Ada, do you have any pins in your hair?” Elros asked.

Ada shook her head. “No, I wore my hair down today.”

Pins, pins, pins.

His eyes fell upon the pile of bones.

“I’ll bet you there are some pin bones in that pile,” Liam said.

Elros looked at the bones in the far corner.

“Yeah, but it will take you forever to get over there.”

Liam judged the distance between where he was to where the bones were and then he saw Azrog’s bed. He smiled, looking at Elros.

“How far can you kick?”

“Pretty far. Why?” Elros said.

“Good.”

Liam climbed out of Elros' pocket and slid down his clothing, landing on top of his boot.

“I want you to kick me into those furs.”

“Liam, you can't be serious,” Elros said in disbelief. “You could die from a fall like that!”

“You two will die if I don't do something!” Liam said.

Elros still looked skeptical.

“Please, Elros, let me use my life the way I need to.”

Elros smiled and nodded.

“Elros, kick me!” Liam said.

“Gladly!” Elros said, pulling his foot all the way back and then kicking it as hard as he could.

Liam flew, his arms flailing. The pile of furs grew closer and closer until Liam hit dead center. The impact, however, was not as soft as he would have hoped, knocking the wind out of him. He could hear Ada and Elros calling his name and shook his head. He got to his feet and gave them a thumbs up.

Liam made his way over to the pile of bones and began to dig through them. Then, he found what he was looking for: a fish. He broke off three of the pin bones and went back to the pile of furs. He searched the pile for a cloth he could tear to tie the bones to his back before realizing what the furs were. They were the ogre's dirty loincloths. Finding one that was particularly thread bare, he tore off a strip and tied the bones to his back.

He yelled, "I got the bones! Now what?"

"You mean you didn't have a plan on how to get back?" Elros said.

"I didn't think I would make it this far, to be honest," Liam said sheepishly.

"We need to get you back on this side of the cave, and fast," Elros said.

Silence filled the cave as they all were in deep thought. The breeze blew in a red leaf, causing it to loop in the air.

“It’s too bad you can’t fly,” Ada said, watching the leaf.

Liam watched the leaf and then an idea struck him.

“Maybe I can,” he said.

Searching the pile of loincloths, he found one without any holes and tied it to his waist.

Gathering up the cloth he headed to the very top of the pile and stared down at the drop.

“Liam, wait--” Elros began.

Without hesitation, Liam ran off the side of the pile, throwing the loincloth into the air. He began to glide down towards the floor. Liam stuck his arms up and began to concentrate. He willed the air to blow up into the loincloth. Liam was now flying, moving his arms to steer the loincloth.

“Brilliant, Liam!” Elros said. “Free Ada first!”

He steered his way towards Ada, landing on her cuffs. Liam untied the loincloth and let it drop to the floor.

“That was amazing, Liam!” Ada said.

“Told you I could fly,” Liam said, smiling. “Now, let’s see how good I am at picking locks.”

Liam pulled out a pin bone from behind his back and began to pick the lock. Liam had never picked a lock before. It had to do with pins and tumblers. Something like that. It took him a few tries, but he heard something click and the manacles fell off Ada. Jumping over to Elros’ chains, Liam stuck one of the pin bones in and began to work on his lock.

Just then, Azrog came in, arms full of mushrooms of different colors and sizes.

“Me hope this last thing me need to eat elves. Me tired.”

He dropped the mushrooms next to the fire pit.

“What little elf doing out of chains?” Azrog said, grabbing Ada by the wrists.

Without thinking, Liam grabbed his bow and shot one of the pin bones. It went straight into the ogre’s hand. Azrog howled in pain, dropping Ada. Ada crawled as far away as she could.

“Who do that?” Azrog said, looking around.

“I did! The next one goes in your eye if you don’t let us go!”

Liam shouted.

“No, Liam, don’t!” Ada yelled.

Azrog looked at Elros and then at Liam.

Squinting, he said, “There you are! So, you the hero, Liam?”

Azrog laughed. “You not hero. You bug!”

“Yeah? Well, this bug has a sting!” Liam said as he shot the other bone.

Azrog reeled back, holding his eye, screaming.

“Now Azrog mad! Will squash little bug!” Azrog said.

Liam, realizing that was his last pin bone, looked for an escape, but there was none. Liam was grabbed by the ogre’s meaty hand.

“Me squish Liam bug!”

Liam felt immense pressure surrounding him as Azrog tightened his fist. The first thing he felt break was his arms.

Liam screamed as he felt them splinter into tiny pieces. His legs were next to go. The pain was excruciating; the pressure did not let up. He could feel his ribs cracking; the air was being squeezed out of his lungs. The edge of this vision was growing black. The last thing he remembered was falling.

CHAPTER 13

Liam woke up somewhere dark. The only light came from a fire he could see from the corner of his eye. He tried moving, but pain shot through his body. He remembered his broken bones. A shadow moved in front of the firelight. Liam could not move his head to see the creature and screamed, assuming it was Azrog coming to finish the job.

“Liam, Liam, shush, it’s okay,” said a soothing, familiar voice. A face appeared over Liam. It was Nerissa’s. Liam stopped screaming and sighed.

“I thought you were Azrog.”

“Well, that’s not very nice,” she said, pretending to be offended.

“How could you confuse someone so radiant for someone so vile?” another familiar voice said.

A second face appeared above Liam. It was Sennin.

“Give him a break. You did give him a lot of medicine,” Elros said, appearing above him.

“I’m confused. What happened? How did we get here?

Where’s Ada? And why can’t I move?” Liam said.

“Calm down, Liam. You’ll tear your bandages,” Nerissa said.

“That’s why you can’t move. I had to splint and bandage your whole body so your bones will grow back straight.”

“If I tell you what happened, will you calm down?” asked Elros.

Liam nodded.

“Alright. While you were keeping Azrog busy, I used some of my magic to finish picking the lock on my manacles. I was able to retrieve my bow and shot him in the forehead. He fell

over, taking you with him. We pried you out of his hand, but you weren't moving. Honestly, we thought you were dead."

"And Ada?" asked Liam. "Is she alright?"

"She's fine. A few scrapes and bruises, but fine," said Sennin.

"She'll be glad to see you," said Elros. "It's been two weeks."

"Two weeks?" Liam said, "No wonder I'm so hungry."

"Okay, everyone, I know we're all excited that Liam's awake, but he needs to take some medicine and rest now," Nerissa said.

"Come on, Elros. You heard the healer," Sennin said.

Elros and Sennin left the room while Nerissa went to a small caldron on the fire. She scooped some of the contents out and gave some to Liam to drink. The liquid was gray and had an unpleasant texture when he swallowed it, but it made the pain go away. Liam fell into a deep sleep.

"Liam! Liam!" Ada called as she ran down the stairs.

Liam's eyes shot open. It was morning and the sun was shining through the windows.

"Liam! You're alive!" Ada said. Elros followed close behind her.

"Ada, I thought we agreed we were going to let Liam rest," Elros said.

"No, it's okay. I was awake, anyway," Liam said, yawning.

"Oh, Liam, I'm so glad you weren't squished," Ada said.

"Me too," said Liam. "And I'm sorry about how I spoke to you. I should have never yelled at you like that."

"Liam? Is what you said true? I mean, about you dying?"

Liam looked up at Elros. Elros nodded his head.

"Yes, Ada, that part is true. I am dying," Liam said.

A teardrop fell down Ada's cheek.

"But don't worry. I will be with you guys until the end, if that's okay with you."

Ada smiled and nodded, wiping away the tears.

“Ada, why don’t you get that thing you wanted to show Liam?” Elros said.

Ada’s eyes lit up with excitement as she ran back up the stairs and out of sight.

Elros smiled and looked at Liam. “How are you feeling?”

“Honestly?” Liam said. “I’ve never been in this much pain in my life. It hurts everywhere. Elros, it hurts to breathe.”

Ada came down the stairs holding a book.

“Ever since Elros told the story of how you two tricked those bandits with your sketchbook, I decided to make one!” Ada said, opening the book.

She had already drawn some pictures in it: A flower with misshapen petals and what looked like a rabbit.

She quickly closed the book. “It’s not that good...”

“I think they were wonderful,” Liam said.

“Go on, ask him,” Elros urged.

“I was wondering,” Ada said, looking down at her shoes. “If, maybe, when you’re feeling better, maybe, you can teach me how to draw?”

“As soon as I can pick up some charcoal, I’ll teach you.” Liam smiled.

The door to the outside opened and Nerissa came in with an arm full of herbs.

“Okay, you two, who wants to help make up some medicine for Liam?”

Ada raised her hand as high as it would go.

“How about you, Elros?” Nerissa asked.

“No, I think I’ll hang back here and keep Liam company,” he said as he sat down at the table.

“Okay, Ada. First, we have a pot of boiling water going,”

Nerissa said, pointing at the small caldron. “Next, we will need some Rosemary.”

Ada grabbed a handful of long sprigs with little purple flowers and threw them into the pot.

“After that, we will need some White Willow Bark and Comfrey.”

Ada threw in some little splinters of white wood and some more purple flowers.

“And lastly, a river trout.”

Liam gagged. “I hate fish!”

Ada laughed and put in the strips of fish.

“Now, we need to just let it boil for a few hours and it will be done,” Nerissa said.

“Oh, goody! I can’t wait!” Liam said sarcastically.

They all laughed.

“What should we do until then?” Elros asked Ada.

“I want to know more about Liam!” Ada said. “I want to know more about the world of man!”

CHAPTER 14

Liam looked hesitantly at Nerissa. She nodded as she continued to chop carrots.

“Well, Ada, men live like you do. I live in a village, that’s a group of people that grow and cultivate goods,” Liam began.

“Usually poorer men,” Elros added.

“Yes, poorer men, but we get by,” Liam said. “We are the ones with the farms and shops that supply the cities.

Cities are the next kind of settlement. It’s like your city, except it’s not as grand. That is where we go and sell our goods. It’s also the place we get what we need that we can’t find in our village. So, many villages and cities are grouped in a kingdom. There are three kingdoms each ruled over by a king.”

“What is a king?” Ada asked.

“It’s someone of noble birth that is placed and oversees the country we live in. They make the rules we live by,” Liam said.

“Like taxes,” Elros said with a smile.

“Yes, like taxes. But we are glad to pay them because they support our troops, which protect us from any dangers,” Liam said.

“Like dragons or ogres, right?” Ada said.

He nodded.

Like elves.

“Alright, story time is over,” Nerissa said. “It’s time for Liam to take his medicine and get some rest.”

“I don’t want it now that I know what’s in it!” Liam said.

“You have no choice.” Elros laughed evilly as he took the spoon away from Nerissa.

He moved the spoon towards Liam's mouth. Ada giggled as Liam tried to refuse the potion by swinging his head side to side. Liam finally gave in and drank the potion.

Gagging, he said. "Talk about your Elven torture."

Elros laughed, his evil laugh again, causing Ada to laugh even harder.

"Well, you won't have to suffer much longer," Nerissa said, taking the spoon away from Elros. "Sennin and I have hired a professional healer. You men take forever to heal naturally. So, we thought we would try some healing magic."

"Thank you," Liam began to slur. The potion was taking effect.

"Good night, Liam," Elros waved.

Liam fell asleep.

The next couple of days, Ada would come down and beg Liam to tell her stories of men's life. Ada enjoyed them all. But

Elros was particularly interested in the one about how smithing worked.

“First, you need to heat up a small portion where the handle is going to be. Then, you work on the blade. You first work on the tip of the blade and you go down the blade every three to four inches. You want the middle of the blade to be the thickest part. Then you grind down the edges. You then heat treat the blade. That's when you heat it up hot for like half the day and then you let it cool down for the other half,” Liam explained. “Then, you have yourself a sword.”

“And you can do this with any kind of metal?” Elros asked.

“Yes, as far as I know,” Liam replied.

“Well, tonight's the night,” Elros said. “Mother and Father went to fetch the healer. They should be here by nightfall. You need to take your last dose of medicine.”

Liam did not fight this time. He took the medicine and began to fall asleep.

“Get some rest, Liam,” Elros said before everything went black.

Liam woke to the sound of a door opening and closing. It was pitch black and Liam felt a little claustrophobic.

“Do you remember our bargain?” a muffled voice said.

“Yes, yes. We are not to talk about the patient outside of this house,” another voice replied.

Liam recognized the first voice as Sennin’s but did not know the other voice. There was some silence and then the sound of money being exchanged.

“Okay, then,” the unknown voice said. “Where is the patient?”

“Go ahead, Elros,” said Sennin.

Light fell onto Liam in his bed as a large bowl was removed. Standing with Elros and his family, was a wizened old elf. She had no wrinkles or signs of old age, except her gray hair, but you could see the wisdom behind those eyes. Right now, those eyes were ready to pop out of her head.

“But you hinted at the patient being a man,” she said, confused.

“He is a man,” said Sennin.

“Surely, you jest. How did he come to be in his current state?” she asked.

“Fairy circle,” they all said together.

“Oh my,” she said.

She stood there as if she were processing all the information she had just been told.

“Very well, then. You,” she said, pointing at Elros. “You will be my translator. I haven’t used the common language in ages.”

Elros was about to say something to her, but Liam spoke up.

“There’s no need. I can understand you just fine.”

“Well, you two have been busy,” she said, looking at Ada and Elros. “Teaching a man to speak and comprehend elvish is no small feat.”

“My name is Liam, by the way,” Liam said, a little annoyed.

She thinks that I'm their pet.

“I'm Esta, the healer.” She said sharply, “tell me, Liam, just how did you sustain your injuries?”

“Oh, just saving these two from an ogre,” Liam replied, nodding towards Ada and Elros.

Esta laughed, twittering, but when she saw no one else was laughing, she cleared her throat and continued.

“I'm going to have to take off these bandages to be able to determine the extent of your injuries.”

Esta, with the help of Nerissa, slowly and carefully removed the splints and bandages.

“This may hurt,” Esta warned before she began to examine his body.

She felt his arms, chest and legs for what he assumed were broken bones. The pain was excruciating. Liam could not help but let out a scream or two every time she touched him.

“It seems, Liam, that ogre broke almost all your bones. You’re lucky to be alive,” Esta said.

“Can you help him?” Ada asked.

“Of course, dear. That’s why I am here,” Esta said.

She searched the front pockets of her robe and pulled out a gnarled tree branch.

“What’s that?” Liam asked.

“That, my dear boy, is a wand,” she said, holding it out for everyone to see. “It was made for me by a wizard that died long ago. It’s to increase my healing powers.”

“Can it make me big again?” Liam said.

She acted as if she didn’t hear him as she swished it around.

“Now, everyone, stand back!” Esta said dramatically. “I have not used this in years.”

Liam was about to say something snarky about how she would know if it still worked, if she hadn’t used it in years, but she put the tip of the wand to his chest, and he grew silent.

Everything grew silent as Esta concentrated. Liam could feel the magic flowing from the wand and into his body. He could hear and feel the crackling of bones coming together and mending themselves. Esta quickly withdrew the wand and returned it to her pocket.

“There. You should be as good as new, maybe even better,” Esta said, smiling.

Liam hesitantly sat up. He moved his arms and then got to his feet. He walked around, then ran. Then, he did a cartwheel, ending in a handstand. Ada and Elros laughed, clapping their hands. Liam realized he was acting like a pet and stood up and bowed to Esta in thanks. It just felt so good to be able to move again.

“It was a pleasure doing business with you,” Esta said, shaking hands with Sennin and then Nerissa. She opened the door and before closing it said, “Oh, and mum’s the word.” As the door shut, Liam looked at Sennin and Nerissa.

“Thank you,” Liam said. “However can I repay you?”

“No, this is our way of repaying you,” Sennin said, “You did risk your life to save our children.”

“But I was the one who put them in danger in the first place,” Liam argued.

“I know how you can repay us,” Nerissa said.

“How?” Liam asked.

“Be happy.” Nerissa smiled. “Live your life to the fullest. No matter how long that is.”

She gave him a motherly kiss on the forehead. Liam blushed with embarrassment and nodded in agreement.

“Now, let us celebrate!” Sennin said, “Nerissa, break out the sweet berry wine! Elros, fetch me my lyre! We shall dance and sing til dawn!”

CHAPTER 15

Fall turned into winter and with winter came snow. Liam loved the snow! He couldn't wait to play with Elros and Ada. He wondered what kind of games elves played in the snow. Elros and Liam ate breakfast and then changed into some winter clothing. Elros had a coat made of silver fox skins. Liam wore a rabbit skin glove that had been tailored into a coat. Ada was down in the kitchen waiting for them in her bright red fox coat.

“Alright, children, go on and have fun. Bundle up and stay close to the house. I don't know when the storm will hit, but at the first sight of the storm, come in quickly,” Nerissa said.

“Okay, Mom!” they all said in unison.

Nerissa smiled and returned to her cooking. Elros and Ada ran out the door with Liam stuffed in Elros' pocket. The snow was falling gently down to the ground. Elros took Liam out of his pocket and set him on the pile of wood near the house.

“So, what exactly do elves do in the snow?” Liam asked.

“Snow elves!” Ada said.

“What’s a snow elves?” Liam asked.

“This!” Elros said.

Both Elros and Ada fell to the ground and started to move their arms and legs. They moved their arms, forming the wings. The legs made the robe.

“Put me down, I want to try!” Liam said when Elros was finished.

Elros picked Liam off the pile of logs and knelt down to place him on the ground. Liam fell on the ground and moved his arms and legs the way that they did.

He got up and inspected his work. It wasn't as good as theirs were, but if you squinted, you could see an angel.

“So, what do men do for fun in the sn-” Elros began.

He was interrupted by a small snowball that hit him on the cheek.

Liam yelled, “Snowball fight!”

“Oh, you'll pay for that!” Elros said, gathering up some snow.

“Ada's on my team!” Liam said as he dodged the boulder-sized snowball.

He jumped on Ada's outstretched hand, running behind a tree.

Liam showed Ada how to shape the perfect snowball.

“You have to pack nice and tight.” he said, showing her with his own snowball.

She imitated him. He looked at the snowball and nodded with approval.

Ada peeked from behind the tree and threw the snowball and just barely missed Elros. He laughed and made another

snowball. He threw it and Ada dodged behind the tree, the snowball hitting where she had just been moments ago.

Once more, Ada came out from hiding and threw another snowball. This time, however, Elros' snowball hit Liam right off Ada's shoulder. Having the wind knocked out of him, Liam flew a good distance away from where they were playing. He landed on the soft snow, and it took him a while to recover.

"I'm good!" he said, sitting up, covered in snow. He looked around for Elros and Ada.

Had it been snowing this hard before?

The flakes of snow were falling a lot faster and heavier than before. The storm was here.

"Elros! Ada! I'm over here!" he called out.

But his voice was muffled by the wind and the snow. Liam freed himself from the snowball and tried to remember his bearings. Try as he might, his flight in the snowball had

completely messed with his sense of direction and the snow blinded him. He could not see the house, nor any landmarks. The temperature was beginning to drop, and Liam was getting colder by the minute.

What had father taught him about being caught in a snowstorm?

His teeth began to chatter, causing him to lose focus for a while. Suddenly, a white rabbit hopped right in front of him. “Hello, there, bunny. I bet you know what to do in a snowstorm,” Liam said.

Liam got an idea and slowly approached the rabbit.

The rabbit watched him with its fearful blue eyes. Liam quickly jumped on the rabbit’s back and slid to the base of its head.

Liam held onto the rabbit’s ears to keep from falling off.

I hope you’re going where I think you’re going.

It took the rabbit a matter of minutes to go where it was going. The rabbit dove into its warren and out of the snow.

Liam leapt off the rabbit before it went too deep into its hole.

He made camp by the entrance of it, using some fire magic to produce a little fire to warm himself. Liam found some twigs to feed to the fire, then laid there exhausted.

“I’ll just have to wait out the storm,” he said to himself.

He folded his arms together and nodded off to sleep.

The next day, Liam woke up to the familiar vibrations of larger beings approaching. His eyes opened; the sun was shining through the entrance of the tunnel. The vibrations were becoming stronger as the beings were getting closer.

I wonder what kind of person I’ll get stuck with as my protector now. I doubt they’ll be as good to me as Elros and his family were. Well, better check it out.

Liam went towards the edge of the tunnel and then hesitated.

He wanted to hear how they sounded first.

“Liam! Liam!”

“Liam!”

It was Sennin’s voice, followed by Elros’. Liam couldn’t believe his luck. He quickly ran out of the hole and began to shout.

“Sennin! Elros! Down here!” Liam shouted.

They could not hear him. They were searching the ground, but in all the wrong places.

How can I get their attention?

Liam then had an idea. He concentrated on fire and air magic working together. Liam made a fireball in his hand, then shot it up in the air as high as he could. The fireball then exploded in the air. Instantly, it caught their attention. They looked down and saw Liam, who was waving his hands.

“Liam! We thought you were lost to us, my boy!” Sennin said, clapping his hands.

“I’m never letting you out of my sight again!” said Elros, picking Liam up and placing him in his pocket.

“I was fine! No, really! I was fine,” Liam said, feeling embarrassed with all the attention he was getting.

“How did you find me?”

“Well, when the storm was over, Father and I began to track you,” Elros said. “We judged the trajectory of the snowball and found a set of your tracks. Which was a task on their own. We then followed the tracks until they met up with some rabbit tracks and then they disappeared. We thought we had lost your trail for good, but I said that we should continue to follow the rabbit tracks because only you would be reckless enough to ride a rabbit.”

“Guilty,” Liam said.

“How about we head on back home?” Sennin suggested.

“Nerissa has some leftover porridge on the fire waiting for us.”

“Yeah, and on the way back, you can tell me how you did that fireball trick.” Elros said.

CHAPTER 16

Days after that, Liam rarely had time to himself. He was either in Elros' pocket or within his reach. They sat down at the table and saw Sennin, which was an unusual sight.

“Hurry up and eat your porridge, boys! Today, we practice tracking!”

Now this is more like it!

Liam finished his portion of porridge. He had gone out hunting and tracking with his father many times. It was their favorite thing to do together. Just thinking about it excited him, but it also brought memories of home.

He remembered his first time hunting with his father. They had decided to track a rabbit that lived near their house, not

too far into the forest. Liam did his best to follow the signs of the rabbit, only occasionally losing the trail and having to rely on his father to point him back to it. They found the rabbit munching on some clover. They snuck up on it and Liam shot it with his sling, killing it.

Liam ran home with his kill, with his father walking behind him. His mother was waiting for them in the doorway of their hut. Liam held up the rabbit by the ears and yelled to his mother.

“Look what I caught, Ma!”

“Good job, Liam!” she called. “Bring it here and I’ll make some stew with it!”

Liam remembered that stew being the best stew he had ever eaten, even to this day.

Liam eagerly went into Elros’ pocket. He couldn’t wait to get started. They exited the house and Sennin turned to face Elros.

“Now, Elros, let's practice tracking down hooved quarry. Tell me what kind of pattern hooved animals say, deer, walk?”

“A deer is a diagonal walker. Meaning it lifts the front and hind legs on opposite sides at the same time,” Elros said, as if he had said it a thousand times.

“Remember, you must think as the animal thinks. Do what it would do,” Sennin said as he got low to the ground. “Tell me, Elros, what time of day is best for tracking?”

“Early morning or late afternoon or early evening.” Elros sighed.

“Do you know why?” Sennin said.

“Because the slant of the light makes it easier to see the shadows made by the tracks!” Liam said enthusiastically.

“Right, Liam!” Sennin said happily.

“Don't encourage him, Liam,” Elros said. “Can we get on with this?”

“Very well,” Sennin said. “First one to find a deer wins!”

Sennin disappeared into the forest.

“What was that all about?” asked Liam.

“Nothing,” Elros said as he began to walk into the forest. “Just a stupid competition our fathers have when we preform the rebirth ceremony.”

“Rebirth ceremony?” Liam asked.

“Right, you don’t know, do you? I forget you’re not an elf,”

Elros said.

“Thanks, I think,” Liam said.

“The rebirth ceremony is when elves of a certain age dawn the mantle of longevity,” Elros said.

“How do you do that?” Liam questioned.

“It’s an ancient Elven secret that I am not allowed to tell you,”

Elros said. “But I’ll do my best to try and describe it to you.

I’ll leave out the secret things.”

They stepped out of the thick forest and onto the animal trail.

“Receiving longevity is not as easy as one may think. One must search for it. That is basically the ceremony, is the search for the sacred creature that will bestow the gift.”

“And that ceremony is only an elf thing, right?” Liam said.

Elros stopped walking, his mind reeling.

“Maybe not,” he said.

Elros ran back to the house, all hopes of finding a deer gone.

He burst down the door, causing Nerissa to drop the vase of flowers she was holding.

“Mother, where are the books on elf history?” Elros said.

“In your father’s study, with the rest of his books. What has gotten into you?” she said as Elros rushed to the study.

Elros entered the study. Reaching the bookcase, he began to pull out books one by one. Glancing at the titles, not finding what he wanted, he threw them onto the floor. He did so at a frantic pace, nearly toppling the bookcase. Finally, he found the book he was looking for. He opened the book, flipping

through the pages. Nearing the end of the book, he found the passage he was searching for. Liam tried to read it, but Elros marked the pages and quickly shut the book.

“This just might change your fate, Liam!”

They returned to the kitchen and found Sennin waiting with Nerissa, who was cleaning up the broken vase.

“Elros!” Sennin said, turning towards Elros, “I thought we were going to track deer today.”

“I’ve tracked down something far more important than a deer. See here, Father, read this passage,” Elros said, opening the book to the marked page.

“The mantle of longevity is given to any who is deemed worthy,” Sennin read.

“Do you see what this means?!” Elros said excitedly.

They all shook their heads.

“It said any who is deemed worthy. Not any elf. That means it’s open to anyone!”

“Including me,” Liam said softly.

“You, see? If Liam could get the gift of longevity, it would counter the fairy circle’s Short Life curse!” Elros said.

“That’s a big ‘if,’” said Sennin. “The reason it’s an elf secret is because no man has proven themselves worthy to inherit the gift.”

“When was the last time a man was tested?” asked Liam.

“I’m not sure,” Sennin said.

“Then why not let Liam try?” asked Elros.

“If we do this, we do so in secret,” Sennin said. “It would take more time than Liam has for the Elders to decide. So that means, Elros, we are going to accelerate your and Liam’s journey to begin next week.”

“What do we do until then?” Liam said.

“Relax and enjoy your time here,” Nerissa suggested.

The next few days marched on. Liam, however, developed a mysterious pain that would come and go. It would start at the

top of his spine and work its way down, radiating pain as it went. Nerissa and Esta had no idea where it came from. Not even Esta's wand could take the pain away.

"I've deduced that the pain may be related to your fairy circle Short Life curse," Esta said. "I believe it is because you are in the last stages of the curse."

"Great," Liam said.

The next day, Liam was instructing Ada on her drawing.

"Ada, this will be our last session for a while," Liam said.

"Why?" Ada asked.

"Elros and I must go away for a while. We might have found a way to make me better. We will come back as soon as we can," Liam explained.

"You're going to get better?" Ada said.

"We are going to try," Liam said.

Ada grabbed Liam and held him to her cheek in an embrace.

Elros walked into the room and cleared his throat.

“Ada, I’m going to need Liam back so we can pack our things for our journey.”

“Okay,” she said, handing Liam to Elros.

Elros took Liam and went across the hall. Elros set Liam down on his workbench and pulled a small pack for him.

“Mother made this one for you,” he said, giving it to Liam.

Liam took the pack. He could feel the love that was put in every stitch. What could he put in it? Elros would be carrying the main gear. Liam folded his clothes and neatly packed them in the pack. He watched as Elros packed up his gear. He put in his clothes, a winter cloak, rope, and a tinderbox. Elros set his pack against the wall and laid down on his bed.

“Are you ready for this?” Elros asked.

“Yes and no,” Liam said.

“Why not?” Elros asked.

“What if I’m not worthy, Elros?” Liam said.

“Then it’s been nice knowing you,” Elros teased.

“No, really!” Liam said.

“Then we will keep on searching,” Elros said. “Now it's time to sleep. We head out tomorrow morning.”

Soon, it was time for them to embark on their journey. Nerissa filled their pack with bread and meat to last them a couple weeks. Ada was pleading to go with them, not wanting to be left behind. Elros stood at the door with his pack on and Liam in his breast pocket. Sennin stood next to them.

He put his hand on Elros' shoulder. “Are you ready?”

They both nodded.

“Then, you must go to the city of Greenend and seek out the ranger Folen. I know him well; he is a good elf. He keeps track of the unicorn's movements.”

“Unicorns?” said Liam.

“Yes,” Sennin said, “unicorns are the creatures that grant us longevity. This is our secret.”

“So that is why we need to find Folen, because he will know where to find the unicorns?” Liam asked.

“Yes, Liam. So, you and Elros should get started,” said

Sennin.

Elros smiled and began to walk away, but they were stopped by Ada.

“Draw me a picture of what the unicorn looks like!” she said, handing her sketchbook to Elros while looking at Liam.

“I’ll try my best.” Liam promised.

Elros put the sketchbook away in his pack and continued to walk away. This was it, Liam’s final chance to rid himself of this curse. They reached the top of the hill and turned back.

They waved and Sennin and Nerissa waved back, Ada waving and crying at the same time.

CHAPTER 17

The weeks that followed were uneventful, save for times Liam's bouts of pain came upon him. One time, they were trying to dodge a patrol of elves, if you could call it a patrol. The elves that were supposed to be patrolling were sitting and playing music. One elf was playing a lyre. The other one was playing a flute and the last was singing along with the music. As Elros and Liam were trying to sneak past the group of elves, a sharp pain shot down Liam's spine. It felt like lightning had struck him and was trapped in his body. He let out a shrill scream as his body was wracked with pain.

The elves' singing and music stopped as they leapt to their feet. Elros quickly put his hand over the pocket where Liam was and tried to muffle the sound. Nearly passing out from the pain, Liam stopped screaming. There was a long, silent pause after that.

"Hadir, I think you need to clean out your flute. It sounded like something was dying in there!" one elf laughed.

"No, I think it was your singing that threw everything off, Lindir!" Hadir said.

"Well, whatever it was, I hope it goes peacefully," the last one said.

"Right, now where were we, Beren?" Lindir said.

The music and singing started up again. Elros sighed with relief and looked in his pocket.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

Liam laid there in a crumpled mess.

"Yeah, I'm okay." He said the words between deep breaths.

That night, Liam slept very deeply after the comfrey Elros gave him for the pain. The snow crunched under Elros' feet as they walked along the path. Liam stood on Elros' shoulder.

“How close are we to Greenend now?” Liam asked.

“It shouldn't be much farther. Maybe a day or two,” Elros said.

For all the times Liam wished he was his right size, now was the moment. It wasn't like Elros was being slow, he had been walking at a brisk pace for most of the journey. It was just that he wanted to feel like he was doing something, instead of just riding along. That's why he had decided to come out of the pocket. Maybe he could help keep a look out for trouble. But who was he kidding? How could he compete with eyes like Elros' that seemed not to miss a thing?

As if on cue, Elros asked, “What seems to be troubling you, Liam?”

“Oh nothing, just wondering what I can do to help out,” Liam said.

“Well, you can talk to me so I can stay alert,” Elros said.

“I thought that would be the opposite of what you would need to stay alert,” Liam said.

“I do my best work when I am multitasking,” Elros said.

“Besides, I get bored walking in silence.”

“Okay, well what should we talk about?” Liam asked.

“That is part of your job, finding things to talk about. Mine is to concentrate on where to walk,” Elros laughed.

“Fine. I’ll start with a question for you. What do you know about unicorns?” Liam asked.

“I know very little about unicorns, probably as much as you know,” Elros began. “I know what my father told me about them. They are the most pure and innocent creatures you will ever see in your lifetime.

“To harm or kill one is unforgivable. The unicorn can see into the souls of other creatures and see their true ambitions. The reason why we have to seek out this ranger, Folen, is because unicorns are also very rare. Only one unicorn foal is born at a time. It is almost always a male. Female unicorns live longer than males but are harder to find. That is all I know about unicorns.”

“So, how does this ranger know how to find the unicorns?”

Liam asked.

“That will be something to ask the ranger, won’t it?” Elros smiled.

“You know, I can’t remember? Sennin said to keep this whole thing secret? That includes me!” Liam said, yanking on Elros’ hair.

Elros pulled his hair out of Liam’s hands and said, “I know, you will just have to find a way to remind me to ask your question for you.”

Night soon fell and Elros stopped to rest for the night. Elros sat down and felt around in the bag until he found what he was looking for. He pulled out a small piece of bread and began to eat.

“It’s a good thing we are going to be in Greenend soon, that is the last of the bread.” He tore off a corner and handed it to Liam.

Liam took the bread and began to eat.

“What do you know about Greenend?”

“What do you mean?” Elros said.

“Well, is it a man city or an elf city?” Liam said.

Elros’ smile faded. “I forgot to ask my father.”

“Well, how do you usually enter man’s cities?” Liam said.

“I avoid them at all costs,” Elros said.

“Great. So, we will have to disguise you until we know if it’s safe,” Liam said. “Do you have a cloak with a hood?”

Elros searched his pack for a while and pulled out a long cloak. He put it on, pulling the hood over his head.

“Like this?” he said.

“Yes, now I will hide by your ear inside the cloak and tell you what to do,” Liam said.

“Let’s try it,” Elros said, picking up Liam placing him inside the hood of the cloak. Liam got close to Elros’ ear. The fabric of the cloak settled on top of him and he could see from a small crack.

“Can you hear me?” Liam whispered.

Elros gave a thumbs up. Elros grabbed Liam from behind his ear. He held Liam in his hand.

“That should work out perfectly,” Elros said.

“I hope so,” Liam said, unsure of himself.

The next morning, Elros dressed in his cloak. Placing Liam in his position, they approached the city of Greenend. They entered the city limits and were immediately surrounded by

the hustle of city life. Merchants of all sorts were trying to sell their wares. From what Liam could gather, they were in a man's city. It looked like they were used to travelers' comings and goings.

They were stopped by the most beautiful woman Liam had ever seen. Her hair was flaxen gold and fell in waves down her back. She had deep blue eyes that lit up her face.

"Care to buy a flower?" she asked in her melodious voice.

"We don't have time for this," Liam whispered.

"Is that a rose I see?" Elros said.

"Why yes, it is," the woman said, "it's my favorite."

"I will take a rose," Elros said, handing the woman two gold pieces.

Her eyes grew as she saw the gold.

"Sir, this is too much!" she said, trying to give the money back.

Elros closed his hands around hers. “I think it’s the correct amount for a beautiful flower from a beautiful woman.”

She blushed at his words.

Liam tugged on Elros’ ear, partly to get his attention and partly out of jealousy.

“Stop fooling around!” he said sharply.

“I must take my leave,” Elros said, as he took the rose from the flower lady.

“Wait!” she said. “Let me help you some more. I do not feel that I have earned this gold. Are you looking for a place to stay? I know the innkeeper here in town. I’m sure she could find a room for you.”

“Actually, I am looking for someone. A ranger by the name of Folen,” he said.

“Oh, Folen? Are you sure that is who you want to see?” she said.

Elros nodded.

“Okay, but be warned, he is not the nicest person you will meet. He keeps to himself, hardly socializes. If you’re sure, he stays at the Cackling Hen. It’s not too far from here. It is just down the street,” she said, pointing down the road.

“Thank you for your service,” Elros said, giving the rose to the young woman.

She blushed again, even harder this time. Elros waved goodbye as they continued down the main street.

“See, sometimes it pays to be nice,” Elros said.

“Yeah, but now you have drawn attention to us!” Liam said.

That was true. All the ladies, after seeing the display, looked hopefully at Elros as he walked by. The men seemed to look at Elros with anger and jealousy.

“Let’s try to keep a low profile from now on,” Liam said.

Elros nodded and pulled his hood up to cover more of his face.

CHAPTER 18

It took a couple minutes for them to reach the Cackling Hen. No one else stopped them along the way. Opening up the door, they found out how the inn got its name. The air was full of chatter. But when they all saw Elros, the chattering stopped. A group of men formed a half circle around Elros. One man stepped forward to be the spokesperson of the group. The man was quite large and very muscular. His face was burned bright red and he looked like a blacksmith by trade.

“Well, lookie here, boys. It’s Mister Twig.” the man said.

They all laughed in unison.

“Not quite. My name is Elros. What would your name be?”

Elros said.

“Bronwen and we ain’t too happy with you ‘Ellie Roast!’” he said.

“What have I done to offend you?” Elros said innocently.

“You was movin’ in on our girl, Ellie Roast!” Bronwen said.

“You mean that lovely girl selling the flowers?” Elros said.” I was merely interested in the flowers she was selling.”

“You saying there somethin’ wrong with Felice?” Bronwen said, his muscles tightening.

“No, was that her name?” Elros said.

“No one goes disrespectin’ Felice while I’m around,” Bronwen said, winding up his fist, preparing to strike.

“He’s with me,” said a voice from the corner.

The crowd's attention shifted to the man in the corner. He was a tall, wearing leather armor and a few furs. When he moved, he seemed to glide across the room. He, too, had his hood up. Grabbing Elros by the shoulder, he whispered in his ear.

“Come with me.”

They made their way to the back of the inn. They entered and the stranger locked the door behind him. His steely gaze locked with Elros' eyes. Liam could also feel the gaze through the fabric. It was like he could see right through it.

That's impossible, right?

"So, our mysterious love bird has revealed himself," he said.

"Elros, am I right?"

He motioned for Elros to follow him up a flight of stairs and into a small room with two chairs. Elros entered the room, sitting down in a chair. The stranger locked the door behind him.

"Now that is out of the way, let me introduce myself to you properly. My name is Folen. I am the ranger of this valley."

"It's nice to meet you, Folen. We are here to—" Elros began.

"You are here for what all Elven children come to me for," he said, pulling down his hood, revealing his pointed ears. "You are here to find the unicorn and receive your longevity."

Elros nodded abruptly, causing Liam to lose balance. He quickly grabbed Elros' ear.

“Watch it!” Liam whispered.

Folen looked at Elros for a moment. “You can lower your hood, boy. Surely you must be hot on a spring day like today.”

Elros shook his head, Liam still clinging onto his ear.

“No, I am quite the opposite.”

“Very well,” Folen said, a glint of suspicion in his eye. “You must have some questions. Go ahead and ask.”

“Ask about the uni-” Liam began to say.

“How do you know my name?” Elros asked.

“Well, I knew you before you even entered the Cackling Hen.

You are Elros, son of Nerissa and Sennin. You are their firstborn. Their second being your younger sister, Ada. You were born on the twelfth day of spring, under a full moon.

When you were only five hundred years old, you fell out of a tree and broke your arm. Shall I go on?”

“No, no I get that you know of me. But why do you know so much about me?” Elros asked.

“I make it a point to get to know the elflings that are born in this valley,” Folen explained. “So, I know their values. Like you, for example. I know you want to do the right thing and help people. Even if that means getting into trouble yourself, am I right?”

Elros nodded in agreement.

“Okay, now that is taken care of, ask him about how to find the unicorns!” Liam urged.

“Right, we would like to know how to find the unicorns,”

Elros said.

“We?” Folen replied.

“Me! I meant me would like to know how to find the unicorns.”

Folen looked at Elros in utter confusion.

“Okay, me. I will tell you. But you must be doing this for yourself, not for anyone else, am I clear?”

“Yes, I am doing this for myself,” Elros said.

“Mostly,” Liam whispered.

“The key to finding unicorns is...”

Liam quivered with excitement. Suddenly, Folen snatched Liam from behind Elros’ ear, causing the hood to fall. Elros moved to get Liam back, but Folen was a good foot taller. He held Liam up high out of Elros’ reach.

“Well, what do we have here?” Folen said, inspecting Liam.

“A wingless pixie, perhaps?”

“Let me go!” Liam shouted as he struggled against Folen’s grip.

“A feisty one, at that!” Folen laughed.

“Give him back!” Elros said.

“First, tell me what is going on?” Folen said. “You can trust me, Elros.”

Elros sighed and looked at Liam, who shook his head.

“It’s the only way we can move farther in our quest, Liam.”

Elros said.

Fine. If Elros won’t fight to save me. I will save myself!

Liam concentrated and caused himself to heat up.

“Ho, ho! This one seems to have a bit of magic in him! Fine,

I’ll play along. What will you do if I do this?” Folen said.

Almost instantly, Liam felt cold. The coldness chilled him down to the bone. Liam remained focused and increased his temperature. It was now a battle of will, of fire and ice.

As Liam increased his temperature, Folen would lower it.

Each time the cold increased, it was more frigid.

“Yield, boy!” Folen said after sending a particularly strong wave of cold.

Liam answered by increasing his temperature to the highest that he could.

“Never,” he said.

“Very well.” Folen said.

Folen’s final blow hit Liam like a ton of rocks. It was so cold that he couldn’t even breathe. He couldn’t feel anything. His fingers and toes were nonexistent. He only felt the numbness in his body.

The last thing he saw was Folen shaking his head, whispering, “Fool,” before he passed out.

CHAPTER 19

Liam awoke wrapped up in several layers of furs.

He struggled to get out, but the furs were wrapped too tight.

He could hear Elros and Folen talking. Liam rolled to his side, seeing them in the two chairs that were sitting on either side of the table he was on. They hadn't noticed him yet, so he kept quiet.

“And so, you see,” Elros explained, “We thought that he could try the test.”

“I see,” Folen said. “Well, it's not my place to judge. I will leave that business to the unicorn.”

Liam wanted to eavesdrop some more, but he couldn't hold back the sneeze that came out of him suddenly. Elros and Folen looked towards the direction of the sneeze.

Folen smiled. “Looks like our little firebug is awake.”

Liam smiled wryly.

“A little help?” he said, struggling once more against the furs.

Elros laughed and picked Liam up. He carefully unwound

Liam from the strip of fur. He then set Liam back on the table.

Folen cleared his throat and said, “Now then, let us start this

encounter over again. My name is Folen. I am the ranger of

this valley. We’ve established that already, I know, Elros.

Now, Liam, I would like to know more about you.”

Liam hesitated. He was not sure if he wanted to reveal himself

to this elf. But with the encouragement from Elros, he gave in.

“Before we begin, may I hold you in my hand? I would like to

have a closer look at you while you speak,” Folen asked.

Liam simply nodded. He did not want Folen to think he was

afraid of him. Folen set his hand down and Liam stepped up

onto it. As Folen lifted his hand up, Liam sat down, looking

down at the palm of Folen’s hand. It was rough and worn. It

had calluses that were built up from hard work. It was hard to believe that moments ago, these hands literally held Liam's life in them. This encounter had reminded him how foolish and fragile he was.

When the hand stopped, Liam was eye level with the elf. Liam stared into the large hazel eyes that seemed to penetrate his soul. He began to tremble with fear.

"M-m-my n-name is L-liam," he stuttered. "My parents are Martha and Warren. I come from the village of Redvale."

"How old are you, Liam?" Folen asked.

"Seventeen," Liam answered.

"Quite young, even for a man. And this fairy circle business was your first experience with magic?"

"Yes."

"I bet you didn't believe in this stuff before, did ya?" Folen said with a knowing grin.

“No, I thought it was all just elf tricks,” Liam answered honestly.

They all laughed at this.

“So, Elros told me about your theory. I agree, it won’t hurt to try. Now, as I was just about to tell Elros, the best way to find a unicorn is to go to where its favorite snack grows. Unicorns love midnight clovers. This time of the year, midnight clovers can be found in only one place.

There is a small glade that is nestled in the deep woods. That is where the midnight clovers grow. I can be your guide and take you there,” Folen said, looking at Liam and Elros expectantly.

“What do you think, Liam? It would be nice to have an extra pair of eyes to keep watch and hands to help around camp,” Elros said.

Liam nodded in agreement.

“Good, now that is settled, let’s get moving. Time is of the essence.”

With that, Folen set Liam down on Elros’ shoulder and pulled up his hood. Elros followed suit. Liam took his place behind Elros’ ear as they exited the room. Folen and Elros made their way through the crowd. Soon, they were out in the fresh night air.

“Let’s head for my hut,” Folen said. “There, we can gather up some provisions.”

Folen led them through the city as only one that was familiar to the layout could. They mainly stayed on the main road but would occasionally take a back road or two. When they finally reached the outskirts of town, Folen looked around and then at Elros.

“Shall we pick up the pace?”

“Let’s,” answered Elros.

Soon, they were racing through the forest. They weaved between trees, dodging branches and leaping over logs. The wind had blown off their hoods. Their hair whipped behind them. Liam hung on to the edge of Elros' ear. He flapped in the breeze.

“Elros!” Liam screamed.

Without stopping, Elros grabbed Liam and tucked him into his breast pocket. Folen and Elros ran most of the night. The next morning, they had slowed down to a brisk walk.

“We should be there within the hour,” Folen said.

They walked in silence for a while until Elros asked. “Why did you decide to become a ranger?”

“Well, I have always loved animals. I believe them to be more trustworthy beings. But what really persuaded me to become a ranger happened when I was about your age,” Folen began. “I was out practicing my tracking when I came across a mess of

footprints. Many of which were so muddled together I could not tell what animal they came from. I could recognize one of the sets of footprints belonged to a fawn and that it was injured.

“I decided to follow the tracks. As I followed the tracks, droplets of blood began to appear. Soon, the droplets became streams of blood. I drew closer and I could hear the bleating of the young fawn. I pushed my way through some bushes onto the gruesome scene.

“There, standing above the dying fawn, were two boys and their dogs. The dogs were mauling the fawn, ripping and tearing flesh from bone. The boys stood there, goading them on. In a fit of rage, I scared them off, threatening them with my bow. But it was too late for the fawn. I felt its life drain away as I held it in my arms.”

Liam’s stomach sank. To think that those boys were his kin made him sick. Unfortunately, he had heard of this “game”

before. It was a common training practice among breeding hunting dogs. It was said to strengthen the dog's killing instinct.

“And from that moment on, I decided that I would protect the animals and teach others how to respect them,” Folen said.

Liam was about to ask something when they came to a sudden stop.

“Here we are!” Folen said. “My humble abode.”

They stood in front of what could only be called a shack. It was well-worn and barely holding together. Vines grew between the boards, holding it in place.

“Come in!” he said. “We won’t be long. I just have to grab some essentials and we’ll be off.”

Folen opened the door. They were greeted by a blast of heat. The aroma of meat filled the air. Magical fire danced in the fireplace. A row of strips of meat hung above the fire.

Walking in, it was a bit crowded. This was one of those times Liam was glad he was not his normal size.

“Elros, grab that sack and start filling it with that dried elk meat,” Folen instructed.

Elros did as he was told. Liam watched as Folen expertly packed his pack. He did not see everything Folen put away, but he did see him pack some rope, bandages, a compass, and a knife. Snuffing out the magical fire, he grabbed his bow, leaving the shack behind.

“Now, let us make haste, my friends!” Folen said, patting Elros on the back.

“How long is it going to take to get there?” Liam asked.

“About a week on foot,” Folen said. “But for us, it will take no more than three days.”

“If we’re not going to be traveling by foot, how are we going to get there?” Elros asked.

Folen brought his fingers to his mouth, letting out a small whistle. The whistle echoed through the forest, bouncing off the trees. Then there was a moment of silence. Off in the distance, there was the sound of galloping hooves. It grew louder as they drew nearer. Then, standing before them were two large stags.

The stags were huge! Much larger than regular deer. They were twice the size of a large horse and their antlers could have been mistaken for small saplings. They tossed back their heads and kicked at the ground impatiently. Seeing the look of awe on Liam's and Elros' faces, Folen explained.

“These are a breed of deer called ‘The Prince of the Forest’.

They are much larger than their counterparts. Not only are they larger, but they are faster. Their stamina has no bounds.”

Folen walked up to one and began to stroke it.

“Come now, let them get used to your scent.”

Elros approached one of the stags, slowly holding out his hand. The stag watched him closely, then slowly sniffed his hand. Elros then began to pet it behind its large ears. The stag took a liking to that and leaned into Elros' hand.

“I think he likes that,” Folen said. “Now, introduce Liam to him.”

“Is that really necessary?” Liam asked as Elros lifted him out of his pocket. “It’s not like I’m going to be riding it by myself anytime soon.”

“Are you scared of a little old deer?” Elros teased.

“That is not a little deer!” Liam said.

“The deer must be used to all the scents around it. No matter how big or small they may be. If they are not, it may spook them,” Folen explained.

Elros held Liam out towards the deer. The deer lowered its head and began to smell Liam. His hot, wet breath covered Liam. The deer then snorted. Its wet tongue came out and he

began to lick Liam. Once the deer was done, Liam was covered head-to-toe in deer saliva. Both Folen and Elros laughed.

“Laugh it up,” Liam said, wiping the goo off. “I’m going back in your pocket.”

“Enough fooling around,” Folen said.

He made a clicking noise. Both stags knelt down. Elros and Folen mounted the stags, and, with another whistle, they were off, running through the forest.

CHAPTER 20

The deer moved at a breakneck speed. The birch trees flew past as they went along. The sun rose, illuminating the forest. The sound of the rushing wind whistled in their ears. Liam had to shout to be heard.

They stopped only to eat lunch. The elk jerky was delicious. It had a peppery taste to it. The meat was tender, not too dry.

“Liam, how about you ride with me?” Folen said.

“Okay,” Liam said as he walked onto Folen’s hand.

Fortunately, Folen had the foresight to pack a shirt with a breast pocket. He slipped Liam into the pocket, and they mounted the stag. Taking off through the birch forest, they

began to see more wildlife as they went. The other deer took notice of the stags and quickly made room for them to pass.

“So, Liam, how are you feeling?” Folen said.

“I’m good. I’ve had no spasms lately,” Liam said.

“That’s good. Elros told me of your condition,” Folen said.

“Yeah, this is pretty much my only hope,” Liam said in a dark tone.

“What are you going to do with your newfound longevity?” Folen asked.

“You mean if I pass the test?” Liam said.

“You’ll pass the test. I’m sure of it,” Folen said.

“How do you know?” Liam said.

“Just from the stories Elros told me,” Folen said.

“You tried to help Elros escape the bandits when you could have run. You risked your life to save the lives of two elves when you could have just left them for dead. That sounds like a man with morals.”

“I did what anyone would have done.” Liam shrugged it off.

“No, you didn’t. And that is why you are going to pass,” he said. “Now, answer my question. What are you going to do with your newfound longevity?”

“I really haven’t thought about it,” Liam reflected. “I just wanted not to die, really.”

“Well, what is it you want to do?” Folen asked.

“I want to help people,” Liam said. “I want to travel and see the world. But I am afraid that won’t be possible.”

“Why is that?” Folen said.

“Because of my size. How can I help people when I can barely take care of myself?” Liam said.

“I’m sure you two will figure out a way,” Folen said.

“Two?” Liam said.

“I’m afraid there is no getting rid of Elros. He is the type of friend that will stick with you until the end.” Folen laughed. “I see many more adventures in your future.”

They traveled through the night with the stars illuminating their way. The moon was almost full.

On the final day, as they neared the place where Folen said the glade was, they slowed down to a gallop. Liam shifted in Elros' pocket and asked, "Is there anything we should know before we go into the glade?"

"First, you must identify the gender of the unicorn. That will determine how strictly you will need to follow the traditional greeting. Male unicorns will be laxer about how you greet them. Females, however, will expect near perfection," Folen explained.

"Now, the way you can easily tell a male unicorn from a female unicorn is by the color of their horns. Males have silver horns, while females have golden horns. Once you have done that, you can begin the greeting. You must follow these steps in this order. First, you must make eye contact. You don't want to surprise a unicorn! That horn is not just for

decoration,” he said seriously. “Second, pick some of the midnight clovers, then approach slowly. Offer up the clovers and bow. If the unicorn accepts your clovers, you can move on to the wish ceremony. If not, you must back away as soon as you can, for you have been deemed unworthy and the unicorn might just exact their judgment themselves.”

Liam’s stomach caught in his throat. After a long hard gulp, he asked, “And the wishing ceremony? How do we do that?”

“I’ll let Elros explain that one to you,” Folen said, nodding to Elros.

“It’s something we are told as children,” Elros explained.

“You simply touch the unicorn and think of what you wish for with all your might. Then, the ceremony ends with you falling asleep. Then, you wake up with the gift you wished for: longevity.”

“Okay, but how do we know that it worked?” Liam asked.

“Ah! Smart lad! The way we know that it works is this.” Folen said.

He rolled down his sleeve on his right side. On his wrist was a mark that looked like a leaf branded into his skin.

“Do all elves have this mark?” Liam asked, looking from Folen’s wrist to Elros’.

“Just the ones that have been blessed with longevity,” he said, rolling his sleeve back into place.

Why didn’t I see this sooner?

Seeing Liam’s look of confusion, Folen remarked. “We don’t draw attention to it very often. It is sacred to us.”

Liam nodded. They stopped beside an opening in the trees.

They had made it to the glade.

“This is where I will wait for you,” Folen said. “You will have to go the rest of the way on foot.”

Elros dismounted the deer, beginning to unpack.

“No need to unpack anything. You won’t be in there very long,” Folen said, watching the sunset. “I’ll have breakfast waiting for you when you return.”

Elros began to walk away, Liam now riding on his shoulder.

“Remember to follow the ceremony steps!” Folen shouted.

“And good luck!”

The pale moonlight of the full moon lit up the rolling hills.

There were clovers everywhere! They glowed in the moonlight, swaying in the gentle night breeze. The glade was full of life. Liam saw several groups of dark purple rabbits that looked like pieces of the night sky munching on the clovers.

Deer with star constellations on their fur ate alongside bright white elk that bugled happily.

Elros and Liam made their way through the menagerie of animals. The animals moved, looking at them with curiosity rather than fear. Liam thought he caught a glimpse of a bright yellow fox tail, when Elros tapped him on his head.

Elros pointed towards the tree line where they spotted it. A bright white horse pacing back and forth. It was their unicorn! Still too far to see the color of the horn, Elros and Liam approached with caution. As they got closer, Liam saw what he had feared, a golden shimmer.

The unicorn was too busy pacing to notice them. Elros took Liam off his shoulder, holding him out on his hand. Liam panicked as he tried to remember what to do first. He looked up at Elros, who stared straight ahead. Following his lead, Liam stared ahead, and his eyes immediately met the golden eyes of the unicorn. Her eyes locked onto them as she continued to pace.

Liam's mind went blank. It was like all his fears and lies he used to protect himself melted away. Nothing was hidden from those eyes. Elros stooped down, picking some of the clovers. Liam grabbed a handful, too. They held them out, offering them to her.

The mare stopped pacing. Her breathing was labored, she was sweating all over. She walked up to Elros, immediately eating his clovers. Looking down at Liam's offering, she paused.

Liam held the clovers up high, standing as still as possible, being careful not to break eye contact.

The unicorn stared at him for a long time. Her hot breath blew down on him with each breath she took. Sweat dripped down her beautiful white coat. Finally, she carefully took Liam's clovers and ate them. When she was finished, she laid down.

Elros knelt by her, placing his hand on her neck with one hand. He moved Liam towards her with the other. Liam reached out, placing his hand on her neck as well. Closing his eyes, he thought of his wish.

I wish for longevity.

He repeated this in his mind over and over. But another thought popped in his head.

I wouldn't mind being a little bigger.

Shaking his head, the thought went as quickly as it came.

Soon, Liam was fast asleep.

Light shone overhead into Liam's eyes, causing him to stir. He woke, feeling strangely sore, as if he had been stretched to his limit. Raising his hand, he looked at his wrist. There was an image of a leaf branded on it.

He sighed. It had worked. He wasn't going to die. Setting his hand down, he closed his eyes, wanting to get more sleep before Elros came and found him. Liam felt something squirm under his hand. He didn't think anything of it. He felt a sharp bite on his hand. Liam turned to his side to swat the insect who bit him. Just as he was about to make contact, Liam stopped himself. There, under his hand, was Elros.

CHAPTER 21

“Elros? What happened? You’ve shrunk!” Liam said.

“I haven’t shrunk, you grew!” Elros said.

The animals had gathered around Liam and Elros as they had slept. They now were all miniature versions of themselves.

Liam stood up carefully. He was as tall as some of the trees.

“Wow, Liam, I would wager you’re about forty feet tall!”

Elros said.

“What happened? This is not what I wished for!” Liam said.

“You have the mark of longevity, right?” Elros asked, showing his wrist.

Liam nodded, showing Elros his mark.

“I don’t know what could have happened,” Liam said, confused.

“Let’s go talk to Folen. Maybe he’ll have an idea,” Elros said.

“I’ll run ahead and prepare him.”

Elros ran off in the direction where they had left Folen. The animals scattered, making way for him. Liam waited a few moments, then followed Elros.

He took great care, trying not to step on any of the animals. It didn’t take him very long to catch up with Elros. Elros was talking with Folen when Liam walked up. The presence of Liam was too much for the Prince of the Forest stags. They ran off into the forest, leaving them stranded.

“You’re right, Elros. We do have a big problem,” Folen said, looking at Liam. “So, tell me what exactly happened?”

“We entered the glade. Then, we came upon the unicorn, which happened to be female. We performed the ceremony steps like you instructed. And finally, made our wishes. That’s it,” Elros said.

“A female unicorn,” Folen pondered. “Tell me, how did she look and behave as you approached her?”

“Well, how do I say this without it being offensive?” Elros said. “She was quite larger than I expected a unicorn to be.”

“She was huge!” said Liam, using his hand to measure with.

“Yes, thank you, Liam. And she was sweating all over her body,” Elros continued.

“She was constantly pacing back and forth. When we went to touch her to make our wishes, she laid down,” Liam said.

Folen smiled. “You two were indeed fortunate. Had you waited a few more moments, you would have witnessed the birth of a unicorn.”

“Really?” Liam said in awe.

“Yes. Those were all the signs that the mare was in labor. You two must have received your wishes before she gave birth.

Which means... No, it can't be.” Folen paused.

“What?” Elros and Liam said in unison.

“It is very rare, but it could have been that when the foal was born, it saw you two and granted you additional wishes,”

Folen said.

“An extra wish?” Liam said.

“Did either of your minds wander while you were wishing?”

Folen asked.

“Well,” said Liam, “just for a moment.”

“I also had a moment of weakness,” Elros said.

“What exactly went through your heads?” Folen asked.

“I wouldn't mind being bigger,” Liam quoted.

“Mine was similar, except it was for Liam to be bigger,” Elros said.

“I see. Neither of you specified what bigger meant. So, the foal had to guess,” Folen said.

“So, what are we going to do now?” Liam said.

“I don’t have the foggiest,” Folen said. “I believe this is a case for the elders.”

Liam sighed loudly. “But they’ll take forever to decide.”

“At least you’ll have the time to wait for their decision,” Elros said.

“Yeah, thanks to you guys,” Liam said.

“Now, let’s head out!” Folen said.

“What are we going to do about me?” Liam asked.

“You’ll be our mode of transportation, since you scared off the stags,” Folen said.

“That’s fair. But won’t I stick out like a sore thumb?” Liam said.

“We’ll stick to the trees. You’re still smaller than the trees,” Folen said.

Liam picked up Elros and Folen, placing them on top of his shoulders.

He began to walk slowly, heading into the trees. Once inside the forest, he began to move at a brisk walk. It felt good to stretch his legs again.

“At this rate, we will be back at my house in a week!” Elros said on Liam’s left side.

CHAPTER 22

They traveled a great distance, thanks to Liam’s new size. The only problem Liam had was some of the branches from the trees whipped against him, causing scratches on his skin and rips on his clothing. They traveled well into the afternoon.

“We will stop here,” Folen said, patting Liam on the neck to get him to stop.

It was a little after lunchtime when they stopped. Liam was starving. The breakfast Folen had given them was barely a mouthful. His stomach rumbled in anger. It sounded like the rumble of an approaching storm.

“Sounds like we need to find you some dinner,” Folen said.

“Come on, Elros. Let’s go hunt!”

Liam gently set the elves on the ground.

“What should I do?” Liam asked.

“Clear the area of debris and stay out of sight,” Folen said as he and Elros disappeared into the forest.

Liam decided to get to work on it right away. He looked around the forest floor. There were a couple of large boulders scattered around. To Liam, they were the size of large marbles. He kicked them aside and out of the way. Next, he found a log on the outer edge of the camp. He picked it up and moved it where the firepit was going to be, making a

makeshift bench. Liam sat down on the opposite side of the firepit. Looking over his work, he was pleased.

Now for a fire. I need to think small.

Liam thought of a small flame, picturing it in his mind's eye, but nothing happened. He tried again, nothing. No matter how much he tried, he could not produce a flame. He tried using his other magic. The same thing happened, nothing.

Just then, Elros and Folen came back with a large deer carried between them.

Seeing the look of confusion on Liam's face, Elros asked, "What's wrong?"

"I've lost my magic," Liam said.

"You can't lose your magic. Can you?" Elros said, looking at Folen.

"No, you can't. But maybe when you grew, your magic didn't grow with you. So, now it is such a small amount that it is like you don't have any at all," Folen said.

“Great! I’m becoming more useless by the minute! I can’t hunt! I can’t do magic!” Liam said in dismay.

“You’ve made an excellent campsite,” Folen said.

“You’ve made traveling a breeze,” Elros added.

“And I’m sure you’ll make for great protection against the larger animals that roam around here. Especially now that we have this,” Folen said, motioning to the deer carcass.

“Speaking of which, can we set this down? It’s a lot heavier than it looks,” Elros said.

They dropped the deer on the ground with a heavy thud. Elros and Folen had a large fire going within minutes. They had butchered the meat and were now cooking it over the fire.

After Folen and Elros had eaten their fill of deer, it was Liam’s turn. The meat was sweet and juicy, cooked to perfection. But it was gone too soon. Liam’s stomach yearned for more, but he had picked the bones clean.

Clearing a spot to sleep, Liam laid down. Elros climbed on top of Liam's head. with some difficulty, but managed to pull himself up by using Liam's hair. He sat on Liam's forehead, panting.

"You could have helped a little," Elros said.

"I know. I just wanted to see how far you'd get," Liam said.

"Well, thanks!" Elros said, slapping Liam on his forehead.

Liam smiled and looked up at the stars.

"What's going on in that head of yours?" Elros asked.

Liam sighed. "What if the elders decide that they won't help me again?"

"Oh, I think they'll have to help you this time," Folen said, stoking the fire. "You're a much bigger thorn in their side than you were before."

"Yeah, and you'll be staying with us. We can keep you a secret for a while, but once word gets out, there will be no hiding you," Elros said.

“Great! I’ll be the star attraction at my own circus!” Liam said.

“Don’t worry, Liam. We will get through this, just like we got through the Short Life curse. By sticking together!” Elros said.

“Now, try to get some rest,” Folen said.

CHAPTER 23

The next morning, Liam awoke to Folen and Elros calling his name. Opening his eyes, he saw that they had filled their packs up with berries. He sat up, taking the berries. He emptied the contents into his mouth and chewed. Each bag made a decent mouthful, which he was grateful for, but he still craved more. After repacking their packs, they headed out, riding on Liam's shoulders.

Moving through the forest, they made great time. They only stopped for meals and for Liam to sleep. In the early morning, they were soon within sight of Greenend.

"We will need to avoid the patrols around town as much as we can," Folen said. "If you would kindly put me down, I will scout ahead."

Liam picked up Folen and placed him on the ground.

"Elros, keep an eye out for any trouble. Liam, move as fast but as quietly as you can. Try not to draw attention to yourselves. I will check back with you."

He ran up ahead and out of sight.

“Come on. Let’s go,” Elros urged.

Liam picked up his pace, placing his feet on the ground carefully so as not to break any large branches or logs that laid in his path. While Liam focused on this, Elros scurried around, moving from shoulder-to-shoulder, scanning for any movement. Whenever Elros saw something suspicious, he would give the signal to stop, which was the sound of an owl hooting. They did this dance until they were almost clear of Greenend.

We are almost there. Almost home free.

Just then, Elros gave the signal. Liam stopped and his eyes fell towards the ground. His heart stopped. Only ten feet away from them was a boy. He was dressed in armor that was far too big for him. He clanked as he walked, getting closer and closer.

How had Elros missed him? He isn't stopping! What am I going to do?

The boy walked up and bumped into Liam's boot, his helmet's visor falling over his eyes. Lifting the visor, he looked at the boot and then followed Liam's body up until he met Liam's eyes. Liam saw the boy's eyes widen with fear. His lungs filled up with air ready to sound the alarm.

Liam did the only thing he could think of. He scooped up the boy, cupping him in his hands, and ran off. After they had gotten out of view of Greenend, Elros jabbed Liam in the neck with his bow.

"Ouch!" Liam said.

"What did you do?" Elros accused.

"I don't know! I panicked!" Liam said.

"Well? Let's see if he's okay!" Elros said.

Liam slowly opened his hands. The boy lay there, motionless.

Elros quickly ran down Liam's arm into his hands.

“Is he okay?” Liam said.

“He’s still breathing. I think he just passed out,” Elros said.

“You wait here, and I’ll find Folen. I think we passed him when you ran away.”

“But what if he wakes up?” Liam said.

“Be creative,” Elros said, running into the forest as soon as Liam set him on the ground.

As soon as Elros disappeared, the boy began to stir. He sat up, his helmet’s visor falling over his eyes once again. Taking the helmet off, he stood up.

Liam smiled when he heard the boy say, “Must have tripped and hit my head. I could have sworn I saw a...” his voice trailed off as he looked down at Liam’s hand.

Following the hand, he once again met eyes with Liam.

The boy fell and cried, “Giant!”

Crawling backwards, he moved as far away from Liam as he could, until he was at the edge of Liam's hand. Liam tried to calm him down, but then realized he was speaking Elvish.

"Calm down," Liam said in Common. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"Sure," the boy said, looking for an escape. "I bet you like your food nice and calm before you eat it!"

"I'm not going to..." Liam was about to say.

His stomach growled loudly, sending the boy into a crying frenzy.

"Please, Mr. Giant, don't eat me!" the boy begged, crawling on his knees. "I'll do anything!"

Just then, Folen and Elros came out of the trees. Relieved, Liam set down his hand, letting the other two get on. He lifted them up to the boy's level. Seeing the elves, the boy quickly ran to them.

"Minions or Masters?" the boy said.

“What?” Folen replied.

“Are you the giant's minions or masters?” the boy repeated.

“We’re his friends,” said Elros.

“So, you have some sway in what he does, right?”

“What are you trying to say, boy?” Folen asked. “Liam, what have you said to this young man?”

“Nothing! I just said I wasn’t going to hurt or ea...”

As if on cue, Liam’s stomach growled loudly once more. This time, the boy groveled at Elros’ feet.

“Please don’t let him eat me!” he cried.

“I see,” Folen said. “It seems like we’ve gotten off on the wrong foot. Let me introduce ourselves. My name is Folen, this is Elros, and you’ve already met Liam.” He smiled as he motioned towards Liam. “What is your name?”

“W-Wendell,” the boy replied.

“Well met, Wendell! Would you care to join us for lunch?”

Folen said.

Wendell nodded his head.

“Good, now Elros and I will go fetch a deer. You can stay here with Liam.”

Wendell looked like he was going to object but with one look from Folen, he grew silent. Once again, the two elves disappeared into the forest.

CHAPTER 24

“Well, it looks like it’s just you and me, Wendell,” Liam said softly, looking down at the small figure in his hand. “Tell me

what a lad like yourself was doing out in the forest, dressed up like that?”

“Isn't it obvious?” Wendell said. “I was on patrol.”

“You're a guard?” Liam said. “Aren't you a little young for that?”

“Not according to the recruiters,” Wendell said smugly.

“How old are you?” Liam asked.

“Fifteen.”

“Now, how old are you, really?”

“Thirteen,” Wendell said sheepishly. “They originally wanted to recruit my older brother, Percy. But when they found out he was too sick to serve, they were about to leave. So, I took the invitation myself. I took his armor and reported for duty.”

“Why did you do something like that?” Liam said.

“Well, you see, it's just me and my brother. Since my brother fell ill, it's been a lot harder to get food and medicine that my brother needs. The money left to us by our parents is running

low. So, when I heard that this job paid five gold per night, I took it. Five gold!”

Liam looked down at the boy.

That amount is so little. but it was enough for this kid to risk his life for.

“Had I known I’d run into you and your friends, I would have stayed home,” Wendell said.

“Oh, come on! I’m not that bad of a host, am I?” Liam said.

“You did kidnap me,” Wendell said.

“I’ve kept my promise of not hurting or eating you,” Liam said. “And speaking of eating, here comes Folen and Elros with breakfast.”

Folen and Elros had come home with a big buck between them.

“Wendell, come down and help me cut up this deer. Elros and Liam will get the fire started!” Folen said.

Liam set Wendell down by Folen. The boy seemed to be relieved to be on solid ground. Liam sat down next to the fire pit. He watched as Folen taught Wendell how to skin the deer. He smiled. Folen seemed to have a way with kids.

“A little help here?” Elros said, carrying a pile of sticks far too heavy for him. Liam picked up a few from Elros’ pile, lightening the load.

“So, did you learn anything from our new friend?” Elros asked, now speaking in Elvish.

“No, not really. He’s your average run-of-the-mill kid. Just trying to make enough money to live.”

“Do you think he will give us away?” Elros asked.

“I don’t know. He’s a good kid. I think we can try to persuade him not to, but I don’t know,” Liam said.

They soon had the deer skinned and roasting on the fire. The three of them ate their fill before they turned it over to Liam. Liam attacked the deer, making sure each bone was free of

meat. He felt as if he were eating a mouse. Sucking on a bone, he saw Wendell staring up at him in awe. He felt embarrassed and quickly finished.

“Now,” Folen said, “you see, Liam here wasn’t always a giant. In fact, he is supposed to be normal-sized like you and me. We are on our way to get Liam a cure so he can get back to normal. We need to do so in secret. The less people know about Liam, the better. Can we count on you not to tell anyone about him?”

“Well, I guess, but it’s gonna cost ya! Twenty gold!” Wendell said.

They all looked at each other and nodded.

“Deal,” said Folen.

“I meant fifty!” Wendell said quickly.

“How’s about twenty gold and I don’t eat you?” Liam said menacingly.

Wendell gulped and said, “Deal.”

They handed Wendell the bag of coins.

“I will drop you off at the gates,” Folen said, wrapping his arms around him. “Liam, Elros, find another campsite and get it ready for tonight. I should be back by dusk.”

They waved goodbye to Wendell and Folen as they disappeared into the distance.

CHAPTER 25

Making a new camp, Liam and Elros waited for Folen to return. It was around midnight when Folen appeared.

“What took you so long?” Elros said.

“I decided to make sure Wendell made it safely home to his brother,” Folen said. “Apparently, Wendell gets into trouble like this all the time and comes home telling wild stories. So, I think we should be safe, even if he does reveal our secret.”

Liam let out a sigh of relief.

“But this was too close. I’m afraid we are going to have to go deeper into the woods,” Folen said.

“Deeper?” said Elros. “Won’t that mean we’ll be in Shagamaw territory?”

Folen nodded.

“Shagamaw? What’s a Shagamaw?” Liam asked.

“A Shagamaw is a giant half-bear, half-moose. They are very territorial and compete for food. Shagamaw’s will always fight to the death, so prepare to battle when you see one. Though, I’ve never seen one myself,” Folen said.

“No big deal. It won’t come after us while I’m around,” Liam said.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Folen said. “You might be bigger but remember, the Shagamaw competes for food. That means it must fight off larger and stronger predators. We must try to avoid them.”

As they turned in for the night, Liam had a hard time falling asleep. Just thinking of something that wouldn’t be afraid of his size sent chills down his spine. The next day, they started on their journey by heading deeper into the forest. The trees became denser, and Liam’s pace had slowed. Time seemed to stand still, making the walk feel endless. Folen seemed not to lose his sense of time like the others.

“It’s time for us to hunt and for Liam to clear a spot for camp,” he said.

Liam stopped, letting them off. He waved as they disappeared into the woods. Sighing, Liam began his work clearing the camp. A couple of hours had passed. Liam was sitting down on the ground with a large branch in his hand. He had a stone in the other hand and was using it to sharpen the end of the branch. Satisfied with the newly made spear, he laid it by his side. Standing up, he searched for another branch.

Just then, Elros came bursting out from the forest, panic on his face. Liam was about to ask them what was wrong, when he heard the roar. It sounded like a mix between a roar of a bear and the bellow of a moose. A thirty-foot Shagamaw emerged from the trees in pursuit of the elves. Folen came running out and tripped, falling on the ground. Liam had only seconds to respond. The Shagamaw would soon be on top of the elves. He dove in front of the beast and used his body to shield the

elves. Wincing, he felt the Shagamaw's claws tear into his back. He felt the flesh rip and the blood trickle down. Looking under him, he saw Elros helping Folen to his feet.

The Shagamaw raked his claws against Liam's back once again. Only two things were on his mind: protect his friends and reach his spear. Arching his back, he tried to throw the Shagamaw off.

"I need you to move with me," Liam said to Elros and Folen.

They nodded. Crawling sideways, Liam moved towards his spear. The Shagamaw pounded against his back, causing him to stop in his tracks. He continued to make his way towards the spear. Reaching out his hand, it brushed against the spear.

Just a little further.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the Shagamaw rear up onto its hind legs, readying another attack. Stretching to his limit, he closed his fingers and gripped the spear, turning around quickly. Liam held his spear out as the Shagamaw

came down. The spear buried itself deep into the beast's chest.

Slumping to the ground, the Shagamaw fell dead.

CHAPTER 26

Liam lay on his side, panting. “Are you guys... okay?”

“Yes, we’re okay,” replied Elros.

“Of course, we are!” Folen scolded. “But you’re not, you fool! You shouldn’t have put yourself in danger like that!”

Liam smiled. He knew that Folen was only angry with him because he cared. After getting a long lecture, Elros explained what happened.

“We were out hunting, and we came upon the tracks of a moose. So, we decided to follow them. They led us deeper into the forest. After a mile or so of following the tracks, they suddenly changed into bear tracks. Confused, we stood there for a while, wondering where we had lost the trail. That’s when we heard the Shagamaw charge.”

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Folen said. “Switching which two legs it was walking on, so it could leave certain prints. What an amazing creature.”

“It sure left its mark on me,” Liam grimaced.

“Let’s have a look at those wounds,” Folen said.

He walked around and inspected Liam’s back.

“I was afraid of this,” he said. “Your wounds are deep and will soon become infected. We will need to get you to a proper healer. Until then, I’ll make up a salve made of silver sap. It’s going to take a while, so let’s get started.”

Elros and Folen began to work.

“Where do we get the silver sap?” Elros asked.

“The trees that have dark green leaves with silver linings will have the silver sap in them,” Folen said, putting a tap to a tree. He hammered it in, and silvery sap began to flow. Gathering it in a pot, they began to boil it. Building a second fire, they decided to butcher the lower, moose half, of the Shagamaw.

Liam helped where he could, but the pain prevented him from doing too much. The Shagamaw meat was delicious and there was enough of it to satisfy even Liam.

“Alright, Liam, it’s time. Take off your shirt,” Folen said.

Liam took off what was left of his shirt.

“I’ll need your help for this, Elros,” he instructed.

Liam lay flat on his stomach, arms at his side. Folen and Elros lifted the pot of sap between them. Climbing up his arm, they made it up to his back, being careful not to step on any scratches. They poured the sap onto his back. It seeped onto the wounds. It stung at first but then a feeling of warmth came over the wounds. Liam suddenly became very tired.

“That’s all of it,” Folen said, emptying out the last of the silver sap salve. “Liam, you should get some rest. We’ll head out in the morning. Liam?”

“I think he’s way ahead of you.” Elros laughed, pointing at Liam, who was fast asleep.

CHAPTER 27

Liam wrapped up the last of the Shagamaw meat in his tattered shirt. They began their journey home. The first day passed with no problems. However, the next day, the wounds on Liam's back began to bother him. After a day of walking, they stopped and made camp. They finished the rest of the Shagamaw's meat and acquired a large pelt. Liam lay on the pelt, grateful for something soft to lay on. Folen climbed up onto Liam's back and inspected the scratches.

"I was afraid of this. The wounds are red, and pus is coming out of them. Infection has set in. We need to get to a healer soon," he said.

"My home is only a day away. Half a day at the speed we've been traveling. We should make it by lunchtime," Elros said.

"I'm fine, Folen," Liam said. "I can make it."

“Alright, but if you start to feel worse, let me know. We can always come to you,” Folen said.

Liam had a fitful night’s rest. His back hurt to the touch. Even when you didn’t touch it, the scratches throbbed in pain.

Liam walked with a purpose today: to reach Elros’ house.

With each step he took, he started to become hotter and hotter.

His vision started to blur around the edges.

Just a little farther.

Liam exited the dense forest and saw the familiar little cottage, crystals clinking in the breeze.

“Liam, you have a fever! You can stop here! Elros and I will get some help!” Folen said, feeling his skin.

“No, I’m good, I can make it,” Liam said tiredly.

He continued his way towards the cottage. The closer he got to the house, the blurrier his vision became. Falling onto his hands and knees, he was exhausted.

“Liam! Your job is done! Let us take it from here!” Folen said.

“Listen to him, Liam! You’re going to faint!” Elros pleaded.

Liam nodded and lay on the ground. He watched Elros and Folen run the last twenty feet to the cottage, before passing out completely.

CHAPTER 28

“Liam, please wake up!” a familiar voice pleaded. It was the cry of Elros’ little sister, Ada.

“You just gotta wake up!” Ada cried.

“Ada, it’s time to go home,” said Elros.

“Okay,” she said, heartbroken.

“I’m sorry, Ada. Sometimes it doesn’t matter how much we wish for something. It doesn’t always happen the way we want it to,” Elros said.

“Maybe if you wished one more time, it might,” said Liam, eyes still closed.

“Oh, Liam, I wish you would wake up!” Ada said hopefully.

Liam opened up his eyes and saw Ada and Elros standing close by.

“Look who decided to join the land of the living,” Elros said with a smirk.

“I just wanted to test this longevity thing out,” Liam said.

“It’s longevity not invulnerability,” Elros clarified.

“How long was I out?” Liam asked.

“About a day,” Elros said nonchalantly.

“Where is everybody?”

“In the house, talking about what the next step of your healing process is.”

“Let’s get closer and listen to what they’re planning,” Liam said, picking them up and rising to his feet.

As stealthy as he could, Liam made his way to the back of the cottage. Kneeling down, he set Ada and Elros on the ground.

They listened at the nearest window.

“Have you contacted the healer?” Folen asked.

“We have,” a woman’s voice said. Liam instantly recognized it as Nerissa, Elros’ mother. “But she has gone on a hiatus and won’t be back for a week.”

“His infection is only going to get worse unless we do something,” Folen said.

“I can help. I was a healer back in the day. But we are going to need lots of supplies and help,” Nerissa said.

“We have no choice; they will have to be informed sooner than later,” a man’s voice said. It was Sennin, Elros’ father.

“Very well, we will talk to the Elders in the morning,” Folen said.

“Now, what could be taking the children so long?” Nerissa said.

“I’ll go check,” said Folen.

Liam heard the chairs slide across the floor. He motioned for Ada and Elros to go, while he headed back down to his spot.

He laid down just before Folen opened the cottage door. Ada and Elros stood in front of him.

“What’s been keeping you two?” Folen questioned.

“Nothing,” Elros and Ada said in unison, smiling at each other.

“Oh, really? Well, it’s time for young elves to get some rest.

We are going to have an eventful morning tomorrow.

Everyone will need to be on their best behavior,” Folen said, emphasizing everyone.

Liam got the hint. As much as he hated the idea, they would need to talk to the Elders of the village.

CHAPTER 29

The next day, Liam was awakened by Elros.

“Come on, Liam! The Elders will be here soon. Mother wants you to bathe before they come.”

“Bathe?” Liam said, sitting up. “I don’t think I’ll fit in your bath house.”

“No, not there,” Elros said. “You’re going to a special place to bathe. Come on!”

Elros ran on ahead of Liam. Liam stood up and followed Elros, quickly catching up. Elros gave up running against Liam and rode on his shoulder.

“Just through that group of trees,” directed Elros.

Passing through the trees, they came upon a large lake. The lake was milky white, with thousands of tiny pink bubbles rising to the surface.

“Okay, Elros,” Liam said, turning his head to face Elros.

“What does the magic lake do?”

“It’s not magic, Liam,” Elros said. “It’s a natural phenomenon, a mineral spring.”

“Okay, then. What is a mineral spring?”

“A mineral spring is a spot where a spring collects in a pond or lake. It produces so many minerals that the water becomes undrinkable. However, we found that the waters were ideal for healing and for general skin care.”

“That’s why elves seem to glow!” Liam said.

“You caught us,” Elros admitted. “Now, mother said you needed to soak for at least ten minutes to receive the full healing effects.”

“Okay,” Liam said as he stripped down to his under garments. He began to walk into the lake and the moment his skin hit the water, he felt the tingling sensation. It was a strange feeling, but not unpleasant. The lake became deeper and deeper. He

went in until the water was up to his shoulders. The bubbles penetrated his wounds. It burned and soothed at the same time. Waiting ten minutes, Elros remained on the shore. Before he exited the water, Liam dunked his head in the water. Coming up, he spat out the water. Climbing out of the lake, he did his best to dry off. He shook his head, causing water to rain down on the forest below.

“Hey! Watch it!” Elros said, trying to shield himself, unsuccessfully.

“Whoops! Sorry.” Liam laughed.

He quickly put his pants and boots back on.

“Come on. Maybe I can change before the Elders arrive,” Elros said, wringing out his shirt.

“I’ll help,” Liam said as he picked Elros up.

He began to blow on Elros, only stopping when Elros was completely dry.

“There, all dry.” Liam smiled.

“What was that?” Elros exclaimed.

“I call it a blow dry,” Liam said.

“Never do that to me again!” Elros said, trying to smooth down his hair.

Liam laughed, placing Elros on his shoulder. They made their way back to the house. Just as he was about to exit the trees where the cottage was, he stopped. He wanted to overhear what they were talking about.

“So, what you are saying is that they received two wishes each? And they wished for Liam to become bigger?” a voice said.

Liam recognized it as Lord Tharival’s, the leader of the Elders.

“That’s my theory, at least,” Folen admitted.

“Where is the boy?” another voice asked.

Liam recognized it as Lord Quarion’s.

Liam stepped out of the trees, into the clearing. He saw the whole council of Elders were there, Lord Tharival, Lord Quarion, Lord Varis, Lady Xanaphia, and Lady Valenthe.

Taking Elros off his shoulder, he bowed.

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintances again, my Lords and Ladies.”

Lady Xanaphia fainted at the sight of him. Swooning, Lady Valenthe was caught by Lord Quarion. Lord Varis checked on Lady Xanaphia. Liam had forgotten how intimidating his presence could be. He knelt down on the ground near the group of elves.

“I am sorry,” he apologized.

“No need to apologize, my boy,” Tharival said. “We were just not fully prepared.”

Lady Valenthe and Xanaphia had both recovered and were now sitting down on some chairs.

“Liam, Folen has told us that you fought off a Shagamaw, saving him and Elros. Is that true?” asked Tharival.

“Yes, it’s true,” Liam replied.

“May we see the wounds?”

Liam nodded and turned around, revealing his back. Many of them gasped at the sight.

“You see our concern,” Sennin said.

“The infection is only going to get worse,” Nerissa said. “We need help.”

“Of course, you will receive the help you need,” Lady Valenthe said.

“But we will need to talk about how to solve the matter of Liam’s size issue,” Lord Varis said.

“That’s all we ask,” Sennin said.

“Very well,” Tharival said. “We shall send you some volunteers, as well as some guards.”

“Guards?” Liam asked.

“Yes, once word gets out, you will be quite the spectacle,”

Quarion said.

Liam groaned. He was afraid of that.

“Not to worry, Liam. The guards are there to help you retain some privacy,” Tharival assured.

They moved to leave when Liam asked, “What about the matter of food?”

“We will take care of that, as well,” Xanaphia said. “Now, if we could please get out of the sun. I feel faint.”

As they disappeared out of sight, Elros teased, “Always thinking with your stomach.”

“It was a perfectly logical question,” said Folen. “Just how is the city going to support someone of Liam’s size?”

“Maybe they will propose a food tax,” suggested Sennin.

“Well, since we’re on the subject, lunch is about ready,”

Nerissa said as she walked into the cottage.

Soon after, Ada and Nerissa came out with trays of food. Liam waited patiently for everyone to eat their fill before he started. Ada and Elros would bring him loaf after loaf, cake after cake. They even rolled out a wheel of cheese. He ate them all in one bite. Eventually, they ran out of food to give him.

CHAPTER 30

Down the road that led to the city, four guards led four women down the path. As they drew closer, they saw Liam. Stopping in their tracks, they hesitated to continue.

“Don’t worry!” Elros called. “We just fed him!”

Folen smacked him on the back of his head.

“Don’t scare my helpers away!” said Nerissa as she ran to meet them.

“Over here, my fine fellows!” greeted Sennin to the guards.

With the encouragement of Nerissa and Sennin, the group came closer. The guards lined up in a row, while the girls received their instructions from Nerissa.

“Since we will be working with each other, I believe introductions are in order,” Sennin said. “My name is Sennin,

this is Folen, this is my son Elros, and this is, of course, Liam.

Now, shall we start from left to right?"

An elf with light brown hair stepped forward. "My name is Iolas."

The next elf with blonde hair stepped forward. "My name is Morthil."

Before the next two could introduce themselves, Liam interrupted saying, "I remember you two. You were at the gates when we went to the library."

"Yes, my name is Helion," said the one with raven-black hair.

"And I'm Stilmyst," the one with silver hair said.

"Yeah! You and I played keep away from Elros!" Liam remembered.

"Sorry about that. I really did think you were a doll," Stilmyst said sheepishly.

"My plan worked, then," Liam said.

They all laughed.

Folen cleared his throat. “Now, I want a ten-foot perimeter around Liam. This is for everyone’s safety. If anyone wants to interact with Liam, they will need permission from either Sennin or myself. I know this will be hard for you, Liam, but no food or drink unless it passes an inspection. Is that clear?”

The guards clicked their heels together and saluted saying, “Sir, yes sir!”

“And Elros, you will stay with Liam,” Folen said.

“That won’t be hard,” Elros said. “It’s not like I’m with him all the time.”

“That’s the thing, Elros, you will need to be with him all the time,” Folen emphasized.

“I understand,” Elros said.

CHAPTER 31

Nerissa came over and tapped Folen on the shoulder.

“Are you finished? We need to borrow Liam.”

“Yes, go on, Liam. Take Elros with you,” Folen reminded.

Liam picked Elros up, placing him on his shoulder. Standing up, he revealed his true size. He heard a shriek of surprise.

Looking over to where the shriek came from, he saw the group of girls. Nerissa hurried over to calm the girls.

“Now, girls, this is Liam and my son, Elros. They are going to help us collect the ingredients. So, we can make the salve.”

Liam smiled, trying to look as friendly as possible.

“Liam if you would be so kind as to carry us. I will lead us to the meadow,” Nerissa said.

Liam stooped down, laying his hand down on the ground.

Nerissa and two of the girls hesitantly got on. He moved his other hand down for the other two to climb on. Once they were on, he stood back up.

“Hold on tight!” Elros said.

“Head towards the mountains, Liam.” Nerissa said.

The girls clung onto Liam’s fingers as he walked.

“Don’t worry, I won’t drop you.” Liam assured them.

They walked in silence for what seemed like an hour. Elros broke the silence by asking, “Mother, what kind of ingredients are we collecting?”

“Well, let’s see, we will need some honey, beeswax, yarrow flowers and comfrey leaves,” Nerissa said. “I know of a meadow where we can find all four, but it’s quite a long way away from home. I thought Liam could save us some time by escorting us there.”

“Yeah, with Liam, it will only take us minutes to get there,”

Elros said.

“I would have rather walked,” one girl with red hair cried.

She was clutching onto Liam’s middle finger rather tight.

“Oh, come on, Gweyr. It’s not so bad, once you get used to it,” said another with snow-white hair, who clutched onto his ring finger.

“Maybe if we introduce ourselves, it will get your mind off everything else,” said one with blonde hair. She had her arms around his pointer finger on his other hand.

Gweyr shook her head, burying her face into Liam’s finger.

“Alright, I’ll do it!” the blonde girl said. “Hello, Liam, my name is Eillia. The scaredy-cat is Gweyr.”

“My name is Iryen,” said the one with light brown hair on his other ring finger.

“And I’m Syviis,” the one the snow-white hair said.

“It is a pleasure to meet you all,” Liam said.

“We’re here!” Nerissa said cheerfully.

Liam stood in front of a vast meadow that stretched to the mountainside. It was full of tiny white flowers. Thick foliage crept on the ground.

“Set us down here,” Nerissa said.

He did as he was told, having to pry Gweyr off his finger.

“Now, we will gather the yarrow flowers and comfrey leaves.

Boys, you will collect the honey and beeswax,” Nerissa said, pointing at the cliffs.

“How are we going to carry this stuff, mother?” Elros asked.

“Oh, dear. In all my haste to go, I forgot containers for everything,” Nerissa admitted.

“Don’t worry,” Liam said. “We can use my pockets. They can carry as much as we need.”

“Yes, that will work. We will need to carry a lot of ingredients,” Nerissa said. “Alright, girls, let’s start picking, and you two figure out how to get those hives.”

FAIRY CIRCLES: A SHORT LIFE

CHAPTER 32

Liam and Elros made their way towards the cliffs. The height of the hives would be no problem. Liam could easily reach them. It would be the number of bees that were the problem.

“How do we get rid of the bees?” Elros said.

“We could use water and drown the bees?” Liam suggested.

“No, that would wash the honey away.”

“I could blow the bees away?”

“The bees would just come back once you stop blowing.”

They thought for a little longer. The silence was interrupted by Elros saying, “I got it!”

“What?” said Liam.

“Let me show you.” Elros said.

Elros ran off towards the woods and began to pick up sticks.

“I need you to start breaking some branches off the trees. The greener the better,” Elros said, breaking off some of the lower hanging branches.

Liam began to break branches off the trees, causing loud cracking noises to echo across the meadow. The girls looked up from their work to see what was going on. Elros gave them the okay signal and they went back to work. As soon as they had enough wood, Liam followed Elros back to the cliffs.

Elros began to pile the sticks up together. Liam realized what he was doing.

“So, we’re going to burn them out?” Liam said as Elros ignited the wood.

“Not exactly. I remember a friend saying that after witnessing a forest fire, all the bees left. Not because their hives were burned but because the forest was full of new trees.”

“So...” Liam said.

“So, that means that there was lots of smoke!” Elros said.

“Oh, so we smoke them out.”

“Yes, exactly! The bees will leave, we won’t get stung. A win-win, I’d say.”

Liam built up the fire until they ran out of branches to burn.

Smoke billowed from their fire, covering the hives with black smoke. Clouds of bees came from the hives. They circled around head and then flew away in search of new homes. As soon as they knew the hives were bee free, they began to fill Liam’s left pocket with the hives. Wax, honey, and all.

Finishing their task, they went to check on the girls. The girls had collected a sizable number of flowers and leaves. But now with the help of Elros and Liam, they soon filled Liam’s right pocket. Once they were done, Liam picked them up and they headed back home.

CHAPTER 33

When they arrived at the cottage, Liam sat down. His back was killing him. All that moving and stretching had aggravated the wounds on his back. Elros, noticing Liam's discomfort, looked at his back.

"You didn't reopen the wounds, but you need to be more careful," Elros warned.

Liam watched as the girls, with the help of the guards, rolled out a couple of large cauldrons.

"Good," said Nerissa. "Now, Liam, empty your pockets and fill up the cauldrons."

Emptying his pockets, he filled the cauldrons to the brims. They lit fires under them and began to boil the contents.

Soon, they heard the noise of a large crowd approaching.

Liam's guards took their positions. The crowd surrounded

Liam almost instantly. There were elves of all kinds: old,

young, men, and women. All came to see the giant. Many had

looks of awe and excitement on their faces. Some were afraid.

Pushing through the crowds were elves with platters of food.

Sennin and Folen met them, and the lead messenger gave them

a piece of paper.

Sennin read the paper. "The Elders have sent this meal and a recipe."

Folen took the paper away. He skimmed over it. His eyes widened.

"This is the recipe for Quanta bread!"

Everyone in earshot gasped.

"What is Quanta bread?" Liam asked.

"It is an ancient and secret recipe. A food that never spoils and can satisfy any appetite," Folen said.

“Maybe even yours,” Elros said.

“Speaking of which. May I?” Liam asked, gesturing towards the food.

Sennin nodded and waved the elves with the food through.

The first elf had a tray full of bread of every kind. The elf shook violently, spilling a few of the loaves. Liam reached down and took the tray from the elf. He tipped it in his mouth, eating them in one bite and returned the tray back to the frightened elf.

Liam said, “Thank you.”

Accomplishing his task, the elf ran away. The line proceeded and the elves became more comfortable around Liam. The crowd watched in awe as Liam ate plate after plate of food.

Some of them started to make bets on how much he would eat.

Then came the meat. Large boars had been roasted. Liam dug in voraciously. Finishing one of the boars in a matter of minutes, he looked for more. That’s when he saw the faces of

the elves. They were no longer in awe. There was no more betting. Fear was in their eyes. Many of the parents had shielded their children's eyes away from the carnage. Liam took great care not to eat the second boar quite as fast. Soon all the food was gone.

CHAPTER 34

Nerissa announced, “The salve is ready. If you would take your position, Liam, we can get started.”

Liam laid down on his stomach next to the cauldrons of salve. Sennin, Folen, and Elros helped the girls lift the cauldrons up the ladders and onto Liam’s back. Pouring the salve over his back, they began to massage it in. The salve was warm and felt good on his wounds. It tingled and numbed the pain. By the time they were done, it was dusk. The crowd had gone home for the night.

“Our agenda for tomorrow is to collect ingredients for the Quanta bread. Most of the ingredients are common, save for the blue salt,” Sennin said.

“Where can we get the blue salt?” Liam asked.

“There is a salt spring about a week away. But we will get there faster traveling with you, so maybe three days?” Elros said.

“It’s settled, then. Liam and Elros will go retrieve the blue salt while we gather the other ingredients,” Sennin said.

They all agreed. Liam noticed someone was missing from the group.

“Where is Ada?” he asked.

“She was looking for you earlier this morning,” Stilmyst said.

“But you had already left.”

“We’ll have to spend some time with her when we get back,”

Elros suggested.

“Yeah,” Liam agreed.

Liam decided to go to bed early so they could start out early the next day. Waking up early, they began to collect provisions for their journey.

“Have you seen Ada?” Liam asked Elros.

“She’s probably off pouting because we’re leaving again.”

Elros said, shouldering his pack. “Mother packed us a sack full of bread and cakes. Could you grab it?”

Liam picked up the large sack and placed it in his pocket.

Picking up Elros, they headed off towards the spring. It was a pleasant spring day. The sun warmed Liam’s bare skin. His wounds weren’t painful at all. Everything would have been great if it wasn’t for the fact that he was still a giant. The more they walked the hungrier Liam became. Soon, it was time to stop for lunch. Sitting down in a small clearing in the trees, Liam placed Elros down.

“You wait here. I’ll go catch a deer. Be back in a few minutes!” Elros said, running into the woods.

Liam sat there in the woods.

“Alone, again.” He sighed. “I hate when everyone goes off without me. And now, I’m talking to myself.”

Liam’s stomach growled loudly.

“You be quiet! Elros said he’d be back in a few minutes.”

Finding a branch, Liam began to doodle in the dirt. A few minutes went by with no sign of Elros. His stomach growled again in protest.

“Okay, but what can I eat?” Liam questioned his stomach.

He then remembered the large sack of bread in his pocket.

Rummaging through his pocket, he pulled out the sack.

“I’m sure Elros wouldn’t mind if I ate a little bit of the bread.”

Untying the sack, he took a pinch of the contents, which equaled four or five loaves. He tossed the loaves into his mouth and chewed slowly, savoring the taste.

“I’ll just have a little bit more,” he said.

But once he got started, one more pinch turned into two more pinches. He was on his fourth pinch. When he was about to throw the bread in his mouth and heard a scream. Pausing, he looked around. Seeing no one he continued to move the food to his mouth, when he heard, “Stop Liam! Don’t eat me!”

Stopping, Liam looked at his hand. There, pinched between some loaves of bread was Ada caught by her dress.

CHAPTER 35

“Ada?” Liam said, setting her free. “What are you doing here?”

And what are you doing in the bread?”

She began to sob. “Oh, Liam! I was so scared you were going to eat me!”

“I almost did. You need to be more careful, Ada. Now, what were you doing in the sack of bread?”

“I just wanted to see you, Liam. You’ve been so busy since you came home. I just wanted to be with you.” Ada cried.

“It’s okay, Ada. I understand. I was just talking to Elros about how we needed to spend some time with you, so I could play with you,” Liam said.

“Really?” Ada said, sniffing.

“Cross my heart,” he said. “Now, maybe you can help me keep my mind off food. What should we do?”

Ada looked around and saw the doodles on the forest floor.

“You should draw me something!” Ada said.

“Like what?” Liam asked, smoothing out the ground to create a blank canvas.

“A unicorn! Draw me the unicorn you saw!” she said cheerfully.

“Well, first thing is that the unicorn was a girl unicorn. She was a pure white horse with a golden horn and golden eyes. She was a little bit bigger because she still had the baby inside her. But she was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.”

Liam moved the branch in the dirt, drawing as he described the unicorn.

“How’s that?” He said as he was finishing his drawing.

“It’s wonderful! I want to see it up close!” Ada said.

Liam placed her on the ground next to his drawing. It was the size of a real unicorn compared to her. Ada ran around the drawing in delight. Liam was glad to see her back to her

normal, cheerful self. Just then, Elros came from out of the woods, deer on his shoulders. Liam quickly snatched up Ada before Elros could see her.

Dropping the deer on the ground, Elros said, “Sorry it took so long. The deer must have known we were coming. You must be starving.”

“Not really,” Liam said, putting his hand behind his back.

“What are you hiding? Did you get into the bread?” Elros admonished.

“Yes, but don’t get mad,” Liam said.

“Why would I be mad?” asked Elros.

“Well, when I was eating the bread, I found a surprise inside,” Liam said, opening his hand, revealing Ada.

“Ada! What are you doing here?” Elros said angrily.

“Now, now, Elros, we said we weren’t going to get mad,”

Liam said, seeing Ada beginning to cry.

“I did not!” Elros said. “Ada, what were you thinking?!

Hiding in the bread sack! Liam could have swallowed you whole! Do Mother and Father know where you are?”

“I left them a note.” Ada cried.

“A note! Well, that makes everything better, doesn’t it?” Elros said sarcastically.

“Hey, calm down, Elros,” Liam said.

“Great, we’re going to lose a whole day taking you back,” Elros said in a huff.

“Who says we have to take her back?” Liam said.

“Oh, so you want her to come with us. Fine! She’s your responsibility!” Elros said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have lunch to prepare!”

Elros dragged the carcass out of the way and began to butcher it.

Liam looked at Ada and said, “Elros was just scared. You could have been eaten and never seen again. And you shouldn’t have left home.”

Tears ran down her cheek.

“But now we know better and will follow the rules from now on, right?” Liam asked.

Ada nodded enthusiastically.

CHAPTER 36

They ate lunch in silence. You could feel the tension in the air. When it was time to go, Liam set Ada and Elros on top of his head. They traveled for five minutes before Ada finally broke down.

“I’m sorry, Elros! I’ll listen to you from now on. Please don’t be mad at me!” Ada cried. She ran and hugged Elros tightly. Elros returned her hug and said, “I can never stay mad at you for very long. I forgive you.”

Having Ada along was like having a breath of fresh air breathed into the journey. They would play games while they walked to relieve the stress. While Elros went hunting, she kept Liam company.

Soon, they found themselves at the salt spring. The water in the spring was tinged a pale blue. It was cloudy and frothed as it sprang from the middle of the pool. Liam set down Elros and Ada. Elros went to the edge of the pool and dipped his hand in, tasting the water. He instantly spat it back out.

“Salt water,” he said. “This is the place.”

“Where is all the salt?” Ada said, looking around.

“Well, the majority of the salt is at the bottom,” Elros explained.

Ada looked in the deep, dark pool.

“How are we going to get down there?”

“Watch,” said Elros as he pointed at Liam.

Liam knelt down at the edge and pulled out the now-empty bread sack. He dipped the sack in the pool. The water was now up to his shoulder. Liam pulled his arm out of the water. The sack was bulging as water drained off of it. He set down the bag. It was filled to the brim with blue salt.

“Alright!” Elros said. “Now let’s get head back home.”

They traveled home in higher spirits than before. Liam

couldn’t wait to try this Quanta bread. He was tired of feeling

hungry. It was the last night before they would reach home.

They had just finished dinner and Liam offered to clean up.

He had started back towards the camp when all of a sudden, he

heard a scream. Hurrying towards the camp, he stopped before

entering. Looking through the trees, he saw Elros and Ada tied

up in the middle of a circle of strange creatures. They were

gangly and of medium build. Wearing nothing but loin cloths,

their skin was the color of bruises. Their bald heads had bat

ears and large fangs. Two larger creatures dressed in armor

made of bone stood next to Elros and Ada. They were more

muscular and had a fiercer look to them. Liam remembered his

father’s descriptions of the monsters. The smaller ones would

be goblins. Not too much of a threat. But the larger creatures

were orcs, a more bloodthirsty race. Neither of them had love

for travelers. The goblins were dancing and cackling around in a circle.

“Can we eat them now, boss?” one said, walking close to Ada and licking his fangs.

“SILENCE!” The lead orc with the purple scar yelled. “Tell me, elfling, what are you doing in our part of the forest?” he asked Ada, holding up her chin.

“LEAVE HER ALONE!” Elros said, struggling against his bonds. The other orc yanked him back and threw him on the ground.

“YOU BETTER LISTEN TO HIM AND LEAVE THEM ALONE!” Liam’s voice boomed. The goblins stopped their dancing, standing perfectly still.

“Who dares command U’rick?” the one orc holding Ada said. Liam pushed through the trees causing some to crack and break.

“I dare,” Liam said, standing to his full height. At the sight of Liam, the goblins began to panic. Scattering, they ran away as fast as they could.

“Stand your ground, cowards!” U’rick shouted.

But it was too late. The goblins were gone, leaving only the two orcs.

“Now, I’m only going to say this once. Let my friends go!”

Liam said threateningly.

“These elf filth are your friends?” U’rick said. “Are you not part man? Your race has no alliances with elves. Let us rid you of this scum.”

“I said they are my friends, so they are my friends. Release them now or I’ll kill you where you stand!” Liam said.

U’rick stared at Liam for a while and then said something to the other orc in a language Liam couldn’t understand. The orc untied Elros and returned his bow. U’rick threw Ada at Elros, causing them both to fall.

“Here, have your precious elf scum.”

Liam picked them up out of harm’s way. The other orc whistled, and two wolf-like creatures ran up to them. They mounted them and rode off into the forest.

“What are orcs doing in the forest?” Liam wondered out loud.

“I don’t know but let’s keep this between ourselves,” Elros said.

Liam could not sleep, so they continued their journey through the night.

CHAPTER 37

As the sun rose, they reached the cottage. They were greeted by Sennin, Nerissa, and a woman Liam recognized as Esta the healer. Liam set Elros and Ada down. Nerissa ran towards Ada. She hugged her tightly.

“Ada! I am so glad to see that you are safe! You shouldn’t have run away like that!” Nerissa scolded. She hugged Ada again.

“Elros, Liam! Welcome back!” Sennin greeted. “Were you able to retrieve the blue salt?”

Liam reached into his pocket and brought the sack full of salt out. He set the bag in front of Sennin.

“Good! Now we can make the Quanta,” Sennin said. “But that can wait. We have company!”

Esta stood there, mouth agape, staring at Liam. Sennin tapped her on the shoulder, causing her to jump.

Righting herself, Esta said, “Right, down to business. If you could lay down so I can examine the wounds more efficiently.”

Liam laid down on the ground. He felt Esta climb onto his back. She walked the span of his back, being careful not to step on the wounds.

“When the council told me I would be working with you, I thought they were exaggerating on how large you were. But they were right to call you mountainous in size.” She chuckled. “Nerissa, what have you been doing in terms of treatment?”

“The town’s healers and I have been treating him with a salve made up of honey, yarrow and comfrey. We have also been having him bathe in the mineral spring,” Nerissa added.

“Well, everything seems to be healing nicely,” Esta said. “The only service I can do is to speed up the recovery.” Esta looked at Sennin for approval.

Sennin nodded. Esta pulled out her wand and touched the corner of the highest scratch. Liam felt a tingling sensation as the wounds began to heal. The skin began to knit together, causing the wounds to shrink and disappear. In a manner of seconds, all the wounds were gone. Not even a scar was left. “Well, my work here is done. I shall be off,” Esta said as she climbed off.

CHAPTER 38

“How do you feel?” Elros asked.

“Great!” said Liam.

Liam’s stomach growled in disagreement.

“Except, you must be starving,” Nerissa said. “I’ll get to making the Quanta.”

She motioned to one of the guards, who quickly grabbed the bag of salt and followed Nerissa into the cottage.

“Where is Folen?” Liam asked.

“He’s already left,” Sennin said.

“Where?” Elros asked.

“The council came while you were gone and told us that we need to seek the help of a wizard,” Sennin said.

Liam heard a collective gasp. He had just noticed that a crowd was beginning to form.

“Um. Shouldn’t we have this conversation in a more private setting?” Liam said, already seeing people whispering among themselves.

“Right. Let us take a walk,” Sennin said.

Liam picked up Sennin and Elros, then began to head towards the mineral spring.

“As I was saying,” Sennin continued. “We are to seek the help of a wizard. The council can think of no other way to reverse a unicorn wish.”

“But aren’t wizards notorious for being hard to find?” Elros pointed out.

“Yes, but we have a few leads,” Sennin said. “Folen has gone after the one rumored to live near Wyvern’s way.”

“That place is crawling with monsters! Are you sure he doesn’t need us?” Elros said with concern in his voice.

“Folen said he needs you two to check out the other lead. Besides, he wanted stealth to be on his side,” Sennin said looking at Liam.

They had made it to the mineral pool. Liam sat down and took his boots off. He dangled his feet in the bubbling water and asked, “So, where are we to search?”

“In the forest of Shawmor,” Sennin said.

“Shawmor? Isn’t that in the middle of Mad King Matchitchew’s kingdom?” Elros said.

Matchitchew. Liam remembered his father talking about King Matchitchew and his new hair-brained scheme to rule over all the kingdoms of the realm. He had tried to overthrow the other kingdoms by trickery, assassinations, ransoms, wars, and he even tried to steal a dragon’s egg.

Two of the larger kingdoms worked together to keep him in check. He had gone silent after they foiled him the last time.

Liam's father told him that nothing short of total world domination would please Matchitchew.

"Yes, you must be careful while traveling through his lands. Traveling must be done carefully and most likely in the dark. You must move swiftly and as stealthy as you can," Sennin said.

"Which reminds me. Liam, we have something to show you back at the cottage. Let's head on back."

Liam took his feet out of the pool and put his boots back on, hardly waiting for them to dry. Excited by what could be waiting, they quickly made it back to the cottage.

CHAPTER 39

A strong aroma of something baking wafted from the cottage. Liam's stomach growled loudly, reminding him that he had not eaten breakfast. Liam knelt by the cottage, setting Sennin and Elros down. Just then, Nerissa opened the door, letting more of the intoxicating aroma out. She was followed by Ada who carried a large plate with a wedge of blue bread on top of it.

"May I present to you, Quanta!" Nerissa said.

"Where's the rest of it?" Liam said. "Surely you jest when you give me only that amount?"

Nerissa shook her head. "No, I believe my calculations are correct. This should be enough to last you the whole day."

"The whole day?!" Liam said in disbelief.

“Quanta is powerful stuff, Liam. That is why it is a closely guarded secret,” Sennin explained.

Liam took the bread from Ada, looked at it skeptically, shrugged, and popped it into his mouth. The bread was soft and warm. A little bit saltier than usual, but still delicious. As soon as he swallowed it, the bread began to expand. It filled every inch of Liam’s stomach. filling him completely.

“How was it?” Nerissa asked.

“Honestly, I don’t think I could eat another bite,” Liam said.

“Now, Nerissa, if you could get that other thing you’ve been working on,” Sennin said.

“It’s already out back, if everyone wants to move back there,” Nerissa said.

“Race you to the back!” Liam said to Ada and Elros. Ada squealed and ran through the house. Elros ran along the outside of the cottage. Liam waited a few moments before he moved to the back of the cottage. When he reached the back,

everyone was waiting for him. Next to the cottage was a large pile of cloth.

“What’s this?” Liam asked.

“Nerissa and the women of the city have been gathering as many spare cloths as they could find. In order to make you something called a Furin,” Sennin said.

Liam picked up the cloth. It was a shirt, except its color was constantly changing.

“This will help you hide as you move through the forest. You will remain hidden as long as you remain still. Even though it is just a shirt, it will hide your whole body,” Sennin said.

“Thank you, Nerissa. Though, I still think this look is more intimidating,” Liam joked as he flexed his muscles.

“Oh, go put your shirt on!” Elros said.

CHAPTER 40

Over the next couple of days, they prepared themselves for the journey ahead of them. Nerissa and Ada spent the days making plenty of Quanta. Sennin, Elros and Liam studied maps of Matchitchew's kingdom, trying to find the best route through.

"If we follow this river, we'll avoid most of the larger cities," Elros said, tracing his finger over a blue line.

"What about these settlements along the river?" Liam asked.

"They are small and secluded enough that we can take those risks," Elros said.

“Remember to avoid this part of the forest,” Sennin said, pointing to a small section. “It is rumored that a hag lives there.”

"Hags, while not as powerful as wizards, are just as dangerous. They can use spells and put hexes on you that can prove difficult to remove,” Elros explained.

“Now, do you have everything you need?” Sennin asked.

They went over their supplies one last time. Liam picked up the sack of Quanta bread and, before placing it in his pocket, asked, “No surprises inside?”

“I’m right here!” Ada answered.

Liam smiled and put it in his pocket. Elros hugged his mother and father goodbye. Hugging Ada last, Elros turned to Liam and said, “Shall we go?”

Liam picked Elros up and put him in his shirt pocket that Nerissa smartly included. They waved their final goodbye and headed off into the direction of Matchitchew’s kingdom.

They traveled by night and slept during the day. It took them two weeks to reach the first settlement along the river. They stopped a few miles from where the town began.

“I’ll go scout out the town,” Elros said, putting on his cloak, making sure to cover his ears. “You stay here until I come back.”

Liam nodded.

“Remember your Furin will only work if you stay still,” Elros reminded Liam.

He then headed off down the path towards the town. Liam, tired from the night’s long walk, laid down and fell asleep.

Liam woke to the sound of wolves howling. He sat up quickly, looking around for where the sound was coming from.

Nothing. The sound had gone as quickly as it came. The sun had gone down, and Liam’s eyes were adjusting to the darkness when Elros came from the trees.

“Liam? Liam are you there?” Elros whispered.

Liam realized he was invisible and waved his hand, causing himself to become visible again.

“Come on it’s time to go,” Elros said.

“What about the night watchmen?” Liam asked.

“There is only one and I have been supplying him with drinks all evening,” Elros said.

“He’s still going to see a forty-foot man, even if he is drunk,” Liam said.

“Remember your Furin?” Elros said.

“Yeah,” Liam said. “But it only works if I stay still.”

“Have you ever played stop and go?” Elros asked.

Liam shook his head.

“When I say go, you walk as fast and quietly as you can. Then, when I say stop, you freeze in place. Got it?” Elros explained.

“Ok, but what does this have to do about getting past the guard?” Liam asked.

“You’ll see,” Elros said with a smirk.

CHAPTER 41

Liam picked up Elros and headed for the far edge of town. As they drew close, Elros whispered, “Stop,” in Liam’s ear.

The game had begun. Liam froze in place and watched as a gangly man with disheveled hair looked around. The man looked left to right and began to walk to the right.

“Go,” Elros whispered.

Liam moved towards the riverbank and away from the town. Everything was going smoothly until Liam stepped on a branch. It made a large snap.

“Stop! Stop!” Elros whispered.

But it was too late. The man had caught a glimpse of Liam. Letting out an “Aiee!” he ran straight for the town. Liam quickly ran towards the river.

Elros yelled, “Put me down and I’ll lead them away! Meet me on the other side of the river!”

Liam set Elros down and watched him run into town. Liam ran over to the other side of the river and hid among some trees.

He sat there, staying as still as he could. The sounds of alarms came from the village. Liam watched as Elros ran with a group of torch and pitchfork wielding mobs. The gangly man led the group. He led them to where Liam had been moments ago. But with no other clues on where to go next, the group eventually went home.

The sun had risen and now was high in the sky. Still no sign of Elros.

What were they going to do? Surely the town wouldn’t take the word of a drunk man seriously.

Just then, he heard children giggling. Glancing across the river, he saw a group of two girls and one boy running towards the river. They stopped at the river’s edge where a log reached

out into the middle of the river. Liam overheard bits and pieces of their conversation.

“Well, my father says that it was there as clear as day!” a girl with braids said.

“Well, my father says that your father is nothing but a drunk!” the other girl replied.

“You take that back!”

“I won’t!”

“Come on! This is silly! There’s no reason to be fighting. You know there’s no such thing as giants,” the boy interjected.

“Stay out of it, Stephen!” the girls said in unison.

They began to shove each other, shoving each other harder and harder each round. Until the girl with the long braids lost her balance and fell in.

“Olivia!” the other girl screamed.

She went to go in after her but was stopped by Stephen.

“No, Abigail! You’ll get pulled in, too!”

Olivia's head bobbed above the water, and she grabbed hold of the log.

"Stephen! Do something!" Abigail pleaded.

"I can't swim!" admitted Stephen.

The log began to crack and splinter until it finally snapped off, taking the girl with it. Liam leapt into action. Stooping by the river, he reached across and scooped up the girl. He laid her on her side and watched as the other children went screaming into town.

Great. There goes my cover.

Liam heard coughing and sputtering; The girl was coming to. She looked up at Liam with fear in her eyes and then with confusion. Liam heard alarms come from the town. He got up and ran upstream, moving far away from the village. He stopped to rest in a thicket of trees. He held still, becoming invisible once again. Liam sat there, catching his breath.

Nothing else I can do but wait for Elros to come find me.

CHAPTER 42

Liam waited and waited. He waited well into the night. But there was no sign of Elros. He was about to double back when he heard the sound of footsteps. Just then, Elros was pushed into view. His hands were tied behind his back. Three riders appeared behind him, all riding wolf-like steeds. Liam recognized two of them being the orcs they had run into in the forest. The last figure wore a black cloak.

“This is where the tracks stop, U’rick,” the orc who was holding Elros’ rope said.

“Have the elf call out for his friend,” U’rick said. “And Durzol, don’t hold back for the sake of our guest. She enjoys bloodshed as much as we do.”

Durzol’s smile widened. He dismounted and pulled out a wicked looking dagger. This blade was made for tearing and

ripping flesh. Durzol grabbed Elros and held the blade against his throat.

“Call out to him!” Durzol yelled.

Elros just stared at him defiantly.

“Come out, boy! We know you’re here!” U’rick called.

“Come on out! Before we start fileting fingers!”

He looked at Durzol and nodded. Durzol grabbed one of Elros’ fingers and moved his blade into position.

“Liam! Don’t!” Elros screamed.

But it was too late. Liam went to grab the orc with the knife but was stopped suddenly. Liam felt this force settle over his body. The weight became unbearable. He found himself flat on the ground. He glanced over and saw that the cloaked figure had revealed itself. It was an old woman, frail and hunched over with age. Her pale green skin clung to her emaciated frame. Wispy white hair blew around her haggard face. Yellow frog-like eyes bulged from their sockets,

accompanied by a huge wart-covered nose. Her dry, cracked lips were mumbling something while her fingers bent in unnatural ways.

“Well, don’t just stand there! Get the chains!” she screeched at the orcs.

The orcs fumbled over themselves. They reached into their saddle bags and began to pull out a long chain. Liam looked at the chain and saw that it was no ordinary chain. The orcs tied his hands and feet with it. The hag released the spell that was holding Liam down. Liam tried to break free of the chain that held him. But no matter how hard he pulled, the chain would not break.

The hag cackled with glee. “And you two doubted my strength, didn’t you?”

U’rick and Durzol traded glances and U’rick quickly said, “And I’m glad we were mistaken.”

“Now, let’s make haste!” the hag said, settling back down on her mount. “The sooner we get this done, the sooner I can get back to my swamp.”

“And our payment?” Durzol asked.

“Yes, yes. You’ll receive your payment,” the hag said dismissively.

U’rick and Durzol remounted their mounts. U’rick held Liam’s chain, while Durzol held Elros’.

“On your feet, maggot! We march through the night!” U’rick shouted, tugging on the chain.

“And if I don’t?” Liam said defiantly.

“Our friend will make mincemeat out of both of you! Starting with the spare!” U’rick said, looking at Elros.

CHAPTER 43

They traveled through the night and through the day. Soon, they were in sight of a city. The large city was enclosed in a wall and a large castle stood on the far side. This must be the capital city. As they approached, the sound of horns could be heard. The portcullis was dropped, blocking entrance to the city. Not that it mattered to Liam. The wall came up to his waist and he could easily climb over it. Liam watched the frightened guards cower in their towers. They pushed each other until someone had enough courage to say, “Who goes there?”

“Tell your captain that Lady Strega wishes an audience with the King!”

It didn't take very long for the captain to appear. The captain was a tall, muscular man, with brown hair and a short, well-trimmed beard.

He leaned out of the tower and shouted down, “What business does Lady Strega have with the King?”

“Her business is between herself and that King!” U'rick shouted back. “But she comes bearing gifts!”

He motioned to Liam and Elros. The captain looked up at Liam as if noticing him for the first time.

“So, that is what this is?” he said. “Raise the gate let them in! The King will want to see this.”

The portcullis cranked open slowly. They waited until it was fully raised.

“Crawl through, dog!” U'rick barked at Liam.

Liam looked at U'rick furiously, then saw Durzol with his dagger at Elros' throat. Liam got on his hands and knees then crawled through the gate. It was barely large enough for Liam. The bottom of the portcullis raked across his back, tearing his Furin. The color changed to a dull grey. He got back to his feet and looked down at his Furin sadly.

“Oh, don't pout,” Strega said. “I disenchanted that silly thing ages ago.”

They marched Liam and Elros down the main road. The guards called out “Make way!” or “Move!” as they traveled. The townsfolk quickly ran out of the way. Mothers shoed their children into their houses, only for them to stick their heads out to watch as Liam passed.

CHAPER 44

It seemed to take forever to get to the castle. Liam had to shuffle his feet in order for the rest of them to keep up. When they finally made it to the castle, they were escorted to a large, mostly empty courtyard. It looked as if the courtyard had seen better days. The statues that were there were broken beyond repair. Weeds and vines grew through the cracks in the foundation. The fountain was dry. They stopped in front of a balcony where King Matchitchew stood. He stood there, trying to hide his nervousness, but Liam could see the fear in his eyes.

“Well, Captain Hedrick what do we have here?”

“A gift. I am told,” Hendrick answered.

“From whom?”

“From me, my liege. Lady Strega. And if I might be so bold, may I speak to you face-to-face?” Strega asked.

King Matchitchew nodded. He motioned for Hendrick to show her to the stairs.

“No need, Hedrick,” Strega said and with a loud pop, she was standing next to Matchitchew.

“A witch!” he said accusingly.

“I prefer sorceress but witch will do.” she said with a toothy grin.

“W-w-what do you want?” he said, all attempts of hiding his fear gone.

“I just want to be friends, allies! I scratch your back, you scratch mine? Let’s make a deal. I give you this wonderful giant that you can use to maybe lay siege with.” She shrugged.

“All I ask in return is for you to leave me and my swamp alone.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“And how am I going to control him when you’re gone?” he asked.

“Bring me two of your most trusted guards.”

Matchitchew motioned for Hendrick and then for a large man. He was more belly than man. His hair was sloppy, and his overall appearance was unkempt.

With a pop, Strega was standing on Liam's shoulder. She placed her hand on his temple. A searing pain radiated from her palm into his whole body, causing him to drop to his knees. She lifted her hand away and revealed three spirals connected together. Popping down, she performed the same ritual on the other two. Unlike Liam, they did not feel the pain. "There. Now, you should be able to command and control him. Say his name and then the command. Liam should follow it to the letter. If he resists or hesitates, touch your mark to remind him who is in charge."

With a snap of her fingers, the chain that held Liam's hands together vanished.

"Now, who would like to go first?"

The large man with the big belly stepped forward. “I’ll give it a go. Liam? Was it? Liam, grab that statue and throw it as far as you can!”

Liam felt a tingling sensation and an uncontrollable urge to do as the man commanded. Before he knew it, he had the statue in his hand. Liam threw the statue as hard as he could. They all watched it disappear into the distance.

The man laughed and said, “Liam, throw another statue!”

Liam did as he was told. The man looked around the courtyard, looking for other things he could have Liam throw. His eyes landed on Elros, and an evil grin spread across his face.

“Liam, throw the elf as far as you can!”

Liam felt the urge to do as he was commanded, but this time he fought back. As he reached down to pick up Elros, he willed his hand to stop. After a while, it did. The man, clearly upset, touched the mark on his neck, causing a shooting pain

like being struck by lightning to run through Liam's body. He fell onto his knees and convulsed.

“Devland, STOP! Enough of this nonsense! Liam isn't a toy!” Hendrick scolded.

“Elf lover,” Devland whispered.

Liam realized he had no commands to follow. He was now free to do what he wanted to do. Hendrick must have realized that, too.

“Liam, stand at attention until my next command,” Hendrick said quickly.

Liam did so resentfully.

“What is there to prevent Liam from deciding to harm us?”

Hendrick said, turning his attention to Strega.

“Liam cannot willingly harm anyone with the mark or anyone the person with the mark designates,” she said, turning her attention back towards the King. “Are you pleased with your present, my lord?” Strega cooed.

“It is satisfactory.” Matchitchew said, trying to hold back his excitement.

“I’ll take my leave, then.” She motioned to U’rick and Durzol. They handed the chains to Devland. Mounting their wolf steeds, they took off.

CHAPTER 45

There was a collective sigh of relief as Strega left, as if they had all been holding their breaths.

They stood there in uncomfortable silence.

“Well, now that’s over, we can begin your training, Liam. I have big plans for you, big plans!” King Matchitchew said, rubbing his hands together.

“Hendrick! You will begin training Liam. Devland! You take our elf friend here and find out how he’s been controlling Liam.”

“By any means?” Devland asked.

King Matchitchew nodded. “By any means necessary.”

Devland began to pull on Elros’ chains, leading him away from the courtyard. Liam began to fight against Hendrick’s command.

“Liam, HOLD! Liam, STAND STILL!” Hendrick said.

Liam’s limbs stiffened. He watched helplessly as Elros was being taken away.

“Where is he being taken?!” Liam said, focusing all his anger on Hendrick.

“That’s none of your concern!” Hendrick shot back, “You and I have chores to do! Until the King has need of you.”

“I refuse to leave this spot until you tell me what you did with my friend!” Liam folded his arms and stood in place defiantly.

“This can go two ways, Liam. You can do as you’re told under your own free will or I will make you do it!” Hendrick said, pointing to the mark on his neck.

Liam shot daggers at Hendrick with his eyes.

“Very well. We will start by clearing the courtyard of the statues. Liam, stack the statues over in this corner of the courtyard,” Hendrick instructed.

Liam felt the compulsion to do just that but he fought against the feeling. The tug-of-war in Liam’s body was visible. He would start to move towards the statue, but his steps were slow and hesitant. Liam finally managed to stop the movement

completely. Suddenly, Liam's body was wracked with pain. It felt like he had been struck by a thousand bolts of lightning all at the same time. Crying out in pain, Liam crumpled to the ground. Breathing heavily, Liam watched as Hendrick moved his finger away from the mark on his neck.

"Let's try this again, shall we? Liam, stack up those statues!"

Liam resisted; the shock came. Liam fell to the ground again.

"The witch did not tell us how headstrong you were,"

Hendrick said. "But you'll see that I'm not one to give up, either!"

This dance continued for a couple of hours, until Liam physically could not resist. Liam laid on the ground, tired and out of breath.

"Now, one last time. Liam, move those statues now!"

Hendrick ordered.

Liam felt his body move but this time, he had no energy to fight it. Quickly and efficiently, he moved the statues in the

designated corner. Liam finally passed out from using the last bit of energy.

CHAPTER 46

Liam woke up to the cool night breeze.

How long have I been out?

Looking around, he saw no one. He went to move his hands but found that they were bound together with that strange chain. His feet were still bound as well. Not that it mattered. Liam was still exhausted. He wondered how Elros was fairing. Just then, Devland walked into the courtyard, torch in one hand and Elros' chain in another. Elros looked horrible. His once-smooth face was now covered in black and blue bruises. His lips were swollen and bled.

Liam could feel himself begin to boil with anger.

“Move, elf!” ordered Devland.

Elros moved forward slowly, favoring his right leg. Devland pushed Elros forward, causing him to stumble. They made their way over to Liam.

“Here's your elf friend back!” Devland said as he shoved Elros to the ground. “We didn't get much out of him. I think he's beginning to lose his usefulness.”

Devland found a stone to sit on and started a small fire.

“I’ll be keeping an eye on you tonight. And unlike that goodie two shoes Hendrick, I will not hesitate to use this,” he said, pointing at his tattoo.

“So, don’t try anything.”

Hendrick was hesitating?

Liam nodded, laying his head back down.

Before the sun set completely, a young squire walked over with a plate of food and a bottle of wine. The young squire’s eyes never left Liam’s. He began to walk slower and even hesitated as he drew near.

“Come now, boy, bring me my dinner! He won’t harm you,” Devland said, pulling the boy the rest of the way.

“Here, now, sit down. Do you want to see something?”

The boy nodded enthusiastically.

“Liam! Get on your knees!”

Liam tiredly got to his knees. The boy clapped with delight.

“Liam! Bark like a dog!” Devland said.

Liam began to bark like a dog. The boy and Devland laughed.

“Okay, now, that’s enough for one night,” Devland said, wiping away a tear.

“Liam, lay back down.”

Liam slowly laid back down.

“You see, I have complete control over him,” Devland said, uncorking the bottle of wine.

Taking a long swallow, he stuffed a chunk of cheese in his mouth. Shooing the boy away, Devland took his spot on the small stool by the fire. Liam watched as Devland gorged himself on bread and cheese. He emptied the wine bottle and soon fell asleep in a drunken stupor. Once Liam knew Devland was out, he turned his attention to Elros. Elros lay on the ground close by. His breathing had been shallow when he first came, but now it was at a steadier pace.

Thank you, elven speedy recovery.

“Elros?! Elros?!” Liam whispered.

“Wha...” yawned Elros, half asleep.

“Elros! We don’t have much time! How is your leg feeling?”

“It feels fine.”

“Do you think you can run?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Good,” whispered Liam.

He took hold of Elros’ chains and with a quick pull, broke them apart.

“I might be trapped here, but you’re not.” Liam smiled.

Elros was about to say something, but Liam interrupted him.

“Go find Folen. He and Sennin might be able to figure a way to save me.”

“Fine,” Elros said. “But for now, play along and see if you can find out what Matchitchew is up to.”

Liam nodded. Elros quickly disappeared into the shadows.

Liam fell back to sleep.

“LIAM!”

Liam’s eyes shot open. In front of him was Hendrick, Devland, and twenty spearmen.

“Liam, where is the elf?”

