

Journey into the Realm: The Dream Catcher

Markelle Grabo

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First Edition

Journey into the Realm: The Dream Catcher

For my editor, Patricia Lantier, PhD. Thank you for taking this journey with me.

Markelle Grabo

Journey into the Realm: The Dream Catcher

Also by Markelle Grabo

Journey into the Realm Series

The Elf Girl

2013 Shelf Unbound Writing Competition Notable Read for Best Independently Published Book in the Young Adult/Teen category

The Spell Master

The Stolen Child

2014 New Apple Award for Excellence in Independent Publishing in the Young Adult category



Praise for the Author

“How many books are there about Elves? Certainly not many despite being a common creature within both high/epic fantasy fiction and children's literature! This was the main element that makes this incredibly exciting new series stand out a mile from other books, and so I give sanction for you to behold something supremely singular.”

~Lucinda Fountain, Goodreads & Amazon review

“I could hardly put Journey into the Realm down as I followed Ramsey through the pages on her quest to end the war. There were several surprises along the way and interesting new characters. Markelle's writing brings them vividly to life. The wait for the next installment will build my anticipation to see how Ramsey's life further unfolds.”

~Petra Kegley, Amazon review

“Markelle Grabo did an excellent job in building a world where three realms collide: Human, Elf and Fairy. The world building throughout this book is detailed, intense and captivating. You will surely get sucked into the world. The writing was purely gold for me. It was an intense read because of all the details, but it definitely was smooth and easy to read.”

~Nay Denise, Goodreads review

“I was surprised in a good way after finishing the first few chapters. I was expecting another teen fantasy romance and was happy to find a fleshed out story with a compelling cast of characters and a new take on the fantasy realms.”

~ Krystal Hickam, Goodreads review

Glossary of Magical Creatures

Golden fairies: the strongest fairies both physically and magically. Each Golden fairy has three natural magical abilities present at birth. Golden fairies can also learn and perform spells, potions, and charms. When they experience extreme anger or joy, they release a wild form of magic that constantly changes. Usually tall and toned, with tan skin, golden hair, amber eyes, and curved, pointed ears. *Ruler:* Queen Titania, also known as the High Queen to all fae.

Element fairies: just below Golden fairies in strength, these fairies have control over the elements. An Element fairy can wield earth, air, water, or fire. Their power is tied to their emotions. Water and air fairies are usually fair-skinned, while earth and fire fairies are typically darker-skinned. Curved, pointed ears. Physical strength and height varies. *Ruler:* King Vortigern.

Woodland fairies: gifted in spells, potions, and charms, the power of these fairies would match that of Golden fairies if not for their distracted nature. Woodland fae care more for beauty and pleasure than power. Their personalities often shift from frivolous to regal, making them difficult to understand. They enjoy dancing above all else. Tall and willowy, with fair-skin and curved, pointed ears. Hair and eye color varies. *Ruler:* Queen Ella.

Flower fairies: the least powerful of the four main types of fae, they prefer to keep to themselves, and while it's been confirmed that their magic is tied to nature, their precise power is undocumented. Also known as Butterfly fairies for their wings, these fairies are bird-like in size with curved, pointed ears. *Ruler:* Queen Flora.

Elves: the most human of magical creatures, elves are known for their compassion and intelligence. They are graceful and skilled in swordplay and archery, but lack physicality in running long distances.

Elves stop aging at age sixteen when they receive their magical ability. They need very little sleep and do not dream. They also have an internal clock. Tall and slender, with fair skin, pale or black hair, green eyes, and slim, pointed ears. *Ruler:* Queen Brielle.

Mermaids/Sirens: fish-like creatures of the sea with beautiful voices. They value self-preservation above all things. *Rulers:* King Almog and Queen Naida.

Tree fairies: ancient fae who act as the balance between the physical and spiritual worlds. They are immensely powerful, although they only access their magic during extreme circumstances. Short and very thin, each Tree fairy resembles the tree it's connected to.

Solitary fae: fairies who do not belong to one of the four main fae groups. This category includes but is not limited to: brownies, bogeys, sprites, pixies, gnomes, leprechauns, trolls, etc.

Dwarves: incredibly strong, fast, and resilient creatures. They have no magic but are skilled in battle. They also have horrible singing voices. Short, burly, and usually quite hairy.

~Prologue~

For a long time, I believed that dreams were simply an individual's unconscious manifestations – involuntary images, ideas, emotions, and sensations that occurred within the mind during sleep. Sometimes dreams revealed one's grandest wishes and, other times, one's darkest fears. Dreams could be random or logical, vague or vivid, easy to overlook or hard to forget.

I believed that one could exert a certain amount of influence over what happened in a dream, but that the influence was limited and not always obtainable.

I didn't believe that dreams could be real.

I didn't believe that dreams could be piloted by a presence, a ghost who called himself *the Dream Catcher*.

These were my beliefs...until I tampered with ancient magic.

"I can't believe this is happening," I said breathlessly, watching Stellan from across the orchard. "I wanted the spell to bring you back to life, not bind your spirit to my dreams."

Stellan's bright smile refused to dim; the former elf soldier didn't see this as the terrible consequence of my foolishness, but as an opportunity. "Although being alive again sounds nice, I think I prefer this," he admitted, walking forward and sitting down on the grass next to me. "None of life's troubles. Just you and me together again."

I scooted away. I couldn't help it. I was feeling very uneasy about this situation. "Stellan, this isn't natural. It's my punishment for performing an ancient spell from a book I didn't understand."

He sighed and looked up at the sky. I looked up as well, marveling over how real everything seemed. I truly felt like I was sitting in Aaliyah's orchard, in the Elf Realm. Deep down, I knew this wasn't true. Outside this dream I shared with Stellan, I was sleeping in a temporary camp near the Element fairy city of Etain. I was in the process of a long journey to the Golden Fairy Realm to end the war between elves and Element fairies.

I picked at the grass, twirling green blades between my fingertips, and wondered how long I had been sleeping. Time seemed

to pass normally in this dream. My interactions with Stellan were occurring chronologically, so perhaps a minute here was also a minute in the Element Fairy Realm. I wouldn't know for sure until I woke.

"I don't want you to see this as a punishment," Stellan said quietly.

I felt guilty for seeing negativity where he saw positivity. Despite my unease, I reached to take his hand, shocked by how warm his skin felt, how familiar. My thoughts traveled back to the first time we had held hands like this – traveling to Birchwood City with his sister, Addison, after I had just discovered I wasn't human.

So much had changed since then.

"I'm sorry," I said, blinking back tears. "Ever since you died, all I've wanted was to see you again. I just didn't expect it to be like this."

Stellan pursed his lips. "I know."

"I was selfish, Stellan," I continued. "I should have left you to your afterlife. You deserve peace." I swallowed. "But I was having nightmares, and most of them revolved around your death. They were so powerful and they started controlling me. I feared that if I didn't do something, they would ruin my chances of reaching the Golden Fairy Realm and ending the war. I thought that if I brought you back, my nightmares would disappear."

"So you were thinking only of yourself," he said quietly. He tried to pull his hand away.

I wouldn't let him. I squeezed harder. "No," I said. "I didn't think it was fair that you died trying to protect me. I wanted to give you a second chance at life."

He frowned, but he didn't try pulling away again. "Instead, you gave me this." His eyes looked out at the orchard stretching before us.

I nodded, biting my lip until I tasted blood. I wondered how much physical pain I could feel, here in this dream world. I wondered if I could die. Shaking my head to chase away morbid thoughts, I lay back onto the grass. Stellan followed suit, our hands still clasped together. Neither of us wanted to let go.

“So what now?” I asked.

He sighed. “I don’t know. All I know is that I’m bound to you and that I’m trapped in this clearing, which is only a small portion of the real orchard in the Elf Realm.”

“I’ll have to speak with Glissarie, see what she thinks of our situation. She has some experience with ancient spells. She’s the Princess of –”

“The Woodland Fairy Realm,” Stellan finished. “I know.”

“How?” I asked.

“I don’t remember my afterlife, but I remember watching you,” he admitted. “I know about your journey through all the Realms as part of Vortigern’s restrictions. I saw your troubles in the Mermaid Realm and the battle in the Flower Fairy Realm. I saw your release of Golden fairy magic in the Woodland Fairy Realm and your reunion with Ellie in the Element Fairy Realm.” He paused, pressing his lips together tightly. I wondered if he was remembering the final moments of his life. Stellan released a shuddering breath. “I saw you recite the spell in the Ancient language.”

I felt chilled knowing he had watched my interactions with Ellie, the fire fairy who had murdered him. Had I betrayed him by cooperating with her presence? After leaving Vortigern’s service out of guilt, she had become the General of the rebellion’s dwarf brigade. Joseph, leader of the rebellion against the Element fairy King, had charged Ellie, also his sister, with the duty of bringing my friends and me to him. Until recently we were led by Eder, the earth fairy my mother had recruited to protect me over the years. Apparently, Joseph didn’t believe Eder was capable of escorting us on his own.

Why he saw Ellie as more capable was a complete mystery to me.

“I’m sorry about Ellie,” I whispered.

Stellan closed his eyes briefly. “I understand that your primary focus is reaching the rebellion. You can’t send Ellie away because she’s part of things now. Her status in the rebellion and her connection with Joseph makes her an asset to your journey.”

“I wish she wasn’t,” I told him. “I wish she would just leave.”

He shook his head. “No, you don’t.”

I blinked. “How can you say that?”

“It’s true,” he muttered. “Remember, I’ve watched your interactions. You’re angry with her and confused by her actions, but part of you...part of you is relieved by the possibility that she can be saved.”

“Just because you see me doesn’t mean you know me,” I said bitterly.

Stellan nodded slowly. “I suppose you’re right. You’re no longer the Ramsey I saved from falling in the Human Realm.”

I finally pulled my hand away and sat up, crossing my arms against my chest. “I know. I’m no longer the innocent elfen you once loved. I’m half-Golden fairy and I’m dangerous.” I looked down at my lap. “You don’t have to remind me.”

“I didn’t mean that,” Stellan said. I heard the rustle of grass as he moved to sit beside me. “I don’t mind that you’re half-fae. At one point, I thought I did. But like I said before I died, I was mistaken. Still, you’re different now. Stronger. Capable of so much more than you were when you first came to the Elf Realm. No matter what you think, you don’t need me anymore.”

“But I still have you,” I said.

“Yes,” he murmured. “Yes, you do. In a way, you always have.”

“I’ll find a way to fix this. I’ll find a way to set you free.”

Stellan kept his eyes trained on the sky as he said, “Please don’t. If freedom means leaving you, I want nothing to do with it.”

I was relieved to hear those words because no matter how selfish it was, no matter how unnatural, I realized that I didn’t want to let him go. He wasn’t alive for the world, but here in this dream, he was alive for me.

~1~

The Final Stretch

When I opened my eyes, the world had changed for me.

The physical landscape remained unaltered. Our temporary camp in the Element Fairy Realm was still a small clearing surrounded by chaotic jungle trees, vibrant ferns, and the exotic sounds of native wildlife. When I stretched my hand away from the makeshift bed of leaves, my fingers touched familiar rich soil. I breathed in the Realm's dense humidity, still unused to its stifling effects, and blinked sleep from my eyes. Everything looked the same, but nothing felt the same.

During sleep, I had experienced another Realm, one undocumented and unbeknownst to me until I was forced to acknowledge its existence. And I had. No matter how absurd and incredible it seemed, I had visited the Dream Realm, and my time there had been just as real as the soil between my fingers, the thickness in the air.

Now, awake and enlightened, I felt as though I had been remade. The knowledge I carried – knowledge of what I had done, what I had seen, what had changed in my life – made it impossible for me to exist the way I had just a day earlier. In one night, I had transformed.

I wondered if I would ever dream normally again. What if I visited the Dream Realm every night for the rest of my life? I shuddered at the thought, but the possibility of that discomfort paled in comparison to how my actions had affected Stellan. He was being held captive in the Dream Realm, held captive by me. I had tampered with nature, with fate. Maybe my consequence was to never dream normally again, but Stellan had received the greatest punishment, even if he didn't see it that way. By way of ancient magic, he had become my prisoner.

Still, just the thought of sending him away....

"Good morning," Nathan muttered lazily, planting a kiss on the back of my neck.

My body stiffened. I had nearly forgotten that while I had dreamed of Stellan, Nathan lay next to me. The realization made my heart race with guilt. Nothing of the romantic sort had occurred between Stellan and me, but we did have a past. I had just begun to mend the fragile situation with Nathan caused by my grief, and now I was dreaming of the elf who had died loving me even after our separation. I would never release the love Stellan had for me, despite my commitment to Nathan, but I meant to keep it tucked away in my heart.

“Are you all right?” Nathan asked when I didn’t respond.

I took a deep breath. “Of course,” I said, forcibly brightening the tone of my voice. “Just nervous about today.”

“Me too,” he agreed.

My response acted as the perfect cover story. After all, today was the day we would begin our final trek to the rebellion. By morning tomorrow, we would finally meet Joseph, the leader of the resistance, King Vortigern’s own son. I still wasn’t used to thinking of him that way. Knowing he was King Vortigern’s kin was both refreshing and disquieting to me. I admired him for escaping his father’s dark influence, but I wondered if he still carried the taint of Vortigern’s reign. How could a child escape completely intact in both mind and heart after suffering for years under the weight of his father’s cruelty and malice? Ellie had certainly not left unscathed, and she was King Vortigern’s daughter. Again, it felt strange to think of her as a princess. Her title had been stripped when she left Etain against her father’s decree, but she still had royal blood.

Ellie was nothing like the stereotypical princess, neither pure of heart nor a damsel in distress. She was a fierce warrior, skilled in battle and magic. She was independent and capable of taking care of herself. She was also Stellan’s murderer.

I had to remember that. I couldn’t place her and Joseph in the same category. Ellie had turned away from her father out of guilt. Joseph had left because he wanted to enact change in the Element Fairy Realm. He wanted to end the war and Vortigern’s rule. If indeed Joseph held a trace of the King’s poison, he hadn’t succumbed to it. I couldn’t wait to meet him.

But I couldn't tell Nathan how excited I was. In order to hide last night's disastrous experience, I had to pretend that my mood had everything to do with reaching the rebellion. So I turned my body until I faced Nathan and gave him a reassuring kiss. His lips were soft and warm from sleep. The heat of our embrace stirred feelings within me that were nearly strong enough to mask my guilt and gloom. But not quite, because when we finally broke away, I still saw Stellan's face clearly in my mind.

"Everything's going to change," Nathan whispered, watching me intently with his silver-slashed emerald eyes.

He had no idea how right he was.

Ellie wasted no time stirring everyone from sleep. The dwarves grumbled and gave her nasty glares, but she was still the General and she had to be obeyed, so they staggered to their feet and gathered their iron weapons. My friends Tavis and Aimee, adjusted to traveling like Nathan and me, needed little encouragement and were ready to go soon after Ellie's rousing call.

The four of us walked together in the center of the pack. Some dwarves traveled with Ellie at the head of the procession and the rest grouped behind us, providing full protection. Ziv, my green wyvern companion, hopped along beside me. Although he usually got easily distracted by colorful birds or falling leaves, Ziv must have understood the seriousness of our situation today, because he didn't stray. He remained obediently close to the group.

Des, a member of the rebellion and apparently one of Ellie's closest friends, traveled with the General, her dark blue cloak obscuring her slender figure. I couldn't believe she was wearing such heavy clothing in this heat. As a native, she probably was accustomed to the stifling temperature, but I still wished she would remove the garment. It was making me sweat just looking at it.

Des was a spy for Joseph. When not working in the rebellion's camp, she was infiltrating Etain, on the lookout for enemy secrets. She had also introduced me to Vortigern's queen, Anastel, who was

being kept prisoner in a guarded tower ever since she discovered Vortigern practicing dark magic.

I shuddered, temporarily forgetting the heat of the Realm. How Vortigern had accessed magic from the Dark Times – magic that was supposed to be extinct – was baffling to me. Only dark beings were supposed to wield such magic, and they had all been defeated during the first war in Magical Realm history. So how was Vortigern able to produce dark fire? And when did he plan on revealing such a power to the rest of the Realms? I was surprised that he hadn't already. The war between elves and Element fairies was in its thirtieth year. If his magic was as strong as Queen Anastel believed, Vortigern could possibly use it to end the war in his favor.

Why was he waiting?

“Have you spoken to Eder yet?” Nathan wondered at my side, his features tight, as they were whenever he mentioned the earth fairy.

Eder was a sore subject for Nathan and me. My biological mother had stolen my memories, but I still knew that I had grown up in the Human Realm under Eder's protection until she decided to reassign him. The reason for his departure was what bothered Nathan the most: Eder and I had fallen in love.

My mother, Rosina, was sister to the High Queen and the orchestrator of my life thus far. She had designed “Operation Bring Ramsey to the Rebellion and Ultimately the Golden Fairy Realm” with the aid of various helpers like Eder. Unable to leave the Golden Fairy Realm because of a royal decree from Queen Titania, she had relied on these helpers to follow every order concerning me. Eder had disobeyed one of those orders by becoming more than a protector to me, and we both paid the price. I lost countless memories of my childhood, and Eder lost the chance to pursue a relationship with me.

I knew I had loved Eder once – well, as much as any naïve thirteen-year-old could love someone – but those feelings were as nonexistent now as my memories of him. Sure, he was brave and fiercely loyal, and I would be a fool to deny any physical attraction to him – but every fairy was enchanting. And despite our history, I didn't intend to fall prey to his charms. Nathan was my future. Eder

was my past...just like Stellan *should* be. But instead I had brought him into my dreams with the help of a spell.

I sighed. No matter where my thoughts began, they continued to end with Stellan. I suspected this process would repeat itself for quite a while, at least until the novelty of my situation settled. I would just have to get used to it.

“No, I haven’t,” I finally replied to Nathan. “As much as I would like to yell at him for keeping Joseph and Ellie’s parentage a secret, he’s avoiding me. Actually, he’s more than avoiding me. I don’t see him anywhere in the procession.”

“That is because he has chosen to Glamour himself invisible,” Princess Glissarie, heir to the Woodland fairy throne, remarked as she came to walk beside me. I still couldn’t get used to the fact that she wore the guise of another Woodland Fairy, Elvina. She even had Elvina’s voice, although, being a royal, she spoke more eloquently. The two Woodland fairies had switched places in the Woodland Fairy Realm so Princess Glissarie could discreetly leave her kingdom and join the rebellion.

Elvina had stayed behind to pose as Glissarie while the Princess traveled with us. I wondered how she was doing. After being away from the Woodland Fairy Realm and living among elves for thirty years, readjustment probably wasn’t simple. She did have Glissarie’s younger sisters to help guide her, but I still worried for her.

I rolled my eyes. “You have *got* to be kidding me.”

The Woodland fairy blinked with Elvina’s warm brown eyes, clutching her ancient spell book closer to her chest. “I am not. He told me his intentions last night.” I felt the beating of my heart quicken as my eyes rested on the edges of the spell book’s worn pages, remembering the feeling of its weight in my hands as I completed the binding spell. I could sense Princess Glissarie’s knowing gaze upon me.

Nathan laughed, distracting me from the spell book. “I can’t believe he went this far to avoid you. I almost feel sorry for him.”

I shook my head. “I’m not very surprised. Eder’s greatest tactic is avoidance. Let him hide for as long as he wants. I’m not going to submit to his foolishness.”

The Princess nodded. “I agree. He is behaving quite immaturely. However, do we not all fall into such behavior at some point in our lives? All strong emotions can make us act...prematurely.”

I detected the true meaning beneath her words. She was politely and covertly berating me for my hasty actions last night. After she had discovered me with the book, she said that she wouldn't hold my mistake against me, but that vow obviously didn't extend past subtle chastising. I didn't blame her; I knew I deserved worse.

“Yes, but he's supposed to be leading this group with Ellie,” Nathan reminded us. “Shouldn't he be a little more responsible?”

“One would think,” Princess Glissarie mused. “Unfortunately, sometimes Eder's emotions prevent him from acting as a true leader should.”

“He's told me the same thing,” I said. “No wonder Joseph sent someone else to bring us to Etain, although I'm still bothered that he considered Ellie the fit replacement.”

“So am I,” Nathan agreed. “But at least she sticks to a schedule...and she's visible.”

I scanned the crowd, wondering where Eder lingered unseen. Near the front with Ellie? Farther back with the majority of the dwarves? Or was he completely separate from the group, traveling on his own?

Wherever he was, I hoped he would end his childish behavior soon and just face me, because I had a lot to say.

Just as Ellie had predicted, it was dusk when we reached the edge of the valley that separated us from the rebellion. After spending so much time under the cover of trees, I was fearful as I looked beyond to open grassland. We hadn't run into any Element fairy soldiers yet, but now we were about to travel across a fifteen-mile stretch of open land. I had survived two Element fairy attacks with the dwarf company already; they were excellent combatants. But I wasn't sure if they could handle a third battle, especially after roaming through this thick jungle for so many hours. I didn't know if I could withstand another fight myself. I was weary from my fitful sleep last night and

drained from performing the ancient spell. I was in no state to wield magic or even my bow.

“Are you sure this is the only way?” I asked Ellie nervously, joining her at the front of the group with Nathan, Aimee, and Tavis close behind. Princess Glissarie remained near the back, watching Ziv to make sure he didn’t run off. I still hadn’t caught sight of Eder.

Des chose to respond for the General, placing a comforting hand on my shoulder as she said, “I am afraid so, but don’t worry. I’ve traveled across this valley countless times. Not once have I ever been confronted by enemy soldiers.”

“Yes, but were you ever traveling with an entire battalion of dwarves and their clanging iron weapons?” Tavis inquired, never one to skirt an issue.

Des frowned. “No. I suppose not.”

“Well, there you have it. We’re all going to die,” Tavis summed up.

“Tavis, that’s enough,” Aimee scolded, swatting his shoulder with her hand. Try as she might, though, she couldn’t completely mask her affection for the bold elf, and a quick kiss on his cheek followed her reprimand.

“We’re not going to die,” Ellie muttered. “Stop being so fragile. Vortigern’s soldiers rarely travel across the valley.”

“Why not?” Nathan wondered.

“Vortigern used to send scouts quite frequently, but rebellion soldiers were always able to stop them before they reached the true border. The valley is simply too revealing. Now, his soldiers usually travel the long way through the trees and attempt surprise attacks from other sides. But even that hasn’t helped Vortigern discover the rebellion’s true location, which is something we rely on while our numbers slowly grow,” Ellie explained.

“Why not just send his entire city after the rebellion?” Tavis asked.

“Well, no matter how much confidence the King exudes, another thing he doesn’t know about the rebellion is numbers, and he doesn’t make any decisions until he’s fully informed. He fears Joseph could have enough soldiers to match his own.”

“Does he?” I asked.

Ellie shook her head. “No. Not nearly enough.”

“Well then,” Tavis remarked, “let’s hope Vortigern doesn’t figure that out for a while.”

We all nodded in agreement.

“So you think we’ll be safe crossing the valley?” I asked, addressing both Ellie and Des.

Des said, “yes,” at the same time that Ellie said, “maybe.”

“That’s reassuring,” I mumbled, rubbing my arms anxiously.

“We’ll make it to the rebellion,” a new voice interjected suddenly. “But in order to do so, we need to leave now.”

“Ah, Eder, how nice of you to make an appearance during our dire time of need,” Ellie said sarcastically, resting her hands on her slender hips. “I was about to send the wyvern out looking for you.”

Everyone, including Ellie, knew how much Eder disliked Ziv. Wyverns were feral, dragon-like creatures with very little intelligence. They relied on primal senses to survive, especially taste. Once a wyvern got a taste for a creature’s blood, that creature basically became a permanent food source. Ziv had tasted my blood the day I rescued him from a pair of griffins, and Eder worried that he would one day turn on me. But since then Ziv and I had bonded. I never let my guard down completely around him, but I did have a lot of trust in him.

Eder grimaced. “No need for that. I’m here now.”

“Clearly,” Ellie said. She held his gaze for just a moment, but in that moment a question began to form in my mind. The inquiry dissolved as she turned her head away, and my focus returned to our present situation. “Let’s go.”

“Wait, that’s it?” I asked, suddenly eager to return to the jungle.

“The longer we delay, the more danger we’re in,” Des said. “Just stay close to the group. Everything will be fine.”

I nodded hesitantly. Nathan took my hand as we started moving forward.

“Move as quickly and as quietly as you can,” Ellie announced, raising her voice just enough for the entire group to hear. “The idea is to reach the border before morning, so there will be no stopping.”

Grunts and groans sprang from the dwarves, which Ellie happily ignored, keeping her face forward as she led the group. Princess Glissarie appeared with Ziv in tow, immediately beginning a conversation with Eder after one swift, loaded glance my way. The look said: “We need to talk.” She was probably curious about whether or not I had received my consequence for last night. Although she hadn’t been sure how the spell would manifest, she knew it would have something to do with Stellan’s spirit binding itself to me. I felt obligated to tell her about the Dream Realm, but not until we reached the rebellion.

We moved at a brisk pace. I was already breathing heavily after the first few miles, but I didn’t complain. With Ellie in charge, I knew it wouldn’t get me anywhere. Besides, I didn’t want to sound like a weakling. I was destined to end the war; I could handle this last stretch before the rebellion. But I didn’t ask anyone how much farther we had to travel. I knew the answer would only discourage my motivation.

Eder made sure to keep far away from me, which hurt my feelings more than I would have guessed. I resolved to confront him once we reached the rebellion; he could get in line behind Princess Glissarie.

Part of me, no matter how tired, was glad that we weren’t taking any breaks. If I stopped to rest, I would surely pass out and dream of Stellan, which I didn’t want to do again so soon. I needed time to process his existence before I entered the Dream Realm once more. For now, I was at peace with traveling fifteen miles across a valley in the middle of the night.

“What do you think he’s like?” Nathan asked, his breaths far more labored than mine. “Joseph?”

I shrugged. “I have no idea. His letters made a great impression on Brielle. Queen Anastel told us to trust him and made him seem honorable. But I’m curious to hear some of his story. I want to know what made him leave Etain, what made him leave his father.”

“The Queen mentioned he may not be interested in sharing,” Nathan reminded me.

“He sent Ellie, the fairy who betrayed us and killed Stellan, to escort us to his rebellion,” I said. “The least he can do after that is share a little.”

Nathan nodded. “I agree. But until we meet him, we won’t know if he values a good compromise.”

“He’d better, or I’ll send Ziv after him,” I joked.

Nathan gave my hand a light squeeze. “Glad to see extreme exhaustion hasn’t stolen your sense of humor.”

“I was taught by the very best,” I said.

He grinned, but his easy smile soon fell as Eder fell in step next to him.

“May I have a few words with Ramsey?” he wondered.

“Ask her yourself,” Nathan muttered. “She doesn’t need my permission.”

Through gritted teeth, Eder responded, “Fine.” He weaved around Nathan, who sent the back of Eder’s head a nasty glare, until we were side by side. “Can we talk?”

I sighed. *May as well get it over with now*, I told myself. *Then I’ll have one less thing to worry about when I reach the rebellion.*

“All right. Nathan, can you check on Ziv?”

I could tell he didn’t want to leave me alone with Eder, but he trusted me enough to adhere to my request. With one small nod, he departed into the crowd to search for my wyvern, leaving Eder and I to talk.

“Before you say anything,” I started, “I want you to know that being angry at me for following Des to Etain is ridiculous. If you had just told me about King Vortigern’s true family yourself, I wouldn’t have had to go. But you left me no choice.”

“You ventured into enemy territory with a complete stranger,” Eder countered.

I winced. “Yes, and I’m sorry about that. . .but, again, I wouldn’t have followed Des if you had just been honest with me like you promised.”

“I wanted to be honest with you,” he insisted, the tone of his voice layered with urgency. “Joseph commanded that I keep his

bloodline a secret. We have a long history together; I couldn't refuse him."

"Do you even realize that he treats you like a servant?" I mentioned randomly. "You shouldn't allow it. You are just as important to my mother's cause as Joseph."

"You don't know him," Eder said. "He's persuasive and he's my leader."

"He's a prince," I replied. "He was probably taught to be persuasive by his king."

Eder's eyes narrowed. "Joseph is nothing like King Vortigern. He's no longer a prince."

"Whatever you say," I remarked. "But I hope you know that I won't attend to his every need and desire the way you do."

"You will if it means getting the crown," Eder challenged, watching me intently for my reaction.

I bit my lip. "Have you said everything you wanted to say?"

His shoulders fell. "No. I haven't. Ramsey, I'm sorry that I've kept so much from you. I've been in your mother's service for so long that I've forgotten what it's like to be completely honest with anyone. My life has always been about secrets."

"So has mine," I said quietly, "but at least you know your secrets. My secrets were kept from me."

"I know I'll never again be the fairy you knew when you were thirteen," Eder admitted. "However, I'm trying to be *someone* worth knowing."

"Then try harder," I said. "You can start by telling me why Joseph was exiled." My lungs were burning and my throat was dry from travel, but I didn't want to end our conversation until I knew more about the rebel leader.

Eder closed his eyes briefly. I could tell he was trying to remember. "I don't know exactly what happened; Joseph has never shared details with me. I do know that Vortigern asked him to do something terrible, and it opened Joseph's eyes to what a monster his father is. Joseph's response was to exile himself from the kingdom. Vortigern will never admit that it wasn't his decision for Joseph to leave, though. He's far too proud."

“Does Ellie know what happened?” I asked.

Eder nodded. “She was young, but she most likely remembers. I’ve wanted to ask her, but she’s doesn’t...,” he trailed off, his face tight with frustration. “Well, she’s not the easiest fairy to converse with.”

“That’s an understatement,” I muttered. “Thanks, Eder.”

He looked at me questioningly. “For what? I barely told you anything.”

“But you were honest,” I said, meeting his gaze. “That’s all I want from you.”

He smiled, but the expression was fleeting. “Even as a fairy, honesty has never been easy for me. When your mother recruited me, I learned quickly that secrets are necessary. Secrets can keep someone safe, keep someone alive.”

“They can also put someone in danger,” I said.

He shrugged. “Agree to disagree.”

I nodded, realizing I couldn’t make Eder believe that secrets were destructive any more than he could convince me they were necessary.

Instead of letting our conversation end completely, I asked, “Why *did* my mother recruit you? You were elven, hardly rebellion material.”

Eder brought a hand to his temple, fingers pressing against the skin beside his eye briefly. Then he seemed to remember my presence, because he looked at me and dropped his hand to his side like it was made of lead. “A story for another time.”

“Promise?” I asked, curious to know what the gesture signified.

His head lifted, earthy eyes looking ahead. I couldn’t tell if he was searching for something in this valley or merely seeing past memories within his own mind. I watched him blink slowly. “I promise.”

We walked silently for a while after that. I found myself gazing across the valley like Eder, wondering when I would see the rebellion in the distance, trying to picture what it would look like and trying to imagine crossing the border for the first time. Vibrant grass glistened with droplets of humidity. Stars overhead illuminated the dwarves’

iron armor. I recognized a few species of jungle flowers in patches, clustered around smooth rocks. The air was mostly silent with the exception of our group's labored breathing. I couldn't help but find the scene sort of lovely, which surprised me. Until now, I had believed that I would always see this Realm as despicable and ugly.

On a whim, I unfurled my Golden fairy wings, feeling only a slight twinge of pain in my back because practice had helped me become accustomed to the sensation. I had also started cutting slits in my shirts so my wings could slip easily through the fabric without causing tears. I watched them shimmer in the night, tendrils of gold curling over my shoulders and around my waist. I brushed against the gossamer vines affectionately, as if I were caressing an old friend.

In this moment, I felt completely and wholly myself. I was no longer hiding. I was my mother's daughter. I was my father's daughter.

And I was ready for the rebellion.