

1427AD – SOUTH WEST ENGLAND

The growing pains were excruciating. Tearing his skin, continually stretching as new cells formed, split and formed again. In his conscious moments his body railed against the constraints of the cocoon, ripples of agony searing through his gangly limbs, straining for release yet finding none. He had no concept of how long he had endured the pain, only that it was ever present, peaking until he could bear it no more.

Gradually, he became more lucid as the pain diminished. In those brief moments, he was aware of light filtering through the thin membrane, and a shadow hovering over it. This time, consciousness arrived and with it, a realisation that the agony had gone. His nails unclenched from his palms, leaving bloody half-moons. Working his hands up past his naked chest to his face, his fingers sought instinctively to remove the source of the suffocation. The shadow darkened, and he heard it say a muffled, "My love..."

The yearning to join the voice, to be free, drove his panic. A guttural sound came from his throat as he clawed frantically at the suffocating veil. With a squelch, his nails snagged a hole and he pulled, straining with his entire being to enlarge it. Taking a huge gasp of breath, he realised that tender hands were smoothing limp membrane away from his face.

"Open your eyes," she said, that gentle yet somehow familiar voice again, as her touch wiped mucus from his nostrils. The panic subsided in him and, for a moment, he was aware only of his heart thumping uncomfortably in his chest, beginning to slow as the breaths came easier. He forced open his eyelids, turning his head in her direction. Focus blurred before clearing, then began to blink from the light streaming through the window behind the shape.

Part of him expected the pain to return when he moved his limbs, yet instead the joints felt lubricated, smooth. Stretching out, he became aware again of the cool, wet membrane, now slipping from his naked body. Feeling it with his toes and hands, it suddenly revolted him. He instinctively jerked away from it, falling towards her.

His knee hit the earthen floor hard as he fell, and the jolt sent a quick wave of pain through his leg. To his surprise, it wasn't the same kind of agony as he had so recently endured - quite dull by

comparison. A pale hand clasped his arm, supporting him as he straightened to look up at her properly.

"My love..." she repeated, and his eyes finally came into focus on her mouth. Small white teeth peeked through smiling red lips, framed by long silver-blond hair. He knew her... he knew that voice and he recognised her smell. Lavender, witch-hazel and fir - all mingled to provide a scent that was uniquely hers. His arm reached up to touch her face, still not daring to speak, and in one smooth movement, he stood to his full height, instinctively yearning to be nearer. As he breathed in, her arms joined his and they clasped each other. Their eyes locked together, searching for confirmation that their very souls were still intact.

From the edge of his vision, he glimpsed iridescent wings unfurling from behind her. He was mesmerised by the light from the window aperture which shone through them like the finest of stained glass, illuminating and shimmering. He felt his shoulder blades quiver and, turning his head, saw his own newly formed appendages rise up, silvery translucent grey yet with the radiance of hers catching the sunshine. In wonder, she reached out and stroked the edges of his wings; it tickled as rain falling on cold skin.

His senses exploded at her touch and the immediate surroundings rushed at him, overwhelming him. Almost involuntarily, his toes scrunched away from the vibrations of the worms wriggling through the earth beneath his bare feet. The distant call of a lone seagull circling high above briefly deafened, piercing his ears to the point of painful before fading as it glided away. His heart pounded as the volume of the next noise washed over him. As his gaze darted to the window, he frowned, before his drowsy mind identified the ominous rustling sounds - fir trees creaking in the breeze accompanied by the crackle of pine cones flexing to share their seed.

He turned back to her, wide-eyed and seeking reassurance. His newly sharp focus met a gentle, knowing smile and his grip tightened. Opening his mouth to try to speak, all he could taste was the burnt ashes emitting the last of their woody tang, chalky and spent as they lay in the hearth. Instead, he gulped sour air with a tinge of iron lingering on its edges. He swallowed to clear the mustiness from his throat, hoping the other smells and sounds would stop their assault as well.

Drawing in a deep breath, feeling his chest expand without the anticipated stab of pain, he recalled - he'd needed something, anything, to take away the pain from the injury.

The blood. Running his tongue around his mouth with the lingering iron taste, he remembered the blood. But not just his own. Mingling, warm and salty, rich, red. He had absorbed the long history of her Lifeforce, and she his - a much shorter, human life. He jerked away from her gaze; something akin to shame caused him to study the ground beneath him as he searched his foggy mind for clarification.

Her blood held the only promise she could make him at the time, and neither of them had understood the consequences. But, he would have done whatever it took to stay with her.

Then, the change had begun. Numbing his senses as she had bundled him tightly, suffocatingly. Somehow, she must have known he needed to be wrapped - she hadn't mentioned in their frantic discussion before they shared blood, he was sure. He looked up at her in horror, reeling from the invasion of the memory. Stepping back, his face formed the question before he could speak it.

"I didn't know..." she tailed off, her hand clasping his arm with a wobble in her voice. "I... I'm sorry. I'm sorry for the pain. I've never done this before," she said. "The wings are... unexpected. I thought it would be as it is for animals, you'd just heal. But you were in so much distress, I felt I needed to cocoon you, like a pupae. When I saw the lumps form, I hoped the wrapping would make it easier."

She blinked, but her eyes still pleaded for understanding. Forgiveness even.

Drawing a ragged breath, he took a moment to reply. Should he tell her that it had been unbearable? That he had changed his mind? Was that the truth, or just a remnant of the hurt talking? A childish plea to return to his former self?

He contemplated how best to respond to her unspoken request, searching the depths of her pale eyes as he tried to calm his breathing. The familiarity of her shapes, her colours and scent reassured him. And

with that comfort, he remembered he had been enthralled by her. That, from the minute he had unclothed her and revealed the truth of her, there had been no other thought in his mind but to join her. The knot in his ribcage eased as clarity returned. How could he ever have thought to pull away from her when all he wanted to do was be with her? And, if possible, be more like her? Love itself had infused their ribbons of blood, binding their destiny together, for what would now be an eternal lifetime.

He felt a waft of cooler air soothe his neck, rhythmical as a heartbeat. His lips lifted and he felt a rush of unexpected giddiness as he acknowledged her unintended gift. His own wings, beating without effort, as if they had always been there.

He had chosen this. Chosen of his own human free will. He knew what had been done could never be undone.

"No longer Tarl, the smithy's son," he whispered as he stroked her pale face. "Change is upon me." He pulled her closer and searched her luminous blue eyes in wonder and forgiveness.

She knew then that she had truly changed her own destiny; the only future she now had was with him by her side. "And I, I relinquish Aioffe... She was alone, and now is not," she said, with conviction and hope in her voice.

He could never know what it had cost to change her intended fate, for him and for herself. She had no intention of telling anyone that 'duty and obedience' were no longer a part of her destiny. Those chains of responsibility fell silently from her shoulders as she took his hand, whispering, "Together, we can be truly free." She tilted her head to one side, eyes flaring as she absorbed the noises outside. "But, we need to go now - before we are discovered!"

CHAPTER 1 – SEPTEMBER 1534

Tendrils of smoke filled the young man's sensitive nostrils with the lingering scent of waxy paper, apples, sea salt and lichen-covered bark, evoking happier memories of the last five years. Tasting the essence of their temporary home as if that would commit it to the past only, he had to subdue the cough tightening his throat. No matter how many times they ran, the thought of starting over again sat on his heart, heavy and full of dread and sorrow. He swallowed down the bitterness, resolving to look to the future. He tried looking up at the clear skies, but the canopy of stars through the array of amber leaves blurred as his eyes welled. Shaking his long blond fringe away, he jabbed at the embers. Bright sparks gracefully leapt into the air and twinkled before vanishing with a quiet pop.

The snap of a branch behind him made him spin around, but his face quickly lifted into a smile as he saw her. Pale in the moonlight, her skin always glowed clearest at night, lighting the shadows with its luminescent tone. She smiled gently at him and held out a slim hand. "Ready?" She said softly.

"Soon," he answered, taking her chilled fingers in his and leading her to the warm log at the fires' edge. In the still, dark forest where they were most comfortable, they sat companionably, slowly pushing in their paper identities nearer the glowing core. The moment of sadness he felt earlier lifted in her company; she was, and always would be, his partner in their long journey to survive. Together they would carve out another future, in another town. It never got any easier, no matter how many times they resettled.

He replayed memories through his minds' eye - the lowered gazes from the once welcoming shopkeepers, a lull in conversation amongst the previously courteous ladies after church when they approached. Then, inevitably, the anger. Always under a veil of suspicion, the striking young couple were

ultimately people with no verifiable roots who never truly fitted in.

Often, it started innocently enough with the women noticing a peculiarity about the newcomers - even after years of living in the community. Talking, gossiping about why they weren't quite 'right'. Then the menfolk joined their wives, voicing their anger, their sense of injustice. Before long, something would happen which wasn't 'usual', and, having nothing more than guesswork and gossip to interpret, sometimes the mob mentality would begin. Despite their efforts to lie low, the couple would find themselves hounded out of town, if they missed the warning signs and delayed.

Here, the apples had tasted so juicy, the surroundings so beautiful, they had almost left it too late to move away. Life here had been unexpectedly rich and varied, with its frequent visits from travelling performers and community rituals celebrated with gusto and wine. A temperate southern climate made it harder to resist the temptation to feed from them, especially her - she was trickier to keep sated. The people in this seaside township were generally so happy and full of Liferforce, it was hard to leave. Some he had counted as friends. Stranger still to have no time to say goodbye or make their excuses for leaving.

The sunlight was just starting to pick through the forests when he heard the voices, faintly at first, then growing closer. Then, the crash of dogs bounding through the drying undergrowth. Picking their way nearer to their hideout, he knew they would have discovered their empty rented house by now and come looking for them in the nearby copse. Maybe even the bodies of the animals they feasted on, desiccated and hastily buried in the dead of night, had been found.

He rubbed her shoulders in his lap, gently whispering, "It's time, my love, we need to go. They are close." She opened her eyes and sat up quickly, blinking in the pinkish light of dawn, her ears suddenly picking up on the sounds as they got closer. The dying embers of the fire would give their location away, and she hurried to pick up the heavy leather sacks she had brought with her earlier.

Without warning, a large, shaggy-looking dog bounded into the clearing. Pulling up and planting its feet wide, it paused to glare at them, judging as it sniffed. Then, it lifted its head and started barking loudly. The clipped yaps ensured that other canines arrived, circling them and noisily declaring their hunting success. Salivating jaws anticipated the reward awaiting them from the men not far behind.

The hounds didn't advance on them, instinct warning them they were not top of the food chain in this instance. But they wouldn't betray their masters and back away. Dark pairs of eyes fixed on the couple, unblinking. Hunter versus hunter. Beast versus beast.

The fae were trapped. He stepped towards one, making to shoo it away, but the dog growled, digging in with its haunches and baring yellowed teeth in a snarl. Fetid breath puffed in the crisp dawn light, surrounding them with a foul-stenched net.

"We will be seen if we leave from here," she murmured, barely audible to most ears over the noise of the barks and snarls. She hurriedly fixed straps behind her, the bag altering her slim silhouette, making her look strangely unbalanced with a protruding pot-belly where it hung.

"Probably, but it's a risk I think we need to take," he said. "I'm willing if you are?" Despite his long cloak, now draped over his chest, he also appeared cumbersome with his front-strapped sack on.

"Over 'ere!" Shouts, sounding close, followed by dull snapping branches as boots crashed their path through the undergrowth.

She nodded and pulled the bonnet from her head to free her hair. Shimmering wings unfurled, the morning light bouncing off them as it streamed through the tree leaves. "Straight up!" he said as he bent his knees to lift off, his darker wings already freed and waving slowly.

They shot up through the canopy and into the bright sunlight. Shrinking below, the fields were dotted with sheep and horses, mottled green and brown hedgerows marking their boundaries. Small thatched dwellings laid low to the ground, their stone chimneys spouting thin wisps of smoke as early morning fires were stoked. Higher they flew, out of the range of the voices shouting, cussing as the enraged and frightened humans found the still-warm ashes of the fire. Higher, to where the birds circled, swirling in formation around them.

Looking up through the trees, one of the men saw their odd-shaped silhouettes, out of reach of arrows, disappearing into the clouds. Shaking his head, the notion that he had witnessed something not of his world was forced from his mind. It did no good to stir up further talk of the devil amongst them. A man would only have to spend yet more time in the confessional and at prayer if he had seen anything sinister, after all. Best not to mention it.

"Who shall you be today, my love?" she called over the clouds. "I like the name Joshua!" He smiled and shook his head, grinning at her. "You like Joshua because you liked the boy, not because you like the name, I think."

"He had the sweetest tasting Liferforce I have had in a long time," she said, remembering, "but I nearly got carried away. I caused this relocation, and for that, I'm sorry."

"You are insatiable, in more ways than one," he called back, moving closer to grasp her hand mid-air. They slowed, joined hands, then fluttered to face each other. In the brilliant sunlight, they gazed at each other, searching, studying and reconnecting. Together they hovered, hands clasped around the bulky sacks filled with their only belongings, two halves of a lumpy, bejewelled butterfly. In the unfiltered light, high above the clouds, their love glowed through in its intensity. It would be absurd to think that they had ever blended in - no human would have mistaken them for mortals were they to glimpse them now. Fair skin, ash-white hair almost translucent as the sunshine poured through it, and wings rippled with rainbow tones, fluttering as they lingered in the moment.

"I can't promise more boys like him," he said, looking at her lips as he leaned in for a kiss. "And we must try to blend in more next town, and not risk losing control with a human, however much we become lost in their energy. We can survive without them, you know!" He reproached, but still with love in his tone. "We could have stayed longer if only we had been more careful. I think the lad will recover with some rest. The young usually do, then attribute their lack of get up and go to overdoing it, or some sort of malady."

She smiled and nodded, but nevertheless felt remorseful. Her need for sustenance from the unseen joy humans emitted was compulsive, necessary even. The Liferforce fae-kind gained from its root source in blood was enough for him, but satisfying her needs was more dangerous and required crowds of people. Keeping control of herself during these times was always a challenge. A moment or two longer in her thrall, and it would have been too late for that poor boy. She sometimes forgot herself in those heady inhalations, but had so far never broken her own rule of not killing a child in the heat of the inhale. But youth, they were so free, so deliciously innocent. Their Liferforce had no filter and its purity was sublime.

"I just want to build a home with you, where we can live in peace. I don't think that's too much to ask?" Joshua's begging broke through her guilt-laden reminiscing.

She pulled back from the embrace and stroked his face, feeling the boyish stubble along his jawline. "I know, I wish for that also," she said wistfully. "Maybe this next time..."

"You always say that..."

"I know."

"Never satisfied," he teased.

He flapped his dark wings and spun her around and around. She leaned her head back and relaxed, allowing him to take the lead in a dizzying spin. They both laughed at the release of the exhilarating action. As he slowed, he lowered his face to embrace her again.

"My head!" she said, breaking off the kiss. "It's still spinny... if this is what death feels like, I could die right now, happy. It's like a little death."

"Believe me, this is not what dying feels like," he said, nuzzling her ear. "I could remind you what a 'little death' feels like if you want though?"

Her grin broadened, "You'll have to catch me first!" She darted upwards, playing. Like dancing dragonflies, they dashed around the skies, giggling and whirling.

"I won't lose you again, minx!" He caught her slender ankle, "I will follow you, find you, hound you down like we are hunted now, even if there were an arrow still jutting from my side!" He paused, hovering up to look her fully in the face earnestly.

Stroking away loose strands of hair from his cheeks, she whispered, "Never, I'll never truly run from you. Nothing will ever part us." They embraced again, and he gave her bottom a squeeze through her skirts. Squealing in mock outrage, she pushed away from him and dashed off. He followed, of course, and they continued their journey north together.

They slowed after a few hours and dipped down through the cloud blanket, to where it was raining and grey. Flying lower, yet still out of sight, they scanned the ground with hawk-like eyesight for a group of houses - a town, not just a village. The occasional straight Roman road cut gash-like through the landscape. He pointed northeast, and together they gracefully swung around and headed for a small wooded area they noticed, close to a sizable cluster of dwellings. Rough tracks weaving their brown trails around the countryside meandered through fields less enclosed by hedges than they had been in the south. Through the drizzle, the patchwork of leaves turning golden amber enticed them for the cover it could afford.

They landed by the side of the woods and pushed aside undergrowth to enter the forest. Hidden by branches, the couple dropped their packs and loosened their garments, secreting their wings close to skin. Helping each other, they straightened their attire, pushed hair back into caps and tucked smock edges neatly into jerkin and kirtle. A last check before hoisting their belongings onto their backs, a brief kiss for luck, and their windy and unusual travel method was obscured.

Returning to the muddy track, they picked their way through the puddles left by carts and carriages, and headed towards a cluster of buildings ahead.

"How about Annabella? For me. Mistress Annabella Meadows," she said, as they approached an inn nestled on the crossroads of the road into town.

"I'm flattered you remember my little treats," he said, glancing down and smiling at her. "And a fitting way to honour her charms. I plan to demonstrate how stimulating I found her Lifeforce, just as soon as we find our next abode." Giggling, they pushed open the faded oak door and entered, hoping to buy a room for the night where they could rest. It was getting dark, and experience had taught them it was best to view a new possible home in daylight. The smell of damp leather and stale ale assaulted their noses as they crossed the threshold, but there was comfort in the humanity within and a warm hearth.

CHAPTER 2 – A FRESH START

A sunnier day dawned, and a steady stream of carts, horses and other folk heading to market trundled down the track to town. A few traders staying at the inn the night before had already set off at first light to set out their stalls, woken by the inn's cockerel. Not needing breakfast, Joshua and Annabella had snuggled back down in their straw bed and enjoyed each other before packing their bags once more.

Vacating their temporary lodgings, the young couple walked at a steady pace the few miles towards the town. Although they pasted smiles on their faces to all who passed them, anxiety was buried under

their woollen capes and only acknowledged by the firm grasp of each other's hands.

The initial hurdle they faced was that it was unusual for people to uproot and arrive to live somewhere else, unknown by anyone. Communities, especially in rural areas, were small and close-knit, built upon a shared history and a long set understanding of where they sat in the economic and social scale of things. It was an unexpected - and welcome - happenstance to discover they had arrived in time for market day. The crowds ensured their presence in a new town would be less noticeable amongst all the other visiting traders. Joshua and Annabella were all too aware of their luck as they circumvented puddles and jumped over to the side ditches to allow carts to pass.

However, even their fortunate timing couldn't dispel their nerves entirely. Each time they resettled, there followed a period of adjustment, a careful note taken of reactions to their arrival and continuous assessment made about their reception by the community. More than once, they had encountered hostility and suspicion from the very start and had swiftly fled overnight to find somewhere more suited to their needs.

It boded well that they had just spent a surprisingly relaxed evening in the company of travelling merchants and a few locals in the inn last night. Although the bawdy shanties sung as the night wore on were unknown to them, the tone and tales contained within were comfortingly familiar. They had both participated energetically in the applause, and the crowd noisily appreciated their contribution. Constantly the couple remained alert, at pains to not proffer any opinions in the heated discussions which followed as the ale flowed.

As it had been in their last town, undercurrents of religious tensions were running high in the area surrounding Beesworth. The growing reform movement was on the verge of becoming dominant, with King Henry only recently imposing himself as the Head of the Church of England. Newly emboldened Protestants passionately advocated their simpler faith as being the truest path to spiritual enlightenment, after so many years skulking in the shadows. Yet most people still clung to their centuries-old Catholic religion, distressed at the fabric of their beliefs and rituals being torn away by royal decree. The impact of Henry's proclamation was the source of much consternation, with blame firmly placed on his new companion, Anne Boleyn.

Rather than become lured into the debate, Joshua and Annabella had retired to their room at the back of the inn. They had long ago learned that to get involved invited elaboration about their own beliefs. They followed the rules decreed at the time, and would attend the local church as required. To do otherwise would attract suspicion, even if the strands of religion were currently evolving. For many decades, conversations about theology with each other had decades been avoided. It was the one aspect of their union where each held very different viewpoints.

The muddy track widened as Joshua and Annabella approached the township, giving way to a hodgepodge of buildings. On the outskirts, the houses were traditionally constructed with cruck frame timbers in their distinctive V shape lined the road. Where space permitted, or to replace ruins, recently built dwellings with a striking black and white half-timbered design began to appear.

As they walked deeper into the township, where side roads started to peel away, two or even three-storey buildings came into view. Occasionally, fully stone-built houses broke up the monochrome, and the rooflines varied wildly in height. The road grew firmer underfoot as they reached flagstones and cobbles of the main thoroughfares. Strips of common land interrupted the clusters of buildings; muck and mud pervading into the township as livestock rotated around fields.

Joshua relaxed his grip a little on Annabella's hand as they joined the throngs of people heading towards the centre of town, or waddling home with baskets and bundles. Despite Beesworth being further north than they had visited in the last century, it was similar to many other towns they had lived in. In the morning sunlight, the stark stripes of black and white walls brightened the narrow streets, even those with jetties overhanging perilously above.

They rounded the corner of a single storey parish church, and faced the large market square before

them. Shops and craftsmen seemed to go out of their way to raise the volume of noise with their sales calls and crafting demonstrations, adding energy to the general hubbub of the market. Business was brisk, but the town would likely be quieter and more sedate in following days.

"Looks promising?" Joshua said to Annabella as they picked their course through stalls and small herds of sheep. "It looked about the right size from above," she replied, her eyes keenly taking in the surroundings and the crowds as they thronged about the green. "And it seems busy enough today..." She tailed off, pausing to look at some delicately woven 'madder red' cloth at a stall. The woollen fabric was smooth to touch and had barely any of the bobbles of imperfectly spun threads so often found in local markets.

"Tis a pretty piece," the stallholder offered. "Would make some lovely sleeves for Christmas! From Norwich, this 'ere is. They do make a good red." Her smile revealed browned teeth, like a dark scar sitting in her fat, ruddy face, with wisps of greying hair poking out from her small frilly cap fashioned from a bright green cloth. The overall effect of hat and rounded face on top of a rotund figure reminded Annabella of a fading strawberry. Inwardly she felt a pang of relief - the unfortunate effects of aging would not show for many centuries, especially not her bloodline.

"Perhaps later," Annabella said, her fingers feeling the texture once more before moving on. She would be in need of supplies soon so didn't want to appear unfriendly, but the other cheaper fabrics the merchant was offering were slightly grubby and smelt of damp from their journey. A seamstress by trade, Annabella usually preferred to buy from shops which took better care of their stock. There was a lot to be said for the new fashions in fabric which travelling merchants offered, if clients were conscious of keeping up with the trend-setting classes.

Walking away from the market, Joshua and Annabella wandered down the widest street leading from the common land at the centre of the townstead. Delicious smells of fresh-baked bread and pies wafted out, countering the more unpleasant scent of excrement in the drains down the sides of the cobbled road. The shops they passed had open windows to attract custom as well as to air the spaces after the wet weather. Many had no glass in the aperture at all, only greased blinds which were drawn up to let in the light or dropped to offer scant protection from the elements.

Joshua and Annabella drank in the more pleasant smells the streets offered, and smiled at each other, optimistic for the next well-practised step in creating a new life. So far, the townsfolk had appeared friendly and polite, even if it was purely a sales gambit for the benefit of strangers.

It didn't take long to find the Guildhall, proudly boasting its large overhang into the street with ornately carved and painted heraldry symbols running the length of the eaves. Inside, Joshua made enquiries to an ageing clerk at the main table in the Grand Hall vestibule about any glazed, vacant shops with lodgings above or behind. As a silversmith, security was essential to Joshua, and window panes also suggested both affluence and respectability.

Shuffling rolls of paper, the grey-haired officer sized the couple up before disappearing into a side room. He emerged with a faded scroll detailing the town map. Using a candle for extra light, he then proceeded to study it, muttering to himself as his gnarled fingers ran along the street lines, as if mentally ticking through a list of the town's inhabitants.

Finally, he looked up and pointed to the options. Offered the choice of two which were immediately available, they chose the one which had been vacant slightly longer and was less central. The map detailed the landlord to whom their rent would have to be paid with clear boundary lines. The clerk shuffled amongst some papers before confirming that the shop they selected was within their budget and the glazing was reported to be in good order.

Joshua took out his leather purse and made sure to create a satisfying clink as he rummaged. The clerk's eyes began to glint at the prospect. Pretending to consult with Annabella about the rent, which was not the most extortionate they had encountered, but still not the cheapest, a few coins then passed hands and the clerk agreed to a few days grace for their papers. Joshua could always forge more references once

they had some privacy - many years of travelling had equipped them with sufficient resources to recall names of now-dead 'patrons' to authenticate their stories.

Desperate to settle as soon as possible, Joshua proffered a few extra shillings to the clerk to consider giving them a key today. They promised faithfully to sign the lease papers later that week when they had been formally drawn up. Annabella fluttered her eyelashes and pleaded extreme exhaustion, so the agent took pity on them.

The decision for the clerk was simple - they appeared to have readily available coin, looked presentable and honest, and frankly, he wanted the long-vacant shop let so he could claim his kickback. It was a risk worth taking. Few people turned up at his desk this well presented, and he prided himself on his instincts. Christmas was coming soon, and he had mouths to feed. The clerk hastily drew up a receipt for a deposit which he felt would suffice, suitably absolving himself of the blame should their verbal agreement fall down. The couple were confident, having glanced at the general state of the dwellings they had passed, that the abode would be at least habitable. And so the deal was struck.

Annabella and Joshua found their new home at the end of a side street, close to the Guildhall and just a little further away from the market square than most people would probably have wanted for passing trade. However, its location was ideal for them, affording easy access out of the town and into the countryside so they could come and go with minimal chance of being observed.

The shop itself was, as to be expected from a long-vacant building, dank and dark. The rushes on the floor dealt up clouds of foul, damp smelling fug as they pushed open the door. "No matter," Annabella said carefully, casting her eyes around the dim shop floor, also their front room.

"We've been in worse," Joshua muttered under his breath as he closed the door behind them.

Walking over to the counter, he swept aside the discarded papers strewn across the top and peered behind to assess what other detritus was left hidden there. A skinny brown rat darted out, running along the edge of the darkened room, its eyes catching the little light from the dusty windows. Annabella quickly dipped down and grabbed its tail as it ran past her, then grasped it by the neck. "Snack?" She said to Joshua in a sing-song voice.

"Maybe later?" He smiled as he rose off the counter. She shrugged, wrinkling her nose as the ratty taste would do little more than quench her thirst. First she inhaled deeply, her mouth close to its pointy teeth, then delicately bit into its neck and sucked. Throwing the dried husk into the fireplace, she wiped a pale hand across her lips, her eyes sparkling once more.

The upstairs was in equal disarray, its previous tenants having vacated in haste, leaving dislodged dust balls, odd socks and bits of kitchenware clearly dropped or left out of hasty packing. In the oak-panelled main bedroom overlooking the street, a wooden sided bed filled with old and mouldy straw awaited them, along with a large battered chest in which they could keep their belongings and clothes. A smaller second room overlooking the south-facing garden was lighter, and could be used to house Annabella's sewing.

They began by lighting fires and flinging open the windows to air the dampness out from the shop floor, before unpacking their scant possessions. Later, they would lay fresh rushes on top of the old, musty ones - it was considered healthier not to disturb them and release goodness knows what into their accommodation.

Finally, having wrenched free the swollen-shut back door, they investigated their outside space. The yard was half the size of the house, smelt of rotting fallen leaves and was clearly neglected. In the far corner they found remnants of a kitchen herb garden, shaded too much by the ramshackle fence. Annabella leant over the desiccated stubs and breathed over them.

After a few seconds, the brown plants began to straighten, the stems turned green as new energy

flushed through them and the dead leaves dropped to make way for fresh growth. Over surprisingly little time, Annabella would transform the tiny yard to a blooming, scented haven, from which they could readily supply their abode with fresh-smelling plants to help keep at bay the inevitable odours of human life and ward off unwanted humours.

Returning inside, the couple changed their clothes and stretched their wings briefly before opening the bedroom blind for airing. This was a well-practised routine which brought them pleasure. A fresh start, no suspicions around them yet, and the chance to breathe freely again, for a while at least.

It was late morning by the time Joshua and Annabella stepped out of their shop door, now wiped clean of dust and cobwebs. With new hairstyles mimicking those of their fellow townsfolk, they set out towards town on the muddy cobbles, looking every inch a happy young couple ready to make their way in the world.

Arriving at the marketplace, today less frantic with activity, they made their way around the shops in the square. Buying just a token item or two from each establishment afforded them not only the opportunity to introduce themselves politely but also to assess the competition and likely customers they could expect. Where possible, they requested the goods they purchased be delivered. They could then welcome, at the very least, the delivery boys, if not the actual tradespeople to their own premises, and make a good first impression.

Leaving Joshua discussing grades of silver ore with the blacksmith the next street over, Annabella returned home to begin preparations. She filled the bashed-up old kettle left behind by the previous tenants and placed it on the hearth to warm. She had brought flour and other dried goods back with her and set to baking small pastries to offer.

As she worked, she hummed a little Fae ditty to herself, taking a moment to reconnect with that part of her history which must always remain hidden. In her rare time alone, the tune reminded her of home, of Naturae. Somehow though, today, the song also prompted thoughts of her unwelcome duty, of ties that had been cut. She stopped singing, kneading the dough with renewed fervour. That world was estranged, so remote, so claustrophobic. Here, at least she was free to do what she liked, be who she wanted - within reason. She stretched out the dough, pulling at it with strong, slim hands, then smoothed away the bumps and shaped it once more to rise.

Annabella clapped, then rubbed off the excess flour - especially from the silver ring which Joshua had given her. Rinsing her hands, the circle returned to its polished state, and she smiled as she twisted it into place on her fingers. In this human realm, she wasn't alone. Looking at the sweet-smelling roses which Joshua had bought for her earlier reminded her that she would never again be lonely. One person had chosen to make her the centre of his life. On arriving in each location, a new bunch would adorn their house. They had a little game, she and he, of how long she could keep the blooms fresh. Over the past century, she had never yet picked up a petal.

She looked around at the smartened, clean room, with the warm scent of baking and light streaming in through the windows. Her heart gladdened. Although generally happy wherever she was with her love, she sometimes wondered if she didn't also enjoy the challenge of a change as well. She tried so hard to be content in these human towns. To fit in and settle. But they both acknowledged that she liked to travel, to seek out all that the world had to offer. This particular house suited her well - in the distance she could see that the road outside led to an open landscape with many pockets of woodland. She could barely wait to explore the area and find out what secrets it held, but would have to rein in this urge until they were properly established in the town.

By the early afternoon, the couple had laid out the stock they had managed to bring with them - garments neatly pressed and displayed, and silver trinkets softly glinting on the shop counter by the flickering firelight. Candles placed on corner shelves, ready to brighten the room once darkness fell. It wasn't long before deliveries began arriving - handed over in person by nosey neighbours and fellow

shop-keepers eager to assess the new arrivals. They warmly welcomed each with the offer of a drink and delicate savouries, to be nibbled whilst a not-so-subtle interrogation took place.

The patchwork of lies about who they were and where they came from had evolved over the decades, but remained in essence the same. Minor modifications or embellishments added according to the area and the ever changing times. It was a story designed to elicit both sympathy and admiration for their fortitude and luck. Both orphaned at a young age, no family to speak of but met each other through apprenticing in London. Following the sad demise of their aging masters, they married and decided to make their way into the wider world to trade and put down roots. On their travels, they had heard how lovely and welcoming this town was, and so had chosen to see if the rumours were true. And of course, they had excellent references from their sadly now deceased patrons.

Almost always, their story passed muster. Some people even claimed knowledge or kinship with the aforementioned but long, long dead patrons which the couple mentioned. It was always a source of amazement to Annabella that individuals would use any opportunity to claim the slightest social leverage with such distant relations, even those hundreds of miles away.

One of the most frequent questions related to London: why had they moved away from the bustling capital, where the King was rumoured to appear amongst his people? Joshua always gave the same reason for leaving - rents too high, cost of food too much, streets too dirty, and they longed for wider open spaces in which to walk and breathe cleaner air. Oh yes, a rural community was far more appealing to a young couple starting out in the world. And of the King - no, they had never seen him, he was cloistered away in his palaces hunting in his own grounds, or on a Progress around the country, and wasn't it sad he so rarely visited this corner of his realm?

Annabella usually held her tongue and left Joshua to talk during these introductions. This appeared as if she was a good, dutiful wife who let her husband lead, but in reality it was by prior agreement with Joshua. Her own views on royalty were too hard to swallow for most folk on a first meeting. Some might have said treasonous. She was a nervous liar as well, too prone to gabbling whereas Joshua had learned their fabrications like a travelling player would lines.

In most areas, their tale was enough to satisfy. It provoked a local pride in their community and played to underlying suspicions that the Monarch was aloof, uncaring about the common man. This seemed especially true in current times, as King Henry was moving towards enforcing a change in religion upon his subjects, which appeased only some elements of society. In the less populous, rural areas of the country, Protestantism was viewed as a dangerous threat to their familiar religious way of life.

Joshua and Annabella knew, having longer lifespans, that these civil disruptions would likely pass and change again. Whilst they lived alongside humans through the challenges which each transition of monarch heralded, the social and economic structure on a local level was largely the same as it had been for many centuries. They had learned that in order to stay hidden, it was easier to not express opinions yet live by the letter of the law and religious dictates. The irony was, not being mortal themselves, Joshua, and especially Annabella, were more widely versed in scripture than the majority of the clergy.

Tired after a long day of charming people, Joshua sat down on the recently vacated stool by the hearth and picked at the buttery crumbs remaining on the attractive platter which they always managed to escape with. Annabella began to wash the cups and tidy away, moving swiftly around the room as if she had energy to burn. He ventured to break the silence. "I'd say the plate, not to mention its delicious contents, was as much of a success as usual."

The piece was unlike anything most folks had ever seen, often the subject of a passing compliment. It featured an eye-catching and intricately woven pattern of swirls, with holes in between the weaving and

golden edging. Highly polished silver proclaimed its value, but it also held an otherworldly quality. Frequently, Joshua was asked if he was the maker of such artistry and he was forced to answer that no, it was his wife's family heirloom, no-one knew its provenance. "The ladies always covet it, and the gentlemen always weigh up its value," Annabella would say afterwards.

However, as a conversation starter, the plate enabled Joshua to subtly bring out his own showpieces. Delicate jewellery - embellished and engraved tankards and tiny keepsake boxes which were his speciality. He tried hard to keep up with the modern trends in design, feeling that influence grounded them in the present times more, layering their disguise and avoiding questions about their eternally youthful age. He was always conscious, perhaps more than Annabella, that they must be at pains to blend in smoothly and quickly to a new town. He sometimes felt that she was a little too risky in trying to set themselves apart, above the crowds, with their work in order to be a success. Whilst beautiful, her clothing designs leaned towards eye-catching flamboyancy. Only occasionally had they found a local who wanted to purchase 'court fashion' finery in the less extravagant towns they settled in.

Annabella poured them both a too-stewed cup of the honeyed drink she had prepared and sank down beside him. "I feel as if we are making a good start," she carried on, relaxing at last, "and they seem welcoming enough to newcomers at least."

"Aye," he nodded, "although, their accent is hard to follow sometimes."

"We will adapt," she said. It had taken decades of living in the south of England for his original Gaelic twang to fade, whilst she almost intuitively could understand and fall into the regional dialects. "'Tis further north than we have been for a long while, and will come back to us in time no doubt."

"I heard nought to cause concern so far," she remarked, in case he had overheard anything to alarm them which she had missed whilst engaged in other conversations.

"Yet." Joshua remained cautious. "No-one sounded too sorry to see the back of the Thomas's here before us. A rough sort, apparently, gone back to York for family reasons. We should take care to distance ourselves from any knowledge of them."

Annabella rolled her eyes. He was always more on edge in the first few weeks. The more sociable of the pair, he maintained it was more to do with making sure they would be a welcome addition to a community. It would take him building a rapport with local tradespeople over a few drinks in the inns of the town before he would relax into his surroundings. For herself, she was quite content to remain at a distance from the locals, whilst maintaining a facade of openness. She was the cool assessor of the pair, able to read peoples' true intentions before he could.

"The blacksmith and his wife, the Tunns, seemed very welcoming. Although goodness knows with four children and another on the way, it must be hard for them to make a living from just his forge," Annabella said.

"Aye, especially with the coinage due to change yet again, probably worth even less soon."

"These are indeed troublesome times," Annabella replied sagely. "But they will come around again, they always do."

"I think she had some money come to her from family," Joshua said. "Although why would she have settled for a 'smith if she could have had more? It's a tough existence, no doubt."

"Maybe she didn't have a choice - perhaps there was a child on the way? Or maybe she loved him."

"I'd like to think it was the last one." He sighed, reaching to stroke her arm. "But I suspect you are right with the first two guesses. Anyway, they seem pleasant people. We should try to make friends of them, given I will need to work closely with William if I'm to earn a living here."

"Margaret did look to be interested in the clothing here, although I think it out of her price range." Annabella was always torn when selling to common folk; frequently they simply couldn't afford entire new outfits which she loved to create. Often she ended up battling her conscience and discounting so heavily it barely covered the cost of the fabric - just because she longed to see people feeling better about themselves. Joshua was far more profitable in his endeavours and a harder haggler.

"I need to feed," Joshua said, rising from his chair.

"Shall we take a dusk-time walk then?"

"I think we should. I heard a little from Mistress Hooper, was it? Waxing about the mansion on the mound deep in the woodland. It sounds promising to have gentry almost on the doorstep. Maybe we should have sight of it before we go a-bed?"

Annabella smiled, "I'll fetch the cloaks."

They loosened their wings from beneath their clothing and fastened long woollen capes around their necks, draping the cloth so it entirely hid what was underneath. Holding hands again, they wandered down the muddy track away from the town towards freedom.

Each time they entered woodland, it seemed to Joshua and Annabella like a homecoming, to long-lost family. Long tree shadows guarded the road which skirted the copse, but they were welcomed inside by giants, whispering and rustling in a light breeze. The discovery of a new forest, crisp at this season with fallen leaves in the fading sunlight, was a joy. Clacking, squawking noises of pheasants, woodcocks and the many other birds who called the trees home as they began their evening calls comforted the couple. The chatter swelled in volume as Joshua and Annabella turned off the main track and picked their way through the undergrowth.

They were hoping to find a natural clearing, in which to drop the veil of their cloaks and their identities and be free amongst the wildlife. Already, just breathing in the life surrounding them had energised both. They also needed the heady rush of a direct infusion of Lifeforce. Always quicker to spot movement, Annabella suddenly flew up through the trees and, with a rustle of her skirts, returned with a squirrel in her slim hands. Joshua smiled lovingly at her as she offered it to him first, and he supped delicately before passing it back to her to finish. They carried on through the woodland, using the dying sun as a guide. Eventually they stumbled across another track, rising gently up an incline.

"It may lead to the mound we want," Joshua said, dropping the rabbit he had been finishing next to a large fallen tree, before climbing up it in one long stretch. He reached out a hand to assist Annabella up and over the log, causing her to smile. He was ever the gentleman, even though he knew she was perfectly capable of just fluttering over such obstacles. On the ground walking however, she admitted she was more prone than most to tripping. She reasoned that it was probably no bad thing he should constantly remind her to behave like a human by treating her as a lady. Whenever she fell, he was around to help pull her back up to her feet, pausing to smooth her hair from her face, plopping a kiss on her nose and telling her to take it one step at a time. It was never a chastisement, always a suggestion that implied she ought to slow down and think her actions through, both in walking and in life it seemed.

They came to the edge of the wooded track and looked up towards the summit of the mound. Bathed in the last rays of the sunlight, a mansion dominated the skyline. The hillside surrounding it had been cleared of all shrubbery and trees, leaving it boldly visible from all sides, like a bailey, only newer in construction. The rendering between the dark brown beams had faded to a greyish cream colour, lending the building a somewhat tired cast. The size of the long three-storey dwelling was perhaps what impressed Joshua the most, filling the space on top of the steeply rising hillock like the head of a pimple bursting up through swollen landscape.

The track continued to the base of the rise and they found themselves in a smaller cleared patch. A few posts for tying horses had been placed at the edge of a wider turning circle for carriages. Leading off from the clearing was a narrower, slightly overgrown footpath circling around to the other side of the hillock, for foot access to the house. They had approached the back of the residence, Joshua surmised. In the rapidly closing darkness, they would likely not be noticed, but should they be confronted, the pair lacked a reasonable explanation for their presence in such a remote spot, other than sheer nosiness.

Annabella glanced at the darkening sky and said with an air of defeat about her, "I suppose we shall have to wait until we are called upon to see the front of it."

"It's best we head home, yes," replied Joshua, "Soon be full dark my love, and whilst that isn't so much of an issue for us, we should not be spotted entering the town without some more obvious means to light our way. There would be questions."

They turned and began back down the track, taking the straighter route homeward. From a distance, they heard dogs barking a warning. Their presence hadn't gone unnoticed. Joshua tilted his head to look at the looming house and saw the tell-tale glow of a candle held close to a draped window. Walking was slower despite their quick pace, but flying was not an option.