

Chapter 6

Unexpected Meetings

Sky brushed her hair with the pink doll brush and returned it to the small box that held all her things. As she stood up she brushed a bit of lint from the nightdress given to her by Mary and modified for her wings. She loved the deep blue nightgown for its comfort and softness. She flew to the bowl that served as her home.

Mark came in the room she'd felt his irritation now for a while, and she raised an eyebrow as he walked up to her.

"Mom's cat is out." He explained. "And she's working late, which means she's going to be checking on me at some point tonight."

Sky shivered. She'd already had an encounter with the huge tabby of the family. That had ended up with her racing along the ceiling hoping no one saw her while Marigold ran beneath her, trying to catch a hold of her dress.

"Did you want to sleep on my shelves or would you like to be locked up for tonight?" Mark asked. She could feel his sudden uneasiness at the question.

Sky felt so tired she had no reservations at all. "Lock the door so I can sleep. Marigold climbs, after all."

"Right." Mark nodded. He went to the nightstand to fish the lock from its place in the drawer. A loud click echoed a minute later.

"Night, Sky." Mark murmured. He placed the key on the dresser and slid into bed.

"Oh, good night Mark." Sky yawned. New paragraph he turned off the light, plunging them into darkness.

Tap, tap, tap. Sky heard the sound as if from far away. The clouds raced beneath her as she soared high above the earth. Puzzled, she tried to locate the sound, but could see nothing. *Who could be knocking on what up here?* She had no clue. The sound came again, and Sky realized that she was dreaming. Someone was knocking on the glass of her home, and she had a pretty good idea of who it could be.

“Marigold, go away.” She mumbled rolling over and trying to recapture her dream.

Tap! Tap! Tap! Sky opened her eyes, fully expecting to see the cat batting at the glass and trying to get in. Nothing was there. She blinked, confused before she realized she’d been looking much too high. A trio of fairies stood just outside the bowl. Two were tall fellows with pointed ears, fit bodies, and broad dragonfly wings on their backs. One had blonde hair and the other ebony midnight. Yet it was the diminutive female in the middle that Sky stared at.

It had been four weeks since she had seen her best friend, but it seemed like no time at all had passed. The same red hair flounced atop the elfin face with its big blue eyes and full red lips. The slenderest and most colorful wings in all the Glades idly pumped once or twice in flashing iridescence. The only difference is between her memories and now were the short spears thrust behind all their backs between their wings and the relieved smile on her face instead of the mischievous grin usually there.

“Alleah!” Sky shouted, rocketing from her bed in surprise and delight.

“Sh!” Alleah fist, pointing to mark sleeping on the bed.

“What are you doing here?” Sky asked more normally. She could barely hear her reply through the glass.

“We’ve come to get you out.” She whispered. “Stand back. Jok’ral, Kev’inska, help me.” All three of them flew to the lock before she could tell them.

All three glowed brightly as Alleah withdrew three seeds from her pouch. Sky recognized the pleased to grow, though the tone felt... Different. She felt unsure why, the old ways had worked so well before. The plant sprouted long slender vines that wrapped around the lock. Growing thicker, heavier,

and stronger they strained against the steel. A great flow of magic flowed from the trio, adding to the plants efforts until *snap!* The lock separated into two pieces. Mark snorted in his sleep, but made no further signs of waking.

Alleah sent the plant back into its seed, and returned it to the pouch. Sky flew up and hugged her friend, glad for the moment just to feel her arms returned the embrace. She had so much she wanted to say, but Alleah broke free first.

“Come on, we’ve got to get out of here.” She pulled Sky towards the open window.

“Ally, I can’t.” Sky protested, tugging back. Already she could feel Mark’s command not to leave pushing on her.

“Forget whatever he is holding over you.” She growled. “You aren’t breaking your word. We are doing it for you.” One of the other two, Kev’inska, Sky thought, grabbed her arm in between the two of them hustled her towards the window.

“Wait! You don’t understand!” Sky cried, but it was too late. When she crossed the edge of the window she felt a mighty wrenching and was hurled back into the room. She landed with a painful smack! Right onto the floor and lay there a minute, fighting to regain her wind. Alleah and the others landed beside her. She was conscious of hands patting her face.

Sky groaned, looking straight into Alleah’s concerned eyes. “I told you, I can’t leave.” She gasped.

“But... How?” Alleah stammered.

“He knows my True Name.” There came a chorus of gasps. Sky shakily regained her feet.

“How?” Alleah asked plaintively.

“A spell.” Sky explained. “He had this thing called a book on the Fey that he was looking at for a way to talk to me. He found a spell that would give him our language and he followed the instructions thinking he could convince me to stay by talking with me, but the book lied to him, giving him my True Name.”

"I'll turn him into a newt." Alleah growled. There was a chorus of agreement from Kev'inska and Jo'kral.

Sky laughed. "Even with the village behind you, you wouldn't be able to do that. And I wouldn't let you." She finished in a grimmer tone, giving the others her best stare. The little voice that had been with her so long remained strangely quiet. Sky had no idea why...

"But Sky..." Alleah whined.

"Don't worry, Ally." Sky soothed. She needed a moment to compose herself and explain, and she wanted to catch up on what was happening. "It's not as bad as you might think. But please, we don't have too much time. What's been happening at home?"

All and the others glanced at one another. The two men moved a little further off, watching Mark as a hawk would a snake in its nest as Alleah took her back a little ways. Sky prayed fervently that Mark wouldn't toss poor turned this night, or he could be in for more trouble than he expected.

"Ally, what is going on?" Sky demanded, planting her feet firmly way she could still see Mark.

Alleah looked around as if searching for hidden ears before speaking.

"The forest is growing dark." Her voice held a sharp edge of terror. Something Sky'd never heard before from her fun-loving friend. "Oakstead and Mushroomville are gone. We haven't heard from the other forests in weeks. But that's not the worst. The number of Golobraith spiders is increasing. They've taken travelers and unwary fey, making journeys of any sort impossible. Oddest of all, everywhere strange plants have appeared in the Glades, plants that don't respond to any of our spells."

Sky frowned. The information was worrisome. The spiders in particular she shuddered at, they were the natural enemies of her people and had always hunted them. The plants though, that was interesting. She briefly wondered what kind of plant would not respond to her people, who could call or cajole most of the green world to their bidding.

"What are we doing to help the survivors?" She asked.

“That’s the thing, there haven’t been any.” Alleah frowned worriedly. “The elders have had us create a fairy ring around the village inside the main ring, and most of us now go armed.” She absently touched the spear on her back.

“That’s terrible!” Sky gasped. The fairy ring was their most powerful defense. If they had created a second one, that would have drained the villages reserves dangerously. It was a desperate measure. How could things have gotten so bad so fast?

“You see why you have to come back? We need you. We can break that monster’s hold on you and...”

“He is not a monster.” Sky said firmly. Alleah stiffened. “You don’t have the full story.” Sky said in a gentler voice. “Let me show you.” Having proof would add weight to her words, she thought, and show Alleah how needed she was here still.

Sky flew up into the air and went to the ajar door. Glancing down she saw Marigold asleep half in and half out the door. She realized how much magic the others had used that night, and found herself touched at the sacrifice her friend must have paid.

In Mary’s room, Sky hovered just above the sleeping form. Alleah stayed beside her.

“You brought me to another human?” She asked quizzically.

“For she is the reason I am here.” Sky gestured, feeling the power fill her. The covers slithered down to pool at Mary’s feet. Her wasted form became starkly revealed in the moonlight, but just in case Sky lit a faint ball of light.. Alleah gasped.

“What happened to her?” Horror cracked her voice.

Sky told of Mary’s sickness and Marks desperate effort to bring the one thing that could save her, could bring her to fight again. She explained how she had gotten captured the night of the Festival, of her True Name being revealed, and being given a new purpose as a companion for Mary, teaching her about the Fey while learning more about humans.

"And that's why I am here." Sky finished. She had replaced Mary's covers and doused the light, leaving them shadowed in the dim light of the moon. She wished she could make out her face better so she could tell what affect her words were having.

Alleah remained quiet for a while. When she did speak, most of the fire had disappeared from her voice. "All right, he isn't a monster, but we still need you back. They won't show it, but the elders are very worried."

Sky chewed her lower lip, suddenly uncertain. Mary *had* improved by leaps and bounds, but still she worried. She'd only recently learned about "relapses", and the notion frightened her. She'd kept a close eye on Mary looking for the faintest trace of a sign she could relapse.

Be reasonable here. The voice was back. *You know that isn't the ONLY reason you want to stay.*

Sky stifled her surprise at the unexpected return, focusing on the words themselves. *I guess I'm afraid.* She realized slowly. *I've slept in safety and lived without worries for so long now, I've become used to it. And Mark and Mary? What would happen to them if I left? I've grown so attached to them, I couldn't bear to bring them any pain. Not now.*

Pet. The voiced whispered triumphantly. It gloated in its victory until Sky recalled Mark's words from earlier. . *No. Not a pet. Family.*

"Alleah," she turned to her friend. "I want to help. I really do. I'm needed here as well though. But, maybe we can help each other." A new idea was percolating through her mind.

"What are you thinking?" Alleah asked cautiously.

"It's simple." Yes, she could see it now. "Move closer to here, maybe in the garden. The spiders would never dare to leave the forest and venture against man!"

"Sky!" Alleah squalled, shocked. "Have you gone completely mad?! The humans would see us and catch us. They'll keep us locked up like you and make us slave for them and never feel the sun or dance in the Glades again!"

The depth of feeling surprised Sky, and she felt ashamed and a little hurt.

"I guess you're right." She said dejectedly. "It was a silly idea."

She led the way back to Mark's room. There they found Kev'inska and Jo talking in undertones as they waited. They looked up as they approached.

"I'm going to talk to Mark tomorrow." She announced.

Alleah exchanged a glance. "I'll stay here with you." She told her. Kev'inska and Jo quickly added their vote to wait too.

"Thank you all." Sky smiled. "But I'll be fine the Glade needs you right now. You should go."

They protested, as she expected, but Sky remained adamant. So, just as the Sky began to lighten and dawn drew close, Alleah and her friends departed. Sky watched them go, feeling conflicted for the first time in her long life. Should she go, or should she stay?

Mark woke up feeling perfectly refreshed and happy. The sun shone bright through the window and he could hear birds singing.

What a beautiful day. He found himself thinking. He got out of bed and found Marigold sleeping in the doorway. Pushing the protesting tabby out the door he shut it firmly and turned to get the key. As he walked his foot collided painfully with a hard object: he could hear it against the wall. Cursing, he looked to see what he had hit and saw the shattered lock lying against the wall.

Terror clutched his heart as he imagined Marigold catching the poor fairy sleeping, reaching down with her paw and running off with her dangling like one of her toy mice. Running to the globe, he lifted it and feverishly looked inside. Sky wasn't there. Putting the globe back down, he turned to chase Marigold, her name rising to his lips when his gaze fell on Sky standing in the window, staring out with a thoughtful expression.

Heart hammering, Mark opened his mouth angrily to give her a piece of his mind but stopped. Something about this felt... Off.

He came to stand by the window, suddenly afraid to break the silence. He waited with a patience he knew his parents would be proud of.

At length, she spoke. "Mark, did you really mean what you said? Am I truly a part of your family?" Sky turned as she talked until she stood facing him from the window, tiny face uplifted.

Mark started, he hadn't expected such a question. "Of course."

She took a deep breath, and Mark braced himself for whatever she was going to say. "Mark, I have to go home soon. There's too much to explain," she said hurriedly, feeling his shock and sudden hurt. "But something bad is happening to us in the forest. Entire villages had disappeared. My friends need my help."

"But what about Mary?" Mark asked, then kicked himself mentally. Her friends were disappearing and he wanted her to stay. How selfish could he be? *But that still doesn't change the way I feel. There has to be another way.*

"Mary will be fine for a day or two, and I promise I will come back." Sky soothed.

Not if you're hurt, Mark wanted to say. He realized that this was an adult situation, something he was normally sent away for. He didn't know how to handle the situation. What would dad do? He wondered. His father would get more information first, Mark realized. But Sky didn't seem to want to tell him. Mark knew he would have to hurt her if he wanted to continue.

It's for her own good, he told himself. "Please, tell me everything." Her eyes widened as her mouth began to spill all the information she had heard last night. In the back of his mind he could feel her feeling of betrayal lancing through him like a knife. *I will make it up to you*, he promised. He listened intently as Sky told of huge spiders attacking and of the fairy rings.

"I remember those!" Mark interrupted excitedly. "They make it impossible for bed to see it and keep all sorts of nasty things out."

"Precisely." She gave him a look, though one his sister gave when he interrupted her.

Mark held out his hands in a placating gesture. She went on about how her people had used up most of their reserve magic, so that if enemy managed to breach the ring that her people would fall. The

other fairy towns had completely vanished, no one had ever been found from any of the ruins. "I'm afraid that my friends will end up just like that." Sky sniffed.

"But who could be doing it? Spiders by themselves aren't that smart." *Or that big*, Mark added silently. He didn't doubt her word, but he had difficulty in believing spiders could grow as large as his head. Or in spiders that could think and plan fights for themselves. The only obvious explanation he could think of was that someone was leading them. He asked. "Could it be this Dark One you mentioned before?"

Sky shrugged helplessly, and he realized she wouldn't know either. He needed more time to think. He smiled at Sky sadly.

"Thanks you for telling me Sky. It means a lot to me. Why don't you go see Mary? But Sky?" He felt very grim as he looked at her. She licked her lips and trembled, anxiously awaiting what he would say. "Don't tell Mary, not just yet. I don't want to worry her."

Sky hesitated, and then nodded. She flew to the bowl to dress. He noticed she grabbed the white dress again. In minutes she had flown out the door.

Mark sat down on his bed to think. Scenarios ran through his head: Sky leaving and never coming back, Sky coming back badly hurt or dying, of monstrous spiders binding her, biting her, draining her of blood and life. He thought, too, of Mary wasting away again before his eyes of sorrow and loneliness.

So gloomy were these thoughts he could feel tears starting to roll down his cheeks. This could not be happening! Hot anger filled him near to bursting. He had to do something, anything, to protect his sisters. (Mark gave a start at the thought, but he liked the way it sounded). He would defend his sisters, and though he was only ten and didn't have any magic, he was confident he could come up with something.

Forget magic, he growled. *I can do lots of things without it. I've never needed it before, I won't need it now.* His eyes traveled over a picture on his wall. It showed him with his great-grandfather standing in front of a Sherman tank, just like the one he had driven in the Second World War. He had bailed out of his burning tank and fought his way on foot to friendly lines in one of the largest battles of the war. For his heroic actions, he had been awarded a Purple Heart which made quite an impression on Mark, though at the time he'd been too small to understand why.

Market nodded to the picture, not even realizing he'd made his decision. Going to his closet, he stood on his small stool to reach the top shelf. There a long black box lay. Sliding it carefully down, he placed it on his bed. Stepping the locks, he opened the case to reveal a short, slightly stubby rifle.

The stock seemed to be made of oiled wood, though it was actually plastic. The long steel barrel shown in the light with black flame. Pulling it out, he checked it for any issues before returning it to the case. Going back to the shelves he seized the heavy box of BBs and set it next to the rifle. From his drawer, he pulled out the most powerful flashlight he could find. It'd been given to him by his uncle last Christmas. Taking duct tape from the kitchen, he taped the light under the barrel.

Weapon ready, he went to prepare his clothing. He had black jeans and a shirt, plus a heavy camo coat and rain pants he had gotten during a sale at the local hunting store. To give himself extra padding, he would wear a leather jacket underneath.

Grabbing his pocket knife, he lay it on the pile of clothes. Going through his checklist, he couldn't think of anything else he would need, and hid the entire kit under his bed.

"I'll keep them safe, grandpa." He promised the picture.

He found Sky showing Mary another Fey dance. She twirled and delecte, wings flashing in the light with the riots of color like the surface of a bubble. Mary laughed and clapped along to provide the beat.

Mary seemed a completely different person. She begun regaining some of her weight again, her hair shone with glossy locks from being crushed in her face was no longer pinched or drawn but rather dimpled when she smiled like now. Mark hovered in the doorway just to watch the scene. It filled him with contentment and happiness.

Mary looked up from the dance. "Come on, Mark!" She grinned. "Come join in."

Mark felt the tension melt away inside him as he joined the dancing, moving wildly exaggerated copy of Sky's movements. Both the girls broke into spastic fit of giggles at his antics soon all three were laughing helplessly on Mary's bed.