

Chapter 8

Home Again

Mark slowly came aware of a low rumble in the dark. Too loud for a cat, it had a deep and rhythmic sound that sounded both familiar and comforting, though Mark had no idea why. *I wonder what it could be?* The second thing he noticed was that he felt frightfully cold.

Mark struggled to open one eye and then another. A white ceiling entirely devoid of any decoration or cheer greeted him. *Wherever I am, I'm not at my house.* His thoughts seemed so groggy, they were swimming through molasses.

Getting to a seated position where he could see around him took some effort, but at last he could see what had been making the noise: His sister sat in her electric wheelchair leaned up against the headrest. Her mouth was open and she breathed in and out in a gentle snore. On her lap she held Sky who looked to be also asleep, dressed in her white dress and leaning stiffly in a fairly upright position. Mark realized that to most people, not looking closely, it would simply look like Mary brought a little doll in for comfort. *It's still a horrible risk,* he thought fondly.

Mark debated on waking them, but decided against it. He needed rest himself, he supposed. Before he could finish getting to sleep however, his parents walked in.

For a moment they just stared at him, then his mother came around his bed and clutched him tight to her chest. Mark twitched as he felt wetness dampen his hair from his mother's cheeks, she was crying! For him! His father held his free hand, Mark could feel it trembling. A twinge in his gut made him wiggle slightly, and his mother loosened her hold immediately, getting ready to pull away. Mark stopped her, hugging her tighter than she had held him. After being in the company of death, he never wanted to let them go again.

"Mom, Dad." Mark began, but couldn't find the words he wanted to say. Instead, all that came out were "I love you."

“And we love you.” They chorused back. Each sounded slightly hoarse.

The noise had woken both Mary and Sky, Mark noticed as he peered around his mother’s arm. Mary had a tearful smile on her face and she sniffed slightly at him. Sky didn’t move of course, pretending to be a doll, but Mark could see the smile on her face and the tears shining as they leaked from her eyes. And he could feel her joy and happiness through their link. No matter what the Dark One had said, Mark vowed, Mark knew he could never take advantage of her again. He loved her too much, and in return he could feel her love like a warm blanket surrounding him and keeping the chill at bay.

“What happened?” he asked in a small voice as everyone came together. He had some recollection of the battle, but much of it remained a mystery to him, and he feared what he didn’t know. Most especially, he feared what happened to the Dark One; had he in fact perished or was he out there now, biding his time to strike again? But these questions he could only ask of Mary and Sky, and he would have to wait for later. For now, he wanted to know what everyone else knew, so he could judge for himself how much of his story he wanted to give when the truth wouldn’t be believed or be the right thing to do just yet. Later, he would tell his parents everything, and reveal the truth about Sky and the danger facing them, but not yet.

“We were hoping you would tell us.” His father looked and sounded stern again, though Mark could see the corners of his mouth trembling and see how pale he looked.

“The Sherriff’s outside, honey.” His mother sounded worried. “He’s waiting to take your statement.”

“My statement?” Mark’s eyes got huge. “Am I in trouble?” He asked, looking between them wildly.

“Well, yes and no.” His father said. “You’re in big trouble for going outside that late at night, but we need to know who stabbed you and what happened.”

“What’s going on? Please tell me!” Mark begged, beginning to struggle. His parents pushed him back on the bed with effortless ease. They then told him what had happened to keep him calm. Mark listened intently.

They had been asleep when a bright flash of light woke them and the sound of banging on the front door sent them hurrying down the hall. Outside, they had found a nearly incoherent Mary holding Mark’s body on her lap, tied to him with the belt of her robe for added security, and so she could let go

of him to drive and knock on the door. From there, they had all gone to the hospital by ambulance where the doctors spent most of that night and the next day stitching him back together and fighting the strange infection of the wound.

“They told us it was the dam-uh darndest thing they had ever seen.” His father told him. “The wound turned black and icy cold to the touch, not hot like most infections, and it resisted all the antibiotics and drugs without even slowing down. They lost you twice on that table, barely getting your heart going again. They told me whatever it was had come from the largest knife wound they’d ever seen, or a sword. Nothing seemed to be working, and then you were suddenly getting better, the infection leaving you. They’re still puzzling over that one. The over-paid stuffed-shirts that can’t even...” he desisted into mumbling at that point, for which Mark was glad. His father rarely got angry, but when he did it was best to find any excuse to get away quickly.

The sheriff came in, a thin, lean, rangy looking fellow with dark hair and the predatory look of a wolf on the scent. He held the snapped remnants of Mark’s BB gun. “We found this at the scene.” He announced, looking right at Mark. “Now, I should like you to tell me all about your encounter.”

Mark licked suddenly dry lips, and launched into his story. He’d gone to the woods, he claimed, to think and shoot his rifle a bit. He’d had a nightmare where Mary had turned backwards and was going to die again. He wanted a chance to sort out his feelings and fears, so slipped out of the house through his window to the meadow to think.

When he got there he came across a tall figure in a shadowy cloak already there. He couldn’t offer any description at all, other than he stood taller than his father and seemed much thinner. He’d gotten only a quick peek at his face when he shined his flashlight up at him and saw that it was a strange grey color. But nothing else. The figure had shouted something funny at him that Mark couldn’t make out and attacked. He had shot his rifle dry at it and thrown in crosswise it up in front of himself to defend against a black sword, but the blade had snapped his rifle and cut him in the chest, then the man had stabbed him.

“And then I guess I must have fallen asleep or something, because I woke up here.” Mark said, embarrassed and relieved that his story had been told.

The sheriff had been taking notes the whole time while his mother had held him close to her body. When he had told of being slashed at then stabbed, she crushed him against her and he had trembled. Only now did he come to realize how close to dying he had been, and what he would have lost.

“And what were you doing out there young lady?” he asked, turning to Mary.

“I heard him slip out and felt scared something bad was going to happen.” Mary said. “I followed, because I didn’t want to get him in trouble for going out that late. I thought I could talk to him and get him to come home. It took me some time to get out of bed and climb into my wheelchair, but I wasn’t worried. I knew where he’d be, we used to play there sometimes after school before I got sick. I had dad’s old light. When I got to the glade I had it on, and saw the man standing over Mark with his sword through him. I screamed and turned the light on him and he ran off. When I got to Mark, he was lying with his blood all over the place. I got him onto my chair and went home, praying I could keep him alive until I could get help. I didn’t think I’d make it.” She finished in a subdued tone.

“Lucky thing that you did.” He replied. “Or he wouldn’t have.” He looked at them hard like he suspected they weren’t telling the whole truth. Mark did his best to look guileless, and Mary looked positively angelic. The sheriff snorted in amusement and looked at their parents. Before he left, he made them promise to tell the police anything else they could think of.

“Well.” His father finally said, clearly not sure what else to say. They looked at each other and Mark realized he was about to get a lecture, and punishment too, but he felt extraordinarily tired. He leaned into his Mom, ignoring the sharp pain that warned him not too, and closed his eyes as she held him.

“I’m sorry.” He whispered into her breast as he began falling. “I didn’t mean to hurt anyone. I just wanted to help.” He realized he was rambling, but didn’t care anymore. He was so tired.

“Shh. Shh. It’s okay. You helped.” His mother whispered, rocking him gently.

“Did I?” He asked. Before; “But I didn’t save everyone.” Just before the night claimed him.

This time when he woke up, it turned out to be his mother sleeping uncomfortably in the chair. He smiled at the sight. Movement next to his hear made him turn to look.

"Sky!" he whispered.

"Mark, your mother is still asleep, but only if you don't wake her." She chided quickly.

"Sorry." He whispered as quietly as he could.

"What were you thinking, going off like that?" she scolded tearfully. "You practically died, twice! You got lucky enough of us remained to cleanse that dark curse out of you."

Mark's face twisted. "How many..." he asked.

"More than anyone else could have." She told him firmly. "Far more, you saved many that had fallen to shadow."

His brow furrowed. "Huh?" he felt completely clueless.

"The captured fairies." She said earnestly. "You freed them by shooting the spiders and keeping the Dark One's attention at bay. Then when Mary hit him with her beam, he left too quickly to give orders to his slaves, so right now they are inside the circle and free of his power."

Mark shook his head. "No." he moaned. "He can command them any time he wants, because he can call directly to their minds, like he did with you."

"What?" Sky asked, startled.

Mark told her of what had actually happened, and of his conversation, and what the Dark One had revealed. "I'm sure he will get them when he wants to, but I don't know what to do. I'm too little for this." He muttered, feeling very downhearted.

Not too little." Sky said crossly. "It isn't every human that can face the Dark One, even full grown, and you bested him in combat, at ten summers, no less! No, no one can call you little anymore, though young is still appropriate."

Mark thought about her words for a moment. He felt a glow of contentment, for a moment. Then curiosity took hold of him. He asked what had happened when he had fainted.

Mary had woken up at the sound of Mark's window sliding open. She'd lain awake, trying to hear what was being said, but it was too quiet. Instead, she had struggled on her own to get her wheelchair. Rolling to Mark's room, she found Sky sobbing on the floor. She tried desperately to get Sky to tell her what was wrong, and where Mark had gotten off to. Sky refused to tell her, despite Mary's pleas and begging.

Just when Mary had determined to go outside to follow the tracks, Sky brightened and grabbed a notebook. Mark had been teaching her her letters, and now she saw a use for it. Using her magic to move the pencil until she had explained the whole affair. Every bit of it, including her own True Name.

Mary started to read that, and looked in mingled surprise, horror and pain for Sky at reading about her brother's mistake. Yet it was the rest of the message that was important, and she looked up when she had reached the end of it, the tiny scrawl covered most of the page.

"We have to go after him." She said simply. Sky couldn't agree more.

They grabbed the spotlight, and Mary tied on her robe and went to her electric wheelchair. They set off into the dark, not bothering to wake their parents. Sky led the way, she hadn't been directed not too, after all, and they soon made their way without incident to the Glade.

When they got there, they found the battle in full swing, and Mark lying at the feet of a shadowy figure holding an immense sword. And in the fairy ring all the fairies were flying to and fro, throwing magic blasts out of the ring at the spiders rushing in to feast on him.

Mary let out a shriek like an eagle! Turning her light on, she aimed it like a shining lance, right at the Dark One! She merely intended to blind him and throw off his aim, and distract him entirely from Mark. What she hadn't expected was for the figure to writhe in pain, hissing like a teakettle that had been left on too long. Sky added her strength to the light, and the creature...melted. His cloak and sword vanished like wisps of fog, and at his defeat all the spiders and goblins fled into the forest, leaving behind the plants and all the prisoners they had collected.

The fairies had come out of the rings cautiously, rescuing those from the suddenly submissive plants, and freeing the bundles. Mary and Sky barely noticed. She rushed over to him as quick as the chair would go, and fell on the ground next to him. The wound was bleeding horribly, and in his palm Mark clutched a small fairy, her wings torn and her body black and blue from the impact of the sword.

“Help us!” Mary screamed at the fairies. They looked at one another, clearly unsure as to what they could do. Sky turned to them and scolded them in her own language, which Mary did not understand.

“What did you say to them?” Mark interrupted, looking at her keenly.

She blushed. “I told them they were cowards to let this hero-child fight their battle for them, and then let him die without rendering any sort of aid.”

The fairies, of course, could not let that stand. They helped Mary return to the chair, and placed Mark next to her. Then Sky, leading a full circle of twenty fairies came to them. Chanting in a strange tongue, much different than any she had taught Mary or Mark. The air, which had been as still as death, whipped into a frenzy, shaking trees and howling into the night. The main maple that grew in the center of the glade grew bright green, and glowed with an inner light. The fey continued to chant, and that light was transferred to Mark’s still form. Blackness emanated from him, so black as to be pitch black. Mary refused to let go, and held onto him as his body bucked and thrashed. Sky held that her power fought another in his body, but their connection proved the stronger, and the power broke.

“But what good is that?!” Mary asked her, terror stricken.

“It means we can work a little magic now on that wound.” Sky told her tiredly. She didn’t want to admit it, but the fey had used up nearly all the magic in that struggle. Try as they might, they had only enough to suspend Mark temporarily, to keep the wound from bleeding out.

In terror, Mary ran the wheelchair as fast as she could, jouncing along the trail with Mark on her lap. Sky flew right beside them, using what strength she had left to maintain the spell. It was then she realized that a shard of the blackness still remained embedded in him, but she didn't have the power to break it out herself.

At the house Mary knocked on the square red door wildly, determined to bring half the neighborhood down on them. But Sky felt this was still too slow, she raced around the back of the house where the window of the Master bedroom stood. There she sent a burst of magic that turned the room brighter than daylight in a clap of lightning. The parents jerked awake and sat up blinking before rushing out the door to the sound of the knocking.

Sky watched the large carriage with red lights pull up, timing her entry for the point when the fewest people were looking up. Mary got in and rode, and Sky darted under her wheelchair as they lifted it up. Then she crawled up to her lap and lay there like a doll so she could watch the healers work on Mark.

At the hospital, she learned that the healers could do nothing about the shard, it fell quite outside their experience. So, she raced back to the glade to find the wisest and eldest of the councilors, Him'bo. Dragging him from his hut she brought him to the hospital, ignoring his protests that he needed to be back at the Glade resetting the warding spells that kept everyone safe, and overseeing the removal of the Fairy Plants, and a thousand other things. Yet, despite his grumbling, he hurried to the top of the room where the doctors were working over Mark.

His breathing and heart stopped, and for a moment he lay dead. The doctors rushed around, bringing in carts, or slapping his heart with enough force to bet a single beat from it. Him'bo and Sky both chanted entreaties to Nature to lend them her power, and using what was given, they fought the shard.

In the end, they destroyed the darkness that remained, though he would always have a huge, cruel scar from the encounter. It was all they could do, and Him'bo left soon afterwards after delivering a Council Edict to Sky. He also gave her news of her friends, which she appreciated.

"What about the fairy that helped me out?" Mark asked quietly. "Did she make it as well?" he feared the answer.

A cloud passed over Sky for a moment before she brightened. "That was my best friend, Ally" she informed him. "And she's alive, at least. But the sword crushed her wings and tore them too badly to heal." She looked downcast. Then she asked; "If it's alright with you, I'd like to bring her back home with us and a few of the other grounded as well. They'll be safer there than even in the Glade, as there are fewer predators, and the spiders won't follow after."

"Of course!" Mark agreed. "But is there anything we can do to heal her wing?" Mark teared up. It seemed grossly unfair, after everything she had done to help him that she should end up a cripple.

"I'm sure Mom and Dad will agree." He began.

"Mark." Sky broke in. "The elders don't want anyone else to know we exist. As you and your sister already do they've granted special dispensation, but they don't want anyone else to know, including your parents."

"What? Why?!" Mark whispered fiercely. "I'm done with the half-truths and lying. I want to tell my mom and dad."

"They feel it's for the safety of ever fey that lives, not just in our Glade but elsewhere as well." Sky explained. "Other humans might not behave the way you do towards us, but more like the Dark One, seeking power and slaves. They don't believe any human is ready for that to change, and they argued to me that you were one such, despite all that you've done for them. They wanted to empty your mind of all the knowledge on fey, and me, and leave you forever. I refused, and threatened to show everyone our existence, for which they threatened exile for me and Ally, as well as any who followed us."

She bowed her head. "I-I can live with exile if I must, and you order me, but I don't think Ally or the others can, just yet."

"I don't want you to be banished." Mark cried. This was turning to be a horrible ending to the entire adventure. It wasn't supposed to happen this way! "I thought when the good guy wins, everything was supposed to be better for everyone and stuff. This doesn't feel like winning anything at all."

"But they are better than before." Sky whispered to him, coming up to stand very close to his ear. "You will see, in time. The Dark One has been thrown back, and he will be some time to regain his

strength, and you made a lot of friends, and Mary is in much better health than when this all began, which is what you wanted, right?"

"Well, yeah. But what about you?" Mark asked.

"I'm fine." Sky told him. "I feel more at home with you than I ever did at the Glade, and I don't think that's a part of the spell. It's because of who you are, I think. And that is someone very special indeed. I'll say no more though, I think your mother is waking up."

Another two weeks passed in the hospital before he was released. The wound remained badly scarred, as Sky had warned him, and still hurt very badly. He moved slowly and breathed as shallowly as he could. His mother walked beside him on one side, supporting him while his sister, in a miracle from the Heavens, walked on his other side.

Mark had thought himself dreaming when she had strode into his hospital room, as if she'd never been sick. There were still a gauntness about her face, and dark lines around her eyes, and her legs moved slowly from lack of use for so long, but she still walked! Her doctors were flabbergasted, having confidently stated that she could never walk again, and if she had the disease in remission, then she would always remain sickly. No longer did they say that, and they constantly scratched their heads in wonder.

Mark didn't wonder at all. He knew it was a very special friend that had helped her, a sister in fact. He had told her so last night, when she and Mary were with him in his room, getting him ready for the morning. Sky had nearly fainted from the surprise and delight she felt, reinforced by Mary's vigorous insistence that she was in fact, their new sister.

Now the whole family (their parents not realizing that the number had grown by one, though a small one at that) came home to a fabulous welcome. There were signs put up celebrating Mark's return and Mary's, like they'd been gone on a long holiday and only recently returned. They ate good food (which Mark greatly appreciated from the yucky hospital food the nurses had insisted on serving him) and watched *The Fellowship of the Ring* together, one of Mark's favorite movies.

The biggest surprise came later, after his parents sent them off to bed. Mary helped him into his room (she'd insisted) and closed the door firmly behind them, just in case their parents left the study or den from their work. On Mark's bed stood a total of eight fairies, some male and some female, all youngish looking like most of the fey, and most with some fear or trepidation on their faces.

Mark barely noticed, for in the middle of the group, standing next to Sky, stood a wingless fairy with red hair, a cocky grin, and bright eyes. She waved at him and spoke in a strong cello voice. Sky looked up and translated:

"She's glad you're alright, and hopes the wound doesn't hurt too much."

"A light scratch, nothing to worry over." Mark told them airily. His sister snorted, which ruined the impression a bit, but Mark giggled as well.

"That's good, she wanted to thank you for saving her life twice." Sky continued, listening as Alleah spoke rapidly. "She says she's never seen anyone so brave, and the council are fools to think you would willingly hurt us."

"Thanks." Mark felt a great pressure squeezing his heart. Nothing to do with the wound, he thought. It was something else.

"And thank you, Miss Alleah" He stumbled over the odd sounding word, "For saving my life. Please, consider yourself as one of the family, you and our sister, Sky."

The fairies spun around to look at Sky, who seemed a foot tall now, glowing with pride and bashfulness. They turned to look up at Mark and Mary, and Alleah reached out to extend her palm. Mark gave his forefinger for her to shake.

It seemed like a good time to go to bed, so Mark showed the fey several high shelves that they could sleep on to remain out of reach of the cat, as well as a large box they could use for privacy. He showed Alleah Sky's bowl, and placed another rag in there for her blanket, then helped her get inside. Mary helped him every step of the way.

Before she left, she gave him a fierce hug, careful of his wound. "You're the best little brother in the world, and certainly the best little brother I've ever had." She whispered to him.

"That's easy." Mark laughed. "I'm you're only little brother."