



Introduction

This solstice story is set in the 'world' of my series Living Fae, but I hope it can be read as a stand-alone. The focus of the series is a thoroughly modern fairy, Harlequin, who lives on Alderley Edge in Cheshire, UK. The books follow him and his brothers and sisters through various adventures and romances. The main characters are Harlequin and his partner Yarrow who is leader of the local

unicorn troop, Starling, the eventual unicorn master (equivalent of a vet) who succeeds Harlequin's stepfather in the role, and Ferdy, a foxfairy from Ireland who met Harlequin and Starling in Tara. There are also mentions in this story of Harlequin's sisters Peasblossom, Columbine and Moth, their partners, and their children. By the time the story takes place, Harlequin's younger brother Cobweb has left Alderley Edge. If any readers are confused they should consult the glossary on my website for further information. Eichhorn, the focus of this story, is a German Elfe who met Harlequin in Germany and has been a regular visitor and correspondent ever since.

Across Two Seas

'Do you really have to go?' Eichhorn's brother Igel was frowning. So was Pookie, his beloved Rottweiler.

'I promised to spend the solstice with them,' he said. He knew Igel understood and he half hoped Pookie did, too.

'But the winter solstice here is, well, the best time of year.' Igel sounded exasperated. Eichhorn understood but didn't agree. He could do without all the German beer drinking, table thumping and overeating. English celebrations, at least on the Edge, were more reserved. Elfe, he reflected, shared many of the traits of their human compatriots.

'It's the best time there too,' he said, frowning himself. He shouldn't have to justify himself every time he left for England. It wasn't as if he was needed by anyone special in the Teutoburg Wald. His extended Elfe family could celebrate quite well without him, and would.

Igel sighed. 'You know I'll take good care of Pookie,' he said, and Pookie wagged his tail in obvious agreement. 'But come back, Eichhorn. We'll miss you. I'll raise a goblet of beer to you for the solstice and another for the new year if you aren't with us by then.'

Eichhorn rechecked his bag. He didn't need much; he could always borrow if no-one had time for laundry. It was winter so it would be foolish to wear too little, but a heavy jacket, two sweaters and two pairs of jeans should suffice.

Most of the space in his bag was taken up by gifts: a huge box of Lebkuchen, star-shaped with icing, chocolate, coffee and a sparkling white frost, should be acceptable to most of the English fae, especially the children. Then there were the special things; he had chosen wooden nutcrackers for his intimate circle. Each was carved and coloured to give individual character, designed to appeal to the recipients. He hoped the strong jaw mechanisms would be useful for the cob nuts he knew grew in and around the Alderley Edge woods.

Eichhorn clapped Igel on the shoulder, stroked Pookie's silky head, shrugged into his jacket, picked up his bag, and left.

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The flight was uneventful. Elfe found it easier to use glamour to distract human observation than the English fae did. They had no wings to disguise, and at this time of year small horns and extra fingers could be hidden in mittens and beanies. Even Eichhorn's passport didn't betray his Elfe heritage; his dark hair, naturally curly and worn longish, hid his horns and pointed ears. He carried a 'normal' passport, albeit one he'd acquired by some scheming. A tree in the Wald did not make an acceptable

address and he'd spent some time in Paderborn, actually living in the city, to make sure of his travel documents. Things like his birth certificate were accurate, though not issued by any human authority. Some glamour had been needed to make them pass muster.

Dusseldorf to Manchester was a journey over almost before it had begun. Eichhorn reflected that he had spent more time waiting around in the airport than in the plane. His bag could be stowed in an overhead locker so he could walk out of the airport a few minutes after landing. The British customs officers seemed, as usual, as happy with his passport as the Germans were.

He hadn't expected anyone to meet him. They weren't sure which day he'd arrive and there was no need. He commandeered a taxi to Alderley Edge and asked to be dropped at The Wizard. He knew the fae had moved further into the woods since his last visit; he'd have to walk from the pub. He paid for the taxi, as for the flight, with his bespelled credit card. The airline and the taxi driver would not be out of pocket; he thought the credit card companies could well stand the loss.

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A hard frost had made the woodland a wonderland of sparkling leaves and branches. Eichhorn wondered who would be awake. There hadn't been any snow yet, but some fae would have hibernated by now. Only the unicorn riders would be active enough by night to avoid freezing to death and even they would have to make sure they didn't sleep alone. The heat of another body, or more than one, would be essential. He hoped to provide some of that body heat.

There had been detailed directions, sent by mobile phone, and he checked them now: Google maps was, he reflected, a wonderful thing. As nearly magical as humans could get.

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Between the solstice and the new year was a busy but strange time on the Edge. There were two wild hunts and the unicorns needed extra care – extra food, too, if the weather was bad. If it was really bad, most people would hibernate so the troop had to fend for themselves as well as for their unicorns.

Yarrow and Harlequin were not particularly good cooks.

'Why can't one of us cook?' It wasn't clear whether Harlequin genuinely wanted to know or was simply complaining.

'Because we've both tended to leave that kind of thing to other people on the grounds that we're looking after the unicorns, and by extension, everybody else.' Yarrow repeated the usual excuse patiently.

'But dinner's so boring: soup, more soup, and occasional pancakes.'

'You don't like my pancakes?' Yarrow was hurt.

'They're nourishing,' Harlequin admitted, 'but nowhere near as good as Peasblossom's. My sister's cooking is superb.' And his husband had to agree.

Harlequin had hoped Ferdy or Starling might have culinary skills, but they didn't.

'I'm involved in unicorn care too,' Starling pointed out. He was the unicorn master, and as such, responsible for the health of the entire herd.

'Maybe we could all suck eggs.' Ferdy looked faintly bewildered by the entire conversation.

'Except that there aren't many, unless somebody feels like raiding local farms.' Harlequin looked hard at Ferdy, who was the only one who could get away with that easily.

‘All right,’ said the foxfairy. ‘At least I’ll contribute to the pancakes.’

‘And maybe eggnog,’ said Eichhorn who had arrived the previous afternoon and was missing his usual treats.

Peasblossom and the cubs were fast asleep, curled up together in a nest of woven branches lined with moss and feathers. Mal slept beneath, in wolf form to take advantage of his fur, one eye open just in case. Columbine took Cocklebur into a similar nest and hadn’t been seen since the beginning of December. Elder found a sleeping place of her own, so as not to disturb them. The Portuguese fae all shuddered at the temperatures, and the ones who weren’t riders joined Moth in yet another warm cocoon. They said the Portuguese mountains had weather like this but that didn’t mean they had to like it. Plus, according to Castanha, Britain seemed to lack adequate sunshine to compensate.

As the fae were mostly awake at night, nobody was quite sure how this mattered, but Yarrow pointed out that as the hunts took place at dawn, sunshine would be nice.

So the riders were left to themselves, though Ferdy tried to stay awake more often than not.

‘Elder looks lonely,’ said Harlequin.

‘But determined,’ said Yarrow. ‘And she’s probably used to worse than this, coming from Wales.’

‘I envy Goosegrass,’ said Starling. ‘He has his panther to snuggle with when riding and chores are finished.’

‘You have me,’ said Ferdy, and Starling looked slightly ashamed of not making it clear he appreciated Ferdy’s brush. And his draught-free earth.

‘I suspect Sloe keeps them both in provisions,’ said Yarrow. ‘Blessing, too.’

They were quiet for a moment, contemplating Goosegrass with his panther and his goblin; strange additions to the troop but much appreciated.

‘Small creatures like mice or voles unwise enough to venture out of their winter quarters won’t be expecting a panther,’ Harlequin agreed.

‘So long as he isn’t encouraging spotted snakes and thorny hedgehogs to breed in the wood,’ said Yarrow. ‘The hunt has enough to do as it is without any extra beasts to scatter.’

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There were five of them: a complicated group. Yarrow and Harlequin were married now, but still involved with their other lovers, not usually physically but certainly in terms of affection. Starling had Ferdy, of course, or Ferdy had Starling. Eichhorn stayed in Yarrow’s tree with the married couple, but occasionally slipped down and headed for Ferdy’s earth. In fact all of them could be found wandering between the two homes occasionally, but most of the time was taken up with the unicorns and the hunts.

Eichhorn had not brought Pookie (he didn’t think the dog would appreciate air travel) and watched longingly when the others rode. He helped Starling with the herd, and spent time with Ferdy, too, though the foxfairy had taken to riding behind Harlequin, since Araminta seemed happy to accept a pillion passenger. That left Eichhorn and Starling to entertain each other while the troop exercised.

Eichhorn didn’t know Ferdy and Starling as well as he knew Harlequin and Yarrow, but would not have minded getting to know both or either much better. However, Starling was in constant demand, removing ice balls from the unicorns’ hooves, helping to disentangle frosted manes, and once dealing with a cut paw; Sloe had slipped on the ice and somehow connected with a sharp twig. So the Elfe

was occasionally at a loose end. However, he was enjoying the companionship when it was available, and he loved the quiet English wood.

The solstice was not going to be a huge family affair this year. The weather had seen to that. It was rare for snow and frost to set in so early and Harlequin regretted the lack of colour and merriment in the wood.

‘The goblins haven’t even bothered to set up their rides,’ he said, his voice full of disappointment.

‘My people are first and foremost business managers,’ Blessing pointed out. ‘There’s a distinct lack of customers for rides or games, or even for the market. No profit to be made.’

‘Well,’ said Yarrow, ‘that’s their decision and their loss. We won’t be giving them any spells or granting wishes if they give nothing in return.’

‘I think it’s a pity,’ said Eichhorn. ‘I was looking forward to your solstice market.’

‘I’ve heard German Christmas Markets are a wonder,’ said Harlequin. ‘Maybe we should come over next year.’

‘I don’t think they’re much different from the Manchester one,’ said Eichhorn. ‘Lots of stalls, lots of Glühwein, but no rides. I know Elfe who’ve come over to help run stalls. You could just go into Manchester next December and spend an evening there.’

It was too late for this year. The Christmas Markets usually closed round about the solstice to let the stallholders get home to their families for the Christmas festival.

Eichhorn contemplated his bag of gifts. He did so hope the weather would break and the rest of the fae would be awake at least for the new year. He could give his friends the nutcrackers, of course. But he wanted to see the children trying the Lebkuchen. He decided all gift giving could happen at the same time, unless, of course, nobody emerged from hibernation before he had to leave.

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The solstice was very muted. Eichhorn, Starling and Ferdy saw the hunt off each morning, then snuggled together, deep in the earth. Ferdy might ride Araminta, but not for the hunt.

When the riders returned they were inevitably tired though Yarrow made an effort and encouraged everyone to drink sloe brandy to toast the season. Goosegrass refused at first and had to be reassured that the liqueur had nothing to do with his panther, other than the colour. They had, the second day, put an old doe out of her misery, but rather than attempt to butcher the carcass and feast on the venison, they hung it beneath Yarrow’s tree. It would keep well, in the icy weather, and the meat would age better that way. Eichhorn hoped Peasblossom would be awake for the new year, if only to oversee the jointing and cooking of the beast.

They ate the liver straight away – anyone could fry liver lightly and it was best eaten fresh. Other than that, they left the carcass alone. Eichhorn wondered what the leprechaun couple who lived in the roots of Yarrow’s tree would feel on waking and walking out into a hanging larder. They had moved deeper into the woods with Yarrow and insisted on staying with his tree. Amanita was an excellent cook and would help with the feast if it ever happened.

When the solstice hunt was over Harlequin and Yarrow went into the village to drink at one of the bars and took their foreign guest. Eichhorn liked the English Christmas decorations and for that matter liked English beer. Starling and Ferdy didn’t join them; Ferdy rarely went anywhere with too many humans, finding it hard to keep up a glamour or remember one someone else cast on him. Not that any

of them tried hard. They pulled woollen hats low over their ears and wore gloves. Heavy jackets hid fae wings. But Ferdy's brush would be harder to disguise and Starling claimed to be busy.

The trio watched television in the pub and saw the weather forecaster promising a thaw.

'Do you think they know something or are they just making empty promises?' Eichhorn had never seen a German weather cast and had no idea how reliable the Met Office information might be.

'They're usually fairly accurate,' said Yarrow. 'They use all kinds of machines to observe weather patterns and watch things like rain approaching over the sea. They sometimes fail when it comes to local details, but this seems to be a promise for the entire country.'

So they walked back through the wood cheerfully. The new year might be festive yet.

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Between Christmas, which the fae did not celebrate, and the new year, which they did, a warm front came through. All was scurry and bustle as the awakened fae tried to prepare for new year celebrations. Peasblossom and Mal were delighted with the deer; venison was to be the centrepiece of the formal dinner.

The Portuguese grumbled a little.

'New year is all very well,' said Castanha. 'We rode then too and sometimes it was cold enough that the non-riders hibernated, as here. But we saved our main celebrations for January 6th. That's when the local humans had their biggest festival so we did, too. I think it had something to do with their religion, but whatever, it was good. We ate king cakes and fruit coated in chocolate, and drank local liqueurs. The mountain people make much the same kind as you English fae do.'

Moth was quick to explain the significance of January 6th to anyone who wanted to listen. Then she joined the cooking party.

A group were certainly coming from Tara. Nobody had much idea who or how many but there would be either the lord of the hunt or his son.

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In the end it was Velvet, Stag's son, who arrived with a contingent of Tara fae including Veado on his unicorn Praia. Veado was anxious to see his Portuguese friends again. Velvet would lead the hunt riding Crown. Both unicorns seemed unsettled at having crossed the Irish Sea in mid winter and Starling was called upon to find medicine to soothe them. A few of the other Tara riders were well known to the Edge fae, so there was a lot of sharing of news and renewal of friendship.

Purr wasn't among them. He would hunt with the Tara troop this year and Rafferty was not leaving the controlled underground temperature of the palace for the icy lands outside.

'Though he might as well be hibernating in that library of his,' said Stripe, the catfairy who had accompanied Velvet.

Eichhorn had never seen Velvet. It just so happened they had never been on the Edge at the same time. Eichhorn had not attended the wedding and whatever seasonal celebrations he had attended on the Edge had not included the lord of the hunt's son. Now, to his astonishment, he became aware of two antlered fae, Velvet and Veado, when he had never seen even one.

Velvet amazed him. He was taller than the average fae, and his eight point antlers added to his height. His brown hair and skin let him fade into the woodland, till the only signs of his presence were his

eyes, if you knew where to look, and his antlers, branching out too widely to be part of the beech tree background. All fae could still into practical invisibility but this was beyond the usual. Veado was more conspicuous, with his black curls and his golden unicorn. Velvet's Crown was a muted bronze, which merged into the beech woods along with his rider.

There was a moment when Eichhorn was happily thinking about his friends. Then there was another moment when he was simply hoping for a relationship with this magical being. Not being one of the riders, he had no absolute means of ensuring an introduction, but oh how he wanted one. Nor was he certain he should ask Yarrow or Harlequin. It might sound ungrateful, or childish, or some such.

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He need not have worried.

He was introduced as their guest from Germany, and Velvet, brown eyes sparkling, looked interested, even intrigued. He asked that they should sit together at the feast.

'I have never met an Elfe,' he said. 'This will be a tale to tell back in Tara.'

'We didn't even believe Elves existed till we met Eichhorn,' Harlequin told him.

'I knew they existed,' said Velvet. 'There are more things than you can dream of in Rafferty's library, and I was a studious child. But nobody from Tara has been to Germany and so far as I know, no Elfe have made the trip to Ireland.'

Eichhorn was pleased and flattered to be such an object of interest. But he hoped Velvet would soon look beyond the exotic nature of his dinner companion and see Eichhorn for himself. He hoped, too, that he could overcome his awe of the antlers and get to know Velvet as a person.

Dinner was to take place at midnight. Those who intended to go to The Wizard for the human celebrations were strictly exhorted to return in time for the meal. Especially Thorn and Oliver, who were expected to be at the meal, despite new year at the pub being a kind of anniversary for them. Then everyone would stay up to watch the hunt leave at dawn.

Everyone was conscripted to ready the central glade. Mal oversaw the placing of tables and stools, Moth kept everyone supplied with drinks, and the children got under everyone's feet on the assumption that this would be the best way to assist.

Various cooks were busy. Peasblossom and Amanita were directing operations but Mal joined them when he could be spared from overseeing the seating arrangements, and Delver was roped in to prepare vegetables. Amanita said he might as well make himself useful. Blessing visited his relations, who had warmed slightly towards him since his acceptance as a rider, and brought back spices and candies to add to the luxuries on offer.

Columbine made soup with the mushrooms that grew beneath their tree. They had recovered from the depredations of the mushroom hunter. Chicken of the woods was the human name and indeed they tasted meaty and delicious.

Peasblossom made pancakes in advance, and called on Yarrow to help. They had a pile ready to be filled and heated at the last minute, stuffed with minced venison and chopped nuts.

The largest part of the venison was already roasting slowly on a spit. Cocklebur was supposed to be watching it, but even his mother suspected he'd leave the task to Funcho and Alecrim, two of the younger Portuguese refugees. It would, when ready, be accompanied by roasted vegetables seasoned with dried wild garlic and some of the goblin spices. Perhaps dried fruits, too.

There were the goblin candies, oatcakes shaped like holly leaves, and enough wine to drown in, as Harlequin put it. He had helped Agrimony to carry most of it from storage in the tree roots.

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Eichhorn and Velvet, as guests, had not been asked to help, but both had joined the group carrying tree stumps for stools, and were pleasantly tired by their exertions. They did not talk, but Eichhorn kept glancing at Velvet, taking in the antlers and the way the fae's reddish brown skin made him look almost like one of the native red deer he resembled. He was delighted when he noticed Velvet was glancing back.

The pub contingent had returned, rowdy but genial, Thorn and Oliver among them. The children, wide-eyed at the platters on the tables, had stopped tripping everybody up by running around and were now tripping them up by standing in the way, oblivious of people trying to get past. The candies Blessing had brought were in small dishes, but put firmly out of reach until later. Eichhorn overheard Cocklebur telling the others there might be honeyballs and hoped he was right, for the sake of all the excited faces.

Mal was putting the final touches to the venison which he would carve, a task he had reserved for himself ever since joining the Edge fae. Eichhorn was looking forward to it.

'What kind of feast do you have in Germany?' He realised Velvet was addressing him.

'Similar to this, really, but we don't often have venison. Sausages – all kinds – and sometimes wild boar. There are deer in our forests but boar are more widespread where I live, and they're usually easier to hunt.'

'And do you hunt? You have unicorns?' He looked puzzled, presumably knowing there was no foreign unicorn in the meadow.

'We ride dogs – giant Rottweilers, and mine's called Pookie. But I didn't bring him because...'

'... because you didn't have to and I imagine they're like unicorns in their dislike of travel by air or sea.'

'Exactly. He'll be with my brother, begging for sausage at the moment.'

'You said all kinds of sausages. Are there different kinds? I only really know the ones we have in Ireland.'

Eichhorn laughed. 'There are as many kinds as there are towns. More, probably. My favourite is Blutwurst. And no, it isn't a bit like British black pudding. I like Leberwurst, too. You have a half hearted version of that. Is Irish food so different from that in England, then?'

'In some ways. But in the palace we have what we like to imagine is international cuisine. Clearly our chef hasn't heard of German sausages so I must bring him up to date.'

'I'll have to tell Pookie there's another reason to stay at home,' said Eichhorn, grinning. 'No choice of sausages.'

'So you wouldn't consider visiting Tara?' Velvet sounded wistful.

'I didn't say that,' said Eichhorn.

They had taken their assigned seats and were enjoying the stuffed pancakes. Someone had reminded the children they'd contributed by helping to pick the nuts, and they were busy telling tall tales about the nut gathering day.

‘What about royalty? Do you have a titania or an oberon?’ Velvet was determined, it seemed, to learn as much as he could about Germany. He must have forgotten much of what he’d learnt from Rafferty’s books and scrolls. Or perhaps he was determined to engage Eichhorn in conversation for as long as possible.

‘We don’t have royalty in your sense,’ said Eichhorn. ‘We have a leader who takes on some of the trappings of royalty, but he’s elected for a year, each summer solstice. We call him the Stechpalme Graf and he presides over the waning of the year and then the spring growth. He’s at his peak now, when the holly is in full glory. In June he’ll hand over to another Graf, or ‘count’ as you would say in English. Anyone can seek election.’

‘You?’

‘I could, but no, I couldn’t stand the responsibility. You’re saddled with that by inheritance, I think.’

‘Yes. I’ve known all my life that some day I would take over as lord of the hunt. I hope not for a long time yet. And of course there are these to be considered.’ He touched his antlers.

‘They’re special and spectacular. We have no antlered Elfe. I suppose with that headgear you can’t exactly opt out of the family business.’ He grinned again, hoping Velvet didn’t take his words as disrespect.

‘I can’t, no. And I feel so sorry for Veado. He’s lost everything he knew: his lordship of the local hunts; much of his family; all the reasons for what you call his headgear. He still has Praia, of course, but that’s about all.’

They looked across at Veado who was chatting animatedly with Castanha. Eichhorn admired the Portuguese rider’s antlers but felt sad at what Velvet had said about him.

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After the meal, the riders intended to rest, ready for the dawn hunt. Velvet was staying in a guest tree, one always ready for whoever came from Tara. There were platforms on a few of the branches and most of the Tara group were housed there, other than a few who had opted to stay with friends.

‘Were you going to do anything special?’ Velvet asked.

‘You mean like helping to clear up?’ Eichhorn was amused. ‘I could offer, of course, but they’d rather not involve a guest. So no, nothing special. I could go for a walk. I never tire of these woods.’

‘I suppose your walk wouldn’t take you past the guest tree?’ The query or statement was uttered very quietly, so quietly that he almost missed it.

‘It might,’ he said. ‘That’s if I thought I would be welcome.’

Velvet almost dragged him to his platform. Rest seemed to be the last thing on his mind. Eichhorn was thrilled and surprised. He had thought the Irish fae would be shy, conservative, tradition-bound. He was wrong on every count. It seemed strange to look into a lover’s face and see it framed by those antlers. Velvet was careful not to let them poke or scratch. He was also careful to make sure of his partner’s pleasure. Eichhorn had been used to casual affairs. Pleasant, certainly, but with no sense of permanence. That had been the case with his friends here and that was how he had always thought he wanted things to be. Now, suddenly, he was desperate for this to last, to be anything but casual. But he couldn’t imagine a scenario in which the affair could continue. This was the British lord of the hunt in waiting, after all.

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Later, sated and happy but unsure about the future, he watched Velvet mount Crown and ride to the front of the troop. Veado followed him closely on Praia, not quite beside him but ahead of the others. Yarrow was next, then all the troop and the Irish visitors. Ferdy and Starling watched with him, everyone wishing the troop a good new year hunt.

Most of the children were in bed, but Cocklebur was still awake, a few last honeyballs in his hand. He was gazing at the unicorns, probably thinking ahead to the time when he would ride. Elder waved to him and to Columbine as she passed.

Once they were all assembled and in the right order, Velvet raised his voice. 'A happy new year to all of us and to the woods,' he said loudly. Then he brought his hand down sharply from shoulder level to Crown's mane, and they were off, all of them, a rush of dark and light into the trees and beyond.

'Did he make a good dinner companion?' That was Starling.

'Where were you the last few hours?' That was Ferdy, getting right to the heart of the matter, as usual.

Eichhorn felt himself blushing, though it was too dark, he hoped, for anyone to notice. He stammered some kind of reply but by the time they were in Ferdy's earth he had started and stopped so many sentences his friends had to know something was happening.

'I was with Velvet,' he admitted finally, as Ferdy wrapped his brush around as much of all of them as he could reach.

'And?' Ferdy asked sleepily and Eichhorn wasn't sure he answered. He fell into a deep sleep and dreamed of antlers, unicorns and a tossing Irish sea.

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When the hunt returned mid- morning, they were too tired to socialise and just tumbled into their beds. But that night Eichhorn spent the hours after midnight with Velvet again, marvelling at this royal prince with his exquisite antlers and his complete lack of the pride or snobbery the Elfe had half expected.

When they rose, and before the hunt set off, Eichhorn decided that as everyone was assembled this was as good a time as any for present giving. He had held back after the feast – Lebkuchen would have been too much with all the other sweets.

Now he gave the whole package to Mal, with an explanation of what it contained.

'You can dole them out as you think appropriate,' he said, grinning. And Mal grinned back.

Then Eichhorn offered the nutcrackers to his friends. They exclaimed over the detailed carving, the unusual mechanism, and the painted faces, each chosen to suit its new owner. Ferdy's nutcracker prince even had a hint of a red tail behind his narrow head.

'I'm sorry,' he said to Velvet. 'I didn't know, you see, that I would meet anyone new here.'

'Of course you didn't,' came the reply, 'and you have given me the greatest gift: yourself.'

Eichhorn resolved to find a suitable nutcracker when he returned to Germany and to get it to Tara somehow. He assumed there would be mundane postage addressed to the palace.

The next few nights passed in a whirl. Every time he left Velvet's bed he wished he could make this a permanent part of his life. But the antlered prince would have to return to Tara, and the Elfe would have to return to Germany. They didn't mention the issue until their last meeting, when it became obvious something had to be said.

‘I wish...’ they both said at once. Then they were silent in face of the clear situation.

‘I don’t think I will have time to come to Germany,’ said Velvet. ‘My father has many years left but he is getting older and looks to rest a lot of responsibility on me. He says it’s to train me but I know it’s at least in part to give him some respite.’

‘I could come to Tara,’ said Eichhorn. ‘But I couldn’t bring Pookie, and my brother would not appreciate another long absence in the near future. He wants to stand for election in six months, so...’

‘So of course you must be there for him. It seems we both have duties.’

‘We do. But I still wish...’

‘So do I. But knowing that we both wish it could be makes it easier, somehow. And we can stay in touch. I promise.’ He gave a quick smile and tossed his antlers. They were at the foot of his tree and Eichhorn loved the sight of the points losing themselves against the branches then reappearing.

‘I promise too,’ he said. He offered his mobile phone number but Velvet said he didn’t have one.

‘There’s no signal in our underground palace,’ he explained. ‘And yes, we go out, but I’d inevitably forget to take it with me, so we use pigeons, as all fae used to do.’

‘It’s a long way to Germany,’ said Eichhorn, even while he knew it would only take an hour or so by plane. ‘There are two seas to cross.’

‘I know. We have specially trained birds for diplomatic communication. Look out for mine, and feed him well when he arrives.’

Stripe came clattering down from the tree at that moment and the conversation turned to general things: the weather, the unicorns, memories of the feast.

‘What do you hunt in Germany?’ he asked Eichhorn.

‘We cull deer as you do,’ said the Elfe. ‘And wild boar. But for sport we hunt Wolpertinger.’ When both his listeners expressed a lack of knowledge he tried to describe hares with antlers, foxes with wings, mice with horns and giant claws. They looked bemused and disbelieving.

‘So you hunt antlers for sport,’ was all Stripe said before they headed for the unicorn meadow, Velvet laughing, and Eichhorn left wishing he had Pookie with him so that he might join them.

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Velvet bade everyone goodbye and said how much he’d enjoyed his visit and how he hoped to see them all again soon. If he looked hard at Eichhorn when he said that, what of it? Eichhorn might or might not be visiting next time. If he was, they would no doubt renew their affair.

Ferdy was looking at Eichhorn too.

‘You feel more for him than you thought you would,’ he said, and the Elfe did not reply.

They watched Velvet on Crown and Veado on Praia led their troop off to the west. It was the hour before dawn when the only humans likely to be watching the roads would no doubt shake their heads and think they were hallucinating. And no creature could gallop as softly as a unicorn when it wished not to be heard.

The friends gathered together. Eichhorn would be leaving the next day and had already told them not to interrupt their sleep to see him off.

‘And if you miss me,’ he said, smiling, ‘look at your nutcrackers. Better still, use them to crack a nut or two in my honour.’

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From his window seat in the plane he looked out at the North Sea, iron grey and currently calm. It was probably as cold as iron, too. Then he thought of the Irish Sea Velvet had to cross, and shivered. He’d heard it was not often calm.

They landed at Dusseldorf and he reached the Teutoburg Wald by train and bus to find everyone still carousing. The new year hunt had been a great success, Igel told him, then showed him the head of a Wolpertinger, an antlered rabbit that reminded him horribly of Velvet. He left his brother abruptly and went to find Pookie, who welcomed him home with zealous face-licking, paws on his shoulders so as to reach properly. When the dog got round to his ears, Eichhorn had had enough.

‘I’m clean,’ he told Pookie. ‘And anyway, that tickles.’ They went for a brief ride then, bond re-established and stronger than ever, returned to the main feast glade. There was a great deal of rousing song accompanied by beer steins being thumped rhythmically (and not so rhythmically) on the tables.

‘You should have tasted the boar we ate for new year,’ said Drachen, one of his friends, but he told them about the venison Peasblossom had cooked.

‘A pancake stuffing as well as a roast,’ he said, and this silenced them.

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The weeks passed happily enough. There were hunts and gatherings, trees to climb and dogs to train. Just before human Easter they heard about a Wolpertinger in the woods.

‘It’s supposed to have a marmot’s body, a duck’s wings and webbed feet, and the horns of a bull,’ said Igel. ‘But that sounds like more than one creature to me. Or just exaggeration, of course.’ They’d heard the rumours from village children.

They set off in pursuit, and found it, just as the children had described. They usually killed the Wolpertinger; too many left at large could wreck the local animal populations. They were vicious predators with no sense of restraint.

‘Like foxes in a henhouse,’ said Drachen, and the others agreed. Eichhorn thought of Ferdy. Ferdy could creep into a henhouse and come away with a pocket full of eggs without the birds even noticing. But he always left the fertilised ones, hoping the farmers would let the hens sit.

There were too many times, thought Eichhorn, when he was reminded of his friends, old and new. Too many times when he compared his life in Germany unfavourably with life on the Edge. He knew he could move there. But there was Pookie to consider, and Igel, too. And perhaps, just perhaps, the Edge would become as ordinary and restricting as the Wald.

He was getting tired, a little, of being free to roam as he wished. Maybe watching Harlequin and Yarrow had unsettled him. Ferdy and Starling were a definite couple, too, as were Peasblossom and Mal, Columbine and Elder, Moth and Castanha, and even, all the way on the other side of the world, Cobweb and Mikey. Eichhorn had nobody in particular, and until recently had liked it that way. Now, he thought longingly of Velvet and tried to tell himself that a minor scion of Tara royalty would not want a permanent liaison with a footloose German wanderer. An Elfe at that. He was not sure how the fae in general felt about Elfe. Elfe, on the other hand, reacted to fae with a mixture of disbelief and

contempt. Anything more than a holiday fling would bring problems in its wake so he tried not to think about Velvet at all. Which was hard.

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The pigeon, when it arrived, was, he decided, verwirrt. That was the only German word to describe it. He thought there was an English one with a similar meaning, bedaggled or driggled, or some such. Anyway, it showed, in the state of its plumage and the way its head sank forward, every moment of the rough journey it had just endured.

He fed it and found it a soft place to rest, then unwrapped the message that had been tied so carefully to its leg. The writing was tiny and he had to spell it much larger to read. It was still difficult.

My Eichhorn. I miss you. But I could not subject one of our pigeons to crossing two seas in winter just to say something I'm sure you know already. So I waited. As you know, my father is getting, if not old, perhaps elderly. He has reached an age when he no longer wants to travel. He is going to focus on hunts on the Irish side of our sea, and ask me to look after those on the island of Great Britain. I shall be permanently in England. I thought about basing myself on the Edge, but I do not want to intrude on Yarrow's brilliant command of his troop. I have settled on Ernocroft Wood in Etherow Park, part way between the Edge and Werneth Low where Harlequin and Yarrow grew up. I will have to avoid humans, particularly the ones who have built what they call a fairy trail, but as I will not have a troop with me that shouldn't be hard. Crown will settle wherever I go, and we can visit the Edge as well as reaching other communities that might need me. The titania has asked if I could stand in for the oberon if any marriages are to be solemnised. I suspect our royal leaders are also tired of crossing the sea in anything but midsummer. So, by the summer solstice I shall be settled only one sea away from you, and when you visit your friends on the Edge you will find me eager to see you again. Your Velvet.

No mention of inviting Eichhorn to live in this wood, but at least he would see him and perhaps manage to quell these odd longings. However, there was no question of going for the summer solstice; Igel needed him. The elections were in full swing, and Eichhorn had promised to look after Mädchen, Igel's Rottweiler, during the busy period. It was only fair, in recompense for Igel's care for Pookie at the winter solstice. He would write to tell Velvet, addressing the letter to Mr Velvet, Tara, and using a normal post office. He kissed the pigeon, now quite recovered from its exertions, and sent it on its way. He did manage to write a single line, 'letter following' in tiny script, and tied that to the little messenger's leg. It would take him a while to compose a full reply.

Eventually, he decided to be on the Edge round about the end of August. He texted Yarrow and Harlequin to warn them of his possible arrival. Meanwhile, he had a brother to support and little time for letter writing.

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Igel was elected Stechpalme Graf. Of course he was. Once Eichhorn's brother put his mind to something nothing short of a world earthquake would stop him achieving his aim – and his aim had been to be Graf for a year.

'How can you cope with the responsibility?' Eichhorn was supportive but faintly horrified.

'Easily.' Igel grinned. 'Somebody needs to do it, and the alternative is to watch somebody else making a mess of the job. There are a lot of things that need to be sorted out, I know exactly how to do it, and I feel strong enough.'

Eichhorn shook his head. His brother was certainly self-confident. So was he, but he didn't want to put his talents to serving the community.

He thought by the time the September equinox was close Igel would be thoroughly settled in his new role and he could leave without guilt. But what about Pookie? Igel would be too busy to exercise two dogs. At present Eichhorn was sometimes exercising Mädchen when Igel's Graf duties kept him too occupied. Drachen would probably take that over but if he did, he wouldn't also be able to look after Pookie for Eichhorn, and Eichhorn didn't think he trusted anyone else. Another friend, Schafgarbe, would be willing but was almost totally unreliable. It amused Eichhorn to remember that the name translated as Yarrow... Two very different personalities. Schafgarbe was a delightful drinking companion and a competent rider, but his memory was like the proverbial sieve. His Rottweiler, Nessel, was not exactly starved, but sometimes only ate every other day, when his claws scratching his rider's tree became too much to ignore. Weissdorn, another friend, was not a rider and would not want to care for a dog for any length of time.

So what to do? Gradually, he came to the conclusion that he would need to take Pookie to England. After all, if his affair with Velvet continued he would want to stay. He wouldn't want to be without his dog too long, and would hate missing hunts in Germany yet not being able to join in in England. Once or twice was acceptable, but in the long term, that wasn't what he wanted.

He researched air and sea travel for dogs and found he could sail from Rotterdam to Hull with a dog, even a large one. There were kennels on board the ferry and even some pet friendly cabins. That would be better than crating Pookie for a plane journey. It was an overnight crossing but the alternative was to travel much further south to one of the ports that connected with the south coast of England. He'd then have to trek back north when he landed. If he booked well in advance and had a pet cabin, he thought Pookie would cope with the journey.

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Igel and Drachen thought he was mad.

'England with Pookie?' Igel grimaced. 'How long are you intending to stay?'

'Taking Pookie to England? You'll have to teach him some English commands: sit and stay.' That was Drachen, only half serious.

Eichhorn just smiled and went ahead with his plans. He noticed that neither of the others offered to look after Pookie.

'We'll be all right,' he told the dog, hoping he would at least partly understand. The Rottweilers were easy to train and very loyal, but there wasn't the same semi-telepathic connection he knew the English and Irish fae had with their unicorns. He wasn't sure about Goosegrass and Sloe, but at least there was a precedent there for a different animal to join the troop.

And that was, he admitted to himself, if not yet to his brother, what he intended to do. He was sure he would be welcome on the Edge, and welcome in Yarrow's troop. So he had a plan and a future, even if Velvet only wanted a few nights of fun.

So he wrote:

Lieber Velvet. I am sorry about the delay in replying properly to you. I had a brother's electioneering to support and plans to finalise. I am coming to the Edge at the end of August. I am bringing Pookie and intend to join Yarrow's troop. He already has a panther so I imagine a well trained dog will be welcome. I prefer life in England; it's quieter than Germany most of the time. So, I will see you. You will be settled in Etherow, and I hope to see your tree. I hope Crown will accept Pookie but if not, I can leave him in the unicorn meadow though I will have to work out how to reach your park if I can't ride Remember that Elfe, unlike fae, can't fly. If Crown is happy about a dog, I can ride over. Pookie will readily accept a collar with a name

tag and do his best to look like a well-behaved pet. Yarrow will know the date of my arrival because I will text his mobile phone. And I hope so much that we can be together again. Viele Grüße von Eichhorn.

There. Informative. Not too needy. But it could be open to interpretation if Velvet really wanted to see him. He did so hope... but if not, he was prepared to enjoy a day or so and then settle back into life on the Edge as a member of the community instead of as a guest. Before he could second-think what he'd written and tinker with the wording he posted it, smiling as he bought a stamp at the post office.

Perhaps Velvet, living in England, would condescend to buy a mobile phone?

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He did wonder if just maybe he had delayed too long. If Velvet was actually interested and not just polite, would he be hurt by the long delay? But they both had commitments and it was too late to worry now.

The end of August saw him heading for Rotterdam. Neither he nor Pookie was impressed by the sprawling docks and industry of the huge port, but they found the ferry terminal easily enough, and were pleased with their cabin. At least, Eichhorn was. He assumed Pookie was, too, as the dog just curled up beneath his bunk and went to sleep. He had visions of Pookie trying to share the bunk in the night but even a dog could presumably tell that there just wouldn't be room. He had been to the restaurant and brought goodies back for his canine friend: sausage (of course), a meat pie, and some biscuits with cheese.

When they disembarked in Hull he was tempted to take a train across the Pennines, but when he learnt a large dog would have to stay in the guard's van he decided against it. He would ride.

They travelled at night, keeping to the fields and woods, hoping not to be seen. A humanoid figure and a dog would not excite comment, but a humanoid figure riding a dog would probably bring out British animal protection people by the score. When he reached the mountains he followed the Pennine Way, loved by walkers but not usually frequented in darkness. By day they slept in copses or once some caves.

And then they were there. He passed a sign he knew would lead to Etherow, but ignored it. He could not consider visiting Velvet unannounced, however great the temptation. Soon he had skirted Greater Manchester and reached the canal system that led west. The towpaths were deserted after dusk and he hoped nobody was peering from the parked narrowboats.

Alderley Edge: a welcome sign.

Soon, he was in the woods he now knew so well, passing the area where the fae had once lived. His experiences in the Teutoburg Wald made him sympathise with the need to move further away from human habitation. The woods were wilder, pathless, as he neared the new community area, and he sighed with pleasure when he could see Yarrow's tree.

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They were expecting him, but Pookie was a newcomer and had to be made much of. There were teething troubles, almost, Eichhorn thought, tooth troubles, when Pookie snarled at Sloe (who snarled back) and at various cats and kittens scattered around the trees. These all scampered up into the branches, regardless of whose bed they disturbed. But then Mal greeted the newcomers and Eichhorn was glad he'd dismounted because instantly Pookie was rolling on the ground in full submission. Mal grinned and ruffled Pookie's head, then introduced the cubs who played with the giant dog for a few minutes in fae form then changed to their wolf selves and teased him unmercifully. Pookie realised

they were puppies, but werewolf puppies were outside his limited world view and Eichhorn just hoped he would not submit to them as he had to their father. They were much too young to be giving orders.

‘Will he want to live in the meadow?’ Starling sounded slightly concerned at the idea of a huge Rottweiler among the unicorns. But then they were used to Sloe, now, so maybe a predator in the troop would be acceptable.

‘I don’t think so,’ said Eichhorn. ‘At home he always...’ and then he corrected himself. ‘In Germany he used to sleep beneath my tree. Most of the dogs see themselves as guard dogs, you see, as well as for riding.’

‘We thought you could sleep with us until you decided where to base yourself permanently,’ said Starling, and at that point Ferdy appeared. The snarling and growling started all over again, on the part of both dog and foxfairy. Mal was needed to calm them both.

‘So just outside the earth might not work,’ said Starling, a hint of apology in his voice, but whether for his initial idea or for his partner Eichhorn wasn’t sure.

‘I think,’ said Yarrow, ‘he’d better take the guest tree. We have no visitors just now and by the time we do Eichhorn will no doubt have come to some conclusions.’

Eichhorn had half expected to have a tree offered to him. The guest tree was all very well, but why were they wondering what he would decide and giving him time? Still, he made himself at home and showed Pookie where he would sleep, pointing to the base of the trunk very firmly. The dog turned round three times and curled up. No panthers, no cats, no werewolves large or small, and no foxfairy. The guest tree was clearly a good choice.

It was late by the time everything was settled. Eichhorn didn’t join the dawn ride. The unicorns and riders needed exercise; after his exertions on the way from the sea, Pookie didn’t, and neither, he decided, did he. The next night would be time enough to join in. Pookie raised his head and opened one eye as a couple of unicorns passed, but took little notice, and the unicorns seemed quite unconcerned.

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‘Did you go to Etherow on your way?’ Ferdy asked.

Eichhorn wasn’t sure how much to say. ‘I saw a sign,’ he admitted, ‘but I was anxious to get here and I hadn’t given Velvet the date of my arrival.’

‘Velvet knew the date of your arrival almost as soon as we did,’ said Ferdy. ‘He pestered Yarrow and Harlequin every day for news of you. He’ll turn up tonight so get some sleep.’ He laughed when Eichhorn managed to stammer some kind of reply before heading for bed.

It was daylight both when he fell asleep and when he woke. Long summer days and short nights were difficult for fae and Elfe. Nobody had said anything about breakfast but Peasblossom would probably have prepared enough for him too, and when dressed he went to their tree, one of the central ones, just as it had been in the original community and just as Peasblossom and Mal were central to life on the Edge. The cubs had prodigious appetites and Eichhorn had to be quick to make sure of a plate of pancakes.

Almost immediately he saw Velvet, riding Crown into the middle of the glade looking excited and apprehensive. Eichhorn stood, Velvet slipped from the unicorn’s back, and they embraced. It was a very long, firm embrace. Eichhorn warned himself it might mean nothing other than friendship, but it did seem to express more warmth than warranted merely by friends meeting again after almost nine

months. Pookie, suddenly by his side, looked over this new person in his rider's life, and for a moment Eichhorn was worried. But Pookie and Crown touched noses, sniffing gently. It seemed they would be friends, too.

'Will you come to Etherow? To see my tree?' Velvet sounded almost shy, though Eichhorn knew the fae was anything but.

'Of course,' he said. 'I've been looking forward to it. When would you like me to come over?'

'Now? I knew you were arriving. I checked with Yarrow. And you have no duties here. So...'

So Velvet had ridden to the Edge just to invite him to visit? Eichhorn suddenly felt more confident about things.

'Just let me get something from my bag,' he said. 'A present for your new home.' He went back to the guest tree and collected a small package plus a collar Pookie might need. He didn't want to start his time in England persuading humans his dog was not a stray.

The others didn't seem surprised. They had obviously expected him to leave straight after breakfast. He said he'd see them later, though Harlequin raised an eyebrow and Ferdy was muttering to Starling. Then he mounted Pookie and they set off.

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They followed a direct route, parallel with the roads, passing Poynton and crossing the A6 at Hazel Grove. The main road was still busy with evening traffic but both Crown and Pookie took it in their stride.

'I've hidden Crown's horn, and your dog will look like a pony to anyone who glances at us,' said Velvet. 'But I've cast a glamour, too, so that they look away.' Presumably his antlers would look like some kind of party headgear. He must be used to hiding in plain sight.

Etherow Park was officially closed at night but it was easy to jump the car park barriers and ride in. Velvet's tree was well beyond the lake, in the less frequented woods above the waterfall. They passed a badger who grunted but went about his business, and a few squirrels who chattered noisily. An owl hooted and its mate replied.

The tree was large and clearly chosen for comfort and permanence. Velvet pointed to it proudly. Having made sure Pookie would be happy enough at the foot, with Crown for company, he led the way up into the branches to his sleeping platform where he grabbed Eichhorn before they had spoken and wrestled him onto the woven bed. The sex was fast and furious, and still he didn't speak apart from endearments and exclamations of pleasure. Eichhorn felt overwhelmed, and surprised, but thrilled.

'There,' Velvet said at last. 'You are mine again. I missed you so much.'

'But we only knew each other just over a week,' said Eichhorn.

'But I knew that first night,' said Velvet. Then he drew away. 'Am I assuming too much? I thought we had the same feelings but perhaps I've simply told myself what I wanted to hear.'

Eichhorn kissed him. 'I feel strongly,' he said, 'but I wasn't at all sure of you. And I'm still not. What is this? A short fling? An ongoing affair when you have time? I'll take whatever you give me, but I need to know where I stand.'

‘Or lie,’ said Velvet, laughing and hugging him. ‘I want something permanent, Eichhorn. Like Harlequin and Yarrow, perhaps, or at least like Starling and Ferdy. I know you won’t be here all the time but...’

‘But I will.’ Eichhorn explained his plan to join Yarrow’s troop permanently and settle in England. ‘Does that change things?’ he asked, wondering whether Velvet would be as keen on the liaison if it was to be full time. He’d written about his intention to join the troop in his letter, but perhaps Velvet had thought he only meant to be a temporary member of Yarrow’s group.

‘All the time? That’s wonderful. But if you’re in the Edge troop it’s too far to ride from here every day. We’ll have to find somewhere nearer.’ That ‘we’ was music to Eichhorn’s ears.

‘It’s what I want most in the world,’ he said, ‘but I think there are problems.’

‘Problems? But if you are here and I am here and there are no longer two seas between us, then how can there be problems?’

‘You’re the lord of the hunt’s son,’ Eichhorn pointed out. ‘You’ll inherit the position eventually so the royal family might disapprove of a foreign partner. Besides, you’ll need to marry a fae woman and have a child who will have antlers like yours. Or will grow them,’ he amended, realising that a child could not easily be born with such appendages. Almost before he’d finished speaking Velvet was laughing.

‘I won’t marry,’ he said. ‘You can’t guarantee antlers on offspring anyway. There are young antlered cousins in Scotland and I can make one of them my heir. Everybody approves. I told my father, the titania and all my friends that I’d met a German Elfe and wanted to persuade him to settle down with me. They’re all excited and want you to come to Tara one day, just for a visit of course. Though maybe we’ll have to move there eventually.’

Eichhorn stared at him. The moon was bright, dappling the antlers and making his eyes shine. ‘So the fae on the Edge already know how you feel? No wonder they were talking as if I had some decision to make.’

‘It’s a big decision.’ Velvet sounded solemn. ‘Have I rushed you? Do you want time to think about it?’

‘I’ve been thinking of very little else all summer,’ said Eichhorn. ‘I just thought it wasn’t possible, that I was creating dreams.’

‘That’s settled then.’ Velvet’s voice held infinite satisfaction. ‘We’ll find a wood nearer the Edge, and then we can truly make ourselves a home. I won’t take you travelling with me yet – I’m proud of you but it might take time for a few fae communities to accept a foreign Elfe with a foreign dog. I’ll tell them all about you first, then you can go with me when I travel for special hunts.’

Eichhorn gasped. It seemed his future was planned. Even visits to other fae and Tara. Velvet was right to say he’d rushed him, but he thought he liked being rushed.

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The Edge troop welcomed them with a lot of teasing. All their friends mentioned the certainty Velvet and Eichhorn were fated to be together even if they hadn’t quite realised it initially. Yarrow suggested they take over his old tree in the main glade.

‘It’s near the humans,’ he admitted, ‘but there are only two of you. Pookie won’t be a problem if he wears a collar, even a glamoured one. Crown can live in the meadow. It was my grandfather’s tree.’ He sounded wistful and Velvet decided they’d take it.

They moved all Velvet's things one night. He hadn't brought much from Tara but there were some treasured books and now a beautiful nutcracker from Eichhorn. The Edge fae gave a party to celebrate the move, and there were enough honeyballs to satisfy even Cocklebur.

Afterwards, the pair lay in their tree, glad that Yarrow and Harlequin had mended the roof branches because it was raining, hard.

That was when a pigeon landed on Velvet's antlers. This was, Eichhorn thought, the pigeon who had come to Germany, but he wasn't sure. It was more than verwirrt. It looked half-drowned and wholly dizzy. It cooed plaintively until Velvet gave it some grain and showed it a nest of moss and feathers.

There were two messages on its legs and he read the shorter one but passed the other directly to Eichhorn.

It was from Velvet, telling him to come straight to Etherow. So it had missed him, arriving after he had left Germany.

He read the other over Velvet's shoulder, careful to avoid the antlers. It had two lines, in different handwriting. Igel had written: 'Nicht hier. In England,' then Yarrow or Harlequin had added: 'Etherow.' Then, at the bottom, hastily scribbled: 'Try the main glade.'

Velvet stroked the pigeon's soft head. 'He flew across the sea twice to find you,' he said.

'Well, he's found me now,' said Eichhorn, admiring the antlers silhouetted against the lightening sky, and the colours in the pigeon's drying wings.

'He has, and so have I,' said Velvet. 'Come to bed.'

And Eichhorn did.

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