



# OUT OF TIME

*A fantasy Novella*

*by Jay Mounney*

*Cover by Jay Mounney based on a photograph by Annie Spratt, shared on Unsplash.*

# Out of Time

Copyright 2022 by Jay Mountney

## Chapter 1: The Portal

Kit sighed very quietly, as he placed the saucer of milk and a piece of bread on the windowsill. He knew perfectly well that there were no brownies doing the household chores, just himself and his sister. But if it pleased his sick mother to think so... Well, anything that helped her cope with her illness and stopped her fretting about not 'pulling her weight' in the house.

For that matter, Kit didn't actually believe in brownies. Or not in small ones that came to help out with mundane tasks. He wasn't going to dismiss the whole idea of other worldly beings. The priest insisted there were angels, after all, and demons, too. But he thought if there were brownies or elves or fairies, they were probably uninterested in human doings, and were, in any case, unlikely to be 'little people'.

Later, he would put the saucer outside for a fox or a hedgehog to find. It might not be good for them but they'd enjoy it. He would feed the bread to the chickens, then clean and tidy the house. His mother would be satisfied.

Kit's sister, Agnes, was asleep now. She'd been nursing their mother all afternoon, trying to get her to eat and drink, turning the mattress and the covers to ensure some degree of comfort. So it would fall to Kit to clean the pots, rake out the fire ashes, bring in well water and kindling for the morning, and plan the next day's work on the land.

That was a thankless task. They didn't own the land, just farmed it, giving what seemed to be greater and greater tithes to the local lord of the manor. Still, they just about managed, and Kit wasn't going to grumble. At least they had a roof over their heads and food in their bellies. And Agnes was not only able to care for their mother in her wasting sickness, but was being courted by a young man whose land ran alongside their own. Between them they would probably be able to make quite a good living, despite the greedy lord's demands. That was something more than they had ever expected when their father died, trampled by one of the oxen. Hal, Agnes' suitor, had suggested slaughtering the beast.

"Now that it knows it can best a man, it will continue to rebel," he said.

But Kit couldn't afford to do without his ox team. He worked the land alone, having no siblings other than Agnes, and he could not plough as he did without the team's aid. Nor could he drag the logs home from the forest to chop for firewood. The murderous ox would have to stay, at least until Agnes was safely wed and Hal's team could be borrowed.

It wasn't ploughing season, but it was always good to have more wood for the fire, so Kit decided that unless the weather was too wet he would go to

the forest the next morning. He had no objection to working in the rain but it would be foolish to remove wood from the comparative shelter of the trees and have it in the open if there was a downpour. It was late autumn and soon enough there would be frosts or even snow to contend with. They would need the wood.

He finished his tasks and went to the shelf by the fireplace where he slept. He had a mattress stuffed with ferns, a pillow with chicken feathers, and a cover made from a cured deerskin that the lord had graciously allowed him to keep. He thanked the lords, the one in the castle and the one in heaven, for his comfort, and lay down to sleep.

Kit wasn't thinking about help, paranormal, supernatural or otherwise. He was just automatically adding logs to the pile near the edge of the wood and wasn't really thinking at all, just working hard. Later, he would bring the ox team and a sled, and get the logs back to the yard where he'd chop them for firewood. So when he saw the young man between the trees, he didn't react. Sometimes, friends or relations of the lord came hunting in the woods, though it wasn't a dedicated game reserve and Kit had the right to forage for firewood and for berries in season. He was even permitted to trap rabbits. The young man was certainly beautiful, perhaps too beautiful, and definitely too clean and tidy to be anyone local. Even the lord's people were never usually as perfect as that. And yet initially, Kit merely tried to keep out of his way. Then he noticed that the man was watching him work. Oh well, let him. It would be nicer if he offered to help, but that wasn't going to happen. He glanced at the stranger again and gulped as he realised that the figure was flickering somehow. There'd been rain overnight so perhaps drops sliding off the few leaves still hanging were responsible, or it could be the weak sunshine between the trunks. Whatever the cause, the effect was a little unnerving, but he could hardly ask the man to stop flickering and stand still.

Then there was a ringing sound and the man fell backwards. Kit rushed to help, still without thinking though at some level he must have realised it would not do to leave one of the lord's people prone in the woods. As he stepped forwards the man was dragged backwards as if by invisible hands or ropes. And Kit found himself falling forwards and then being dragged himself, whilst there was a veritable peal of bells, like the ones in church on Sundays but higher and wilder.

Suddenly, the man he was, as he thought, rescuing, pushed him away and sat up, scowling.

"What on earth are you doing?" he said. His voice was as lovely as his face; golden, somehow, with a hint of sunbeams or stars.

"Are you all right? I thought..." Kit couldn't go on. The man had stood up and was quite definitely all right. He was also well built, extremely healthy-looking, and, at the moment, equally extremely cross.

"I don't know what you thought, but you were wrong." Not quite what

Kit had expected to hear. Maybe a casual thank you and an assurance that everything was fine. Maybe a nod of gratitude and an acceptance of assistance back to the manor. Maybe...

"I saw you fall," he said, "and I wanted to help. I didn't know whether you'd tripped on a tree root or something."

"Or something." The tone was mocking.

"Well, but you fell."

"Of course I fell. I came too far and leaned out, and the portal dragged me back."

This didn't make much sense. "What do you mean, portal?" Kit had, by now, picked himself up and stood facing the man who hadn't wanted his help. They were about the same height, but the other was slimmer and more graceful, with blond hair that outshone Kit's mousy brown, and green eyes that glinted in the sunshine; the strong sunshine, with no hint of rain. Or of trees filtering it, for that matter.

The scowl turned into a look of concern. "The portal to those woods, of course," came the response.

"But we were in the woods," said Kit, a little desperately.

"Well I'm sure you can see there are no woods here." And he was right. There wasn't a tree to be seen. Kit's woodpile had vanished, as had the track that he'd followed earlier.

"I was in the woods." He felt as if repeating that might make the trees reappear. Of course, it didn't.

"And you followed me." The stranger groaned.

"I wasn't following you. I was trying to help. You fell, and..."

"And you though you were doing a good deed. Yes, that's becoming increasingly obvious, but have you any idea what you've done?"

"No, but I'm sure you'll tell me." Kit was beginning to feel irritated and a little worried.

"You came through the portal. You must have grabbed me and fallen on top of me just as it dragged me and closed."

Kit had never heard of portals. They might, he reflected, have something to do with porches, or ports, or... "So where are we?" was what he asked.

The man sighed. "We're in Faeonia," he said. "I live here, and now, it seems, so do you. I won't bid you welcome because you aren't, really; you shouldn't be here. And more to the point, I have no idea how to send you home again."

## Chapter 2: What's in a name?

"What do you mean, send me back?" Kit was beginning to think he'd just tried to rescue a madman.

“Your world – we call it Humania but I think you just call it Earth or Terra – is not the same as ours. They’re joined from time to time by portals, but I have no idea where or when we’ll find the next one.”

Kit looked behind him. Admittedly he couldn’t see the trees. And the weather was different, too, summery and sunny. “Earth,” was all he found to say. “Well, I’ve heard Terra, too, but that’s just Earth in an old language, the one they use in church.”

“So you see, you’re stuck,” said the possibly mad stranger. “You shouldn’t have jumped at me.”

“I thought you were either ill or injured,” Kit pointed out.

“Yes, well, you still shouldn’t have done it, though I suppose it was one of those things that seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“It did,” said Kit. “Since I’m here anyway, I’d better introduce myself.” He was aware of the shock on the other man’s face but went on, “I’m Kit.” He held out his hand but it wasn’t taken.

“You’re either very brave or very foolish,” said the man, rather in the manner of scolding a child. “We don’t give our names away here. There’s too much power that goes with a name.”

“We do,” said Kit. “I can’t see how you can have any power over me. You’re not my lord of the manor or a member of my family. You don’t seem to be a soldier or any kind of authority figure. As I said, I’m Kit, and if you have any manners you’ll tell me your name now.”

The stranger stared at him. “Look at me, Kit,” he said.

Although Kit felt able to refuse, he didn’t. He looked into the stranger’s eyes, brilliant green eyes that sparkled; probably an effect of the bright sunlight.

“Now, Kit, raise your right hand.”

He felt able to refuse again, but to his dawning horror, he found his hand rising until it was held out level with his shoulder. He tried to drop it and failed. Something was holding his hand in place but he could see and sense nothing.

“You can drop it,” said the man, in a rather tired voice. Kit’s hand abruptly fell back to his side. The man continued: “You see now, I think, what I mean by power, but it’s clear you had no idea, and I should not have done that.”

Kit looked at his hand then at the man who suddenly seemed at once stranger and less mad. “You made me do that.” The words came out in a whisper.

“I did, and I should not have taken advantage of you, though there’s no harm done. There are rules to prevent abuse of power, you know. Or at least, you should know. You obviously don’t know anything about it at all. To make amends I shall give you my name. Since you aren’t of this world you probably won’t be able to make any use of it, but there’s power in knowing, and I trust you not to use it except in private.” Before Kit could answer, he went on. “I’m Rianthe,” he said, and gave an odd little formal bow.

“So what do I call you?” Kit felt and sounded bewildered but he did

glance around in case there were other people within hearing distance.

“You’ll have to find an appropriate name that isn’t mine. I think I’ll call you Human. Hu, for short. You are, after all, and I don’t want to give others power over you. You could call me Fae but then most people you meet will be fae.”

“Green eyes,” Kit found himself saying.

“Just Green would do. And there are plenty of people with green eyes but few who get called Green so it’s a good choice.”

“But you called yourself fae,” said Kit. “Where I come from we take that to mean something like fairies or elves. I never believed in them, but since we’re here and you call this place Faeonia I must be in what I would call Fairyland. Not somewhere I ever expected to see, I have to say. And I suppose your portals are what let you in and out of our world and let people think you disappear using magic.”

“No magic, but you’re right about the portals,” said Rianthe.

“What about the way you made my arm rise? Was that magic?”

Rianthe shrugged. “Not really. We’re just very good at something your people might call hypnotism. You won’t have heard of it, of course. And having your name makes it all the easier to gain your undivided attention and make you do things. That’s why we don’t give our names easily.”

“If there’s no portal around,” said Kit, shelving the idea of the name and power issue for now, “what am I going to do?”

“I suppose I’m responsible for you in a sense, so you’d better come home with me,” said Rianthe, though he didn’t sound as if he relished the idea. He turned and set off across the meadow where they were standing.

Kit wasn’t at all sure whether he should follow, or, if he decided not to, whether he’d be able to refuse, or for that matter, what else he could choose to do. He sighed and set off after Rianthe, hoping they didn’t meet anyone else just yet so that he didn’t have to practise using the wrong name till he’d got his head round the idea.

They didn’t. The meadow was full of wild flowers and nothing else. No people, no animals, not even birds. He imagined there must be worms beneath the grass to keep the earth in such good condition, but he saw no movement, apart from Rianthe walking in front of him. The flowers were just slightly out of the ordinary: pink daisies, red dandelions and blue clover. Odd, but recognisable despite their coloration.

He considered the name he’d been so arbitrarily given. Hu. It sounded like the short form of Hubert and would do nicely. His father had been called Hubert and he would feel at least familiar with it.

They reached the edge of the meadow. Kit assumed it was the edge because the grass and wild flowers gave way to a more formal arrangement with what looked like low hedges in a geometrical design, keeping the paths separate

from displays of roses and lavender. He was so busy admiring the flowers and drinking in their scent that it took him a moment to realise that they were approaching a long low building with lots of small arched windows and, in the centre, an arched doorway. It wasn't unlike a monastery, he thought, but Rianthe didn't remind him of any monks he'd ever seen. The man was dressed in a silky shirt with swirling patterns, and leather breeches that clung to his thighs. Kit had to confess that with his green eyes, blond hair, tanned skin and form fitting clothing, Rianthe was a sight well worth looking at.

Of course, he would never be able to confess that to the man himself. He would never even say it in the confessional when he got home. If he got home, he reminded himself with a jolt.

But of course he would get home, then this would all be just a dream, brought on by hard work and a touch of the sun. Yes, that's all it was, and while it lasted he could enjoy watching Rianthe and dreaming.

They had reached the door and Rianthe bowed.

"Welcome to my home," he said. The words were formal, not particularly friendly, but at least they were said, and Kit followed his host inside.

"I expect you'd like something to eat and drink," said Rianthe. Kit wasn't sure. Would he? He remembered stories about how you should never accept food or drink from fairies. But he didn't believe in fairies, and just because Rianthe called this place Faeonia didn't mean anything really. It couldn't, could it? And he was thirsty, after his work in the woods and their walk.

"Water?" he said. Water had to be all right. He hoped.

Rianthe gave him an odd look then disappeared through a door. Kit wasn't sure whether to follow so didn't. A moment later, Rianthe reappeared with a delicate blue glass goblet. He walked through another doorway and held the door open for Kit. Then he put the glass on a small table in the middle of the room. Kit took a deep breath and lifted the glass to his lips. Well, he'd already been told he was stuck here, so maybe he needed to drink and maybe drinking wouldn't make things worse. He drank, and what tasted like spring water slipped down his parched throat. He emptied the glass and put it back on the table, smiling his thanks to Rianthe. Then he looked at his surroundings.

If the sunshine on the meadow hadn't convinced him he'd fallen into an alternative reality, the furnishings of this room would most certainly have caused him to believe.

### Chapter 3: Travels in time

The tables and chairs, whilst rather more numerous than in his own small house, were of wood, which was a familiar material. But the wood... The colours astounded him. The furniture was not painted like the wooden figures he had seen in church; it glowed with some inner colour. The wood itself was

green, yellow, orange, red, grey. And then the shapes were odd. The chairs seemed to twist into shapes that looked comfortable enough but looked nothing like his more utilitarian pieces. The tables shone with a depth of polish his mother and sister would envy, and there were lamps, possibly oil lamps, that were balls of etched glass, fine like spun sugar and again in all the colours of the rainbow.

Rianthe waved casually at a chair, one that had not only gnarled arms that begged to be held, but also soft cushions on the seat. Kit was only too aware of his working clothes. Here, he thought, he should be dressed in his Sunday best for fear of soiling anything. But his Sunday finery was elsewhere. Very elsewhere.

“What am I going to do with you?”

Kit couldn't imagine a sensible answer to his host's question so he remained silent.

“I suppose you can stay here,” Rianthe continued. “The house is big enough and sometimes I rattle around in it.”

“Stay? Here?” Kit knew he was just repeating what Rianthe had said, but it seemed so unlikely he had to query it, and hear it again.

“Yes, stay. I've already told you that it's unlikely you can return to your home. I'm afraid the portals don't work like that.”

“So when might they work?” Kit knew his voice sounded faint.

“Next week?” Rianthe shrugged. “Next year? In a hundred years' time? I really have no idea and nor has anyone. Besides, they might let you back through to another place entirely, or into an age well before or well after your own.”

“That can't be the whole truth,” said Kit. “If it is the whole truth, you were taking an enormous risk.”

“Not really. I was never completely outside. I was just looking.” Rianthe looked apologetic.

“The portal disagreed,” said Kit. “It dragged you. And me,” he added.

“Not exactly,” said Rianthe, and a look of misery flitted across his handsome face. “I sometimes have moments when I feel dizzy and start to fall. The portal sensed that and wanted to protect me, I think. But you saw me and wanted to be a saviour. I'm grateful though it wasn't necessary. Still, you meant very well indeed and I'm beholden to you. So you can stay here as long as you need to.”

“Then I should be grateful in turn.” Kit tried to bow but the way the chair held him didn't really permit bowing.

“You don't sound it,” said Rianthe.

“I am, but I'm worrying. What will happen to my family, my animals, my land?”

“What would have happened if you'd met with a fatal accident in the woods?”



Kit pondered. “After grieving, I suppose my sister would have married Hal and they’d have run the two farms together. She’d have carried on caring for my mother of course.”

“Then that,” said Rianthe, gently, “is what you’d better imagine happening while you’re here. I’m afraid you’re never going to see them again. It isn’t impossible, but it’s so unlikely that you should put the idea out of your head. Think of them as dead to you and yourself as dead to them. I know, you’ll need your own time to grieve, but they’ll be happy, I’m sure.”

“My mother is dying, was dying.”

“And would still die whether you were there or not. This way, you won’t see her suffer, you know your sister will be there, and by the time you see Humania again, if ever, they’ll all be long dead and gone whereas for you, only a few years might have passed. That’s how the portals work, you see.”

They both fell silent, considering the situation. Or at least, Kit was. He rather thought Rianthe was, too. He imagined a total stranger thinking to rescue him from a falling tree then imposing himself on their hospitality for the foreseeable future. It didn’t bear thinking about.

Then he thought about this place, Faeonia. Fairyland? Well, perhaps. Filled with people who could use portals to appear and disappear, could manipulate people like himself using their given names, had rainbow furniture and brilliant sunshine in February. Though it probably wasn’t even February here.

They sat without talking for a while but it was somehow a comfortable quietness. Then Kit felt he had to know about something Rianthe had said.

“You said ‘an age well before...’ he began, but Rianthe held up his hand to stop him.

“I was spinning you a tale, one we tell youngsters to make them fear the portals. But the rest of it is true enough. Our worlds don’t seem to travel at the same speed.” He stopped.

“Worlds? Travelling?” Kit was feeling more confused than ever.

“Well yes, but that, I think, is an explanation for another day, when you’ve got used to the idea of being here.”

“And you’re sure if I recrossed the meadow there would be no portal to my woods, my logs, my oxen?” He didn’t even mention his family or his farm.

“Quite sure. It closed while I fell and you ran to me. That’s why and how I was dragged and why you are here. But now I’m tired, and it’s late. Bedtime, I think.”

Kit stared. “The sun is still up and even if the season is different...”

“It never sets in summer here,” said Rianthe, delivering this momentous information in the same manner that he might have offered another glass of water.

“And,” said Kit, ignoring for the moment the idea of perpetual day, “I’m not tired. It was mid morning when I rescued you or rather didn’t, and it can

only be just past lunch time now. I can assure you that's what my stomach is telling me."

"I'm an appalling host," said Rianthe. "It's long past my dinner time so I never thought about the time for you and whether you'd eaten. Let me see what I can find."

He jumped up and left the room. Kit could see through the open door that he entered the place where he'd got the glass and the water. So, another room for storing food and water. Probably another room for sleeping because he certainly couldn't see any closed off areas in this one. A large house, as suggested by the windows as they'd approached. Something like the lord's manor then. And he, Kit, was a guest, albeit a reluctant one.

Rianthe broke this train of thought by reappearing with a plate holding what looked like bread and cheese, together with some kind of fruit, maybe an apple but if so, the most shiny and glorious apple Kit had ever set eyes on.

"It's all I could get together at a moment's notice," Rianthe told him. "Tomorrow I'll make sure we have substantial meals."

He must have noticed Kit's hesitation despite his obvious longing because he laughed.

"Eating will have no effect whatsoever on whether a portal will or won't appear. And since you're living here for at least the time being I really think you ought to eat."

Kit could feel himself blushing as he took the plate. He enjoyed the bread and cheese. They were familiar and grounding. The apple was less so, and when he bit it, he found his mouth full of fizzing juice that tasted like apples and pears and perhaps brambles all together. Startling, yes, but too good to forego and he soon finished the treat, noticing as he discarded the core that there were very few seeds.

"And now," said Rianthe, "I really must sleep, and I'm sure you have at times napped during the day, so please, join me, and I will just have to hope you adjust to our time and spend the night in slumber."

Kit supposed he would have to adjust as quickly as possible. He was admittedly a little tired, partly from the shock and the newness of everything and partly because he'd been up early and done a lot of work in the wood before feeling obliged to rescue a beautiful stranger. So he got up when Rianthe beckoned, and followed him to what he assumed was a sleeping room.

## Chapter 4: Out of the Blue

Kit was not worried at having to share a bed. He had shared with his sister and his father often enough. He knew people who travelled frequently shared beds in inns, even with complete strangers. However, he was startled to

find Rianthe wrapped round him in the morning, rather like ivy twining round a tree. He managed to extricate his limbs and went out of the room seeking a drink of water and somewhere to relieve himself. He assumed that would be outdoors but Rianthe had either felt or heard him get up and came to show him what he called a bathroom. Kit could hardly believe his eyes; a whole room dedicated to washing and other bodily functions. Rianthe showed him how to use all the fixtures and left him to it. As he enjoyed the warm shower and the soft towels he thought how much his mother and sister would like something like this and felt sad that they couldn't see it, and then even sadder that he couldn't see them. So he was in a sombre mood when he dressed and came to the room with the rainbow furniture. Rianthe had set the low table with bowls of some kind of porridge and goblets of a drink that steamed. Kit's misery vanished as he ate his breakfast and tasted the hot liquid.

"We call it chai," said Rianthe. "I don't think this or kaffee, which we also like, have reached your country yet though they are drunk in parts of Humania.

The rest of the morning consisted of a question and answer session that left Kit's mind swirling.

Apparently there were sometimes stable portals that stayed open for days and could be recognised as such. Fae often visited Humania and came back with artefacts and writings to study. That accounted, Kit thought, for all the sightings of supernatural beings, probably including the church's angels.

He learned that they were not actually speaking the same language.

"There's another world we interact with frequently," Rianthe told him. "The people there have a great deal of knowledge that they are unwilling to share. But they do share some of the products of that knowledge and we all have what they call universal translators so that we can talk to them and to you."

The conversation was enlivened by the arrival of a few of Rianthe's friends, including a completely blue person who looked about as strange as Kit felt among the handsome fae. The fae were differently coloured with varying skin, hair and eye hues, but none of them were the uniform colour of Blue, as they called him. His skin, hair and eyes were all the colour of the summer sky and Kit was so surprised that it took him some time to notice that Blue also had only one nostril, and a third small eye just below his hairline.

The others were somewhat like Rianthe but ranging from coal black skin to a blond who looked almost ethereal. Kit didn't learn their names. He already knew about not using given names, and soon realised that they referred to each other in an odd way. They would address their friends as 'You by the window' or 'You in the low chair' or some such fashion. No names and therefore, Kit supposed, no power or manipulation. These fae must learn this from the cradle but he was going to take time to get used to it. Meanwhile, Rianthe introduced him as Hu and told them he'd been called Green, which seemed to amuse everybody.

The strange form of address was fine for conversation but Kit wondered how he could refer to people who were not present and decided he'd just have to go with their most prominent characteristic and hope Rianthe knew who he meant.

He was warmly welcomed. It seemed Blue had arrived in much the same way and had decided to say, even though there were plenty of portals between Faeonia and what he called Blue World. Kit gathered that it was 'nearer' in both time and space, though he was still struggling with the whole concept of different worlds.

Then he, Blue, had become the partner of the fae Kit was thinking of as Tall since he was much taller than the rest. They were, he noted, both males and again he was unsurprised. He had seen oxen and horses affectionate with their own gender, and the only thing that did come as a shock was how casually the others seemed to regard the same sex relationship.

"So, You who provided drinks," said Tall, "you had one of your dizzy spells again and won a companion from Humania through it."

Rianthe grinned and just nodded.

"Are you staying?" Blue was addressing his words directly to Kit, who also just nodded, then thought perhaps he should elaborate.

"Green told me I don't have much chance of returning to the right time and place," he said. "So I shall stay here for the time being until I know more and can make an informed decision."

"You're in good hands," said the woman he was thinking of as Red because of her flowing red hair.

And indeed Kit thought he was. Rianthe was a good host to all these people who seemed pleasant enough and who all seemed to like him and to accept Kit. He wondered why they'd all arrived on his first morning and asked.

"Were you all meeting here for something special? Have I accidentally interrupted something?"

It was Blue who answered. "We all came to see you, Hu. And as to how we knew, which I think would be your next question, it's another thing my people have given Faeonia." He showed him a slim case, about the size of a deck of cards, with tiny buttons on it and a square where pictures seemed to move or ripple.

"We communicate with each other using these," Rianthe said, "and I couldn't wait for all my friends to meet you."

"And we couldn't wait when he told us," said Tall. "So much so that some of us went without breakfast. I'll order lunch, shall I?" He glanced around at the nods of approval and used his case to speak to someone apparently at a distance. "There," he said, "they'll bring the food soon. I know you all like the flatbread with toppings and I just hope Hu will, too."

Kit did; it was absolutely delicious.

“So. You seemed to get on well with my friends.” Rianthe sounded satisfied. The others had all left and the clearing up had been done.

“They were very welcoming,” said Kit. “I’m not sure I expected that, though if they welcome Blue, I suppose...”

Rianthe laughed. “Yes, we like to be very inclusive. And Blue’s a good guy. What did you think of Red? Do you find her beautiful?”

Red was the only female in the group and Kit hesitated before answering.

“I find all of you beautiful. Red isn’t special. Blue is perhaps too strange to be handsome in my eyes though I’m sure Tall finds him delightful.” He wondered if he was imagining the look of approval on Rianthe’s face.

“Strange can be beautiful too,” murmured the fae. Then he suggested a walk through the meadow before dinner.

Kit took more notice of the flowers this time. They were definitely strange but beautiful, he thought. When they passed the spot where he had entered Faeonia he was startled. There was no sign of his woods. He had expected them to be there but somehow inaccessible. Instead, he could see hills in the distance, hills that did not exist in his reality.

“If there’s ever a portal, will it be here?” he asked, not sure whether he wanted to hear the reply.

Rianthe shrugged. “Unlikely,” he said. “But it will probably be in your country rather than somewhere foreign to you.”

“How do you know all this?” Kit was further confused by every explanation he received.

“We have intrepid explorers who travel the worlds,” Rianthe told him. “People who don’t care what time or place they return to.” He sounded wistful and Kit wondered whether he wanted to be one of them.

“Have you ever done more than watch from a portal?” he asked.

“I haven’t been through, no, but I’ve seen a lot,” said Rianthe. “And I can assure you time passes strangely between the worlds. I’m probably about the same age as you but I watched your Stonehenge being built and saw the Romans arrive at the white cliffs then later build the wall across the north.”

Kit shivered. All that encompassed far more years than he cared to consider.

“My woods must have been a disappointment,” was all he said.

“Hardly,” said Rianthe, grinning. “They brought you to me after all. I know I was annoyed at first. Mostly, annoyed with myself for falling. But now, I’m enjoying having you here.”

After their walk they sat and talked for a while and Kit learnt more about some of the things the fae had from Blue’s world.

“They sound like magic,” he said.

“They call it technology,” said Rianthe, “but we tend to think of it as magic, too. It isn’t power over people like our manipulation through names. It’s

power over objects and that's just as useful and really just as inexplicable.”

“I expect they'd be able to explain it if they were willing,” said Kit.

“But they aren't,” said Rianthe, “or they won't or they can't.”

There was a short silence while they both pondered the meaning and extent of magic. Or at least Kit did and he thought Rianthe did, too.

Then they prepared dinner together in the room for food which Kit had learnt to call a kitchen. He was happy to prepare vegetables, even though they bore only a faint resemblance to the turnips and cabbages he knew. After a while, when everything was simmering in a pot that hung over a crackling fire, he watched the swirling depths then sighed. There would be no answers in his dinner.

The meal was ready at just about the right time. He was beginning to feel hungry again despite the wonderful lunch. More magic, he thought.

Satisfied in body if not in mind he willingly followed Rianthe to the sleeping room. And began to wonder, in light of what he knew of Tall and Blue, whether the vine-like tendency of his bedmate was based on more than mere restlessness. If so, did he mind?

## Chapter 5: Of chairs and chickens

He was still wondering a week or so later. He wasn't quite sure how many days he'd been in Faeonia. Perhaps he should have made marks on the wall or something. Though it didn't really matter, since time ran differently and he was never likely to get home again if he believed everything the fae told him. All he really knew was that every night Rianthe curled around him, not demanding anything, but getting as close as possible.

Kit was more than interested. He had always felt attracted to his own gender but had never dared express his longings to anyone. Not that there'd been anyone in the village who had been worth taking risks for. Agnes' suitor, Hal, was attractive enough but had eyes only for Agnes, and Kit had not wanted to do or say anything that might affect that blossoming relationship. Now, he was just glad Agnes had Hal. As for his own desires, it looked as if they were more likely to be fulfilled in Faeonia. But by Rianthe?

He couldn't deny the way Rianthe made him feel. His fae host was beautiful, charming and kind. On the other hand, if he was misreading the signs that his interest was returned, he risked losing his only home here. So if the fae were seriously considering more than friendship it would be up to him to make things clearer.

Meanwhile, Kit was learning more each day about his new world. Much of what he saw and heard seemed like magic to him even though Rianthe denied any such thing. But then perhaps magic was just another way of saying something was unexplained. Perhaps in time he'd come to understand the way

things worked: the cooking and bathing facilities in the house; the communication devices from Blue's world; the strange carts that seemed to move without oxen or horses to pull them.

He'd learnt more about Rianthe's friends, too. It was nice to know how easily and warmly he was accepted. Sometimes one of them would visit unannounced while Rianthe was not available. The fae might be in the shower room or out behind the house tending to the birds that looked a lot like chickens but had brilliantly multi-coloured feathers and golden beaks. Kit suspected they were the source of the occasional dish of meat that instead of being brown, white or even pink swirled with muted greens and blues. The first time they'd eaten it Kit had felt wary. After all, those shades usually suggested that meat was rotting. Rianthe had laughed at him and told him things were different in Faenia. Of course.

It was no surprise, therefore, when Red called one morning. Kit knew Rianthe had gone to feed the birds, and offered to call him but Red threw herself into a curved woven chair and said she was happy to wait but that she would love a glass of water. Kit fetched it, using the green glass he knew was kept for visitors. The water was spring-cold from the tap in the cooking room and he marvelled again at the magic involved.

"How are you settling down here, Hu?" Red's voice was low and lazy, pleasant to listen to and not at all threatening. Kit was usually a little afraid of women's voices with their shrillness and the thought that they could so easily turn to scolding. But he liked Red, so far.

"I'm getting used to being here," he replied, smiling.

"Hu's an odd name, but I suppose it's short for Human," said Red. Her eyebrows were raised and Kit nodded. "But what do your friends call you?" she went on.

Kit could feel his own eyebrows rising. "If you mean my new friends in Faenia, they call me Hu, as you just did. If you mean my family and friends in my past life I think I would be foolish to tell you."

Red laughed. "I don't want to manipulate you," she said, "or at least not much, although..."

"...although what?" Kit felt uneasy now, and wished Rianthe would come back into the house.

"It's just..." Red hesitated then seemed to make up her mind and continued in a slightly more resolute tone. "We all love the fae who lives here and want him to be happy. It's becoming clearer every day that being happy involves you. And most of us would bet our souls that you return the feeling so we don't understand why your relationship doesn't seem to be going anywhere. If I knew your name I might make you do something about it." She stopped and looked hard at him.

Kit knew he was blushing. "You're right," he told her. "I do return the interest, or rather, I'm interested, but I'm not sure about his feelings for me. I

would be mortified if all he feels is friendship.”

“Friendship doesn’t put that kind of expression on someone’s face,” said Red.

“Who has what kind of expression on their face and good morning by the way.” Rianthe had come back into the room and was glancing between them.

“You do, and Hu does,” said Red. “An expression of very intense desire. The rest of us just wish you’d both admit to it.”

Rianthe laughed. “I’ve been trying,” he said, and Kit knew he was referring to their nightly entanglement.

“So try harder,” said Red. She was quite clearly unaware of causing either of them embarrassment and went on to talk about some local gossip that had made her call in the first place.

For the rest of Red’s visit Kit found himself exchanging hesitant looks with Rianthe, each observing the other but pretending not to when caught.

When she left, Kit thought Rianthe might say something but he didn’t, and Kit felt too shy to start the conversation they ought to have. His shyness was fuelled by Rianthe’s looks: the fae was quite gloriously handsome by Kit’s standards, slender but muscled, with golden hair, impossibly green eyes, sharp cheekbones and plump lips that begged to be kissed. Except that Kit had no idea of whether he was worthy of doing the kissing. He was acutely aware of his own peasant sturdiness, his mouse-brown colouring and his very ordinary features. Though maybe, he thought, they weren’t that ordinary in Faenonia. Still, they might well not appeal to any of the fae. Then he remembered that Tall was with Blue and perhaps fae were not as interested in physical beauty as his own compatriots. Though there again, Blue might be handsome to his own kind. Confused and longing, he waited for Rianthe to say something, anything, but he didn’t. And the longer he didn’t, the more Red’s remarks faded into an impossibly distant past, a couple of hours ago at least.

The afternoon passed, as afternoons do. They fed and admired the multi-hued birds, even though they’d been fed once that day already.

“They’re very good at fattening themselves for the table,” said Rianthe and Kit had to laugh.

“What do you do with the feathers?” he asked. At home, his mother would have used chicken feathers to stuff a mattress or a pillow. A very special one might first adorn her Sunday headgear.

“I give them to Red,” said Rianthe. “Or at least, I give her the outer coloured ones and she uses them for making hats. I use the under layer, the little creamy ones, to stuff bedding. Our bed has their feathers in it.”

“Not so different, then,” said Kit, not really commenting so much as thinking aloud.

“Most people, fae, human or blue, want a soft bed at night,” said Rianthe. “And a pair of warm arms, too.”

That was probably Kit’s cue to say something but he was suddenly



tongue-tied.

Before he could think of a suitable response they were indoors again but in a part of the house Kit hadn't seen. It was obviously a workroom and Rianthe had various pieces of the rainbow furniture in different stages of completion. Kit hadn't realised he made them. If he'd thought hard about it he might have assumed he'd made the ones in his living area. After all, many people made the furniture they used. But this was clearly a workshop with numerous chairs and tables, too many for one house.

"Do you sell them, or give them away?" was all he could think of to ask.

"I sell them, of course," said Rianthe. "I'm not quite the gentleman of leisure you imagine."

"But you don't work every day," said Kit.

"I have to wait while glue and varnish dry," Rianthe pointed out. "I don't have an assistant and to start more projects would soon end up with this space so full I couldn't move. So each piece takes time and then I send it off to whoever commissioned it. Apart from a few show pieces I display at a fair, which get me more commissions."

Kit gulped. It was obvious, really, but it cast the fae in a completely new light. A furniture maker was a master craftsman on earth. Even less likely to want a liaison with a mere tenant farmer.

"I grow the wood, too," Rianthe continued, blithely unaware of the effect his explanations were having.

"How do you get the colours?"

"I have no real idea. The land hereabouts simply lends itself to rainbows, as with the feathers." He twisted a couple of thin branches together to form a frame of some kind.

"Where does it grow?" Kit thought he might like to see this wood. It would not, he thought, be suitable for chopping into logs for the fire. But then Rianthe's house didn't have a fire. There was some system of pipes with hot water running through them, and the cooking room had a magical appliance that heated when a knob was turned.

"At the other end of the meadow," said Rianthe. "The opposite direction from your portal. We can walk that way some time if you like."

Yes, Kit would like that, and he nodded vigorously. Then he settled with his back leaning against a wall of the workshop and watched Rianthe make basket chair seats for the rest of the afternoon.

## Chapter 6: Magic and myth

Kit was tired. The moving coloured strands were weaving into strange thoughts in which he felt caged by the basketwork and yet propelled away from earth by the rainbow of colours. He must have fallen into a

temporary doze because he jerked when Rianthe touched his shoulder and said it was dinner time. The fae smiled.

“Did I send you to sleep?” he asked. His tone was teasing but his eyes were concerned.

“Not you,” mumbled Kit. “The wood. It’s so unfamiliar and I got caught up in thinking about how everything is so different. And then, well, I started to dream.”

“That’s understandable,” said Rianthe, “but maybe it would be good if you came to eat and started thinking about ordinary things like dinner and plates and glasses. You live here now, whether you like it or not, so…”

Kit shook himself. Rianthe was right but that didn’t make it easy. However, he followed to the cooking room where they prepared a simple meal. There was no actual cooking tonight. It was just a matter of tearing bread, finding butter, and slicing meat. There were fruits, too, or vegetables; Kit wasn’t sure. Some were round and red, smaller than an apple, and tasted slightly sweet but at the same time a little tart. There were some recognisable onions and some leaves that reminded him of lettuce but seemed to be an exotic variety. The eating utensils were strange to him, too. There was a metal rod with three tines at one end, a little like a miniature version of a hay rake. He watched his host and gathered he should spear the food with the tines and then convey it to his mouth. It seemed a convoluted way of eating but he intended to emulate the manners of the place where he found himself.

He ate slowly. After dinner, after a post-dinner drink, it would be time to go to bed and he wasn’t sure how he felt. If Rianthe wanted him… But did he, or was Red just amusing herself with the idea? And if she wasn’t, and he did, then did he want him back? Yes, his heart whispered. Not yet, his brain replied. Rianthe had said nothing, had not commented on Red’s words. But he was watching Kit closely, and there was something that looked a lot like hope in those green eyes. Surely this exquisite fae couldn’t want him, a solid English peasant?

It appeared he did. He wound himself round Kit more fiercely than usual when they got to bed, and Kit found himself returning the embrace even while his head still suggested drawing back. His heart was clearly winning the battle and its song of victory was loud.

There were more embraces, then Rianthe began to caress him. Kit had often wanted to experience a man’s body with his own but had no idea what to do. He was only able to follow Rianthe’s movements, mirroring them and hoping it would be good enough. It seemed to be because he heard the fae moan with obvious pleasure.

“You do know,” whispered Rianthe, “that we’ve wasted time.”

“I wasn’t sure,” Kit whispered back. There was nobody else to hear but somehow it seemed disrespectful to talk in a normal everyday voice.

“I wanted you from the first,” said Rianthe. “That’s why I was so cross.

You came with me by accident and I would have had you follow on purpose.”

“If I’d known, I might have done,” said Kit. He wondered whether that was completely true. Would he have left his family without a second thought? Possibly, because at that point he would not have known how hard it would be to return.

“You looked so handsome there in your woods. Your muscles looked so strong as you wielded your axe. And the odd sunbeam shone on your hair.”

Kit felt confused. He didn’t think he was the handsome one. He tried to explain but Rianthe just laughed and his caresses grew bolder.

Soon they were writhing together and for the first time in his life Kit knew an ecstasy he had only imagined. The imagined feeling had been only a faint copy of the reality. It was a feeling he knew was frowned on by his fellows and especially his church. Yet it felt as right as anything ever had and he gave himself up to the enjoyment of their coupling. This was magic indeed.

The next few days went by in a blur for Kit. Rianthe, now given permission to show his passion, did so at every opportunity. Between bouts of sex they walked in the sunshine, visiting the woods where the multicoloured trees grew, the place where the portal had been but would never be again, and a local village where some of Rianthe’s friends lived. They called on Tall and Blue, and Kit noticed that their house was full of Rianthe’s furnishings. Seeing Tall with his alien lover reminded Rianthe of his own, and on the way back to the house he grabbed Kit and pulled him to the ground where they rolled together in the grass until both were sated.

Red visited again, and nodded approvingly. They didn’t need to tell her that her words had sparked a change in their relationship. Their glances and touches must, Kit thought, be clear to all who saw them. He wondered if he should feel embarrassed. Probably not. None of the fae seemed to think it was anything out of the ordinary.

He wondered occasionally whether he was being manipulated. However, even in the throes of sexual passion Rianthe never called him Kit, just Hu, so he decided he wasn’t being somehow enchanted. Though if he was, he was enjoying it anyway.

He mentioned his fears to Rianthe who laughed and laughed.

“Only a criminal would ever use the power a name gives for sex,” he said. “And the punishments would be severe if anyone found out. Which they would, because even the strongest compulsion won’t last for ever.”

“But I’m enjoying it, so if the compulsion wore off and I was still enjoying it, I wouldn’t say anything,” said Kit.

“Hmm. I suppose I could have compelled enjoyment as well as pleasure,” said Rianthe. “But I think you know I wouldn’t. Why don’t you just concentrate on the enjoyment part and stop worrying.”

It seemed to be a genuine question rather than an instruction framed as

one. Kit wasn't sure. Perhaps because everything was still so strange, and perhaps because the thought of a spell of compulsion catapulted him into thoughts of horrendous myths and legends he'd heard growing up. He tried to explain, and Rianthe tried to soothe him. It worked while the soothing was physical, but once they were breakfasting or walking the worries rose again.

"It seems your world has a lot of upsetting stories," said Rianthe. He was stroking Kit's back as he spoke, and then his thighs and then...

"You're right, as usual," said Kit. And having acknowledged the fact that they were just that, stories, and distressing too, he felt more able to put them behind him.

"You know," said Rianthe, "the stories might be from contact with worlds other than mine. Who knows where portals might lead? And then people could lump every experience together and come up with horrific tales."

Kit regaled him with some of the stories, from the bible, from folktales and from things he'd overheard from others as a child.

"Definitely nothing to do with Faeonia," Rianthe insisted. "We simply don't have talking snakes, wicked wolves, or demons here. We have our own legends, of course, but none of them concern behaviour that meets with disapproval."

"Tell me some of yours, then," said Kit. "They might help to chase mine away."

So his lover told him of adventures, of rescues from natural accidents, of happy families and loving partners until the world seemed a brighter place altogether.

They asked Blue about the legends in his world but found it hard to make him understand what they meant.

"Stories," said Kit. "Stories that are based on some kind of truth but that are set around fictional places and people. Stories with magic or religion."

"Magic doesn't exist," said Blue, patiently. "It's just another word for something that hasn't yet been explained. And we don't have what I understand you to mean by religion."

"So you don't have any tales?" Rianthe had, perhaps, been hoping to hear some new ones.

"Stories about the past, yes," agreed Blue, "but they're all factual, such as what we know about the people who made the first kind of anything, from the communication devices to the moving carts. And about the ones who founded our cities, too."

"Nothing to stir the imagination?" said Red, who had joined them.

"Only to imagine making even greater discoveries," said Blue, and they all contemplated a world without any mention of magic or myth.

Kit shared some of the more gruesome stories he'd told Rianthe and the group agreed that they could have foundation in other worlds.

"Not ours," said Tall, adamantly, and everyone nodded.

Kit was beginning to find them all less odd, more real as friends, and he trusted them to tell him the truth. This seemed to be a wonderful world. Did it have no problems?

There didn't appear to be any problems between him and his fae lover. They got on well and enjoyed the everyday things as well as the sex. The sex, Kit thought, was mind blowing. But then, he'd never imagined anything like it other than in his wildest dreams. He stopped worrying and instead simply thanked whatever powers existed in the universe for his incredible luck.

## Chapter 7: Seeking help

Like most luck, it didn't last.

Kit thought he was happier than he'd ever been. He had a lover, something he'd never seriously hoped for, and he liked the place where he was living. He even had friends, and although he helped around the house and the workshop the tasks weren't onerous and he was never too tired for sex. He missed his family, of course. But he believed Agnes would be truly happy with Hal, and as for his mother, she couldn't last long, and by the time he left, most days she didn't even recognise him. Rianthe, he decided, was perfect.

It turned out he wasn't. Not that he was anything other than the gentle and faithful lover Kit thought him to be, but he was a lot less than perfect in every respect.

Once or twice, he had passed out momentarily, much as he had when Kit first saw him in the woods.

The first time, or the second if Kit counted the woods, Tall and Blue were there. Blue looked worried but Tall said it was something his friend had done for ever and a day, so Kit, at least, had not felt concerned. He'd known people who had small fits and it never seemed to affect their general health. It was as well to keep them away from sharp implements but he had to assume Rianthe knew what he was doing with his woodworking tools.

The second time, they were alone in the living area of the house, and for a moment Kit worried, then Rianthe came round again and laughed at Kit's expression.

"I'm fine, Kit. If you scrunch your face up like that the lines will stay there, you know. I just sometimes faint, that's all."

"Do you know when it's going to happen? Can you make sure you're somewhere safe?" Kit was about to ask if he could make sure there were no knives or axes but Rianthe responded quickly and almost abruptly.

"Yes, I get some kind of tingling, and yes, I can make sure I'm safe enough. Even at the portal I knew in time to step backwards. Stop fussing."

Kit obediently stopped, but he watched his lover carefully, hoping he was completely truthful about the warning signs.

Then the fainting fits came more frequently; every day in fact. By the end of a week they were twice daily. Rianthe shrugged off all questions with the same refrain.

“I’m fine; stop fussing,” was all he would say.

Kit tried not to fuss, but after a day with Rianthe losing consciousness at least three times he became determined to seek advice, at least from their friends. He had no idea whether there were healers of any kind nearby, or whether Rianthe would consider consulting one, but he did know his own peace of mind needed healing.

“Can we visit Tall and Blue?” he asked. “We haven’t seen them for a while.”

Rianthe was carving a kind of spiral, maybe for a chair leg, and didn’t answer for a moment. Then he raised his head.

“I don’t see why not,” he said. “I’ll have finished this before lunch and we can take some free time. You don’t often make suggestions about what we should do.” He didn’t phrase it as a question but his eyebrows rose.

“Blue intrigues me,” said Kit. “I’d like to get to know him better.” It was true as far as it went. He didn’t say that he suspected Blue would know more about Rianthe’s malady, if it was a malady, than the others did, and he hoped to consult him, however obliquely.

“Just so long as you don’t make Tall jealous.” Rianthe laughed to show he was joking, and carried on carving.

After lunch, they headed out across the meadow. The day was as sunny as all days were. Kit wondered how the grass got watered, and asked.

“We have rain,” Rianthe told him, “but it comes in huge storms and fills underground lakes that then feed the plants. You’ll experience a storm eventually but probably not for a while.”

They arrived at the village and found Tall outside his cottage, weaving some kind of cloth on a loom that was clearly a loom but looked odd to Kit’s eyes. He watched the process for a while and realised that he had little idea of how weaving worked, either back at home, or here in Faonia. His sister, he was sure, would have had a hundred questions to ask, but he could only admire the cloth and Tall’s obvious skill.

“You all seem to carry out work similar to that on my world,” he said. “You make cloth and furniture, you care for birds and plants, you cook, and so on.”

“Don’t forget Red and her hats,” murmured Rianthe.

“Here we do, yes,” said Tall, answering Kit rather than the fae. “This is a small rural community you see, and I expect you come from a similar one. The cities are different. I go to the nearest city to sell my cloth, and that’s where I met Blue. They have far more of the technology from Blue World, and you’d find it a very noisy busy place.” He went on to describe the city, with tall buildings, some the height of six or more people standing on each other’s heads,

the carts that didn't need animals to pull them, and the lights.

"They can work in rooms without windows," he said. "They have lights that make everywhere as bright as day. So the houses are quite different and there are many different jobs to do with trading, managing the technology, and so on. There are groups of people whose only work is to seek knowledge," he went on. "They are the ones who travel the worlds and bring information back to us."

"Do you want to visit the city?" Rianthe broke in.

"Not immediately," said Kit, who thought it sounded rather crowded and difficult to negotiate. "Maybe one day, if you want to take some of your chairs to sell." They would travel, he assumed, by one of the carts. He couldn't see how they worked, but as they always had a fae inside he thought they must be controlled in some way. It would be weird but exciting to ride in one.

"But here I am lecturing you instead of offering hospitality," said Tall. He took them indoors and brought cups of kaffee, something Kit had begun to enjoy.

"Where's Blue?" he asked. He hoped he sounded casual and not anxious. After all, Tall was Rianthe's friend and was their host. He should be enjoying the visit even if Blue wasn't in evidence.

"He went to see a local farmer who cut himself badly," said Tall, then at Kit's puzzled expression he continued, "He's our local healer, you know. Or perhaps you didn't."

All the better, Kit thought. Blue would be exactly the right person to consult about Rianthe, even if he couldn't get Rianthe to consult him on his own account.

Blue came back while they were still finishing their drinks. He looked tired and accepted a cup with alacrity.

"That was a nasty case," he said to Tall. "A fall onto a sharp spade that was propped in just the wrong place by the wall, and a deep cut in the calf. I had to stitch it. I just hope he keeps it bandaged and clean."

"No medicines?" Tall sounded interested and Kit was fascinated. Rianthe, however, was wandering round the room looking at some of his own handiwork and then at some small ornaments on a shelf.

"Not this time," said Blue. "I've run out of the ones that prevent infection and the ones that stop pain. I must visit my world soon. Cleanliness will have to do for now. I hope it's enough. I tried to impress on his partner that she should keep it all washed and dressed but I don't quite trust her not to apply the old herbal remedies."

Kit was about to ask why those would be harmful, when he realised that Rianthe was swaying. Then his lover fell backwards onto a low divan, fortuitously placed behind him.

"Another of those faints?" Blue sounded alarmed. "Has he had many lately?"

“They’ve been more frequent,” said Kit. “But you know Green. He just tells me he’s fine and not to fuss.”

“That settles it,” said Blue. “I must go home and I need to take a sample of his blood with me. Do you think he’ll let me extract it?”

“Some kind of magic?” Kit thought it sounded like witchcraft, but Blue seemed to know what he was talking about, and if it would help...

“Not magic.” Blue sighed. “Just science. Though I know neither you world nor this has quite reached that stage of scientific discovery yet. Still, if I can help a friend, I will, and my world does not object to us bringing small advances across the borders.”

Rianthe had come round and was listening. “Some kind of your science that involves my faints?” he asked.

“Yes, you fainting person,” said Blue, quite gently. “I want to stop it happening at all. But I must ask for a sample of your blood, I’m afraid.”

“And how do you propose to get it?” Rianthe looked alarmed. “Will you cut me?”

“No,” said Blue. He had a bag by his side, one he’d had when he came back from the farm. He reached in now and brought out a strange contraption of glass and metal. There was what looked like a thin needle on one end and in the same box there was a small glass vial.

Rianthe obviously trusted Blue because he let him take the blood. Kit and Tall watched. Kit wondered if he would be the next to faint when he saw Rianthe’s blood dripping into the vial. But his lover didn’t seem to be in pain so he mentally slapped his own head and told himself not to be silly. It was Rianthe who was bleeding and if he didn’t mind, then nobody else should.

The bleeding stopped almost immediately. Blue corked the vial, wiped Rianthe’s arm, and looked apologetically at Tall.

“You know I have to go,” he said.

Tall nodded but didn’t look happy. “Try not to make it so long this time,” he said. Then he turned to Kit. “There are more portals to Blue World than yours,” he said, “and they open far more frequently. But the last time Blue went home he was away for a whole season and I missed him badly.”

Kit hoped for everyone’s sake that Blue would return quickly. Tall would obviously miss him. Rianthe needed Blue’s skills; the farmer with the injured leg might need them too. And he, Kit, would be a great deal happier if someone with healing knowledge was dealing with the fae’s far too frequent faints.

## Chapter 8: Good and bad news

In the end, Blue was only away for a few days. He and Tall arrived at Rianthe’s house late one morning. Rianthe was in his workshop and Kit half hoped he would stay there until he had had a chance to question Blue. But the



blue alien was anxious to speak to Rianthe himself.

“I have news for our woodcarver friend,” was all he would say while they waited, and Kit shrugged and went to the cooking area to arrange drinks for all of them. He looked into the workshop and beckoned Rianthe who took his time putting his tools away then sauntered into the living area. Kit was fretting, anxious to hear what Blue had to say.

“You have the iron sickness,” Blue began.

“But we already know that,” said Rianthe.

“Of course, because so many of you have, but yours is particularly severe an advanced.”

“What’s the iron sickness?” Kit felt everyone was discussing something that to him seemed to be a mystery.

“You know the fae find iron difficult to handle?”

Kit thought about it. He had heard tales of defeating hostile spirits with cold iron implements but had dismissed them as stories. Perhaps there was a basis of truth. So he nodded but Blue clearly saw his slight hesitation.

“You must have seen how they never use iron tools,” he said. “They can suffer rashes, blisters, painful sores and some say iron burns. We, that is my people, call it an allergy.”

Since Kit had never heard of anything like an allergy he wasn’t much wiser, but then recalled things like nettle rash and decided that would do as an analogy for now. So he nodded again, a little more confidently.

“There’s iron in Faeonia, of course,” said Blue, “but the people shun it. Most of them don’t suffer anything more than the occasional sting if they come in contact with something made of iron. We learnt that early and now we never give them any technology that contains iron.”

“But if they all suffer, why is Green different?” Kit frowned. “And where has he been in contact with iron?”

“His condition isn’t common but it’s not unknown,” said Blue. “Like you, the fae have iron in their blood, and he is suffering because his body is rejecting his own blood. That’s not the whole story,” he added. “It’s just the easiest way to explain it.”

Iron in blood? Kit was puzzled but inclined to believe the alien technology or magic or whatever it was.

“So what do you suggest?” Rianthe sounded worried, even grim.

“We can help,” said Blue. “The only thing is that you would have to come to my world for treatment. I’d accompany you, of course, but it would take some time, and you’d need to arrange your affairs before you travelled.”

“And I’d come too,” said Tall. “You’ve only just got back and who knows how long you’d be away?”

“So you’d arrange your affairs too,” said Blue, apparently unsurprised at his lover’s insistence.

“What about me? I can’t stay here without any of you,” said Kit, panic

creeping into his voice.

“All right,” said Blue. “All four of us. I have a house on my world which is big enough for us and is near the place where they’d carry out the treatment. We call it a clinic, or hospital.”

The word ‘hospital’ was vaguely familiar. Kit didn’t care much provided they could cure Rianthe. He was nervous about going to yet another world but even more nervous about staying behind. Then he thought about it from Rianthe’s point of view.

“Would you rather I stayed here?” he asked. He hoped Rianthe could hear how much he hoped for a negative reply. “I could care for the birds. And Red would probably help me if I got confused by things here.”

“No, I want you with me,” said Rianthe. “Red will care for the birds, I’m sure. And she can deal with any customers who want their finished furniture.”

Kit was relieved; Rianthe wanted him. He was still nervous, but at least he would be with his beautiful fae.

They travelled in one of the horseless carts and Kit watched Blue hold a wheel inside, turning it gently from time to time. Magic, then. The road, once they had left the village, was paved with some kind of smooth interlocking stone slabs, and the cart moved smoothly. Even so, Kit felt slightly sick and was glad the journey didn’t take long.

The city astonished him. It wasn’t as if he’d had much experience of towns, let alone cities, in his life so far, and the crowds and noise were almost overwhelming. The others seemed, however, to take it all in their stride and he didn’t want to appear cowardly, so he gritted his teeth and said nothing. They stayed overnight in an inn which was, in fact, similar to those he’d seen. The bar served drinks, just like the tavern near his home, and the only difference he could see was that there were no horses either outside or in a stable block.

“You’re coping well with your first trip to a Faeonian city,” said Rianthe as they lay in bed. They didn’t make love; the walls were thin and there were too many people around. However, they talked, in whispers. Kit wouldn’t have minded Tall and Blue hearing them, but there were strangers about.

“I’m fascinated,” he admitted. “Your whole world is strange to me, but in the village I could see points of similarity with my own home. Here, it’s more obvious than ever that I’m in an alien land.”

Rianthe grinned. “I think you’d find your cities not too different from this,” he said. “But tomorrow we cross over into Blue’s world and then I think I’ll be as much of a foreigner as you.”

“You’ve never been?” Kit had wondered, but hadn’t asked.

“Not even Tall has been,” the fae replied.

The portal was one that Blue told them was almost constantly open and

usually in the same place. If not, it was only a field or so away. It was just outside the city walls and shimmered slightly as they walked towards it. They had left the cart at the inn, and paid for its storage.

“It’s a stable portal, more or less,” said Blue, “but the time slippage still applies. I have no idea how long we’ll be gone so I’ve left plenty of money at the inn. We’ll want transport when we return.”

Kit turned to Rianthe. “You said hundreds of years...” he began, but Rianthe shook his head.

“Not between these worlds,” he said. “Weeks, normally, or months if we’re unlucky. Not years.”

More magic then. Kit decided he didn’t have the learning, or even the aptitude, to understand, and would have to be content to rely on the others.

“In any case,” said Blue, “we’ll be gone a matter of weeks even by subjective time. Rianthe’s treatment won’t be finished in a day.”

“What happens if he isn’t treated,” Kit asked. “Will your magicians definitely agree to tend him?”

“Of course they’ll agree,” said Blue. “They suggested I bring him. As to what would happen, that would depend on how strong he is, how often he fell, where he fell, and so on. If he avoided hitting his head he might live a year or two, but not more.”

Kit gasped. He had realised the iron allergy was serious, but hadn’t quite grasped how fatal it might be. He tried to imagine losing his beautiful lover so soon after finding him, and had to wipe away tears.

“And by the way,” Blue said, in quite a normal voice, just as though he hadn’t just talked about Rianthe’s possible death, “don’t call them magicians. They call themselves physicians, which is quite different altogether.”

Kit frowned as he thought hard. He had heard of physic. He knew the monks at a monastery near his home had what they called a physic garden. They used plants, herbs mostly, to treat various ailments, with varying success. So this was not magic after all, just a more advanced use of the same kind of knowledge. It was still beyond his understanding, but if it would save Rianthe, he was all for it.

He was still pondering on the links between herbal medicine and magic when they reached the portal and stepped through: Blue first, followed by Tall, then Rianthe, and at the last, Kit, almost running to catch up with the rest.

## Chapter 9: A blue world.

The Faeonian city had been bewildering: noise, crowds, traffic and strange shops. Kit had, however, felt he stood some chance of understanding the place, given time to study it. As it was, he didn’t even know its name. Once through the portal he found himself in a place so alien he knew that even a

lifetime wouldn't be long enough to get to grips with it.

"This is my home city," said Blue, proudly. "It's called The City of Two Rivers." He hesitated. "I'm sure there must be others with two rivers but somehow this one got the name. Later, I'll take you to see the bridges. For now, we need to get to my house."

To begin with almost all the people Kit could see were like Blue. They were, he noticed, slightly different shades of blue. Some were so pale they were almost white, and others so dark they reminded him of the night sky. But all had that same uniformity of colour over their skin and hair, all had the three eyes and single nostril, and almost all were big. Not huge, just slightly taller and definitely more solid than humans or fae.

Then the city looked like nothing he'd ever seen. The sky was almost hidden by the massive buildings that linked with each other by criss-crossed walkways between them. The roads were shiny and though there was very little traffic, what there was seemed to be like the horseless carts but covered so that Kit couldn't quite see whether people were controlling them or not. Everything was blue: people, carts, buildings.

It was warm. Not too warm, just like a hot summer's day, but noticeable. Hot summer days didn't occur often in Kit's part of the world and Faenonia was more like eternal late spring. There were wafts of hot air which he hesitated to define as breezes, and every so often he saw lizard-like creatures going up and down the walls. He only knew they were lizards because he'd seen carved ones on the church walls at home and had asked once what they were. Seeing them in stone had not prepared him for these moving ones. Especially since they were also blue.

"You'll meet some of my neighbours and then of course the physicians," Blue told them. "You'll be introduced by name, which you fae will find odd. We don't have your skill in manipulating people through their names so we call each other by separate names. I think Hu's world is similar?" He looked enquiringly at Kit, who nodded. It would probably be better to stick with the name Rianthe had given him, even here. He didn't want to give Tall any power over him once they returned. He liked and trusted Rianthe's friends but you just never knew when someone would slip up and mention a name in front of strangers who were not so friendly.

"I'll go by the name of Green," said Rianthe. "Hu gave it to me so I'll feel comfortable using it."

"Tall isn't really a name," said Tall, hesitantly. "Even though Hu gave it to me I'm not sure that's how I want to be introduced."

"Hm," said Blue. "And 'You' isn't useful, either, even though that's what I usually say."

After some discussion they decided on Weaver for Tall, referencing his work.

"I'll be addressed by my name," Blue told them. "Weaver knows it

already and I trust him, but it seems I must trust Green, too. Hu, like me, comes from a world where very few people have the skill to use names to manipulate.”

“Of course you can trust me,” said Rianthe. “After all, you’ve brought me here for a cure. I will owe you my life.”

It turned out, however, that Blue’s name was something like Xzqkstch and try as they would the others couldn’t pronounce it properly at all.

Blue bundled them all into one of the covered carts and showed some kind of card to the driver holding the wheel. Kit found he could see out, and the strange city passed by at a dizzying pace until they came to a stop where they were bundled out again and taken to a door then up stairs and along passageways all of a shiny stone substance, then crowded into a tiny room. Surely this couldn’t be Blue’s home? Before he could even ask, he felt his stomach give way in a most unsettling fashion then the door opened and they got out again, but onto a different passage from the one where they’d got in. More magic, he thought, not even trying to make sense of it. This passage had holes in the walls, some square and some more decorative with curved and carved openings to the fresh air. As they walked, he could see that they were now high above the roads and wondered how they had got there. He could see the sky and was almost reassured to see that it was also blue, though it was weird to see that the city seemed to blend with it so that it wasn’t possible to see where it began or ended.

Blue’s house was similar in some ways to other houses, in that it had windows, a door, furniture and other attributes of a dwelling (all blue). But it was clearly up in the sky somehow, and Kit just hoped it wouldn’t choose to fall while they were staying.

It was good, in a way, to find Rianthe and Tall as bemused by it all as he was. However, they seemed to accept the differences more equitably and Kit supposed that was due to their habit of peering into other worlds through portals.

Blue produced a meal, flicking open square boxes and mixing the ingredients he found. One of the boxes was clearly as cold as snow and another as hot as fire. Kit stayed well away from them.

“I must apologise,” said Blue, “for the quality of the food. I bought things that would keep just before coming back for you, but of course these meals aren’t our finest. I’ll buy fresh meat and vegetables tomorrow, or even take you out to dine at what you’d probably call an inn. Though Green might have to stay with the physicians. They said they thought a few nights with them would be needed before you were well enough to stay in my house and just visit them daily.” He looked at Rianthe, who sighed but shrugged.

“I’ve come for treatment,” he said. “I’ll do whatever your physicians tell me.”

Blue looked relieved, and Kit felt relieved, too. If Rianthe was a good patient no doubt these people would be able to cure him and he would have his

lover back hale and hearty. Of course, if Rianthe had never had fainting spells Kit would never have met him in the first place, but now that he had, he was determined not to lose him to the disease, or allergy as Blue called it.

The next day was taken up with a visit to the physicians. They clustered together in a huge building filled with sick patients, mostly in beds, and a strange array of machinery which Blue said was just scientific equipment but which Kit knew must be magic. Rianthe went willingly with the physicians who said they wanted to do more tests before starting treatment and the other three waited on comfortable chairs in a room that seemed to be set aside for the friends and families of the sick.

When he came back, Rianthe looked rather paler than usual, and very tired. They had promised to start treatment in a couple of days, he told the others. Someone would contact them when everything was ready.

“So,” said Blue. “I have a couple of days to take you all sightseeing. I hope you’re going to find my world interesting.”

Kit was sure they would. Then he wondered whether the fae and the blue people would find his own world equally fascinating. Maybe. Just because he thought of it as humdrum didn’t mean everybody would. But he also knew both Faenonia and the blue world (he couldn’t pronounce its name any more than he could pronounce Blue’s) would find his small rural community unpleasant on a long-term basis. Compared with their worlds, his was dirty, and lacked all kinds of magical devices to make life easier. Anyway, he didn’t think they would be likely to visit. There would be no need. Meanwhile, he should take in as much of this world as he could; it would give him and Rianthe topics of conversation for many months to come.

## Chapter 10: More good and bad news

They visited the bridges, massive stone spans (blue, of course) over two wide rushing rivers that ran parallel then joined to form an estuary that would, Blue told them, eventually meet the ocean. Kit knew oceans as his own home was not far from the coast, but although he would have liked to see this one Blue said there wasn’t time.

“It’s a day’s journey,” he said. “I want to show you round the city first, then when Green’s with the physicians you’ll want to spend part of each day visiting him, I’m sure. Maybe when he’s recovering.”

The bridge arches were near the confluence of the rivers and joined with a third arch that crossed the estuary. So there was in effect a three arched bridge and the people, Blue said, were very proud of it.

“It needed a lot of architects and engineers to work out how to build it for

both safety and beauty.”

More magic, Kit decided. Though he knew architects or builders as he would call them could create marvels, such as cathedrals and palaces.

Then they visited what Blue called a shopping centre. There were more shops than Kit had ever seen in one place. Some of them were familiar, selling clothing or food, even if the clothing or food looked a little strange. Some, however, sold devices like their communication pieces or translators. And others sold things that Blue said were games and entertainment. He didn't even try to explain when he saw the complete lack of comprehension on Kit's face. He just grinned and left them for a moment to rush into a food shop, coming out with packages which he distributed among the four of them to carry home. Then he smiled and went into what he called a game shop, and came out with a slim parcel that he tucked into his pocket.

“That's entertainment for tonight,” he said, but would say nothing more, however much they begged for information.

After dinner, which Blue cooked, they spent the evening watching what Blue called a film. He pushed a kind of thick card into a slot in a machine then moving pictures played out on a screen on one wall of his living area. Kit snuggled close to Rianthe on a low divan. He was fascinated by the film, more for the concept than the actual content of the play being shown, but was also very aware that he would be separated from his lover for a while. He just hoped he would get him back all in once piece and cured of his illness. Blue would, he knew, try to keep him occupied while Rianthe was undergoing treatment but he rather thought he would leave the sightseeing to Tall and spend whatever hours he was allowed at the place where the physicians did their work. Blue called it a clinic but Kit only knew it was where Rianthe might recover from his frightening allergy to his own blood.

Blue found it impossible to persuade Kit to join him exploring the city and beyond. Even a promised trip to the coast didn't appeal. Kit only wanted to spend time at the clinic, and the staff there soon got used to their foreign visitor. They let him stay all day but turned him out when it got dark, calling for one of the horseless carts to take him back to Blue's home. He got good at finding his way around the strange stone corridors and even negotiated the moving room on his own. There was a similar one at the clinic and he supposed anything became banal and easy with time and exposure.

Rianthe was in a comfortable room and the staff seemed kind. They made a fuss of him and apparently had very few fae patients. Occasionally a young nurse or physician would be found peeping round the door to see the fae for themselves.

“They're nice to me,” Rianthe said. “But I wish they wouldn't treat me like something strange. I know we're different from the people here, but our

worlds have been communicating and visiting for years now, and you'd think they'd be used to the idea of fae."

"I expect it's just the researchers and perhaps the makers of things like the carts who go to and fro," said Kit. "You'd attract quite a bit of attention in my world, but not as much as here because we're physically much more similar. Still, people would stare at your beauty. They'd stare even more if you manipulated them using their names."

"You know," said the fae, "I'm not even sure that would work in your world. Blue says it wouldn't here. I haven't tried it, even though I know the names of some of the staff. Maybe I should experiment, though I'd hate to offend any of them."

"Don't offend them," said Kit, kissing him gently on the forehead. "I don't want anything to delay your recovery."

"About that," said Rianthe, then he returned the kiss and they stopped talking for a few minutes.

"About your recovery?" Kit was curious, once he was able to breathe again.

"Yes, my chief physician, whose name, of course, I can't pronounce, wants to talk to us both, tomorrow."

"I wonder why," said Kit, then continued, "but at least if you can't pronounce their names you can't manipulate them. And I'd really rather you didn't try it on me again." He grinned. There were no hard feelings but it had been disturbing to move involuntarily, and he had no desire to repeat the experience.

Kit worried as he headed for the clinic the following day. Blue had tried to reassure him, saying the physicians probably just wanted them both to understand any further treatment, especially if there was some kind of medication Rianthe had to take. But Kit was faintly alarmed at the idea that the physicians wanted to talk to him too rather than just telling Rianthe to pass on any messages. He was beginning to realise he had fallen in love with his fae lover. Yes, he enjoyed the frequent and mind-blowing sex, but it wasn't just the sex. He wanted to spend time with Rianthe. A lot of time. Preferably a life time. He was vaguely aware that in the normal course of events Rianthe would probably outlive him. The blood allergy seemed somehow to even the odds. But he had been blithely assuming all would be back to what now passed as normal when the treatment was finished. And now the blue physicians wanted to speak to him as well as to their patient. He couldn't stop his mind whirling with speculation and arrived at the doors of the clinic with a scowl on his face that must have upset the reception staff because someone came forward to escort him to one of the moving rooms.

"They will see you in what we call a consulting room," said his guide. "Your partner won't be in his room today or at least not until after the meeting."



Kit smiled, or thought he tried to. Judging by the expression on his escort's face his attempt wasn't very successful.

Eventually they reached a room that didn't seem to have anything to do with clinical matters. There was no bed, no shelf of medicine, no equipment of any kind. Kit had stopped expecting bunches of dried herbs or a bubbling cauldron on a hearth, but he felt surprised all over again by this room. It was more like a living room in someone's house, with comfortable chairs and a beautiful rug on the floor.

A blue person and Rianthe were already seated, and Kit found his smile more readily for his lover.

"I'm Zvdnsk," the blue physician introduced himself. "I've been part of the team treating Rianthe. And before you ask, we use his name here but of course would not pass it on to anyone unless he gave permission. I gather you're privileged, being his partner."

"Yes, I'm Kit," said Kit. "Though I've got used to being called Hu in front of Rianthe's fae friends."

He was gestured to a seat now that the formalities were over, and Zvdnsk cleared his throat and looked hard at them. Kit assumed he was male but wasn't entirely sure. However, he was bigger than Blue, and had quite a deep voice so Kit felt justified in making assumptions unless and until corrected.

"We have some really good news for you," he said now, a note of satisfaction creeping into his voice. "We have cleansed Rianthe's blood. We removed and replaced it, in fact. So he now has a new blood system with no allergy."

Rianthe was looking half pleased and half worried. Did he already know something Kit didn't? Kit felt entirely pleased but then thought maybe there would be a price to pay that would create difficulties for his lover.

"However," Zvdnsk continued, then paused as if to make absolutely sure they were both listening carefully. "If Rianthe goes back to Faeonia for any length of time, the allergy may well recur, and next time could be fatal before we could arrange another course of treatment. You see," he added, "that allergy to iron is part of the fae and part of Faeonia. It's just that Rianthe has it in an extreme form and that's due to his genetics." He paused again, seeing the bewilderment on both faces in front of him. "That just means the way he was born, and the body he inherited from his family, much like inheriting eye colour or the shape of a nose."

"Are you saying I should stay here?" Rianthe sounded miserable. "I suppose our friend here might put us up for a while, and perhaps I could find work, but..."

"But," agreed Zvdnsk. "We know this isn't an ideal place for you. Very few fae choose to remain here for long. We are, I think, too different, even if the two peoples are to some extent friends."

"Quite." Rianthe sounded very definite. "So I'll just have to go back and

risk the recurrence of the illness. It might not happen, or it might give me a respite for some years. You've given me what we might call breathing space as it is, and don't for one moment think I'm not grateful."

"We had another suggestion," said Zvdnsk, glancing at Kit as he spoke. "It appears your partner here is from another world; one where he would be happy and you would live without fear of the allergies recurring, or at least not in such an extreme form."

Rianthe and Kit both stared; first at Zvdnsk then at each other. Kit swallowed convulsively. There was such hope in Rianthe's eyes, and such trust. That was probably the definitive moment in which Kit realised he truly loved Rianthe and wanted whatever was best for him, regardless of what it might mean for himself.

"Rianthe told me," Kit said slowly, "that if I returned to my world a great deal of time might have passed. It would no longer be the place I knew and there might be nothing for me there." He held up his hand as the others started to speak. "I'm not saying we shouldn't try it. We should. But I think we might need quite a lot of help."

Rianthe nodded. "Things like some idea of how much time, what changes have occurred, how we might fit in and for that matter how we could explain our appearance there without incurring accusations of some kind. But perhaps you have ideas?" His gaze was turned towards the physician and he was clearly desperate with hope and need.

"We can help," said Zvsnsk. "Those are details we can easily deal with. The main thing is your willingness to try it."

Rianthe was looking at Kit now. "Will you take me to your world?" he asked, almost diffidently.

"Of course." Kit didn't need to think before answering. "With help, I'm sure we can make a place for ourselves. But can you bear to leave Faeonia and your friends?"

"It seems if I don't I'll be forced to leave them by death," said Rianthe.

"You could go back briefly," Zvdnsk offered. "Collect some things you might need; say goodbye to people; plan to cross through a portal near where Kit entered Faeonia. Although the times would be vastly different, at least he'd be familiar with the geography. But you could only stay a matter of days. Then the information we could give you would still be current."

## Chapter 11: Planning for change

Rianthe was free to leave the clinic. His treatment was finished and he was cured, provided he stayed either on the blue world or went to Kit's. They returned to Blue's house with plenty to think about and discuss. Blue and Tall

were so pleased to see Rianthe well they made light of the problems ahead.

“You’ll be fine,” said Tall. “Your woodworking skills will guarantee you work anywhere. I can’t imagine a society that doesn’t need beautiful furniture, and if they use something other than wood I’m sure you’ll adapt easily enough.”

“We might even be able to stay in touch,” said Blue. “Our researchers find portals and keep a careful note of what’s happening where and when. They could tell us about any chance of communicating.”

“The times are so out of line that I doubt that,” said Rianthe. “But you’d know I was safe, and you could imagine us living a long and happy life together.” He looked fondly at Kit as he spoke.

“You’d lose your fae abilities, I think,” said Blue. “There is no record of anyone manipulating through names in Kit’s world, and so far as I know, nothing to suggest you could change the colours of wood at will. But it sounds as if it’s a price you have to pay for life.”

“There are legends of fae abilities,” said Kit. “But I always thought that’s all they were: stories. Now I think maybe they’re based on the occasional fae visitor, but I don’t think we can rely on any fae abilities remaining for long.”

“Visiting is a bit different from settling there for life,” agreed Rianthe. “And any legends are probably based on the kind of technological differences we’ve seen between Faeonia and Blue’s world. Both seem to be a lot more advanced than your world, or at least your world when you left it. We all know advanced skills can look like magic to societies that don’t have them.”

“Do you think my world might have caught up?” Kit thought about it, even as the others nodded. It would be strange indeed to see horseless carts and moving rooms on Earth.

“Some of my people are bound to have watched Hu’s world recently,” said Blue. “We need to find out what they’ve seen and what you might need. For example, if you chose to stay here you would require papers to prove who you are and what your role in society might be. I can well imagine other places having the same systems, especially as their populations grow. It’s easy to organise a sparsely populated world without too much bureaucracy but from what I’ve already heard, Hu’s world has followed ours in its development rather than Faeonia.”

He made enquiries and they found the researchers were only too happy to share their findings. They would indeed need papers, but fortunately it was quite clear what these would entail and the blue people were glad to provide the necessary documents. Kit was bemused by what he saw. He could read, though not well, but enough to see his name was associated with a variety of numbers, each pertaining to a different aspect of society.

Blue’s researcher friend was interested in their plans. Kit mentally called him Darker Blue since his name was, as usual, unpronounceable. Once they had their documents he was anxious they should get going as soon as possible.

“Before things change again,” he said. “Don’t forget these papers have

dates on them so if too much time has passed you will have useless information with you.”

He thought they could spare a few days for Rianthe to arrange his affairs in Faeonian and decide what, if anything, to take with him.

“But only a few days,” he warned them. “A week at most.”

“What happens then?” Kit’s head was whirling and he just hoped he’d understood enough to make sense of it all when they eventually reached Earth. “Do we need to come back here and use a portal you’ve observed through or can we find one near my partner’s home?”

“I think we’d better arrange a portal in Faeonian,” said Darker Blue. “As Zvdnsk has said, we want the general geography, at least, to be familiar. But,” he added, “you’ll find things very different. I think you said you came from a rural area?”

Kit nodded. Most areas of England were, he thought, quite rural. There were a few cities but they were small and scattered. He’d visited Chester once, taking a day to get there and marvelling at the old Roman walls and the new shops in their two storey arcade.

“We’d better give you a crash course in the latest human history and society,” said Darker Blue. “It will be difficult, but...” He didn’t need to add that it would also be essential for Rianthe’s survival.

Later, back at Rianthe’s house, Kit snuggled close to his lover. They’d spent the day saying farewell to friends and it seemed sad to know they wouldn’t see Tall, Blue or Red again. Rianthe had given Red his house and told her to share his workshop and tools with whoever wanted them. She would care for the birds, at any rate. He had packed a few tools, things Blue’s friends had told him would not be out of place anywhere, and a couple of things he wanted to keep as mementos of his life on Faeonian, an ornament he’d carved of coloured wood, and a small picture of his parents. They had, he told Kit, had him late in life and had now passed away. Kit admired the miniature and said he thought it would not look out of place on Earth.

He knew Rianthe was stressed. It was quite hard for him to get to grips with the idea of an Earth so different from the one he’d known, but it must be much worse for a fae who was going to a totally unfamiliar environment where even the woods and hills would be alien.

“What do you think?” he whispered. “Will we find work, make enough to live on? Get somewhere to live?”

“We have all the information,” Rianthe said after a long pause. “There shouldn’t be any problems. It’s not as if we’re going unprepared.” But he sounded unsure, and Kit worried. He decided he’d better worry quietly and sound confident. One of them had to.

“I’m imagining showing you my world,” he said. “I hope you’ll like it. And yes, I know you’ve glimpsed it through portals but we both know actually

being somewhere is incredibly different.” He thought of the woods where they’d met, where such drastic events had changed his life for ever. Rianthe’s life would have changed anyway, he supposed, and he thought of the fae doomed to resettle on Earth with nobody by his side if he hadn’t met Kit.

“We’ll be all right,” he murmured. “We have each other.” He hoped he was right, and on that optimistic note he fell asleep, one arm thrown across his lover and one foot nudged between the fae’s ankles. Tomorrow was moving day.

## Chapter 12: Home alone

Kit was never quite sure what went wrong. One moment they were standing by a portal and Blue was fussing about whether they had all their papers.

“Make sure you each carry your own at all times,” he said. “You might need them and you might get separated.” Kit shuddered. “And,” Blue continued, “I hope you have the money we got for you safe in inside pockets. You can’t afford to lose it.”

“Of course we have,” Rianthe said, laughing. “You remind me of one of my coloured birds, clucking at us like that.” Then he turned to Kit and held out his hand.

They planned to walk through the portal hand in hand, partly so that Blue’s fears of separation were ill-founded, and partly just because they wanted to enter the next stage of their lives together in every sense.

But a wild bird, possibly like Rianthe’s tame ones but with fewer brightly coloured feathers, chose that exact second to rush out of the grasses near their feet and they were jerked apart.

It shouldn’t have mattered much.

But Kit found himself hurtling through the portal alone and on the other side, when he turned to speak to his fae lover, there was nobody there.

He waited, assuming Rianthe would appear within seconds, but there was no sign of him. He squinted back through the portal but as he did, the sun shone in his eyes and he could see nothing but light. Then the portal closed and there was no disturbance in the surrounding air.

Surely there would be another portal nearby. Surely someone would do something. Hours passed while he waited, patiently at first then with a growing sense of dread. Nothing whatsoever happened. He heard a bird singing in a nearby tree and thought it might be a blackbird. He was aware of a rumbling that he assumed was thunder until it never stopped and he realised it was horseless carts, many of them, passing on a nearby road. Their wheels made a low sound on the hard surface and occasionally he heard snatches of music or the hoot of a small horn.

He was not certain what to do. If he stayed here, waiting for Rianthe, the fae might never come, and anyway, he would lose the chance to find accommodation at least for that night. He could sleep in the field where he had arrived; the weather was warm and no rain threatened now that he had discounted the idea of thunder. However, he had no idea whether the fields belonged to someone who might find him and be annoyed at the trespass. Yes, he had papers and money, but he knew he'd have been annoyed to find a possible vagrant sleeping on his farm and might have kicked him first, or called the sheriff, before asking for papers or payment.

He had, moreover, no means of leaving a message. He was sure there were ways to bend twigs or stems to mean something, but he had no idea how and wasn't, in any case, sure Rianthe would be any wiser than he was.

He would have to rely on the wisdom and kindness of Blue and his people. And hope. He would not, he told himself firmly, give up hope.

And yet... His fae lover had been so unexpected, so wonderful, so perfect. Well, not perfect, but perfect for him. Perhaps it was only too likely that he would lose him in an instant the same way he'd found him.

He argued with himself as he slowly headed for the sound of the traffic. The carts would surely be heading for the nearest town and that would be where he would find somewhere to stay, and where Rianthe would look for him if he reached the same time and place.

Another portal might decant the fae into a different area and era. He told himself to stop thinking, just to put one foot in front of another. This was his world, after all, and somehow or other he would make a success of being here. At least he was forewarned about the time difference and he'd already come to terms with the knowledge that everyone he knew would be long dead.

The traffic, once he was near enough to watch it, was going in both directions. However, there was a sign that gave what he assumed were place names and the number of miles to each. He set off to the nearest, knowing he would be alone that night and possibly for a lot of nights to come. Being back in his own world didn't in any way make up for that, and besides, the entire point of moving was to give Rianthe a chance at a normal life. He, Kit, could have happily stayed in Faeonia for ever.

He found accommodation. There was a sign which said Bed and Breakfast: Rooms to Let. That sounded clear enough and he mentally thanked the sign writer who had used large clear script. The person who answered the door could have been male or female. They wore shapeless clothes and had short hair. Their high voice suggested female but Kit still wasn't sure.

"Bed and breakfast," he said, letting his voice make it a query.

The person smiled and waved him indoors. They didn't seem worried about his papers though he offered them.

"We don't have to bother about that in a small place like this," she said.

But all the same she looked carefully at the document that said he was Christopher Smallwood, aged twenty three. She showed him to a clean room with what looked like a comfortable bed, and offered to make an evening meal for an extra charge. He accepted with relief. The thought of scouring the neighbourhood for an inn that would feed him had been weighing on his mind for the last couple of miles. Then she showed him what she called a bathroom, much like the one in Rianthe's house, and told him to come downstairs when he was ready to eat.

"I can rustle up a meal in no time," she said, cheerfully.

He didn't recognise the food which was some kind of long strings made, he thought, from flour, with a sauce that was rich and spicy. He ate it with pleasure and accepted a second helping.

His hostess, who had introduced herself as Anne, sat opposite him while he ate and flushed with pride when he praised her cooking.

"Not much call for it," she said. "Very few guests arrive early and most leave after breakfast. There's nobody else here at the moment so come down whenever you wake up, as long as it's not too early, and I'll make something there and then. A full English suit you?"

Kit had no idea what she was talking about but nodded anyway.

"And so, Christopher," Anne continued after a long pause, "what brings you here?"

"To Knutsford, you mean, or the area in general?" he countered, giving himself time to think. Her accent was strange but he was following, just.

"Both or either, I suppose," she said, smiling.

"I was born in these parts," he told her, "but I've been away a long time. I've returned seeking work. Farm work preferably but almost any labouring job."

Anne looked delighted. "That's perfect," she said. "I know a number of farms hereabouts are seeking workers. After Brexit all the foreigners went home, you see."

Kit didn't see at all but didn't say so. Anne sounded inclined to be helpful and that was what mattered.

"We can phone the job centre in the morning," she went on, "and I'm sure they'll fix you up in no time. I assume you'll need somewhere to live and if you get something nearby you can stay here for the time being till you're settled. I charge lower rates for weekly lodgers," she added.

"I wouldn't have taken you for local," she continued. "Your accent is odd though I couldn't have said where you came from."

"I left when I was a child." That was all the information Kit was willing to give and it seemed to satisfy her.

He slept better than he'd expected. Rianthe either would or wouldn't turn up and there was nothing he could do about it. He might be able to remain here

and even find congenial work. His chatty landlady might want to know more about him but he thought he could just stay quiet about his past. Knutsford; not far from home though not his exact address, either.

After breakfast, which turned out to be a splendid feast of bacon, sausage, egg and some kind of red vegetable, followed by bread and honey, Anne used her communication device which looked very like the ones he knew from Faeonia and like the one he had himself. The job centre, a place that apparently distributed workers where they were needed, would be delighted to put him in touch with a number of farms. What were his preferred tasks?

Anne waited while he listed chickens, horses, tree felling, and vegetable picking. He didn't add oxen because he suspected there would be few, and he worried that the horses might have been replaced by the carts. However, by noon he found himself setting out for a stables that needed a strong labourer willing to muck out, feed and exercise the horses, and carry heavy bales of straw and hay. It sounded ideal.

## Chapter 13: Life goes on

Kit found that it was indeed ideal. Horses were horses, after all, and hadn't changed since his own times, so apart from a few modern things in the stable yard like running taps he felt at home. Even the newfangled taps and so on didn't worry him as he'd been introduced to most of them in Faeonia. His employer seemed happy with his work and he found himself enjoying it. He was, however, glad of the translator device he'd been given in Faeonia. Twenty first century English was hard to understand at times.

Life went on. He found himself with enough money to rent a small cottage nearer the stables but still visited Anne from time to time. She was a friend by then, someone who had helped him, and besides, he wanted to make sure Rianthe could find him if he ever arrived. He asked Anne to look out for anyone asking for him, and gave her the number of his new communication device. He was glad he had got used to those in Faeonia too and here he learnt to call it a phone. He'd exchanged the one he'd brought with him for a more up-to-date model as soon as he could afford to, after some of his co-workers had laughed at his 'old fashioned' phone. Someone took pity on him and showed him how to work the new one but of course he had a new contact number and they were unable to transfer the old one. Somehow, he seemed to have a local provider and although the bills were eye-wateringly high he thought he both could and should afford them. Rianthe might call if he ever found out how to get in touch.

All the same, he was not really hopeful. He thought Rianthe might reach Earth at the wrong time and place. Or, in his more depressed moments, he



considered that his time in Rianthe's world, and Rianthe's arms, might have been all a dream or the product of some kind of mental disorder. Maybe he only thought he could remember mediaeval Cheshire, or his golden haired lover. Sometimes he wondered whether, if Rianthe made the trip successfully, it would be in time to stop the disease that was killing him and would continue to do so in Faeonia.

He made friends with some of his fellow workers and occasionally joined them on trips to Chester or Manchester. He found nightclubs dizzying and unpleasant though he liked Canal Street and was amazed to see men showing public displays of affection to other men. He never tried to find anyone for himself. If Rianthe was out of reach he wasn't out of mind, and Kit had no desire to be unfaithful. His companion revellers found him to be what they called a 'cold fish' and he shrugged off the implied criticism. He would swim, he decided, in his own stream, and it would be Rianthe or nothing. Nothing, he knew, was the more probable outcome, but after his fae lover, nobody else held much attraction so remaining celibate was easy.

There were those who tried to seduce him, but usually they backed away at his disapproving glare, assuming he was not available or not interested in men. Women, too, tried to ensnare him, but they had no success. Both they and the men did manage to convince him that he was not as plain looking as he'd always thought, and that Rianthe's almost immediate attraction was not as unlikely as it had seemed.

Then Anne phoned him.

He had just finished shifting a pile of manure, bagging it to deliver to a local garden centre, when the phone in his pocket buzzed. He extracted it but could barely remember how to answer. He had the phone for emergencies and thought ruefully that if there ever was an emergency he'd be too slow to respond.

"Hello, Anne," he said, wondering at the magic that enabled the phone to tell him who was calling.

"Hello, Christopher," she said, sounding cheerful. "I have some news for you."

He hoped it wasn't about his job or the job centre or anything that might change his current circumstances but realised they were hardly likely to contact Anne since they had at least his employer's address.

"News, for me?" He tried not to sound too anxious or excited.

"Someone called, asking for you," she said.

"Did you get a name or a description?" He tried not to feel hopeful.

"A very handsome blond gentleman," same the reply. "He said to tell you he was hoping to contact you."

"His name?" Anne's idea of handsome might not be his, and he tried not to show his impatience.

"Mr Ryan Carver," she said, and Kit wished he could hug her through the

phone.

“Did he tell you where I could find him?”

“He’s from Manchester,” she told him. “Left me an address and a phone number.”

“Anne, if you could tell me the number...” Kit thought getting information from Anne was like getting blood from a stone but then she couldn’t possibly know just how much this meant or how urgent it all was.

Once he had the number he engaged her in conversation for a few moments. She’d been kind, and he didn’t want to offend her. Then when he rang off he realised one of the other workers was watching him, clearly needing help with a task. Rianthe would have to wait. Well, it had been months so a few more hours would hardly hurt.

By the time he had space and privacy to make his phone call Kit was almost sick with hope and nerves. Could it be a hoax? Would Rianthe really still want him? Why had Anne not passed his number to Rianthe? He knew she thought she was protecting him but it would have made everything happen so much sooner. Still, he had the precious number and could find out the answers to these and other questions now, this very evening.

Adam, one of the other stable lads (Kit was highly amused that they, adults, could be called lads) had asked him to go for a drink after work but Kit had refused, claiming to be tired. In fact, he was shaking with excitement.

He didn’t even make himself a drink when he reached his cottage, just sat down at his kitchen table and keyed in the number.

“You’ve reached the phone of Ryan Carter,” said a familiar voice. “I’m not available to take your call but please leave a message and I’ll get back to you.” Then there was a kind of buzz and Kit only just managed to say,

“It’s me, Kit. Anne said you called. Phone me. Please phone.” He didn’t want to sound so needy but it couldn’t be helped. He hoped somehow the magic would show Rianthe his number. He certainly couldn’t remember it himself although he vaguely recalled someone showing him how to find it.

Rianthe would laugh at his insistence on magic, he thought, but really, since he didn’t understand the science or technology it might as well all be magic or witchcraft. Earth seemed already ahead of Blue’s world in many ways, though he was thankful that this little rural corner of Cheshire remained calm and to some extent understandable.

And now all he had to do was wait.

## Chapter 14: Together in a strange land

It was a good thing, Kit thought later, that he hadn’t had to wait long. He was thoroughly on edge, one moment fizzing with excitement and the next

terrified that things would go wrong again in some unfathomable way. He couldn't eat, and he only just managed to drink a glass of water. Sleep would have been beyond him so it was as well that Rianthe called before it was dark.

The phone was lying on the table and he'd had practice earlier, replying to Anne, so he was able to press the right glowing sphere and suddenly heard Rianthe, not in a pre-recorded message about being unavailable, but for real.

"Kit, my love, you're here, you're really here." The fae's voice held endearment and worry and relief all at once. "I was so scared you might not be. I've missed you so much."

"I've missed you too." Kit didn't elaborate. He thought Rianthe might very well know how he'd been feeling. "Whatever happened?"

"That idiot bird. When we were separated I thought nothing of it because it was so momentary, but when I looked up, you'd gone, and the portal closed. Blue and his friends were frantic on my behalf. They managed to find another portal, not too far away, and we just hoped the time frames wouldn't be too wrong. I've only been here a few days. I traced you by your communication device but the lady who lived in the house wouldn't give me your address. All I could do was leave my details and hope she'd pass them to you. She knew you, at any rate, and I can tell you that was a relief."

"It's been months," said Kit. "Tell me you've arrived in time to stem the disease."

"Of course," came the reply. "They found the portal really quickly. So it hasn't been months for me. Oh, Kit, you must have been so worried. How are you, where are you, and how soon can we be together?"

"I'm fine, even finer now I know you're here, I'm near Knutsford, not far from the house you visited. And I hope we can be together as soon as you work out how to get here." He didn't add that his biggest relief came from knowing that Rianthe was real, after all, here at last, and still apparently wanting him. There was even greater relief knowing that being here would almost certainly cure him.

Rianthe was evidently good at researching transport and maps. He had been to Knutsford already when he found Anne, but now managed to locate the stables where Kit worked, and arrived just as Kit was finishing for the day. They fell into each other's arms, to a chorus of cheers and catcalls, and recommendations to get a room, from the other stable lads, male and female alike. Kit was still trying to explain that all stable workers of both genders were called lads when Rianthe simply dragged him out of the yard and into a waiting vehicle.

"Tell me all about it when we're at your house and I've dismissed the cab," he said. So instead, Kit directed the driver to his cottage and soon they were safely inside.

Almost immediately he stopped even trying to talk and just luxuriated in

his lover's embrace. After they'd established, pretty thoroughly, how much they'd missed each other, and how much they'd worried, they actually reached the bedroom where they went through the entire process again.

"Does it make sense to be so in love after what is, after all, quite a short period together?" Kit sounded shy as he asked, but Rianthe laughed at him.

"Of course it does," he said. "We were fated to be together and that's why you saw me in your woods that day. And by the way, have you revisited your old home?"

"I tried," said Kit. "It's covered with buildings. I think it's called a housing estate and there's certainly a lot of housing but nothing I understand as an estate."

"I think I might be glad," said the fae. "You won't feel anxious to live there again. Or will you?" Kit assured him that it wouldn't be at all the same.

They discussed their options. The original plan had been to find work near each other but now Kit was well established in the middle of nowhere.

"But I think," he said, "my employer might be able to recommend me for work somewhere else. I know some of the lads move around so it must be possible in this new world order."

"I intend to start my own business with my woodwork," said Rianthe, "but I'll need to live somewhere near a suitable market outlet. I'm staying in what they call a bed and breakfast for now, like the one your friend Anne runs."

"So you could come here," Kit suggested. "You could work here and build up a stock of things to sell then we could make up our minds about where to go."

Rianthe agreed, and the next day moved into Kit's cottage with his woodworking tools, which comprised most of his luggage. Kit had explained his lover's return from 'travels' which he did not specify, and his colleagues had been supportive. His employer, John Ballard, had also been interested when he heard about the woodworking.

"There's a wood on my land that needs coppicing," he said. "If the timber is any use to your friend he's welcome to it."

Kit helped fell the wood in his free time, and felt a little nostalgic as he recalled the logs he'd been collecting when he met Rianthe. These, however, were intended for beautiful furniture rather than firewood.

He talked to his colleagues about the plans to set up a craft workshop and sales. One of them suggested an online selling site and once Kit was sure he understood he told Rianthe, who seemed to understand the idea much more readily and was enthusiastic about it.

"I can sell a line of goods and then do bespoke pieces for anyone who contacts me," he said, sounding quite satisfied with the strange way of doing business. He used some of the money he'd brought, suitably converted, from Faonia, and bought a computer. Kit didn't expect ever to comprehend the thing but before long was interested in the sales site and the way everything worked.

“I’m adjusting to the twentyfirst century,” he said, wonder colouring his voice.

“Not hard,” said Rianthe. “You adjusted to Faenonia then to Blue’s world, and at least this one is full of people you recognise as your own.”

“I didn’t expect them to use magic,” said Kit.

“It’s not magic.” Rianthe seemed likely to embark yet again on an explanation of the difference between magic and advanced technology but Kit stopped him with a few well-timed caresses. He knew the difference, but so far as he was concerned, if he didn’t understand it completely, it might just as well be magic.

“It isn’t magic, then,” he said, when they’d eventually finished making love. “I think I like this world. Lots of not magic, plenty of paid work, and a society that seems to accept us being together. As men, I mean, not as fae and human.”

Rianthe nodded. “I don’t think they’re quite ready to accept the idea of fae, yet,” he said.

There was no reason they should. He was handsome, yes, but so were a lot of the people Kit saw every day. This world had all kinds of advanced techniques for skin care, hair care, teeth, clothing, and so on. He thought he and his lover fitted in quite well, and one day he would give up his stable job and act as Rianthe’s assistant in the furniture business. It was already doing well, and he could see himself learning to deal with the computer. Then they could live anywhere they pleased though he thought they might stay near the woods the stable owner was so willing to share. He shook his head as he realised he’d have been burnt for witchcraft back in ‘his’ day, and they both laughed when he explained to Rianthe.

“So what shall we call our business?” Rianthe had just been selling under his new name, Ryan Carver, but they’d both noticed some site names that were clearly designed to lure customers. “Ryan and Christopher?” he suggested now.

“No, that doesn’t have that magical appeal, except to us,” said Kit. He thought for a while then came up with an idea. “What about ‘Wood magic’ with your name in smaller letters?” He smiled when Rianthe clapped and agreed.

Almost immediately, Wood Magic was born, and it flourished under the joint care of Ryan and Christopher. Customers couldn’t know they were getting the fruits of another world and another time, but they knew lovely pieces of furniture when they saw them.

As for Ryan and Christopher, or Rianthe and Kit as they still were to each other, they knew only too well that it had all started way back with a fae visit to a mediaeval wood.

## Chapter 15: Out with the old and in with the new.

Kit had lost track of time. The hours of the day were easy, given that he needed to rise at dawn to see to the horses, and the whole stable worked to a rhythm that included breaks for drinks or lunch. He had, however, only a hazy idea of the days of the week, and very little concept of the months. He supposed the seasons were fairly obvious. It must be winter, because it was frosty in the mornings, and the evenings grew darker till they needed lights for the final chores.

Rianthe shrugged when he mentioned it.

“Your seasons are different here anyway,” he said, and Kit recalled the apparently permanent summer time of Faeonia.

“It must be nearly Christmas,” he mused aloud, then had to explain Christmas to the puzzled fae.

“New Year. I understand that,” said Rianthe, eventually. “We celebrate the old year passing and the new beginning, though I don’t think our festival date quite coincides with yours.”

“Do you celebrate with gifts?” Kit asked. He and his family had tried to make sure everyone had something new for the new year: clothing, perhaps, or a freshly carved platter. Once, his father had gifted him a knife, and he had treasured it. Now it was lost in time.

He had heard his colleagues talking and realised that the presents they were discussing were for Christmas, not the New Year. Christmas had always been just a matter of going to church for him, with a wooden nativity scene greeting the parishioners at the door, and the whole building festooned with pine branches and holly. This new society he had joined so involuntarily but willingly seemed to see Christmas as the time for gifts. Perhaps, he thought, they were thinking of the wise men and their gifts to the baby, though that would make more sense at Epiphany.

Rianthe did something he called googling which involved the computer and was still, to Kit, a kind of magic.

“In some countries, they do celebrate at Epiphany,” the fae said. “Here, however, in England, Christmas presents are now the usual thing. In fact, some people think it’s all too much and is a celebration of gifts rather than of any religious observance.” He frowned. He had made it quite clear to Kit that the fae did not believe in any of Earth’s religions and indeed had none of their own.

“I just wondered because...” Kit began, then stopped. He had been wondering what to get or make for Rianthe or even whether he should. He thought probably yes. The others would be asking what people had given and received and he wanted to fit in.

“My sales have risen steeply,” said Rianthe. “Especially the smaller items. Perhaps people are buying things as gifts. Perhaps every year we can

expect extra trade at this time.” He looked pleased and then asked, “What were you wondering?”

“Just whether we should celebrate and when and how,” said Kit.

In the end, they bought a small tree for their cottage and some of the hanging globes that were for sale everywhere. It looked cheerful and reminded Kit of the church greenery. He wasn't a strong believer but he had always enjoyed the way the great occasions were marked: evergreens at Christmas and flowers at Easter. He still had no idea what to give Rianthe or when. New Year, he decided. Rianthe said the fae observed that, and now that they were firmly located in twenty first century Earth the fae would probably get used to Earth's calendar and its meanings. That still left the question of what.

Someone recommended Knutsford for shopping, especially for gift shops, so one afternoon, Kit found himself wandering round the streets hoping inspiration might strike him. He admired the window displays, with their decorated themes and their coloured lights. He laughed to himself at the occasional representations of fairies, brownies and suchlike in scenes from folk tales and children's stories. What would the people thronging the streets think, he wondered, if they knew about the real fae? He glanced upwards at a sparkling snowflake made from bright white lights, and then turned to the next shop.

Immediately, he knew he'd found just what he needed. It was a stationery shop, with all kinds of paper, notebooks, folders, pens and pencils. In the centre of the window there was a beautiful book and he realised it was a year book, or diary as he was learning to call them. The cover was purple leather, embossed with flowers, and beside it lay a pen with similar leather wrapped around its shaft. Rianthe could use it however he wished but it would be good for keeping some business records, even if those were also kept on the computer, and it would remind him of this world's dates as well as being simply a lovely thing to handle and to own. He was aware, at the stables, of the various uses of a diary for controlling life, work rosters, celebrations and all kinds of things.

Kit gulped when he heard the price, but after all, he had a job and he didn't spend much. This was for Rianthe and for the coming year. He thought he might be allowed to peek at it from time to time, to orientate his thoughts about the date. The woman who took his money was saying something and he had to ask her to repeat her words. It turned out she was offering to 'giftwrap' the book and pen, and he hastily agreed. He wouldn't have the faintest idea where to start in such an operation. Soon, he left with the gift smartly and neatly wrapped in a silvery paper with delicate outlines of holly leaves. There was even a matching card so that he could sign to say who the giver was but he thought that might be obvious.

Christmas was approaching quickly, it seemed. First there was the solstice, which marked the longest night. Kit listened to some garbled explanations of how someone some time had changed the calendar by a few days and so the solstice and the other celebrations were no longer quite aligned. It didn't really worry him. He sensed the gathering darkness and then the infinitesimal lightening of the days and that was good enough.

On Christmas Eve Ballard invited them all, with their partners and families, for drinks at his house. He served what he called mince pies, though neither Rianthe nor Kit could imagine what the fillings had to do with mince. They ate their pies politely but knew by their exchanged glances that they would not be buying any of these strange things for consumption at home. Everyone was in a convivial mood, some of them talking about the turkey feast they would eat the following day, others of the gifts they hoped to receive. Only a few, it appeared, would go to the local church.

Rianthe presented their host with a small chair, something he called an occasional chair, as a token of appreciation for the friendship and the wood. It was thoroughly admired by everyone, and then the party broke up, people heading towards home as the daylight faded. Kit had offered to take extra shifts over Christmas, so that some of the lads could spend more time with their families. He didn't think Rianthe would care much and in any case he intended to make New Year the focus of his own celebrations.

The horses, naturally, did not observe any festivities and there was plenty of mucking out and exercising to be done. After a hard day's work Kit went back to the cottage to find Rianthe had cooked a splendid meal. He was good at adapting Faeonian cooking styles to foods he could obtain locally and had produced a delicious casserole followed by a delicate spun sugar dessert.

"Happy Christmas," he said, tentatively, and Kit just kissed him by way of response. They ate, enjoying the cosy atmosphere of the cottage, with a fire in the grate and the little tree glowing beside it.

The days between Christmas and New Year were full of work. Kit was busy at the stables and Rianthe needed to replenish his stock after the buying spree in the run up to Christmas.

"I'll be thrilled if this happens every year," he said. "I've made as much in the last month as I forecast for the next three. At this rate it won't be long before you can give up the horses and join me."

"Don't forget I like the horses," said Kit. "And you might not make much at all now that people have spent all their money for Christmas. Wait a while before you gloat."

Rianthe grinned but it was clear he was elated and Kit was pleased for him. He considered, however, that he might remain a stable lad. The beasts grounded him, connected him in some way to this new Earth that still confused him at times. He would be interested in Rianthe's growing business without



necessarily wanting to be involved.

They discussed the likelihood of more people wanting to buy things.

“We must have sold to every house in the area,” said Kit. “Where are customers going to come from?”

“They already come from all over the place,” said Rianthe. “I have to pay to send things far afield, though of course I add that cost to the price. And even around here there’s a huge population so I don’t think we’ll run out of buyers any time soon. Also, word of mouth makes for wonderful advertising, as does seeing one of my pieces in a friend’s house.”

Kit smiled at the thought that his lover’s work was now adorning many of the homes in the housing estate where he used to live.

New Year’s Eve dawned bright and sunny. Riding one of the horses to exercise her filled Kit with happiness. He would miss the daily ride on New Year’s Day. Adam had very seriously told him he was to take the day off, after his hard work covering for his fellow stable lads over Christmas. John Ballard had overheard them and had added his own strict injunction not to come to work the next day. Kit agreed, and despite knowing he’d miss the horses, looked forward to a day spent with Rianthe. A special day, he hoped; the day when he would hand over the gift wrapped book and hope to see pleasure on his lover’s face. He didn’t expect anything for himself. Maybe Rianthe would somehow work out when the Faeonian new year fell and observe that, or maybe not. It didn’t matter. They had bought some kind of bird to cook. Kit thought it was a chicken but it didn’t really resemble either the ones he’d known or the ones Rianthe had kept. It was much larger, for one thing. Rianthe had spent time choosing vegetables to go with it, ending up with a rainbow of red and white cabbage, yellow swede, mixed peppers and green broccoli stems.

When Kit got home he found the house filled with the glorious scent of preparations; the bird was marinating in a bath of spices and the vegetables were prepared and ready to roast alongside it.

They had learnt that people were expected to stay awake till midnight however tired they might feel, to see the new year in. Just after midnight, Adam came to the door carrying a lump of coal and a slice of cake. First footing, he called it, bringing good fortune to the house for the following year. It was a good job he’d warned them of the custom, Kit thought with a smile. Otherwise, they might have been too wrapped up in each other to open the door. And if Adam had walked in he might not have appreciated the sight that could so easily have greeted him. He didn’t stay long, just enough time to drink their health in some whisky Rianthe had bought for the occasion, after the warning.

They drained their own glasses and went straight to bed, tired but happy with the new customs they were learning. Rianthe insisted on welcoming the new year with a bout of lovemaking that left Kit weary but immensely satisfied. Sex between them seemed to get better and better as time went on and they

learned each other's bodies, what pleased them most, and what contributed to deep pleasure for both.

“Happy New Year.” It was Rianthe who spoke, waking Kit with the words. They got up, but didn't breakfast, wanting to be hungry enough for the huge lunch they planned. Soon, everything was cooking and the small table was set not only with plates but with a garland of pine boughs and a candle in the centre. Rianthe had added a string of lights to the little tree which glittered in the corner.

When they had eaten all they could and put the rest away for later, though Kit couldn't imagine ever wanting to eat again, Rianthe brought out a cake, covered in what Kit called marchpane but the local shops called marzipan. It had marchpane leaves and berries on the top and a few tiny silver balls that Rianthe assured him were edible.

“They may well be,” said Kit, “but they'll be just as edible later when I have room for them.”

He got up and went to the cupboard where he'd hidden his gift. As he handed it to Rianthe, repeating the Happy New Year refrain, he saw there was now a package similarly wrapped on the table beside his place.

He was too anxious to see his lover's reaction to the book to unwrap his own gift, and was both relieved and thrilled to see Rianthe's face as he took off the paper and stared in wonder at the book and the pen.

“These are perfect,” was all he said, but he said it in a voice that expressed love, hope, and rich happiness.

“Now we'll know what day it is,” said Kit, and just laughed when Rianthe pointed out that the computer, and their phones, tended to tell them that anyway.

Finally, Kit unwrapped the square parcel so clearly intended for him. The squareness, however, was just because it was a box, so there was more opening to be done.

Inside there was a woven wooden globe, its strands stained with some kind of dye Rianthe had found that copied the shades his Faeonian wood had had naturally. Inside the globe, only just visible, was a small carving of two people. They were embracing and it was hard to see where one began and the other ended. If the globe was moved, the little couple were shaken this way and that, falling against the inner walls of the structure as if stumbling around in their wooden house.

Kit gasped at the beauty of it.

“It doesn't do anything,” said Rianthe. “Not like my book. But I thought it could symbolise us in a way. We've been moved around and shaken by events but we've stayed together.”

Kit just nodded, too full of love to speak. The globe was delicate but sturdy, much more fragile looking than most of the fae's work, but nevertheless

something that would last and last.

He placed it almost reverently on the mantelpiece and turned to Rianthe.

“This is perfect too,” he said, and then, yet again, and because he could, he said, “Happy New Year.”

\*\*\*\*\*