

What the Fae Take

by Ivy Marlowe

You go in for your sister's ring. You come out his.

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You don't go into the Ashwood after dark. Everyone knows this. You've known it since childhood — your grandmother's voice, the particular firmness of it, the way she'd grip your wrist if you wandered near the tree line at dusk. *What the wood takes, it keeps.* You'd thought it was a folktale.

You were wrong about that, as it turns out.

You go in for your sister's ring.

She dropped it on the path that cuts through the first quarter-mile of trees — the safe part, the daytime part — and by the time anyone noticed it was missing the sun was three hours down. Your sister cried. It was your mother's ring. You said you'd get it.

It takes you seven minutes to find it: small gold band with a garnet eye, glinting in your phone torch at the base of an oak. You pick it up and pocket it and feel the reasonable satisfaction of a solvable problem solved. You turn to leave.

The path is gone.

Not hidden. Not obscured by dark or mist. Simply not there. Trees where the path was, and silence where there had been the distant sound of the road, and the specific quality of stillness that means something nearby is paying attention.

"Lost?" says a voice from somewhere above and to your left.

You look up.

He is sitting on a branch twelve feet off the ground with no apparent concern for gravity. Tall, even folded into that position — long legs, silver-white hair that isn't quite natural, and eyes that catch the darkness and throw it back as something else, something colder and more amused. His clothes are the colour of bark and shadow. His ears are very slightly wrong in a way you don't want to look at directly.

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"Yes," you say, because lying seems inadvisable.

"Hm." He tilts his head. The motion is a fraction too fluid. "What did you come in for?"

You hold up the ring. He looks at it with an expression you can't read.

"Brave," he says. Not a compliment. An observation.

"Not really," you say. "Stupid, probably."

Something moves in his expression then — not a smile, but the precursor to one. He drops from the branch. You brace yourself but there is no sound when he lands, just a disturbance in the air close to your face and then he is standing in front of you, very tall, smelling of cold stone and something underneath it that is warm and dark.

"A human in the Ashwood after dark," he says. "Alone. For a ring."

"For my mother's ring," you say. "My sister's ring now. It was important."

"What you love is always the price," he says, almost to himself.

"I'm not paying anything," you say. "I came, I found it, I'd like to go home now."

He looks at you for a long moment. His eyes in the dark are silver-pale, the pupils vertical slits — you try not to react to this and partially succeed.

"You're in the deep wood," he says. "You crossed the boundary while you were looking at the ground. The path will not come back on its own."

"Will you bring it back?"

"I could."

"What do you want for it?"

He considers you. Not the way a person considers a problem. The way

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something ancient considers something small and unexpectedly interesting.

"A night," he says.

You process this. "A night."

"Here. With me." The not-smile again. "You'll be unharmed. You have my word, which means something, in case you didn't know."

You know it means something. Your grandmother's stories were thorough. You also know that fae bargains have teeth in the fine print, but his word of no harm is the kind of word that cannot be broken.

"Define night," you say.

"Until the sky begins to lighten. Your path returns, you go home, the ring stays yours."

"And what do you get?"

Something in his face shifts. Less predatory than you'd expected. More honest, somehow, which is worse.

"Company," he says. "I have been in this wood for two hundred years. Human company is. Unusual."

You look at him. The silver eyes. The wrong-perfect face. Two hundred years in a dark wood for what reasons you don't know, and something in his voice when he says *unusual* that is neither threat nor performance.

"One night," you say. "Unharmed. Path home at dawn."

"Yes."

"Then yes," you say.

He builds a fire from nothing, which you watch without comment because commentary seems beside the point. There is a space between the roots of

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an enormous oak that becomes, somehow, a room — not enclosed, just defined, the firelight making walls out of air and shadow. He sits. You sit.

He is curious about you in the way of something that has had nothing new for a very long time. What is your work? What do you love? What do you fear? He asks these directly, without the social lacquer of human conversation, and you find yourself answering directly in return.

You ask him things. He answers. Not everything, and not always in words, but there is — against all reasonable expectation — a conversation happening, genuine and strange, and at some point the fear has metabolised into something else that you are not yet ready to name.

"You're not what I expected," you tell him.

"What did you expect?"

"Something more frightening."

"I am frightening," he says, mildly. "You've simply stopped being frightened."

"Is that a problem?"

He looks at you across the fire. "No," he says. "It's been a long time since something stopped being frightened of me."

The fire breathes. An owl somewhere makes its single syllable.

"Two hundred years," you say.

"Two hundred and eleven."

"What keeps you here?"

A long pause. "Obligation. Once. Then habit. Then—" He stops. Looks into the fire. "I stopped counting reasons some decades ago."

You move. You are not entirely sure what decision you're making but you

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move across the fire-warm space and sit beside him rather than opposite, and he turns to look at you with an expression that is completely unguarded for one unguarded moment before the long habit of composure returns.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

"I don't know," you say honestly. "Is that alright?"

Another long pause, silver eyes searching your face.

"Yes," he says. Quietly. Like the word costs him something he's glad to spend.

He touches you like he has learned patience through centuries of it, which is not quite human and is entirely intoxicating. His hands are cooler than yours but warm quickly, and he learns you slowly — the places that make you breathe differently, the specific sound you make when something is right — with that ancient methodical attention, like every detail of you is a new thing in a world he thought he had fully catalogued.

"Tell me what you want," he says, and his voice in the dark near your ear is not the voice he used for conversation — it is lower, rougher, something underneath it that vibrates in your chest.

You tell him. He listens. He acts on it with a focus that makes thought briefly impossible, and you have his name now — Caer, three letters, old as the wood itself — and you say it twice in the way that means something, and he makes a sound that is not quite human and is absolutely what you needed to hear.

Afterwards you lie against him in the space between the roots and the fire and the dark, and he is warm now, and his hand is moving slowly through your hair in something that is either thoughtless habit or extraordinary tenderness, and you can't tell which and it doesn't matter.

"You'll forget most of this," he says. "In a year. Two. Humans do."

"I won't," you say.

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"You think that now."

"I know it now." You tilt your head to look at him. "Will you?"

He looks down at you. Two hundred and eleven years of waiting in a dark wood.

"No," he says. "I will not."

The sky begins to lighten at 5:47 AM. You know the exact time because your phone, which had been dead since you crossed the boundary, flickers back to life with the dawn. You stand and the path is there — you can see it, clear and obvious, leading back the way you came.

Your hand goes to your pocket. The ring is there.

He stands at the edge of the fire's last warmth, tall and still, and something in his face is different from when you found him in the branches.

"Thank you," you say. "For the fire."

"Thank you," he says. "For the company."

You walk to the boundary. You turn once.

He raises one hand — not a wave, just an acknowledgement. Silver eyes in the greying dark.

You walk home. The ring is safe in your pocket. Your phone shows nine missed calls from your sister.

You'll call her back in a few minutes.

You're not quite ready to leave the Ashwood behind yet.
