

Golden Girl

The young woman with the baby carriage paused as she came to the gates of the Chapel. She smiled a grim smile at the open gates. They were only shut once a year, when the Pastor blessed them and opened them to symbolise the welcome that the Holy One had extended to everyone.

The woman pushed the baby carriage up the wide path between the grave stone, skirting the big yew tree, and reached the Chapel's open door at the same time that someone came out of the Chapel.

"Right, so I'll see you on Tuesday, Pastor. I'll have the leaflets printed by then. Bye!" She turned and saw the woman with the baby carriage. "Oh, hullo! Are you new in town? My name is Violet. Vi. And you are?"

"Sami," said the woman with the baby carriage. "Is the Pastor busy?"

"I don't think so, Sami," answered Vi. "She's just tidying up in there." She bent down to look in the carriage. "What's your baby's name?"

Violet suddenly went rigid. She stood up and glared at Sami. "Get out! Get out! We don't want your heathen ways in this Chapel!"

Violet might have attacked Sami such was her rage, but the Pastor came out of the Chapel at that moment.

"What's going on? What's happening here?"

"I only wanted —" Sami started to say.

"Everything's fine, Pastor. I was just showing this **tramp** the way out!" interrupted Violet.

"Vi, please! I am the Pastor here, not you. What do you want my dear? Did you want to speak with me?"

"Yes, please, ma'am." Sami looked from the Pastor to Violet. "If you have the time."

"Come on in. Vi was just leaving, weren't you, Vi?"

Violet huffed and puffed, but flounced off down the path. "Well, really!"

"Tea, Sami?" asked the Pastor.

"Yes, please, ma'am. Um, I was wondering, my babies, they are just over three months old. I was wondering if you would give them their First Blessing."

The Pastor nodded. "I haven't seen you in Chapel, Sami. Are you a believer? Hmm. Babies. How many babies do you have?" The Pastor was beginning to realise what she was dealing with, and why Violet had exploded.

Sami looked into her tea cup. "Um, I have four. Three boys and one girl. Yes, I'm a believer. I haven't been to Chapel because I'm scared. Scared that people will react like Violet did, that is."

She put her cup down and reached into the carriage.

"This is Dekken. I think he is the first born, but only by a few minutes. This is Elsie, my girl, named after her Grandma. These are Frankel and Darvan. They are always together."

"So cute," cooed the Pastor and smiled.

She held the small girl in the crook of her arm and gently stroked her cheek.. The Pastor knew why Violet had exploded, but she was still startled when the baby yawned and showed an impressive set of teeth.

"Wow! Those teeth! Oh, she's so lovely."

“Thank you, Pastor. ”

Elsie was blond, with round blue eyes like her mother, while Dekken was dark, with brown eyes. The Pastor suspected that he took after his father. Frankel and Darvan had fair hair and hazel eyes. Their hair might be silvery when they got older. Apart from their teeth, and an abundance of hair, they looked much like Human babies. Fully Human babies, mused the Pastor.

“It must be so difficult for you, with four of them on your own, my dear.”

“Oh, I’m not on my own! My husband helps me so much. He’s so good. Um, I’m sorry, Pastor, but he’s not religious. His family never went to Chapel because ...”

“Because they are shape-changers,” the Pastor nodded. “You were properly married? Sorry, you came on your own, so I guessed, wrongly, that the father was not around.”

“Yes, ma’am. We found a Pastor who agreed to marry us. We’ve been together since we were kids, and, to me, it seemed right to get married in the Chapel. Brod, my husband has only been in a Chapel a few times in his life, and that was one of them.” She giggled. “He was so nervous!”

“Did you say ‘Brod’? One of my friends, Garge, said that he had a new worker called Brod. Garge said that Brod was working out well. Garge’s not a Chapel goer, but his wife is. He’s a good man. Well, there’s a coincidence!”

“Oh, good! I’m glad Brod is doing well.”

“Am I going to see you in Chapel this Sunday, Sami?”

Sami frowned. “Yes, Pastor. But I won’t bring the kids. Violet might...”

“Cause a ruckus? Leave Violet to me! I’ll have a word with her.”

“I can’t officially approve of your calling, Garv. You know that. Wizards are shown as sneaky individuals in the Holy Book, though they are never labelled as evil.”

“Sometimes, Pastor, I don’t approve of my calling myself. I don’t **like** spying on people, especially Sami and Brod. The magic forces me! I’ve been following them for, um, at least a dozen years now. The best times were when we were all in the Boss’ gang, and I could mostly just be myself!”

“Yes, you’ve told me about those times. Halcyon days. I was going to go on to say that I understand it. My own calling doesn’t call for me to follow people, thank goodness, but it does involve me in peoples’ lives. It could be considered to be meddling! And I don’t have a choice, either. The ‘magic’ of my beliefs makes me! Another cup of tea?”

“Please, Pastor. Well, I didn’t influence Sami to visit the Chapel. That was her own idea. Is she going to have more problems with Violet, do you think?”

The Pastor scowled. “Almost certainly. But I’ll have a word with Violet and get her to back off a little. That will buy some time. I’ve got some longer term plans in place too. Biscuit?”

“Please.” The small man smiled and his beard bobbed.

“Dad! DAD!”

The young woman with a baby carriage was calling out to him. He was startled, and then his heart jumped.

“Sami? Sami? Is that you?”

“Yes, Dad. We’re only here for a short time. I **had** to see you!”

Joe hugged his daughter. “Oh, Sami! Are you well? Is this... Are these your babies?”

“Yes, Dad. Mine and Brod’s. Your grand-kids.”

“Oh, Sami. I’m so sorry about what happened back then. I caused you to run away, you and Brod! You must have been so scared. You were so young!”

“Don’t worry, Dad. We were a little scared, but more excited. We actually had a great time.”

“You got married to Brod! I’m sorry I didn’t come to the wedding, but thank you for the invitation. I’m glad now that you didn’t get married to Donnie. He’s been in and out of prison ever since he left school. Your life would have been hell on earth.”

“Really? What did he do?”

“This last time, he beat up his girlfriend and punched her son. We sent the girl and her son to live with her aunt, a long way away. But before that it was stealing and assault.”

“Oh, the little gods!”

Sami’s Dad, Joe, nodded grimly. “But anyway, you must come and meet my wife. You know that ...”

“You and Mum divorced? Yes, we had a joint wedding, remember!”

“Of course. I remember.”

They started off towards Joe’s home. “You know, my wife is nothing like your Mum. Doesn’t go to Chapel! Spoils her son silly! Your Mum and I were happy once, but then things got bad between us. Worse when you left. Since we got divorced and I remarried, I’ve become happy again.”

“So has Mum. She and Kem are so happy. You should make contact with them.”

“I might just do that. Erm, are all your babies like Brod? I used to rant about shape-changers in Chapel, didn’t I?”

“Yes, they are like Brod. I only have one set! Do you still go to Chapel?”

“Yes. My faith is still much the same. I don’t find the need to be so assertive about it these days.”

After the confrontation with Violet, Sami noticed that some people were reacting badly to her and her kids. Some people would make disapproving noises behind her back and some even pushed in front of her in shops. One woman spotted her coming and crossed the road.

Some, like the owners of the local store, were much more friendly. When they found out that Sami’s kids preferred meaty snacks over the sweeter ones that all the other kids craved, they kept back little titbits like bacon rinds for them.

The woman next door loved Sami’s kids. “Put them in a pen,” she suggested. “That’s what I did with my lot when they started to roam around. And they are just normal kids.” The woman’s youngest daughter smiled at Sami and the babies.

“Thanks, Mrs D. I will.”

Sami realised that she had been reluctant to pen them because she didn’t want to treat them like puppies, but she suddenly remembered sitting in her pen while her Mum ironed or cleaned. She was over thinking it!

“There’s another toy ruined,” Sami said to Brod. She held up the toy wooden train, and little Davan ran up and reached for it. She let him have it, even though the wheels were long gone and the cab was loose. There were tooth marks all over it.

Brod laughed. "When I was little we didn't have many toys. They never lasted long." He thought back. "I did have a favourite stick. I took it everywhere with me. I didn't let my brothers near it."

"Favourite stick?" laughed Sami. "Um, Brod when will they learn to, um, become wolves?"

"Good question. I'm not sure. We learned some time before we started school, while we were still at Kindergarten, I think. We couldn't control it at first, so Mum and Dad kept us at home for a while."

"I guess that we will have to do that." She gazed into the distance, trying to imagine what their life was going to be like. "How did your Mum handle you and your brothers being ... You know?"

"Being shape-changers, you mean?" Brod was laughing at her. "She accepted it. She loved us all, but I wonder sometimes if she would have preferred having fully Human children. She'd be looking out of the window at nothing at all, then she would snap at us, sigh, and take us down to the butcher's shop."

She laughed. "The butcher's shop? Not the corner shop with all the lollies and ice creams?"

Brod grinned. "Oh, we went there often enough!" It was Brod's turn to stare into the distance. "When we were still small, on Sundays, we would all jump into Mum and Dad's bed and snooze for as long as they would let us. It was heavenly."

"Oh, yes. Your Mum is not a Chapel goer is she? And your Dad obviously isn't."

"Mum went a few times. But she got the cold shoulder from almost everyone there."

"You're OK with me going on Sunday?"

"Yes, of course. Let's hope that some of this lot are nicer than Violet. Are you planning on taking the babies?"

"Just Elsie this time. Maybe the others later."

"Mmm. Good luck."

They watched the kids playing. Darvan and Frankel got into a fight over a toy, and Brod reached over and separated them. "That's enough, boys!"

"You only jumped into your parents' bed on Sundays? We can't keep the little rat-bags out of ours!" laughed Sami.

Brod laughed back. "Yeah, only because you keep picking them up! They are developing fast though. Human babies will catch up when they go to Kindergarten."

Sami paused just before the Chapel gates. "Here we go, girl," she muttered to little Elsie, as she pushed the baby carriage up the Chapel path. She plastered a smile across her face.

A group of ladies watched her coming. Violet muttered something and moved away, but a large woman walked down the path to meet Sami.

"Welcome, my dear Sami. I'm Mel." The woman looked into the baby carriage. "Who's this? She is soooo cute."

"Hullo, Mel. This is Elsie. Did Violet tell you my name?"

Mel shot a look that could only be termed 'venomous' at Violet. "Violet? No, I remember you from the shop!"

"The shop? Oh, the butcher's shop! You are usually working in the back room, aren't you? In white overalls and a white hat on your head!"

“Yeah, and we’re always busy during the day. I don’t have time to turn around. I’ve meant to come out and say hello, but I haven’t had the chance yet. Come and meet the girls!”

‘The girls’ turned out to be a cheerful group of women who welcomed Sami and oohed and aahed at baby Elsie. Some had husbands who had formed their own group a little way off, and some didn’t. Teenagers hung around looking morose and bored. and younger kids ran around playing. A couple of the women drifted off when Sami was introduced to the group, but the majority welcomed her.

Sami was trying to remember all the names when the Usher announced the Verse of the Day and read it in the porch of the Chapel as usual. He turned and everyone followed him in.

“Leave the carriage at the back,” whispered Mel. “Next to Lucy’s.”

Sami smiled and picked up Elsie. Mel led her to a pew and they stood while the Pastor welcomed the congregation and the congregation responded to her. As everyone sat down Elsie suddenly said “Gah!” and a ripple of amusement ran through the congregation.

Sami relaxed into the familiar ritual, and Elsie didn’t make any further noises. “Good girl!” Sami whispered. Mel heard her and smiled.

The Usher escorted the Pastor to the lectern for the Sermon, and Sami wondered what the topic would be. She had, when she was small, played a guessing game with her Dad. What would the sermon be about today? They were rarely correct.

“Today, I’d like to talk about shape-changers,” started the Pastor, and Sami’s heart sank. Surely the Pastor was not going to call her out in the middle of the service? She cast a quick look at Mel, who smiled and squeezed her hand.

The Pastor started with the same verses that Sami remembered from years ago. She talked about the Evil One and the Evil One’s creatures, but she described how the creatures had been banned from the Hallowed Lands by the Holy One. She read the passage where the Holy One had promised that the Evil One’s creatures could never re-enter the Hallowed Lands.

“Promised!” said the Pastor. “The Evil One’s creatures will never be found in the Hallowed Lands. The Holy One promised us that. So where did the shape-changers come from? They are like strangers in a strange land, but one thing that we can sure of is that they are not creatures of the Evil One. We have the Holy One’s word!”

Sami was shocked. She had read the Holy Book and she knew the passages that the Pastor was quoting. She just hadn’t connected them in her mind. Of course! Brod and her babies were not creatures of the Evil One! She knew in her heart that they weren’t, of course, but up until that moment, she couldn’t explain why she believed it.

The Pastor moved on. “Strangers in a strange land. It is recorded in the Holy Book that the Holy One met some travellers from a far off land. The local people were making fun of their clothes, the way that they talked and even the colour of their skin. The Holy One went and shook their hands and talked to them in their own language. He took one of their cloaks and put it on, he took one of their strange tall hats and put it on his head. He told the locals off for teasing the strangers, and brought the foreigners to the local inn and introduced them to the landlord. The locals were ashamed.”

Sami smiled. The Pastor was talking about shape-changers. She had to be. Sami smiled at Mel and Mel nodded. She patted Sami’s hand.

“That’s a flea in Violet’s ear,” she whispered.

“We don’t know where the shape-changers came from. The Holy Book doesn’t tell us, but we know for sure that the Holy One has created them for some reason that only He knows. Only He knows.”

The Pastor concluded her sermon with a prayer.

After the service, when people were chatting and passing round the traditional short biscuits, Sami and Violet came face to face. Violet’s face stiffened as she held out the plate of biscuits.

“Please join us in sharing a biscuit as a token of our fellowship.”

Sami completed the ritual as she took a biscuit. “Long may it last.”

Violet leaned forward and hissed in Sami’s ear. “The Pastor is wrong, and I’ll show you all!”

“Nice sermon, Pastor.”

“You were there, Garv? I didn’t see you. Oh, I see.”

Garv’s beard bobbed. “Yeah, no one did. Do you think that will do it?” He sounded sceptical.

“Come on in, Garv, and have a cup of tea. No, that won’t stop Violet, but it may influence some of the others who have been tending to side with her.”

She looked at Garv with suspicion. “I felt inspired when I gave that sermon. You didn’t ‘help’ me, did you?”

Garv laughed. “No, Pastor, that was all your own ‘magic’, I assure you. I’m not even sure that I could ‘help’ you in that way, on your own turf!”

“Glad to hear that. I’ve got some chocolate biscuits somewhere.” She rummaged in an untidy cupboard.

“Come and get it,” called Garge, and the kids rushed into the dining room. “Woah! Careful kids. Don’t make me drop the roast!”

“Sowwy,” apologised Dekken, his head bobbing as he acknowledged the rebuke. His siblings followed his lead.

Mel laughed. “Don’t worry kids. He’s just teasing. Silly man!”

The kids all giggled and Garge wiggled his eyebrows at them. He started carving the meat and served the adults first. Garge knew how fast the kids ate. He put vegetables on their plates and covered them with his thick gravy before he added the meat.

“Po-ta-toes!” said Elsie suddenly.

She stabbed her potato with a fork, but it split and fell off. Undaunted, she scooped it up with her spoon. Sami and Brod had just introduced the kids to cutlery and they were having some success. Sami noticed that Frankel was holding down a piece of meat with his finger so that he could stick his fork in it more easily. She sighed. Then Frankel struggled with the task of turning the fork around and delivering the meat to his mouth. The meat fell back on his plate and he quickly grabbed it and put it into his mouth. Then he noticed his mother watching him and grinned guiltily at her. She smiled.

“Violet is still agitating,” said Mel. “One of her friends was talking to me. Apparently Vi has written to the Provost. He’s a distant relation of hers.”

“Still? After all this time?”

Mel nodded. "Yes. The Pastor knows. Vi's friend told her, apparently." She laughed. "Some friend! Anyway the Provost is due down here in a month on his annual circuit. Let's hope that there's no drama."

"Thanks, Mel," said Brod. "I thought that opposition to our family within the Chapel had died down."

"Well, apart from Violet and her few friends, that's true."

"Let's forget all that for now," said Garge. "I don't know what all the fuss is about."

"Yes, dear, but you never go to Chapel!" Mel snorted. "Right, who wants some more meat"

Four tiny voices squeaked "Me! Me, please! Me, please!"

Sami laughed. "Thanks for inviting us all for Sunday lunch," she said.

"Oh, we love to see the kids," said Garge. "They're growing so fast!"

"They are!" agreed Brod. "But other kids will start to catch up with them soon."

Sami laughed. "That will get the other mothers off my back, I hope."

Sami nervously dressed the kids in their best clothes and fussed around them, hoping that that they would behave themselves at Chapel.

"Brod, where is ..." Her voice trailed off as Brod came into the room. He was dressed in his best clothes. "What are you dressed up for?"

"Oh, I thought that I might come to Chapel with you today."

"What?!"

He was laughing at her. "Yes, it's been a long time since I went. I think it was at the kids First Blessing, wasn't it?"

"Brod, you know that the Provost is visiting today?"

"Well, what a coincidence!"

Suddenly she realised that he was going to Chapel to support her. There was no telling what the Provost might say, especially if Violet had managed to get to him. She threw her arms around his neck. "Oh, Brod!"

Brod kissed her and hugged her. "Now, what was it that you were looking for?"

Sami sighed. "I love you, Brod. Um, I was looking for Frank's shoe. He had it a minute ago."

Brod bent down and picked it up. "Here it is. And I love you too."

Violet scanned the attendees who had gathered outside the Chapel. She saw no sign of Sami and smirked. Violet guessed that she had decided not to come this Sunday because the Provost was visiting. It wouldn't make any difference. After today, Sami would be unwelcome in the Chapel and she and her disgusting litter would be banned. Violet smirked at the word 'litter'.

"Looking for someone, Violet?" It was the Pastor.

"I notice that Sami has decided to miss this service."

"Now, now, Violet! We've talked about this. Anyway there she is."

Violet's head spun round. "What?"

"Oh, and it looks like she's brought her husband along too."

Violet hissed. "She dared!"

Sami, looking determined, pushed the baby carriage up to Violet and the Pastor. "Good morning, Pastor, Violet. I'd like to introduce my husband, Brod."

“Nice to meet you at last, Violet. I’ve heard a lot about you.” He extended his hand.

Violet looked as if she might burst. She glared at Brod, spun on her heel and walked away. Brod just lowered his hand and smiled after her.

“Brod, I —“ the Pastor started, but at that moment, the Provost appeared at the door of the Chapel.

He cleared his throat. “Ahem! Gather around everyone, gather around. Ahem. The Verse for Today is ...”

Sami was on tenterhooks for the whole service, but the Provost didn’t bring up the subject of shape-changers, in the prayers or in his sermon. When the Pastor invited everyone to gather in the Annex, she relaxed. True, Violet was still shooting venomous glances at her and Brod, but that was normal.

The congregation slowly moved to the Annex, and Mel exchanged a few words with the two of them and went off on some errand. Sami picked up Dekken and passed him onto his father. Then she picked up Darv, who was a little restless.

She was surprised when the Provost appeared in front of them. The Pastor was behind him on the left and Violet was to his right. Vi had a broad grin on her face.

“Hullo, my dears,” said the Provost. “You must be Sami, right, and you must be Brod?”

“Yes, sir,” said Brod, shaking the Provost’s hand.

The Provost held Brod’s hand for a second. “I’ve heard about you two, from your Pastor and also from Violet.” He nodded to the Pastor and Violet. “I’m pleased to see your kind in our Chapel, son, and you are welcome any time. I understand that some people have not exactly made your family welcome, but I hope that they can look deep into their souls and come to accept you and your family with open arms.”

“Thank you, Provost. Thank you very much.”

Sami caught Violet’s eye and the older woman was furious, and at the same time looked defeated.

“Your children are lovely, Sami.” The Provost looked into the carriage and sighed. “Lovely.”

He turned to the Pastor. “Where are the biscuits, Pastor. Ah, thank you. Brod, will you have one?”

“Sir,” said Brod. “Thank you.”

“Please join us in sharing a biscuit as a token of our fellowship,” the Provost said formally.

Sami suddenly wondered if Brod knew the response. He smiled at her, then at the Provost and said “Long may it last.”

The Provost nodded to Sami and Brod and moved on. Mel paused as she passed and put her hand on Brod’s back.

“OK?” she asked.

“Yes, thank you. I may come to Chapel a bit more often, Mel, but I doubt that I will come regularly.”

Mel kissed the top of Dekken’s head and smiled. “I understand. Now, if only I could persuade Garge to come to Chapel now and then.”

“They’ve all passed their exams, Professor Garvan. By quite a fair margin, actually. Darvan and Frankel could have done better, but they are always fooling around. Dekken and Elsie are always telling them off! But they still did well. Dekken did the best but only marginally.”

The speaker was a tall, thin young man. He had long hair, tied in a pony tail, and a wispy beard. Garv looked up at him. “Rog, uh, Probationary Wizard Rogan?”

“Yes, sir?” Rog looked down at his mentor.

“For the little gods’ sake, please call me ‘Garv!’”

“Certainly, sir, um, Garv.”

“Rog, I will be leaving tonight. Dekken and the rest are now your responsibility. I’ve got something else to do.”

“Mine? But, but ... Garv. I’m not ready! What have you got to do, anyway?”

“Don’t panic, boy. Yes, you are ready. Our craft tells me that you are ready. You can do it. In any case, I have, as I said, something else to do. I don’t know what that is, but I will find out.”

“Oh. Well, thank you, Garv. Our craft. I see.”

“Rely on it, Rog. Or rather, Associate Wizard Rogan, Just one more step and you will be a full Wizard.” Garv’s beard bobbed. He reached into thin air and pulled out a backpack. “Good luck to you, Rog. Maybe I’ll see you around.”

He started off up the road and Rog watched him go. “Good luck, Garv,” he called. And then to himself he said “Thank you for everything, Senior Wizard Garvan.”

“Woof, woof. Bark!”

Elsie turned. “What do you want, Digger?”

Digger’s real name was Robinson, and he scowled. He didn’t like his nickname, so he pressed on.

“Chase a stick, doggie girl?” He waved the stick in the air.

“Grow up, Digger.”

Elsie was walking along the main path, between the University gardens on one side and a lawn on the other side. The building that she was heading towards, for her lecture, was just past a pair of large magnolia trees,

Digger moved closer to her and she backed up.

“Actually, you’re not that bad looking. For a shape-changer.”

“Don’t push me too hard, Digger. You don’t know what I am capable of.”

He sniggered. “I’ve got a charm.” He brought a medallion from beneath his shirt.

“What?” Elsie looked at it. “There’s nothing special about that!”

“You’re just trying to put me off. I bought it off a genuine Wizard!”

“That’s what the guy told you? That he was a genuine Wizard?” Elsie brushed past Digger and walked up the path and into a more populated area. Digger followed her for a few steps and then gave up.

“Digger was bothering me again. He says he has a charm. I’m pretty sure that it is useless, but still.”

“Don’t worry, sis. We’ll take care of him.”

“Yeah!” added Darvan. “We’ll take care of him!”

“No, Darv. No, Frank! You won’t do anything! Right? Nothing!”

"I second that, guys," said Dekken.

Darv held his hands up defensively. "Ok, ok! Anything you say, sis. Why did you tell us, then?"

"Aww, boys! I just wanted your advice. Do you think Digger has got a charm?"

"That loser?" said Darv. "No way! He's just a blow-hard. Just ignore him."

"Thanks, guys. It's a bit hard to ignore him."

Darv and Frank went off to a lecture and Dekken stepped forward.

"Are you OK, sis?"

"I think so, big brother. I'm used to people hitting on me, but Digger is different."

"Yeah. He follows you around. Checks which classes you are in."

"He was chatting to Jen recently and she said it was more like an interrogation. He wanted to know all about me."

"You've reported him?"

"Mmm. They're not interested. He's not touched me or anything. They suggested that I was misinterpreting his actions."

"Hah! Well, be careful, Else."

"I will, Deks."

Elsie at eighteen was a beautiful girl. She had laughing blue eyes, and long silvery blond hair. She was slim and athletic, and on top of all this she was a kind and thoughtful person. She and her brothers were friendly and popular people, and although they were close, that didn't stop them getting along with other people.

Although most people liked them, there were a few people, like Digger, who didn't. Elsie didn't know what Digger's problem was, but he took any opportunity to remind people that the four were shape-changers. He hinted that they were only able to attend University because people in positions of power had been paid by Sami and Brod to look the other way. Elsie knew that this was just rubbish. Her parents just didn't have that sort of money, and both of them would be shocked by the suggestion.

Elsie was just passing the Gym on her way to a lecture when Digger joined her. It was a seldom used short-cut and only Elsie and Digger were currently using it.

"Digger, it's not funny! Stop stalking me will you?"

"Stalking you? I just happen to be going the same way as you."

Elsie stopped. "I'm going to report you again!"

"Like that worked the last time, doggie girl," Digger scoffed. "Why don't you and your brothers take the hint and get out of everyone's hair? No one likes you and your doggie pack!"

Digger pushed her on the shoulder and she took a step back. Why was he goading her? Did he think that she would change in front of him if he did it enough? No, he was just being a bully.

Digger reached out to push her again, but this time she grabbed his fingers and bent them back. He yelled and fell to his knees.

"I could snap your fingers if I wanted," Elsie hissed at him. "How would you like to go around for the rest of the term with your hand in plaster?"

"No, no! Please don't! Let me go!"

Elsie let him go and stepped back. "Get lost, Digger! Stop bothering me!"

"You'll regret this, you bitch!" He laughed. "That's appropriate! I'll tell them that you attacked me."

"I'll tell them what really happened."

"No one will believe you. No one did before."

"I'll back her up. I saw what happened." A boy that Elsie didn't know stepped forward. "I saw you push her, and when you tried to do it again, she twisted your hand and you squealed like a pig."

"No one will believe you either, whoever you are." Digger hurried away cradling one hand in the other as he went.

"Thank you," Elsie said to the stranger. "He's been a pain in the neck all term."

"Hmm, you should report him. I came around the corner and he was pushing you. I was going to help you, but you didn't need my assistance," said the stranger, grinning.

He had brown eyes, brown hair and a pleasant smile. She thought that she had seen his face somewhere. He seemed familiar.

"I'm Elsie. I don't think that I've seen you around. What's your name?"

"I'm Will."

They started walking towards the lecture block. "Nice to meet you, Will."

"Are you heading to a lecture, Elsie? If you aren't would you like me to buy you a coffee?"

Elsie considered. She wasn't heading for a lecture, but she didn't know this guy. He seemed much nicer than Digger, though. The coffee shop was a public place, she thought.

"OK, then," she finally answered, and they headed off.

A tall thin figure suddenly appeared in the shade of a nearby tree. Rog's mentor would have been proud of his student's skill at not being noticed. Rog raised his hands, made a pushing gesture, and a ring of light expanded past Elsie and Will as they walked away. The ring, which was barely noticeable anyway, faded. Rog nodded.

Will ordered their coffees and sat down with Elsie.

"What are you studying, Will? How come I haven't seen you before?" she asked.

"Well, I've just transferred from —"

He was interrupted by one of Elsie's friends. "Else! Else! Guess who's coming to study with us! It's —" She stopped, shrieked, and ran away.

"What on earth?" Elsie was shocked, but she noticed that Will was quite calm. In fact he seemed to be suppressing a laugh. Elsie shook her head. "I'll have to catch up with her later."

"Are you serious? You really didn't recognise him?"

"No, Nym, I didn't. I thought that he looked familiar, though."

"Else, you are hopeless! Prince William chats you up, and you don't recognise him?"

"He didn't chat me up! Why on earth did you run away, Nym? Why didn't you come and talk to him?"

"I panicked! I wouldn't know what to say to him."

Elsie shook her head. "Now he thinks that I'm friends with a lunatic!"

"Oh, no!"

"You could come along tonight. He's coming to the Student Bar tonight."

"I can't! He thinks I'm a head-case!"

"I'm sure that I can persuade him that you aren't. In fact, he probably guessed what the problem was."

"He didn't say anything?"

"No."

"Phew!"

Prince William had indeed guessed that Nym had been overcome with shyness. He assured Nym that he understood. He chatted with the stream of students who ventured to talk to him. Soon everyone was calling him "Will" but the students had not yet accepted him as one of them. There was still some reserve.

Elsie was pleased to see that he seemed to get on well with her brothers. She wondered if it was because she and her siblings were also different from the average student. Then she wondered if he knew about them.

Puzzling about it, she was surprised when he sat down beside her.

"You look thoughtful," he said.

She looked around. No one was close to them, which was a miracle. "Um, do you know about me and my brothers?"

He nodded. "Yeah. I was briefed about the students and teachers that I might meet. The briefing was high level. For instance, it didn't mention that you were being bullied by that thug, Digger, or that you were friends with a crazy woman." He smiled to show that he was joking. "And that you are stunningly beautiful."

Elsie didn't know what to say next.

"How about coffee tomorrow, Elsie? Are you available at ten o'clock? O'Malley's? The coffee shop?"

"OK. That would be great."

A wave of students surrounded them, all wanting to talk to the Prince. He smiled at Elsie, and talked easily with them. Elsie stood up and moved away, but not before the Prince nodded and smiled at her.

Digger never bothered Elsie again. She guessed that Prince William had told someone what he had seen, and the authorities couldn't ignore his report. Digger pretended that he didn't know her whenever they passed each other. Eventually Digger stopped attending lectures and dropped out.

Will often met up with her, sometimes when she was with her friends, sometimes when she was by herself. When no one was around he sometimes took her hand, and once, briefly, he held her and kissed her.

She began to daydream about him, and, screwed up her courage one day and told him. He looked around, but there were people not far away.

"Me, too." He touched her hand. "Small steps?"

She felt like she was floating. "Small steps. Of course."

"Can we talk, please, Will?"

Will looked around. For once there was no one near him.

“Sure, Deks. Do you mind me calling you ‘Deks’?”

Dekken smiled. “Everyone else does.”

“You know, I like your sister very much. She’s a beautiful, kind girl.”

“Yes, Will. I know.” Dekken leant on the parapet around the balcony outside the coffee shop.

“She’s what I want to talk to you about.”

“I see. You’ve noticed my interest in her, and you want to warn me off?”

Dekken looked out at the scenery again. “No. You seem like a good guy. Besides, I know my sister. I could warn her off you, but if she didn’t want to, she wouldn’t listen to me. And if I did try to warn you off, would it work?”

“Hmm. You’re assuming that my friendship with Elsie is deeper than, well, just friendship.” He sighed. “You could be right. We’re more than two thirds of the way through the term, and I admit, I would like to spend more time with her.”

Dekken smiled. “Yes, Will. I’ve seen you looking around a little lost when she wasn’t near by. I don’t think that anyone else has noticed.”

“Thank the little gods.”

“Um, she told me the other day that she was thinking of taking a weekend away. By herself. To some unspecified destination. She never goes anywhere without us! Just because we are so close, the four of us. Coincidentally, you are unavailable that same weekend.”

“Ah.”

“You know her views, Will? Her personal religious views?”

“Yes. She is steadfast in her beliefs. She attends Chapel every week, and she believes in no sex before marriage. I respect those beliefs.”

“You’ve talked with her already?” Dekken was astonished.

“No, I actually found that out from her friend, Nym. She’s talked with her friends about her beliefs and Nym and some other girls were gossiping. I overheard. It was a light bulb moment for me. That is why she is the sweet, lovely girl that she is.”

Dekken was nodding. “Yes. She is very much her mother’s daughter. Elsie’s mother, our mother is exactly the same. So is her Granny, after whom she was named.”

“But, Deks, when I invited her away for the weekend, she was a little concerned. I told her that I knew her views and that I respected them. I respected them and would not ask her to go against them. She was surprised, but I told her about her loose-lipped friends, and she laughed and said ‘Nym?’.”

Dekken laughed, and then he turned serious. “You understand why she and I and my brothers are so close?”

“Yes, Deks. You are shape-changers. I know. I was briefed before I started here.”

Dekken sighed. “Good. I thought that I might have to explain things to you.”

“I understand that she needs to change most days, or she will get tense and irritable.”

“Yes. It’s the same for all of us, of course.”

“What is it like, Deks?” Will was suddenly curious.

Dekken smiled. “Glorious. It’s like a different world full of scents and sounds. Running full tilt is so freeing. The hunt —“ He paused. “There’s a deep, almost mystical feel to the kill. But we don’t need to do it often as we mostly feed when we are Human. We usually hunt, sometimes alone, but more often together, and then let the prey go.”

“Anyway, I hope that I have allayed your fears, Deks.”

“Mostly, but —“

A crowd of students swept out of the coffee shop and surrounded them. Dekken nodded to the Prince and left them to it. He didn't notice that a tall, thin young man with a pony tail watched him go. Rog stroked his wispy beard and nodded.

“Does it feel strange not to have your brothers around, Else?”

Elsie and Will were sitting in a hammock chair, on the broad paved area around a large house. Will had his arm around her.

“Are you worried about that? I'll be honest, it feels slightly odd. I keep feeling that they are around somewhere, but of course, they aren't.”

“Mmm.”

They watched the sun go down. Stars started to come out.

“Deks said that becoming a Wolf was ‘glorious’.”

“You talked to him about it? Yes, it is. It is so freeing. You become a part of everything. Not some mystical ‘nature’, but of something, well, something more real.”

“You love it.”

“Yes.” It was almost a breath.

“I hope that you enjoy all this.” He gestured at the surrounding parkland. “There's no one here.”

“I will. I will.” She hesitated. “Do you want to see me change?”

“It would be a honour.” A thought occurred to him. “What about your clothes?”

She laughed. “A good question. The change takes care of that. I change and I don't need clothes. I change back and I am wearing my clothes. Magic!”

“Magic!” he laughed.

She kissed him. “I'm going to be away most of the night. You might as well go to bed.”

He nodded. “Good night then, Elsie. I'll see you in the morning.”

She stood up and walked a few paces away. She looked back at him and changed. Suddenly there was a silver Wolf looking at him.

He drew in a breath. “The little gods. You're beautiful! Beautiful.”

The wolf looked away, sniffed the air and then trotted off. Will watched the pale creature as it disappeared into the bushes.

“Beautiful,” he repeated.

The silver Wolf sniffed the air. Rabbits. Squirrels. A fox over there. The fox was wary, she decided. It must have noticed a scent in the air, or a slight difference in the behaviour of other animals.

The Wolf ignored the sheep and the horses. The sheep were fearful and ready to run, but the horses, she knew, would defend themselves. But they were not wild animals, so she wouldn't bother them in any case.

She looked back at the house. She knew that she would be drawn back there some time during the night, but for a few hours, that was not her world. She turned and moved down the slope towards the river, navigating mainly by scent and only a little by sight. She wasn't hungry so she would only chase something if it popped out in front of her.

A shadow moved and a growl rose in her throat. She relaxed almost immediately. It was only a stoat. Nasty things! They killed for the fun of it, and she would kill one if she caught it, but they were tricky creatures and often escaped.

She wanted to run, but wasn't sure of this place, so she dredged her Human memories of this place, which felt uncomfortable, and loped across the big meadow, and down to the river. She hesitated but crossed the Human bridge and ran freely through the water meadows.

There was a plop in the river as something dived. She sniffed a strange scent. An otter was looking at her from a log partway across the river. The creature was confident. It knew that she belonged on the land and would be useless in the water. She looked at the otter and the otter looked back at her unconcerned. They went their different ways.

"Hi, Rog."

"Oh, hullo, Professor Garvan. Sorry, Garv. Habit. Have you come to check up on me?"

Rog was in the inn near the estate where Will and Elsie were staying.

"No, lad. I've just come for your report."

"Come for my report? But I sent it ... Oh, OK. My report. Well, they're enjoying their weekend away, just down the road. I surveyed the estate before they got there of course and I refreshed their protection when they got there. Then I came up here for a pint! Can I buy you one, Garv?"

"No need, lad."

One of the barmaids appeared with a pint on her tray.

"There you are, Garv. See ya later, eh?" She winked at him.

"Sure thing," said Garv and winked back. She giggled and went off.

Rog was annoyed but he wasn't sure why. "Is that why you came down here?"

"What? Oh, Ena, the barmaid? No, I only met her today. When the coach dropped me off and I booked into the inn."

Rog sighed. He was booked into a bed and breakfast place up the road. He suspected that the landlady was a Witch, in fact and by nature. He couldn't afford the inn.

"So, Rog. Tell me what been going on. Concerning our favourite were-Wolf and her boyfriend."

"Boyfriend? Of course! I must be dumb! It's obvious!"

Garv's beard bobbed. "Just tell me, Rog."

Rog wagged a finger in the air and stared into space. "Wait a minute. Ah, your original protection spell is still working, but it's morphed to include the Prince. That's why I didn't suspect."

Garv nodded again. "I'm impressed. Nice work. That spell is configured to hide itself."

"OK, Garv. Here's what has been happening."

Like experts anywhere, their conversation quickly became impenetrable to an outsider.

“You’ve changed, Will.” Ro looked at him with suspicion.

“Me? I’ve changed?” The Prince looked guilty. “What do you mean, Ro?”

Ro, the Lady Rohanna, sat down beside him. “You’re preoccupied all the time. Not that interested in your old friends, even me! Huh! You’re never home any more. You’ve cut right back on your public appearances. You dash back to that darn University all the time. It’s a girl, isn’t it?”

“I’m concentrating on my studies.” He saw her look. “OK, it’s a girl. We’ve become close.”

“Yea, Elsie.”

“What? You knew?”

“I have my spies, as you do. What are you going to do?”

“Do?”

“Yes, you dummy! Tell your Auntie Ro all about it. Spill it!”

“Auntie”? You’re the same age as me. The little gods, we grew up together!”

“Tell me, you ratbag! Stop avoiding the question!”

So Will told his old friend and playmate the whole story. Ro nodded along.

“Hmm, I see.”

“What do you think I should do, Ro?”

“Well, you could abdicate your role as Prince. That would cause chaos. But maybe you should do that. Or, you could talk to her. I hear that she is a smart girl, and between you, I’m sure that you could come up with a plan.”

Will nodded his head. He didn’t look happy. “You’re right. I need to talk to her.”

“It’s OK, Will. You won’t die. You might not be happy for a while. But I guarantee that you won’t die.”

She stood up to go. “What’s this about her being a shape-changer?”

“Yes. She is beautiful. She’s beautiful as a Human and as a Wolf.”

“Hmm. You’ve seen her change. Will, I think that I’ll go down and see her. If that is OK with you?”

“I don’t mind. Go ahead.” He was so depressed that he barely raised his head.

“Oh, Will.” She kissed him on the top of the head. “You’ll get through this.”

Elsie paused outside the door and looked at the name plate. ‘Administration Group’, it said. She knocked and, hearing no response, she opened the door and looked in. It was an office with three empty desks so she walked in.

“Elsie? Though here!”

She followed the voice into a side office.

“Come in! Come in! I’m Ro, a friend of Will’s. Sit down. Sit down. Tea, coffee.”

“Tea, please. So this isn’t an admin matter?”

“No, no. It’s about Will. Erm, I’ve known Will since we were babies. There weren’t that many kids of our age around, so we sort of grew up together. He’s my greatest friend and vice versa I hope. I think he’s in love with you and that’s a problem.”

“A problem?”

“Oh, not with me. The little gods, no! But with his parents, the Government, the press and the paparazzi, the Peers, and probably the Heads of all our religions. With almost everyone.”

“What?”

“If he was to decide to abdicate his role as Prince. To marry you.”

“Oh! Marry me?” Elsie put her hand up to her mouth. “Oh! Yes, I see. Oh, the little gods, he told me he loved me, and I told him that I loved him, but he didn’t say anything else. I wondered why he was sad. I hadn’t thought it through!”

“Talk to him, girl. Talk to him. It’s going to be hard, whatever you decide. You know, I could provide a role for you, in the Capital. You could be together, but not married —“

“No! Do you know my views? My views about that sort of thing?”

Ro looked at her and sighed. “Yes, I do. Will told me. You come from a religious family. You are a believer and Will respects that. As do I. But I had to ask.”

“Will told you a lot about me,” Elsie said defensively.

“Yes, but it would be more accurate to say I forced it out of him. It won’t go any further. He’s my best friend. I’m sorry.” She paused. “You being a shape-changer doesn’t help.”

“You know about that?”

“It’s common knowledge around the University. Not a secret. Yeah?”

“Yes, of course. We’ve never kept it a secret.”

“Well, anyway. It would cause immense problems if you were just a normal girl, and not one of those sycophants and opportunists around the Palace, but there’s a significant group of people who don’t like your sort. Some of them are quite influential. Sad but true.”

“Oh the little gods! Is it really that bad?”

“Yes, it can be nauseating at times. I don’t know how Will turned out to be so ..., so normal.”

Impulsively, Elsie smiled at her. “Maybe because he had a friend like you, Ro!”

“Aww! You’re so nice! Anyway, business over. Will says that he enjoys it here, so I want you to show me around this place. I want a pint in the student bar. I was only at University for six months before they threw me out!”

“Threw you out?”

“Actually, I left after six months. Too busy. Daddy is a Marquess, but he’s useless at it. Mummy and I do most of the work for him. But please show me around.”

“Sure. Let’s go.” Elsie was coming to like the girl.

Ro came round the desk and gave Elsie a hug. “You know, Will says you are beautiful both as a Human and as a Wolf. I know for sure that half of that is right.”

“Hi, Mum.”

“Elsie? It’s lovely to see you. What are you doing here, though? It’s not the end of term.”

“I’d love a cut of tea, Mum.” She sighed. “I had to see you. I had to talk to you.”

“That sounds serious!” said Sami as she made a cup of tea. She got out some biscuits and pushed them towards her daughter.

“Yes. I met this boy. He’s wonderful! He loves me, and I love him.”

“Wow! Are we going to meet him soon? Oh, no. There’s a problem isn’t there? Is it the shape-changing thing? Can’t he handle that?”

“No. He’s OK with that. I let him see me change a few times. He says I’m as beautiful as a Wolf as I am as a Human.” She smiled.

“I see. So what’s the problem?”

“He’s a Prince. Prince William. He’s studying at our University.”

“Oh, yes, I heard about that. So?”

“He has obligations. Responsibilities. He mentioned some of them. He has to be here, there, or doing something all the times. He’s met ambassadors and envoys, and he’s visited factories and hospitals.”

“He doesn’t want to drag you into all that? He sounds nice.”

“He’s lovely! Basically, yeah. I actually spoke to his best friend, Ro. Lady Rohanna. She’s nice. She explained to me what I would be getting into, what she has to do and it sounds horrible. Apart from the visits and the shaking hands and talking to people, she gets followed around all the time. Photographers, officials, security! Security. And any time left over she uses to manage her father’s estates. She said that her trip to the University to meet me was ‘like a bloody holiday’!”

“I see. What do you think?”

“I think I’d hate it. No night-time, um, excursions, apart from anything else. But Will could abdicate his role.”

“That sounds like it would cause more problems.”

Elsie nodded. “Yes, and he wouldn’t do it. I wouldn’t let him do it. But there’s a third possibility.”

Sami nodded her head. “I think that I know what it is. You, erm, stay together, but you don’t get married. I can’t believe that I’m saying this to a daughter of mine, but maybe that’s the way it should be?”

“We live together in sin? I don’t believe that the Holy One would approve, though of course he would understand. No. I won’t do that, and Will said that he understand and respects my beliefs.”

“Granny and Granddad Joe were divorced. Granny had your Auntie Jonni almost before she was married!”

“Sorry, Mum. I’m just like you. I won’t do it!”

“Oh, Elsie. I’m so proud of you and sorry for you at the same time.”

“Give me a hug! I’ll talk it out with Will when I get back. Wish me luck!”

“Luck? I’ll give you a blessing!”

The atmosphere in the empty restaurant was gloomy. Will and Elsie had talked out their problems and a decision had been made.

“I was not going to propose to you tonight, Elsie, my darling. I knew in my heart what was going to happen, and the decision that I, I mean we, would make. I respect you and I admire you for

sticking with your beliefs. They help to make you who you are. I'm sad, because, under different circumstances, I would have been happy to spend the rest of my life with you."

"Me too," Elsie replied. She sipped her coffee. "I'll miss you horribly. From the moment that you saved me from that bully, Digger, I've been drawn to you." She smiled to show that she was joking. "I love you. So sad."

"As I said, I wasn't going to propose to you tonight, Elsie, but please, I'd like to give you this ring. To remember me."

"I'll always remember you, Will. Thank you. Oh, this is so beautiful. It seems to glow."

"It's a 'Wolf Fire' diamond. They all seem to glow like that. May I put it on your finger?"

Elsie extended her hand and allowed him to put the ring on her finger.

He laughed as he sat back. "It's not like one of those enormous rings that are common in my family, but I didn't think that you would like one like those monsters!"

"You're right. It's perfect."

He raised his glass which still held a sip of cognac. "Your health, my Elsie. May you find a man who makes you happy. Even if it isn't me."

She picked up the small glass containing the last mouthful of her wine. "Your health, Will. My William. My Prince. I hope the same for you."

She stood up and walked out of the restaurant and up to the driver of the car which had brought them here. "Take me home, please."

"Certainly ma'am. Your companion?"

"I believe that he has a car arranged."

"Very good, ma'am."

"What are they up to, Geena?"

The waitress looked through porthole in the door to the dining room.

"Mmm. They're looking glum. He's given her a ring. She's crying. I think that they will leave soon. I'll be crying in a minute!"

"Thanks, Geena. Thanks for doing this for me. I have to look after them, but I don't like to spy on them."

Associate Wizard Rogan smiled at the waitress. He was still tall, but he had put on some weight, and although he would always be slim, he would not be considered skinny. He now had a decent beard, though unlike his mentor, Garv, he kept it neatly trimmed.

Geena put her arm around him, as he sat on a stool. "When they've gone we will have the whole restaurant to ourselves. Shall we have another beer, Rog?"

"Mmm. Please."

They heard the restaurant door close and a car drive off.

"She's gone, Rog. He's just sitting there."

"I'll have a word with him."

Rog passed through the swing door into the dining room, and sat down opposite Prince William.

"Would you like me to call you a car, sir?"

Will looked at him. "You're Rog, aren't you. Our own private Wizard." There was a note of bitterness in his voice.

“You know about me?” Rog wasn’t worried. He’d never strived for complete anonymity, though he did wonder how Will had found out.

“Yeah. One of my security people has some magic powers. He spotted you and assured me that you were protecting me and Elsie. But I guess you didn’t have the power to help us.”

“It doesn’t work that way, sir. We can’t make major changes to the course of events. That would result in chaos.” Rog wasn’t being completely truthful, but it didn’t matter.

Will nodded sadly. “Well, I’d better go home. My driver should be here in a minute. Home! Where all the ones that you love can be found.” He made a face.

He stood up and walked out of the restaurant.

Rog nodded and watched him go. Then he smiled and headed back into the kitchen with the plates and glassware.

“Oh, thanks Rog! I’ll get the rest later. Here’s your beer.”

“I’m glad that’s over!” He slipped his arm around Geena’s waist and drew her onto his lap.

They were disturbed by a rapping on the back door.

“What? I’m not expecting anyone.” Her annoyance showed in her voice. She went to the door and looked through the spy-hole. “A small guy with a bushy beard,” she reported.

Rog sighed. “Let him in, Geena. I know him.”

Geena opened the door and Garv walked into the kitchen, waving a bottle. He was accompanied by a statuesque brunette. “Meet Marie.”

“Garv,” Rog said. “Meet Geena. Garv is my mentor, Geena. Hullo, Marie.”

“Not any more, Junior Wizard Rogan. Do you have some glasses, please, Geena?”

“‘Junior Wizard’? Really. Thanks Garv!”

“Well, it wasn’t me! They asked me and of course, I said you were rubbish.” Garv laughed.

“Huh!”

“Yeah, well done. But anyway, I guessed that you would need some cheering up.”

“Actually, it was sort of sweet. And sad. But Will has gone back to the Capital, and I think that Elsie will go back to studying. Not that she stopped, but she could bring her grades up a bit. Her brothers will support her. I think I will get a new assignment now.”

“Sorry, Rog. But there are four of them. Elsie will be OK, but support her as much as you want. But there’s still Dekken, Darvan, and Frankel. One of them is going to need your support and I don’t know which one.”

Rog nodded. “I don’t mind. I like it here. I’ll finish my Masters course while I’m looking after them. Let’s go and sit down.”

They took the bottle and glasses to a booth in the bar.

“Marie’s a possible Student Wizard,” Garv announced.

“Yes, I’m going up to the School next week to be tested. Garv is my sponsor.” She smiled at the small man and hugged him.

Rog nodded. “My sponsor was my schoolteacher. But Garv mentored me from the beginning. I’m indebted to him. Thanks, Garv!” He raised his glass to the small man, and they started to empty the bottle.
