



Hollow Dreams

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IN HIS DREAM, POOK STOOD IN THE MIDST OF A VAST FOREST, breathing in the evergreen-scented air. The deep snow muffled all sound, and reflected back the brilliance of the waning moon. The stars blazed in a clear sky, like a thousand eyes staring down at him. It was terribly cold, but the part of him that wasn't human relished the dominion of winter. If only he could stay forever.



The sound of voices woke him. Pook muttered an obscenity, knowing he'd never get back to sleep. The dream had been good, thank God, not one of the nightmares where he was still a climbing boy back in Gloachamuir.

He lay on a plank in one corner of the basement flat that the Rat Soldiers called the Trap. It was right down by the river, so the damn place flooded every time it rained, and the ground never quite dried in between. The raw earth smelled like, mold, dirty water, and sewage.

"I'm sick of going to the tavern," Darcy said loudly—it was probably her voice that had woken him, and Pook wished he dared tell her to shut up so he could get back to sleep. But she was the gang's leader, and she kept the position the same way she'd earned it: with her fists. Her skin, a few shades darker than Pook's mocha complexion, blended into the shadows, but he could see the bored look on her face. Seeing in the dark was a good thing about being part fae—the only good thing, far as he could tell. Darcy, George,

Raw, Hal, and little Meg stood in a

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bunch at the foot of the stairs, like they had started to go out but then couldn't decide where they were headed or what they would do once they got there. George was the oldest at seventeen, and Meg the youngest at five, and they'd all been passing around a whiskey bottle that represented the last bit of alcohol in the place.

And did they wake me up to share it? 'Course not.

His best friend, Rose—his only friend, really—sat on the plank by his hob-nailed boots, perusing the filthy scraps of a newspaper she'd fished out of the gutter. *Queen Dagmar Seeks Alliance between Niune and Grynith*, proclaimed the front-page headline.

"Anything?" he asked her, hoping like hell the answer was no.

"Nothing weird enough that the fae might be mixed up in it," she said in a low voice. She'd known his secret since his powers had come on a couple of years ago, when something nasty had started eating the other kids they ran around with, and had nearly gotten them, too. Ever since, she'd looked over the dailies with him, trying to spot where the fae might be setting up shop in the city. Dead bodies with no marks on them, people starved to death in a house full of food, a whole bunch of urchins gone missing all of a sudden—that kind of thing meant the fae were on the prowl.

Not that he particularly wanted to tangle with the fae. But nobody else gave a damn if a bunch of dustbin kids got eaten or killed, did they? So he figured it was up to him to do something about it, whether he liked it or not.

Rose's eyes widened, and for a moment his heart sank, thinking that she'd come across something fae-related after all. But then she yelled over to Darcy. "Hey, look at what I found in the late edition!"

Darcy broke off arguing with George and gave Rose a glare. "Better be something fun."

Rose straightened the paper with a snap and read: "Mr. Hershel Blackmere of Saint Lily's Lane, Dere, was arrested late today for the public stabbing of Miss Eleanor Cooper."

"Halfway Hershel?"

"One and the same."

Pook felt like he was missing something. "Halfway Hershel?"

"Gin runner," Rose explained. "Picks the stuff up from the guys what cook it in their bathtubs, runs it up and down the river to various grogshops on the quiet, and nobody pays no taxes, right?"

"And if he's in gaol tonight," said Darcy, rubbing her hands together and looking happier than Pook had ever seen, "and the crushers haven't got round to tossing his place yet, who's there looking out after any gin he might have stashed away?"

Well, hell. Maybe the evening wouldn't turn out so bad after all.

