

M.A.I. Murray



A Short Story From Aorea

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Circle

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DEDICATION

For Britt, the badass scientist
who gave me this fantastic idea
in the first place without even
realizing it.



Saturday, 23 September 2023

You'll never believe what happened today. If I hadn't lived through it, I don't think I'd quite believe it myself, yet there I was, picnicking by my lonesome on the hill and watching the sunrise when all of a sudden the sky opened up, and my entire worldview, everything I thought I understood about the universe, shattered. But I'm getting ahead of myself. I suppose I should start back at the beginning. You always did emphasize the importance of proper chronology.

It started out like any other day, as ordinary as any I've had since...well, you know. I rose early with the intention of exercising before breakfast, but on a whim I decided—instead of my usual jog around the grounds—to hike up to the faerie stones and have a wee picnic there. I hadn't visited the stones in ages, and looking back now, I'll be damned if it wasn't some strange, twisted thread of fate that called me up to that misty old hilltop. Feeling nostalgic, I packed a thermos, some crumpets, cheese and dried sausage, then threw a blanket round my shoulders to fend off the worst of the chill. Even though it'd been years since I'd last made the trek, my feet well remembered the way; all the same, I was glad for my torch in the pre-morning gloom. As I ambled through the familiar forest, a lone owl shadowing my steps, I reminisced about all those mornings we spent along the same pathway...Cattie and I racing to the stones, you and Auntie Agnes trailing behind, laughing all the while. And when we'd reach the top,

you'd point out the different minerals that flashed in the rocks, catching the sunlight and sparkling as if lit from within. That's when I first fell in love with stones, I think; your stories inspired me to become a geologist. It wasn't until I started studying for myself that I realized you'd made most of it up! But then, you were a historian, a storyteller...I was always the stray scientist in the family.

Now I'm the only one of us left, and so the scientist becomes the storyteller.

The stones looked exactly as I remembered: a ring of haphazard monoliths, concealing a rainbow amid the mottled greys, with a battered rowan tree at the heart of the stone circle. Mushrooms still peppered the moss here and there with splashes of white, but the clearing otherwise remained free from the bracken that had littered the path through the wood. The wind was strangely silent this morning, as if the land itself were holding its breath. Perhaps that should have been my first clue what insanity was about to unfold, but I thought nothing of the preternatural stillness at the time, beyond marvelling at the tranquillity. I spread out my blanket just outside of the stone ring and had begun pouring tea from the thermos when all hell broke loose. Out of nowhere the wind returned with a vengeance, howling and swirling, unleashing an army of dry leaves, bitter berries, and thorny twigs. The sky—just now lightening with the pastels of dawn—began to heave and tumble, a maelstrom of spinning air. I thought, surely there are no tornadoes in the highlands! And yet what else could it have been, all that atmospheric havoc? And yet it seemed as if the stones themselves were vibrating, humming, echoing an ancient song I'd listened to all my life and yet never really heard. I dropped the thermos, closed my eyes tight against the turbulence, and huddled close as I could get to the frosted ground.

Then as soon as the cacophony started, it stopped. I dared to open my eyes, and that's when I really began to doubt my own sanity. For, suspended in a spiral of lavender cloud right above the rowan tree, were five raggedy people: two women and three men, hands clasped together in a ring that echoed the formation of the faerie stones themselves. I blinked, and the people fell to the earth, landing with a shudder and a thud around the roots of the rowan tree. The clouds cleared away, revealing a mundane sunrise, as if nothing at all were amiss but a second prior. The raggedy people stood up, brushed the bracken off their clothes (well, what remained of their clothes), and began looking about their surroundings. They spoke to each other in low voices, so I couldn't catch the conversation, not that my brain was capable of interpreting human speech at that moment regardless as I was still decidedly in shock.

So as I sat there, tea spilled all over my lap, mouth agape, one of the men finally noticed me. He was thin but wiry, with scraggly black hair and

an olive complexion. I wouldn't exactly call him handsome, but he was striking and possessed a defined jawline; he had a hooked, crooked nose and an even more crooked grin that he flashed shamelessly. He pointed me out to one of the women, who I assumed must be their leader from the way the others watched to see her response. She turned to face me, and once she deemed I was not a threat—such was evident in her calculating expression—the others visibly relaxed and went back to chattering quietly amongst themselves. However, that was about the same time I noticed that the whole lot of them were heavily armed with a variety of archaic weapons—swords, knives, bows; you name it, they had it—so while her companions settled down, *I* began to hyperventilate. She attempted to speak to me in soothing tones, but I didn't understand a word of it. I stood up with a jolt and started to back away toward the wood, eyes darting from one person to another. I must have been quite a sight, panicked as a rabbit in a fox den.

In an effort to calm myself, I slowed my retreat. Luckily, that's when the rational scientist part of my brain kicked into gear. I took note of each of their appearances, realized that they were in no shape to cause me any kind of harm (the man with the crooked grin was leaning on a large staff, and he appeared to be using it more for support than with the intent for combat). Furthermore, with the state of everyone's shredded clothing, they weren't exactly dressed to survive a Scottish autumn. Hell, they weren't even dressed for a Scottish summer! If anything, I posed more of a threat to them than they could possibly pose to me, despite there being five of them and my being quite alone. I've always been tough for my size, though, and I'm swift. I gathered that I could probably outrun them all the way to town if need be. Thus, once I could breathe normally again and my curiosity got the better of my caution, I managed to choke out, "Who the hell are ya?"

It was the woman, who I'd pegged rightly as their leader, who answered. She was of average height (making her the shortest of the bunch, but still quite a bit taller than me), and sported an athletic build—she looked like a runner or a fighter, probably both—with tangled, mahogany curls pulled back into a ponytail. She was dressed all in earth-tones: a wide brown belt over a tattered green dress, leggings, and boots. I could tell from her stance that she was used to being in charge, even though she was physically dwarfed by her male companions. She also bore an ornate sword sheathed at her hip and a knife strapped to her thigh, and while she reached for neither, I didn't doubt that she was adept at using both. She took a few measured steps toward me, her hands held up in a placating gesture. "My name is Mari," she said, "and I'm hoping you can help us."

"What?" I asked, stupidly. Really, and I call myself a scientist!

"I'm Mari," she repeated. "And if you don't mind, could you tell us where, exactly, we are? And even better, *when*?"

By this time it occurred to me that the maelstrom of swirling sky through which the five raggedy people fell must have been some type of magic portal. Magic! Can you believe I'm using that word? Me, the geologist, who never believed in anything I couldn't see, touch, test, measure, and test again...writing about MAGIC! But I don't know how else to explain it. One moment I was up on the hilltop alone with my breakfast, and the next I was conversing with five strangers bearing swords. Like I said at the very beginning: my worldview has been completely shattered. Shattered, and then reformed by today's events. Which brings me back to my newest acquaintances.

As best as I can comprehend after only a day of knowing them, the five raggedy people are travellers, of a sort. Apparently there's this whole other world out there—they told me the name, but it was all a blur, and I can barely remember everything we talked about—and they access it through these circles, and poof! Magic happens, and you wake up elsewhere. And, evidently, else-*when*, but I'm still wrapping my head around the timeline discrepancies based on what they've described. While my brain catalogued all this, I answered Mari's questions as best I could, and, much to their delight, offered them my breakfast. From the way they gobbled up the meagre rations, I assumed it must have been a while since they'd eaten. There was barely enough tea for everyone to take a few sips, but nonetheless the warm liquid did wonders to lighten the collective mood. We began chatting in earnest, and they told me some about their recent adventures—far too much for me to recount here!—and about themselves.

Mari and one of the men, a pretty-boy type whose name I've since learned is Gren, are both Americans, and they're a few years my junior though they were born over a decade before me. Like I said, there's some timeline discrepancies with inter-dimensional travel. Gren is the tallest of the group and, like Mari, appears to be something of an athlete. He's all lean muscle, and if it weren't for his friendly, albeit dark, eyes—his lashes are so long, they're almost feminine beneath those brooding brows—he'd be intimidating. But once he opens his mouth and starts talking, you realize he's a big teddy bear. By now I'd be rather enamoured of him, I suspect, if he didn't look right through me. I got the impression Gren doesn't see much else whenever Mari's around, and I can't say I blame him. Her presence certainly commands attention.

The wiry, scraggly, crooked-nosed man who first noticed me is named Ruv. I couldn't quite place his accent, but I did learn that he's originally from somewhere in Eastern Europe, and he's spent at least a few years wandering about with Mari and Gren, hopping between worlds as if that were a perfectly normal thing to do with one's time. I'm not sure what to make of Ruv just yet. He appears to have a mischievous streak, but he also strikes me as deeply kind. Like Gren, his attention mostly follows Mari, not

that she seems to have noticed (or perhaps is just pointedly ignoring it, as I am a stranger to them, after all).

The last two—Sam and Sarah—have been aloof, so I still don't know much about them beyond what I can deduce from my own observations. They're clearly brother and sister, as they look remarkably alike, all angles and lithe grace, restless despite their obvious injuries; they remind me of caged cats. I get the sense that the other three aren't sure what to think of them either, although they're by far in the worst shape of the bunch. Well, worst *state*, perhaps, I should say—they seem as athletically inclined as their friendlier companions, so I'd wager they're in very good shape—but their clothes are practically rags at this point, barely covering the important parts. Sarah has magenta highlights in her hair, and her brother's own black hair is streaked with turquoise. They speak in a pronounced London accent, though there's something...off, almost like they're trying too hard, but perhaps that's just because they're originally from elsewhere and grew up in London (they look like they might be of Japanese or Korean descent; they haven't specified, and I haven't asked).

I hope you wouldn't mind, uncle...but I've invited all five of them back to the manor. You see, I didn't realize how lonely I'd been until all of a sudden, I wasn't alone. Once I got over the shock of their falling out of the sky and such, and realized they were really quite normal—well, not normal...extraordinary, rather, but human enough—and we got to talking, it struck me how much of the past six months I'd spent in a fog. I was only supposed to stay for a few weeks while I got everything settled after the accident, and then I was going to go back to Glasgow to finish my doctorate. But a few weeks turned into a few months, and then before I knew it, summer was over, and I was still living at the estate, going through the motions of “settling” your affairs without any intention of ever getting anything settled. Boxes full of dusty books, papers, old lecture notes. Crates of moth-eaten clothes. There's whole rooms I haven't even opened, let alone inventoried, since that fateful day that left me stranded as the last of the MacEunrigs.

Yet, while I invited them back, I didn't exactly reveal the whole story either. I'm still not sure if I can trust all of them—especially those shifty siblings—so I told a wee fib. I said that you were only away on vacation, and would be returning in a few days, and that I was essentially housesitting for you. They don't need to know that your vacation ended last spring yet here I stay, orphaned all over again, living with hazy memories and writing letters to ghosts. That all changes today, I decided. I'm going to get back out there and live my life, dammit. And after this morning's events—witnessing magic first hand!—I've finally decided what my doctoral thesis will be. I always did love visiting the faerie stones...

So I brought my new acquaintances back to the manor, showed them the kitchen (I'm ashamed to admit it's not nearly as well stocked as it used to be; I've definitely let things go in recent months), and placed each of them into a room. Mari said they didn't mind sharing a space all together, but there's so many unused bedrooms upstairs, I insisted they could spread out. I cooked us up some lunch while they got cleaned up. Mari and Sarah are about the same size as Cattie, and I didn't think she'd mind them borrowing her clothes. Not like she'd have much use for them now anyway, and mine were far too small. As for Ruv and Sam, they both fit your own wardrobe (Ruv seemed particularly delighted by the selection, as you two share a sense of dignified style, evidently), but I'm afraid Gren was too broad in the shoulder and long in the leg. He'll have to make do with your old dressing robe until their laundry's clean and dry.

And that about brings us up to where we are now. My new acquaintances are all upstairs, sleeping off the aftereffects of their recent travels, and I'm down in the study, scribbling notes and taking store of my remaining lab ware. Tomorrow I'm hiking back up to the stones with Mari to gather some samples and run some tests. She seems almost as excited by the prospect as I am. Of course there's a chance when I present my thesis to the board, I'll be laughed out of the program. But there's something in those stones, I just know it, and I'm determined to find out how they work.



Sunday, 24 September 2023

As is often the case in any experiment, the first round of tests proved inconclusive. Though, here I am, getting ahead of myself again. Once I finished inventorying and reorganizing the lab equipment yesterday, I braved your old library. I stayed until the wee hours of the morning, as much of a night owl as ever, reviewing lore about the faerie stones while my new friends slept. Never thought I'd actually use folklore and superstition as research material, but I suppose there's a first time for everything. I was surprised how many papers you'd collected about stone circles in general and how many folk have been rumoured to disappear near ours in particular. I wonder if all circles are portals, or just some? I snatched a few hours of sleep this morning, then rose early again to make some breakfast. However, Ruv beat me to the kitchen. He had just put a kettle on the hob to boil, and I found him searching the cupboards for tea. Greeting me with that sly, crooked grin of his, he thanked me for the hospitality, and remarked how much he'd missed having strong, black tea at the ready.

After we exchanged some further conversation on the magical properties of caffeine, Ruv told me more about himself, and—well,

perhaps it'd be best if I just recount the conversation as it occurred, to the best of my memory.

"So you're a sanguine," Ruv said, as if that were a completely normal thing to say.

"Er, I'm Scottish," I replied, thinking he may have gotten his terms mixed up, what with English obviously being his second language and all, possibly his third. Can't fault him for a language barrier; I certainly don't speak whatever it is he grew up speaking.

Ruv's crooked grin broadened, and he reiterated, "You're a sanguine, like me, like the others. I noticed right away when we met. What's your totem?"

"My what?" At this point I'm sure my eyes were round as the teacups we were about to drink from, and I began to suspect it wasn't a language barrier after all, but rather a completely foreign concept for which I did *not* possess the proper vernacular.

"Your totem, your animal form," he explained patiently. "Wolves are common; big cats, too. I've met a few bears, but they're not much fun to travel with."

"Right, I see," I said, not seeing at all.

Ruv chuckled and turned his gaze toward the fogged window. "I've no idea what your totem is. I can only tell when people *can* shift, not what they shift into, although different totems have a different sort of scent so I can usually, at least, guess. But with you..." His voice grew quieter as he drew his gaze back to me; quite piercing hazel eyes, he has. Perhaps he's a teensy bit handsome after all, in a roguish sort of way. "With you, I can only be sure that I have never met someone with your totem before," he finished.

Just then, as I was coming to terms with having invited into the manor a bunch of loonies who think they can shapeshift, the kettle provided a much needed distraction by whistling. I turned the cooker off and set the tea leaves to brew while I collected my thoughts. I was vaguely aware of Ruv saying something about showing me so I'd understand, but my head was too full with possible ways to politely exit the conversation to really listen. I kept busying myself with the teapot (not that there was much to really do at this point but wait) until I noticed, finally, that Ruv had stopped babbling. It was his silence that prompted me to turn around.

And that's when I saw the wolf.

The next few moments were a little foggy. My entire vision narrowed to the giant predator before me, all grinning teeth and shaggy black fur. I was vaguely aware of a siren going off, and stupidly thought I must have a fire somewhere, only to realize that it was my own scream assaulting my ears. I also must have scrambled up onto the counter at some point, because that's where I was, teacups shattered on the floor below my feet, when Mari—

knife drawn and roaring for a fight—burst into the kitchen with Gren close on her heels.

She stopped short when she saw the wolf, and Gren smashed into her back, causing them both to stumble at the threshold. At first I thought it was fear that made Mari halt her momentum so suddenly (and, terrified as I was by the big bad wolf slobbering in my late uncle's kitchen, I could hardly blame her), but her face revealed only annoyance tempered by mild amusement. She slipped her knife back into the sheath clipped round her thigh, crossed her arms, and frowned at the wolf. A wolf, I finally noticed, that calmly sat next to a pile of neatly folded clothing in precisely the spot Ruv had previously occupied.

A wolf with scraggly black fur and hazel eyes.

“Dammit, Ruv,” Mari admonished, “you know we’re not supposed to shift on Earth!”

Gren sighed and put his own knife away. “I’m going back to bed,” he grumbled, and shuffled away to do just that.

Mari shook her head, and I thought she was about to leave too, but instead she reached for a broom in the corner and began sweeping up the broken teacups. “Sorry about that,” she said on behalf of Ruv.

Remembering the wolf in the kitchen, I glanced back at him...only to be greeted by the sight of a pale bum squeezing into a pair of trousers as Ruv dressed again. I blushed and looked back at Mari. Finding my voice strained after maintaining such an epic scream, I rasped, “So you really are shapeshifters, huh?”

Mari’s face warmed with a smile. “We are, but we generally call ourselves sanguines; Gren could explain the Latin roots better. See, it’s our blood that lets us shift into our totems. I take it Ruv was trying to prove he wasn’t crazy by just showing you?”

I nodded, then asked, “Why aren’t you supposed to shift on Earth?”

“There’s not enough magic here,” she replied, smile fading. “Sometimes people get stuck in between forms, or else find they can’t shift back. The animal part takes over. The human is lost.”

By this point Ruv was fully clothed again, and re-entered the conversation with a bow. “Only skilled sanguines should attempt a full shift on Earth. Fortunately, I am one of the most skilled there is. I would not suggest *you* try to change here, though.” He grinned at me again and *winked*, the sly bastard. “Especially since we don’t know what you are. Not until you’re in Aorea.”

Right. So Aorea is what they call this other world they travel to, where time slows down and magic is common as allergies in spring.

We kept talking as we drank our tea, and then Ruv left to go wake Gren again and check on the siblings while Mari and I headed up to the hilltop, which brings me back to the faerie stones. Mari says there are only three

active travelling circles left on Earth (the faerie stones included), but long ago—at the dawn of humanity—there used to be more. I picked her brain about it while we hiked back up, and once we reached the top she helped me scrape the samples. This morning the circle seemed so ordinary, without the swirling clouds or hint of ancient song, that I found it hard to believe only yesterday a portal had spit out my new companions at that very spot. We took samples from the stones, the rowan tree, even the mushrooms after Mari remarked that those are common to all the travelling circles she'd seen. She doesn't know if the spotted mushrooms are a key part of the magic itself or just a by-product, so I was careful not to actually damage the delicate fungi while scraping cells into a sterile container.

Once we'd gathered everything I needed for the initial round of tests, we hiked back down to the manor. By then everyone was up and about again, and the menfolk had scrounged up some food to cook. By the menfolk, I mean mostly it was Ruv who did the cooking while Gren snored with his head on the kitchen table, and Sam and Sarah sipped on fruity cocktails. I'm not sure who among them was the bartender (or where, for that matter, they acquired a slice of pineapple and tiny umbrellas with which to garnish their glasses), but I was too impressed with their resourcefulness to be mad about them raiding the whisky. I suppose you did have quite the collection of single malts, and I certainly haven't been putting them to use.

"What's on the menu?" Mari asked, inhaling the savoury aroma.

Ruv said something to her in another language—his native tongue, I thought—and Mari replied in the same. Sarah rolled her eyes and mumbled, "I hate it when they do that." She exchanged looks with her brother before loudly adding, "I thought we agreed secrets don't make friends, eh?"

"For chrissakes, they're discussing *sausage*," Gren grumbled, finally picking his head up off the table and wiping the drool from his chin. Perhaps I should relook the validity of my original assessment of Gren as a pretty boy type.

"Then they may as well discuss it in English," Sarah asserted.

Mari shrugged and followed me to the corner of the study that I transformed into my lab, where I had already set up the equipment for the first round of tests: my streak plates and hardness pencils, acid bottles and chemical washes, my laptop with its many modelling programs already installed but long unused, the binocular microscope you got me before I started grad school. I wish I still had access to the lab at the university; the electron microscope they have would have come in handy. Oh well. Just have to make do! We deposited our collection of samples on the counter by the sink, then headed back to the kitchen to eat.

After lunch, I spent the rest of my afternoon in the lab, running every test I could think of. I analysed and catalogued the different minerals in the stone samples first, but nothing unusual there, mostly granite, a strand of gneiss and flecks of garnet, thin bands of red sandstone. Nothing I hadn't already seen before, but I checked again just to be sure. Next I looked at the crystal structures under the lens of the microscope, but nothing unusual there either. I wasn't sure at first how to test the lichen and moss samples I took, but I looked at them under the microscope as well. Again, nothing out of the ordinary. After hours of pressing, scraping, recording, analysing, modelling and analysing again, I may as well have been back at square one.

Thus, I decided to sleep on it, looking at everything with fresh eyes in the morning. I hadn't realized how late it'd gotten since I've been immersed in the lab! It looks like the sun has already set again, and my new friends have been amusing themselves all afternoon. Auntie Agnes would be mortified. I suppose I'd best track them down and play hostess for the rest of the evening, lest her ghost come back to haunt me for my poor social graces.



Monday, 25 September 2023

I took my new friends into town this morning to pick up some things. They don't have active bank accounts anymore (at least, not on this planet, I suppose), but Gren insisted that if he could only get his hands on a guitar, he'd be able to pay me back within a few days for everything. I remain doubtful, of course, but I always did enjoy music, and learning that he was a musician as well as a traveller of worlds only made me eye him with new respect. So our first stop was a music shop, where Gren picked out a used acoustic that was on sale. The weather was a bit too dreary for him to set up on a street corner and strum for pennies, which I assumed was his plan, but I'm sure the sun will show his face again eventually and dry up the drizzle, however temporarily. In the meantime, I'm looking forward to some live entertainment back at the manor.

Sam and Sarah somehow snuck away from the group while Gren was still inspecting guitar strings, but it's not a very large town, and their brightly coloured hair doubles as a beacon, so we'd no trouble finding them a few blocks down along the main drag. In their brief time away, they'd managed to obtain some produce to restock the kitchen as well as a fresh set of clothes. I never even knew any shops around here sold black leather

leggings, yet they were both sporting a pair (along with some rather intimidating boots and dark, lacy sweaters that looked like they were made more from cobwebs than wool) once we found them again. I'd like to think Sarah and Sam paid for their acquisitions, but I didn't care to investigate the matter in any great detail. I somehow don't think I'd like the answer if I did. Sarah tossed a shopping bag to Mari with a wink and a nod, while Sam handed over another tote to Gren. "Now we're even," Sarah announced, which struck me as an odd thing to say at the time, but Mari just dipped her head and accepted the gift without looking at the contents. Gren followed suit, but Ruv's constant smirk wavered for just a fraction of a second, so quick I almost didn't catch it.

On our way out of town, Mari spotted a "help wanted" sign in the window of the local pub (remember that time you had to rescue Cattie and me, after we had a few pints too many in celebration of finishing university? Same pub, same owners, though they've since changed the name) and snatched up a few applications. I told her she didn't have to get a job—after all, you left me more than enough to fund whatever they need to get back on their feet, not that I've revealed to them exactly how much that is yet—but, like Gren did earlier, Mari insisted she'd pay me back for everything. I don't feel like I deserve repayment; I'm not really doing much besides give them a place to crash and keeping them fed for the time being, and my motivation has as much to do with my own curiosity as any sense of altruism. The stories of their adventures, if even half true, paint a picture of a world I would very much like to visit. Can you imagine the kind of samples I could bring back from Aorean stones, what new minerals I might discover there? The longer I spend with these folks, the more I wonder what else is out there, what other universes await through the circles, what new adventures lie in store for Mari and her merry band of shapeshifting sanguines.

I think, dear uncle, that I'd like to be a part of their next one.

I've already taken this much time off from school, what difference would a few more months make, especially if I return with one hell of a dissertation topic? It'd be unlike anything the board has ever seen! But I'm getting ahead of things again. One step at a time. Maintain chronology. I can almost hear your voice in my head, reminding me to slow down, to really see what I'm studying, record it properly.

Since our return to the manor, Gren's been busy practicing on his guitar upstairs, Ruv's wandering around the grounds and exploring the woods (probably in his wolf-form, if I had to wager a guess) and the siblings are taking a cat nap. Mari, however, has been helping me in the lab. I can tell she doesn't have much experience, and she's no aspiring scientist, but she's careful with the glassware, good at paying attention to detail, and has a steady hand. We chatted idly while I ran a few more specs through the

computer program, seeing if there was something I'd missed yesterday, but alas...same results: nothing conclusive. Nothing out of the ordinary. I may as well have been analysing any other local rocks, lichen, or fungi.

I was lamenting this aloud when Mari had an idea. "What about the song?" she prompted.

"I'm afraid I don't follow," I admitted. To be honest, I was only half paying attention to whatever she'd been prattling on about before, as my nose was firmly embedded in mineral specimens and crystal structures. I always *have* been somewhat single minded.

"Gren sings a song," Mari explained (or repeated, for all I know). "It changes every time, but that's how he opens the circles. With a song." Then she started humming, and the light bulb finally turned on in my head.

I immediately recognized the tune. It was the same one I'd heard, subtly and distant, when the portal opened. I'd thought the faerie stones themselves must have been singing, or maybe the wind through the rowan branches, and so much from that event has blurred already in my memory that I also thought perhaps I'd imagined hearing any music at all, but there it was again. The same tune. I grilled Mari with questions about the song, about her understanding of the travelling circles, and then at long last, the start of a theory began to take shape. I asked her to hum again while I turned my eye back to the microscope.

And, to my dismay, the music made not even the least difference. No reaction at all, not from the stones, not from the moss, not from the mushroom spores, not even from the slivers of rowan tree bark.

It was all just...normal.

Seeing my frustration carved clearly into my face, Mari got up from where she was sitting, and said that she was going to find Gren. "It's not just the song that opens the circle," she told me on her way out of the lab, "it's the voice singing it." I nodded, although I didn't see what difference one voice would make from any other in terms of activating the magic latent in the materials—it had to be there, there had to be some kind of reaction—but I was willing to humour her idea. She'd been a good lab partner so far, and she certainly has more experience with travelling circles than I do, never mind that I've apparently lived most of my life right next to one.

When Mari returned she was indeed accompanied by Gren, but from the way they both lingered in the doorjamb I could tell they had no intention of joining me in the lab. I immediately sensed that something had gone awry, although neither had yet spoke. So I stood, backing away from my laptop (still whirring away, running another spec that would also likely come back perfectly mundane), and joined them. "Did something happen?" I asked in a whisper.

"Gren thought he heard something while he was playing," Mari began.

“Well,” Gren interjected, “it was more what I *didn’t* hear.”

“But it’s probably nothing,” Mari added, a bit too quickly, which told me it was clearly something.

“They’re probably here somewhere, just not in their rooms right now.”

“You’re probably right. Too soon to panic.”

That certainly caught my attention. “What are we not panicking about now?” I inquired.

Gren ran his fingers through his long, dark bangs. “I was in between songs, you know? And then I realized I couldn’t hear Sam snoring anymore. So I went to check, because I was supposed to be keeping an eye on them...”

“Wait, what?” I asked. “Why?”

Mari and Gren exchanged a glance. “We haven’t been travelling with Sam and Sarah that long, and there’s still a lot we don’t know about them, but we think they’re mostly harmless,” Mari said softly, as if they might be waiting around the next corner and could overhear. “It’s just, a few days before we met you, we’d kinda rescued them from some trouble they were in. And we’ve been trying to make sure they’re not left to their own devices too long because we don’t know how much they’ve really left that old life behind...”

“You can tell her,” Gren urged.

Mari inhaled a big breath before continuing. “They were working for this trickster guy, who was using them not only because they’re sanguines, but because they have a, uh, unique skill set.”

By this point we had left the lab far behind and had made our way to the kitchen, where we encountered Ruv. He had evidently returned from his grounds explorations and fancied himself a snack, for we found him with his mouth stretched halfway round a sandwich while he perused the contents of the refrigerator. He greeted us with that mischievous, crooked smile of his. He must have picked up on some of the conversation as we’d approached, for as soon as he’d swallowed, he said with no shortage of gusto and crumbs, “What Mari is trying to tell you, is that Sam and Sarah are professional thieves.”

“So if we don’t know where they are,” I reasoned out loud, letting my logic fill in the gaps left by my acquaintances’ omissions, “then that means they’re probably making off with some priceless family heirlooms.” Something out of place on the recently closed refrigerator door caught my eye, so I drifted closer to Ruv. He stepped aside to let me study it, and my fingers brushed a magnet that wasn’t there that morning, holding up a scrap of paper that was likewise new. The magnet depicted a lounging leopard, its fur a solid sheen of black. I recalled then what Ruv had told me about sanguines. *Wolves are common; big cats, too.* “By chance, do the twins shift into panthers?”

“Yes,” Mari replied, drawing out the word. I mutely removed the scrap of paper from the refrigerator door. It had the word *dreamer* scribbled on the front, whatever that was supposed to mean, but I handed it to Mari without reading it further. I somehow didn’t think the words inside were intended for me.

When she finished reading it, Mari let out a long sigh. “It’s definitely time to take stock of your valuables. The twins are officially gone.”



Wednesday, 27 September 2023

Mari, Gren, and I spent the rest of Monday, all of yesterday, and most of this morning inventorying the whole manor while Ruv scoured the grounds nearby for a trace of where Sam and Sarah had disappeared. Fortunately, the inventory I intended to do for months is now finally complete, and better yet, it looks like the twins didn't sneak away with anything beyond what they had acquired in town, which raised my opinion of them ever so slightly. They do seem to have a code of ethics, at least.

Unfortunately, while Ruv was able to pick up their trail, it ended at a corner on the outskirts of town where they must have gotten into a vehicle (perhaps a taxi, or else perhaps they've added grand theft auto to their list of skills), and he couldn't find where they went after that. We could probably track them if we really wanted to—it's not a grand town, and two strangers with brightly dyed hair and a penchant for the gothic would leave an impression—but as far as I'm concerned, they're free to leave as they please. Maybe our paths will cross again, maybe not. They weren't exactly helping me in the lab anyway, and in any case I don't believe the other three intended to hold the twins hostage.

Speaking of the lab, I'm sad to report that I was so exhausted after inventorying the rest of the manor that I haven't had the energy to pursue

further study on the materials that comprise the travelling circle. Instead, I've spent the past few evenings listening to Mari and Ruv tell stories of their adventures while Gren quietly plays the guitar in the background. He's actually quite good, and I've no doubt he'll earn a few pounds if the weather clears enough for him to set up on a street corner.

As for the stories Mari and Ruv have been sharing, let's just say they haven't lessened my desire to join them on their next otherworldly venture. They've told me more about the shapeshifting they do, and Ruv continues to insist that I have that same power, although he doesn't think I'm a wolf like he is, or a feline like Gren or the twins. If I hadn't seen the evidence first hand that such a thing is possible, I'm sure my lingering doubts would be significantly greater. Even so I've still got a niggling sense of disquiet: what if none of this is real, what if I've finally just snapped after months of loneliness and my subconscious fabricated the entire experience of the past few days, the travelling circle and my new friends included?

But if I really had just gone bonkers, there would be breaks in the logic somewhere, right? Like surely an insane brain couldn't manufacture an experience so convincingly. Then again, there *are* the timeline discrepancies. Even Mari and Gren, who seem to be the most modern of the bunch, eyed my mobile with confusion and suspicion at first. I suppose it makes sense; cell phones weren't a thing yet when they first left Earth, and while they did exist when they returned after that first trip—it was too long of an adventure for me to recount here, and I've only heard snippets of it anyway—technology keeps just exponentially progressing, as technology tends to do. Ruv appears to take all the changes in stride, although he's by far the most displaced from his original time. If he were of a less fluid constitution, I imagine his first sight of my laptop and sundry lab equipment would have given him a panic attack. But in a way, the timeline discrepancies do make an odd sort of sense to me. Of course time wouldn't travel at the same pace on different worlds in different dimensions; how could it? The passing of time is just a perception, really, and that perception naturally stretches or contracts depending on where you are and what you're doing.

I mean, theoretical physics was never my best subject among all the sciences, but I still did pretty well in the basic courses. Better than chemistry, anyway. Gravity, time, the components of the fabric of the universe...it's a lot to wrap your head around for anyone, even those of us who pretend we know how everything works. Throw magic into the equation and it becomes a whole new problem set. Well, perhaps not entirely new; there's a part of me that believes that what I'm calling "magic" is, in fact, simply science I don't yet understand. Maybe I'll find a way to understand it, to find the science hidden within the spell. And on that note,

I do believe I'm finally inspired to continue my studies of the travelling circle!

Yet I'm not ready to head to the lab just yet. First off, I've got a lot to ponder about still, theories I'm working through and such, before I dive back in to my sample analyses. More importantly, my lab assistant is busy for the time being. Mari went into town this afternoon to drop off the job applications for herself, Gren, and Ruv at the pub. I'm sure at least one of them will get hired. They tend to go through barkeeps, cooks, and wait staff at an alarming rate for being the only such establishment in town. On the other hand, after last night, perhaps not. Which reminds me, I do have a funny bit to recount about that! Well, I found it funny, at least. Karma, as they say, is a...er, you know what I mean.

We went to the pub yesterday evening for dinner, as none of us were quite feeling up to cooking (plus, with so many new mouths to feed—and shapeshifters seem to be hungry all the time—the kitchen's already running low again). So there we were, the four of us all crowded round a wee corner table in the back. Mari and Ruv both took seats where they could survey the whole room, their backs to the walls, while Gren and I were on the opposite side. Sitting right next to Gren, I was acutely aware of how short I am compared to most people, let alone these hulking Americans (and whatever the hell Ruv is). Anyway, so the waitress on duty for our section of the pub was Francine, if you remember her? She's the one who used to tease and torment me for being so small, back when I first moved in with you, the first time I became an orphan. She teased me for that, too, but it was the remarks about my size that bothered me more for some reason. I suppose because I never *felt* like an orphan, not with you and Auntie Agnes ensuring that I had such a loving home, and with Cattie always more like a sister than a cousin. But Cattie was a level above me, and Francine was an expert at catching me alone in the hallways. She knew better than to try anything when Cattie was around.

I hadn't seen Francine in at least five years, busy as I have been at the university and then turning into a hermit at the manor, and the years between had not been kind to her. It appears she went downhill fast after secondary school, her face sporting far more lines than a woman in her mid-twenties ought to have. It also appears that I'm just petty enough for that observation to have given my own confidence a boost, considering how I still look much the same. I could tell Francine recognized me as well, though she didn't comment right away as she took our drink order.

When she came back with our pints, she had that too-familiar fake smile plastered across her face, only it wasn't nearly as effective now as it was when she was younger and ruled the hallways with her army of perfume-drenched, cosmetic-caked clones. She lingered over Gren and Ruv as she handed them their ale, which triggered pursed lips and a quirked

eyebrow from Mari, but no verbal response. Either way, neither young man seemed to notice when she shamelessly attempted to flaunt the assets she no longer possessed. What they did notice, however, was when she slipped in a few snide remarks directed at me.

She began the conversation innocuously enough, although she did use the nickname I used to loathe so much: “Wee Wendy, you’ve come down from your castle! *And* you’ve brought friends. Where on Earth did you find them? Chained up in your rich uncle’s lair all this time, waiting for you to free them now that the old coot is gone? Or did you just buy them off?”

I stiffened, but managed to force a polite smile and keep my voice steady as I introduced them, naturally omitting the details of how we truly met. Instead, I said, “They’re from the university.”

“Wee Wendy with her nose in a book,” Francine cooed. She sidled closer to me, clutching the empty tray against her hip while she dropped her voice to a whisper, but her words were still loud enough for the whole table to hear. “*However* did you convince these handsome gents to even look at you? Did you beguile them with your tale of misery, the lonely orphan princess, forced to labour among us common folk now that rest of the lofty MacEunrigs are finally dead?” Her smile cracked into a sneer, and she gave a sniff as she added, “You haven’t changed an ounce. Still waiting for puberty to hit, aye?”

Even as much as I’d like to think I’ve grown as a person, that bit still stung. I just kept forcing a smile while I ordered some chips for an appetizer. Francine may be a cow in heels, but I at least know my manners. She turned and walked to the bar, while Mari narrowed her eyes at her retreating back. “If she says one more thing to you like that,” Mari declared, “I’m gonna cut her.”

“Now, now,” Ruv interjected with a lazy grin, “no need for violence just yet. There are other ways we can handle this that will be equally entertaining.”

“I’ve got an idea or two,” Gren offered, sipping his tankard thoughtfully.

But then Mari turned her gaze toward me, and asked softly, “What did she mean, though, about everyone else in your family...?”

I knew, back when I first told the fib about you being on vacation and me just housesitting, that this moment would come eventually. I supposed it was as good a time as any to unleash the whole truth, so that’s what I did. It was difficult for me to talk at first—I haven’t discussed it with anyone, really, not even at the funeral—but once I got started, the words just tumbled out of me in a rush until I’d told my new friends all about the past two decades of my life. I told them how my parents passed away on a mission trip when I was very young, and so I came to Scotland to live with my dad’s estranged half-brother, who took me in and raised me as if I was

his very own. I told them about running round the wood with my cousin Cattie, exploring the faerie stones and making up stories about the fae who dwelled there even though I'd never believed in them. I told them about how you inspired me to become a geologist, to look for deeper stories, deeper patterns, within the bones of the Earth itself. I told them about your work with the historical societies and the UN, fighting to preserve ancient ruins from destruction by civilizations that no longer saw a use for remembering the past. I told them how, nearly six months ago, you and Auntie Agnes and sweet, protective cousin Cattie were vacationing in Greece while I stayed at the university, too busy with a term paper to bother accompanying you. And, finally, I told them how your rental car was targeted by a terrorist group who wanted to make an example of the pale foreigners with diplomatic visas.

By the time I was done spilling my whole life open in the corner of a pub in a quaint highland town, Francine was heading our way with a tray full of supper. I braced myself for whatever new poison she'd throw at me, keeping my fingers crossed that maybe, at least, she hadn't spit in our food before taking it from the kitchens. I needn't have worried, though. Before she could start yammering on and making digs about my family history and spoiled rotten life, Gren tugged his chair closer to mine, threw one of his muscled arms round my shoulders, and whispered in my ear, "Just play along. We've got this." His warmth and close proximity were enough of a distraction that I honestly don't know what Francine was mouthing off about, although I was vaguely aware of hearing her voice. Whatever she was saying, I can only assume, based on the events that followed, that it was more of the same inane, juvenile teasing.

I believe she was making another joke about how short and skinny I am when Mari cut her off with a loud promise that if she didn't start being nice, she'd go have a chat with the manager. Regrettably that didn't seem to make much difference in Francine's general demeanour, as she only shifted to target Mari instead. Big mistake. They went back and forth a few times with barbed remarks, but Francine was no match for Mari's quick tongue. I've never seen someone be so thoroughly eviscerated in so few words before, and the entire time Mari somehow managed to look and sound perfectly polite. Really, it was quite remarkable. Eventually Francine gave up and huffed off, leaving our table in peace for the remainder of the supper.

I'd transcribe the conversation between them, but I'm afraid my memory isn't enough to do it justice, and Gren's distractingly warm arm wasn't helping on that front, either. Suffice it to say that even though we've only known each other for a few days, I'm glad I've got such fierce friends on my side. Cattie would be proud.

I'm not so sure if Mari will be getting that job at the pub now, though.



Friday, 28 September 2023

This will probably be the last entry I have time for, at least for a while, so I'm going to be as thorough as I possibly can. We'll be going to London soon, and then it's straight to the faerie stones after we come back north. These past few days I've been too distracted in the lab to write at all, and then suddenly Sarah returned, and it's been a whirlwind since of planning and prepping and...I'm doing it again. Getting ahead of myself. Everything we'll need is packed up and ready to go, though, so I finally have some time to myself while we wait for morning. The others are resting up. Big day tomorrow, and all. There's so much to get down before then!

Right. So Gren and Mari have both been helping me in the lab, and I think I must concede that there is something magical in Gren's voice that is intrinsically tied to the construction of the faerie stones. I tried testing all of the samples with myself, Mari, and Ruv each singing (as well as playing a selection of recordings by random singers, and I even tried recordings of each of us singing as a control), all to no avail. No reaction. But when Gren sings, the particles—the bits of stone, the lichen, even the mushroom spores—vibrate in time to the frequency of his voice, practically humming

right along with him. It doesn't work with recordings of Gren singing, either—only when he gives a live performance. However, it doesn't seem to matter what particular song Gren sings; the materials still react. He tells me that when he steps foot in a circle, he can hear all the different possible songs swirling inside his head, but that the one he needs to sing to get where he needs to go always sounds louder than the others. Isn't that fascinating? A bit foolish, perhaps, but who knew I'd be using geology to examine the magic of music!?

So while the mystery of the travelling circles isn't exactly solved, I've definitely got a solid start. Of course more trials are needed to prove my hypothesis, and I'd love to take samples from the other travelling circles on Earth and test them as well, but that will just have to wait. Mari and Gren tell me the only other Earthly circle they've been to is in Virginia. Can you believe it? The United States, home to a magic circle! Scotland at least makes sense. We've certainly an abundance of faerie tales here to accompany such a thing. I never would have suspected America, though, of all places. Ruv believes the third travelling circle might be somewhere near the Russian border, but he can't be certain as he was there quite a long time ago, it was apparently dark out, and he didn't exactly know what travelling circles were at the time (let alone intend to fall asleep in one, and then wake up in Aorea, rather confused as to how he got there). When I have more time, I should go into more detail about his unique story. I think you'd quite like him, uncle...once you got past the permanent smirk, that is.

Yesterday evening, once my friends grew tired of acting as my lab assistants—I'm quite proud of myself for paying attention to their reduced enthusiasm since that's not normally something I'd even notice—we chatted in the lounge. I'd turned the box on so we'd have some background noise, but no one was really watching it. We were too busy sharing stories, swapping theories, and eating shortbread (Cattie was always the better baker, but I did my best to follow her recipe) to give any mind to the reruns on the telly. Well, they were reruns to me. I suppose they would have been brand new programming to the other three. Anyway, the topic of our conversation varied a great deal over the course of the hours; we discussed everything from the mechanics of travelling circles and shapeshifting (or, as Ruv prefers to call it, the "art of Sanguina") to their interactions with—and I can't believe I'm sincerely writing this—unicorns and dragons and sassy ginger forest nymphs.

But it gets even stranger, uncle. There was a natural lull in the conversation at some point, so I got up to make another pot of tea. With four avid tea-drinkers under one roof, the kettle is constantly in use. Nevertheless, when I returned with a fresh pot, I noticed that Gren had left the room. Before I could so much as ask where he scampered off to, Mari explained, "Gren just stepped out to take a call." Normal enough, right?

Except for the part where none of them own phones.

“On whose mobile?” I inquired with a quirked brow, knowing full well that mine was in the back pocket of my pants, and it’d been years since there’d been an active house line.

“Ok, so remember about that first journey to Aorea, how Gren and I went with two other friends?” Mari began, and I nodded. I’d be lying if I said I retained everything they’d told me, but I was at least reaching a point where I could mostly follow along and keep all the names straight in a roughly chronological order. “Even though Laria and Hal are in the sanctuary, we can still talk to them. Telepathically.”

“Right,” I said, evidently with no shortage of doubt in both tone and face. I thought I was getting so good at believing in things lately, learning to let loose a little. I found myself wondering then if I’d become *too* gullible and that my new friends were, in fact, a bit wrong in the head. Unicorns and dragons I can rationalize, to an extent—unicorns are just extra intelligent horses with bony growths on their foreheads, and dragons could be just gargantuan, winged reptiles, not so different from dinosaurs, really—but telepathy? Come, now. Everyone knows that’s a crock.

“I know it sounds ridiculous,” Mari continued, accurately interpreting the incredulity from my face, “but it’s linked to our fatestones.” Her fingers instinctively reached to the pendant she always wore, a crescent moon carved from some green stone, likely jade or a type of agate. I’d always assumed it was just a normal necklace, but then I did recall noticing the frequency with which her fingers brushed across it, as if always reassuring herself that it was still in place. Of course, something I perhaps should have noticed earlier on in our acquaintanceship, was that the same green stone and crescent shape that perpetually adorned Mari’s throat also adorned her sundry weaponry. From her leather sword belt and sheath to the studded dagger, bits of green stone flashed everywhere.

The formulation of another hypothesis began to take root in my mind. “So Gren, I’m assuming, has one, too,” I intoned. I had observed a hint of silver chain peeking out of his collar upon occasion, but I couldn’t remember ever seeing the pendant attached to it. As my eyes strayed to the bow and quiver set that Gren had left propped in a corner of the lounge, noting the glint of deep blue gems embedded in the leather and metalwork, I added, “Is his a star, perchance?”

Mari seemed to catch onto where my brain was going, because she grinned and said, “Yes, a sapphire star. And they’re more than just miniature, gemstone cell phones, I’ll have you know. We actually hear our friends’ voices directly inside our heads.” However, as soon as she was done speaking, her eyes glazed over for a few seconds, her fingers still wrapped tight around her gemstone crescent. When her focus returned, she

explained, “It looks like Laria and Hal have a few things they want to tell me as well. I’ll be right back.” With that, she stood and left the room.

As my mind spun with questions and assumptions and possible constraints for even more future experiments, I refilled mine and Ruv’s teacups. I was even contemplating expanding to other branches of science, straying from the geology to which I’d devoted the majority of my academic career, when Ruv interrupted my thoughts by clearing his throat. “They’re not crazy,” he assured me. “And everything we’ve told you is the truth.”

I nodded absently and sipped my tea. “Not even a slight exaggeration?”

“None,” Ruv asserted. “If anything, we’ve under-exaggerated. If you truly want to come to Aorea with us...”

My back straightened as I said with all the conviction I could muster, “I’m coming.”

“...then there are some things you need to understand,” Ruv finished. “Mari and Gren are more than they seem. They have a destiny. In Aorea, they are practically celebrities, known as much for the things they’ve already done, as for the things they will one day do.”

“Like what?” I pressed him, curious despite my reservations.

Ruv shrugged and sipped his tea. “It is not for me to say.”

I tried to get Ruv to elaborate, but he kept his mouth firmly closed on the destiny front after that. Instead, he contemplated further what my totem animal might be. He seems to be undecided whether I’m predator or prey. My own vote is for the former. I may be fine-boned and baby-faced, but I have never felt like *prey*. But I also know that I’m no wolf, and I’m certainly no panther. None of the other animals he listed as candidates felt right either: bear, lynx, deer, horse, antelope. He tried to talk me through how to find my totem, how to look inside myself and see this other form I supposedly possess, but to no avail. He even tried to guide me through a meditation for it—did I mention Gren and Mari were gone for quite a while? Their untouched cups had long gone cold by this point—but that didn’t work either. For whatever reason the process of clearing my mind just wouldn’t stick.

I couldn’t help but laugh when his frustration tipped the scales on his patience, and he blurted, “You’re overthinking it!”

That was far from the first time I’d heard those particular words lobbed in my direction, and I suspect it will not be the last.

Ruv gave up after that on trying to coach me on how to find my totem. Instead, he turned his intention toward walking me through, at least in theory, how to actually make the shift. Ruv seems pretty convinced that I have enough “totem blood,” as he calls it, that my first shift in Aorea will be fairly easy, once I figure out my inner animal. He said sometimes it’s possible for a sanguine to shift without knowing what form waits on the

other side, but that it is rare, and potentially dangerous. Maybe the atmosphere in Aorea will be enough to trigger some latent inner knowledge on the subject. I suppose we will just have to wait and see.

Finally, after what must have been at least an hour, Mari and Gren both returned to the lounge. But of course, no sooner had they gotten comfortable on the settee than there came the lyrical sounds of the doorbell followed by a frantic pounding on the front door. The others exchanged glances, equally as confused as I was, wondering who could possibly be calling at such an hour. As much of a hermit as I've been the past six months, the manor hasn't been receiving many visitors. So, more than a wee bit perturbed, I motioned for the others to stay put while I rose from the couch and went to the door, the rhythmic knocking continuing the entire time.

When at last I finished the trek from the lounge—the foyer felt so much longer than usual—I clicked on the porch light and peered through the windows that framed the front door. The pounding abruptly ceased, and, spying a familiar set of black leathers across the glass, I opened the door. Without so much as a greeting in preamble, Sarah barrelled into the entrance and snapped, “Where are the others? I need their help.”

“What’s wrong?” I asked, shutting the door and leading Sarah back to the lounge.

“They’ve got Sam,” she said.

And drat, I do believe that is the sound of the alarm going off now. That’s all the time I have for writing now...more to follow, uncle.

Until then, sweet dreams.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melissa A. Ivanco-Murray is a writer, artist, and musician who resides in Charlottesville, Virginia with her husband Sean and their horde of fur- and feather-children. For more adventures about Mari, Gren, and their friends, see Ivanco-Murray's debut novel *Destined (Circle 1)*, the companion novella *Bound*, and the upcoming full-length sequel *Hidden (Circle 2)*.