

THE EDGE OF STRANGE HOLLOW

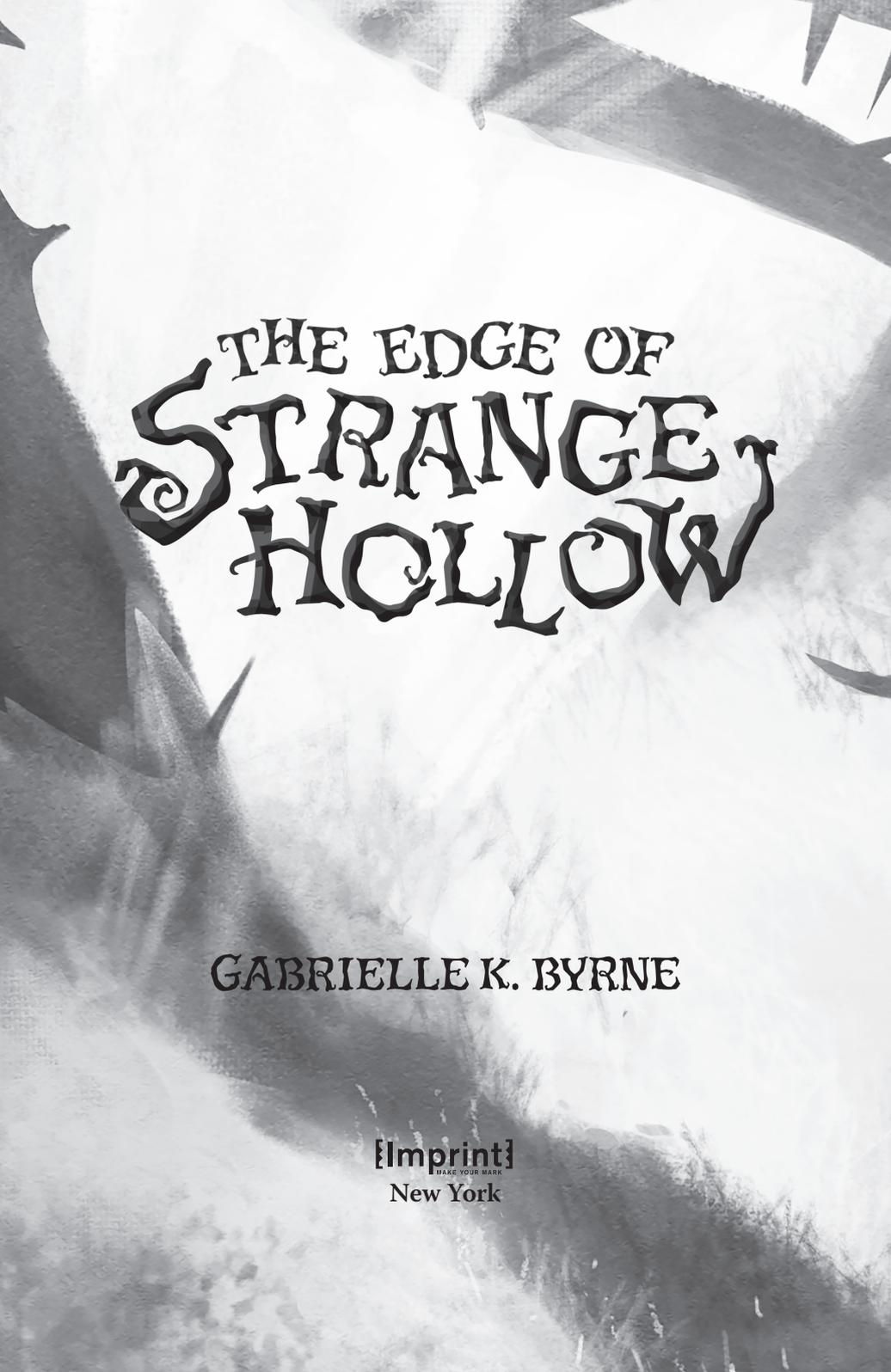


GABRIELLE K. BYRNE

THE EDGE OF
STRANGE
HOLLOW

ALSO BY GABRIELLE K. BYRNE

Rise of the Dragon Moon



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STRANGE
HOLLOW

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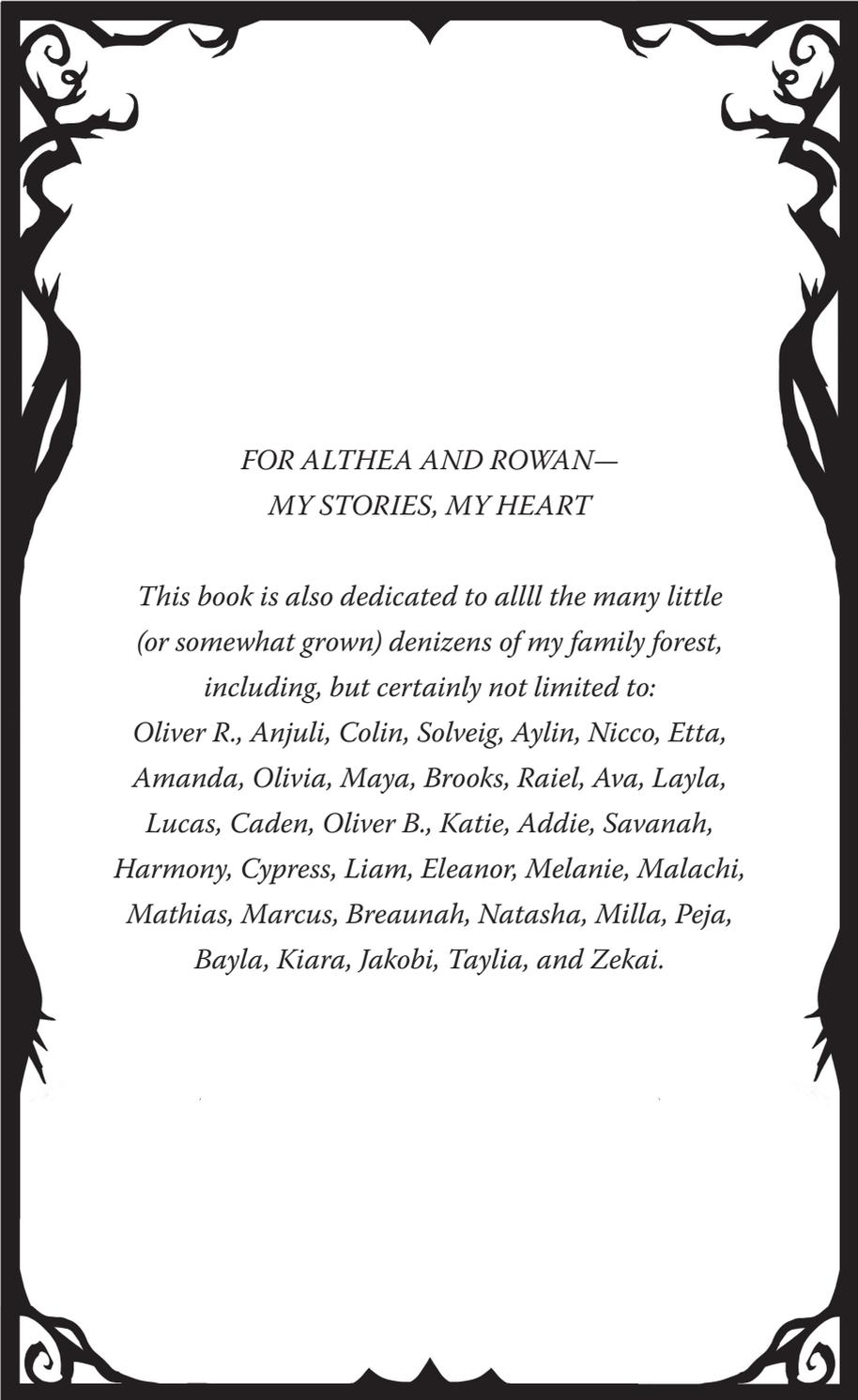
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There are all manner of witches in the Grimwood.
One thing they all have in common is a dislike for law-breakers, oath-snappers,
and, for reasons that are not entirely clear . . . pharmacists.

In any case, consider yourself warned.

If you steal this book, you may end up holding a witch's windsock
for the rest of your days.



FOR ALTHEA AND ROWAN—
MY STORIES, MY HEART

*This book is also dedicated to alllll the many little
(or somewhat grown) denizens of my family forest,
including, but certainly not limited to:*

*Oliver R., Anjuli, Colin, Solveig, Aylin, Nicco, Etta,
Amanda, Olivia, Maya, Brooks, Raiel, Ava, Layla,
Lucas, Caden, Oliver B., Katie, Addie, Savanah,
Harmony, Cypress, Liam, Eleanor, Melanie, Malachi,
Mathias, Marcus, Breaunah, Natasha, Milla, Peja,
Bayla, Kiara, Jakobi, Taylia, and Zekai.*

ONCE UPON A TIME



The twins—one boy and one girl—sat beneath the thick wooden table, listening. Rain pattered against the windows, and the fire crackled in front of their father as he carved a new ward to sit on Governor Gale’s roof beam. The thin curls of wood flipped themselves neatly into the hearth as he worked. Their mother stood next to him in the firelight as they spoke in clipped whispers.

“They say he walked right out of his house last night,” the girl heard her mother say.

Their father said nothing, but his mouth tightened and another curl of wood whipped itself into the fire.

“He was a good man—a good neighbor.”

Their mother wiped her eyes on her sleeves. “He *never* went into the wood. He kept his wards strong.”

The girl swallowed. She hadn’t known Mr. Chaten well, but he had once brought a stew to share with them when her father was gone to Trader’s Hollow.

“What was it?” their father asked, and the girl’s heart quailed at the anger in his low voice.

“Governor Gale thinks the malediction took the shape of a fork. Just . . . just a plain fork.”

Their father sighed and let the carving fall to his lap. He turned to their mother and took her hands. “Such a simple thing. Did he bring it inside? Did he use it?”

Her mother nodded, and the girl could feel the tickle of her brother’s breath near her ear, listening with her.

“Uprooted it in his own field,” their mother choked. “It could have been us, Rob. He thought it was his own. He laughed with Talon about it last night at the inn—how he’d grown careless in his old age.”

“And—”

“And—this morning he was gone. Walked into the Grimwood on his own two feet in the night.”

Their father turned back to his carving. Another flick of his knife. Another curl of wood hissing in the fire. “He won’t be back.”

“No. He won’t be back.”

“Any pickers?”

“Not that anyone saw. Only footprints.”

The girl’s brother shifted next to her. “I bet the pickers come tonight,” the boy said in her ear, making the hair on her neck rise. His dark curls, a perfect match to hers, caught the light. “I bet you picked up a malediction and didn’t even know it, just like Mr. Chaten—some little thing by the river—and tonight the pickers will walk through the Hollows with their stick bodies and their tiny heads, and their scrabbling legs. They’ll tap at your window and call you out to follow them into the Grimwood.”

“They will not!” The girl scowled as she sat up and crossed her arms. The two looked alike in every way—dark curls, dark eyes, and skin the color of gingerbread—the same shade as the pale brown earth under their fingernails. She was, perhaps, a bit smaller, a little thinner in the face—but perhaps not.

“Anyway, the pickers would never take me,” she hissed at him. “Mother says I’m too ornery to feed to the thorn trees. But I bet the faeries *will* take *you* in the night.” A gleam came into her eyes. “Their queen will come knocking. Mother won’t even mind. She’ll let them through the wards, and they’ll take you away in chains.”

The boy’s face fell. Tears filled his eyes. A flash of remorse flew across the girl’s face. Her brother was full of clever thoughts and bright plans, but the sharp edge of his imagination cut two ways. He was too quick to believe. She took his hand. “They won’t really, Peter,” she whispered, unable to meet his eyes.

They watched their mother’s feet, silent in green wool house shoes, as she moved across the worn floor to open the front door of the cottage. The pensive blues of nightfall spilled into the room like the finest faery silk. “See,” the girl insisted. “Mother’s setting the wards now.”

They peeked together out from under the table as their mother placed their protective ward gently on its post outside the door. The gruesome witch, with her twiggy carved hair and sharp teeth would keep away real witches—and

other horrors they couldn't name. Then their mother sprinkled salt and iron shavings at their doorstep and held up the small bell, ringing it to set the wards. "Many are the roots," she sang. "Many are the eyes. Pass us by. Pass us by. Pass us by." Her words rang like the bell, over the top of their neighbors' voices as they did the same, their many voices and bells folding into a singsong. Pass us by. Pass us by.

The boy shivered, and grabbed his sister's other hand. "Say the rhyme with me, Mags."

Her smile could have warmed a stone. She turned to face him, both cross-legged, and met his eyes. Their voices pitched just over a whisper as the scent of warm bread filled the room.

Stay away from the Grimwood, child. Stay away from the fog. Stay away from the thorn trees, child. Stay away from the bog. Keep the promise. Rue the day. The Grimwood is no place to play. Close the shutters. Lock the doors. They come for you on twos and fours. They come for you on twos and fours.

CHAPTER ONE

There were terrible things in the Grimwood. Things that could, and would, try to kill her. This was why Poppy's parents didn't want her in the Grimwood at all. She understood that, and yet here she was, standing at the forest's edge.

Her heart raced, but not from fear. It wasn't likely she'd bump into a monster—not at high noon, so close to the town of Strange Hollow.

She peered into the wood's dappled shadows where the trees stretched away behind the cockeyed arches and towers of her house. Poppy could only manage one hundred paces into the wood before the ward her parents put on her became unbearable. They hoped it would curb her thirst to learn everything there was to know about the Grimwood, but it didn't. Trying to make her stay out only made the longing worse. Especially when her parents were always leaving on long, mysterious trips into the wood themselves.

She was nine when her parents stopped sharing

stories of their work. They must have realized that the light in Poppy's eyes was more than just a passing fancy. Instead they huddled together in the kitchen reviewing their plans when they thought she was asleep. Poppy, in turn, perfected the art of eavesdropping. She learned a lot that way, not just about the woods, but about the dangers her parents faced hunting maledictions. They risked their lives to bring the objects home and put them in stasis—making them powerless to lure the people of Strange Hollow into the wood.

Poppy tugged her long black hair into a ponytail and wiped her palms against her black jeans. She carried her small day pack, filled to bursting with her mother's old net gun, an extra knife (her favorite was holstered in her right boot), two apples, bug spray, and a water bottle. She slung the length of rope over her shoulder. Before she left the house, she'd swapped her own black T-shirt for one of her mother's from the laundry—decorated with a sea dragon and the words "They Might Be Giants," whatever that was supposed to mean. She lifted the neckline of the shirt and closed her eyes to take a deep breath. The bunched muscles of her shoulders eased as the warm green scent of her mother's vetiver oil washed over her.

Her parents had hunted maledictions in the Grimwood for the last three days. Jute told her they were back the moment she had woken up that morning. They'd

arrived home when the sun was just a hint of green on the horizon, and they would sleep for most of the day. So Poppy was taking matters into her own hands.

It was time to prove they could make the Hollows safer *as a family*. She was tired of being alone. She was tired of hoping they would see she wasn't just another kid they had to protect, who had nothing to offer.

They had taught her a lot about the forest—more than they knew—but it wasn't enough. Poppy wanted to know *all* the Grimwood's secrets. Her questions itched under her skin, as numerous and irritating as the mosquitoes buzzing around her. Some of them were big . . . like whether the Alcyon sea was bottomless, or whether the Holly Oak could talk, or if unicorns were real. She wanted to know more about the maledictions—and how to tell the difference between a good witch and a bad one. Big or small, any question could keep her awake for hours—like, what did a thorn tree look like, or how many species of tentaculars were there?

Poppy wanted to see it all with her own eyes—was *going* to see it all. She was done starving for answers while her parents threw them out like bread crumbs.

She tugged on the fingerless leather gloves her uncle Jute had given her for her last birthday. The black leather made her skin look even paler than usual, but they beat the cuts and insect bites she used to come home with on her hands. Jute wasn't really her uncle. He was a hob her

parents had rescued in the forest and invited home before she was even born.

Poppy finished pulling on her gloves, and straightened her spine. She would go in, get the Mogwen feather, and come straight out again. Alone, the Mogwen were no threat to a human—but they were rarely alone. A symphony of Mogwen, once angered, became merciless predators. But if she could get a Mogwen feather, her parents would see she was ready. She let herself imagine it—holding the long red and turquoise feather out as her mother’s eyes widened in shock. Her father’s mouth falling open . . . their faces full of resigned respect.

Poppy stared into the forest and considered. Yes, that would make them listen. It would prove she deserved to go all the way into the Grimwood—not just a hundred steps. She hoped that after today her parents would take their ward off her themselves.

Her parents were always going on about the town’s useless obsession with wards. They carved statues of monsters and placed them on roof beams and posts outside their doors to keep the real monsters away. They put out bells to appease faeries. But they were just trinkets. They sang songs, too, and they were pretty—but *what good was a song*, her father would scoff.

No, there were only two kinds of wards that did any good at all. Rock salt mixed with iron shavings was one. The other was a blood ward, like the one her parents had put on her.

Poppy took a deep breath and stepped into the forest. Her ears buzzed with the warding, but she ignored it. The air was cool and smelled of sap and heat, and something else bitter-sharp, and like always—despite the ward, there was part of her that could breathe better here. It was as though she was a knot, drawn tight all the time, and only the air of the forest could untangle her. Ninety-eight steps left. Her boots sank a little in the summer soil, and her heart skipped a beat as she looked up into the canopy. There was no breeze, but the trees rustled and creaked.

Poppy paused to listen. In the distance she caught the Mogwen song—two birds, or maybe four—singing in two-part harmony. Mogwen weren't rare, but they were rarely caught. She moved quickly, holding tight to the loops of rope she'd slung over her shoulder and backpack. She stopped counting her steps. She had tested the ward with painstaking thoroughness, so she knew what would happen. First her skin would tingle, and then it would itch—and then, when she got close to her hundredth step, it would burn, and not in a pleasant way.

Poppy's breath rasped against her teeth as she hurried toward the birdsong. She hoped Mack would join her. He'd be angry at her if she "made bad choices" without him. Half a smile edged its way across her face at the thought of his stern expression. It was Mack who had told her about the Mogwen. He'd been her best and only friend ever since an afternoon two years ago when she found him picking mushrooms at the edge of the forest.

The song grew louder, and now the birds sang in three-part harmony. That meant there had to be at least six of them. Any more, and she'd have to come back another time; it would be too dangerous. Three more steps and her skin tingled everywhere with full-body pins and needles. Twenty steps left.

A flash of red feathers high above gave the Mogwen away. Poppy pressed herself against the sticky bark of a pine tree and looked up. The birds were in the highest branches of a white-barked birch—and beside it stood the first thorn tree she had ever seen.

Poppy's heart jumped. She knew what it was right away. Nothing else could have that shiny, smooth black bark. The tree almost glittered, as though it was draped in a fine sunlit layer of frost. The whip-like branches shifted, dancing in the nonexistent breeze, and she caught glimpses of the long thorns underneath. She hadn't expected them to be so . . . pretty. It was like a willow tree gone wrong.

Thorn trees grew from heavy black soil, watered in the blood of their prey, and littered with the skeletons of animals once wrapped in their thorny whips. In the Grimwood deep, whole groves of them grew. Her parents had stumbled on more than one that had caught a human. They spoke about the thorn trees in hushed voices, after they stumbled in from their death-defying missions. Young Poppy had loved the tiny shivers that

ran down her spine when her parents told her about their work.

Seeing her first for-real thorn tree made Poppy's mouth go dry, but she resisted the urge to move closer for a better look. The trick with thorn trees was to see them before you got too close—before they sensed you were there. This one hadn't been there a few days ago. She'd heard they sprang out of the ground like springs, but did they always grow so fast, she wondered . . . and what was it doing here, so close to the edge?

The thorn trees defend the forest and feed its magic. Attack the forest, and a thorn tree would grow. Any creature that dared to cut down a tree in the Grimwood would soon find themselves looking at the world from high up, wrapped in the whips of a thorn tree. Had someone—besides her—gone into the forest and tried to, what? Cut down a tree?

The dark circle of soil around the thorn tree still held remnants of the shrubs and plants that had died when it rose. Poppy shivered. She didn't even want to imagine what had caused the huge groves in the deep wood to grow. Perhaps they had been there as long as the forest.

She peeled her gaze away from the tree, turning back toward the Mogwen. The birds were clever. They had perched just far enough away that the thorn-covered-whips couldn't reach to strike them down or wind them in a deadly embrace.

Poppy ignored the sparking sensations that fluttered over her skin and carefully reached back over her shoulder. Her fingers wrapped around the smooth cold barrel of the net gun as she lifted it free. She peered up at the nearest bird through the crosshairs and pressed her lips together. She'd forgotten how big they were. Easily two feet tall, with a pointed red crest and sharp black beak they used to pierce their prey.

Poppy paused and studied the trees. She'd have to choose one and climb to get close enough to nab the bird with her net gun. Her best option would be the pine just outside the circle of black soil that marked the thorn tree's territory. It was farther from the Mogwen than she liked, but she had the ward to consider—not to mention the thorn tree. The pine was just out of its range.

She wrapped the rope around the pine with a sharp exhale, coiling each end around one of her wrists. She gripped tight, leaned back, and gritting her teeth, began to climb.

Beams of sunlight pierced through the trees like arrows. The pine sap made the rope stick, and sweat burst out over Poppy's forehead as she quietly made her way up the tree. She tried not to step on the small purple and black tentaculars that scattered over the surface of the bark, each one waving its sticky arms in the air to gather pollen before bending them, one at a time, to the hole of its mouth.

Poppy's hands slicked, and she sent Jute silent thanks for the gloves.

The Mogwen song drifted over the forest, the three distinct patterns rising and falling together like a spell. Poppy pulled herself up to sit on a branch and caught her breath. The humming of the ward in her ears was starting to give her a headache, but she didn't care. She was almost as high as the Mogwen now—just below them, but close enough to see their round yellow eyes. One of them had cocked its head at her, watching.

She squeezed her hands into fists, gritting her teeth as she fought to push away the itching pinpricks of the ward. The pain was supposed to keep her out of the wood altogether. It was supposed to make her turn around and go home, but it only made her more determined.

She was shaking her hands out when a thump from below caught her attention. Mack scowled up at her. Her best friend's skin and chestnut curls were almost as dark as the pine bark, and for a moment all Poppy saw were his copper eyes looking up at her from the dappled shadows. Mack was an elf, but still growing and, for now, only a little taller than her. In addition to his many good qualities as a friend, Poppy had to admit that his forest savvy had been helpful on several occasions. From where she sat, high in the tree branches, he looked small. She gave a tiny wave.

"What are you doing?" he mouthed up at her.

She pointed across at the Mogwen.

Mack shook his head.

Poppy nodded and lifted her net gun from her lap.

She could hear his nose-sigh from all the way up the tree.

She scooted farther from the trunk to take aim, her body rocking as she balanced on the narrowing branch. She forced herself not to cringe as the buzzing of her ward grew louder in her ears. Slowly, she lifted the net gun to peer through the crosshairs and sighted a beautiful male Mogwen singing the bass line.

The gun gave a twang. The net careened toward the bird, and he squawked a deep cry, lifting into the air as it wrapped around his branch. Poppy let out a swear word as a single black whip, longer than the rest, looped up from the thorn tree, wrapped around Poppy's ankle, and yanked.

She toppled from the tree.

Mack dived to catch her, and she landed on him, knocking the wind out of both of them. Another whip struck the ground next to their faces, and Poppy rolled over, tugging to get her leg free as the thorn tree reeled her in.

Mack, choking and gasping for air, grabbed under her arms and scuttled backward, pulling until Poppy was suspended in the air, with Mack on one side and the thorn tree on the other.

"Lose the boot," Mack grunted.

Poppy tried to bend her knee, but her leg was pulled taut. “They’re my . . . favorites,” she ground out. Her knee-high leather boots had thick soles, and thick leather—and cute little skulls on the sides.

“By thorns, Poppy! Lose the boot!”

“I thought you were strong! Pull like you mean it, Mack!”

He gave her a yank that bent the thorn branch toward them. “Harder,” Poppy hollered. “It’s loosening.”

Mack grunted again. “Your arms will come out of your sockets if I pull any harder.”

“They’ll heal! I’m not losing these boots! Wait! Move me forward.”

Mack’s heels skidded forward an inch. He tugged back again. “Forward? *Toward* the thorn tree? No way! You’ll be killed!” He yanked again. “Thorns, Poppy! We’ll *both* be killed!”

“My knife’s in my boot. I can cut the whip.”

Mack’s grip loosened a little and Poppy stretched to just reach the wooden handle of her knife. She pulled it clear and swiped across the whip.

They fell back, but this time, Mack pulled them out of range of the thorn tree.

Poppy sat up and examined her boot. There were thorn scratches all over the leather, but no holes. She patted it with a smile, and returned her knife to the ankle holster inside. “Good boot.”

She turned to look at Mack. He was lying on his back, staring up at the canopy and breathing hard. “You okay?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Thanks for the help.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I mean . . . I could have dealt with it . . . but thanks.”

Mack’s gaze shifted to meet hers, then returned to the treetops. “You should have waited for me.”

“I missed the Mogwen.”

Mack scanned the trees. “You’re lucky they flew away instead of attacking us.”

Poppy pressed her lips tight. “They’re faster than I expected.” She hopped up and brushed herself off, then held out her hand to Mack to help him up.

He was barefoot, as always. The tight spirals of his hair—the same tawny brown as his skin, hung low over his coppery eyes. The points of his ears didn’t give him better hearing, exactly, but they did pick up on vibrations that came through his feet. Today Mack had on a pair of jeans, and a green T-shirt with a hand holding a bunch of flowers on it.

He pointed at her T-shirt. “‘They Might Be Giants’? What’s that supposed to mean?”

Poppy shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s my mom’s. I think she got it at the last solstice trade.”

“So . . . it’s a human thing—from outside the fog?”

“Probably,” Poppy agreed, rolling her shoulders to work out the ache.

“It’s a sea monster, though . . . not a giant.” Mack shook his head, his eyebrows furrowed. “And there’s only one. It should say, ‘It might be a sea monster,’ not ‘They Might Be Giants.’”

Poppy waited. She knew where this was going.

“You don’t think humans outside the fog think giants are . . . are sea monsters, do you?”

“No. I doubt it.”

Finally, he got around to the point. “I wonder if my grandfather would have known about this.”

Poppy put one hand up on Mack’s shoulder in solidarity—united in their quest for the unknown. Ever since Mack had found out that one of his grandparents *might* have been human, he was as obsessed with learning about human things as Poppy was about the Grimwood. The grandparents in question had *apparently* had a whirlwind romance, then the grandfather had disappeared, and probably died, before the question could be resolved to Mack’s family’s satisfaction, *apparently*. The whole thing had been making his brain itch ever since.

“But there aren’t even sea monsters or giants or elves . . . or any of the wood folk out there—past the fog, right?”

“Nope. Don’t think so.”

“So . . .”

“I don’t get it either.” Poppy frowned. “Things outside the fog are different from in the Hollows. It could mean anything.”

The buzzing in her ears from the warding was starting to hurt. She squeezed her fists—open, closed, open, closed.

Mack caught sight of her hands and his expression turned stern. “You know what I don’t get, Poppy? I don’t get why we’re hunting Mogwen.”

She sighed, and looked back toward the thorn tree. A flash of red caught her eye. “No way,” she said under her breath, then gave a little hop. “No! Way!”

“What?”

Poppy didn’t answer.

Now was the time for action.

A single Mogwen feather lay at the base of the thorn tree. She’d have to cross the boundary of her ward, but she could do it. “Mack, take my pack.” Poppy shrugged out of her backpack and pulled her knife again.

“Poppy . . . what are you . . .” He followed her gaze to the feather. “No way. Don’t do it.”

“I’m doing it.”

“Poppy, that’s a thorn tree. Seriously.”

“It’s already done.” She launched herself forward. Two steps. Three.

She dived, grabbing the feather from the ground as she rolled back up to her feet, running. The whip cut the air behind her.

She dodged left, out of the tree's range as the pins and needles turned to burning. Pain lanced through her and she threw herself back across the boundary with a scream that was half anguish and half victory.

She lay on her back panting, the feather in her hand, as sweat rolled down her neck. A harsh laugh bubbled out of her. "See? No problem."

He crossed his arms. "I can't believe you just did that. That was really dangerous."

Poppy shot a smirk at him from the ground. Mack had never been a take-chances kind of guy. She understood that.

He scowled down at her. "It's just a feather, Poppy."

She couldn't stop her smile. "It's not just a feather. When my parents see this, it will change everything."

Poppy rose to her feet and gave him a friendly pat on the back as she shuffled past him. "Come on. Let's go see what Jute's got cooking."