

lovely things (but you're the loveliest)

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Snapshots of Mel, Stella, falling in love, and sharing gestures of affection. Or: the Aveyond 3 attraction points rewritten to be for Mel/Stella.

Title from "Prettiest Thing" by Oh Darling.

Thanks to Aco (chapter 1), Ishti (chapter 2), and Danny (chapter 1, 3-7) for beta'ing!

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Additional Notes:

Galahad's flower preservation in Chapter 5 is a total extrapolation inspired by a combination of [Your Shadow](#) and [Rhenegade](#), both by Ishti. You should definitely check them out, although for very different reasons - "[Your Shadow](#)" is an excellent te'ijalahad oneshot, and "[Rhenegade](#)" is a phenomenal Aveyond 1 canon divergent novel of a fanfic!

Chapter 1 - Gheledon

Mel sits scowling with her shoulders hunched forward and her legs crossed on top of her bed in the Gheledon inn. She crosses her arms – pointedly – and stares ahead of her at the wall.

“Mel,” Edward says from the side of the room she’s deliberately not paying attention to, “are you going to be mad at me all day? All I did was buy you a poem!”

“I was mad at you all morning, so yes.”

He groans. “I just don’t understand why you’re so upset about this. I was trying to be thoughtful!”

“You should have thought better, then,” Mel says, rapidly turning her head to glare at him. “I know you don’t feel that way about me. And I know that because you read this damn sonnet to me before even reading it over once yourself. You didn’t even get the rhythm right. Honestly, Edward, isn’t that part of your princely education or whatever?”

Edward grits his teeth. “Would you just–”

“Both of you, relax!” Stella, previously rummaging through the group’s belongings on the floor, stands up and rests her hands on her hips. She’s the tallest of the three, and hopes it briefly grants her some authority. “I’m not going to let you two ruin each other’s days over this anymore. Mel. Edward was trying to do something nice for you. He wanted to be sweet. You understand that, right?”

“He was being inconsiderate,” Mel retorts. “Like he thinks I’m going to believe some generic nonsense about how beautiful I am. First of all, I’m not. Second of all, Stella, the sonnet mentioned ‘auburn locks.’” Mel flicks her decidedly black bob back and forth with an irritated roll of her head. “Do these locks look auburn to you? He should have read it to himself!”

“They don’t,” Stella agrees, slowly. “Which brings me to my next point. Edward, Mel’s hurt because you tried to compliment her by paying someone else to come up with something to say. She doesn’t appreciate the gesture because it doesn’t feel sincere. That makes sense to you, yeah?”

“I guess,” Edward says. “Yeah, that makes sense. I’m sorry, Mel. When Lyra offered to let me read the poem to someone, I just thought you’d appreciate the gesture. I guess I was pretty careless.”

Mel looks at Edward now. Stella thinks she looks less upset, but barely any less tense. Her crossed arms relax slightly, but she keeps her grimace. “...I’m sorry, too. It was a bunch of noble bull, but I didn’t have to be a jerk about it.”

Edward beams. He hops over to Mel's bed, sitting down beside her. "Truce, then?"

Mel's expression flickers, and she matches his smile. "Yeah, truce."

"So we're good!" Stella says.

"I'll come up with it myself, next time," Edward adds.

Mel nods. "Ha, yeah. Good idea."

...

"Hey, Mel, could I ask you about something?" Stella asks, sitting down next to her in front of the waterfall.

Mel skips another stone across the pond. Edward's off somewhere, asking around about advice for augmenting Excalibur, and she's elected to spend her morning pretending she isn't on the run from an evil vampire intent on using her to enslave humanity before they head out to Naylith.

"Yeah, sure."

"Yesterday... did you say you're not beautiful?"

She laughs, throwing her next rock and watching it dance across the water. "I mean, yeah. Have you seen me?" She glances at her. "Don't worry about my self-esteem, Stella, it's not a bad thing. I'm happy with it. Being bland is helpful in my line of work. And I like how I look, anyways." She snorts. "I just know no poet is going to write about how gorgeous I am, and no prince has any business pretending otherwise."

Stella can't help herself. Mel's laugh, however brief and derisive, is infectious. She giggles. "I get you." She glances away for a second; Mel thinks she sees her chew on the side of her mouth. "I just don't agree."

"Huh?"

"I mean, beauty's in the eye of the beholder, right?" Stella looks back at her, a little more certain in her smile now. "I think you're beautiful, Mel."

Mel chucks her next rock with a little less than perfect aim. Instead of its effortless glide before, it plunks into the water. "You're just saying that."

"I mean it! Maybe it's just because I know you, so you couldn't possibly be plain to me, but I mean it."

"Thanks," Mel squeaks out.

Then she looks at Stella - taller than her, and fat, with a soft chest and squishy pair of arms that make for amazing hugs. She looks at her pastel, curly hair, her dark skin with

scattered freckles that remind her of constellations, her deep purple eyes. She looks at her awkward, bright smile, the way her cheeks raise as she makes it. She wonders how awkward her own face must look right now.

Then she thinks about how ridiculous it is she's looking at her like she needed any confirmation.

“You're beautiful, too.”

Chapter 2 - Stormbend

“Flowers for sale! Flowers for sale! You there, young man, would you care to buy some flowers?” Mel groans and stops in their tracks as Edward, yet again, proceeds to hold the whole party up by buying something he doesn’t need. They had almost just reached the port, too. Mel can see the ocean glittering a few more blocks in the distance.

And then their view is blocked by Te’ijal bounding towards it, yanking a reluctant-but-definitely-still-running Galahad behind her. Mel stumbles back as the pair rushes past them. *Huh*, Mel thinks, *maybe she has the right idea*, and they leave Edward to his devices and jog out towards the shore.

When they approach, they slow down, walking the final steps to the water. The ocean is beautiful. Mel tries to remember if they’d ever seen a beach before, but wracking their mind brings back nothing. Harburg was surrounded by dense woods, and Thais was straight in the center of the mainland. Walking through the Thial Mountains, they’d seen water far down below, but it was framed by sharp gray cliffs, and not particularly inviting looking.

It looks inviting now. Te’ijal is unlacing her boots and rolling up the legs of her pants in preparation of striding in; Galahad stands a few yards away, apparently content remaining in his armor. Stella’s found a spot to sit and is tracing her fingers in the sand, making patterns on the shore. Edward is tapping on Mel’s shoulder.

They startle and turn around, only to be met with a bouquet of flowers pushed out towards their chest. The flowers are red and yellow and orange, firey and bold, and Edward is grinning like he’s pleased with himself.

“I got these for you.”

“...I can see that.”

“I thought you’d like the colors! See, we’ve got orange, like your bow, and red and yellow, which, um, go nicely with orange.” He shakes the bouquet in front of Mel.

They take it awkwardly. “Edward... you shouldn’t have.”

“I know I really screwed up the last gift, so I wanted to make up for it.”

Okay, that’s a little sweet. They smile. “Flowers. So original.”

“I, uh-”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

Edward gives an exaggerated bow, and talks in that obnoxious voice he uses when Mel makes fun of him, to be in on the joke. "You're very welcome, my..." he frowns, adjusting his script, and settles on, "my dear."

"Ugh." Mel laughs and loops their arm in his. "You're the worst best friend ever, you know that?"

"Was starting to get the idea, sure."

"Thanks for holding off on the 'my lady' nonsense."

"But of course."

They snicker. "All said, flowers make me sneeze, so I'm going to go give these to Stella."

"Sur- wait, what?"

But they've already unlatched their arm, and skip down the sand to find her. She's moved a little further out, leaving a trail of butterflies and hearts on the sand behind her. Mel is careful not to tread on them and erase her hard work. They plop themselves down beside her, knocking their shoulder against her side. "Hey."

It catches her attention, and she looks over. "Hey! Oh-"

Mel hands over the flowers. "I got you these."

Stella's quiet for a second, eyes wide, glancing between Mel's face and the bouquet as she takes it gently. A soft grin brightens her face. "Really?"

"Well, obviously. But also, not quite. Edward gave them to me, and I figured you'd appreciate them a lot more."

"You don't have to do that! You can keep them - we can share-"

"I want you to have them." *They make me itch* wasn't really the smoothest rationale, so Mel offers, "Really! Your face lit up when you saw them."

"That's very sweet of you, Mel. Thank you."

"Any time." Mel grins.

Stella ducks her head just slightly downward and plants a peck on their cheek.

They're sure they've turned red.

Then Stella stands up slowly, dusting the sand from her dress. With the arm not holding the bouquet, she reaches out to Mel.

"Where are you going? I just got here!"

"We're supposed to be in Stormbend for a few nights, right? I can keep these at the inn. I want to buy a vase!"

"That's ridiculous. You're ridiculous." Mel says, but they take her hand and let her lift them up anyways.

"Forgive me for wanting to appreciate my gift. Especially after you did such a poor job of it."

"Hey now!"

Now solidly up, Mel goes to let go of Stella's hand, but she's locking their fingers before they get the chance. They look up at her as if to ask about it, but she's just continuing the conversation without a care in the world, a warm smile on her face. "I'm teasing you. It's very kind."

Mel squeezes her hand, lies through their teeth about kind being their middle name, and lets Stella lead them back to town.

Chapter 3 - Witchwood

As Stella glances around Witchwood, trying to keep an eye out for a straggling Edward, she notes that for once, their party isn't the only obvious group of travelers. The children swarming around average about eight or nine, she guesses, with an older looking one glancing across their charges with a watchful eye. They're all dressed up, some in dark colors with pointy hats mimicking the very witches they're terrorizing, others in bright shades and fake fairy wings. Stella likes those costumes especially. She watches as they group together, rush towards a house, knock on the door demanding sweets, and run away triumphantly.

Te'ijal, already giddy from her birthday, a fact she shared at least ten times in the morning, is enchanted by the festivities, giggling and pointing at specific costumes. Galahad makes a point to look in the opposite direction every time his wife grabs his arm and points him towards a zombie or ghoul.

"These vampires don't look particularly accurate," Mel mumbles. Stella glances between the caped children with painted white faces and the two vampires in their party, suppressing her laughter.

"Actually," Te'ijal says, clearly delighted by the accuracy, "most of my friends have these exact outfits! Capes are a fashion staple, you know."

"Remind me to get rid of mine," Galahad mutters.

"Ugh." Lydia rolls her eyes. "All of these costumes are *hideous*."

Mel crosses their arms. "That's the *point*! They're supposed to be scary."

"Not necessarily," Stella says in an attempt to mediate. "I like the pretty ones. Look, Lydia, that girl is a fairy queen—"

"With that tacky tiara? I don't think so."

Mel scoffs. "Because yours is *sooo* much prettier. If the witches are anything to go by, you should watch your mouth, because if you get on these kids' bad sides, they'll gobble you right up."

"And if they don't," Te'ijal says, "my husband and I will!"

Galahad glares at his wife. "We will not!" He says, sternly, and then, more gently to Lydia, "we will not."

"Gross." Lydia turns up her nose, grabs the front of her skirt, and moves forward a little faster. "I am going to be walking far away from the woman who just made her third

threat on my life today and go find Prince Edward instead. Stella, you are welcome to join me. Mel, stay put with your creepy friends."

...

Stella doesn't join her, Mel doesn't stay put, and Lydia doesn't find Edward. Te'ijal and Galahad split off to go to Heptitus's house in hopes of finding the quarter key amidst the chaos, Lydia veers in the exact opposite direction as quickly as she can, and Mel and Stella nearly run directly into an exhausted looking Edward carrying their newest supplies. The three quickly decide to stop by the inn to drop the contents of Edward's shopping trip off before reconvening with the others.

As the trio walks through the town, Mel glances over at Stella. "Do you have any Halloween memories?" They ask, then frown and scrunch up their face. "I guess not. I meant more like... does this feel familiar to you? Bringing anything back?"

Stella barely has to think about it. "Not at all. I didn't even know what it was until last week." It was almost overwhelming, the immediate familiarity the rest of the party had with it. They'd been talking about it all week. Te'ijal burst into her origin story, Edward and Lydia described nobles' costume parties, Mel talked warmly about blending in with costumed kids and stashing enough candy with Boden to last them for months. Galahad's stance was a little more negative - he ranted about romanticizing demons and indoctrinating children into witchcraft - but he still knew enough about it to have an opinion.

Stella doesn't have any of that, and with the shared look her two best friends are giving her, she's beginning to feel weird about it. Their eyes are boring holes into her with *love*, she reminds herself, although she folds her arms a little defensively.

"Huh," says Edward, contemplative.

"So," reasons Mel, slowly beginning to grin, "you've never had Halloween candy."

Stella shakes her head. "Is it different from regular candy?"

"This stuff probably is," Edward muses.

"Oh, don't be silly." Mel is beaming now, a wild grin crossing their features, as they punch Edward fondly on the arm. "It's *fine*. They're feeding it to *children*. You don't poison people you're trying to appease. Which is good, because we're about to feed a bunch of it to Stella."

Stella's eyes widen. "You're what?"

"I need to find out what your favorite is! This is important, c'mon." Suddenly, Mel grabs her hand in theirs and pulls her forward to a carved out pumpkin filled with shiny, foil-

covered candy. “Pick a couple out. Make sure they’re different colors. Then we’ll head on to the next house.”

Stella, equal parts bewildered and charmed, lets herself be led along. She selects one in a wrapper as bright a red as Te’ijal’s hair that smells faintly like strawberries and stuffs it in her bag. At Mel’s insistence, she grabs a chocolate shaped like a flat pumpkin, too, before heading on to the next house. Arriving at the front porch, she realizes they’ve lost Edward again somewhere in Mel’s sprint.

“Are you sure the witches won’t curse us for doing this?”

Mel laughs as they walk up the steps of a front porch. “Absolutely not. We saved their asses, as far as they’re concerned.” They wait for a group of trick-or-treaters to collect their reward, then slide over to the cauldron on the doorstep.

A quarter hour later, Mel is finally appeased, and they let Stella lead them both back to the inn. Sitting down on the front steps, they reach over to grab her bag from her shoulder, and begin to sort out her selections.

“Ooh, I don’t recognize this.” Ripping open the small wax paper bag reveals a collection of small, brightly covered, vaguely slime shaped candies. Stella wrinkles her nose, but Mel pops one in their mouth carelessly. “It’s good! Kinda fruity. Wanna try?”

Stella considers protesting, but Mel’s lopsided grin and the light dusting of sugar on the gummy are both compelling arguments. She smiles. “Yeah, sure.”

Mel beams, and reaches their hand to Stella’s, turning hers in theirs to deposit the candy into. She tries one of the gummies, chewing it thoughtfully. It’s sour, but not at all unpleasant. “These *are* good. Are you sure you don’t want more?”

“I’d rather you get the chance to try them,” Mel says, then pauses. “...But also, yeah, I would have another one.”

Chapter 4 - Tar Vedron

"Flowers for sale! Flowers for sale! You there, young man, would you like to buy some flowers for one of the young women in your party?"

Mel rolls his eyes. *This again.* At least he was no longer at risk of falling in the crossfire. It'd taken a while - admittedly because Mel really didn't want to have the "I think you have a crush on me, or at least want to act like you do so getting married at the end of this is less miserable for you" conversation and had thus done everything in his power to stick to implication - but Edward had, ultimately, gotten the hint. He still bought Mel things, but they were practical things like a new dagger or boots, not gifts unsubtly advertised as guarantees to woo. It would be interesting, though, Mel thought, to see how he handled Stella.

"Oh, well, er, no thank you." So he'd gotten that hint too. *Nice.*

Stella's cautious, warm voice stops Mel from striding any further down the sandy path in front of him. "Excuse me, is the offer only open to young men, or...?"

"Oh, of course not! I'm sorry, young miss. Is it for the young gentleman, or one of the other ladies?"

Stella's eyes widen and shoot towards Mel. He grins lopsidedly, shrugs, and jokingly mouths '*sorry*'.

...

"What *should* I have said?" Stella asks Mel later that day, once the rest of their party has cleared out of the inn to do some final shopping for the evening. She wanted to have the conversation in relative private, just in case.

"To the woman selling flowers? What you said was fine, Stella. I can be a lady when I need to be." Mel laughs and sits down on the edge of the bed he claimed, across from Stella's and closest to not one but *two* windows. Lydia had made some snide comment about how he would regret that when the mosquitoes came out in full force, but he had told her to watch out for her own blood and she quieted quickly. "Honestly, I think it's ridiculous to ask someone *who* they're buying a gift for."

Stella giggles, too, taking a seat across from him. "It *is* silly. Maybe I wanted the pleasure of giving them to you myself."

"You want me to give them back to you and we can try again?" Mel waves the bouquet in front of him, close enough for Stella to reach forward and grab from his hand.

"No, it's okay. Next time, maybe." She pauses, and regards him seriously. "But you're *sure* you're okay with how that went down?"

Mel sighs, setting the flowers down on the bed beside him. Stella left her vase back in Thais to save room in her bag. "Look, if someone looks at me and assumes something about what I am, you should feel comfortable playing along. I was a thief, and now I'm a spy, so it's sort of second nature to me. Besides, I grew up feeling totally comfortable when someone called me an orphan girl *and* having butterflies in my stomach when they yelled 'that boy snatched my wallet!'" He frowns and clarifies, "and not the scared kind of butterflies, because I was good and they weren't gonna catch me. Genuinely, it's all good."

"Okay, that makes sense." Stella folds her hands neatly on her lap and takes a sharp inhale. "But, um, I guess tangentially related..." Her eyes dart away from Mel's face. "We're sort of an item now, right?"

Mel leans back, raising an eyebrow. He counts out the arguments towards it on his hand. "Well, we like each other, Edward hasn't tried flirting with either of us in ages, and Lydia's stopped acting like I'm a threat to the un-likelihood of her engagement, so I think that counts as official. Unless *that* happens when Galahad takes one of us aside and warns us about the dangers of ill-thought out weddings?" He grins at her, a little nervous, mostly teasing. She smiles softly back at him. "I don't know, I've never done this before."

"I'd like to be, if you would. I was just wondering...what I should call you."

"Well, I hate the word 'lover'."

Stella bursts out laughing. Mel delights in watching the ways her eyes scrunch together and her cheeks lift up, the slight shake in her shoulders, although he genuinely didn't think it was that funny when he said it. "Boyfriend, girlfriend, partner..."

"Girlfriend's pretty nice." Mel cuts her off. "That's what I'd call you, right?"

"Yeah."

"I like the idea of being the same thing to each other," he muses. "And this might sound silly, but I feel most like a girl when I think about being with you, anyways. You must be contagious."

That wins him another snicker, and it makes him beam with a goofy sort of pride. "I'm assuming that's a compliment. You'll tell me if you change your mind?"

"Of course. Who exactly are you planning on telling about me, anyways?"

"Well, I figure when I find out where my home is, I'll have some friends or family to introduce you to."

Mel falters for a second. He'd somehow barely thought to consider it - maybe because his own circle was two people wide before he made his way to Thais. "Huh. You will, won't you," he muses. "They must miss you."

"I hope so."

"I don't imagine how they couldn't. You're remarkable, Stella."

She looks like she wants to protest in modesty, but she closes her mouth and can't fight the smile crossing her features. "You're just saying that because you're my girlfriend," she teases.

"Maybe so. Hey, if you really wanna make it official, since I don't have anybody for you to meet, I call dibs on introducing *you* to the others as mine."

Stella smiles, steps over towards him, and pulls a couple shorter flower stems out of his bouquet beside him. She tucks them into the pocket of his vest, and reaches her hand out to him. "Sounds fair to me. Want to head out now? We should probably think about finding dinner."

"It's a date."

Chapter 5 - Venwood

Stella loves flowers. She's readily distracted by them when traveling, eager to wander off to investigate a particularly eye-catching one. Mel might have been frustrated by the detours, if she didn't frequently stumble across chests with more practical items along the way, or if her face didn't light up so beautifully when she found one. Sometimes, when she reacted to a new flower she'd never seen before, Mel could nearly swear he could see the starlight sparkling in her eyes.

So he encourages it. He doesn't have anything against flowers, at least the ones that don't send him into sniffles, but he's never thought to pay attention to them the way Stella does, at least until they'd been traveling together for some time. Now he knows to keep his own eyes peeled, and taps her arm to point her towards ones he thinks she might like. Stella loves all flowers, but seems particularly partial to the really vivid ones, and to ones that Mel can only describe as complicated, with sprawling, spindly petals and leaves that curl into thin, fine points.

She even finds common ground with Te'ijal, enamored by the ample variety of flora the Overworld has to offer. It's nice seeing them get along.

Whenever the group returns to Thais for longer than a day, Stella refills her vase, traveling just deep enough into the woods to collect flowers. Mel likes to go with her, and they talk about whatever's on their minds in the rare peace away from four other sets of ears. One night, Edward brings them both to the royal gardens, and eggs Mel on as he slices blooms from the queen's prized roses.

So when the opportunity in Venwood arises, Mel splurges on the ten gold and buys his girlfriend flowers.

He doesn't really understand why he does it - romantic gestures are still a little unnatural to him, and it's rare he opts to buy something he could manage for free - but when the elven woman asks if anyone would like to buy a bouquet, he gets caught up on the way Stella had smiled when he gave her one in Stormbend, and decides he may as well be the one to buy it, once.

She spends the whole afternoon clutching it to her chest and beaming. In the evening, as Lydia stomps around town trying to find out why everyone there has a vendetta against her, Stella sits on the front stoop of the inn, methodically slicing excess stems from the flowers and popping the blooms into an empty aquifolium bottle. Mel sits beside her to watch her work, thoroughly enraptured.

"I'm sorry I bought you flowers the other week," Stella says.

"Huh? We've been over this. You're totally fine."

“No, it’s not about that. Edward took me aside and very gently let me know you were allergic.” She quirks an eyebrow up, the corner of her mouth rising. “Unless you were lying about that to let him down gently?”

Mel laughs. “Fair assumption, but not quite. It depends on the variety. You lucked out. These are fine, too.” He points at the remainder of the bouquet between them. “Any reason you’re decapitating them?”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Stella says, and Mel swears he hears genuine relief in her voice for a moment before it fumbles. “I... I’d like to be able to save them.” She laughs, a little. “Surprisingly enough, Galahad had some pretty good tips for flower preservation.”

“No kidding.”

“Honestly! He saw me trying to salvage some in Thais. Apparently he managed to keep his boutonniere from his wedding for over a *century*. Edward’s great-great-great-great-great-great-great...grandmother, or something, gave it to him.”

“Huh, what do you know?” Mel leans back and snorts. “Man, it’s so weird remembering they knew her. Like, imagine him telling Edward that. Imagine being able to go that far back in your family tree. I don’t even know who my parents are.” He frowns. “Well, I guess I can, with Darkthrop. Ugh.”

Stella sets her knife down, and rests her hand on top of Mel’s for a second, like a reassurance. But it’s gone in a few seconds, and she leans inward on herself, hands clenched in her lap. “I’ve been wondering about my family, too. I...”

Mel figures it’s his turn to reach out, so he leans his weight forward again and puts a hand on her back. “You want to know who they are?”

“I... Yes, but it’s more than that.” Her voice sounds weak and shaky, fumbling under the weight of what’s on her mind. “The reason I’m trying to figure out how to keep these flowers is so I can take them home with me.”

Mel’s hand drops on reflex. “Oh.”

“I imagine,” Stella says, “that once I know who they are, I’ll miss them. I’ll want to go back.”

“Right,” Mel says, and he feels unable to say much more. For all the times he reflected on it, for all the times they’d talked about getting her *home*, it was stupidly, selfishly easy to forget sometimes that Stella must have a whole life waiting for her back wherever she’s from. Being with her felt so natural sometimes he felt as though he’d known her his entire life, even with seventeen years of memories telling him otherwise.

Mel doesn't have a home, really. He has places he's lived before, that he could return to and be okay in, definitely, maybe even happy, but his strongest roots are Boden's office and a tower he'd rather see crumble to dust and a group of people he's known for less than a year. People who all have a good idea of where they're going when this is over.

But it feels a little callous to not support Stella right now, so he finally forces himself to say, "they'll be glad to have you back. And they'll be pretty high on the luckiest people in the world for it."

Stella's laughter comes soft and understated as she shakes her head. "You're just saying that."

"Look, the intent is honest, even if my rankings are a little exaggerated."

She closes her eyes and scoots a little closer towards him, leaning her head against his. "Thank you, Mel."

Her hair brushes against the side of his face and he can't begin to bring himself to feel annoyed. He closes his eyes, too, and breathes until it's not nearly as shaky to, and then he keeps breathing without thinking about it.

"You know," Stella says, softly, "wherever I'm from – I could bring you with me, if you wanted."

It should really make him more comfortable, not less, but instead his stomach lurches. At what? Commitment? Uncertainty? Some attachment to Harburg or Thais deeper than he's given it credit for? He considers extracting himself from her, but he decides to lean into their touching sides instead. Her arm is warm and soft and the curve where it meets her shoulder is oddly grounding. "I don't know," he says, and his voice cracks a little under the weight.

"That's okay." She moves her hand to on top of his, threads their fingers together and squeezes once. "You don't need to right now."

He thinks about a hundred different things he could tell her – *thank you, I'm sorry, I love you* – but none of them feel right right now. Finally, he decides on opening his eyes and doing his best to angle his face towards her. "I'll want to have that conversation. When we know what that looks like. When this is over."

Stella murmurs under her breath, soft and half humming. She caps the bottle of flowers and holds it in her lap, running her thumb along the glass. "Whatever that conversation looks like, it's something to look forward to."

Chapter 6 - Faiara

Faiara is as dazzling as it is overwhelming. Everything shimmers and glows. Mel's eyes and nose both itch. There's so many flowers she can't even tell which ones are upsetting her. Stella, at least, is happy, eagerly darting between them, smile so wide it can't stretch any further across her freckled cheeks. Mel can't help but briefly think that she's glowing, too.

Slipping indoors is scarcely a respite. The fairy's homes are carved out of magic mushrooms, and tendrils of flowering vines regularly curl over the ground and walls. It seems almost every fairy is dead-set on cultivating their own personalized magical flower garden. Mel makes sure not to trip over a root as she crosses the threshold.

"Psst!" The fairy half hisses, half giggles, like she's sharing a secret and not calling the attention of the entirety of the party stepping into her shop. Te'ijal and Galahad have to duck under the doorway to make it inside; Ulf leans into his hunch and curls in on himself. "You there! Would you like to charm someone?"

Mel raises her eyebrows. "Charm?"

"With a love spell," Lydia says, voice cool and steady. "Correct?"

"Yes!" The noise the fairy makes is all laughter now as she darts between the group, poking and prodding at arms. "Who will it be? Surely someone here has an object of affection they'd like to dazzle?"

Galahad speaks before Mel gets the chance to. "Love spell?" He scoffs. "If such a thing even existed, it sounds more like a curse of coercion."

"Foolish human! Did I not just ask for permission?"

"From the admiring party," Mel says wryly.

The fairy huffs. "Well, it's their feelings I'm putting on display. My charms simply let the other know what it will feel like to be in love with them, after all. A sneak peak of what is to come!"

Stella seems equal parts confused and curious. "What if you're already in a relationship? You'd already be in love, would it not do anything?" Mel isn't sure whether to be more startled by her sheer confidence of her question or her level of comfort with the spell.

If she wanted to say anything about either, Galahad cuts her off before she can. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves," he mutters. The low, warm laughter that rumbles in Te'ijal's throat catches Mel off guard, distinct from the giggling cackle she's come to expect. She lays a hand gently on her husband's arm as he rolls his eyes and grumbles something.

"I can't say I've ever tried," the fairy admits, then flies over to rest on Stella's shoulder. "But you sound awfully confident. Would you like to test it with me?"

By the time Stella turns her head to ask Mel, her own mouth has turned to cotton. "Well?" she says, all magic, warm smile. But Mel's persistent, allergic itch has shifted to something scratchy and raw, and she scarcely knows how to push it down or force it out. She feels uncomfortably on display, head reeling from the implications.

"I think Galahad's right," she says. "I can't imagine this has any veracity. It's not worth our time." She doesn't care to worry about her tone, about Stella's shifting features, face falling, just turns on her heels and exits the house.

The concept is so incredibly invasive it baffles her how Stella could beam and laugh at it. What right does a fairy have to peer into your soul and reflect it outward? Why would any of them want to encourage - to enable - playing magic show with other people's feelings like that?

And yet the further she walks away, the more her step falters and a new, guiltier discomfort wells up in her chest. She has every reason to be annoyed, but there was no need for her to push Stella aside like that, to scoff at her feelings or her excitement. Surely she could have said something gently, or laughed awkwardly to show her disinterest. Stella knows her, she would have picked up. She would have played along. Mel could have waited, and talked to her about it later.

As uncomfortable as the concept makes her on principle, she can't ignore that Stella hasn't yet told Mel she loved her, but she may as well have in that moment. And in the same breath, she seemed to say she knew Mel loved her, too. Mel's never told those words to anyone, in any context, and the idea of starting now is... difficult. But she feels like she should, eventually, somehow, because Stella deserves it and it's true for her in what feels like a thousand different ways. But Mel wants to know what words are actually going to come out of her mouth. She wants to pick them herself, to say them fondly, not to have them magicked in her eyes or whatever this spell would do. She wants to find it in herself to do it, and to do it right, because Stella deserves that from her, even if right means awkward and stiff and uncomfortable along the way to genuine.

And now, she realizes, she may have instead conveyed the exact opposite.

She has half a mind to tug at her hair or drag her hands down her face. Instead she sighs and turns back around to wander her way back to the house. She ducks her head back in to find the rest of her party missing, and the fairy scowling at her.

"Boo! It's you again! Go away, you've already scared off my potential customers!"

Mel obliges, somewhat gladly, and she takes to stumbling through Faiara in search of her friends instead. Upon running into Ulf at the general store, she reasons they may have split up.

"We all figured it was better not to wait around," he explains, sifting through potions and pouches of herbs. "We're all meeting back up at the inn in half an hour. It seemed like a safe place for you to check eventually." He waves a bag in front of her. "Did you know some of these are intoxicating to humans, despite having no similar effects on fairies?"

"I did not," Mel responds, mostly to be polite before stepping back to the topic she cares about. "Do you happen to know where Stella went? And if she seemed upset?"

"Upset would be a strong word," Ulf says, "but she actually came here with me to get something to eat. I'm not quite sure where she took it."

Mel finds Stella sitting on a toadstool a little bit away from the store, eating the final wedges of a star peach. She waves gently at Mel when she notices her, and stands up as she approaches. "You found me."

"Well, it was my fault for losing track of you in the first place."

Stella looks like she wants to protest, but can't quite find the words to. She opens her mouth and settles on frowning instead. "Mel," she says finally, "it's okay."

"It's not! Look, it's one thing for me to be frustrated, but I didn't need to storm off."

"Okay, yes, that's true," Stella says, sighing, like she was avoiding admitting it. "And I do sort of wish you didn't? But it's fine, Mel. I messed up, too. I shouldn't have put you on the spot like that. I was making a lot of assumptions - about your feelings, about the fairy's truthfulness, about how comfortable you were with either - and that wasn't right of me."

Mel can scarcely bring herself to meet her girlfriend's eyes. Her voice is so sincere and soothing, and she feels awful for making her feel guilty, even if she's thankful she understands the issue. "It's fine," she says, facing forward, and reaching a hand to hers as if to prove it. "Really. I'm sorry, too. I didn't need to say it like that. There were better ways to have turned you down. And I don't want to turn *you* down, just this spell! I don't want you to think this is about my feelings, Stella, because it's... more complicated than that. I just don't want a spell to tell you I love you! *I* want to be the one to tell..." she realizes, as she's saying it, what she's doing, and that this is not exactly what she intended when she started speaking, but it feels real in her mouth and right in her chest and she decides that she wants to, "you that I... love you. Because I do."

Stella is just looking at her, smile soft and sheepish, like she's half conflicted. "I hope I didn't make you feel like you needed to say that-"

"No, not at all." She shakes her head and squeezes her hand. "I wanted to." She smiles. "It was important to me that you hear it from me."

Stella drops her hand, and immediately brings her arm to her back, pulling her in close for a hug. She rests her head on top of Mel's, nose pressed to her bow. "I love you too, Mel."

By now she knew it, the way Stella knew it was true of her. But it's nice to hear it from her all the same.

Chapter 7 - Naylith

It'd been a rough day.

The Orb of Light couldn't be further than a day or two away now, depending how deep the cavern they found went, but finding that cavern came a flurry of revelations heavy enough to dull the triumph. Afterwards, despite the magic thriving around them, despite finally finding her home, Stella's smile never quite regained its luster through the day. Mel worried they could sense a nightmare coming on and offered to share a bed at the inn.

She accepted, but... Mel wakes in the middle of the night alone, and realizes it's shaping up to be a rough night, too.

It doesn't take long for them to find Stella. She's sitting on the grass just outside the inn, hugging her legs tight to her chest and resting her head against her knees. Strands of purple hair half-obscure her face, bouncing slightly with the force of her sniffing.

Mel sits down beside their girlfriend and considers putting an arm on her back, but worry she's too wrapped up in her feelings right now to notice them, and they don't want to startle her.

"I woke up," they say, mostly just to say they're there, "and you weren't there, so I hope you don't mind I went looking for you."

"I don't," Stella says, but she doesn't say anything else, either.

It's a pretty night. The sky technically stretches on endlessly everywhere, but in Naylith it's like Mel can feel it. They're sure the distance this land hovers off the ground is negligible in the cosmic scheme of things, but they still feel closer to the stars up here. No wonder it was home to one of the most advanced observatories in Aia. It would be pleasant to be sitting here under different circumstances, not least because Stella is warm and comfortable just to sit next to; their sides touch here and there without trying to. Mel vaguely hopes their presence can be something of the same.

"Do you want to talk about it?" *It* could be a lot of things – Gyendal, her wings, the Orb of Light finally in their reach – and Mel isn't really sure which they're specifically offering. Any of them. All of them, if she needs it.

Stella lifts her head up and wipes at her eyes. "I'm finally home, and there's nothing here for me."

Mel just looks at her for a moment, not sure what to say, not sure if she's finished or not. She looks like she's hovering on the edge of something, like she isn't certain herself yet, either. When she stays quiet, they reach their hand to her shoulder furthest from

them, curling it around and tugging her gently closer to them. “Stella, this is still your home, wings or not.”

“It’s not even just about my wings!” she says, and Mel is startled by the volume, dropping their hand. She hugs her legs tighter and her voice drops back to shaking and uncertain. “I just... I thought I’d have family, friends. People who missed me. People who could tell me more about me. And instead, I get here and people don’t even bat an eye or look at me like they think they know me but not enough to care who I am, and...” The tears overtake her again, and she nestles her head back on her knees, face turned down. “And I don’t know if this always hurt so badly, or if I just don’t remember how to be okay with it, and I don’t know if I’m ever going to get that feeling back.”

For a moment Mel has to leave it hanging in the air as they struggle for words. They’re almost surprised by how much it resonates with them. They think back to sitting on the front steps of the Venwood inn in the evening, having what feels like this same conversation, back when Stella was full of optimism and Mel was full of uncertainty. Mel’s still a little uncertain, looking forward. They have no idea where they’re going after this. But the sense of who they want to go with has been solidifying itself for the past few weeks, and now she sits beside them, outlined and steady.

“It’s okay if you never do,” Mel finally offers, gently. “Just because this was your home originally, doesn’t mean it has to be now, or next. That can change. You can go wherever you’re happiest.” They pause, and decide to go for honesty. “Look. I can’t really relate to being upset about this. I never had a sense of family to lose. For me, it’s like... uncomfortable, sometimes, and painful even less often, but it’s kind of just how things are. It’s okay, at the end of the day. And you’ll be okay, too, even without it.”

Stella sighs, half a shudder as she tries to stop crying. She slowly unfolds herself, stretching her legs out in front of her. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be complaining about this as if it’s some horrible thing when...”

“I’m used to it. You’re not. It’s fine.”

She nods, and smiles, albeit a little weakly. “Thank you,” she says. "If there's anything on your mind that you'd like to talk about..."

Mel shrugs, even as they roll straight into speaking. "Not sure what there is to say, honestly. I have to face the evil vampire that wants to use me to take over the world head-on pretty soon, and I'm worried I'm not ready for it, but also I don't really get to make that call. I don't even know what will happen next, because this kind of turned my life upside down, and that's surprisingly difficult to think about, because I should be looking forward to this being over, so I'm not really thinking about it." They say it as

casually as they can, because as nice as it feels to get out there, to watch Stella as she listens, they're not really certain how deeply they want to get into it.

Stella looks almost sheepish for a moment. "I know I invited you to stay here with me, before I knew it was here, and that's obviously not going to happen anymore, and you didn't know what to say then, but I think I'm... happiest with you," she stumbles over slowly. There's a surprising weight to the confession. "Maybe we can..."

"Not know where we're going together?"

Stella drops herself fully to the ground, and then shifts herself over just slightly so the back of her head rests in Mel's crossed legs. She looks up at them. "Exactly that."

"I would love that. We're almost there, for the record, so you can start brainstorming places."

"We are, aren't we? Maybe Thais to begin with. We *do* have a house there." Some strength begins to creep into her voice. It's a heartening concept for certain, to be done with this mess. To be able to really rest, not borrow time from progress they should be making against Gyendal by staying in a city for an extra day. Mel's life has been swept up and turned upside down and sideways so many times they're not even sure how to plan for the other side, but with Stella and a starting place, they begin to gain some confidence. They hope that putting Gyendal behind her will help her do the same.

Mel runs a hand along the edge of Stella's hair, trailing from the top of her head until they reach her shoulder, trying not to disturb her curls along the way. "It's as good a place to start as any." For a moment after they just stay there together. Stella's breathing deepens and slows, and Mel is relieved to watch her calm down some, to watch the gentle rise and fall of her stomach as she breathes in and out. She's looking up, but past them, at the sky, and they follow her direction to stare at the stars.

"It *is* really pretty up here," Stella says, somewhat cautiously. "I'm glad I got to see it, even if I can't stay. Maybe one day it won't have so much baggage associated with it."

"Maybe. We could come back and visit, then."

Stella hums in what Mel interprets as agreement. They let the soft sound settle before they change the subject. "Do you think we could find that ridiculous star Edward bought?"

"It's not ridiculous!" Stella protests, but the energy feels exaggerated. Mel's just relieved she's feeling up for it.

"Who buys a star to dedicate to himself?" they counter. "Scratch that, who buys a star? Who *sells* a star to begin with? Princes and their ilk shouldn't get to own the sky."

“It’s not like they’re stopping anyone else from enjoying it.”

“Technically not, but who let them pick, right? A piece of paper saying you own a star doesn’t mean anything, it’s just an excuse to flaunt your wealth.”

“Actually,” Stella says, “if you were paying attention, you’d know it’s to support the observatory.”

Mel rolls their eyes. “Okay, that’s fair, I *guess*, but I still think it’s ridiculous.”

“You’re entitled to.”

A grin slowly crosses Mel’s face and they turn their face down to look at Stella.

“Actually, I’ve got an idea.”

“Oh?” Stella meets their gaze, quirking an eyebrow up.

“I’m going to steal Edward’s star.”

“You’re going to... steal it?”

“Sure thing!” Mel looks up again, finding the one they *think* is it based off the placement of the nearby sparkling points in the sky, and points their finger to it. “That’s your star now. I’ve decided. And you don’t need to worry about preservation methods or anything, because it will always be there in the sky. Well, not right there, but, generally speaking.”

Stella laughs. It’s soft, but genuine, and Mel smiles to be responsible for it. “That’s the sweetest and rudest thing you’ve ever done, simultaneously, somehow.”

“I’m a spy of many talents, after all. You’re welcome, by the way.”

She lightly lifts a hand to punch jokingly at their arm. “Thank you, Mel.” She waits, then adds, “for everything.”

It shouldn’t catch them off guard, but they’re still a little surprised by it, if not perhaps unduly flattered. “Oh, it’s no trouble. I just want to be there for you, you know?”

“I do,” she says, “and it means a lot. I want the same for you.”

Her hand hangs a little off to the side, in the grass. It’s the perfect location for Mel to snatch in their own and twine their fingers. She squeezes back and closes her eyes. “I know,” they say.

It’s not over, yet. A small, quiet part of Mel worries it will never *really* be over - Gyendal’s defeat won’t suddenly destroy the Darkthrop prophecy, after all. But tonight, and tomorrow, and onward, they have the strength to imagine it will be, one day, some day soon even, and with it they find the ability to imagine a future past it. They crush that concern with reminders that their fate, their decisions, are in their hands, and with

that power, they'll put Darkthrop behind them and keep Stella beside them. It feels possible, not even out of their reach, just a couple steps too far away tonight.

Tomorrow Mel will put their foot forward and take another step closer to getting there. But for now, with Stella's head in their lap and her hand in theirs, they're content to look to the sky and to the future.