

The Torn Map

By Marissa Lingen

Davine was convinced that she should have been able to sense the cataclysm coming. Magic was both her profession and her calling; it was practically all she did. A disturbance in the world's magic ought to have announced itself to her in advance.

But no. One moment Davine was mixing a gout cure potion for the mason next door. The next she sprawled on the floor of her shaken workshop, shards of flask and beaker falling around her, a horrific grinding noise filling her head. She crawled under her thick oak workbench and waited.

The grinding noise stopped.

She froze for several long moments before emerging. More flasks and beakers might yet fall, if the shaking started again, and she had no idea what had caused it. But when silence stretched for enough time to poach an egg, Davine felt herself safe to come out again.

Her shop was a shambles.

The world outside was worse.

Davine had lodged next door to the mason for ten years, ever since she started her own shop. But when she crept to the window she could see nothing of his familiar bricks. Instead there was a long span of empty dirt and patchy scrub flowers, then the dark needles of an unfamiliar tree.

She sat down on the floor amid the glass shards and bits of crockery.

Outside the window, noise returned slowly: first the buzzing of insects, not all at a familiar pitch, then bird calls, again more varied than she was used to, and finally a human voice or two.

Davine made herself take a deep breath, get up, brush her clothes off, and pick her way through the wreckage and out the front door. She held on to the bench and then the wall, just in case.

To her left, all she could see was a shaken mess but basically normal: the butcher shop where Amtraz and their large and fussy family lived and worked, the warehouse full of imported cloth from the sheep-farming islands of the west, the tannery beyond.

To her right, nothing looked the least bit familiar. The buildings were joined wood construction, instead of brick upon brick. They were painted yellow with white trim around the windows and doors. The trees were darker, with pointed instead of rounded tops, and there were more of them, both among the buildings and beyond.

As she stood and stared, a man emerged from the nearest yellow building, looking as dazed as Davine herself felt. His shirt and vest were curiously short, as if borrowed from a child but clearly cut for his adult shoulders: they exposed most of his sturdy green work trousers. He was much paler than any of Davine's neighbors, paler than anyone she'd seen away from the wharves, where sailors and merchants from all lands congregated, but his hair was at least an ordinary shade of very dark brown. He stared at her as she was staring at him.

"Hello?" she ventured.

"Hello, who are you?" he replied, and though his accent curved the vowels strangely, she was relieved to hear her own language, the remnant of the Metuscan Empire through many lands. "My name is Hawthorn."

"Davine," she said. "I'm the hedgewitch for this neighborhood."

He stuck out his hand, and she grasped it tentatively. "I'm a carpenter," he said. "Fine and finish work mostly, but it looks like there'll be need for my more basic skills in this mess."

Davine followed his gaze down his own side of the street. A closer look revealed broken feeding troughs and carts, a few houses structurally damaged. The same was true for her side, and she flinched to think of the injured neighbors. "I think we'll both have a lot of work today," she said ruefully. "Do you...is this sort of event well known? Where you live?" And then she stopped short, because where he lived was now where she lived too.

But he understood her gist and was already answering, "Nothing like this in any stories I've ever heard. What do you suppose it is?"

She shook her head. "I didn't feel anything coming. I have no idea what this is, except a disaster."

"It's surely enough of that." They smiled tentatively at each other.

Just then, the mason's twelve-year-old daughter came out of the butcher's shop and saw that her home was not just gone but replaced. "Where are they, oh, gods, where are they?" she shrieked, and trailed off into wordless screaming.

Davine ran to her and put her arms around her. She repeated her name gently: "Shalran. Shalran, I'm here, it's Davine, I'm here. We'll figure it out. I promise, we'll figure something out." She let the girl wail into her shoulder, stroking her hair.

The foreign carpenter Hawthorn hung back far enough not to scare the girl. Davine decided that she liked him: respectful but also helpful. She could work with that. She turned back to Shalran.

"Child, child, hush, listen. We don't know what's going on. These people were transported safe--" Hawthorn scrunched up his face in mild skepticism, and she couldn't argue, but she didn't need to highlight their worries for a terrified young one. "--so there's every chance that your family was too. Or that we were. Or...whatever this is. We just have to find them. They're not gone, they're just not here."

"You don't know that!" said Shalran indignantly.

"Well, no, she doesn't," said Hawthorn. "And I don't either. But what we do know is that no one is leaving you alone to deal with this yourself. You will have help. I promise you that."

Davine swallowed hard, and then smiled despite herself, to hear someone else give the assurances that had always been her job.

Shalran sniffled and stopped crying. "Who's this?" she asked Davine.

"His name is Hawthorn. He's from--wherever else we are. We're going to--" Davine took a deep breath. "We're going to sort out who's in need, what has happened, and pool our resources. Aren't we?"

Hawthorn nodded. "We are. Do you have other mages close by?"

"Up to the palace," said Shalran uncertainly.

"Which means not *very* close," said Davine. "We'll see how far this goes, yes? And meet back here when we can? If you come upon injured people who can move, send them to my house to wait. Unless you have someone else to...?" She suddenly felt shy about taking over, but Hawthorn nodded firmly in reassurance.

"We haven't had a hedgewitch since my gran died, twelve winters back. This is more magic than any of us have seen in years. Or wanted to see, if it comes out like this."

"I can't blame you," said Davine. "I'll see if I can give your neighbors a taste of better magic than this. Come, child, help me find out what's needed."

She took Shalran door to door with her, hoping that it would distract the girl from her baffling troubles. Another child had also been on an errand and was stranded without his family. The baker was home alone, her family negotiating with a miller in another block. There were several minor bumps and scrapes, one brain-rattling, and a broken wrist from a fall in the tumult. Davine decided to send Shalran and the woman with the broken wrist to stay with the man with the brain-rattling so they could all look after each other until it was sorted.

Very little of Davine's city remained. Only a few blocks down, there was a wall of nigh-impenetrable holly trees where the fountain had been. A brand-new river flowed to the north, with unfamiliar moorlands on its opposite bank. The world was jumbled in very, very small pieces, with no explanation Davine could see.

When she returned home, she found Hawthorn waiting outside with several people as pale as himself, their tunics as strangely short. Suddenly she could see it as a fashion rather than his eccentricity; he fit into his own context effortlessly. He had the injuries organized by severity and kept the waiting patients as calm and comfortable as anyone could without magic. She set the broken bones, sewed up the gashes, and verified that everyone had someone to watch over them.

"Our piece of city doesn't go far at all, not nearly to the palace," she said. "We're lacking in...oh, goodness, several things. We'll be able to get by, but if this lasts, life will be very different. At least there's a river for water--our fountain is gone."

Hawthorn nodded. "We have our fountain, but it's dry. I guess it's lost the connection to the--" He used a word she didn't know, but she could figure it out from context. No source of water, no water.

Davine suddenly wondered how the river was flowing. How many rivers were flowing. She sat down suddenly on her jostled doorstep.

"Are you all right?" said Hawthorn.

"I don't understand this magic," said Davine. "Some things continue beyond the--beyond the edges, I suppose--and some things don't, and I didn't feel it coming. I wouldn't feel it coming again. Why is the river still flowing?"

He looked sober. "That's a very good question. What happens when we go upstream? No, I know you haven't had a chance to. But perhaps we should send a team."

"We'll need to arrange for everyone's food first, I think."

"And make sure everyone's houses are mended enough to sleep in without--whatever weather we get in this combined place coming in on their head. Rain, sleet, all of it. I wouldn't be surprised if the world had a storm or two coming after what it's been through. We've done the health checks, we'll figure out shelter and food and then see about the future."

Davine nodded. It was clear that there was now a "we," that she and this man were now the people who made things work, who made things keep going when it was tempting to just sit down and have a good cry.

At least it wasn't just her alone. It always had been before. Even when the rest of the city, with its palace guards and mages, was supposedly ready to assist, they had their own grand concerns. No one seemed to be as ready to help the neighbors as Davine. No one knew their needs as she did--or tried to.

Davine and Hawthorn enlisted Amtraz--their skills with a large and noisy family would be invaluable with an assortment of confused people--and Hawthorn recommended a weaver named Osprey as a solid head on solid shoulders. People flocked to the border between the regions, poking their feet over the line tentatively at first, and then with more confidence. The strangers were in the same mess they were in. They would have to work together.

It didn't take her long to run out of a key ingredient for a potion: many more things needed mending than in a usual week, and she was surrounded by impatient, worried people who wanted it done by magic instead of waiting to apply sweat and glue or nails or thread. Dryad's saddle mushroom went in almost every potion that bridged one thing to another, whether it was a cracked bucket or a thatched roof. Usually Davine would have hitched a ride with a carter out to the woods to gather her own, or if it was out of season, visited an apothecary near the city wall. Both solutions were currently impossible.

It occurred to her that a man who worked in wood might know where to find dryad's saddle, or at least where to find someone who did, so she went looking for Hawthorn. She found him sitting on the riverbank and started to edge down it, towards him.

The river pitched towards her. She cried out, enough that Hawthorn looked, enough that he rushed to her, sprawled on the hillside halfway down.

"Are you all right?"

"The world just--" She waved her hand in agitation. "It tilted. I thought it was--"

"Yes," he said, not making her finish it.

"So you felt it too?"

"No, nothing of the kind. But if I had, it would have been the first thing I thought of."

Oh. Was the displacement just her, then? But she wasn't displaced, she'd *fallen*. Davine sat up, scowling. "I feel ridiculous."

"Just rest there a minute. Don't hurry it, there's no rush. No reason we can't just sit and watch the river a moment."

"I suppose." She did that. It was very calming, very settling. The world seemed to have found its axis again--at least as much as it ever had, lately. The shadows were lengthening when she remembered she'd come to ask about the dryad's saddle and broke the silence.

Hawthorn stared out over the rapids in thought. "I didn't honestly know there was a use for the stuff," he said. "I thought it was just...not the tastiest mushroom, something to get off a tree quick before it starts rotting the wood you're trying to use. I wonder...there are some very traditional old people who have been afraid that they'd need to eat it if a winter got bad. I think one of them came down on our side of this...disruption."

"I'd appreciate it if you could help me bargain with them for it," said Davine.

Hawthorn waved that away. "You're the only hedgewitch we've got, anyone ought to be willing to help you with their spare mushrooms. I'll make sure that some of the younger folk who are at loose ends do chores for them to compensate. It's for all of us really. Anyone could see that."

Davine beamed at him, refreshed by the way he assumed that people would work for the common good. The beautiful part was that, faced with his assumptions, most of them did. Sure enough, the grandmother they found with a hoard of mushrooms was happy to sort through them and send her home not only with dryad's saddle but hen of the woods as well, before she had run out of that. It was a relief to be able to keep helping people, but beyond she found an unexpected

warmth in Hawthorn's smile of satisfaction at finding a solution, a warmth that she returned more wholeheartedly than she had anticipated.

A few days later he showed up after supper and handed her a small, soft cloth wrapped around something hard and pointy. She raised an eyebrow. "More ingredients?"

He shook his head. "Open it."

The cloth fell away easily, revealing a wooden animal the length of her thumb. It had long legs, a hairy snout--a few curves in the carving stood in ingeniously for hairiness--and spindled branches coming out of its head. Davine smiled at its floppy little ears and earnest face. "What on earth is it?" she asked.

"When I was in your shop, I noticed the event destroyed all your ornaments, so it's just a little decoration for your front room."

Davine blushed. "Oh! No, I--I never had any ornaments like that. I never had much in my life that wasn't work, actually. This is lovely. But I meant, what on earth is the--animal? It's an animal, not a plant or a story?"

Hawthorn laughed. "Yes, it's an animal. It's called a moose. We have them in the forests near--where we originally were. They can get taller at the shoulder than the top of my head."

Davine stared down at the tiny wooden carving with chagrin, and Hawthorn laughed again at the look on her face. "It's wonderful, thank you," she said, privately hoping that there was never, ever a cataclysm that brought them wild animals that big.

He turned to go but hesitated on his way out. "I understand not having much but work," he said softly. Before Davine could answer, he was gone.

But she had plenty more opportunities to find out how much he meant it. Hawthorn was the person she worked with most, rebuilding, reconnecting, exploring. They talked about whose

wheelbarrow was cracked, who needed more dyeing supplies--but also, remarkably quickly, their childhoods, their favorite pastries, the things they missed. She learned that his city was named Gullsport, that he had moved there as a youth, that he liked to make whistles and recorders when business was not booming--but that business was mostly booming. She served him her favorite tisane. He showed her a river reed she hadn't known could be eaten. Their neighbors calmed. They smiled more.

The only fly in the ointment--an expression that had always struck home for her, a person who made ointments often--was that the world was still tilting sometimes. She never got used to it--it made her heart beat fast every time, and not in the exciting way that Hawthorn did. She always thought that it might be another dislocation, and when it wasn't, she was still left clinging to the table or sprawled out in the street.

Hawthorn was quiet and sensible about the problem, better than anyone else about not fussing. When it became clear that the world would continue to sometimes go awry for her--that this was not a singular misfortune--he brought her a cane he had carved, following the twists of a gnarled piece of olive wood to the perfect height for her hand. The beauty and thoughtfulness of the gift couldn't make up for Davine's frustration at having to use one hand for it no matter what she wanted to carry, but it still made her smile.

One day they went together--with notes on their doors explaining their whereabouts, more or less--on an expedition to find the source of the river. They helped each other over particularly large fallen logs and slippery streams, and Davine could almost--almost--pretend that her cane was just a walking stick. She couldn't help but notice that their hands lingered together longer than was strictly necessary for navigation. She was afraid that if she commented on it, it

would stop. It took most of a day to determine that the river was coming from nowhere and flowing into nowhere. This comforted neither of them.

When they returned to the two neighborhoods that were gradually pulling together into one, Amtraz yelled at them. "How could you risk it?" they cried. "You are our only carpenter, our only hedgewitch--our only source of magic at all! And the hedgewitch is already damaged! What if the world rearranged itself again and dumped you gods know where? What would we do without you?"

Davine apologized, daunted, but Hawthorn frowned and furrowed his brow. "I am sorry you were frightened," he said, "and I know we're all important to each other now. But first, let me never hear you refer to another member of this community as damaged again. And second, if something happens to any of us--you, me, Davine, any of us--you *have* to figure out what to do without us. We need each other, I know, but that doesn't mean we'd just give up without one or another."

"I don't know what we'd have done without you," said Amtraz stubbornly, but they had moderated their tone, subsided.

"You would find a way," said Hawthorn. "Always find a way."

Davine embraced him tightly, spontaneously, in a way that startled her--her people did not do that. For his it was natural. He smiled down at her and pressed her close.

When the world shook and rearranged itself again, back to the old ways, back to the city, she remembered what Hawthorn had said about finding a way. Everything was familiar again, and nothing was. It was as though she had gained another sense, taste or touch out of the blue, and then lost it. Shalran fell sobbing with joy on her parents, but Davine stood silent as they thanked her for caring for their child.

Hawthorn was gone. She knew other things mattered, but it was hard to see what.

Restoring their way of life took almost as much work the second time. Crockery broke again, people tumbled down again, and everyone needed the hedgewitch again, even in a world that once again contained the palace mages, for when had they ever come down into the streets of the city? The answer was: they came down in crisis.

Which meant that Davine saw them about a week after they would have been useful.

"We're trying to map people's experiences in the upheaval," said a thin mage with a long nose and shimmering robes that impressed Davine not at all. "If you can give us as close an approximation as you have to--"

Davine was already using the back page of her potion book to sketch the map of which streets had been affected and what had come to their borders. "So, this happened everywhere?"

"So far as we know. His Young Majesty was very upset by the divisions in the palace," said the mage.

Davine rolled her eyes; even with divisions in the palace, His Young Majesty had certainly experienced a softer cushion to his world stumbling than Shalran Masonsdaughter. "Do you have any idea what caused it? I didn't feel anything in the magic."

"You're only a hedgewitch."

"So you *did* feel something in the magic."

He hesitated. "No."

"I've been having--physical disturbances since. Is that common among magic users?"

"No," he said again, this time more confidently.

"And you have *no idea* what's going on. Do you," she said flatly.

"The information we get from you is very valuable," the mage hedged.

"Yes, and the information I can get from you is valuable too," said Davine. "Since we appear to be in the same boat. At least until it happens again."

"Oh, it won't happen again," said the mage.

"Did you do something to stop it? How, since you don't know what it is?"

"No, but the odds are--"

Davine ushered him out of her shop as politely as she could. On the doorstep she had another thought. "Do you happen to know what country the city of Gullsport is in?"

"Gullsport? There's one in *every* country. It's like Clear Lake, Kingston, perfectly ordinary name."

"Oh. Well, thank you." Davine went back inside, thinking hard. Finding Hawthorn was no longer optional. If the palace mage was right and the upheaval in the universe would never deliver him again, she would have to go get him herself. If the palace mage was wrong...what if the next upheaval sent her somewhere else? Someone else?

She had to find out where Hawthorn was.

The palace mage did not seem likely to be helpful, but Davine didn't have to rely on him and his cohort. She went to the navigators' guild.

"Yellow painted wood houses and dark pointed trees?" said the woman at their greeting desk. "I'm sure someone who had been there would recognize it immediately, but off the top of my head I couldn't say."

Davine thought of the little carved figure on her workbench. "He mentioned an animal called a moose. Very large animal, horns like if a goat just kept growing and growing."

"A moose!" said the navigator. "Those are very common in the north, in the Tehavan lands mostly. One of those countries."

"I don't suppose only one of them has a Gullsport," Davine said wearily.

"Bless you, dear, all four of them do."

Davine sighed. But then another idea occurred to her. "What about...what about names being only real things? Hawthorn, Osprey, Cinch, Laurel..."

"Oh, that! That's Norland for sure. You can see it even in the country name: North-land. They just don't use figurative names there." The navigator paused. "You met these people in the upheaval?"

Davine nodded, not trusting her voice not to shake if she corrected the plural to the singular.

"Norland's Gullsport is on at least three shipping routes and two caravans," said the navigator encouragingly. She got a strange look on her face. "A lot of people have been avoiding sea travel, for some reason."

"Indeed," said Davine hastily. She took down the information for the two caravans and went home to think about it. When she got there, Amtraz's youngest had dyed herself blue and wailed until she was restored to her proper deep brown color. Then there was a broken charm on the door of the tailor who had been just outside their region when the upheaval came and who had been waiting until there was a hedgewitch available, but not very patiently.

And then another dozen things, one after another and several at once, and Davine was reminded of Amtraz saying how much she and Hawthorn were needed. She wondered how she could think of leaving them at all.

But while they needed her, *she* needed Hawthorn. Not for his ingenious carpentry or his ability to cobble together supplies from what seemed like nothing at all. Not because he was the

only one who offered her a cane instead of fussing when she fell. Simply because he was Hawthorn.

What if the Gullsport neighborhood showed up with hers again and she had left to find him, though? She weighed the options for another day, then packed a very small and focused bag of magical supplies, mundane necessities, and her moose carving. If the world was thrown to pieces, she would deal with the consequences. It would be much worse if she didn't at least try to find Hawthorn.

The caravan was startled but reasonably pleased to have a hedgewitch among its passengers. They didn't even charge her extra for a seat riding on one of the wagons instead of walking alongside. Some of the other travelers transparently hoped that her magic would be able to anchor them to the geography they'd known. She herself had no such hopes. The magic had come upon them unbidden before; all she could do was her best if it did again.

They were in the mountains when it hit. Her herb knowledge was useful, but everyone in the caravan had survival skills, and no one was completely unprepared this time. With amazement Davine noted that everyone had fallen into the idea that this was one of the things that might happen: rock slide, thunderstorm, wholesale rearrangement of the world. Most of their new neighbors were desert or ocean. They hunkered down and waited, and the world righted itself again. She had lost another month.

Davine left the caravan and returned to the city. But when she got home, though her neighbors were glad to see her, they had to report that the Gullsport people had not joined them this time. It was an entirely different group of strangers who didn't even speak Metuscan, as all civilized people did, but instead ate plump ground-dwelling birds and played a strange kind of music that hurt her neighbors' ears.

The palace mage came around to survey again, and the thin-lipped narrow-eyed stare Davine gave him made him wince. She could see that the palace mages knew no more than she did, in their courtly robes and sense of certainty. She had none of their polish or of their sure sense of the world, and yet she had something more: the conviction that she would have to find Hawthorn again, somehow.

The caravan route did not seem likely, but now staying home and doing nothing was off the table as well.

Davine made herself a cup of tisane and sat down at her table to think.

Magic had brought her together with Hawthorn. No matter that it was not her everyday, ordinary practice of magic. She would have to find a way for magic to bring them back together again. The palace mages weren't looking for that--not for a small solution. They wanted to understand the whole thing. Understanding would be wonderful, but all Davine wanted was Hawthorn.

Most of the potions she made were either small gulps, to be taken in orally, or little dabs, a lotion that could be put on the affected part of the body. This time she needed to put her whole body into it. And yet she knew how to make potions and poultices, not vast velvet robes or grand golden crowns of magic. This was her medium. She compounded and infused and chanted. It was the largest spell she'd ever undertaken.

It looked like a bucket of cold split-pea soup.

Davine took a deep breath, braced herself, lifted the bucket, and poured it over her head.

The spell flowed gloppily over her, seeping into her clothes and tingling with magic. It unsettled whatever within her was prone to unsettling; she staggered and gripped the table harder. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to let the spell sink into all of her at once. When she

felt it dripping down her legs, Davine let herself wipe her eyes as much as she could with the potion all over, then blinked.

The street flickered before her. She squinched her eyes and rubbed them again, and then it became clear what she was seeing: an eyeblink worth of a dozen scenes across the world, cycling and circling around.

She opened her mouth to swear and got potion in it, thick and bitter. She spat and sputtered, and considered her options. The world outside the door continued to flicker, a vision rather than the reality of another city.

Davine wondered, not for the first time, whether the cataclysm was caused by another magician far more powerful than herself. This time she had some notion of what this theorized other might have been aiming for: a reunion.

She discovered she was crying into her potion, leaving salty tracks through its yellow-green muck. She gave herself a minute to just keep crying, then plunged her hand into the countervailing agent she had concocted just in case, and went off to wash.

Why hadn't the other magician used a countervailing agent? But no, that question would sidetrack her. She couldn't even swear that there was such a person, much less guess at their location and their motives. She had to stay focused on what was important.

Hawthorn made that easy.

Her next potion took several days and trips to the apothecary to concoct. Her neighbors noticed, grumbling under their breath at the hedgewitch's preoccupation, but she began to see how they would manage without her. As she walked through the streets to go about her business, she noticed dozens of people building things--not just fixing the damage from the cataclysm, but building new sheds.

She had heard that the cabinetmakers' business was booming--a closed door rather than an open shelf could make all the difference in the world when the earth shifted and shook. She saw people hauling baskets and bags of easily maintained supplies and a few trade goods back to their homes, bent under the weight of knowing how much the world could change. On the way home, she heard a classroom of child voices chorusing lessons in Shohoki--another way to communicate, just in case.

Davine wondered how many other people were in her position, somewhere else in the world, thinking of someone--pining for someone, if she was honest with herself--they weren't sure how to reach. But she had to make it work for herself first. If she could--offering her services would have to be a later step. Possibly a *much* later step.

First, the mortar and pestle.

After hours of grinding herbs and infusing liquids and stirring until her wrists ached, Davine's exhaustion made her fatalistic. The magic in this potion was stronger in her nose, strong enough to make her sneeze. She had layered in the idea that they should be *together*--her spell was aimed at *with Hawthorn*, not *in Hawthorn's town*, just in case he had started traveling too.

Guiltily, she hoped he had.

This potion came out thinner than the prior attempt, its magic more concentrated in a tiny bit of liquid. It reminded her of nothing so much as calamine lotion, a pale pink substance that felt cool when she dabbed it on and dried quickly. Davine tucked her cane under her arm, shouldered a light backpack with essential supplies and one tiny frivolous moose, and started the working, placing swift strokes of pink potion on her forehead, her hands and feet, her chest and belly.

The last stroke completed the spell. There was a loud rushing in her ears. The world around her went dark. She couldn't tell up from down--but this time she didn't blame her body. She could find nowhere to place the cane to steady herself, and she had to embrace the feeling, like tumbling down a riverbank multiplied by a thousand. It felt like she fell for several minutes; she braced herself to hit the table, the wall, anything.

The darkness lifted just in time for Davine to see the tree branch she was about to hit, not in time to stop herself. She landed on the ground with a thump. It was covered in moss, with a bed of ferns nearby.

Hawthorn landed on the bed of ferns with a soft, "Oof."

Davine scrambled to her feet and hurled herself at him, realizing only after she had thrown her arms around him that he would not be expecting her. She disentangled herself hastily. He stared at her and wrapped her in an even tighter embrace.

"It's you!" he said.

"It is," she agreed, her voice shaking. "It is most certainly me, it is you, it is us, I'm babbling. I'm sorry I'm babbling."

"You may babble," he said gravely, surveying her from top to toe. She wondered if she looked different. He looked tired. "You may babble all you like, I don't mind, I like it. Where are we?"

She looked around the forest, dappled and leafy green with summer afternoon light. "I have no idea. I'm sorry. I told the spell to bring me where you were. You weren't here before?"

"I have never seen it."

Davine thought about this. "I think...I think that instead of transporting me, it transported us both? That we were...pulled together? That's interesting, I didn't know it would work like that." She chewed her lip, mind racing.

Hawthorn shook his head in bemusement. "Perhaps it's similar to how your body reacted to the upheaval by producing upheaval of its own? No tree in a forest lives in isolation. Just an idea, though. We can figure out more about it later.."

"We will."

"We're together now, and--oh, that is--that is everything I was working for. I was building a horse cart to come and find you. But this--this is much faster than a horse cart."

She giggled, her chest a bubble of lightness at his presence. "A horse cart?"

Hawthorn smiled sheepishly. "I designed it with space for you to work, and storage for my tools for when we're traveling. I thought...I was going to come get you, and then we could live in it and always be together. If you wanted. I knew you'd want to keep working, keep helping people, but in a world that goes upside-down in new ways all the time...."

He trailed off and reached out for her again, and it was only then that she noticed that she had started crying. "Yes. Yes, let's do that. I'm sorry I laughed at your horse cart, it sounds like the best idea. Our own place, no matter where we end up, so we can help people no matter where we end up. Yes. Please."

"I'm so glad you want to," he said softly. "It did sound like us." He paused. "You're still crying."

"I'm just so glad there's you," said Davine. "The forest is strange, the cart idea is lovely, but--I'm just so glad there's you."

He smiled back at her. "Forest, city, it doesn't matter. The rest of the world, we can deal with. Doesn't that sound silly? But we will. As well as anyone else can."

She pressed her face into his chest and was quiet for a moment. "I can't promise I will never lose you again," she whispered, and she had to swallow hard at the thought.

Hawthorn took her hand against his, measuring the differences in his long fingers and her short ones before curling them together. "No, but we will always find each other again when we do. No matter what the world does."

She nodded and leaned into their joined hands. It was enough.

THE END

© 2025 Marissa Lingen