

Wingless

by Catherine Witzaney

Chapter One

Asher Songfeather felt a strong kinship with hedgehogs.

Firstly, they were nocturnal. They never willingly set out on a journey first thing in the morning, when glistening dewdrops pooled in the clefts of fern leaves or balanced on blades of grass, ready to roll off and soak him in an icy deluge at the slightest jostle.

Secondly, they were quiet. They never announced themselves at the top of their lungs with jubilant whistles and boisterous singing. Unlike the cacophony of birds in the forest canopy far above, and the two-dozen Feather sprites who made-up the caravan of which Asher found himself to be a reluctant member.

He'd been given lead line duty this morning, which was easy enough. The hedgehog shuffling beside him through the ferns had no difficulty pulling the wagon it was hitched to. Occasionally, it bumped its wet, quivering nose against his elbow, probably wishing he would release it into the surrounding shrubs to find a place to sleep. But beyond that, it followed the wagon ahead of them without complaint.

Asher brushed a hand along the creature's dark side. The hollow quills lay deceptively flat and smooth when the creature was calm, but anyone foolish enough to startle it would be

faced with a tight ball of stiff spikes, like the thorns of a cactus plant. It was an ability he sometimes envied.

The sound of feathered wings beating the air met his ears, and he glanced back along the column of wagons that stretched behind him through the underbrush. A male sprite had left the cluster of singers at the end of the caravan and now flew toward Asher above the heads of the walking sprites. With those mottled grey feathers, it had to be Feivel.

Feivel swept down and alighted on the other side of the hedgehog, folding his wings in a single, fluid motion. “G’ morning son.”

His rumbling voice seemed too deep to come from such a thin sprite. He was slender enough to border on twig-like, all elbows and knees and long, nimble fingers, but his creased face could have been chiseled from the side of a tree trunk. Though his wings seemed to dwarf him when spread, when folded they poked up above his shoulders in a way that made him appear taller than he actually was.

Asher nodded to him. “Morning Feivel.”

“Ah, you’re in a speaking mood now?”

“I’d always be in a speaking mood if you’d wait ‘til the sun was up before waking me.”

A smile softened the creases of Feivel’s face and he laughed. “You’d sleep the day away if I let you.”

“I’d like the chance to try that someday. It sounds marvelous.”

“You’ll have plenty of time for rest when we’re back from the market.”

Asher snorted. There was never time for rest during the summer months. He doubted he’d get so much as a free afternoon to himself until the autumn harvest was packed away and they migrated back to the capital for the winter.

“Is there something you need me for?” he asked. It was unusual for Feivel to leave the Morning Song before it was finished.

“Actually, I wanted to talk with you.”

Asher glanced at him across the hedgehog’s back. Such hesitancy in the older male’s voice usually meant he was going to bring up something Asher didn’t want to talk about.

Feivel blew out his cheeks in a sigh. “Listen, son. It’s been several seasons now since the Forest Guard refused your application. Have you thought about what other paths might interest you?”

Asher grimaced and returned his focus to the moss-covered tree roots that rose and fell along the path at uneven intervals. He was already four seasons into being a fledgling—the time in a young Feather sprite’s life when he was supposed to pick a trade to apprentice with. And he still hadn’t made a decision.

“I know you’re willing to keep helping us in the shop,” Feivel plowed on, “but my wife and I didn’t take you in because we needed an extra pair of hands for the chores.”

Guilt pricked Asher. He knew that without Feivel having to say it. When they’d taken Asher in so many seasons ago, they’d already had a child to call their own—a daughter adopted in infancy. She’d been a fledgling herself when Asher had shown up on their doorstep as a disabled orphan nestling. But they’d taken him in and cared for him like he was their own son.

“Carinen isn’t well enough to take over her old chores yet,” Asher said, “and you and Isahel can’t run things by yourselves.”

It was a poor excuse. His adoptive sister had been ill for almost as long as Asher had been living with them. And if the Forest Guard had accepted his application back when he’d first submitted it, he would have immediately moved into the fledgling barracks to begin his

apprenticeship, regardless of the lack of helping hands around Feivel's shop.

“Carinen's condition isn't likely to change any time soon. But we can always hire help if we need it.” Feivel rubbed a hand across the back of his neck. “Great winds, we don't *want* you to leave. But if you stay with us much longer, you'll have to declare yourself our apprentice. And life as an herbalist. . . .”

The very thought of such a life path made Asher groan inwardly.

“It doesn't suit me,” he voiced Feivel's unspoken thought.

Feivel gave a hoarse laugh. “Don't get me wrong, you've got the mind for it. But I know harvesting herbs and mixing tinctures bores you to death. And we just want you to be happy. Are you sure there isn't another trade that appeals to you more?”

Asher sighed. “I don't know. I've never thought about anything but becoming a guard.”

It was mostly true. Following in his father's footsteps and becoming a Forest Guard had always been his goal. Was it unrealistic?

Maybe.

Passing the advanced flight training was difficult for even the most capable of sprites. But for Asher, it was completely impossible.

He'd been born wingless.

Before his father had died, he'd used to claim it meant Asher was lucky. After all, winglessness was an incredibly rare condition. Asher had figured his father had a poor understanding of the concept of 'luck'.

“I know you don't like me saying it,” Feivel spoke carefully, “but you really do take more after your mother than your father. Have you considered—”

Not this again.

“She didn’t talk about her past,” Asher cut him off swiftly. “Her only interests were me and my dad.”

Feivel pursed his lips as if he had more he wanted to say but knew Asher didn’t want to hear it. Unfortunately, he decided to speak his mind. “Your mother was a worthy sprite.”

Asher grimaced. “She was a Bat.”

“I’ve heard nothing but good about her from those who knew her. I understand why you feel the way you do about Bat sprites, but you can’t run from your heritage forever, son.”

“*She* ran from it. Why shouldn’t I?”

“I don’t know the reason your mother fled from her homeland. But she never tried to deny who she was.”

Asher said nothing, and silence fell between them.

At last, Feivel sighed. “I don’t mean to push you into anything. You’ve still got some time left. But will you think on what I said about choosing a different trade?”

Asher let out a soft breath, relieved to have an end to the topic. He dredged up a smile and a nod, hoping to sooth Feivel’s troubled mind. His adoptive father had a point after all—Asher didn’t want to end up as an herbalist for the rest of his life.

Feivel’s expression brightened and he reached over to rub the hedgehog’s round ear. “Not much farther to the Market Grounds. It’s going to be a wonderful day!”

Though Asher was glad to see the older sprite cheered up, he couldn’t have disagreed more. Gatherers Markets were exceedingly boring, with far more long-winded conversations and haggling than actual exchanges of goods.

But he kept that opinion to himself.