



# Rose Crown (All That Glitters #7)

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**Category:** YA&Teen

**Description:** The only thing more dangerous than falling into Faerie is falling in love with an enchanted prince.

Lily has always been content living on the edge of Faerie, where the woods are wild, home life is simple, and the troubles of the kingdom feel far away. She has no wish for anything to change.

But change comes anyway. Treasure hunters swarm the border, her family mysteriously disappears, and she is dragged into a perilous quest through Faerie.

New friendships are forged, but family ties unravel as secrets are revealed. No one is who she thought they were, least of all herself, and navigating Faerie is deadly when a single misstep can mean more than losing just your way...

Rose Daughter is a reimagining of the Grimm's fairy tale 'Snow White and Rose Red'. Dare to venture into Faerie in search of lost treasure and stolen loved ones in this romantic adventure, part of the All That Glitters series – a collection of twelve books brimming with Tales of Treasure and True Love. Each book is written by a different author and can be enjoyed in any order, so pick a new favourite and discover that not all that glitters is gold.

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# Page 1

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## Between Worlds

They say it is neither safe nor wise to dwell near Faerie.

I say things are never that simple.

There is an invisible line between one world and the next, and my family lives on the sliver between them.

Mother would say one can live in a fortress and still be unsafe if it is not where one is meant to be.

She has strong notions of things being meant or not meant to be.

She speaks as though life were a kind of assignment, written in mysterious words rather than plain speech, like the pages in the book she studies, kept on the highest shelf of our cottage.

It is the only one my sister and I are not allowed to read. We call it The Book .

I often pondered such things as I sat in my treetop den, a large shelter of silver-willow sticks woven between the curving branches of the ancient guardian tree.

My sister and I called it our palace, and spent hours playing in it as children.

She was always the princess, and I, being younger, was either her long-suffering lady's maid or the prince.

I sometimes “spoiled the game,” when the prince refused to dance at the ball and ran off to slay dragons instead. If my sister was being particularly bossy I would be the dragon and burn up the ballroom altogether.

I came alone when we outgrew those games, and my sister said that climbing trees was only for children and hoydens.

From my den I looked down on the thatched roof of our cottage. My sister was in the garden, looking more like a child again from this height, instead of the tall, slender maiden that she is.

Beyond our cottage, a break in the ash and oak trees reveals a stretch of the road to the nearest town, several miles away. There is no other road, for we live at the farthest edge of our kingdom. The road dwindles to a bridle track as it passes our cottage and journeys on to the border of Faerie.

It all began as any other day. There was an inkling of change in the air, but I put it down to the shifting of the seasons, as we teetered on the cusp between spring and summer.

I fed our animals, loosed the hens, milked the goats, and gave the donkey a back scratch.

Then I drew the day’s water from the spring.

We called it the Faerie Fountain as children, a small underground spring bubbling out of the ground at the edge of the woods, flowing into a gentle stream that we divert through our vegetable garden and along the roots of our rose bushes.

A larger stream runs a little way from our cottage, ending in a pool where we like to bathe in the summer.

It flows from Faerie, and sometimes I find things floating in the pool from over the border, usually only leaves and twigs or unusual fish, but sometimes more curious things, like the shed horn of a juvenile unicorn, or an elven ribbon as fine as cobweb but strong as hempen rope.

With the morning's chores done, I climbed the guardian tree, leaning into the cradle of woven willow to close my eyes, letting the gentle sway of the branches lull me into that sweet place between waking and dreaming.

It is then that the shushes and swishes of leaves form words in my mind, like a song or poem that makes no sense when I return to the waking world, yet seems full of wisdom while I doze.

My sister could never hear the leaves or the winds talking, or the birds, but I have always heard them.

But that day I was awakened by the excitement of the squirrels and birds. I sat up to peer through the branches. It was just as my fellow creatures warned—there was a stranger coming along the road.

I took the shortcut home across the stones in the stream, hitching up my skirts to splash through the shallows for the last few steps. Up the bank I scrambled, then down the lane to our cottage.

“Here she comes! Here she comes!” squawked the jackdaw in the wild cherry tree, announcing my arrival as I unlatched the garden gate and dashed up the path, through the open door, then skittered across the floor and tumbled over a chair.

“Lily!” cried my sister, looking up from her cleaning and glaring at my wet and dirty footprints. “I have just polished that floor!”

“I know,” I gasped, picking up the chair I had knocked over. “I wish you wouldn’t wax it so thickly, it’s as slippery as ice! ”

“If you were walking like a lady instead of careering about like a—”

“There’s a stranger coming!”

“Oh.” Her cross expression vanished. “So soon? Mother said it would be another week at least. Is he alone?” She folded up her knitted duster.

“I think so. Unless others are following behind.”

“On horseback?”

“No. On foot.”

“Tansy flew over the fence again.”

“Wretched bird! I’ll have to go and find her!”

“Wait!” said my sister, leaning out the open window to reach a white rose clambering around the frame. Taking out her pocket scissors, she deftly cut the stem and stripped off the thorns.

“I should get more,” she murmured, pushing the stem through my tangled locks.

“Stay still. Let me weave it in, or it will fall out.”

“It’s only one man on foot,” I argued, impatient to run and find Tansy before the stranger did. A stray chicken made an attractive supper to a hungry traveller.

“Hurry back,” my sister called after me. “Don’t let him see you!”

She could not see my grin as I dashed away.

It was sport to me to evade strangers. I had years of practice in dodging mischievous, and sometimes dangerous, folk from over the border, so a mere mortal man would be easy to avoid.

But I felt better with one of my roses in my hair.

It was my protective helmet, like the ones the ill-fated knights wore when they passed by each summer.

Besides, I thought as I ran nimbly through the trees, searching all of Tansy's favourite spots, an adventurer who arrives a week early is not very clever .

"There you are, foolish girl," I scolded when I eventually spied my coppery hen roosting under a bush.

"Come on. Out you come." She blinked at me with her yellow eyes and did not move.

"What do you think you're hatching now?" I grumbled, forced to scrabble on my knees as I strained to reach her.

"I shall leave you here. And if you end up on a spit, it will not be my fault."

"Can I help you?" said a voice.

I bolted out from under the bush, jumping to my feet, pushing back the tangled strands of my hair to stare at the stranger. I instinctively reached for my head, even as my gaze fell upon the white rose lying on the ground, pulled loose by my scrambling through the undergrowth.

“Is there someone under there?” the stranger asked, stepping forward.

I took a step back, ready to run. I had sized him up in a glance. He was young, more a youth than a man, at least a year or two younger than me. With that heavy-looking pack on his back, he would never outrun me.

“ ’Tis a chicken,” he said, crouching down.

This was my chance to go. But I didn’t.

There was something friendly in his voice, and something open in his expression. But I kept my distance. People were not always what they seemed.

He remained crouched, squinting at me through a shaft of golden light falling through the trees. He lifted a tanned hand with ragged nails to shield his eyes, scanning me with evident curiosity, his gaze lingering on my unruly silver-white hair and my homespun gown.

“Are you a faerie?” he asked.

Faeries never answer questions directly. I could not resist dropping my voice into something lower and colder than it truly was, something I thought sounded a little dangerous.

“Who is it that asks?”

He stood, letting his pack slide from his back. I stepped back. My eyes flicked to the fallen rose just out of reach.

I half-turned to flee, but he forestalled me by making a jerky bow and saying, “Beg pardon for startling you, my lady. I am Jack, son of Jago.”

Before he straightened, he spotted my rose near his foot and picked it up.

“It is not a wise man, Jack, son of Jago, who gives his name to the fae,” I informed him.

He winced. “Blast. The first faerie I meet, and I forget all I was told.”

He dropped to his knees, holding up my rose like a knight with a token. “Shall I be bound to your will forevermore?”

I suppressed a smile. “Perhaps.” I studied him. “Why do you wish to be led into Faerie?”

“Didn’t say I did.”

“You lack wisdom, Jack, son of Jago.”

He sighed. “You wouldn’t be the first to say so. But do we go?”

“You are one of those fortune-hunters trying to find the lost treasure.” He did not deny it. “Why?” I demanded.

He blinked. “Why not? Who wouldn’t wish to find the lost treasure? The king has increased the reward.”

“Delightful,” I said dryly. “So there will be more of you than ever.”

“More of me? I journeyed alone.”

He glanced over his shoulder.



I caught the glance, yet I knew he had come alone, for I had seen him on the road, and there had been no travellers following behind.

“It is not merely unwise to try and deceive a faerie, Jack, son of Jago,” I said darkly. “It is absolute folly . Who follows after you?”

“No one,” he said quickly. Then, hesitating, “At least... I lost him a se’nnight ago. My brother. He’s on his way, but I outwitted him.” He looked troubled. “Left in the middle of the night. Took all the supplies. And his boots.”

“His boots?”

“Couldn’t follow me without boots. And couldn’t buy new boots without money.”

“You are a thief.”

“Thief? Nay, do not say so! Not a thief, only a... strategist! I outwitted him! He said I’d never do it.

Said I’m a mooncalf, a tomfool, a nitwit, a jackass.

Got so mortal fed up of names I left him behind.

Going to beat him to the treasure.” He sighed.

“I will share it with him. But I shan’t be a nitwit then. ”

“And how,” I said, “did you think you were going to get into Faerie, Master Strategist?”

“Across the border, like everyone else.”

“And where is this border?”

“I’ve only just arrived,” he admitted. “Was looking for it when I saw you, my lady.”

“And how will you know when you’ve found it?”

“I suppose ’tis one of those things you know when you see it.” He shrugged. “Others find it. Why not me?”

I studied him again. I knew enough to perceive that this youth was truly mortal.

Had he been fae, there would have been telltale signs: the slight shimmer of a glamour would have shown itself by now, and his voice would have carried that subtle, unsettling discord of someone speaking under enchantment.

And no fae would ever call themselves a mooncalf or jackass, for, above all things, the fae are proud.

No, Jack, son of Jago, was exactly what he seemed—a young and green adventurer, with more hair than sense.

But it was still not wise for me to engage with him. I must leave him to his folly.

“I release you, Jack, son of Jago,” I said, plucking my rose from his fingers. “But you shall not find the entrance to Faerie these seven days at least, for it only opens on the first day of summer, and you are too early.”

“A week?” he said, dismayed. “Then I hastened ahead of my brother in vain?”

I almost laughed at his expression.

“And you will not take me with you?”

“Few return from Faerie. Why should such a fate be yours?”

“The treasure will be found one day,” he replied stubbornly. “For the king’s wiseman says so.”

I waved a dismissive hand. “The king’s wiseman says so because the king lives in hope that his family’s rule shall not end. What does the king care if a youth like you sacrifices your life for his lost crown?”

Jack looked indignant. “What can a faerie know of my king and my kingdom?”

“You would not risk all if there were not a vast personal reward offered.”

He did not deny this. But I could see my words had no power to dissuade him.

“I leave you with a parting word of advice.”

“Yes, my lady?” He looked hopeful.

“Do not sleep in the woods. There are trees in Faerie whose roots and branches reach into this realm. They can be malicious to sleeping mortals.”

Jack swallowed.

“Eat nothing foraged from these woods. Keep to the meadowland. And do not give your name to anyone.” Lowering my voice, I added, “And if you come across a cottage with roses around it, stay well away .”

“Why? I passed such a cottage. Looked mortal pretty.”

“Looks are deceiving. It belongs to a powerful sorceress. You shall suffer unspeakable curses should you draw her attention to yourself.”

“Thank you,” he said with a bow of the head. “I was told the fae were proud and rude, but you are very kind. Perhaps I might see you again while I’m here?” he added hopefully.

“You shall not see me again,” I said firmly. “But remember what I have said.”

I pointed behind him. “Look to the west!”

The gullible youth obeyed.

I was gone before he turned back.

I would have to come for Tansy later. Jack, son of Jago, did not look shrewd enough to catch a very stubborn hen.

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### The Cuckoo

“Where have you been?” said my sister when I returned home. “Look at the state of your gown and hair! You look as though you’ve been crawling under thorn bushes. Where is Tansy?”

“Under a thorn bush and refusing to come out. Probably trying to hatch pinecones again. If she gets eaten by a fox, it will be her own fault. I had no choice but to leave her.”

“Coming home ! Coming home !” called the jackdaw outside our gate.

“Here is Mother,” my sister said, breaking off from scolding me.

Through the small front window, with its fretwork and shutters, we saw Mother’s solid figure marching up the path, leading our equally stout donkey. A small cloud of butterflies fluttered around her in welcome. I darted to the door and pulled it open.

“What have you got?” I asked eagerly, peering at the sacks draped over Jenny’s crude saddle. “Oats ,” I said, disappointed that Mother’s jars of berry jam and honey had been traded for something so ordinary. I lifted a sack and bore it inside.

“Lily has seen an adventurer,” my sister announced.

“I thought as much,” said Mother, bringing the other sack in and depositing it in our pantry. “A youth, is he not? I saw him pass through town.”

“Yes,” I said. “I met him in the woods.”

Mother raised her eyebrows. “That was careless, Lily.”

“I know. He caught me off guard. I was under a bush trying to get Tansy.”

“Don’t let it happen again. It may not be a harmless youth next time. At least you had sense not to go out without a rose.”

“I made her wear it,” my sister said.

“Put the kettle on, Rose,” said Mother, pulling a package from one of her pockets.

“Licorice root tea!” cried my sister. “You did bring a treat! I knew you would.”

Another pocket yielded a second package.

“Sweetmeats!” I crowed.

“Put Jenny away,” said Mother, shooing out a fat bumblebee, then lifting a ladybird from her shoulder, placing it gently on the windowsill. “Then we shall have a brew, and you shall tell me all about this youth.”

“And you shall tell us all the news from town,” said my sister eagerly, hanging the kettle on its hook.

As we sat over tea I told them about my conversation with Jack, son of Jago. Rose thought it clever of me to deter him from our cottage by claiming a dangerous sorceress lived in it. But she was glad I had advised him not to risk sleeping in the woods.

“He was little more than a boy,” I said. “I feel sorry for him, risking his life on a pointless treasure quest. ”

Rose and I shared the sweets made of almonds and honey. Mother had brought a treat of her own in the form of a twist of tobacco. She sat smoking her pipe thoughtfully. My sister pressed for news from town. She liked hearing about the world beyond our woodland cottage. I did not care as much.

“I anticipate there will be more adventurers than usual this year,” said Mother. “The king has declared that whoever finds the treasure and restores the crown may now keep all the treasure, as well as a reward of land, property, and a place at court.”

“The king is desperate, is he not?” my sister mused, taking a tiny nibble of her sweet.

I had eaten mine already and looked longingly at the two remaining on her wooden plate.

She saw me looking and whisked them out of reach.

“He is desperate,” agreed Mother, murmuring around the pipe in her mouth. She took it out and examined it. “He’s not in good health. If the crown is not found, there will be a violent scramble for the throne.”

“A war?” my sister asked, her eyes wide.

“Very likely. These are trying times. Many factions vying for power.” Mother tucked her pipe back between her lips. “As in Faerie, so it is here,” she murmured.

Mother wouldn’t let me go back for Tansy, but went herself to fetch the wayward hen. She wanted Rose and me to keep close to home, to keep the shutters closed, and not so much as step into the garden without at least two roses each in our hair.

My sister accepted this without complaint, but I chafed against restriction.

“I don’t know why you make such a fuss every year,” Rose said, settling down to her knitting.

“I do not wish to be ogled at by horrid adventurers. It would be different if they were gentlemen of high rank, but they’re always so dirty and unkempt.

” She gave a delicate little shudder. “Like smelly bears.”

“You would be dirty and unkempt if you had travelled far and wide to get to the border, encamping in the open for weeks or months,” I countered. “And Beran is not smelly.”

“Yes he is. You are too used to it to notice. Instead of scowling at the fireplace, why don’t you spend your time profitably? Fetch the workbasket and mend your dress. You’ve torn it ragged.”

Mother returned home with the recalcitrant Tansy under her arm. I wondered how she had managed to coax the stubborn bird out, and without so much as a single scratch or tear in her gown.

“I have been suggesting to Lily that she ought to make good use of her time at home,” said Rose, as Mother took her fireside chair. “There is plenty of mending to be done.”

I crossed my arms. “You know I detest sewing. Oh, Mother, do I really have to be cooped up for two weeks? A pox on that stripling for arriving a week early and doubling my confinement!”

Mother gave me a sympathetic look, but her tone was firm. “I am sorry for you,” she said. “But young women are not always safe around strangers. It’s my job to keep



you from harm. You can still work in the garden. The time will soon pass.”

“Surely I may still go out while it’s only that silly boy camping somewhere about?” I begged.

She shook her head. “There will be more arriving any day. I will teach you something new to pass the time. ”

“A new stitch?” I said resentfully.

“A new book,” she replied.

I brightened, for I loved to learn new things.

I opened my mouth to ask how she could afford something so expensive as a book, but as soon as the words formed in my mind, they slipped away again, like melting snow.

I blinked. What was it about the book I had wanted to ask?

The thought drifted out of reach, dissolving into nothingness.

It was not the first time this had happened when speaking with Mother.

The next morning dawned bright and beautiful, and my resentment at being confined renewed.

I weeded around the berry canes, jabbing my hoe into the earth with more force than necessary.

A delightful breeze passed through the garden, whispering of nectar-rich flowers and

the ferny glades.

I longed to follow it, but could only watch as our honeybees glided amiably away, eager to chase the scents they had heard of on the wind.

I was so used to the chatter of the local birds that I barely paid them any attention.

They trilled of the usual things—the sky was clear of hawks, the ground clear of foxes, there was a new berry crop and a good patch of grubs.

They bickered over territories, and one little gold-breast was always calling his fellow birds rude names before flitting away, laughing when they came after him.

But this morning, a new voice was in the air—a repetitive, high-pitched call, coming from above.

I paused in my hoeing. “That was no bird,” I told the hedgehog that had snuffled out from his den, hoping I had unearthed something tasty.

Abandoning my hoe, I plunged through the garden gate and strode toward the guardian tree.

“Where are you going?” Rose called through the window. “Mother said not to—”

I ignored her.

My skirts swished around my legs as I ran to the tree and shimmied up the ladder to my treetop den.

A voice greeted me cheerfully before my head emerged.

“You did see me!”

I hauled myself up, glaring at the intruder.

“How did you get up here?”

Jack, son of Jago, beamed at me as though I were the guest.

“Is it not the best spot in the world to make camp?” he said, gesturing around him. “’Tis very like a den! Had a mortal good night’s sleep, I was—”

“It is very like a den, because I made it!”

“Did you? How clever. But why are you so cross?”

“How did you find it?” I demanded. “No one has ever found my den.”

“Took heed of your advice not to sleep under the trees, so I thought to sleep in the trees.” He gestured at the ancient branches with a silly smile.

“It is my tree, Jack, son of Jago, and you are trespassing.”

At that moment, the branches creaked beneath us, and the whole tree swayed, unbalancing us both.

Jack staggered against the trunk, while I was thrown against the willow wall that formed the balcony of my den .

Jack laughed, having received no worse than a painless knock. “Methinks your tree is as cross as you, my lady,” he said. “There’s something very alive about this tree.” He patted the trunk fondly, and the leaves rustled in response, like the purr of a cat.

I glared at boy and branches alike, and rubbed my elbow. Overhead, the squirrels scolded me.

“Perhaps,” I said loudly, speaking to the leaves and branches and squirrels, “I should give up all my secret places to this wandering boy?”

The tree remained silent. Indifference was worse than temper.

“I am not a boy,” he protested.

“Well, you are not a man.”

He straightened to his full height, which was a good handspan taller than me.

I put my hands on my hips. “Do not light any fires,” I ordered. “And do not break so much as a single twig from this tree, nor pilfer one egg from any nest!”

Jack looked at me with disdain. “I’m not beetle-headed. Who would light a fire in a treehouse?”

I flounced away to the ladder.

“Don’t go!” His expression softened back into boyish eagerness. He nodded toward my cottage. “You were teasing when you said a dangerous sorceress lived there, for I looked out this morning and saw you! Tried to get your attention. Did you hear me?”

“How could I not? There is nothing like shrill screeching to get one’s attention.”

“Was trying to make a cuckoo call.” He squinted at me. “You’re as crusty as my brother.”

“You would be out of temper too if you found some noisy, irritating fellow spoiling your peaceful morning and stealing your den.”

Jack looked dejected. “You’re not a faerie, are you? And you’re not a sorceress, neither.”

“Who says so?”

“If you were, you wouldn’t only give me a tongue-lashing. You’d do something tricky to punish me.”

“Perhaps I am exercising great patience out of pity for your excessive youth.”

I placed one foot on the ladder.

“I’ve got sweetcake!” he blurted.

I hesitated. “What kind of sweetcake?”

He darted to his pack and rummaged until he reached a wrapped bundle.

“Got currants and peel in it,” he said, unfolding a grubby piece of cloth to reveal a sorry-looking slab of cake. “Smell,” he urged, shoving it under my nose.

I smelled the warm scent of nutmeg and mace.

“ ’Tis a bit dry,” he admitted. “A goodwife gave it me for cleaning out her goat house. Made it last four days. Could have eaten every last crumb in one go.”

He was now close enough for me to see the pinched look of his face. I frowned. “What else have you got to eat?”

He shrugged. "Just this."

I was not going to eat his last morsel. "I have to go," I said brusquely, wanting to stifle the rush of pity I suddenly felt for him. After all, he was not my responsibility. He shouldn't even be here, I told myself as I climbed down the tree.

And nor should I, I thought, as I ran home.

Fortune was with me, for Mother was not home yet. I told Rose of my conversation with the youth .

"I wonder why the tree has taken a liking to him," she said.

"Probably feels sorry for him. He's such a greenhorn, he hasn't even packed provisions for himself. He's been living on currant cake for the past four days."

"There are worse things to live on," said Rose. "Perhaps we should send him some dinner seeing as he's a harmless youth."

"And how shall I explain to Mother how I know about him needing dinner?"

Rose gave one of her graceful little shrugs, and we said no more on the matter. But the memory of the youth's hungry face niggled at me for the rest of the day.

Mother came home in the late afternoon, her basket brimming with wild mushrooms and late allium bulbs. No one could find mushrooms like Mother. She seemed to wrinkle them out with her nose, like a truffle pig, we often jested.

"The border is unusually thin in places," she said when I asked for news.

Rose brought water for Mother's dusty feet. I peered into the basket, sorting through

the foraged goods.

“I hope that boy you met took your advice,” continued Mother, drying her feet. “It would not be wise for him to camp in the woods when the fae begin coming through.”

I glanced at Rose. “I saw him again,” I admitted. “I was in the garden and heard him whistling. He could see me from the guardian tree. The brat stole my den.”

“Interesting,” said Mother, sitting in her chair by the hearth as Rose poured the dirty water out the window onto the rose bushes.

Evening drew near. We were preparing for our dinner when there came a knock at the door .

I sprang up immediately. “It must be Beran!”

I hurried to the door—it could be no one else, for the roses would have barred a stranger. I opened eagerly, and the smile of welcome slid from my face. “You!”

Jack, son of Jago, stood on the doorstep with a silly look on his face.

“Hope you don’t mind,” he said, peering past me. “What a snug little house.” He sniffed the air. “What a delicious smell. Hope I’m not intruding. Came to warn you—there’s a horde of ruffians coming this way.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:36 am*

### Siblings

“Come in!” called Mother.

“Boots off!” said Rose.

I wrinkled my nose as Jack pulled off his patched-up boots and dropped them on the doorstep.

“Sorry,” he murmured, catching my look. “Haven’t washed my feet in a while.”

“I know.”

He tugged his forelock at Mother. She gestured for him to sit in my chair.

He hesitated, glancing toward the door. “But... good mother, are you not afeared? There’s a horde of ruffians coming!”

“Come and eat,” Mother said, and at her words his look of fear faded and he drifted obediently towards the chair.

Rose came to the table and pushed the plate of oatcakes toward him with a smile. He blinked at the sight of her, then blushed like a radish.

I fetched another bowl. “Well?” I demanded, filling it with stew and offering it to him. “Are you eating or not?”



He glanced again at the door as though trying to remember what he came for.

But the smell of hot stew reached his nose, and he sat and began spooning it up rapidly.

“Mmm...” he murmured to no one in particular.

“Most delicious thing I’ve ever tasted. Haven’t eaten such a meal in a se’nnight. Nay, a month.”

“Have some more,” offered Rose, plucking the ladle from me.

We had only three chairs, so I perched on a stool, feeling a loss of dignity, like a small child eating away from the table.

“Those are the best oatcakes I’ve ever tasted,” Jack sighed when the plate was empty.

“You should know,” I said. “After eating seven of them.”

Mother began filling her customary after-dinner pipe. Jack watched with interest as she lit it with a twig from the fire and puffed away. “Now tell us what you saw,” she said.

He sat up straight. “A horde,” he began. “Coming along the road from town. Such a cloud of dust they made—like a troop! Like an army!”

“Exactly how many?” I asked, thinking an army sounded very unlikely.

“Couldn’t count.”

“Why?” asked Rose, frowning at a hole in her knitting. “Were there too many?”

“Can’t count,” he replied. “Don’t know numbers nor letters. No one ever taught me. My brother knows numbers and letters. He’s the clever one.”

“They cannot be riding very fast,” I said. “They haven’t passed by yet.”

“Why do you call them ruffians?” asked Mother.

“They looked like ruffians. ”

“And what does a ruffian look like?” I asked.

“Not like a gent,” he said. “Nor a respectable fellow. A ruffian. They’ll come by your cottage, won’t they, good mother?”

“They will,” murmured Mother, “if they are riding to the border.”

“Which they shall be,” Rose added. “As they do every year.”

Jack looked between us. “How is it you’re not afeared? You’re not afraid of rough men coming to steal your...” he glanced at Rose and me, “...your food?”

“There’s none left to steal,” I couldn’t resist saying. “You ate it.”

Jack turned his silly brown eyes on me as if to reply, but the sound of hooves and a shout caused him to leap up, crying, “They’re here!”

I went to the window. Rose joined me, tucking her ball of wool under her arm.

“They do look like ruffians,” I admitted, noting the grizzled and grimy beards and rough countenances.

They clattered by on pack-laden mules and stout horses, man and beast both weary, as if at the end of a long journey.

“That fellow’s dismounting,” Jack said anxiously. “He’s coming through the gate!” He rushed to the door. “You have no bolt! Barricade the door!” He grabbed the table, dragging it across the floor.

“Stop .” Mother spoke firmly. “They will not trouble us.”

Jack gaped at her. “Not... trouble?”

“Step away from the window, Rose,” Mother instructed.

She obeyed just as the roses began to swell and surge.

I never failed to be impressed by the speed of their movement.

The cottage darkened, as though the late afternoon had turned to night in an instant.

Thick vines and brambles shot up, forming an impenetrable barrier of thorns.

Branches, broad as a man’s arm, wove together like living iron. A cry of alarm sounded from outside.

“Hack ‘em back!” someone yelled.

I heard blades drawn and curses shouted—and then a droning hum filled the air—our bees were roused from their hives, and every curse drew a corresponding sting.

We listened to the yells, the neighing and braying, and then the hurried clatter of hooves as the party of adventurers fled. The vines shrank, the window cleared, and

the golden light of late afternoon returned.

Rose resumed her knitting. Mother puffed her pipe.

I went to the window and shook my head at the mess left behind—broken branches, the garden gate hanging from its hinge, and a few dropped items littering the path.

Jack stood white-faced and wide-eyed.

“They’re gone,” I told him unnecessarily. “There is nothing to fear.”

But it wasn’t them he was afraid of.

“Y-you were telling the truth,” he stammered. “Wh-when you said this was a sorceress’s house!”

Rose looked up with half a smile. Mother puffed on. I was impish enough to cast Jack a dark and knowing look, such as I imagined a sorceress might use.

Mother put him to rights. “We’re none of us sorceresses, Master Jack,” she said. “Only a lone woman and her two girls.”

“B-but that !” Jack pointed at the window where a rose branch was shrinking as it snaked slowly away, resuming its usual form .

“The roses are enchanted,” Mother said. “But we are not the enchanters.”

Jack swallowed. “Then h-how did you get them?”

“They were a gift.”

“A-a magical gift?”

“Is that so surprising, living so near to Faerie?”

Jack hesitated. “ ’Tis not safe to live so near to Faerie,” he said. He still looked wary. “But... you have no magic?”

“We are just as you see,” said Mother. “No more, no less.”

“If we were magical,” said Rose, lifting her head, “we would hardly be eking out a living in a little cottage, now would we?” There was more than a hint of yearning in her tone.

“If I were magical, I should live in a big house and have beautiful gowns and jewels, and feast on roast beef and sweetmeats.”

He considered this, and his face showed he thought it a very plausible argument.

“And if I were magical,” I said, unable to resist my own little gripe, “I would not be cooped up for days every year just because stupid men want to ride into Faerie on a fool’s quest.”

He gave me a reproachful look. “ ’Tis not a fool’s quest. ’Tis a noble thing to wish to save the kingdom from war.”

“So it is,” said Rose comfortingly, throwing me a look as sharp as her needle point. “Do not listen to Lily. She is in one of her petulant moods, for she hates to be confined. Now come and sit back down. You’ll stay for supper, won’t you? We have liquorice tea and a little porridge with honey.”

His face brightened. “I’ve not eaten honey in an age.”

“You will like our honey,” Rose promised. “Our bees cross between here and there, and the nectar from over the border makes the sweetest honey you ever tasted.”

Jack sat down again. “ You could not be a dangerous sorceress,” he murmured, gazing at Rose. “You are too kind. Too lovely. My lady Rose ,” he added, with a touch of reverence.

Rose smiled benignly, like a queen to a courtier. “Mother shall tell us stories until suppertime,” she said. “You will like that.”

Jack did like that. We all did.

Mother’s steady, rhythmic voice wove through the air, telling the old tales of treasures and faerie tricks, of knights and kings, of cunning rogues and clever maidens.

I stirred the pot of porridge while my thoughts drifted amid other worlds, until a loud, insistent knocking jolted me from the story reverie. “Beran!” I cried, rushing to the door, my spoon still in my hand.

I yanked it wide. It was deep dusk outside, and dark to eyes used to lamp and firelight, but I could see that the shape on the doorstep was neither tall nor wide enough for Beran.

“Who are you?” I said in surprise.

The dark shape bent, making a bow.

“I am Jory, son of Jago. I have come for my brother.”

Jack was at my side in a moment.

“Jory ! How did you find me?”

The stranger held something aloft. Rose now came to the door, bearing a lamp. The flickering light revealed a pair of dirty, patched-up boots swinging by their broken laces in the stranger’s hand.

“I recognised these,” said the stranger. “When I saw them sitting on the doorstep. For they are my own. Were my own. How came you to wear them out, you sapskull, scapegrace of a brat?”

I had a feeling I might like this brother.

“You’re welcome to have them back,” said Jack, his pleasure dimming. “They gave me no end of blisters.”

“That will teach you not to steal other men’s boots, then, shan’t it?”

Jack hung his head.

“Are you coming in, Master Jory?” asked Rose, after looking to Mother for confirmation.

He glanced up at her, a ripple of surprise crossing his face. He bowed again.

“If I might have that honour, my lady. I am wholly at your service.”

Rose liked this show of admiration. She tossed her head a little and did not demand that he take off his dirty boots.

“I am Rose. This is Mother, and my sister, Lily.”

“Lily and Rose,” he said, in an amused tone. “How sweet.”

“Jack and Jory,” I flashed back. “How quaint.”

He looked at me for the first time. No admiration lit up his expression when his gaze fell on me. But what was my wild, silver-white hair and hoydenish air compared to Rose’s neat, glossy braids and willowy beauty?

“You must be hungry after your journey,” said Mother, who had not moved from her chair, but pointed with her pipe at a vacant seat.

“I thank you, good mother,” said Jory, letting down his pack and a small quiver and a bow. He unclasped and discarded a green cloak before taking the chair. A slingshot hung from his belt.

“There’s only porridge for supper,” I said. “We’ve had dinner already,” I looked pointedly at Jack, “and there is none left.”

Jory sniffed the air with a frown, and I darted to the pot with a groan. The neglected porridge was a brown mess.

“Is it burnt?” asked Rose needlessly.



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“I’ll make more,” I said grimly. The goats would eat the ruined potful, but scraping it clean would be a chore.

“Do not trouble yourself,” said Jory. “Pass me my pack, brat,” he added, jerking his chin toward Jack.

Jack scowled but did as he was told. “Suppose you’re never going to forgive me,” he muttered as he dropped the pack at his brother’s feet.

“I daresay I shall. After a year or two.”

“Well, I am sorry.”

“Oh, I wager you were very sorry. Probably the first time you went hungry, slept in the rain, and couldn’t start a fire, you were sorry you left me behind with no money and no boots.”

Jack slunk onto my stool. “I have the best camping spot in the world now,” he said.

I held my tongue.

“Here,” said Jory, pulling parcels from the top of his pack. “These came from the market this morning. Good and fresh.” He passed them to Rose.

“You came by some money then,” said Jack, eyeing the packages and the boots on his brother’s feet.

“Didn’t say I bought them,” replied Jory.

“Wheaten bread!” said Rose, eyes wide. “We’ve not tasted soft bread for ever so long. Look, Lily!” She held up the loaf. “And look!” She sniffed a wedge of pale, yellow cheese.

“I’ll toast it,” I said, taking the loaf from her .

“Allow me,” said Jory, rising to pluck it back.

“You don’t trust me not to burn it?”

He smiled, as though to a child.

“I only burnt it because I was distracted by you coming to the door,” I added, nettled.

“I am a master at toasted cheese,” he said.

“Very well.” I left him to it.

Jack gave me a sympathetic look. For the first time I felt a jot of fellowship with the boy, and gave him a look back as though to say, I can see now why you left him behind. But Jack, understanding my look, said quietly, “He’s a good fellow really. He’s the clever one.”

While the bread and cheese toasted to golden perfection, Jory marvelled at our shelf of books.

“History, Faerie lore,” he said, reading the titles slowly. “Mathematicks and physicks and astronomy.” He looked at Mother in amazement. “Where did you get such valuable books? They’re worth a king’s ransom.”

“I was given most of them,” said Mother vaguely.

“By who?”

I was as curious as he was. I waited for her answer.

She only narrowed her eyes, regarding Jory as she said softly, “You do not need to know.”

Her words dulled my curiosity at once, like a mist settling over my mind. Jory blinked and his look of enquiry vanished.

“Do you read them?” he asked some minutes later.

“What else are books for?” said Mother.

“Do you read them?” he asked, turning to me.

“Certainly,” I said. “Is that so wonderful?”

“Why, yes! Only scholars and rich men read such things.”

I hadn’t realised that .

“Your toast will burn if you don’t attend,” I said with some satisfaction.

He hastened back to the hearth.

Jack asked if his brother had seen the band of ruffians who’d passed by earlier. He told him about the one who had come to our door, and how a wall of thorns had driven them off.

“A wall of thorns?” said Jory.

“Magic roses,” Jack whispered. “Enchanted, aren’t they?” he said to Mother.

She nodded. “A gift from the garden of the south queen of Faerie.”

Jory looked doubtful. “I first saw those fellows forty miles back,” he said.

“Kept them in sight while keeping myself out of theirs. Rough band, more brawn than brains. Once they were in their cups of an evening I’d go among them and partake of their supper—the sapskulls didn’t even notice I was a stranger. ” He grinned.

Jack was impressed. “And they never noticed?”

“Not with a hood on and a bit of swagger and bluster. It was dark, and they were full of homebrew.”

I glanced at Mother and Rose to see what they thought. Rose was watching him with curiosity. Mother looked thoughtful.

“You’re a knowing one,” said Jack admiringly.

Jory saw my expression. “What do you say I am, Miss Lily?”

I bristled. He called Rose my lady , while I was Miss .

“A fly-by-night,” I said.

He laughed.

The cheese on toast was delicious. Even Rose licked the last morsel from her fingers

and still managed to look ladylike. I made tea and gave up my chair again to our guest without resentment, seeing as he had made such a glorious supper.

Mother stirred up the fire and added a log.

We all sat round comfortably while Jory told us amusing tales of his journey—how he'd taken a wrong turn at a crossroads and been lost in a forest for two days until a woodcutter showed him the way back to the road in exchange for a hare caught with his sling.

And how, one morning, he had sat on what he thought was a misty hillock in a meadow, only to discover it was a sleeping bull.

“The thing chased me half a mile and wouldn't let me near the field again,” said Jory. “But I had to go back,” he added. “For I'd dropped my pack.”

“How did you get it back?” I asked, still laughing, for he had a humorous way of storytelling.

“A mere slip of a boy came along, demanding to know what I was doing vexing his Buttercup. Turned out Buttercup was the bull. The great hefty brute let the brat pet him like a puppy. I told the boy he could have anything from my pack if he'd just fetch it.

The little runt said if the pack were in his field, it was already his.

I had to empty the coins from my britches to buy it back. ”

“If you cannot outsmart a child or a bull,” said Mother slowly, “how do you think you'll deal with the fae, if you go over the border? And take a wrong turn in Faerie, and you may never find your way back.”

Jack watched his brother, anxious for his reply.

Jory looked steadily back at Mother, then rummaged in his pack and pulled out a wooden pipe and a pouch of tobacco. “May I?” he asked, offering to fill her pipe. She shook her head, for no one touched her pipe, so Jory gave her the pouch that she might fill her bowl herself.

We sat quietly for some time while Mother and Jory puffed meditatively, and Rose’s knitting needles clicked rhythmically. I gazed into the flames. Jack fidgeted, trying to stay awake.

Then Jory said, as calmly as one might comment on the weather—“I won’t take a wrong turn in Faerie. For I have a map that will take me right to the treasure.”

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Strangers

“A treasure map!” exclaimed Jack, sitting bolt upright.

“Let me see it,” I said eagerly.

Rose ceased knitting and leaned forward. Mother’s eyes narrowed.

“That is to say,” said Jory, “I know where a map is to be found. And I shall find it.”

“Where?” asked Jack.

Jory just waved a hand and got to his feet. “Come, Jacko,” he said, putting on his travelling cloak and taking up his bow, quiver, and pack. “We must leave our kind hosts for the night. You say you have a good camping spot to sleep in? Is it far?”

“A stone’s throw,” said Jack, obediently rising. “ ’Tis a grand place to sleep—a treehouse! You can see stars through the leaves.”

“A treehouse?” Jory looked dubious.

“A wondrous treehouse!” Jack assured him, as Jory thrust his quiver and bow into his arms.

Jory bowed to Mother, then to Rose. He nodded at me .

“Thank you for supper,” Rose called after him.

“Show us the map if you find it,” I said in parting.

He grinned and shouldered his pack. “Lead on, Jack-a-napes.”

“Is there a map?” I asked Mother once the door was shut behind them. The cottage seemed quiet and empty. I regained my chair, which was still warm from Jory’s occupation.

“Time will tell,” said Mother, tapping out the ash from her pipe onto the hearth.

“What a pleasant young man he is,” said Rose, folding up her knitting and giving a delicate yawn.

Night had fallen, and it was our custom to retire early and rise at first light. As I moved to go to bed, Mother said, “Aren’t you forgetting something, Lily?”

“What?”

Mother nodded at the blackened cooking pot. “We don’t leave dishes for morning. That’s a sure way to attract mice.”

I sighed but did not argue.

“I’ll help you,” said Rose unexpectedly.

I knew she must want to talk. We took the dishes and pot out to the back garden where a pail of water waited.

“Why do you think the roses let them in?” asked Rose, drying the bowls so slowly that I might as well have wiped them myself.



“Because they knew they were harmless.”

“There are plenty of harmless people they won’t let past the front gate.”

This was true.

“Perhaps I was meant to meet him,” continued Rose in a dreamy voice .

“Jory?”

“Who else?”

I stared at her incredulously, but I was in shadow, and she could not see me.

“Keep scrubbing,” she said. “I cannot make breakfast in the morning with a dirty pot.”

I bent over the bucket, flicking my hair out of the way.

“Why should you be meant to meet him? He’s just some penniless adventurer like all the others.”

“Oh, I don’t know. In truth, he has some charm and good looks, but I only like him because he admires me. But don’t you ever wonder about the future, Lily? About where we will live out our lives?”

“Here, of course!” I said in surprise. “Where else would we live?”

“I don’t know that I want to live all my life hidden away in a woodland cottage, foraging for mushrooms and berries and chopping firewood. Don’t you ever wish for life to be different?”

“No. I don’t! And you don’t do the foraging and chopping, or take care of the animals, or the garden. All you do is keep house and knit things with holes in them that Mother has to unpick and start over.”

“Well, I call that very ungrateful,” said Rose. “You have no idea how much work it takes to keep a house clean and nice when one lives with a half-feral girl and an indifferent mother. If it were not for me, you would live like hogs!”

“Half-feral? I cook and scrub pots and do all the dirty work while you sit around like a lady of the manor overseeing all the servants doing the real work!”

“I, a lady of the manor! Ouch ! Did you scratch me? ”

“ Ouch ! No, I did not! It was that thorn!”

This put an end to our little bicker; it was not the first time the roses had disciplined us.

“So where would you want to live?” I asked, resuming my scrubbing.

“Oh, I don’t know. It’s not that I want to leave you and Mother or our cottage, or our beautiful roses.” She put out a hand to mollify a red rose whose petals looked black in the shadows. “But I should like something more.”

“What more is there?”

I felt rather than saw her little shrug.

“Marriage,” she said quietly. “Don’t you ever feel lonely? Wouldn’t you like to go among people and have friends and neighbours? Wouldn’t you like to have something important to do?”

It was my turn to shrug. I had never given it much thought.

“I cannot imagine living anywhere else,” I said. “I certainly don’t want to live in a town, with all the poky houses crushed up together, and all the noise and smell and confinement.”

I shuddered. An alarming thought struck me, and I dropped the bundle of short twigs I was scouring with.

“You’re not going to marry and bring some man into our house, are you?”

“Would it be so very bad? To have someone to chop wood and hunt game and make things easier?”

“It would be terrible. A man getting in the way, eating everything and making everything uncomfortable.”

“I’m too tired to argue,” yawned Rose, and we went in and climbed the narrow ladder to our cosy bed under the eaves.

I woke with a cry, sitting up in bed, my heart racing.

“Did you have the dream?” asked Rose sleepily, sitting up beside me.

“Yes.”

“Which one? The bear or the man?”

“Both.”

“You’re just worrying about Beran,” Rose rubbed my back.

“Yes.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No. There was nothing new. It was the same dream.”

Rose got up and stretched. “It’s my turn to make breakfast,” she said, exchanging her nightgown for her shift and day-gown. “He will come soon,” she added kindly. “He never comes when the gate is open, but there are a few days yet.”

I nodded and tried to smile, to show I appreciated her attempt to comfort me.

I sat on the edge of the bed for a few minutes, trying to shake off the feeling of helplessness and grief the dream always left me with.

Always it was the same: a large black bear, howling in torment, bound and chained. And I knew it was Beran—I had to help him, but I could not reach him. Then the dream would shift. It was no longer Beran, but a man. A man I had never met in waking life.

He lay dying, his dark head in my lap. I held him, weeping, willing him to live, but he slipped away from me all the same .

Rose cooked eggs for breakfast, and we half expected a knock at the door from our new neighbours, but none came, so I did not have to share my eggs after all.

Later that day, a half-dozen fresh fish were found on our doorstep, neatly gutted and cleaned, and laid in a battered leather hat that I recognised as belonging to Jack.

As I worked in the garden I kept glancing at the guardian tree, but there was no movement on my willow balcony, and no sign of the brothers except for the hat full

of fish.

Mother returned from her walk with word that the ruffians had camped, rather foolishly, in the old quarry next to the labyrinth cave.

They would have a good view of the gateway into Faerie from there, but only if they didn't first fall prey to the unfriendly dwarves in the tunnels, or get chased off by the unpleasant shrieker bats that roosted in the cave recesses.

The sun began to set, casting lilac streaks across the sky—a strange, vivid light that only appeared when the border thinned.

I rinsed the earth from my hands, ready to go inside for dinner, when I heard the creak of the front gate I had re-hung that morning. Must those brothers only visit at mealtimes? I didn't want to share my fish.

I rounded the front garden, and stopped short. It wasn't a lanky youth or his swaggering brother approaching—it was a black, hulking figure lumbering up the path.

“ Bear! Bear! ” squawked the jackdaw.

“ Look out!” came another voice—Jory, appeared at the garden fence with his sling spinning above his head.

“ Run , Miss Lily ! Out the way! I'll bring it down! ”

“Don't you dare!” I cried, hurling myself between the bear and the gate. “Don't hit him!”

The bear caught sight of Jory and let out a roar that brought Mother and Rose rushing

to the door.

Confusion reigned—yelling, growling, shouting, clattering. It was some time before any of us could make ourselves understood.

“What do you mean it’s your friend ?” Jory demanded, lowering his sling in disbelief.

“His name is Beran,” I said, catching my breath. “And he’s been our friend since I was a girl and he a cub! Come in, Beran. We have fish for dinner.”

“The fish!” cried Mother, rushing back inside.

“ We caught the fish,” said Jack, standing warily in the lane.

“And we thank you,” said Rose sweetly.

Before I could give her a warning look, she added, “Would you like to join us for dinner?”

“Won’t the bear attack us?” Jack asked nervously, watching Beran lumber up the cottage steps.

Beran turned at the top step and gave the brothers a low growl.

“I couldn’t say,” I replied mischievously. “He might have taken a misliking to you, seeing as you tried to attack him.”

Jory was more curious than scared. He pushed open the gate. “Is it enchanted?” he asked, watching as Beran disappeared inside.

“ He is a Faerie bear,” I said. “Not an it .”

“But you said everything out of Faerie was dangerous,” said Jack.

“I said faeries were not to be meddled with. He is not a faerie. He is a bear out of Faerie. ”

Jack scratched his head, but Jory looked intrigued.

“Let’s not disturb the ladies,” suggested Jack.

“But I have news they will like to hear,” argued Jory, and strode toward the cottage. “Good thing for that bear I had only my sling with me, or he would have a quiver full of arrows in him by now.”

We each had a fish, and there was plenty of Mother’s salad and roasted sweetroots to go around. Whenever Mother cooked there was always more than enough.

Jack kept as far from Beran as he could, moving his stool close to the door, presumably so he could make a swift exit if our ursine guest proved unfriendly. Jory divided his attention between watching Beran and watching Rose; it would be hard to say which of the two he was most fascinated by.

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Beran stretched out in his usual place by the fire. I leaned against him, scratching behind his ears. Had we been alone, I would have fetched the scrubbing brush and given him the good back-scratch he had enjoyed since a cub.

I examined his limbs for wounds. Sometimes he returned from Faerie with cruel marks, as though he'd been fettered.

I would rub Mother's rose salve into them and weep at the thought of my friend being harmed, wishing fervently that I could follow him into Faerie and find out where he went and who it was that sometimes kept him bound.

But as in my tormenting dreams, I felt powerless to help him.

I was glad to see he had no new wounds this time.

"You say he's been visiting for years?" said Jory.

"As long as I can remember," I replied. "When did Beran first come, Mother?"

"In the long winter," said Mother, carding wool. "The year the streams froze."

"There was a snowstorm," added Rose. "There was a banging at the door. We thought it someone seeking shelter from the storm. What a surprise, when Mother opened it to see a bear cub on the porch."

"Did not think bears minded the cold," murmured Jack. "Thick fur coat and all."



“He was a cub,” Rose said. “And all alone. We thought he must be orphaned. He was so tame, as though he were familiar with people. He came in and curled up on the rug, just as you see now. He and Lily were like a pair of cubs. Romping around. It’s a wonder they did not pull half the house down with their games. ”

I rubbed Beran’s broad expanse of belly and he lazily opened one eye and grunted with satisfaction. “You grew too big for romps,” I said a little sadly. “As did I. But I am happy to see you, my friend. It has been a long while. I wish I knew why you have not come for so long.”

Beran made what sounded like a sigh. I felt the old longing to speak with him. There was always an air of sadness about him. I felt sure it was loneliness. I was sure that he only found some pleasure and peace in the few hours he spent with us.

“How does he cross the border?” asked Jory. “I thought only the fae can cross the border when it’s closed. You said he’s not one of the fae.”

“He’s not fae,” I said, “but he’s not ordinary.”

“Then what is he?” said Jory. “It don’t make sense.”

“He is a bear,” I said. “But he has magic on him. That’s the only way a non-fae can pass over the border.

But what the magic is, and how it binds him, we do not know.

He can pass over in the evenings sometimes, but always leaves before dawn, as though he has some invisible chain tethering him to Faerie by day.

” I looked to Mother. “That is what we have concluded, is it not so?”

Mother nodded, regarding Beran thoughtfully, as she often did. “The roses give him some refuge in the dark hours,” she said. “But what binds him to Faerie is strong, and pulls him back.”

“Can’t you get the queen of Faerie to help him?” suggested Jack from his stool by the door.

“And how would a cottager find the queen of Faerie, numskull?” scoffed Jory.

Jack shrugged. “She gave magic roses to protect them all.”

But Jory still did not believe his brother’s tale about our roses.

“Why did she give you magic roses?” persisted Jack.

I looked at Mother, waiting to hear her reply. It was one of the many questions I had often asked her, and had received a vague reply that did not satisfy me before I felt the question slip away from me again.

“Have you never heard of the fae granting boons and favours to mortals?” said Mother.

“I suppose,” said Jack. “There’s a mortal lot of stories where they give wishes and such.”

Mother waved a hand and we all blinked as the feeling of mystery was brushed away, like a besom sweeping dust out of the door.

“You said you had news,” Rose reminded Jory.

“Indeed,” he said, pulling out his pipe with theatrical flair.

“There’s more riders coming,” said Jack, spilling the news. “We saw them from our tree!”

I bristled at ‘our tree.’ Beran, always highly attuned to my mood, opened his eyes to regard me. I made myself relax again beside him.

“More adventurers,” said Rose, unimpressed.

“Another pack of ruffians, no doubt,” I said.

“But no,” said Jack. “Not a pack, a procession .”

“What kind of procession?” said Rose.

“A noble procession.” Jack rocked on his stool looking pleased with himself.

“Is it the king?” asked Rose, letting her knitting fall in her lap.

“I doubt the king would ride all this way,” said Jory.

“I’ll warrant it’s some duke and all his fellows,” said Jack.

Beran watched Jack with his glittering brown eyes. I was never sure if Beran could understand our language, or only appeared to be listening with great interest.

“His eyes don’t look like bear eyes,” said Jack thoughtfully, catching Beran’s gaze upon him. He shifted on his stool. “ ’Tis like a fellow’s eyes looking out of a bear’s face.”

“How do you know it’s a nobleman?” said Rose, keen to hear more of this ducal procession.

“Who else would come with standards and pennants?” said Jory.

I leaned aside to let Mother light her spill.

“When did you see them?” I asked. “We have not seen or heard anyone ride by today.”

“They stopped a while by the threemilestone,” said Jory. “And one went off as a scout. Probably looking for a good place to make camp for the night. They won’t camp there, so my guess is they’ll ride by any minute now.”

As if by the power of prescience there came the blast of a bugle and the unmistakeable clatter of a company of horses in harness.

Jack and I reached the window first. Jack made a long low whistle. “I’ll be jiggered,” he said, his eyes wide. “You ever seen such fine horses?”

I had not. Nor such fine bridles or well-laden packs.

Rose joined us. “Is that a prince?” She almost elbowed me aside to get a better look. “I am sure it must be. He has a princely look if ever I saw one.”

“You never have seen one,” I said.

“I have now. Is that gold thread on his cloak? Oh, he is stopping. He is looking in. Mother, what should we do? Should we make our curtsy?”

“Best not to let him see you,” advised Jory, putting Rose aside and earning a flash of resentment from her clear, brown eyes.

“Why not?”

“Men of privilege think they can take what they please as much as ruffians do, my lady.”

“Our roses will not let any man harm us,” argued Rose, though she did not attempt to move back to the window. But Jory had not seen our roses defending us, and raised a skeptic’s eyebrow.

“Nor would Beran,” I added, a little piqued that Jory did not see the need to put me out of harm’s way.

“Should you like the fellow to set all his armed men upon your bear?” asked Jory.

“He’s coming up the path!” cried Jack.

“Does he come alone?” said Jory sharply, peering out of the window in such a way as to not be seen himself.

He did. He had dismounted and given his reins to one of his knightly companions. Now he was striding up our garden path as though he owned all the land and could go where he wished.

I held my breath, waiting to see if our roses would close rank against him. They did not.

“Do not open to him!” ordered Jory.

“This is my house, son of Jago,” said Mother, rising from her chair to open the door before the stranger had time to knock.

“Do not let him in!” hissed Jory, moving next to our tall cupboard where he would not be seen from the doorway.

“Good evening, sire,” said Mother. “May I serve you in any way? A cup of spring water or a basket of herbs is the best I have to offer, but you are welcome to them.”

“I thank you, good mother. I should not take from a cottager the best of what she has. I halted only because I thought I saw at your window the loveliest face I ever beheld. Have you a daughter?”

“I have two roses, sir. One fair as the moon, one bright as the sun. But why do you ask, for you would not take from a cottager the best of what she has?”

“Take? By no means, I merely—”

He said no more, for Beran lifted his black head as though listening, then arose, crossed the room in three bounds and let out a sound between a roar and a groan. The man started back in surprise, and made some exclamation that I could not hear over the bellowing of Beran.

“He shall not harm you,” Mother hastened to assure him. “Do not approach with sword!” she commanded as the man reached for the hilt at his side.

Beran’s roar brought what seemed a score of men rushing at our gate to come to their liege’s defence.

“He shall not harm you!” I cried, rushing past Mother, out onto the front step. “He is our friend and guardian, but he is of Faerie, and you must not approach him!”

I spoke quickly, anxious to deter a swarm of sword-wielding men from our garden. They would not reach inside our cottage, for our roses would defend us, but what a dreadful scenario it would be, and what would be the consequences of our bringing the disfavour of powerful nobility down upon us?

“A fae bear?” said the man, raising a hand to halt his men once he saw that Beran had made no attempt to rush at him.

“Why is he here, this side of the border?” he asked, not taking his eyes from the great, black bear. “Is the border now open?”

“Not yet,” said Mother. “A few days more. You would be wise to camp in the meadows to the west. The woods are unsafe, and there is an encampment of rough men by the old quarry to the east.”

His gaze sharpened. “Among these rough men is there one in a green cloak bearing a quiver and bow?”

“Is he of especial danger?” said Mother.

“He is a wanted man. If you meet him, do not trust him. It is good for you that you have a fearsome guardian.” He glanced at me. “I see you are the fair one, cottager’s daughter. Perhaps I may glimpse the bright one ere I go into Faerie? A charm of beauty to defend me.”

I wanted to laugh at such nonsense, but was wise enough not to. The man peered past me, as if hoping for a glimpse of my sister. His eyes fell on Beran, and he withdrew his gaze quickly.

“You must be on your way, sire,” said Mother, her voice firm. I watched curiously as the man’s eyes glazed slightly. He shook his head, as though he could not remember something.

“I must be on my way,” he agreed, a little abstractedly.

He bid Mother farewell, and even bowed his head to Beran, and returned to his

waiting horse and men. They clattered away and to my gratification we heard them take the west turning towards the meadows. He was not altogether nonsensical a fellow if he had taken Mother's advice.

"I don't see why I could not have made my curtsy." Rose pouted, but managed to look childish rather than bad tempered.

"Time we were going," said Jory, when he had seen from the window the last of the horses disappear from sight. He whisked his green cloak round his shoulders.

"You have much to explain, Jory, son of Jago." I said as he made his bow of farewell.

"Next time!" he sang over his shoulder as he left.

"Don't forget your hat," Rose reminded Jack. "Though I advise you not to wrap fish in it again. Use a basket, or broad leaves next time."

Jack frowned. "I thought I'd lost it... how came you to have it?"

"Jack, what did that man mean about your brother?" I asked.

Jack shook his head. "Don't know. Truly." He sniffed his hat and grimaced.

Jory's voice rang out, calling for Jack.

Jack hesitated. "He never hurts anyone," he said. "Whatever he did, it can't have been very bad. Good night, Mother! Good night, my lady Rose. Night, Miss Lily. Night, sir."

This last greeting was for Beran, who took no heed .



I watched them go, the dusk absorbing their forms as the evening advanced.

The evening sky shimmered in waves of violet and fiery orange.

The border was thinning much faster than usual this year.

The night air was full of expectancy, charged with the approaching magic of Faerie.

The sweep of colours in the sky glimmered and flashed above the silhouetted trees, as though someone were shaking out a rippling curtain of royal satin above our heads.

As though our reality was only made of fabric, and it was about to be torn.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:36 am*

Rose and Thorn

The following mornings found Rose rubbing beauty cream onto her face and brushing out her hair for longer than usual.

“He is nobility,” I reminded her. “And you are a cottager’s daughter. Why do you want to attract his attention? What do you think he will do—bring you a white horse so you can ride off and marry him?”

I meant to be sarcastic, but Rose’s eyes glowed.

“Lords marry ladies,” I added. “Not peasant girls. At best you are deluding yourself, at worst you might bring trouble to our door. Jory spoke rightly when he said that men of privilege think they can take what they please as much as ruffians do.”

“History is full of lords and princes marrying ordinary girls,” said Rose, giving a final brush to her glossy hair. “Mother has told a score of such stories.”

“Stories .”

“What do you know?” Rose tossed her head like one of the nobleman’s party of sleek horses. She picked up a basket and a pruning knife to go into the front garden, where she might be seen by a passing lord.

“You’re just bad-tempered because Mother won’t let you go wandering about,” she threw over her shoulder.

This last part was true. I was wearied to my soul with being confined to the garden.

My only consolation was that the entrance to Faerie was thinning faster than usual this year.

Any day now it would open, and then all those pesky adventurers would be gone.

A week later the border would close for another year, and I would be at liberty again.

But it irked me that Mother still went out, doing I knew not what, and telling very little of what she had seen. There was a lot Mother did not speak of.

These thoughts passed through my mind as I watched Rose saunter away to make herself conspicuous. "I'll tell Mother!" I called after her.

"If you do," floated back the reply, "I will tell her you've been going to the tree for the past three days."

This also was true. And I went again that morning, running over to the tree to climb up and glower at what those usurping brothers had done to my treetop den since my last visit.

A cooking pan and fishing net littered my domain. Clothes had been washed in our stream and draped over branches to dry.

"They've turned it into a launder's room," I told the squirrels on the branch above. "How do you like that?"

They ignored me.

"Still feeling hospitable to them, are you?" I asked the tree as I looked around at the

blankets and darned socks sully the place. I got a mere shaking of leaves in reply.

I peered toward the road in the distance to see if any more parties of adventurers were coming. There had been a handful of stray riders or walkers over recent days, but no large groups.

I ran home again but was dismayed on my return to hear Rose's voice just beyond the wild cherry trees.

I made my way stealthily to the nearest tree, dreading to see Mother there.

But it was not Mother whom Rose was speaking with—it was the tall young nobleman with his fair hair and his riding cloak embroidered with gold.

“May I come in?” the man said, his hand on the garden gate.

Surely Rose would not be so foolish as to invite a man into the garden when she was alone? I was ready to dart forward and shout out a protest. I could feel the rippling of air, as the rose stems quivered, ready to spring to my sister's defence.

“Away ! Away !” cried the jackdaw, hopping up and down on its branch.

“No,” said Rose. “You may not. I perceive you are a gentleman as well as a nobleman. You would not come in without my mother's leave.”

“Certainly, I would not,” said the man, removing his hand from the gate. The roses stilled, but their magic thrummed in readiness.

“I must not remain,” said Rose, turning gracefully, as though to leave, but moving slowly, giving her admirer time for a good, long look at her.

“Wait!” called the man. “Only tell me your name?”

“Why do you ask?” said Rose, looking over her shoulder at him with a wide-eyed look of innocence.

The man put a hand to his chest. “That I might know whom it is that has captured my heart.”

I rolled my eyes .

“I think you are toying with me, sir,” said Rose. “For what can a nobleman want with a cottager’s daughter?”

“No cottager’s daughter looks and speaks as you, my lady. You are a priceless jewel unearthed in a remote cave. You are a rare flower, never before seen, blooming in an isolated place.”

Rose glowed, and I groaned.

“So you would put a pickaxe or a gardener’s knife to me, sir? I would be better left in my remote cave or isolated place, would I not?”

“No, indeed! You should be fitly set in gold or planted in a royal garden!”

“As a trinket? An ornament?”

“As a treasure.” His voice lowered. “As one beloved.”

I knew all my sister’s expressions by the tilt of her head or the lines of her figure. I knew she was delighted by these sickly-sweet words.

“I shall not submit to being beloved by any man save my future husband,” she said in a maidenly voice.

She glided to the door before he could answer.

I could never glide, but she did it effortlessly.

She half-turned at the entrance, made a deferential curtsy, allowing her starry-eyed admirer one last look at her beauty.

All her brushing, braiding, and the smoothing of beautifying balm into her face had not been in vain that morning.

She whisked herself inside and closed the door.

The foolish fellow stood for an age at the gate. Would he never go?

“ Away ! Away !” screeched the jackdaw, flying at the man’s head, forcing him back from the gate. He slowly walked away, looking back hopefully, his silly hand over his silly heart.

“Does Lord Prosey come every day while Mother and I are gone?” I asked when I entered the house. Rose was humming to herself, but my words quenched the faraway look in her eyes.

“Do not call him names,” she said.

I mimicked him. “ Thou shouldst be set in gold, my treasure, my jewel, my heart’s delight !”

Rose tossed her head. “You’re jealous.”

I snorted.

There was a warning tap of thorns on the windows. I watched as my sister put petals from her gardening basket into a cooking pot to boil for rosewater. I saw a teardrop plop into the pan and felt a sudden rush of pity for her, stronger than my disdain for her simpering suitor.

“I’m not jealous, Rosie,” I said, calling her by her childhood name. “Mother says we must take care around fae and mortal men. Men can be even more dangerous than fae.”

“I know what she says,” said Rose in a tight voice. “But he is different.”

“How can you know? You have as much knowledge of the ways of men as I do. Mother says that charm can be—”

“I know what Mother says,” snapped Rose. “You don’t need to repeat everything like a talking jackdaw.”

I resolved to say no more. The border would soon be open, and the man would be gone—perhaps never to return, or to wander out again, looking not a day older while everyone this side of the border had lived through many years.

A roamer came by that afternoon, a sure sign that the opening into Faerie was imminent.

I heard the jangle and clatter of his goods before his rickety wagon came lurching past, pulled by a horse whose little horns and feathered hocks marked it as some unfortunate creature turned into a horse by enchantment.

I eyed the roamer as he passed our gate. He stopped, raised his hat to me, and

bounded down from his perch.

“And what have we here?” he called, grinning over the gate at me. “A fair maid in a fair way to be made fairer. Lotions and potions for beauty have I, hoof of unicorn for silvery nails, flowing hair powder from mermaid scales, oil of—”

“You can cease your patter,” I called back, well aware of the enchantment in his rhythmic words. “Your magic won’t work on me.”

He scowled. I saw the telltale ripple over his face and glimpsed the sharp features beneath his glamour of youthful good looks.

His gaze fell upon the roses behind me. He sniffed the air, murmuring, “Royal roses .” His green eyes gleamed. “How about a little trade, my knowing one? A mere pocketful of petals for a cutting of an everlasting pear tree?”

He held forth a little potted tree with tiny golden pears swinging from its branches. It was a pretty thing, and I took a step nearer out of interest. He held the pot out to me, moving it back and forth so the golden pears swung and gleamed.

For a moment, I could not look away. The little fruits glimmered entrancingly, their honeyed scent stirring a strong longing in me. I took another step closer.

“Beware ! Beware !” shrieked the jackdaw.

The roamer scowled at the bird, and the moment of enchantment dissolved like a puff of smoke in a breeze.

I shook my head clear, stepping back out of reach of his persuasive magic.

I had no intention of taking anything from him—I could smell the underlying stench



of stolen goods and the curses they bore.

“You cannot have so much as a petal,” I told him. “Be off with you. Go and peddle your wares elsewhere.”

His face darkened, and his covetous eyes lingered on the enchanted roses. I did not need to look back to see them quivering; I could feel their movement rippling the air. Their thorny stems swelled, bristling like a cat’s fur in warning.

The roamer took a step away from the gate, muttering oaths, then hastily bounded up to his seat and urged his creature forward. I watched him go, his goods swinging and clinking from their hooks.

“Was that a roamer?” Rose met me at the door of the cottage. “Why were you talking to him? Mother said—”

“I was telling him to peddle his nasty goods elsewhere.”

“Good.” She gave a little shiver. “I hope he doesn’t trick Sir Oswain into buying anything.”

I did not need to ask who Sir Oswain was.

“More fool him if he has more embroidery than brains and lets himself be taken in by such a one.”

Rose shot me a resentful look.

Jack came by later that afternoon.

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“Brought you these,” he said, looking pleased with himself as he held up a fish in each hand. “Caught them myself.”

Rose thanked him and called him to come in.

I fetched a large bowl to receive his gift.

By the deep colour and luminescence of their rainbow-hued scales, I could tell they had passed out of streams from Faerie.

We were used to eating food watered by Faerie springs—the aftereffects were limited to heightened senses for a few hours and vivid dreams that same night—but mortals like Jack, who had not grown up at the border, might have a more troublesome experience.

“Have you some for yourself?” I asked.

He nodded. “Ate some yesterday too. Jory caught them.”

“How did you sleep?”

“Sleep?”

“Did you have strange dreams?”

His brow furrowed. “How did you know?” He stared at the fish. “Jory said it was the mushrooms I picked, though I was sure they were regular puffs.”

“Nothing is regular so close to the border,” I said. “It’s a wonder you didn’t sleepwalk into a faerie ring.”

He looked troubled. “I dreamed I woke up pinned down by a branch,” he confessed. “I could hear the prettiest singing I ever heard, and I longed to find it, but I couldn’t move.”

“It was not a dream,” said Rose, shelling peas.

“How do you know?” said Jack.

“The tree was protecting you.”

He ruffled his thatch of hair, thinking this over. “Strange,” he murmured.

“What shall you eat when you go into Faerie?” I asked.

He looked blankly at me. “What should I eat?”

“Nothing from Faerie.” I examined the fish, wondering which herbs to use.

“If you cannot eat food from the border without ill effects, you will not be able to stomach so much as a berry on the other side. Mother says that’s likely what happens to most of the adventurers who never return—they eat of the land and lose their senses. ”

Jack looked alarmed. “What should we do?”

“Go home like a sensible fellow.”

“Don’t have a home,” Jack said wistfully.

Rose took pity on him. “Don’t you have parents?”

He shook his head, looking like a shaggy dog as his hair fell into his eyes. “Never knew them. Jory raised me.”

“No grandparents? No aunts or uncles?”

“None that would own us, Jory says.”

“Well, you must gather supplies before you cross over,” she advised. “Sir Oswain has brought sackfuls of wayfarer bread, raisins, and dried apricots.”

She caught my eye and blushed. Jack was too absorbed in his thoughts to notice.

“Wonder how we can get wayfarer bread,” he mused.

“Has your brother got this map he speaks of?” I asked.

Jack looked uneasy. “He’s having some trouble getting it, but he’ll have it very soon. Perhaps today.” He pushed his forelock out of his eyes. “He’s been gone a good while.”

“Gone where?”

Jack shrugged. “Didn’t say. Said I was to catch fowl or fish for dinner. I’m not good at snaring, but I’m a fair catcher of fish.”

Mother came in, smelling otherworldly and looking weary as she sank into her chair.

I felt equal parts of concern for her tiredness and vexation that she would not tell me what she had been doing to make her so tired. I was growing impatient of mysteries

and prohibitions.

When Jack repeated all he had told us, she heaved herself up from her chair and went into the garden, returning with a large bouquet of what Rose and I had always called stingingwort .

As children we thought it a bad-tempered herb, for it stung our skin if brushed against, and made our eyes water if we sat too near it.

As we grew older, it no longer affected us.

“Add it to your cooking and drinking water,” Mother advised.

“ Ouch !” Jack yelped, withdrawing his hand as he tried to take it.

“The stinging sensation will counter the effects of food grown near Faerie,” she promised. “Here, I’ll wrap it in a rag to preserve your hands. No, don’t sniff it, child—it will irritate your eyes.”

Jack’s eyes began streaming, and he sneezed several times.

“You’ll grow accustomed to it,” Mother said, pressing the bundled herbs into his hands before sinking back into her chair.

Jack was making ready to leave when a noise from the path drew us to the window. One of the ruffians streaked past with a look of terror on his bearded face. Several others followed, and last of all lumbered a portly man, his weathered face bearing the same expression of fear.

“Wonder what they’re running from?” Jack said, blinking back tears as he wiped his sleeve across his streaming nose. This was a mistake, for he used the arm that held

the stingingwort , brushing the end of his nose with the leaves.

Rose and I pushed him out the door before his sneezing fit began again.

“Thank you for the fish,” I called after him.

He held out the herbs. “Don’t— achoo —think I— choo —wa— choo —want this!”

“Do as Mother says,” Rose advised. “You will feel better soon, I promise. Wait a moment! ”

She returned with a handkerchief soaked in rosewater to soothe his eyes.

“Please bring it back,” she said as he pressed it to his face. “It took all winter to make the pretty edging.”

Jack departed. We could hear him sneezing all the way to the gate.

But there was little peace and quiet after he had gone.

From his cherry tree perch, the jackdaw squawked, “ Here they come ! Here they come !”—his announcement quickly followed by another adventurer rushing past on foot, then another on a mule. A soft haze of smoke drifted by on the breeze.

“What is going on?” I turned from the window to Mother, who was accepting a cup of fennel tea from Rose.

“Dwarves,” she replied without looking up.

“Did you see them?”

“There have been a few coming out of the quarry. It would not be the first time they’ve burned down the camps of travellers who get too close to them.”

“But some of those riders were from Sir-what’s-his-name’s camp,” I argued. “They aren’t camped near the mines.”

“Most likely they wandered too deep into the woods. There are some spiteful creatures about at present. That is partly why I want you and Rose safe at home.”

“What creatures? What else have you seen?”

I thought she would not answer, but after a moment’s pause she lowered her cup and looked at me.

“The coming of the nobleman has roused a deal of interest,” she said slowly, as if carefully choosing her words.

“Among the fae?”

“Some of them. Those who rebel against the queen. ”

“Why should a nobleman be a threat to them?” Rose asked.

“It has always been said that the downfall of the rebellion will come through a royal mortal.”

“But he is not a prince or a king,” Rose pointed out. “He’s the son of an earl.”

“There are no earls in Faerie,” said Mother. “One is either royal or common. The son of an earl is not a commoner.”

I frowned. "Have you seen only common fae, or royal?"

I did not expect an answer, but to my surprise she replied, "Both."

Rose looked up from her cooking.

"I knew it," I said triumphantly. "You go into Faerie, don't you? It's unheard of for royals to cross the border."

I could not quite read the look Mother gave me. It was not anger. If anything, it was sadness.

"Only when I must," she said. "These are unusual times."

"Tell me," I begged, dragging a stool near her chair. "I know these are unusual days, I feel it! Where did you get the magic to cross the border?"

She did not answer my last question, and I felt it fading from me even as I spoke the words. But she reached a hand out to tuck a stray lock of hair behind my ear. She was a kindly mother, but rarely affectionate.

"Things may change a great deal, my Lily," she said quietly. "For all of us."

"What kind of change?" Rose asked, as eager for an answer as I was.

"That depends on many things. I am not a fortune teller. There are choices to be made by many people. "

"I do wish," I said, unable to keep a note of frustration from my voice, "that you would give a straight answer. Every time you explain something, you only make more questions fly up in my mind."



“The day you run out of questions, Lily,” said Mother, “will never dawn.”

Annoyed at another evasive reply, I got up and noisily set about laying the table for dinner.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:36 am*

### A Step Too Far

The dawn sky shimmered gold with ribbons of green.

“The border is nearly open,” I marvelled, watching the folds of colour above our cottage.

“I’ve never seen the colours so bright,” said Rose.

“Everything feels stronger this year.”

The roses hummed, their petals quivering.

Our honeybees were frantic with excitement, no longer flying lazily home with pollen but streaking past, startling us out of the way.

Even our donkey in the meadow at the end of the garden—usually the laziest creature in the kingdom—skipped through the grass, braying like a trumpeter.

Our hens chased each other in circles and laid eggs with pearly shells.

Mother came in from the back garden, carrying two circlets of roses, one red, one white. Five roses each.

“I want you to wear these,” she said. “Put them on, and keep them on.”

We did not need to ask why. We always wore a circlet of roses when the border

opened.

Rose looked prettier than ever with the crimson glow on her fair cheeks.

I, with my unruly white hair crowned in flowers, looked wilder than ever, like a sprite in a springtime faerie dance.

How was it that one sister looked regal while the other looked fey?

And how was it that Mother did not resemble either of us?

As soon as these thoughts surfaced, they faded before I could pursue them. I shook my head, trying to clear away the strange forgetfulness, though I knew from experience that I could not.

The twine of thick rose stems pressed against my forehead. The magic thrummed, tingling against my skin. My senses sharpened, and I became more aware than ever of Faerie's influence seeping through the thinning border. I glanced at Rose, but she did not seem to feel it as I did.

"Will the border open tonight?" I asked as we breakfasted.

"How should I know?" said Mother.

"You know more than anyone." I watched her as I chewed my food. If I squinted slightly, the air around her shimmered.

"Why are you scrunching your eyes?" said Rose. "You look silly."

"So I can see where magic is."

I turned my squinty gaze on her, but only the roses shimmered around her head. I looked back at Mother, opening my mouth to ask why she glowed with magic—but before I could speak, she met my gaze and said firmly, “Not now, Lily.”

A restraint settled on me, like a heavy blanket.

Had I spent my whole childhood under the influence of the magic in her words?

I struggled against the restraint; I had never resisted it so strongly before.

Questions bubbled up, trying to break the surface.

Questions about Mother, about myself, about the mystery I had lived with all my life.

But I could not break through the restraint.

“One day,” said Mother quietly, repeating the old phrase I had heard so many times.

“When?” I asked impatiently.

“Soon.”

Suddenly, she looked sad, and my irritation melted.

“Sooner than I would wish, Lily. For it will change everything. And I am selfish enough to want to keep you as my little girl.”

Rose looked between us. She was never as curious as me. She never sensed mystery the way I did. But even she was struck by Mother’s unusual mood.

Mother arose and put on her light summer cloak. I blinked at the brightness of the

shimmer on that old, nettle-green fabric. She took up her basket and gave us each a rare kiss.

I stood in the doorway, watching her go, feeling the tingling on my forehead where she had kissed me. It felt like a charm, or a blessing.

A sudden, inexplicable urge seized me—to run after her, to beg her not to go. I even took a few steps forward, but before I could call out, the green of her cloak and hood blended into the trees. She vanished.

Rose and I were restless all evening, wondering where Mother was.

Dinner sat between us, growing cold. Rose said Mother would be displeased if we let food go to waste, so we ate, but without appetite.

Every sound outside sent me darting to the window, looking for that familiar hood, that sturdy figure moving noiselessly through the trees, emerging from the gloaming with her foraging basket, surrounded by a flutter and scurry of creatures.

“I’m going to search for her,” I said as the sun neared the horizon.

“You will not!” said Rose with unusual fierceness. She gripped my arm. “Look at that mist coming from the border. I won’t lose you as well, Lily!”

She looked truly afraid, so I relented.

The sky was green with deep pink accents, and the mist was tinged the same unnatural shade—something between fresh fir needles and summer beech leaves.

It was not uncommon for a mist to pass over the border, wreathing the trees and changing the familiar landscape into something dreamlike.

But this mist was different. Weightier, more tangible.

Something unusual was going on in Faerie.

It would be folly for me to try and find Mother in such obscurity.

“She will be waiting for the mist to lift,” I said, trying to reassure myself. “That’s why she’s delayed.”

Rose frowned. “I would have thought Mother could find her way home with her eyes closed.”

I felt vexed, for she was right.

“Shut the door, Lily. There’s such strangeness in the air. I don’t want that mist drifting into the cottage.”

“The roses won’t let it come in,” I said. “Come and see.”

The roses were shedding petals in a light shower that settled around our boundary. Any that drifted beyond the garden fence vanished into the mist with a green glow.

“I don’t want to see,” Rose said. “I want you to shut the door.” She shivered, so I closed it.

Rose sat in Mother’s chair, watching the fire and attempting to comb out the wool for Mother’s spinning, but too distracted to do much work.

I could not rest. There was something almost invigorating about the magic seeping over the opening border, and I paced up and down the length of the cottage, despite Rose’s pleas for me to sit.

Eventually she could bear no more and she went up to bed. I paced until I was exhausted, then fell asleep in Mother's chair and dreamed of faeries dancing in rings, mesmerising me, until a great black bear shook me and roared until the spell fell from me and I was free.

I thought it was still night when I awoke, for the cottage was cast in gloom.

"Wake up, Lily," said Rose, prodding me.

I sat up groggily. "Is Mother home?"

"No. And I'm too scared to let the hens out or fetch water. What shall we do?"

I yawned, moving to the window.

The mist had deepened, absorbing daylight and casting everything into the gloom of a forgotten forest glade. Green swirls rippled and danced along our garden fence like ghosts.

"It cannot pass our boundary," I said. "There is nothing to fear."

"Put your wreath on," urged Rose, handing me my white roses.

I obeyed and stepped outside the back door to fetch water.

The hens were subdued, pecking cautiously. The cockerel circled round them protectively. Even Tansy did not stray far from the henhouse. The meadow beyond was hidden in mist, but I heard a muffled bray and a few plaintive mehs from the goats.

Returning to the cottage I set down the water pail. Rose had removed her wreath to

brush her hair, and the brush and wreath lay on the table, but Rose was not there. I heard her voice, calling from the garden gate.

“Oh, I am so glad to see you!”

I ran to the door. There she stood, reaching out toward Sir Oswain.

“ Rose !” I called, snatching up her wreath and running down the path.

I could not believe she was being so foolish!—to be standing at the gate, bareheaded, reaching for Sir Oswain’s outstretched hands! Worse still, he was lifting the latch!

The jackdaw echoed my cry—“ Take care! Take care!” he squawked, but his voice was muffled by the strange, swirling fog.

Our roses quivered along the walls, petals trembling in warning. But Rose was too far beyond their reach to be restrained by them.

“Send me away with a treasure more priceless than any jewel or crown,” Sir Oswain begged. “Allow me the honour of bestowing one kiss upon your fair hand, that I might carry it with me into the world beyond.”

“ Rose !” I yelled, running down the path.

The gate swung open.

The jackdaw shrieked from out of the mist—“ Beware! Beware!”

Beyond the path, in the shadowy trees, a figure glided between the trunks. A figure in a hooded cloak.



“Mother !” Relief flooded through me.

Rose hesitated in the gateway and turned her head towards the trees.

“Mother!” she called, stepping into the path and drifting toward her. The hooded figure stood with arms outstretched.

But something was wrong—the figure was too tall.

The mist rushed forward, curling nebulous fingers around them both. Sir Oswain shouted something, but his words were swallowed up.

I hurled myself down the path, tripping, scrambling to my knees—but it was too late—the arms of the faceless stranger closed around my sister—the mist enfolded them, swallowing their forms—and they were gone.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:36 am*

Into Faerie

I rushed to the gate, calling my sister's name.

“ My lady !” shouted Sir Oswain. “ My horse !”

His handsome white steed had taken fright, cantering away into the mist with a thuddin g of hooves like a muffled drumbeat .

“ Ablican!” Sir Oswain called, running a few strides after the lost horse.

A new voice called out from the mist—“Miss Lily! Are you there?”

Jack emerged from the green haze, his lanky frame swaying like a young aspen.

“Found 'em!” he called back over his shoulder.

A rope was tied around his waist, trailing behind him. Moments later, his brother followed, his hand grasping the line of rope to navigate his way.

“Have you seen Rose?” I demanded, relieved to see the brothers but unsure how much help they could be.

“The lady Rose?” said Jack.

“She's been taken!”

“By who?” said Jory .

“A woman in a hood and cloak!”

“I will find her!” declared Sir Oswain, returning horseless. “Have you a mount?”

The brothers started at his voice.

“You!” said Jory in dismay.

“You!” Sir Oswain retorted. “Have you any part in this malevolence? If you do, I swear I—”

“He had no part in it!” I interrupted, moving between them. “He has been a friend to us.”

Sir Oswain gave a snort of disbelief. “That man is friend to none but his own interests! He is a thief and a sneak and a traitor !”

“Unfair!” protested Jory.

“Jory’s no traitor,” cried Jack.

“Any man attempting to break into the royal treasury is a traitor!”

“I did not break into the royal treasury.”

“Because you did not succeed! But you were seen—and you are a wanted man!” Sir Oswain’s hand moved to the short sword at his side.

“It must be someone who has my likeness,” argued Jory. “I am innocent.”

“Innocent? Have you not skulked about my camp these past days?”

“Not skulked, sir. Only surveying the terrain.”

“Have you not pilfered from my supplies, you thief?”

“I do not pilfer, sir. I merely relieved you of more food than you needed. It was but a morsel.”

“It was a half-barrel of wayfarer bread!”

“Nay, sir,” remonstrated Jory. “Not so much as that.”

“Never mind bread,” I snapped. “Rose has been carried away!” I rounded on Sir Oswain. “You should not have tempted her beyond the protection of the gate! ”

He looked ashamed, as well he ought. Bowing stiffly, he said, “I will recover her. Fear not.” His gaze swept over the mist. “Only... I do not know how I will find my way without a horse.”

“We’ll find her!” promised Jack.

Jory frowned. “She was taken by a woman, you say? A mortal?”

“A woman, yes,” I said. “But what mortal could find their way in this?”

Jack’s eyes widened. “A sorceress, or some such?”

“Perhaps.”

“Where would she take her?”

“Into Faerie,” said Jory. “Where else?”

“Then we must follow,” said Jack.

“You are not fit to loose the lady’s shoe,” said Sir Oswain, still glaring at Jory, “let alone go after her.”

“Perhaps you wish to go alone, sir,” I suggested, feeling exasperated at all this needless delay. “Though I would advise against it. But you shall not keep me from searching for my sister, and the sons of Jago shall aid me”

Sir Oswain was silent a moment. But he released his sword hilt, as though realising the truth of my words; it would be folly to go into Faerie alone.

“I am ready,” said Jack.

“As am I,” said Sir Oswain. “With or without a mount. Though I wish very much I had one.”

“We’ll need more than a horse to find the way in this pease-pudding fog,” said Jory.

I glanced at Jack’s waist. “What is your rope secured to?”

“Our tree,” said Jack. “Jory’s idea. He has good ideas.”

“Can anything be seen from the tree?”

Jack shook his head .

“The entrance to Faerie is due north,” I said.

“And how will we know which way is north,” asked Jory, “when we have no sunlight?”

“I have a box compass,” said Sir Oswain.

This was good news.

Sir Oswain groaned. “It is in my horse’s saddlebag.”

“A pity,” I murmured, thinking hard. “There is another way. Lead us to the tree, Jack, and hurry! Every passing moment carries Rose farther away.”

“Hurry , hurry !” cried the jackdaw from somewhere in the mist.

I turned toward its voice, though I could not see it. “Find Mother!” I begged. “Tell her Rose is gone!”

“Hurry , hurry ! Gone , gone !”

The roses behind me trembled, their thorns sharp with agitation. But Rose and I were beyond their reach.

I still held Rose’s wreath, and jammed it tightly on my head to mingle with my own roses. A determined gust of wind sent a shower of red and white petals cascading down over me; I put out a hand and caught some, thrusting them into the pocket of my gown.

As I walked away I caught the sound of a faint bray from Jenny, and a chorus of bleats from our goats. Their voices were eerie and distant. I hoped with all my heart we would return to them quickly.

Jack led the way, his rope our guide. We made an odd caravan, each holding onto the next person so none was lost to the blinding mist. We reached the tree, and Jack untied the knot at his waist. Sir Oswain eyed it, saying, "That rope looks suspiciously like the coil that vanished from my camp supplies."

"One rope looks much the same as another," said Jory airily. "I will... er... also fetch the sack of supplies I have pack ed. It will not do to get caught short of food. Dangerous thing, fae food."

"A sack of wayfarer bread, perhaps?" said Sir Oswain, but Jory was already climbing the tree. He returned with his pack slung over one shoulder, and a second pack for Jack.

"What do we do now, Miss Lily?" said Jack, as he adjusted the straps of his pack.

I pulled off my shoes. "Take off your boots. All of you."

"My boots?" said Sir Oswain. "Walk barefoot like a peasant?"

"There is a spring that flows out of Faerie just a few steps away. We shall follow it."

"Why can't we follow in our boots?" said Jack.

"Because it runs underground. The ground above it is damp. We'll feel the path under our feet."

"You may walk barefoot," said Sir Oswain, "but I shall follow. In my boots."

"As will I," said Jory.

Jack was already unlacing his patched-up boots. I thanked him for his fellowship in

damp feet and tied his laces together so he could sling his boots across his shoulder. We set forth, I leading the way, feeling the cool, dampness between my toes.

“Is this it?” Jack sounded disappointed.

I perched on a rock, retying my shoes onto my damp feet. “What did you expect?”

Jack shrugged. “Something... magical.”

We knew the moment we crossed the border, for the veil of green mist ended abruptly as we stepped out of our kingdom and into the other realm.

“Looks the same as it does on the other side,” Jack said. “But without the fog.”

At first glance, the woodland glade did look the same, although the carpet of starry yellow flowers was far brighter and more prolific than anything on our side.

“Look again,” I said.

Jack turned slowly, drawn to a tree with an unusual patterned trunk. He reached out—then yelped as a cloud of winged creatures, something like moths but with the temper of disturbed wasps, burst out at him.

I couldn’t help laughing as the tree sprites scolded and pinched him. But my laughter turned to a yelp of my own as the stone I sat on shifted beneath me, rising up and tipping me onto the woodland floor.

I scrambled away as the stone faerie straightened, glaring at me for my impudence.

“I beg your pardon, sir!” I said, recalling from our books on Faerie lore how quickly a stone faerie could crush one if offended. I hurried to rise, pulling from my wreath a



white rose, holding it out like an offering. “Please accept a gift from the queen’s own rose garden.”

This checked the advance of the faerie. Its stony joints grated as it lowered its fist of pebbles, and it tilted its head to study my wreaths of roses. Then it bowed stiffly, speaking in a deep and gravelly rumble.

“It would be an honour to have a Daughter of the Rose Crown rest any part of herself upon me.”

I curtsied, trying to emulate Rose’s grace, and tucked the rose into a crack in the faerie’s stone chest, all the while wondering at its strange address.

The tree sprites ceased from harassing Jack, and flitted over at the sight of the roses. I offered them the petals from my pocket, and they accepted, declaring in their thin, high voices that they would not have bitten the mortal had they known whose servant he was.

“Servant?” Jack muttered, rubbing his cheek where small, angry teeth marks were welling up.

Jory laughed at his brother, but Sir Oswain was more interested in the effect of my roses.

“Daughter of the Rose Crown,” he said, looking at me closely for the first time. “Who are you that you should bear such a title?” He examined my white hair and my fae roses. “Are you of fae bloodline?”

I hesitated, for in trying to answer the question I felt that familiar sensation of a veil over my memory.

“Perhaps,” I said, though I doubted it. I had great affinity with the influences of Faerie, but only because I had grown up on the border. I certainly had no magic.

“And your sister?” he said slowly, revealing the cause of his troubled expression.

“Perhaps,” I repeated, evasively.

I knew what troubled him. He could not marry a fae bride. Marriage between mortals and fae was forbidden. The fae sometimes abducted mortals into marriages, but that was a fate worse than death.

“They’ve no more fae blood in them than your horse, sire,” said Jory.

I rounded on him. “What do you know?”

Jory shrugged. “I know mortal girls when I meet them. But that dame you call Mother... I’m not so sure about her.”

Sir Oswain stiffened. “If the mother is fae, then it follows the daughters are. ”

Jory snorted. “She’s no more their birth mother than she is yours, sire.”

Sir Oswain and I glared at him, saying in unison—“ How dare you ?”

Jory lifted his hands in surrender. “ Is she your birth mother?” he challenged. “She’s not a whit like you.”

Everyone now looked at me. I could not answer.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:36 am*

Jory had only voiced what I had always felt deep down. But I had never dared to say it aloud, not even to Rose. Not even in the whispered secrecy of our treehouse palace or under the cottage eaves at night. Had we been bound by magic from speaking or thinking of it?

That familiar veil of forgetfulness crept over my mind.

But here, in the Faerie air, the restraint felt thinner.

I struggled against its strictures, refusing to yield.

Was Rose truly my sister? Could any two girls be more unlike?

She, dark-haired, willowy, and graceful.

Me, with my wild white mane and hoydenish ways.

My fingers brushed the remaining petals in my pocket. Their familiar scent reminded me of home, and a pang of childhood longing struck me.

“It matters not,” I said quietly. “Whether by birth or otherwise, she is my mother, and Rose is my sister. That is all that matters. Now let us waste no more time, that I might find my sister and go home.”

Sir Oswain placed his fist over his heart. “I give my fealty to your rose crown. Both the red and the white. All that I can do to rescue your sister, I shall.”

I was touched by his loyalty enough to say, “Rose is not of fae blood, sir. I can promise you that. She has not the smallest particle of magic in her.”

“Now that we’ve established fealties and so forth,” said Jory. “Let’s be on our way. ”

“Which way is that?” said Jack, looking miserable as little red welts arose over his face and neck.

There were several directions we could take. Multiple pathways beckoned.

I turned to the stone faerie who had settled back into the landscape.

“I beg pardon for disturbing you a second time, sir,” I said. “But might I enquire of your great knowledge?”

I recalled all I knew of stone faeries: they were ancient creatures.

Their knowledge of history was extensive, for there was nowhere in Faerie where there were not rocks and stones in the ground or fashioned into walls, and so they heard all things that all peoples spoke through ageless times, and one stone or rock knew what their neighbouring stone or rock had heard.

The faerie was slow to answer. But it did lift its granite face to me, saying, “The Daughter of the Rose Crown may enquire of my knowledge.”

I thanked it by praising its wisdom elaborately, for faeries liked to be flattered.

The faerie was slow again to respond. But at last it replied to me—“Three questions shall I grant. The next three I hear.”

“Ask where the lady Rose is,” said Sir Oswain immediately.

“Ask where the dwarf lord’s stronghold is,” urged Jory.

“Ask how to make these bites stop hurting,” muttered Jack.

“Here are the answers to your three questions,” said the faerie.

I opened my mouth to protest, but it was too late.

“I know of no person by the name of the lady Rose,” it said .

“Her name is Rose!” I cried, remembering as soon as I spoke that one should not give a true name to the fae. “She was carried into Faerie only today!”

But the faerie continued in its slow, gravelly voice.

“The dwarf lord’s stronghold lies in the heart of the Black Rock. And the remedy for the bite of a birch sprite is the pulp of three leaves from the Singing Tree, gathered by the light of a falling star on the last stroke of midnight at midwinter.”

“What of the lady of the name of Rose?” I asked desperately.

“Is there a shortcut to the Black Rock?” pressed Jory.

But the faerie had answered its quota. It settled back into its former shape, its shimmer of magic fading until it looked no different from any ordinary stone. Only the faintest thrum of lingering magic marked it as anything other than rock.

“Remedy for sprite bites!” said Jory, cuffing his brother’s inflamed ear.

“Didn’t know it was listening to me,” Jack protested, ducking away.

“There is no use bickering,” I said, feeling just as cross as Jory over the misspent question. I had wanted to ask the stone faerie about the whereabouts of Beran, as well as Rose. “You all wasted the opportunity.” I gave Sir Oswain a reproachful look. He had the grace to look ashamed.

“My question wasn’t wasted,” argued Jory. “It was the only one with a clear answer. We must go to the Black Rock.”

“Then lead the way,” I said, gesturing to the tangled paths that disappeared into shadowy woods .

Sir Oswain stared at Jory. “How did you know to enquire about the dwarf lord’s stronghold?”

“Oh, I keep my ear to the ground,” said Jory, lowering his pack.

“What is to be found at this stronghold?” I asked, though I already guessed the answer: Jory was only interested in treasure.

“Good thing for all of you that some of us are well prepared,” said Jory. He opened his pack and produced a tinderbox, several wrapped parcels, and then a rough scroll of paper marked in brown ink.

“How did you come by that?” exclaimed Sir Oswain, snatching the parchment. “I guarded this with an oath on my life! No one but the king’s wiseman had a copy! It was entrusted to me!”

“What does it matter where I got it?” said Jory, trying to snatch it back.

“You stole this!” cried Sir Oswain. “Is this what you were skulking about the king’s treasury for? You heard of where the treasure was, and you heard of the map!”

“The important thing is that we have it,” said Jory. “If I hadn’t taken it, we’d be wandering blind. You, sire, left it behind. I call it providence that I borrowed it.”

“Cease your double talk,” said Sir Oswain. “Your tongue is as slippery as your fingers are light!”

“You should thank me,” said Jory. “I knew the treasure was at the dwarf lord’s lair, but not where that was, until now. Now, where are we on this map?”

He reached for the scroll, but Sir Oswain held it out of reach.

“Never mind where it came from,” I said impatiently. “What of Rose? ”

“We’ve no clue where to look for her,” said Jory. “Only a clue to the treasure. Let’s search on the way.”

That was not good enough for me. “Let me see,” I demanded, and took the map, studying it carefully. I had seen similar drawings in one of Mother’s old books.

“We are here,” I said, pointing to a point marked Teg’s Well . “We followed this stream. That tree there, Teg’s Tree , is guarded by sprites.”

Jack muttered that he was quite aware of that fact.

“There’s the Black Rock,” said Jory, stabbing a finger at the triangular symbol in the top corner. “North by northeast. That’s our direction.”

Sir Oswain frowned at the map’s depiction of ancient forests. “It is a long way. If that’s the Leaden Forest, we could spend months walking through it. And the border is only open a se’nnight.”

“A se’nnight in our world,” I corrected. “Time flows differently here.”

Jack looked uneasy. “What does that mean?”

“It means,” I said, “that we could be here for three years and return to find only three days have passed.”

“And likewise the reverse,” Sir Oswain added gravely.

Jory was already stuffing things back into his pack.

“If you want to spend months in a sunless forest, go ahead,” I said to him. “But I am going here.” I pointed to a place lower on the map.

“The South Queen’s Bower,” read Sir Oswain aloud.

“She may help me find Rose,” I said, though I could not be certain. But it was my only hope. If there was any chance that we stood under some protection of the queen who had gifted Mother our roses, I had to try for her help.

Sir Oswain looked doubtful. “It is impossible to enter a royal court without invitation,” he said. “Least of all a Faerie court. One may search for years and never find it unless it is opened to one.”

“I must try,” I said. “For Rose’s sake.”

Jory peered at the spot I had indicated. “It’s in the opposite direction of the treasure. Might be a fool’s errand. And I’ll not waste months wandering through a forest—I’ll take this shortcut across the marshes.” He jabbed a finger at the map.

“You may go north, Jory, son of Jago. I am going south,” I said.



Sir Oswain raised his hand to his heart again. "I shall go with you, Daughter of the Rose Crown."

"Thank you, sir."

Jack looked between us all in dismay.

Jory snatched the map and rolled it tightly. "I cannot waste time on a hopeless search for a Faerie court no man has found."

"But what about the lady Rose?" said Jack. "We can't leave her."

"We'll keep an eye out," said Jory. "That's all that can be done for now."

"Will you not come?" he said, looking between myself and Sir Oswain.

I shook my head. Sir Oswain thumped his fist over his heart, asserting his loyalty to his lady.

"Then I wish you well," said Jory, shouldering his pack.

"Come, Jack." He took a few steps northward before glancing back, noting with surprise that Jack was not following.

"What?" he said. "Are you forsaking me?"

Poor Jack was a sight. His face was blotched with bites, and he looked wretched. "But the lady," he said in an anguished voice. "We cannot leave her. She's worth more than any treasure. "

Sir Oswain nodded solemnly. "Young man, if we return home, you shall be honoured

for such loyalty.”

“Unless the royal crown is recovered, sire,” said Jory, “you’ll have no power to bestow rewards.”

Sir Oswain considered this. “Find the crown, Jory, son of Jago, and you shall be rewarded with a full pardon as well as treasure. But I fear you will not prosper alone. Better to come with us, and seek counsel of the queen, if she will grant it.”

“I’ve no time for chasing wild geese,” said Jory, and turned away. “Not even royal ones. Fare thee well. I’m not afeared to go alone.”

Jack looked after him with a desolate expression.

“If you wish to follow him,” I said gently, “do so. I understand. He is your brother.”

But Jack shook his head.

“The lady,” he said, in a cracked, but determined voice. “We must find her. People are worth more than treasure. At least, some people are.”

Jory had almost disappeared under the trees. He paused once to glance back. But Jack didn’t see, for he was blinking back tears.

Jory shook his head, hitched up his pack, and strode away.

### Paying Court

“I believe,” said Sir Oswain, who was looking less noble and polished with his lank hair and unshaven face than he had at the outset of the journey, “that we have passed this tree before. Perhaps twice. Or thrice.”

“Thank you for your observation, sire,” I said dryly.

I was teetering on despair, for after three days of searching we still could not find the entrance to the Faerie court.

At least, I thought it had been three days. The hours melded together in Faerie, and one’s memory did not function as usual in the magic-tinged air.

“We’ll run out of bread soon,” muttered Jack. He slid his pack from his shoulders and sank onto a fallen tree trunk, rubbing the back of his neck.

“If only I had my map,” mourned Sir Oswain, regarding the tree we had passed three times. “I ought not have let that scapegrace depart with it.”

It was an unusual tree, towering above all others, bearing silvery berries of a flat, round shape, like coins, and leaves also of a silver-white colour, very like my hair, as Jack had observed the first and second time we passed it. He did not mention it the third time.

I needed to think. I would have liked to walk a little distance from my disheartened companions to gather my thoughts in peace, but I recognised the danger of losing

sight of one another in this enchanted woodland.

Every path looked different but led one in circles.

Circling around together was one thing, but it would not do to be caught up in separate circles that might never cross paths again.

I was sure we were in the right place. The magic was tangible, both heightening my senses and disorienting me, as though spells had been laid to ensure we could not find our way.

I was certain that the tree Sir Oswain was now strolling up to was the silver tree depicted on Jory's map, marking the entrance to the court. But where was the entrance?

"We will never find the gate," I said, recalling lines from Mother's stories, "unless they wish us to enter. What was that tale of the swineherd's daughter?"

"The swineherd's daughter?" said Jack, looking up with interest, for he loved stories.

"She chased a straying pig into Faerie and found herself in the Faerie court."

"I know that one!" said Jack. "The Faerie princess's brother caught the pig and had it cooked for a rare dish at his banquet, and the princess, who wanted the pig for a pet, was so angry with her brother that she turned him into a pig and sent him away with the swineherd's daughter.

And when the Faerie queen learned of this, she went to fetch her son and gave the girl great riches, for she'd kept the pig from being sent to market, and the girl had dowry enough to go and marry a mortal prince."

“Not that story,” I said. “In Mother’s story the pig entertained one of the young daughters of the Faerie king, for she had never seen a pig before.

Her court jester was jealous of the pig and cast an enchantment upon it to give it wings so that it might fly away.

But the princess was even more delighted with the flying pig, and the swineherd’s daughter, who was a clever girl, convinced the king that pigs were worth their weight in gold in her country.

She negotiated a king’s ransom for the animal, returned home excessively rich, and married a prince. ”

“Why do the girls always want to marry princes?” said Jack gloomily.

“I don’t. But the point of the story I am trying to remember is not who she married, but how she got into the court.”

“In my story, she followed the pig into a faerie ring,” said Jack.

“We are in a ring,” I said, looking around at the evenly spaced trees encircling us. The silver tree stood as the head of the ring, as though presiding over it. In Mother’s story, the girl had simply run after the pig and found herself in the court.

“We can see the fae and speak to them if they allow us to,” I said. “We are already there, but we cannot perceive it.”

“Already there?” Jack rubbed his cheek tenderly, for it was still red and sore. “Then why don’t we just ask to be let in?”

I sighed at his ignorance. “One does not simply ask to be let into a royal court.

Common folk cannot demand entry.”

I followed Jack’s gaze as he turned his eyes to Sir Oswain, who was peering at a branch as though it were of immense interest to him.

“Sir!” I called, causing Sir Oswain to jump a little, for he had been absorbed. He turned round.

“Such fascinating creatures,” he said. “Something like ants, but quite luminescent. One would not see them at all but for the trail of light they leave as they scurry along, for they quite meld with their background, becoming almost invisible. I have an interest in the natural world, but the creatures here are remarkable. I could study them all day.”

“Except that we must rescue my sister,” I reminded him. “And time is pressing.”

“Certainly we must,” he said, his scholarly look dissipating in an instant. “Have you found the entrance?”

“We are at the entrance, sire.”

“We are? I see it not.”

“Like the faerie ants, it is invisible to us. But you are the very person to open it.”

“How so?”

“Royal etiquette. A visiting dignitary from one kingdom usually shows courtesy to another’s court, do they not?”

He bowed his head to agree.

“What etiquette should be followed in such a circumstance as this?” I asked. “How would you approach the queen of another kingdom if you found yourself in her domain and in need of assistance?”

“I should seek an audience and come before the regent with a gift.”

“What kind of gift?”

“The usual kind.”

“Pray, do elaborate, sir,” I said, stifling my impatience .

He made a flourish with his hand. “Jewels, precious metals, rare perfumes, slaves, that kind of thing.”

“We have no jewels or metals or perfume,” I said. I slumped dejectedly beside Jack.

Jack was looking distressed at Sir Oswain’s words. In fact, he looked strangely pale and swayed slightly as though he were going into a swoon.

“Are you ill, Jack?” I asked, alarmed by his expression.

“Y–yes,” he stammered, his breath a little short.

He stood up from the tree stump and put his pack on his shoulders.

Now he leaned forward, putting his hands on his knees as though to steady himself.

The movement caused his pack to ride up, making him top-heavy, and he inevitably tumbled over and lay sprawled on the ground.

“What is wrong with you?” I said, rising and putting out a hand to pull him up. Sir Oswain grasped his other arm, and we yanked him to his feet.

“I will do it,” said Jack, still pale and breathless. “For her, I would do anything.”

He made a small, choked sob.

“Only, I’m sorry I couldn’t say goodbye to Jory first. For I shall never see him again, and would have liked to say farewell.”

“Do what?” I asked, bewildered.

“Give myself as a slave to the Faerie queen.”

It took a moment for Sir Oswain and me to understand his meaning.

“Nay, son of Jago,” said Sir Oswain decidedly. “You have not the makings of a royal slave.”

“I don’t?”

“One would not offer a slave to a queen who was not of the handsomest form and countenance. It would be offensive to do otherwise.”

Jack’s face cleared, then fell again. “Then we have naught to give.”

Sir Oswain gave Jack’s shoulder a squeeze.

“Though you are not fit for a slave in the fae queen’s court, Jack, son of Jago, yet your willingness to sacrifice yourself for the lady Rose is noble indeed. I shall not forget it.”



Sir Oswain then drew out his short sword from the scabbard at his hip. He stroked the hilt tenderly.

“This sword was forged for me at my coming of age, a gift from my mother. But I consider it of no value in comparison to the life of the lady Rose. It is all I have to offer as a gift.”

“Then it will have to do,” I said resignedly. “Now you must ask for admittance. This is the centre of the ring,” I said, closing my eyes as I moved into position, searching for the deepest point of magic that swirled around us. “You must make a petition for entry into the court.”

“Feels like I’ve got a spinning top in my head,” groaned Jack, staggering as he entered the middle of the ring.

“It’s the magic,” I said. “It is very strong here.”

Jack groaned again, looking increasingly sickly.

Sir Oswain also paled; perspiration beaded on his brow. “What shall I say?” he asked grimly.

“Whatever you would usually say in such circumstances.”

“I have never found myself in such a circumstance.”

“Then devise a petition, sire. Contrive. Improvise,” I urged.

“Speak to whom? There is no one here.”

“Just because we cannot see them does not mean they cannot see and hear us.”

Sir Oswain regarded me unfavourably .

“I think,” he said, “that you are a young lady of a managing disposition.”

I bit back a retort, deeming it wiser to manage my impatience instead.

“But I shall indulge you on this occasion,” he continued, “for there is naught else to try.” He tugged a very fine handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his forehead.

“On behalf of my sister, sir, I thank you for your indulgence,” I said dryly, marvelling at the contradiction of a man who carried both a warrior’s sword and a lace-edged handkerchief.

“Stand behind me,” ordered Sir Oswain, when he had re-pocketed his handkerchief. “Royal protocol dictates that persons of common birth do not stand beside noblemen.”

Jack and I obeyed.

“Where shall I direct my speech?” Sir Oswain asked.

“Toward that tree,” I replied. “That is where the magic flows.”

Sir Oswain staggered slightly as he turned to face the tree. Jack moaned and said he thought he was going to be sick.

“Do not give your name,” I counselled. “Only your title.”

Sir Oswain lifted his chin and called out in a loud, clear voice, trained for oration: “To Her Royal Highness, queen of the south of Faerie, I, servant of King Athelfrid of the Westshires of Albion, do beseech Your Highness for the immeasurably great

honour of an audience.”

He paused. We listened. There was no sound.

“Mention the gift,” I advised.

“I carry before me a humble gift to present to Your Highness. ”

“You should not have said humble ,” I said. That was not a word that would appeal to the fae.

Jack whispered that he thought no one was listening and asked if he could step out of the wretched faerie ring before he cast up the contents of his belly, for surely that would be an insult to the fae.

“Hush,” I said, listening intently. “Do you hear that?”

“I hear only the echo of my own voice,” said Sir Oswain, wiping his brow again and staggering half a step. “I cannot remain in this place any longer.”

“There!” I said, moving forward eagerly. “I heard the creak of a gate. And there it is!”

“I see naught,” said Jack.

But as we neared the tree, a pair of tall, ornate silver gates became visible. By the time we reached them, they were as solid and tangible as any gate in the mortal world. It was difficult to imagine how we had not seen them before, but only perceived a pair of saplings flanking the great tree.

A branch shimmered and shifted, and a bright spear was thrust before me, blocking

our way.

“Halt!” ordered a tall, fierce guard, dressed in bark-brown with a silvery breastplate. “Who seeks entry to Her Highness’s court?”

Sir Oswain shouldered past me.

“The ambassador of King Athelfrid,” he announced in princely style. “These are my servants from the mortal realm.”

“Servants?” said the guard, barely glancing at Jack but fixing an intent look upon my hair. “What servant wears a crown from the royal garden?”

To my astonishment, the guard lowered his spear and bowed before me .

“Had you only knocked, my lady,” he said, “the gate would have opened to you directly. Allow me to escort you and your companions to Her Highness.”

Sir Oswain’s face was a picture, but I was too surprised to laugh. There was no time for words, for the guard walked quickly, and we hurried to follow.

Down an avenue of trees, each as tall as the guardian tree, crowned with silvery leaves and golden fruits, we walked. Each leaf whispered as the trees wondered among themselves who the strangers were that had come among them.

I wondered if Beran had ever walked this avenue.

Every hour since entering Faerie I had thought of him, looked for evidence of him, hoped against hope that our paths might cross, that somehow he would know I was here and would come and find me.

But perhaps he was bound. Perhaps he was not at liberty to seek me, and where would I begin to look for him in this vast, strange, and dangerous land?

I did not feel danger in this place. The light was strong and golden. Fountains glittered in arbours between the trees, the water casting dancing rainbows in the air.

All my senses felt overpowered, for the flowers were large, bright, and strongly scented, and the whispering of the trees, the golden light, and the drone of the fae bees were harmonious but so very loud and vivid to our mortal ears and eyes.

Poor Jack was dreadfully pale as he winced and shaded his bedazzled eyes.

Sir Oswain likewise looked unwell but held himself tall, his expression grim and resolute on his perfectly symmetrical features .

“May we drink?” I asked the guard, gesturing to a fountain.

He bowed, and before I reached the fountain, a faerie servant appeared with a cup to catch the silvery drops.

“Drink,” I urged Jack, holding out the cup to him, for he looked as though he suffered the worst of us. “You will feel better.”

“Is it safe?” whispered Jack.

I nodded. Water and food freely given under the laws of hospitality were safe in Faerie. This much I knew.

He took a sip gingerly, and immediately his face brightened. He drained the cup, blinked a few times, and gave a lopsided grin of relief.

“My head don’t feel like a kettle’s being bashed about in it anymore.”

I drank my cup. Sir Oswain hesitated, but on seeing that Jack and I suffered no ill effects, he too drank his down.

The water was cool and crisp as an apple, with a slight fizzle that made the tongue tingle as it travelled up to the head and down to the stomach.

When the fizzle abated, the world seemed softer and more natural to the senses, and all the sounds and scents were quieter and lighter.

We walked on. The avenue gave way to a maze of gardens.

Jack now had a spring in his step and cooed his pleasure at the beauty of the royal gardens.

They were indeed very beautiful, though a little too formal and perfect for my liking.

The desire to wander about and explore was very strong, but I had only to think of Rose, and the temptation to lose myself was overcome by the remembrance of her plight.

Up ahead stood a large, domed building, its white marble walls intricately carved in latticework, with marble roses clambering all over. A heady scent of roses drifted round. The domed pavilion stood in the heart of the royal rose garden.

Fae courtiers in fantastical clothes promenaded the pathways between the rose beds.

They turned to stare at us as we passed, barely glancing at Jack and Sir Oswain but bowing and curtsying to me.

I could not keep from staring back at them, for they were beautiful faeries, their gowns and cloaks like colourful, shimmering butterflies, their hair like fine silver thread swept up into fabulous styles adorned with flowers and jewels.

The gentlemen courtiers carried silver canes, and the ladies fluttered fans like dragonfly wings.

Only their hard, green eyes spoilt their beauty.

I had never felt so small, ragged, and wild-haired as I did in the presence of these glamorous beings. Even Sir Oswain looked short and insipid by contrast. Small wonder the fae considered mortals insignificant.

Jack gave a gasp of admiration, and I followed his gaze to the entrance of the marble pavilion where a tall lady, so exquisitely lovely that it almost hurt to look at her, stood watching our approach.

As we neared, I saw that, like the courtiers, her splendour was marred by the cold look in her green eyes. My companions seemed not to notice but gazed slavishly at her. The lady's mouth lifted into the shape of a smile, but her eyes spoke disdain.

“Your Highness,” said Sir Oswain, with a sweeping bow. “Servant of King Athelfrid of the Westshires of Albion, at your service.”

Jack attempted a bow, but staggered under the weight of his pack, ruining his attempt at courtly manners. I dropped a curtsy .

“Welcome to Her Highness's court,” said the beautiful lady.

Her voice was mellifluous, golden, and sweet. Jack glowed, and Sir Oswain gave a soft sigh at the sound. But there was another note between the dulcet tones—a



squeak, like a flute being played one note too high.

I narrowed my eyes to peer at her more closely. Now I could see the telltale shimmer of a glamour over her face and above her head. She was neither as beautiful as she presented herself, nor as tall.

“Her Highness?” repeated Sir Oswain. “Are you not Her Highness, ma’am?”

She gave another false smile, and I heard a bitter note in her voice as she said, “I am her sister. Chief lady-in-waiting.”

She looked at me, and I wondered at the cat-like gleam in her expression.

“Come and see the queen in her glory.”

“Do not forget,” I whispered to Jack. “Never give your name to any fae.”

Jack nodded, his eyes as big and round as summer squash as he looked about at the glittering and fantastically carved walls of the queen’s summer house.

“I shall say my name is Jago,” he whispered. “What shall you say?”

“Mother taught me to give my name as Snow White.”

The queen’s sister parted a shimmering curtain.

Beyond the curtain drifted soft, lullaby music. It was very like the music of pipers in the mortal world, but sweeter and lower in tone, each note causing the air to ripple with colours, and a feeling of relaxation to settle over the hearer.

Magic swirled in the music round us, and I was mildly surprised at how well I bore it,

for I could see that Jack and Sir Oswain were looking increasingly like a pair of drunken men, their eyes glassy, their movements a little off-kilter, and a foolish look on their faces.

I wondered how they would bear the overwhelming beauty of the queen.

A silver couch with cushions like clouds was now revealed before us. A crowned faerie reclined upon the cushions. And we all gasped.

### Revelations

The royal body reclining on cloud-cushions was sumptuously draped in a silvery gown, and the shape of the royal form was enormous.

A pair of plump ankles and feet peeked out from the glistening folds. My eyes travelled from her feet to her face, with apple-round cheeks and a notable wart on her rosy chin.

Her eyes were closed, and a snore escaped from her open mouth. Her crown was knocked askew. I glanced at the beautiful sister, noting the sly gleam in her eyes.

“Well I’ll be jiggered—is that the queen?” said Jack in amazement.

At the discordant note in his voice, the music halted abruptly, as though a spell were broken. The queen’s eyelids flickered.

I was about to hiss an order to my fellow travellers to leave quickly, for I suddenly understood the malicious look of the sister; were the queen to awake, we would be caught in a dreadfully disrespectful position, looking upon her in the privacy of her royal nap .

As my mouth opened to urge my companions to hasten away, the eyes of the queen also opened, pinioning me to the spot. Dismay gripped me, and I stood staring like a simpleton, my mouth agape.

“Who are you?” demanded the queen.

I hurried to curtsy. “I am Snow White, Your Highness. This is my travelling companion, Jago. And this—” I gestured to Sir Oswain, who was staring with a shocked expression. I gave him a nudge.

He made a hasty bow and said, “Sir Osw—” Here I nudged him again to remind him not to give his true name—“Os- wart ,” he blurted, glancing at the queen’s chin.

She looked past us. “Lupine !” she said accusingly.

The queen’s sister lifted her beautiful chin defiantly.

“Give back my glamour, you traitorous worm-casing.”

Lupine looked sulky, but she shook herself, and a shimmer like a heatwave mirage hid her from view for the space of a blink of an eye, then drifted across the chamber, settling on the queen and melting into her like dew.

In place of the beautiful Lupine stood a thin, angular woman with close-set eyes. But the queen, upon the couch, was breathtakingly beautiful, with shining waves of hair cascading down the elegant lines of her body to her delicate feet.

Sir Oswain recovered his manners first, making another bow and offering a flowery plea for Her Highness’s pardon at awakening her from her repose. Jack made a clumsy bow and mumbled something unintelligible, but it was me the queen fixed her green eyes on.

I curtsied again. “I thank you for the great honour of this meeting, Your Highness.”

The queen spied the roses in my hair. She sat upright, looking regal and glorious .

“A Daughter of the Rose Crown has always the right of an audience,” said the queen.

“You had no need to use a mortal lordling to ask for entry. You had only to knock.”

Her eyes flickered their beautiful green light over Sir Oswain.

I wished to ask what rights she spoke of, but I recalled Mother’s words regarding the precarious ways of the fae— they manoeuvre by bargains, promises, and the binding laws of language.

To admit my ignorance would place me at a disadvantage in not knowing my rights under the terms of whatever bargain had been made.

The fae are bound by law. But they have no conscience. If they can bend the rules to suit their purposes, they will. One must know the laws in order to invoke them and keep the fae from trickery. They do not like mortals, but they will respect any bargains, unless they perceive weakness.

“I have sought your presence, Your Highness,” I began, “on behalf of my sister, who is also a Daughter of the Rose. She was taken captive into Faerie, and I do not know where to find her. We seek your aid.”

The queen gave a delicate yawn behind tapered fingers.

“Helping is fatiguing,” she said. “Lupine, order refreshment. And no more of your tricks, you hag, or I shall turn you into a beetle, and this time for two centuries.”

Lupine lifted her chin and stalked away.

In came a troop of liveried servants bearing a table to set before the queen’s couch. Though the servants moved swiftly, the queen urged them to hasten, her eyes gleaming with anticipation as the table was speedily covered with bowls, platters, and carafes.

Jack licked his lips. I shared his hunger. We had been existing on small portions of wayfarer bread for what seemed an age.

The queen ate rapidly, her plate and goblet refilled by her servants as soon as they emptied.

Sir Oswain grew restless, no doubt irritated by the lack of courtesy, for we were left standing awkwardly, watching the queen's feasting.

When a fresh course of platters was carried in he spoke up, barely concealing his indignation.

"Pray, excuse us, Your Highness. We shall step outside and await the conclusion of your feast." He made a curt bow.

His words distracted the queen from her eating, and she looked up, her eyes narrowing with amusement, or mischief, I could not say which. She licked her fingers delicately before replying smoothly, "Your table must be peasantish, Sir Oswain, if you consider this little nuncheon a feast."

The servants sneered, and the queen looked pleased with her own wit.

"You may partake, if you wish," she said. "Shall I offer you a platter, or are you still eating from stale trenchers in your kingdom?"

Sir Oswain said haughtily, "I thank you for your kind offer, Your Highness, but we are sorely pressed for time."

She ignored him, for she had turned her attention to me and was looking again at the red and white roses I wore.

“Which of the rose daughters are you?” she asked.

“I am Snow—”

“I know what you said,” she said impatiently, plucking a cluster of large, pink berries from her plate. “Hair white as snow, and so forth. But are you the foundling or the princess? ”

And she popped the fruit into her mouth.

“Princess?” Sir Oswain exclaimed. He looked at me in astonishment.

“Princess?” echoed Jack, gaping at me.

The queen chewed and swallowed, and plucked another pink orb.

“Does your godmother give you the white roses or the red?”

I could not speak. I was too stunned by her previous words.

The queen smiled. “Oops. Have I spoiled the secret?” She crushed another berry between her teeth.

Her words lingered in the air like the last reverberation of the notes of a plucked lute. Jack and Sir Oswain stared at me, their expressions shifting between astonishment and curiosity. My own thoughts whirled. Princess? Foundling?

“ Godmother ?” I managed to say.

The queen idly rolled a berry between her fingers. “I seem to have broken a little spell, Rose Daughter. So which one are you? The red princess or the white

foundling?”

“I... I must be the foundling,” I heard myself whisper.

“The lady Rose is a princess!” exclaimed Jack.

“The princess?” breathed Sir Oswain. “Impossible. The king’s daughter disappeared as a mere babe, the same dark and dreadful night the crown prince was likewise taken. Lost forever!” He shook his head. “Can it be? Can the lady Rose be the lost daughter of the king?”

“Are you missing any other princesses?” the queen asked, pushing away her plate and leaning back with a soft sigh of contentment.

I had no answer. My thoughts churned so violently I felt sick; but the queen did not wait for a reply. With a wave of her hand, the table was cleared in an instant. Jack sighed as the last of the food vanished.

Sir Oswain turned to me, speaking in a low voice.

“We must make haste. Will you enquire of Her Highness? It is what we came for. I cannot rest nor slumber until the princess is safely returned to the king.”

I roused myself to say, “Where shall we find my si—the princess, Your Highness?”

The queen regarded me through half-lidded eyes, her expression unreadable.

“You are honour bound to help us,” I pressed, though I did not know if this was true. I only knew that Mother had been given royal roses to protect us, though I did not understand why.



“So I am,” she murmured to my relief. “How vexing. Who took her?”

I described the dark figure I had seen.

“It must be the one they call Amara,” said the queen.

“What is she? Is she fae?”

“A nuisance, is what she is. A rogue royal godmother grown greedy for trade, and turned to dabbling in sorcery.”

“Why would she take my—the princess?”

The queen spoke as though bored by the conversation. “The dwarf lord put a price on the princess’s head the day she escaped out of his hand. Marriage to the mortal princess would remove the final obstacle to the mortal throne.”

“She is going to give the lady Rose to the dwarf lord?” Jack said with dismay.

“To wed him!” exclaimed Sir Oswain, grasping his sword hilt. “We must hasten to find her! Where shall we find her?”

The queen ignored him, reaching for a silver toothpick.

“Where shall we find the princess, Your Highness?” I urged. “Would this Amara have taken her directly to the dwarf lord?”

“The only thing wrong with summer berries,” mused the queen, as she leisurely cleaned her teeth, “are the seeds.”

I clenched my hands into fists, striving for patience.

Sir Oswain could bear it no longer. “Where is the princess now, Your Highness?” he begged in a strained voice.

The queen ignored him, looking only at me. “Did I hear you had brought me a gift?”

Sir Oswain hastened to draw his sword and laid it on the table before the queen.

I forced myself to keep countenance and speak evenly, though my thoughts were still reeling as the words foundling and godmother swirled round my head.

“We bring you a sword of the highest craftsmanship in our kingdom, Your Highness,” I said.

The queen looked underwhelmed.

“Where shall we find the Rose Daughter?” I pressed again.

“Amara would keep her while she made her bargain,” the queen said languidly.

“Keep her where?”

The queen called for music, and the notes of a stringed instrument swelled and floated from behind a lattice screen. The melody was soothing and restful. Jack made a strange sound like a yowling cat as he stifled a yawn .

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The queen shook loose a fan and yawned behind it. “I am so very sleepy,” she murmured.

“Find out where this Amara is!” hissed Lord Oswain before succumbing to a yawn himself.

“I’m trying!” I hissed back.

The queen’s eyes were closing. I felt an overwhelming desire to sink onto a cushion and close my eyes for just a moment, but even as I longed for it, I knew it was an enchantment in the music.

I reached for my rose crown, holding onto its magic, and summoned the strength to say, “Your Highness, I entreat you with all the rights of the Rose Daughters to do all within your power to recover the princess!”

The queen groaned and waved a hand.

“Tell them, for the love of the High Queen of Faerie, where to find Amara’s dwelling, and give them mounts that they may be swiftly on their way and leave me in peace!”

A faerie servant appeared, and gestured for me to follow. I turned to shake Jack by the shoulder, for his eyes were closing and his legs almost buckling beneath him.

As Sir Oswain staggered past like a sleepwalker, the queen opened her eyes to narrow slits and called after him, “You may take your little knife with you, Sir Oswain. You will certainly need it should you be so foolish as to try your strength against Amara or

the dwarf lord.”

The servant walked silently, ignoring our questions as he led us through a maze of corridors to a chamber lined with shelves of ancient tomes and scrolls. A marble table stood in the centre, and on it, a large map was unrolled .

“Here is the dwelling of Amara,” said the servant, a tall faerie with a crop of silvery curls.

I studied the markings on the map. A jagged outline formed what appeared to be a small area of land, surrounded by rippling blue ink.

“That looks like a moated island,” said Sir Oswain, frowning.

“And what’s that thing in the water?” said Jack, rubbing his eyes as if to make sure he was seeing correctly.

“The draig, ” said the faerie.

“What’s a draig?”

“It is what you mortals might call a water behemoth,” said the faerie, his tone bored, as though speaking to ignorant mortals was a tedious duty.

“Never heard of a water behemoth,” Jack said, looking to Sir Oswain and me for confirmation.

“A foul reptilian,” said Sir Oswain. “A leviathan.”

“A monster,” I concluded. “And how shall we cross the water to the island?”

“You must go over the water, or under it. But I would not advise going through it,” said the faerie.

I was beginning to dislike faeries, with their cool indifference and unhelpful answers.

I exerted my rights once again, saying in a commanding tone, “You are charged to assist a Rose Daughter when she asks for it. Tell me how we shall reach the island, recover the princess, and get safely away again.”

The faerie looked as if I were a vexatious gnat buzzing in his ear, but he unrolled a second map and laid it over the first. This topmost one was semi-transparent, and it layered over the surface of the one beneath a map of a complex web of tunnels .

“Go under the water by way of the tunnels.” He tapped a point on the map. “Enter here.”

Sir Oswain traced the lines with his finger, following them towards the castle perched on the edge of the island.

“There’s no monsters on the island,” noted Jack with relief.

“How far is it?” I asked.

“Five by fifty leagues,” said the faerie.

“So far?” Sir Oswain looked dismayed.

“We’ve got to be home before the border closes,” said Jack.

The faerie did not trouble to conceal his scorn. “Her Highness’s mounts travel more than fifty leagues in an hourglass. But they will not travel underground. They are not

dwarvish beasts.”

I concluded from his tone that he thought as little of dwarves as he did of mortals. “How much more than fifty leagues?” I asked.

But the faerie was rolling up the maps and returning them to their place. He ordered us to follow him to the stables.

“Wait!” I said, as he turned to leave us at the stable doors. “We need food and every useful item required for our venture.”

“I will get you supplies,” he said coldly.

“Wait!” I called again. “Do you know of one known as Beran? A bear who dwells in Faerie.”

“I know of no bear .”

There was no time to marvel at the wondrous stables, with their gleaming walls of white marble.

The queen’s mounts were taller than any mortal horses, but they looked slight and delicate, with their silvery bodies and feathered manes and tails, so much so that Sir Oswain hesitated to mount the one given to him.

“Is there no saddle?” he asked.

The stable master gave him such a look of disdain that Sir Oswain did not repeat the question. “I must surmise that fae mounts need no harness,” he said, approaching the mounting block.

“Never ridden a horse,” confessed Jack, looking nervously up at the proud eyes of his mount, who pawed the ground and snorted at him. “Let alone a fae horse.”

“She has never carried a common mortal,” said the stable master coldly, soothing the creature with a few words in an unknown tongue.

Jack mounted awkwardly.

“Release her!” snapped the stable master as Jack gripped the creature’s feathery mane, and the faerie mount screeched in outrage and snapped at Jack’s dangling leg.

“Beg pardon!” cried Jack, nearly toppling from the creature’s back. “But what shall I hold on to?”

“You do not need to hold anything!” said the stable master sharply. “She will carry you . Press your legs against her gently. Place your hands on her shoulders if you must put them somewhere, and she will do the rest.”

Jack gulped and did as he was told.

I was eager to ride. I had never ridden anything other than our old Jenny, and faerie mounts were said to be as swift as the wind. My mount did not snort at me as I climbed onto her back. I made sure not to touch her mane or press too hard against her flanks.

“I think she likes me,” I said, pleased with the sensation of being so high off the ground .

“She respects your rose crown,” said the stable master. “She cares nothing for you.”

The servant returned with three small sacks of provisions. I slung mine across my

shoulder, adjusting its strap. I had barely finished when the master gave a sharp command, and the mounts leapt forward.

Jack shrieked, Sir Oswain yelled, and I gasped as the world blurred into streaks of green and blue, as trees and sky rushed past and the ground disappeared beneath us and the wind roared in our ears.



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### Mud, Magic, and Monsters

It was an hour or so from sunset when our faerie steeds slowed and brought us to our journey's end.

Jack's horse tipped him from her back with a snort, and he lay groaning on the ground.

Sir Oswain slid from his mount, looking ill as he staggered away to sit on a hillock and put his head in his hands.

I, too, felt strange and dizzy, for there was strong magic in the speed of the queen's horses, though I fared better than my companions.

I opened my sack of provisions and took out food and water. "Sit up and eat this," I said, breaking a piece of faerie bread and giving it to Jack. "You will feel better for it."

I did the same for Sir Oswain, and after a little food and drink, they recovered their balance, though we all walked stiffly after the long ride.

"Strange place," said Jack, looking about.

It was a quiet and lonely landscape after the vivid colours and opulent scents of the queen's summer court.

We were on the border of meadowland that stretched as far as we could see.

I felt uncomfortably exposed beneath the wide-open sky, for I was used to the canopy of my woodland home with its green shadows and dappled shade.

The softly waving grass was tall, waist-high in parts, with a deep purple tinge to its stalks; its seed heads glowed golden in the light of the early evening sun.

“What is this?” wondered Sir Oswain, plucking a head of the purple grass, rubbing it between his fingers, and sniffing the milk that was released.

“Horses like it,” noted Jack.

The faerie mounts were cropping leisurely a little way off.

Sir Oswain wrinkled his nose. “Smells like hops, but stronger than anything that grows at home.”

He lifted his finger to taste the milky juice of the grass, and I said in alarm, “Don’t—!”

But I spoke a moment too late. Sir Oswain smacked his lips. “Tastes hoppy,” he informed us. “But sweeter. I daresay it would make an interesting ale. We make excellent ale on my father’s estate.”

“It’s not safe to eat strange things in Faerie,” I scolded.

I watched his face for any sign of harm, relieved to see none. I looked around, saying, “But where is the entrance to the tunnels? We must find them before nightfall.”

This was a new problem, for there appeared to be nothing but grassland all around us.

“Feels like I’m on a boat,” said Jack, watching the soft undulations of the grass and

swaying slightly. “Like being in a yellow and purple sea, is it not?”

“I would not know,” I said. “I have never seen the sea.”

I listened carefully. The whispering grass was strange to my ears. I could not discern its language. But was that a note of mockery in its tone?

Sir Oswain also swayed. Then he gave a chuckle. Then he laughed. We looked at him in surprise. “Let’s play at sailboat!” he cried, making a pretence of scanning the landscape with an eyeglass.

“Play?” I said, and regarded him closely. “Oh no,” I groaned, noting the flush rising in his cheeks and the glassy look forming in his eyes.

Jack and I exchanged a look of alarm. Sir Oswain’s limbs began twitching as he hummed snatches of a jaunty shanty tune. “All aboard!” he cried, swaying more violently. “She’s setting sail!”

And his twitching legs broke into action. He leapt about, hoisting invisible sails and calling for Jack to take the rudder.

“He’s run mad!” Jack stared in astonishment.

“Weigh anchor!” cried Sir Oswain. “Batten the hatches! Storm’s coming! Jump to it, boy! Why are you standing about like a loon?”

“Beg pardon for saying so, sir,” said Jack, “but I think ’tis you that’s three sheets to the wind! We’ve no time for games, sir, not when the lady Rose is lost!”

But Sir Oswain was not listening. He had broken into a sailor’s hornpipe and was leaping through the grass like a stotting deer.

“What in the world’s amiss with him?” said Jack.

“I suspect it’s the juice in the grass,” I replied.

“Well I’ll be jiggered,” marvelled Jack. “If that’s what a drop does to a grown man, it must be powerful stuff!”

“Indeed,” I said, vexed. “But how long will his inebriation last?”

“He’ll be worn out if he keeps this up,” said Jack .

We watched as Sir Oswain danced away toward the setting sun.

“Who’d have thought he could jump so high and spin round like that,” wondered Jack. “He complained his legs were sore from riding, but he don’t seem to feel pain now.”

“He will when this is over.”

“Is he coming back?”

We had to shield our eyes against the reddening sun to follow the diminishing figure of Sir Oswain prancing through the grass. Lines from a bawdy sailor’s ditty floated back to us. I was sure I could hear a whispery laugh from the waving grass.

“Perhaps I should ride after him,” I said, glancing over at the grazing faerie mounts.

“Herd him back,” agreed Jack. “Though, don’t know how you’ll steer them horses. Seems they only go where they want. What’s he shouting about?”

“Something about gunwales,” I said. “He’s circling round.” I was relieved to see our

dancing lord was coming back toward us.

“Ahoy there!” called Sir Oswain. “Coming about! Clear the harbour!”

He drew near, his face flushed and his breath coming hard and fast. I hoped fervently that the smidgeon of juice he’d imbibed would now wear off, for his body could not sustain such frenetic activity for long.

I considered how Jack and I could restrain him for his own safety. But, with great relief, I saw his pace was slowing. His breath came in gasps, and the unnatural brightness of his eyes began to dim.

“Come ashore now, sir!” I urged.

My vexation at his stupidity waned as I saw he was desperate to catch his breath. His hand clutched his side as though it pained him.

“You’re back on land, sir,” I said, reaching for his arm so that I might restrain him from dancing away again.

“Can’t...” he gasped. “Feel... my... land... legs...”

“Sit a minute,” I said, “and you’ll feel them soon enough. Hold him, Jack!”

I grasped an arm.

He tried to shake us off but had not the strength. The effects of the grass juice were leaving him.

“Did... you... not... hear... me... call?” he said breathlessly.

“About the gunwales, sir?” said Jack. “We heard, sir. All that’s done with now. You’re back ashore, sir.”

“Not... gunwales ,” gasped Sir Oswain. “ Tunnels .”

He gave a long groan and collapsed.

“Is he dead?” Jack peered anxiously over Sir Oswain’s prostrate body.

“He breathes,” I assured him.

Sir Oswain lay unconscious. Dusk was gathering quickly. The gold and purple grass began muting into a sea of ghostly grey.

“What we going to do?” said Jack, glancing at the darkening sky.

I rummaged in my sack, pulling out a small lantern I had seen lying there amid the parcels of faerie bread.

It was of a simple, elegant design: a clear dome, a wick inside, a flat-bottomed bowl beneath, and a long handle. I puzzled over it.

‘How do we light it?’ said Jack.

“I don’t know. There must be some kind of faerie oil in the bowl, but I don’t know how to get at the wick. Nor do we have any means of lighting it.”

“Let me look,” said Jack .

I gave him the lamp and began pacing up and down, waiting impatiently for Sir Oswain to awaken. “I’ve a good mind to leave you here,” I said, kicking Sir Oswain’s

boot as I passed him. “How could you be so stupid?”

“We can’t leave him,” said Jack. “But if we don’t make haste to the tunnel, it’ll be morning before we find it, and the poor lady Rose...”

He stared at the useless lamp in his hands.

“I wish Jory were here.”

“Why?” I said irritably. “I don’t need a third man causing trouble.”

“I haven’t caused trouble,” said Jack reproachfully. “And Jory has a tinderbox. Wish you would light,” he muttered to the lamp, tapping it several times in frustration. “Oh!” he cried. “Something’s happening! ’Tis getting warm!”

The lamp began to glow. A clear, golden light emanated from the wick inside the clear dome.

“How did you do that?”

“Don’t know!”

“You must have done something!” I took back the lamp. “Did you press something or tap somewhere?”

“Said I wished it would light, and—it did!”

But I was no longer looking at the lamp or at Jack, for just beyond Jack’s head, something most alarming was happening.

Jack, seeing my face, got up, turned round, and leapt back with a yell. “What is that

?”

There was a swirling shape in the air, as though a strange and unearthly wind circled round and round.

“It must be a faerie,” I said, my mind racing over all the types of fae beings Mother had talked of. Perhaps it was some air-borne faerie that travelled by wind—let it not be some dark and dangerous wight riding in on the wings of darkness after sunset!

Jack moved backwards, hastening away from the swirling phenomenon, until he tripped over Sir Oswain’s leg and fell.

The strange swirl swelled larger, as large as a full-grown man, and out of it fell something solid and man-sized, as though violently cast out. The swirl shrank—folding in on itself—then faded and was gone.

I raised the lamp to see what the shape on the ground was—it was something dark, and it smelled foul.

My heart sank. We were about to be attacked by some hideous faerie beast, and the only sword wielder among us was unconscious, while my other companion would trip over his own feet sooner than help fend off a monster.

I braced myself to throw the lamp in the monster’s face should it lunge at me.

The monster groaned and raised its head, black gore dripping from its face. It opened a pair of dark eyes and blinked at the lamplight I held aloft.

“Am I dead?” groaned the monster, shielding his eyes from the lamp as though he had come out of darkness and could not bear the light. “Is this the afterlife? Did they eat me?”



“Jory?” cried Jack, scrambling to his feet at the sound of the voice. “Is that you?”

“Jack?” moaned the monster. “Is that you? Where am I?”

“It is you!” I said in amazement.

“What happened?” cried Jack. He moved nearer, then recoiled. “ Ugh ! You stink!”

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:36 am*

“You’d stink if you’d been stuck in a bog and about to be eaten by bog monsters,” groaned his brother. “But how did I get here?”

I was wondering the very same thing.

“You wished him here,” I said, suddenly understanding what had happened. “You wished Jory was here, and then you wished for the lamp to light!”

“ ’Tis a magic lamp!” cried Jack. “We can wish for anything!”

“No,” I said, clutching the lamp protectively. “Faerie boons come in threes. Remember the stone faerie and the three questions?”

“We could wish ourselves back home with the lady Rose!” cried Jack.

I considered this. Would it work? What if it didn’t? What if only the person holding the lamp was magicked back home? That would be worse, for I would never find my way back again to seek for Rose.

“No,” I said firmly. “It’s too risky.”

I ran my mind over all Mother had told me regarding fae wishes. They varied in strength. Royal magic was more powerful than most, but it could still be resisted, unless it was dark magic that overpowered another’s will.

Jory could not have been transported to us by magic if he had not wished for his brother to call for him. There had been a delay of some minutes before Jory had

appeared, although the lamp had responded to the wish instantly; Jory must have put up a little resistance to begin with.

“Don’t suppose you could wish him clean?” said Jack, holding his nose.

Bog marsh mud was certainly vile. Jory clambered unsteadily to his feet, and a waft of malodour overwhelmed me .

“No,” I said, my voice muffled as I covered my mouth and nose. “We must keep the last wish for a matter of life and death.”

“I’d say it were a matter of life and death,” said Jack. “ ’Tis a stink strong enough to kill a fellow or raise one from the dead!”

“Now that is a good idea!” I said. “Jory, come and speak to Sir Oswain!”

“Where is he?” said Jory, still shaky from the effects of the magic and from whatever misadventure he had just endured.

“Here, on the ground.”

“What’s he doing on the ground?”

Jory wiped a glob of black mud from his eyebrow and blinked. I held up the lamp to illuminate the unconscious Sir Oswain.

“Is he dead?”

“Dead drunk,” said Jack.

“From what?” said Jory, coming unsteadily toward the inert body. “Could do with a

drink myself after what I've been through."

"You wouldn't want what he's had," Jack assured him.

"Lean over him," I said. "Tell him to wake up."

"You think the sound of my voice will be irresistible to him?"

"No. I think the smell of you will work as well as burnt feathers."

"I see you're as charming as ever, Miss Lily." He glanced around. "You haven't found your sister yet."

"Thank you for remembering her. If we can waken Sir Oswain, we can be on our way to find her."

Jory dropped to his knees and leaned over the inert aristocrat. "Hey. Sleeping beauty. Time to wake up. "

"Lean nearer," I urged when there was no response.

Jory tried again.

"His eyelids flickered," I said, moving the lamp nearer, then withdrawing as another whiff of bog mud reached me.

Jory lifted Sir Oswain by his coat collar to shake him soundly.

"That will do," I said, when Jory slapped Sir Oswain's cheeks.

"That's how I wake Jack when he's being a lazy dog," said Jory, giving up and sitting

back on his heels. “Have you any victuals? I’ve not eaten for two days.”

“You ate all that wayfarer bread?” marvelled Jack, fishing out the leaf-wrapped bread and the flask of water from his sack.

Jory sighed after a long draught from the flask. “That tastes good.”

“From the fountain in the queen’s summer garden,” Jack informed him.

“You made it to the queen, then?” Jory spoke with a mouthful of bread. “Mmm. Tastes good.”

“Tastes like honey cake, don’t it?” said Jack, watching his supply of faerie bread being quickly devoured.

“So good,” said Jory, closing his eyes as he savoured the satisfaction of food. “I lost my pack to a thieving fellow on a wagon. One of those roamers.”

“And where’s your bow and quiver?” asked Jack.

“Used up my arrows on the horde of boggarts that drove me into the bog.

I was sinking fast. The black mud was over my nose, and I thought—well, Jory, son of Jago, this is it.

After all these years of trying to hustle a living to take care of your little brother, this is how it ends.

At the bottom of a bog. Unless those boggarts pull me out and eat me.

“And I thought of you, Jack, and hoped you’d be a better fellow than I’d been, and I

was glad you weren't there sinking in the mud beside me.

And as the blackness covered my eyes, I heard your voice—heard you say, ‘ I wish Jory was here ’—and then I felt myself sucked upwards, and I thought, well, this is it—I'm about to get eaten—and then I felt very strange, and I wasn't sure if I were still in or out of my body, and then I saw a bright yellow light, and I felt something spit me out, and I fell to the ground, and thought I heard your voice, and, what do you know, it really was you. ”

Jory broke off from his story as his voice grew ragged. Two white streaks appeared under his eyes.

“Thought it was the end,” finished Jory. “You saved my life, Jack.”

Jack also had tears running down his cheeks and moved as though to embrace his brother, but drew back again as the smell repelled him.

“Right,” said Jory, wiping a hand across his nose and getting to his feet.

“You've lost your boots,” said Jack.

“Got sucked off in the mud.” Jory looked down at his black feet.

Jack hesitated a moment, then began tugging at his own boots. “You can have your old ones back.”

“Nay,” said Jory. “Keep 'em on. I've a better idea.”

And he bent down to tug off Sir Oswain's leather boots.

“You can't steal his boots!” I protested.

“I’m not stealing. I’m borrowing. He’s not using them.”

When he’d stomped his newly shod feet a few times and admired his footwear, he took hold of Sir Oswain’s arms and heaved him up.

“Give us a hand, Jacko,” he grunted. “Right. Where are we heading?” he asked, with Sir Oswain slung across his shoulder.

“Are you sure?” I said. “He must be heavy.”

“If a good bounce don’t wake him, nothing will,” said Jory. “Lead on!”

I snatched up the supplies and led the way across the meadow, my lamp lighting our path as I followed the line of flattened grass left by Sir Oswain’s drunken trail.

The lamp soon attracted a little cloud of fluttering fireflies, which made a welcome accompaniment to our procession.

### Going Under

“This is not what I expected,” I said, eyeing the black hole in the ground, ringed with mossy stones. “Anything could be down there.” I peered into the darkness with my lamp outstretched.

“What did you expect?” said Jory, breathless from carrying Sir Oswain. “Catch his head, Jack, I’m putting him down. Weighs more than that whopper of a buck I carried home that time.”

Sir Oswain was unceremoniously dropped, Jack catching him by the shoulders so that his head did not hit the ground.

There was a soft groan from Sir Oswain, and we watched closely, hoping for a sign of his awakening.

“Think he opened his eyes,” said Jack. “Shine the light, Miss Lily.”

I obliged him. Jack knelt to lean over Sir Oswain, saying, “Can you hear me, sir? Time to wake up! My brother can’t carry you all the way to wherever we’re going.”

There was no response. Jack sat on his heels with a sigh.

“We’ll have to leave him here,” said Jory, stretching his shoulders up and down. “We don’t know what we’re going into or how long it will take. I hope your royal faerie wasn’t spinning a tricky tale to send you down holes in the ground. Unbuckle his sword, Jack. We can use it.”



“Can’t steal his sword as well as his boots,” said Jack.

“It’s not stealing, it’s borrowing.”

Jack unbuckled the wide leather belt holding the sword and sheath. “Sorry to take this from you, sir,” he said as he leaned across the prostrate body. “I’m sure you’d agree to it if you was awake and able to say so.”

“If he were awake, he wouldn’t have to say so, would he?” said Jory. “Pass me the belt, numskull.”

I made one last attempt at rousing Sir Oswain, but I could not wake him. Jory was right—we could not carry a dead weight into dark tunnels, not knowing what we might meet with, or how steep or narrow the way might be.

“I am truly sorry,” I told Sir Oswain’s unconscious form. “But if you had not been so foolish, it would not have happened.”

I tugged his cloak loose from beneath him and folded it over his chest. The air was as mild as a summer evening, but the night could grow cold. There was nothing I could do about covering his stockinged feet, however.

“Is there food in that bag?” said Jory, as I arranged Sir Oswain’s provisions at his side. “He won’t need them in that state. Pass it over, Jack.”

“He will need them when he wakes up,” I said, putting a hand on the bag. “You cannot steal a man’s food and drink— and don’t say that it’s only borrowing, for there’s no way of putting it back again once it’s in your belly!”

“I wouldn’t take a sleeping man’s victuals,” said Jack reproachfully.

“Ha!” snorted his brother. “You stole everything I owned on the way here!”

“Made it up to you now, haven’t I?” said Jack. “You said I saved your life.”

“And so you did,” said Jory. “But you pair won’t survive long in this world if you don’t look after yourselves first.”

“I don’t want to survive in a world that’s only filled with selfish people,” I argued.

“No more do I,” said Jack.

Jory muttered that we were both a pair of numskulls, but did not attempt to take Sir Oswain’s bag. “Pass the lamp, Miss Lily,” he said, squatting down to peer into the hole in the ground.

I was not going to let anyone else take hold of the lamp, lest they waste the last wish.

“ I will hold it,” I said firmly. I secured the lamp to me by threading its handle through the buckled strap of my bag so that it hung against my side.

“Can’t we just wish the lady Rose here?” said Jack, as we contemplated the black mouth of the tunnel.

The lamp showed nothing except that the walls were lined with smooth stone veined with something like pink quartz. The air rising from the gaping hole was cool with the smell of wet stone. I sensed cold magic and shivered.

“Not if she’s bound by a stronger magic than what is in this lamp,” I replied, recalling the queen’s warning of the strength of the sorceress’s power.

“If you won’t hand over the lamp,” said Jory, “you’ll have to go first to light the way.

”

This was very true. I stood on the edge of the hole, bracing myself to step into it, though everything in me was protesting that it was the utmost folly to step into a dark hole without knowing how deep the drop was or what might be down there.

I turned to Jack, saying, “When we find Rose, don’t speak to her of who she is. Let us get safely home, and then I shall tell her.”

“Who she is?” said Jory, puzzled.

“The lady Rose is Princess Rose,” said Jack eagerly. “No—” he frowned. “Not Princess Rose.”

“Elaine?” said Jory slowly. “Surely not the princess Elaine?”

“So it would seem,” I said, quelling a powerful surge of troubled thoughts and feelings. There was no time for any of that now.

I looked down again. The cold, unfriendly magic made the hairs on my arms stand on end.

My heart began to race and my head swam as all my senses protested in self-preservation.

A sudden recall of what I had seen on the map in the queen’s map room flashed into my mind.

I saw the marking of the tunnel, and beside it, I recalled another marking—that of a well.

My breath caught, and I began to say, “I’m not sure if—” and felt a shove on my back, and my words morphed into a squeal as I plummeted down.

It felt like flying. My body was weightless as it hurtled downwards, my stomach lurching.

I was ready to cry out a wish that it would stop when the free-falling ended, and a hard, slick surface touched the back of my legs.

I was now sliding rather than falling, but it was still at such a speed that I could see nothing but the blur of the lamplight streaking at my side .

The angle of my descent altered. It was less steep now, and I could see my feet ahead, instead of beneath me. Everything was slowing. I saw the glow of grey and pink-veined walls; I felt dampness beneath my legs, and cold drops fell on me from above.

I saw the shiny surface of something a little way below me— water —and a panicked thought struck me that I was in trouble—for I could not swim! I struggled to halt my descent, scrabbling with my feet, but the smooth surface beneath me ended and I fell, flailing, into the water.

It was a short fall, and I quickly surfaced, gasping, my mouth full of water, my limbs thrashing, and my ears filling with a horrible sound—an unearthly shriek that echoed over and over, as though there were a horde of shrieking creatures I could not see.

Shadows filled my vision, and the shriek grew louder—it was not a horde of creatures shrieking, but a reverberating echo from something dark now hurtling over my head to land with a splash beside me in the water.

“Miss Lily!” gasped a voice. “Are you hurt?”

“Jack!” I gasped back, flailing wildly and expecting to sink at any moment. “Can you swim?” I reached for him, instinctively seeking something to hold onto.

“No! Can you?” Jack reached likewise for me, and we succeeded in dragging one another under the water.

I fumbled for my lamp—it was time to wish us out of a watery end—but the impact of falling with my hands flailing in the air had dislodged my bag from me.

To my dismay, I knew, without touching my head, that my rose wreaths were gone.

I could hear Rose’s voice, chiding me for not weaving them securely into my hair.

Jack’s face was inches from mine, and I thought it horribly ironic that as we drowned together my last thoughts should be that he looked so funny with his unkempt hair fanning around his head like a cockerel fluffing out its neck feathers.

We clutched at one another as we sank. A shadow passed over us. Jack looked up, eyes widening, and with a jerk on my shoulder, he yanked me aside as a pair of leather-booted feet hurtled down through the water, narrowly missing us.

Water broke over me in a wave, and then I was rudely grasped under one armpit and dragged up to the surface.

There was a deal of spluttering and gasping as Jack and I struggled to empty our lungs of water and fill them with air all at the same time.

“You saved us!” gasped Jack. “Didn’t know you could swim!”

“Nor can I,” said Jory, giving us another shake. “What a pair of sapheads you are—this water’s as shallow as a puddle!”

He released us, and I saw that he was indeed standing on the floor of the lake. As my feet sank down, they touched a solid surface, but I had to stand on tiptoes and stretch my neck upwards to keep my nose from being submerged.

Jack, a few inches taller, could just lift his chin above the water.

“We’re not—” he gasped, “—as tall as you!”

I circled round on tiptoe, and spying a wreath of white roses bobbing a little way off, I lunged after it and snatched it up.

“I’ll get your red roses!” called Jack, and a deal of splashing ensued as he recovered my sister’s wreath.

“Can’t lose the lady Rose’s magical flowers,” said Jack, setting the wreath on my head and jamming it down to secure it so that my vision was obscured by petals.

By jumping a little, I could lift my mouth above the water and gasp out,

“Bag! Lamp!”

“I’ll find it!” Jack promised, turning round in an ungainly fashion that caused little waves to smack me in the face and flood my nose with water.

“I can see the lamp,” Jory called. “It’s under the water, there.” He ducked down.

Jack and I waited for him to reappear.

“Kick your feet, Miss Lily,” said Jack. “And flap your hands like this—it makes you float up a bit!”

I kicked and flapped, watching for Jory's head to pop up like an otter.

"Where is he?" said Jack when no head appeared.

"Can you see the lamplight under the water?" I asked.

Jack turned to face me, and I spluttered as he made little ripples slap my face again.

"I'll look—" said Jack, and then yelped with surprise as his head vanished under the water.

"Jack!" I called, spitting out water. "Jack!"

Something brushed against my legs. I kicked harder.

"Stop... fooling... about," I gasped, trying to shake Jack's hand from my foot, while searching the surface anxiously for Jory.

There was a yank on my leg—from a grasp too hard and sharp to be the hand of Jory or Jack.

I made a watery cry of alarm as I was dragged under the water for the final time.

### Perils Beneath

My lungs were burning. On and on I was dragged.

“It’s drowning ,” a harsh voice said. I could see nothing. My vision darkened.

“It’s only a mortal girl,” said a second voice. “Let it drown.”

“It’s marked,” said the first voice. “The queen’s mark. Best not let it drown just yet.”

“Very well,” growled the second voice, and my head was yanked back.

Something cold pressed against my mouth, and a rush of icy air filled my lungs, driving away the burning, and clearing the stars in my vision. I exhaled, flooded with relief to realise I could breathe again, though my mind struggled to grasp how I could be breathing while water flowed over my face.

Something cold now pressed upon my eyes. I opened them, and shuddered.

Black eyes, devoid of compassion, regarded me. I stared back, noting the translucent skin, the long, snaking hair, the suggestion of a womanly form, until the place where legs ought to be showed the scales of a fish.

What had I read of mermaids? One thing I remembered—they feasted on the souls of men.

“Where are my—?” I caught myself just in time. I must not refer to Jack and Jory as



companions. “Where are my servants?” I demanded, stifling my fear for the brothers’ fate.

The mermaids regarded me with their cold, black eyes. I forced myself to glare back at them and not betray the revulsion I felt at their razor-sharp teeth, like monstrous pikes, their bloodless lips, and the two dark cavities where a nose ought to be.

“Release my servants, and do not hinder a Daughter of the Rose,” I said, striving to sound haughty, though my voice sounded strange underwater.

Their eyes strayed to my rose wreaths, and I forgave Jack for jamming them so tightly onto my head. They regarded me for long, cold moments, and I steeled myself to meet their icy stares and not look away.

“Shall we take it to Merharion?” said one mermaid.

“It is of no use to us. Let us take it,” agreed the other, and I was grasped by the arms and propelled through the water again.

At first glance the cavern of pearly walls held a vast shoal of enormous fish, gliding and twisting in ever-moving patterns. It was no shoal of fish, but a circling court of mermaids that parted to make a passage for me and my captors. I felt countless black eyes watching me pass by.

The queen of the underwater kingdom held a tall sceptre of narwhal tusk. I made a bow as best I could whilst treading water to keep from sinking, for the water was deep. I could swim and stay upright with ease now that I held the breath of a mermaid in my lungs.

“What is this?” said the mermaid queen, indicating with a lift of her sceptre that I was to be brought nearer.

“Another mortal, Merharion,” said one of my captors, yanking me forward. “Only a girl.”

“It says the others are its servants,” said my other captor. “It has a mark on it.” She pointed to my forehead. “It says it is a Rose Daughter.”

“Did the south queen send you?” demanded Merharion.

I took a risk, for I did not know what the relations were between this mer ruler and the above-ground queen. I gambled on the likelihood that this Merharion was among the subjects of the queen.

“I am under the protection of Her Highness,” I declared. “As are my servants,” here I glanced about, anxious to see the brothers. “She bids all her subjects to aid us in our quest to recover the Daughter of the Red Rose, who is held captive in the house of Amara.”

There was a hissing and a gnashing of teeth at my words, and I quailed inwardly, for I did not know if they were hissing disdain for the faerie queen or at the name of Amara.

“How shall you recover this Red Rose Daughter?” said Merharion, looking me up and down. “Have you magic stronger than a sorceress who has strengthened herself by dark ways?”

“I will restore the Red Rose Daughter her crown, and we shall make our escape. ”

There was a ripple of cold mirth from the circle of the court.

“I perceive you are as unwise as all other mortals,” said Merharion. “Your crown only protects you while you are in the kingdom of the queen. That Amara”—she

hissed the name as though it were abhorrent to speak it—“has declared her island her own kingdom and gives no allegiance to the queen.”

“Then she is a traitor,” I replied, “and must be made to acknowledge the authority of the queen.”

Another ripple of icy laughter.

“Will you help me?” I said boldly.

“Why should I? If I let you go your way, I have fulfilled my allegiance. But you will perish, just as all who attempt to traverse the island moat.”

“If the Rose Daughter is not recovered, she shall be wed to the dwarf lord, and he will take the throne of the Westshires of Albion. The border will lie unprotected. Greedy men shall pass into Faerie, seeking its treasures and usurping kingdoms. Even underwater kingdoms shall not be safe once man and dwarf conspire together in craft and new weaponry, and in mingling their races.”

“Who is this Red Rose Daughter that she should give the dwarf lord the right to rule in mortal lands?”

“She is the lost daughter of our king, and the last living heir to the throne.”

Merharion’s hair was a glittering grey, its tendrils like countless eels swaying in the current. When she tilted her head, as she did now, her hair rippled and shimmered.

“I fear no mortal men,” said Merharion, showing her pointed teeth.

“But if the border were no more,” I argued, “they would come in their boats with great nets and hooks. You would be confined to your hidden caves. You would not

have the liberty of the waters as you do now.”

All the while I stood before the merqueen, I continued glancing about for any sign of Jack and Jory, my concern for them rising.

“What do you want, Rose Daughter?” said the merqueen, flicking her head again so that it seemed as if a swarm of eels were about to engulf me.

“Give me my servants, and tell me how to get onto the island.”

“That is two requests.”

“The second is a request for your assistance. The first is my right to what is mine.”

The merqueen was before me in a flash, her teeth snapping in my face as she said, “What trespasses in my domain is mine .”

The mermaids hissed, echoing their queen’s displeasure.

“I did not consider it a trespass to seek the aid of one loyal to the queen, Your Highness,” I said, quelling the urge to draw back from the row of knife-like teeth so close to my face. “If it were a small matter, I would not have troubled you. But this is a matter that threatens us all.”

“You speak as smoothly as a sea serpent, mortal girl,” said the merqueen.

I was not sure if that was a compliment or otherwise, but she withdrew from me, and my heart ceased hammering in my chest.

“Bring them!” ordered Merharion. There was a confusion of figures and flashing scales, and two dark-haired heads appeared out of the crowd .

I feigned coolness towards my ‘servants’, when in truth, I was flooded with relief to see them alive.

“They will not wish to leave us,” said the mermaid, holding onto Jory’s sleeve.

She wore the glamour of a beautiful maiden, her straggling seaweed hair now silky smooth, her face adorned with soft lips, a perfect nose, and black eyes that appeared green and lash-rimmed.

Only her razor-sharp teeth remained beneath the coral-red lips. Jory gazed at her, entranced.

“You do not wish to leave, do you?” crooned the mermaid. She sang a strange, high melody without parting her lips wide enough for her teeth to be seen.

“Never,” said Jory, his eyes aflame with longing.

Jack fared no better. His captor hummed a tune to him, and he grinned inanely, mesmerised.

“Shall you leave me?” said his siren.

“Never,” breathed Jack. “I shall marry you and stay here forever.”

The mermaid laughed. I heard the cold edge to the laugh beneath the silvery ripple of the glamour, but Jack grinned slavishly.

“Release them,” ordered Merharion.

The two mermaids obeyed, dropping their glammers. The brothers’ expressions turned to horror.

“What a pity,” hissed Jack’s paramour, showing all her teeth. The mermaids laughed. The brothers were shoved towards me, and I snatched them to my side, saying, “How quick you are to transfer your allegiance!”

They were too shaken to answer, and I felt pity for Jack as he shivered beside me, but I could not show compassion in the company of these cold-blooded fae. They would despise me for it.

There was a golden glow, which shone very yellow among the cold colours of the merqueen’s cavern, and I was glad to see my bag with the faerie lantern still shining from the strap.

“A royal lamp,” remarked Merharion as the bag was thrust at me. She averted her eyes as though the light was unpleasant to her. “Give them tails,” she ordered, and three mermaid tails, like garments made of fish scales, were given to each of us.

Jack recoiled and would not touch it.

“Swim to the island with your ugly mortal legs if you choose,” hissed the mermaid who brought the tails, “but the draig shall bite them off.” She twined around his legs and snapped her teeth.

Jory hastened to pull his tail over his legs, but Jack was not so easily persuaded. “Is there no other way?” he said, eyeing the scales with fear. “Don’t want to be left a merman,” he confided to me, glancing nervously at the mermaid whose glamour he had fallen for.

“You had best put it on,” I replied, tugging the tail up over my legs and trying not to show my alarm at the odd sensation of feeling my lower body tingling with cold magic.

“Could I not put on a turtle shell or something?” begged Jack.

“Let him,” said a mermaid. “The draig is partial to turtle.”

More laughter.

“Put it on, Jacko,” urged Jory, “and let’s get out of here. So, whose was this?” said Jory as he flicked out his tail. “Where are all the mermen?”

“Keeping out of our way,” said a mermaid with a horrible smile. “Would you like to stay and be our merman?” She began to manifest her glamour .

“No, he does not,” I said, grabbing hold of his arm.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:36 am*

“We could play games,” said another mermaid, swimming up and shimmering with glamour. “You would like our games.”

“No, he would not,” I said, urging Jory away, out of reach of her seductive voice.

“But I think I would,” argued Jory, tugging free of my grasp, his eyes glazing as they sought out the siren who was winding a tendril of his hair round her finger.

“Tell him what you would do to him when you had finished playing with him,” I said to the siren, as we tugged Jory between us—she holding one arm as I grasped the other.

She grinned, showing her pointy teeth beneath her sensuous lips. Jory blinked at the sight of those teeth, the enchantment loosening its hold on him. “We would...” she said silkily, putting her face close to his, “eat him.”

She leered, dropping her glamour, and a chorus of laughter followed as he cried out, “Aargh !” yanking his arm free of her grasp to swim frantically away, calling to Jack, “Let’s go !”

Jack was having his own altercation, for on wriggling his new lower limb to test it out, he had shot forward, straight into a mermaid’s shoulder.

He howled in pain as the furious mermaid whirled round and struck him a blow on the face, leaving three angry welts on his cheek from her talon-like fingers.

“Which way is the island?” I asked, anxious to be gone from this perilous cavern.



“That way,” said one mermaid, pointing upwards.

“No, this way,” beckoned another.

“Over here,” called another.

“I have no time for your games,” I said, quelling my alarm as they began circling me at a dizzying speed, and I lost sight of Jack and Jory.

“Let them go,” ordered Merharion. “Lead them to the island. Close the gates behind them, lest Amara send trouble to avenge us for aiding them. Take them quickly, for they will not last long in those waters.”

“This way,” hissed a mermaid as she swam past me.

We passed under a waterfall whose violent cascade hurled us into somersaults that our inexperienced swimming skills could not escape. The two mermaids ahead, and the one following behind, had to snatch us free of the eddy, and tow us onward, their clawed fingers sharp and painful on our arms.

We swam through tunnels, passing in and out of caverns, our guides yanking us to safety as we nearly impaled ourselves on sword-like stalagmites in one cave and were almost blinded by squid ink in another.

Finally we reached tall, broad gates that glowed like mother-of-pearl by the light of my lamp but were solid as iron. It took two mermaids to tug back the bolt, and we were ushered impatiently through them, out of the caverns and into the moat surrounding Amara’s island.

Though I felt no cold in my legs beneath my tail, my upper body began to shiver as soon as we entered the waters on the other side. They were very black and very cold.

Jack chattered with cold as he drew closer to me, hoping to share the light of my lamp in the deep gloom.

“We must stay together,” said Jory. “You go in the middle,” he told me, and we all linked arms.

“Turn off your lamp,” ordered one of the mermaids.

“I cannot,” I said. I was not going to use up my last wish to extinguish it .

“The draig will find you in no time if you don’t,” hissed the mermaid.

“Put it in your sack,” said Jory.

I did so, the mermaids berating me for wasting time as my cold fingers fumbled to undo straps and ties. The lamp still glowed faintly through the sack, so we put my sack inside Jack’s, and no light shone through.

It was horribly dark now. “We cannot see a thing,” I said through chattering teeth. “You will have to steer us.”

There was more cursing of mortals by our guides, and we were shoved from behind as they urged us on, gripping the backs of our collars and propelling us forward, hissing that we must swim harder if we did not want to perish from the cold, and ordering us to silence if we did not wish to attract the attention of the draig .

A dark enchantment lurked in the icy waters. I sensed despair and fear surrounding a malevolent presence. I felt doomed. I was sure this was how my life would end—consumed by some foul creature of the deep.

I would die, and Rose would suffer a fate worse than death, married off to an ugly

dwarf, for dwarves were always very ugly and liked to live underground.

Poor Rose would pine away in a cavern, if she were not pining in a sorceress's dungeon already.

Mother would never know what had happened to me.

She would be left alone and grow old and uncared for in our cottage, and the whole kingdom would sink under tyranny—the mortal inhabitants enslaved and displaced by the rule of the Black Rock dwarves.

And I would never see Beran again. My dearest friend since childhood. My only friend, excepting Rose. And I would never unravel the mystery of where he went when he left us, or who it was that bound his limbs in fetters and chains.

The gloom deepened, and it was something of a relief when my terror was gradually dulled by the sensation of cold. Perhaps I would not die in the jaws of a draig , but by freezing.

“ Wake up !” Something slapped my face.

I struggled to open my eyes. The cold was lulling me to sleep, and I did not want to fight it.

“We're almost there. Wake up!” More slaps, and I was shaken violently until I murmured a protest.

“ G-get m-me out of this c-cold ,” I heard Jory say weakly.

“Mortals are so flimsy ,” said a mermaid in disgust.

“ Hush ,” hissed another. “It’s passing beneath us. Let it go by, then we’ll toss them up.”

The feeling of doom reawakened. I knew the creature was close, and though I had always disdained my sister when she squealed at a mere rat or fire lizard, now I wanted only to scream.

A cold hand with sharp nails clamped over my mouth, and a voice hissed in my ear, “ Not a sound, or it will drag you down .”

This did not allay my terror—what was that thing gliding beneath our feet?

Even in the inky water, I could make out a darker shape snaking in the depths. Jack whimpered, and the slithering shadow paused. It was listening.

We all held our breath, not daring to move. Even our shivering ceased for a long, tormented moment as we waited to see if the creature would move on, or if our doom had come.

It moved on, and the terror abated enough for the shivering to return .

“ Throw them up !” hissed a mermaid, and we were propelled upwards. My head broke the surface of the moat water, and I gasped as my lungs filled with air once again.

“ Quick !” urged the mermaid behind me, and my shoulder hit something hard.

“ Hurry ! Climb, fool !” And the mermaid tail was yanked from my legs.

My mind was so disordered from fear, and my lungs burned as they struggled to adjust to breathing air again.

My numbed hands would not work properly.

I was shoved up against a wall of stone, and there were metal rungs in the wall, and if I could only grasp them, I could pull myself up and escape that undulating, monstrous shadow gathering speed as it turned back towards us.

It took every last drop of my will and strength to grasp the rung above me and heave myself upwards.

“Hurry !” cried a voice behind me.

Jack’s terrified face appeared below as he was tossed against the wall. I saw a row of wickedly sharp fins break the surface of the black water—an arcing row that grew and grew—how long was that monster?

Two rungs more, then I scrambled frantically onto the stone paving at the top, with Jack right behind me, giving me a shove to help me over.

We heard Jory yell, and Jack looked down and yelled his brother’s name.

Jory clung to the lowest rung, but the water beneath him churned like a boiling cauldron as something dark and deadly swarmed after him.

“Take my hand !” yelled Jack, flinging his body over the edge of the paving.

I lunged after him to grab hold of his waist and keep him from being dragged over. My hands were so numb that I had little strength to hold on—I was losing my grip. His shirt began to tear, so I grabbed at his belt instead and held on with sheer will.

“Jory !” yelled Jack, pulling on his brother’s hands as I pulled on Jack’s waist.

The creature had hold of Jory's legs. He would surely lose them.

I cried out a wish for Jory to live—but my lamp would not grant it while it jostled inside the sacks on my back.

We were inching across the stone paving towards the water. Jory would be devoured first, and then Jack would tumble into the jaws now snapping at his brother, and then I would slither over the edge to share their fate.

I felt Jack give a last desperate tug, a final cry of effort, and suddenly Jory's head appeared as he hurtled upwards and onto the paving, where he sprawled, panting and gasping for air.

“Ha !” he said, a manic note of triumph in his voice when he could speak. “Another close one !”

“You're hurt!” I said, noticing a gash on his left leg.

Jory looked down and winced as he lifted back the tattered fabric to see the wound. “Just a graze,” he said bravely. “It took hold of the end of that fish tail and pulled it clean off.”

“Along with your boots,” said Jack. “At least you still have your belt and sword.” He sniffed the air. “And you don't smell of bog anymore.”

I shuddered to think how close Jory had come to being lost to us again. The shudder went unnoticed, masked by the violent trembling that wracked all our bodies. The night air was warmer than the icy water below, but we were chilled to the bone .

“Let's get going,” said Jory, clambering unsteadily to his feet. “Pity we couldn't keep the tails,” he added. “They'd be worth a fortune back home.”

“I hate mermaids,” said Jack grimly, struggling to stand. “Never want to see one again as long as I live. Hate sea monsters. Hate Faerie.”

I left my lamp in my sack. The silvery glow of moon and stars was enough to light our way, and I dared not risk drawing attention.

“How big the moon is in Faerie,” murmured Jack.

“I wonder where Rose is,” I said, turning to look up at the stone walls of Amara’s house.

It was more castle than house. Jagged turrets pierced the starlit sky. I hoped we would not have to search high and low for her, for exhaustion was now pressing on me like a leaden weight. My lungs still burned, and my legs did not feel altogether my own.

Jack tugged down his sopping jerkin. “We are coming, my lady. Hold on.”

“But what is coming for us, I wonder?” muttered Jory as we set off.

### Spellbound

“ ’Tis very quiet,” whispered Jack.

“Too quiet,” said Jory, who was limping but insisted he was fine.

We were a miserable trio—wet, cold, and exhausted—as we trudged into further unknown dangers. But no one challenged us as we crossed a stone courtyard, hastening to reach the shadow of the walls, for we felt exposed in the open air.

There were no guards in the inner courtyard. There was only the sound of my wet shoes and Jack’s boots slapping on the stone floors. It was an eerie quiet.

“Got goosebumps on my goosebumps,” whispered Jack as we halted before a set of stone archways, wondering which way to take.

I perceived a gleam beyond the middle archway, so we agreed to see where the light was coming from.

“Bet the poor lady Rose is in a dark dungeon,” mourned Jack. “Hold on, my lady. We’re coming.”

The dim light came from the slit windows of a long building, like that of a banqueting hall.

I was surprised to find the stout, studded entrance door unlocked.



If it were not for the soft light I would have concluded that the whole place was empty or abandoned.

I saw flickering movements and shapes out of the corners of my eye, but when I turned to look, there was nothing there.

Or at least, nothing visible. Jack glanced furtively about, as though he too saw shadowy things.

“Where’s the guards?” said Jack, echoing my thoughts.

“Could be a trap,” said Jory. “Let me go first. I’m the only one armed.” He put his hand on the hilt of Sir Oswain’s sword.

“I think that monster in the moat is the only trap and guardian,” I said. “I don’t sense an enchantment out here.” I did not speak of the shadows I half saw.

“Well, we’re about to find out,” said Jory, pushing open the door. The creak of the hinges sounded dreadful in the still of the night. We all winced.

A dark hallway of panelled wood stretched before us. We tiptoed along, Jory in front with his sword unsheathed, and Jack and I close together, still shivering from cold, and uncertainty.

“Shall I get the lamp out?” I whispered.

Jory did not answer. He was listening hard at another door.

“You hear something?” whispered Jack.

Jory nodded.

“The enchantress?” whispered Jack.

Jory nodded again.

“Is she speaking curses?” said Jack.

Jory shook his head. “Singing.”

“Chanting spells?”

“No. Singing.” He listened hard for a moment, his face puzzled .

“Singing what?” I asked.

“Sounds like... a ballad.”

“Be careful,” I said. “It may be a siren song. Let me listen. You had no resistance to mermaids.”

I pressed my ear to the door. He was right. A woman’s voice was singing a sentimental song about a beautiful girl and her princely true love. I knew that song. And I knew that voice. I reached for the bolt on the door.

“What are you doing?” hissed Jory. “There’s a sorceress in there!”

“It’s Rose!”

I drew back the bolt, but the door would not open.

“Wait,” said Jory, and he stretched his arm over my head to reach another bolt higher up. He hesitated. “Are you sure it’s her?”

“Quite sure.”

“I hope so,” he murmured. He drew back the bolt, and the door opened. “Let me go first,” he said, trying to hold me back, but I would not wait. No one in the world knew that song except Rose and me, for she had made it up when we were children.

“It might be a trap!” warned Jory, grabbing my arm. “The sorceress might be with her, waiting for us.”

“I’ll peep in,” I said, and slipped inside.

It was a lengthy hall with wood-panelled walls, a long table, and many chairs.

The table was spread with bowls and platters of food.

The walls were draped with woven hangings, and a vast fireplace housed a brazier with a burning log the size of a small tree.

A branch of candles at either end of the table provided the only other light.

Silhouetted against the orange firelight moved a slender figure with long, dark hair.

She was turning in circles, her arms lifted as she sang .

“Rose!” I called, so relieved to see her. “Rose!”

She saw me and continued turning, making dance steps. “Lily. Is that you? Come and join the ball. Is this not delightful?”

“Ball?” said Jack, appearing at my side. “My lady Rose! We’ve come to rescue you!”

She twirled up the length of the table, her steps light and graceful. “Rescue?” she said laughingly, though her laugh was shrill and unnatural. “From what? Come and dance.”

Jack stared as she continued her dance around the table.

“She’s gone mad,” said Jory, watching her.

“She’s enchanted,” I said. I took the wreaths from my head, disentangling my hair from the stems until I had worked the wreath of red roses free.

“Come and eat,” called Rose, who had reached the top of the table and was now spinning round, moving nearer.

“I’m famished,” groaned Jack, noticing the platters and bowls for the first time.

“Don’t touch anything , Jack,” I said quickly. “Unless you want to dance yourself to death.”

As Rose drew near, I could see the bespelled glitter of her eyes and the dark hollows beneath them.

“Oh, Rose!” I said. “How long has that witch had you dancing in circles?”

She smiled, but it was the smile of a marionette. I grasped her arm as she twirled past me, but she was unable to keep from moving.

“Dancing is delightful,” she said. “Why would I ever want to stop?”

“Hold her!” I called to Jack and Jory. They lunged after her, taking hold of her arms, Jack apologising profusely for daring to lay hands upon her.

“It’s impossible!” said Jory, his face showing the strain of trying to still an enchanted dancer.

I darted between them, jamming the wreath on Rose’s hair. The effect was instantaneous. Rose staggered backward, crumpling like a ragdoll into my arms as I caught her to break her fall.

“Oh, Lily,” she said confusedly. “What happened? Where am I?”

“There’s no time to explain. We must leave.”

“I feel so sick,” moaned Rose, sinking onto the floorboards. “Everything hurts so.”

“No wonder. You’ve been dancing like a demented faerie.”

“My throat hurts,” she rasped. “There was a woman,” she said confusedly.

“A witch. I’m sure she was a witch.” She held her head as though trying to regain her memory.

“She had the most horrible carriage, such hideous horse-creatures.” Rose shivered.

“You are sopping wet,” she said, lifting her head from the wet sleeve of my gown.

“Did she hurt you, my lady?” said Jack, full of concern. “Can I do aught for you?”

Rose blinked up at him as though noticing him for the first time. “Jack. What happened to your face?”

Jack put a hand to the welts on his cheek and winced. “ ’Tis nothing, my lady. Only a graze.”

At the far end of the hall, Jory found a door hidden under a tapestry, but it would not open. “Must be bolted on the other side,” he called.

“Then we’ll have to go out the way we came,” I said.

“How will we get over the moat?” said Jack .

“We can’t,” I said, stating the obvious. “We must find the underground tunnel.”

My eye fell on something in the shadows. “What is that?”

Rose looked over. “I never noticed it before.”

It was a cage. And inside blinked a strange-looking creature, something like a small dragon, the size of a male fox, with a narrow head on a long neck. I could see nothing more of it in the dark corner.

“Careful, Miss Lily,” advised Jack. “Might be a fire-breather or something nasty.”

“It would have burned its way out of its cage if it were fire-breathing,” I said. Rose was sitting up now, and I left her a moment, feeling drawn to the strange creature. I knelt down to peer through the wooden bars. “It looks sad,” I murmured.

A pair of orange, glowing eyes looked back at me, and it made a raspy noise, like a sigh. A little puff of red smoke came out with the sigh, but there was no sulphurous smell or heat. I felt sorry for the creature, ugly though it was.

“What was that?” said Jory, alarmed.

I had heard the noise too—a clanging sound.

“It’s the drawbridge!” said Rose. “It’s her. She’s come back!”

“The sorceress?” said Jack, his face paling, causing the red welts on his cheek to look even more garish.

There was a shout of alarm from Jory as the door he had been unable to unbolt now flew wide, forcibly flung open by someone on the other side. Jory staggered back but recovered himself, shouting to us—“ Run !”—before he rushed at the dark doorway with his sword raised.

“I don’t think I can run,” said Rose, struggling to rise.

Jack and I flew to assist her, though I knew it was likely a hopeless flight for all of us if the sorceress had arrived. Jory’s short sword was no match for dark magic.

Jory yelled out a shrill, warlike cry. A responding shout came from his assailant, followed by a great thump. Jack cried out—“ Jory !”—thrust Rose at me, and ran to the aid of his brother.

But the second shout I heard had not been a woman’s voice—unless the sorceress had a very deep voice, like a man’s.

I turned to look, but the far side of the hall lay in shadow.

One figure lay sprawled on the floor, another bent over it, while Jack hurtled himself across the room, shouting, “ Leave him alone !”

And then the bent figure straightened, and Jack skidded to a halt, crying out, “ You !”

Suddenly I understood, and I whirled Rose about, hurrying her to the end of the hall, saying, “It’s Sir Oswain!”

Jack was trying unsuccessfully to pull his brother up from where he lay, for Sir Oswain had dealt him a blow to the face.

“My apologies,” said Sir Oswain, not sounding terribly sorry. “I thought you a henchman flying at me with a sword— my sword! And where are my boots ?”

“In the belly of a monster,” said Jory. He groaned. “You pulled my cork.” He gingerly felt his bloodied nose.

“My lady!” cried Sir Oswain, spying Rose and me. “How glad I am to see you unscathed!”

“ Oh !” was all Rose could say in a soft gasp, before she swooned into Sir Oswain’s arms.

“How did you get here?” I cried.

“Through the tunnel,” said Sir Oswain. “How else?” He glanced around at us. “You are dripping wet. How did you get here? ”

“Through the tunnel,” said Jack. “Didn’t you go through the mermaids’ cave?”

“Mermaids?” Sir Oswain looked incredulous. “Did you fall down the well?”

“The well?” Jory groaned.

“You mean,” said Jack, “we went through all that for naught?”

“Never mind,” I said impatiently. “The sorceress is coming, and we must leave now . Sir Oswain, lead the way!”



“She’ll follow us,” cried Jack.

“Run ahead,” urged Jory, clambering to his feet with another groan and wiping his nose on his wet sleeve. “I’ll slow the witch down.”

“How will you do that?” I asked. But I could soon see what his plan was. He picked up the nearest candlestick and held it to a tapestry.

“Help your sister,” urged Jory. “Jack—light the tapestry at the other end. Quick!”

I turned to follow Sir Oswain and Rose, but halted at the door, looking back.

The tapestries were kindled. Jory threw a wooden chair on the fireplace so it would catch alight, and strewed chairs in a line to the table. The whole room, with its hangings and wood panelling and furniture, would be ablaze in no time.

“Miss Lily!” called Sir Oswain as I darted away from him, back across the room to the cage.

“What are you doing?” called Jory. “Leave it! It’s some foul creature!”

But I looked into the eyes of the creature, and I knew I could not leave it to perish in the fire .

“You don’t know what you’re unleashing!” warned Jory, panting from the exertion of throwing chairs.

I pulled out the lynchpin on the cage door. The creature rushed forward, unfurling a pair of wings, flapping them, and flying out of the door after Sir Oswain and Rose.

“Run, Miss Lily!” begged Jack, and I ran. We left the room, Jack bolting the door

behind us.

### The Last Wish

“Where is this tunnel?” Jory was limping badly. He claimed to be fine, but after traversing the uneven ground for some time, he gave in and accepted Jack’s help, leaning hard on his younger brother.

“It is hard to see now the moon’s behind clouds,” said Sir Oswain over his shoulder. “Look for a pile of rocks. I had the deuce of a time dislodging them from the entrance.”

“Won’t the witch come after us?” fretted Jack, glancing back. “She must know where we’re going.”

“The tunnel is in the realm of the queen,” I said. “We’ll be safe when we reach it.” I forced myself to sound more confident than I felt.

“If we reach it,” muttered Jory.

“That dragon creature’s still here,” said Jack as the dark shape flitted ahead of us.

“It’s done no harm,” I said. “I think it may be leading us.”

I retrieved my lamp. Its soft, silvery light revealed a barren stretch of land, with the occasional crop of rocks and the odd gnarled and twisty tree; Amara’s castle was behind us.

It was a still, mild night, and a thin column of smoke rose vertically from the north

side of the castle where the banqueting hall had stood.

I wondered what Amara was doing, and how much time we had before she realised Rose was not in the burning hall and came searching for her.

We came to a fork in the path, and Sir Oswain hesitated, hitching Rose up as though his arms were growing weary.

“Can we catch our breath a minute?” gasped Jack, struggling under Jory’s weight.

A long, piercing shriek rent the air, sending a ripple of fear through us all.

“The witch,” breathed Jack.

No one needed urging to hurry. Sir Oswain turned to the right-hand path, but I saw the flying creature take the left, then alight on a rock, turning as though waiting for us to follow.

“Go left,” I said, trusting my instinct. It had never failed me before where creatures were concerned. Mother always said I had the same gift she did—a strong sympathy with living things.

Sir Oswain hesitated. Rose stirred in his arms, murmuring, “Am I too heavy? I will try to walk.”

Sir Oswain clutched her closer. “Not till we are out of danger, my lady. You weigh nothing. It is only my feet that are the problem.”

“Your feet?” said Rose weakly.

“I lost my boots. The ground is stony here.”

He threw an uncertain look at the dragon creature and then said, "This way!" And we turned left .

"Is it the right way?" asked Jack worriedly. "My brother's getting heavier. I think he's mortal bad."

"I believe so," said Sir Oswain, though with a hesitant note. "Though all looks the same."

We came to another fork in the path. "Follow the dragon-thing," I urged, lifting my lamp to see the creature bounding over rocks, pausing to wait for us at intervals.

"I'll follow it!" I said impatiently, when Sir Oswain hesitated a second time. "Wait here if you want!"

I ran after the creature, lifting my lamp to track its progress. I did not have to run far before it alighted on a small mound of rocks and flapped its wings triumphantly. Drawing closer, I saw an opening like the mouth of a cave.

"I knew you were helping," I said, and I ran back a few yards, waving my lamp and calling, "Over here! I've found it!"

Sir Oswain gave a little laugh of relief. "That is it! See the rocks I had to dislodge to get out? The entrance was blocked up this side."

I ushered them all inside, noting the sweat beading on Jory's face, while Jack looked awful with three angry welts marring his cheek.

"Go ahead and light the way," said Sir Oswain once we were inside.

"Shall we have to crawl?" Rose asked anxiously.

“Do not fear, my lady,” said Sir Oswain. “We can walk upright most of the way.”

“How long is it?” asked Jack.

“Not far. A league or two.”

Jory groaned.

“You cannot carry me so far,” said Rose. “I must try to walk. Put me down, sir. ”

I looked back at my weary companions. Everyone, myself included, was exhausted and ragged.

“Have you any food, Sir Oswain?” I asked. “Ours did not survive in the water.”

“I have a little.”

“I’m starving,” groaned Jack at the mention of food.

The food was shared around. It was not much, but even a few mouthfuls were welcome.

Sir Oswain tried to give all his to Rose, but she insisted he eat his portion.

The dragon creature drew near to me, eyeing the bread in my hand.

I threw half my piece to it, and it caught it mid-air, swallowing it in one gulp, as though ravenous.

“Glad to see it eats bread,” said Sir Oswain, eyeing the creature warily. “And not mortal flesh.”

The fae bread revived us, even if there was not enough to satisfy our hunger. We agreed that it was imperative to press on. The farther we were from Amara's stolen isle, the safer we felt. No one wanted to discuss what would happen next. It was too much to think about in our present state.

We laboured onwards, Jory and Rose limping, Jack and I supporting Jory, while Sir Oswain half-carried Rose.

The strange creature skipped ahead, looking back with glowing amber eyes as though urging us on.

I noticed distractedly that when it neared the rosy veins in the tunnel walls, its grey skin blushed pink, but perhaps it was only a trick of the lamplight.

It was still dark when we emerged from the tunnel. Judging by the sky, there were a couple of hours remaining until sunrise.

"I cannot go any farther without rest," said Rose, sinking gracefully to the grassy meadow floor. She had chosen the spot where we had left Sir Oswain sleeping, the grass still flattened where he had lain.

"Allow me, my lady!" Sir Oswain hurried to lay his cloak for her to lie on. "Permit me to cover you with my coat," he begged, shrugging it off.

"But you will be cold, sir," she protested, her eyes already closing. "I feel I have not slept for days... dancing..." Her voice slurred as she drifted into an exhausted slumber. Stirring briefly, she murmured anxiously, "Lily?"

"Yes?" I bent near her.

She tried to open her eyes to look at me but could only manage a squint.

“What is it?” I asked, as her hand clutched at mine, as though what she wanted to tell me was of vital importance. I bent nearer so she could speak in my ear.

“Don’t...” she whispered urgently, “...let me snore.”

Jory lay a short distance from Rose, clearly in pain and asking for a drop of sap from the meadow grass.

“You can’t drink that!” I said. “You saw what it did to Sir Oswain!”

“Just a smidgeon, to dull the pain so I can sleep,” begged Jory.

“But it will make you run round like a moonstruck loon,” said Jack. “That won’t do your leg no good.”

Jory could not argue with this and closed his eyes with a groan.

I considered if now was the time to use my last wish to heal Jory’s wound. But when I suggested this, Sir Oswain pointed out that Jory was now asleep, though it was an uneasy slumber. He urged me to lie next to Rose and rest a while.

“I will stand watch,” he promised.

I did not need to be asked twice. Like Rose, I could barely keep my eyes open.

My clothes were still uncomfortably damp.

If only there were trees or shrubs about, we could have kindled a fire; but there was nothing but whispering grass.

It was a mild night, but I felt chilled and shivery.



This was not a good time to fall ill, I mused unhappily as I dropped into a heavy sleep.

I awoke to something nudging my face. For a moment I thought I was home in the attic bed I shared with my sister, and it was Rose waking me up.

But Rose lay beside me, with Sir Oswain's cloak wrapped tight about her like a cocooned butterfly, and her dark hair pooled beneath her as a pillow.

It was the scaly, grey-skinned creature nudging my cheek with its leathery snout, and not Rose.

"You are awake," said Sir Oswain, who was the only other person who appeared to be conscious.

He looked a sorry sight in his crumpled shirt and grass-stained breeches.

His feet were bare and bruised, and his face was anything but clean-shaven.

But he looked better than anyone else. Jack lay sleeping fitfully with lurid red welts marring his cheek, and Jory looked dreadful, a greenish tinge to his pale face.

"He does not look well," said Sir Oswain, seeing my dismay.

"No. That wound looks putrid."

"Looks like teeth marks," said Sir Oswain.

"It was the monster guarding the moat."

Sir Oswain grimaced.

Jack stirred at the sound of our voices. He opened his eyes sleepily, then bolted upright, his eyes going directly to his brother's wounded leg. "Oh, he's mortal bad," he said.

I felt Jory's forehead. It was feverish .

"You'll have to use the last wish," urged Jack. "If you don't, he'll die!"

"I agree he needs help urgently," I said. "But if I wish him well, that still leaves all of us unable to carry on." I plucked two roses from my wreath and began crushing them in my hands, inhaling the fragrance.

"What do you mean, carry on?" said Jack. "We'll go home as soon as he's well. We got our lady Rose back safe."

"Give me a strip of cloth," I said. "For a bandage," I added when he did not move.

"Use this," said Sir Oswain, tearing a sleeve from his arm. "But I am not going home," he said. "Not without my king's crown."

I used the crushed roses for a poultice, binding them to Jory's wound with the linen sleeve. He moaned softly as I worked, but did not wake.

"You cannot travel on without food," I said to Sir Oswain, as I tied the ends of the strips.

"Nor boots," added Jack. "And you can't drag the lady Rose off to some dwarf den."

"Certainly not," said Sir Oswain. "Her Highness will return home with her sister. As will you all. But I must journey on."

I sat back, looking with dissatisfaction at my handiwork. It was the best I could do for now. My weary mind scrambled over all the options available to us, which were not plentiful.

“The horses!” I said, standing to look towards the place where we had alighted from our faerie mounts. “I must see if they are still here.”

“I shall go,” said Sir Oswain. “You watch over Her Highness. She must not be left alone.”

“Pray, don’t call her that,” I begged, glancing back at Rose. “Not yet. It will be a shock for her. Wait till we are home.”

He agreed, and gave me his flask of water from the faerie court. “There is a little left,” he said. “I have saved it for her.” And he strode away, swishing through the long purple-tipped grass.

I had only a mouthful left in my own flask. I set my emptied flask down and almost wished aloud that I had food. This was alarming, for the lamp was hanging from the strap at my shoulder and touching my arm. I took the strap off, fearful of accidentally wishing away our last means of aid.

I walked up and down a little way, my mind busy.

If the faerie mounts had gone, then things were dire.

I would have to use the last wish wisely.

As I paced I formulated wishes in my head that would encompass all that we needed—medicine and food and drink and safe passage—how to get them all in one request?

The dragon-creature watched me, never taking its glowing eyes, like polished carnelians, from me.

Rose groaned softly, and I hurried to her.

“Lily?” she said weakly.

“I’m here. You’re safe.”

“I’m so thirsty.”

“Here, drink this.” I gave her Sir Oswain’s flask.

She drank eagerly, but it was gone too soon. “I hurt all over,” she rasped. “Especially my legs.”

“Lie down and rest some more. Sir Oswain has gone to find our horses. We shall get you to a place where there is food and drink and healing salves.”

“Everyone looks so ill,” said Rose, looking over at the brothers. “Even you. And you are never ill. ”

“We’ve all had quite a venture,” I said, trying to smile.

Rose lay down again, and I resumed my pacing, walking a little way off, looking for any sight of Sir Oswain, but all I could see was waving grass.

“Is he coming?” said Rose, sitting up and trying to smooth her hair. She took hold of my sack, peering inside.

“What are you looking for?”

“Food.”

“There is none. Put the bag down,” I said sharply, for the lamp hung from the strap, and her hand was touching it.

“I’m so hungry,” she sighed. “And so tired. How I wish I were home with a big bowl of porridge and my own bed.”

She rippled like a heatwave—and vanished.

Unravelling

Something was coming across the field, and coming quickly.

“Is that Sir Oswain?” said Jack, shielding his eyes against the rising sun.

“I hope so,” I murmured, likewise peering against the light.

“Them faerie horses run like the wind,” marvelled Jack.

“Halt!” shouted Sir Oswain. “Stop! Hie! Whoaa !”

The speeding creature slowed, then made an abrupt halt a little way from us, sending Sir Oswain flying over the head of the fae mount.

“Are you hurt?” I called, running to assist him. We did not need another injury in our party.

He lay groaning. “Wretched beast. It hates me. I miss my horse .”

Jack and I each took hold of an arm to help him to his feet. “Lucky you fell where you did,” remarked Jack. “Nice thick patch of grass there.”

I was about to ask if the other two mounts were still in the meadowlands, when, with great relief, I saw the other two creatures cantering toward us. The long meadow grass parted a pathway as though bowing down before their advance.

“The prin—lady Rose had best ride with me,” said Sir Oswain, testing his back with a wince. “Mine is the largest of the mounts. You must share with your brother,” he told Jack. Then, looking around, he frowned. “Where is the lady?”

“Gone,” said Jack. “Poof .” He mimed her sudden disappearance with his hands.

“Poof?” Sir Oswain turned to me.

“She wished herself home,” I said. “While holding the lamp. She did not know it held a wish.”

His face fell. After a moment of silence, he sighed. “It is for the best,” he said. “She is safe now. The wish could not have been better used.” Another sigh. “Still. I should have liked to say farewell. I may never set eyes on her fair face again.”

“Help me get Jory on the horse,” said Jack, gathering up his and Jory’s bags, which held only empty flagons. I gave Jack a rose from my wreath to help him and Jory with travel sickness. Only one now remained.

Sir Oswain gathered up his coat and cloak, which Rose had used as coverings. He pressed the coat to his face, but his nose wrinkled, so I concluded that it smelled only of a man in need of a wash.

We mounted with some difficulty. I suspected Sir Oswain spoke the truth when he said the creatures despised us. I looked down at my grey-scaled friend sitting on the ground, its long tail curled around its front feet as it watched us. In daylight, its scales appeared more blue than grey.

The faerie mounts showed no fear of the creature, which confirmed my suspicion that it was not a dragon, for all its appearance. I knew that dragons and royal fae did not tolerate each other well.

“I do not think your small wings will keep up with the speed of these faerie steeds,” I told it. I had assumed that once we reached the meadowlands, the creature would fly back to wherever it belonged.

“Are you ready, Miss Lily?” called Sir Oswain. His mount pawed the ground, snorting and tossing its mane.

I looked down again at the creature. It tilted its head toward me, as if waiting for an invitation.

“You are not taking that ugly reptile, are you?” asked Sir Oswain.

“I do not think it ugly,” I said, meeting the carnelian eyes of the creature. “Not anymore.”

“What will the queen say if we bring a dragon to her court?” said Jack.

“It is not a dragon,” I insisted. “Are you coming?” I patted the leather strap of my bag.

The creature flapped its wings and, in an instant, was perched on my shoulder.

“Put your tail behind my head,” I said as a scaly tail blocked my vision. “And don’t dig your claws into me. Is Jory secure?” I called to Jack.

Jack confirmed he was. “Reckon these horses have grown frisky on that purple grass,” he added, as his mount danced sideways.

I agreed. I could feel the pent-up energy in my own mount. Hopefully, it would translate into a swift return to court.



“Tell them to ride as quick as they can,” begged Jack. His brother lolled in front of him, unable to sit up unaided .

“Are you sure?” I asked. “Remember how you felt after the first journey? It will be worse if they go faster.”

“We’ve got to get help for Jory,” said Jack. “Tell them to go as fast as they can.”

I bent to my mount’s head and gave the command—“Take us by the speediest means back to your stables!”

I had not even finished the last syllable before the whole world lurched into a breathtaking blur, and we were off.

It could have been an hour, or it could have been a whole day, the fae horses ran outside all usual boundaries of time. We reached the faerie queen’s stables to be tipped unceremoniously from their backs onto a mound of hay, where we lay groaning.

I opened my eyes to find the stable master looming over us, his expression unfriendly.

“If you would...” I started weakly, then caught myself—I had been about to request a kindness from him. Instead, I closed my eyes for a moment, willing the world to stop spinning.

I opened my eyes and tried again. “Give us something for the travel sickness,” I said, attempting to make it a command, and not a plea.

He swept a disdainful look over us, but fetched a bottle of cordial, instructing me to take two drops.

I obeyed, relieved as warmth spread through me and my swirling senses began to calm.

Eventually we were all able to stand on shaky legs—except Jory, who had to be supported.

My dragon-like friend lay curled up in the hay like a sleeping cat .

“Take us to a healer,” I ordered the stable master, as Jory’s head lolled to his chest. “Quickly.”

The healing house was surrounded by climbing roses, their vines twining up crystal spirals as tall as towers.

As I passed beneath them, I felt the same quiver of magic as at home in our cottage.

And in that moment I realised the great value of our two rose bushes, and a sudden, aching homesickness gripped me.

The corridors of the healing house were quiet, save for the faint rustling of gowns and the occasional soft chime of unseen bells whose music reverberated through me in a pleasing way.

We were met by a faerie who led us up the spiralling stairs to a chamber where Jory was laid upon a couch of silvery sheets.

“Don’t cry, Miss Lily,” Jack said kindly as we were ushered out. “He’ll be as right as a trivet, you’ll see.”

I could not tell him that I was not weeping for Jory, but for myself. It seemed so selfish. I was not one for tears, and I felt bewildered and ashamed of my own

emotions, unsure what was happening to me. But still, the tears would not stop rolling down my cheeks.

“You must go,” I told him, nodding to a healing faerie who had come to tend the wounds on his face. I watched him leave.

Beside me, Sir Oswain patted his pockets. “I am sorry I have no handkerchief about me,” he said apologetically, and sniffed, as though he too needed one.

“I shall find one,” I murmured, and turned round and gave a cry of surprise—“Mother!”

“What have you been up to, Lily?” said Mother, looking me up and down .

“Rose is safe at home!” I blurted out, my tears flowing faster.

“But you are far from home,” said Mother.

I wanted to fling myself into her arms, as though I were a little girl again, but I noticed her left arm was wrapped in a shimmering bandage.

“You are hurt!”

“Just a scratch. Was that Jack going into that chamber?”

“Yes. Jory is next door. Jack has a cheek full of welts from an angry mermaid, and Jory had his leg grazed by a sea monster. How did you get here? You went out into that green fog and never came home—where were you? What happened?”

“So many questions,” said Mother. “But they must wait a little longer.” She turned to Sir Oswain. “And you? Have you escaped unscathed?”

Sir Oswain bowed respectfully. "I am well," he said, though he looked miserable.

Mother studied him closely. "You both need victuals."

Sir Oswain agreed that this was very true.

I was still weeping silently. Mother put her good arm around my shoulders.

"I don't know why I'm such a watering pot," I sniffed.

"It's because you are in a healing house."

"What has that to do with it?"

"A healing house draws all hurts to the surface."

"I don't have any hurts. I just need food and sleep."

"Do you not?"

I looked into Mother's hazel-brown eyes. They were nothing like my own. Nothing like Rose's. And I realised what was truly hurting me.

"I don't want you not to be my mother," I confessed.

The words blurted from me. "And we are going to lose Rose. She doesn't belong in a cottage.

She belongs in a palace. And Beran. I don't know where to look for him.

I fear I will never see him free." My voice was barely a whisper now. "And me,

where do I belong? Who am I?"

"Come," said Mother, steering me toward the stairs.

"Food and rest, and then you must go before the queen and tell her how you became entangled with mermaids and draigs . Then we shall have a long talk of our own. Come, Sir Oswain," she called back.

"Food, sleep, and clean handkerchiefs lie this way!"

## Page 24

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War

We ate, drank, and slept, and I awoke to find washing water and new clothes awaiting me.

I marvelled at the softness of the fabric of my new gown.

It was the colour of bluebells and shimmered as I turned it, shifting between lilac and blue.

The cloak was grey, the colour of a summer storm cloud.

The boots were light, yet strong as the thickest leather.

“The queen is expecting you,” said Mother, coming into the chamber where I had slept. “And it does not do to keep her waiting.”

She examined my appearance and must have been satisfied, for the only adjustment she made was to take up my depleted wreath and snap off the one remaining white rose, tucking the stem into my hair above my ear.

I had braided my freshly washed hair into a thick plait and secured it with a length of silvery ribbon.

“How is Jory?” I asked.

“Making a good recovery. There was poison in his wound. If you had not bound the

queen's roses onto his leg as a poultice, he would not have survived. ”

This was a sobering thought. “What a powerful creature that monster was,” I said. “If a mere graze of its teeth is enough to kill a man.”

“I doubt it will get the chance to bite anyone else,” said Mother.

“How so?”

“The queen will have to deal with it now it has attacked one under her aegis.”

“I did not realise we were under her aegis.”

“You would not have succeeded in your quest otherwise. Faerie is a dangerous place for mortals.” She tucked a stray tendril that had sprung from my braid back into place. “You are ready.”

I glanced over my scant possessions laid out on the table by the bed and saw that my wishing lamp was unlit.

“Come,” urged Mother as I picked up the lamp.

“How was this put out?” I wondered aloud. “I thought it took a wish. But I suppose the fae can wish as much as they choose.”

“It does not take a wish to put out a faerie lamp,” said Mother, a little impatiently. “It takes three taps.” She tapped it three times, and it began to shine. She tapped it again three times, and the light went out. She plucked it from me, saying, “We must go.”

“Remember,” said Mother as we neared the pavilion.

“Do not place yourself in the queen’s debt or power.

All that she has done for you is due to the oath she made to the Council to help protect the Rose Daughters.

Do not let her put you under any confession of obligation, or you could fall into servitude and never be free.

Answer her questions without guile, and say no more than you are asked.

Words are important when speaking with the fae.

I have warned Sir Oswain and young Jack to be careful and let you do the talking. ”

“Why am I a Rose Daughter?” I asked. “I am no princess.”

“It was at my request. The Council granted it, and the queen was obliged to keep her oath.”

“Why should this Council listen to you? Who are you, Mother?”

“Later, Lily. There is no time now.”

Sir Oswain and Jack awaited us at the entrance to the queen’s bower.

“Don’t we look dandy?” said Jack, stroking the beautiful tunic and cloak he wore over leather breeches. Sir Oswain was likewise finely dressed. “Look!” said Jack, lifting his right foot to show off his new boots. “Did you ever see the like? The king himself don’t have a pair as fine as this!”

Jack’s face looked improved already, and I told him so.



“They said I’d always have these scars,” said Jack, touching his cheek tenderly.

“Not many can boast of scars from a mermaid’s talons,” I said.

“Not as good as a scar from a poisonous sea monster, but ’tis still a good tale.”

“A good tale to tell your children and grandchildren,” said Sir Oswain, giving Jack’s shoulder a brotherly pat.

The queen’s bower was very beautiful. Fountains sparkled, spraying drops over flowers the size of platters.

The queen reclined on a silver daybed, eating pink berries and whipped cream and fluffy white cakes.

Beside her couch sat a grey-blue, dragon-like creature being hand-fed pieces of cake.

It hopped over, wings fluttering, to rub its leathery head against me .

“You found a margool,” said the queen when we had made our bows.

“A margool?” I said. “What is that?”

“A margool is a margool,” said the queen, licking cream from her fingers. “Now tell me what befell you since leaving my stables.”

I told her all that had happened, taking great care with my words, as Mother had counselled. The queen continued eating steadily until I got to the part where I described our setting fire to the house of Amara as we made our escape.

“You set Amara’s hall ablaze?” said the queen, her eyes gleaming.

“Yes, for we wished to delay her coming after us. In truth, I was amazed that we saw nothing of her and were able to escape unhindered.”

The queen laughed. It was not as cold a laugh as that of the mermaids, but there was a sharpness to it.

“You may thank Mother Hazel for the delay of Amara,” said the queen.

“Mother Hazel?” I said, glancing at Mother questioningly.

“She fought the sorceress for three days and nights to keep her from the island so you could make your rescue.”

I stared at Mother, but she would not look at me. Now I had many more questions. No mere cottager could restrain a sorceress for three days and nights.

The queen made a sweeping gesture, and servants glided forth to whisk away the food and table from before her. Two handmaidens appeared on either side to each take a royal hand, and the queen arose from her couch.

She was surprisingly tall, and she seemed to grow taller as she gave an order for her robes of war to be brought. We watched in fascination as the indulgent, feasting queen transformed before us into a fearsome faerie in armour so bright, it dazzled our eyes.

Gone was the languid expression, now she wore a fierce expression, and a silvery sword with a wicked point was buckled at her side. Even her voice was different, deeper and louder, as she said—“Amara shall be reduced to a hedge-witch by the time I have served her for her treachery!”

“I daresay she will have fled her island by this time,” said Mother.

“Then she shall return no more to her stolen land. And her poisonous water snake shall be fed to the hunting dogs of the king of the south!”

“What of the dwarf lord?” asked Mother.

“He shall learn his place. I have let him roam on a long leash, but I am weary of the game now.”

She turned to me, and I took a step backward as a wave of the power she had kept latent now flashed out, striking me like a northeast gale.

“Go home, Rose Daughter,” she commanded. “Take your margool as a prize, for a margool will never leave the one who has saved its life.”

She did not even glance at Sir Oswain or Jack. I was impressed with Sir Oswain’s courage as he spoke up, his voice a little shaky and his face pale, for the magic in the air was thick now that the queen had risen and was ready to advance upon those who displeased her.

“I beg your pardon, Your Highness,” said Sir Oswain, bowing low. “Permit me to go with you to the dwarf lord, that I might recover the crown for my king.”

She barely flicked a glance over him, saying, “All spoils belong to me,” and she swept from the pavilion, calling for her war horse and for her army to ride out.

“We had best keep out of the way,” said Mother, beckoning us to follow her.

We sat in an arbour on a gentle hill, watching below as faerie mounts clad in silvery armour, and faerie soldiers, taller and more fearsome than any mortal knights, assembled before their commanders and began riding away in companies.

“This day has been a long time coming,” said Mother, who was packing a bowl of a faerie-crafted pipe with fragrant dried leaves.

“Here,” she said, passing the pipe to Sir Oswain.

He took it, regarding it with some mistrust. Mother filled another and offered it to Jack, who looked pleased to be invited to partake.

“Don’t have a light,” said Jack.

Mother broke off a twig from a climbing plant and made a snapping movement with her fingers; a flame flickered at the end of the twig.

I stared. “You do have magic,” I said, a little reproachfully.

“It is easy enough with faerie wood,” said Mother dismissively. She passed the twig to Sir Oswain, who took it reluctantly.

“Will it do strange things to me?” he asked, eyeing the pipe. “I have found the juice of the grass of Faerie to be most unpleasant.”

“It will help you think clearly,” said Mother, taking her own pipe from her pocket to fill. “It may keep you from any harebrained schemes, such as riding off unarmed and alone to face a dwarf lord who will be seething with rage on finding his plots have failed. ”

Sir Oswain passed the lit twig to Jack without lighting his own pipe.

“Why didn’t you tell me about Rose?” I asked, unable to keep the note of grievance from my voice.

Mother took a while to answer, lighting her pipe in a leisurely manner, leaning back to draw meditatively on it.

She regarded me with narrowed eyes, like a sleepy cat, and blew out a stream of smoke.

Jack was trying to blow smoke rings but swallowed one and coughed violently.

Abandoning his pipe, he announced in a raspy voice that he was going down the hill to drink from one of the garden fountains.

She finally began to unravel some of the mysteries, beginning with the day Rose was taken. She had been checking the borders that morning, she said, and had heard a troublemaker was prowling about.

“Who told you?” I asked.

She shrugged. “A little bird.”

“Did you know that the troublemaker was a powerful sorceress?”

“Hah,” said Mother scornfully. “Sorceress, indeed. She’s certainly been dabbling in dark magic this past half-century, more fool her, but I knew Amara when she was no more than a proud, disagreeable girl.”

I stared at her. “A girl? You knew her? More than half a century ago? But you cannot be so old!”

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Mother waved her pipe dismissively, and continued her story. “I pursued her, Amara, that is. I got a little delayed by some of her goons. First a cave troll, and then a pair of were-bears.”

“Is that how you were injured?”

“You fought were-bears?” said Sir Oswain, who had been listening. “Alone? ”

“Not quite alone,” said Mother. “There are many I can call upon to aid me—all who are loyal to the queen. I knew Amara had left Rose on her island while she hightailed it to the dwarf lord to finalise her negotiations. I interrupted her journey. We had a little altercation, which is how I got my injury. She got as good as she gave. I had to seek healing from the queen’s rooms while Amara slunk home to lick her wounds. ”

“But when she got home,” I said, “she found it ablaze. No wonder she did not follow us. She had not the strength.” I recalled that piercing shriek of fury that had rent the night as we fled the island. “I wonder what she did next.”

“She would have gone to warn the dwarf lord in the hope of appeasing his wrath. But I do not expect her to pose any threat now.”

“What did you do to her?” I asked, trying to imagine what an altercation between a sorceress and my stout Mother would look like.

“I wrested the stolen source of her power from her.”

“What is the source?”

“Her wand,” said Mother. “Which I returned to the queen. I would have done it decades ago, but I had to wait for my instructions.”

“Instructions from whom?”

“The Council.”

“What Council? Who are you, Mother?”

This last question was something of a plea.

I had always sensed mystery around Mother, but it was painful to feel my family disintegrating like pipe ash through my fingers.

“The Council of Godmothers,” said Mother.

“I was appointed guardian of the border.

Seventeen years ago I was also tasked with protecting the young princess.

I was to keep her safe and hidden until the stolen crown and crown prince were returned to the kingdom.

Until then, her life was in danger, for the dwarf lord sought her that he might wed her and take the throne.

“It was thought that the last place the dwarf lord would think to search for the princess was at the very border of Faerie, right under his nose. And if Amara had not crossed paths with a roamer who had a tale to tell of a young maiden in a cottage with royal roses round it, we should not have been discovered.”

“And what of me?” I asked slowly.

Part of me was desperate to know the truth. Part of me was afraid.

“Who am I?”

“You came to me as a baby. A foundling. A sorry little bundle of rags, left under the guardian tree.” Mother gave a rueful smile.

“I daresay I should have taken you into the village and found a family to take you in, but there was something about the way you fought for life. You had uncommon spirit, Lily. Little Rose was missing her nurse and brother, and when you came to us, she was enamoured with you. So we kept you.”

“Like a pet.”

“We loved you. You were such a happy little soul. Troublesome, though. Into everything.”

I was silent as I considered this revelation.

“It was exceedingly kind of you,” said Sir Oswain, “to take her in. And how like the sweet lady Rose—the princess, I should say—to love a child in need so instantly, though she was only a babe herself.” He sighed softly.

We all sat in silence for some time. Mother finished her pipe. Jack ambled back up the hill and flopped onto the grass beside us.

The queen and her faerie troops rode away, the queen in a chariot drawn by four pearly-white winged horses with tails like peahens, her captains mounted on tall, swift faerie steeds.



“And shall they all return?” mused Sir Oswain, speaking to no one in particular, his hand absently drifting to the hilt of his sword.

“They look mortal fierce,” said Jack. “Surely they’ll return. Do you think so, good mother?”

“The dwarves are also fierce,” she replied, “and desperate. It will not be an easy victory.”

“Shall we stay here ’til they return?” asked Jack.

“No. The queen has given orders. You are to ride home. Three faerie mounts await you in the stables to take you as far as the border. You can find your way from there.”

“Only three?” said Sir Oswain.

“One each.”

“I can’t leave Jory!” said Jack.

“I will bring him back to the border when he is well.”

“I’m not leaving without you,” I argued.

“You will do as you are told. The queen’s wishes are not to be disobeyed. You have been shown a remarkable degree of hospitality. Any trespass upon her wishes will have severe consequences.”

We all fell silent. The memory of the queen dressed for battle was an impressive one.

I certainly did not wish to trespass against her orders.

And yet there was something I still wished very much to do.

Something I had to do, for this might be my only chance, for I would probably never enter Faerie again .

“When do we leave?” I asked.

“At first light. The border will not stay open for long.”

I had another dream that night—the most vivid I had ever had.

I dreamt of Beran, roaring in anger and pain, and then I dreamt of the faceless man dying in my arms. The dreams repeated over and over, then intertwined, so I could not tell which was Beran and which was the man.

I woke with a pounding heart and beads of sweat on my forehead.

It had seemed so horribly real. But it strengthened my resolve of what I intended to do.

It was still dark when I arose from my feather-soft bed in the House of Healing.

I tapped my lamp three times, and it glowed softly.

I had filled my pockets at supper the previous evening, and now I put all the faerie bread into my bag, along with the bottle refilled from the fountain.

I crept out, tapping the lamp to extinguish it as I left my room.

It was never entirely dark in Faerie. The stars were so much brighter than at home. The moon had set, and the sun not quite risen, but there was enough silvery starlight

for me to pick my way to the stables.

Only a few faerie steeds remained. Their white bodies gleaming in the darkness.

All the others had gone to war. I approached the stall of the smallest of the three, recognising it as the one I had ridden to and from the meadows.

I thought I was alone, but the stable master appeared, in that silent way the fae had of moving.

He looked like a tall shadow in the pre-dawn dark.

“I can mount myself,” I told him. As my steed did not show any sign of hostility toward me, he stood aside. But I had a question for him .

“Can the queen’s horses find their way anywhere?” I asked.

“Anywhere in Faerie,” was the imperious reply.

“Can they... find any one in Faerie?” I held my breath. The answer was painfully important to me.

“The queen’s steeds go wherever they are bid.”

This did not entirely answer my question. But I hardly expected a straightforward reply from a faerie.

I stood beside the faerie horse. “Take me to the bear known as Beran,” I whispered into my mount’s ear, hoping that it could indeed take me where I bid it.

She twitched her ear, gave a huff, and pawed the ground, as if signalling her

eagerness to ride. Perhaps she was unhappy at being left behind.

There was a rustling in the hay mound beside the stable, and the outline of a small head on a long neck popped out of the straw.

“So that is where you’ve been sleeping,” I told the margool. “Wait here for me to return. I don’t know what I am journeying into.”

The margool slid out, stretched itself up on its hind legs, and flapped its wings. It hopped to the ground and ran to the stable door. I was surprised that it was actually going to obey me and not attempt to ride with me.

“Away with you!” hissed a voice from behind the door, as the margool flapped a greeting.

“Sir Oswain?” I called in a low voice.

His tall, cloaked form appeared. “I did not expect to see anyone else this early,” he said. I could hear the note of chagrin in his voice.

“You were going to ride off alone?”

He shifted awkwardly. “I knew you would be safe riding the queen’s steed, and you would have Jack with you as escort.”

“You are not going to the border?”

“No. I have a quest to fulfil. I must seek the king’s crown. That is what I came into Faerie for.”

“You would risk all for a crown that does not belong to you, when you could seek out

Rose?”

“The princess is too exalted for a mere earl’s son,” was the subdued reply.

“Have you supplies?”

“I have food and drink. I have my sword. I have new boots and a travelling cloak. I can ask for no more.”

I considered him some moments, thinking of how Rose would grieve for this golden-haired man if he did not return. I tugged loose my last white rose from my braid. “Here. This will help you with the travel sickness. And it will give you some protection on your venture.” The rose glowed softly.

“I cannot take your protection,” said Sir Oswain.

But I tucked the stem into the neckline of his coat and turned away to my faerie horse before he could return it. I was about to mount when I heard another voice.

“Weren’t going without me, were you?” said Jack, hurrying in, breathless, his cloak askew. “Woke up and knocked for you, sire, and you were gone! Miss Lily—you going too?” He sounded hurt.

“Sir Oswain is not going home,” I said. “He is going to seek the crown.”

“I knew it! But you can’t go alone, sir!”

“You must escort Miss Lily,” said Sir Oswain.

“Course I’ll escort Miss Lily, but you can’t go alone, sir! I’ll ride straight back and join you. Will you not wait a day? ”

“You are a youth. Not a trained soldier. You can do me no aid. Miss Lily needs you.”

“He is no more help to me than he is to you,” I argued, keen to lose Jack’s chaperonage, for I too had my own plans.

“You’re both mortal unfair,” said Jack.

I deemed it wise to say nothing until Sir Oswain was gone. I did not want my scheme interrupted.

“You had best go, if we cannot persuade you otherwise,” I said to Sir Oswain. “Jack, open the stall for him,” I said, for the stable master had left us alone.

Jack sullenly obeyed. Before Sir Oswain mounted, he said to Jack, “Though you are but a youth, you are a good and brave young fellow. If I make it back to the Westshires, come and find me. I will do aught I can to aid you, and to give you a rightful share of the reward. You may train among my men if you wish. You will doubtless earn a knighthood.”

“I thank you, sir,” said Jack, still sounding low. “But I came into Faerie for the same reason you did. To find the lost crown and treasure. It’s mortal hard to give it up. Especially after coming so far.”

Sir Oswain squeezed Jack’s shoulder and mounted his faerie steed, bending to speak into the creature’s ear. “Take me to the dwarf lord’s stronghold at the Black Rock.”

We watched from the stable doorway as the horse gathered speed and quickly passed out of sight. There was now a gleam of gold lighting the horizon.

“If you must know,” I said as we turned back to the stalls, “I am not going home either. I too have something to find. Or someone. ”

“Who?” said Jack. He put a hand out, taking hold of my sleeve to stay me. “Where are you going?”

“I don’t know. I have to find Beran.”

“That black bear?”

I mounted my horse. “Out of my way, Jack. Don’t try and stop me. Take the margool back to Rose. Tell her not to worry.”

But as my horse stepped forward, I felt a thudding weight on my shoulder strap. I was not going to be able to leave the margool behind. My horse gathered speed, and we lurched into a world-shifting blur.

### Stronghold

My faerie steed came to a halt, and I slid from its back and collapsed onto the ground. The sickness was horrible without the protection of my rose.

The margool hopped over and rubbed its muzzle against my cheek. I could not move my head to escape it, but the creature's touch dissipated the effects of the magic on my body and mind. So I lay still, eyes closed, letting it continue its oddly healing caress.

It was fortunate my mount had brought me to a quiet, lonely spot—for had I been deposited in the middle of a cave of trolls, I could not have moved to safety while the sickness swirled through me.

But it was not as lonely a spot as I had thought. As my senses recovered, I heard soft moans. I lifted my head, turning toward the sound.

“Sir Oswain?”

And his was not the only voice groaning softly.

“Jack? Why are you here?” I asked, crawling to Jack's side. “Margool, come and rub his cheek. ”

Sir Oswain, in better condition than Jack, sat up, looking displeased.

“You followed me?” he said. “You should not have done so.”



“I did not,” I replied. “That is, I did not mean to. I am not looking for the crown. I’m looking for my friend.”

“Perhaps,” said Sir Oswain, who had now drunk a little water and was regaining colour, “your friend is also at the dwarf lord’s lair.”

“Perhaps. I suppose there is only one way to find out.” I got slowly to my feet.

Sir Oswain rounded on Jack. “And you? Why are you here?”

“You told me to accompany Miss Lily,” said Jack, rubbing his forehead, as if to rub away the dizziness. “So I did. Couldn’t let her go alone. Didn’t know she was following you.”

“I was not following him,” I said. “And I didn’t ask you to accompany me. I asked you to see after Rose.”

“The lady Rose is safe,” Jack muttered petulantly. “Mother Hazel said so. But you—who knows what scrape you’ll get into next?”

“Me?” I was indignant. “I don’t get into scrapes. I’m too busy getting everyone else out of them!”

“I hope you are not referring to me,” Sir Oswain said stiffly. “It shall not be said that a mere maid delivered me from danger.”

“Who got himself drunk as a lord on meadow sap?” I shot back.

“Whose idea was it to jump into a well?” retorted Sir Oswain.

“If we hadn’t gone down that well, Jory wouldn’t have got bit by a monster,” Jack

added .

I rounded on him. “And who was ready to elope with a mermaid and have their soul drained out of them? All because they put on a pretty face?”

The margool bounded up, pressing its head against my hand. I felt the fire of my anger dwindle away.

“Is this a curse?” I wondered aloud.

“Who’s a curse?” Jack asked sullenly.

“This is,” I said. “This arguing. This bad feeling.”

Now that the travel sickness had passed, my usual senses were recovering, along with my sensitivity to magic.

“There’s a curse of divisiveness here. I can feel it.”

I looked down at the margool, still nuzzling my hand.

“Come here!” I ordered Jack. “Quickly!”

He came, but like a resentful child.

“Put your hand on the margool’s head.”

“Why?”

“Just do it.”

I watched his face.

“Do you feel better?”

“Yes,” he admitted. “Not sick.”

“And not angry?”

“No. Not angry.”

I made Sir Oswain do the same and saw the anger drain from his face.

“There is dark magic here,” I said. “A trap to keep us arguing instead of looking for the entrance to the dwarf’s lair.” That, more than anything, told me we were very close to the entrance.

“We must stay close to the margool and each other, so we don’t fall under enchantment. We’re all here, whether we should be or not, so we must work together.”

My companions agreed. I shared some of the faerie bread I had brought. Judging by the position of the sun, we had ridden for hours, and none of us had broken our fast.

“Can see why this place is called Black Rock,” said Jack, craning his neck to view the towering wall of black granite, streaked with veins of grey. “But can’t see no fort.”

Sir Oswain turned to examine the massive rock face.

“I wonder,” he said, tracing the outline of the rock with his eyes, “if this rock is actually a fortress wall.”

I stood beside him. If I looked at the rock out of the corner of my eye, I could see a faint shimmer.

“I think you are right. There’s a glamour over it.”

“What is it with faeries and glammers?” Jack grumbled. “I’ll be glad to get home, where what you see is what’s there.”

I placed my hand on the margool’s head. The shimmer of the rock expanded, then cleared. I was looking at a castle wall. And before us, outlined in the stone, was a large door.

“I think I see a d—” I began, but even as the words left my mouth, the door swung open noiselessly, as only a fae door can—and out rushed six rough and fierce dwarf guards.

We were herded down granite corridors that twisted and turned like a maze.

The guards’ boots must have been hobnailed, for they made a clanging noise as they marched us along, gripping our arms. One of them held the margool, carrying it under his arm like a chicken, clamping its muzzle shut with his other hand to keep it from snapping at his arm and blowing red puffs in his face .

The corridors were gloomy. Our destination was a cavernous hall, where braziers of fire lit up impressive carvings on the walls—graven images that danced jerkily by the flickering light.

Granite pillars as wide as ancient oak trees were hewn out, creating archways, but there were many dark and shadowy areas where the firelight did not reach, making it impossible to gauge the actual height and depth of the cavern.

A throne of granite loomed between two braziers, and on the throne sat a sour-looking dwarf with a long, grizzled beard, and dressed in armour. On his head perched a jewelled crown that did not look dwarvish-fashioned.

Sir Oswain gasped as his eyes fell upon the crown. Was it the very treasure he had come all this long and dangerous way to find?

“Found them outside the south gate, my lord,” said one of the guards holding Sir Oswain.

“They stink of royal magic,” growled the guard gripping my arms tightly enough to bruise.

The guard holding the margool shouldered his way past us and held out his captive. “Look what else we found.”

The dwarf lord leaned forward. “My promised margool . Amara’s missing prize.” He peered toward me, saying keenly—“Is that the other prize? Is that the princess?”

My captor shoved me forward.

Greedy eyes examined me from head to foot. “Who are you?” the dwarf lord demanded.

I hesitated. What should I tell him? If I was of no value to him, we would all be violently dispatched. Drawing myself up tall, I tried to emulate Rose’s queenly posture and tone .

“I am the princess,” I announced. “Order your brutes to release me and my servants!”

The dwarf lord raked me over again. “Why are you here?”

“Because... I want to be queen.”

I could not read the meaning of the gleam in the dwarf lord’s eyes. “What think you, Dryden?” he said in his harsh voice.

Out of the shadows stepped an ancient-looking dwarf with a long, white beard, his hooded cloak casting his face in shadow.

“Sire,” said Dryden in a raspy voice, “I say we bring the witch to tell us who this mortal is.”

“Bring Amara!” ordered the dwarf lord, and two guards departed.

I heard Jack give a little groan. I, too, groaned inwardly. My ruse was about to be swiftly exposed, and there was no telling what the consequences would be.

What fools we are, I thought. Turning up on the doorstep of a tyrannous, kidnapping dwarf lord without any weaponry, protection, or plan, while the border was closing fast—what utter fools.

The figure brought in between guards did not look like a powerful sorceress. She looked more like a tired old woman, her strength dwindled. What a blow Mother must have given her in taking away the source of magic this Amara had once wielded. She stood scowling before the throne.

“Tell me,” demanded the lord, “who this mortal girl is.”

Amara might have been bowed down in body, but her eyes still flashed fiercely as she looked at me.

“One of the guardian’s wards,” she said. Her face contorted as she snarled, “Are these

the fools who burned down my house?”

Then her eyes fell upon the margool, and she hissed, “ It was you ! You stole my prize and burned down my house !”

She lunged at me, catching everyone off guard.

I cried out in surprise—my cry turning to a gasp of pain as my hair was yanked hard, and my throat seized by unexpectedly strong fingers.

Chaos broke out. Guards rushed at the witch to make her release me, the dwarf lord bellowed orders, Jack yelled my name over and over, and Sir Oswain wrenched free of his remaining guard to draw his sword.

Then came a roar that echoed around the cavern, causing even the guards to freeze momentarily and look at one another in dismay.

“He broke loose again!” said a guard, catching hold of the witch by her cloak, while Jack wrested her fingers from my throat with both hands, crying, “ Let her go, you hag !”

“ Hag ?” shrieked the witch, releasing my throat—but not my hair. “ I am Amara ! Sorceress of the island !”

“You’re nowt but an old crone!” yelled Jack. “ You leave her alone !”

The margool had broken free, for it took all the guards to restrain Amara, whose strength seemed to rise with her fury.

The dwarf lord bellowed for more guards, and footsteps drummed along the cavern floor.

Up flew the margool, sinking its talons into Amara's shoulder, pecking at her face until she released my hair.

The deep and monstrous roar again resounded around the cave—it was hard to discern its source, but one thing was certain—the sound was drawing closer .

Amara darted away into the shadows with a hiss.

“He's broke loose!” yelled someone.

The dwarfs ran to form a defensive line before their lord, pulling clubs and maces from their weapon belts and raising them high.

“What beast is coming now?” said Jack. “Are you hurt, Miss Lily?”

“N-no,” I croaked.

I was shaken and sore and apprehensive about what unearthly creature now approached, causing even the guards to quail. More guards stormed in, weapons in hand.

“The queen's army is coming!” bellowed another guard, charging in from a different entrance. “They're riding through the valley! They'll be at the east gate!”

The dwarf lord roared out orders. Everyone was shouting, their rough voices resounding against the cavernous stone.

“We must run!” urged Sir Oswain.

“Run where?” I said, seeing guards in every direction.



Another hair-raising bellow echoed louder and closer. I watched in confusion as the guards scattered, their formation thrown into disarray as a great black beast charged into the cavern from between two pillars—an enraged animal with broken chains swinging from its limbs and neck.

And the creature was charging straight toward me.

The guards fled. Sir Oswain pushed me aside and took a brave stance before me, sword drawn. Jack looked terrified, but he snatched up a dropped club and stood trembling beside Sir Oswain.

“Stop!” I cried, pushing between my would-be protectors. “Don’t hurt him! ”

I flung my arms wide to shield them as the enraged black bear bounded up in long strides, knocking guards sprawling.

“Beran!” I cried, rushing to meet him—“Oh, Beran, what have they done to you!”

Chains trailed behind him, hanging from cruel manacles on his limbs.

Jack looked ready to faint. “Oh, my,” he gasped, staggering back. “I thought we were done for this time! It’s that bear that was in your house!”

“Bear in the house?” said Sir Oswain, staggering back a step, but still holding his sword in readiness. “Is it the same?”

“Don’t let him loose!” bellowed the dwarf lord. “Kill him!”

The dwarf lord took up a fearsome dwarvish sword and charged at Beran from behind.

“Beran!” I shouted in horror as someone shoved me aside.

A terrible clash of weaponry rung out—my ears were filled with dreadful noises reverberating around me—roars of pain and fury, shrieks and bellows all echoing and echoing—“Don’t look!” cried Jack, pulling me away. “Don’t look !”

When I finally broke free I turned to see two bodies lying on the ground—that of the dwarf lord, and that of my friend.

### Treasure

“Run !” rasped a bewildered looking Dryden. “The queen is coming! His lordship is dead—and the witch has lost all power— it is over !” And he fled the cavern, as did the horde of guards trampling away in a chaotic exodus.

“Beran! Oh, Beran— no !” I lay across his body, just as I had as a child. But now he was slumped and unresponsive, and I felt his life seeping out of him even as I implored him not to leave me.

Sir Oswain bent over the dwarf lord’s body. He straightened and said, with grim finality, “He’s dead. They are both dead.”

“Poor Miss Lily,” mourned Jack.

The moment Sir Oswain pronounced Beran dead, something strange began to happen. The fur of his body began to ripple and shiver beneath my hands.

“What’s happening?” Jack asked, wide-eyed.

I could not answer, for I did not know. Something was lifting from him. I watched in bewilderment as the shimmer of an enchantment passed over Beran’s massy body like blue fire flickering across black coals .

“His fur’s falling off!” Jack cried. “Like a great fur coat! ’Tis a man! I’ll be jiggered—’tis a man ‘neath that fur!”

Sir Oswain rushed to my side. “Upon my word!” he exclaimed. “Upon my honour—it’s the crown prince! He lives!”

But he did not live. My dream had come to pass.

I cradled the head of the dying man in my arms, my hot tears dropping fast upon him.

“Oh, do something !” I sobbed, my voice raw, my throat sore from Amara’s grip.

“What can we do to save him?” I knew, even as I said it, that there was nothing we could do.

Sir Oswain tugged the white rose from inside his coat, crushed the petals, and put them to Beran’s lips. The fragrance filled our nostrils, the sweetness mingling unnaturally with the smells of blood, fear, and the smoke from the braziers. But Beran did not stir.

“Don’t die, don’t die .” I was almost beside myself. “I have waited all my life to find you—please, my friend, don’t leave me!”

“Perhaps the queen will grant us a wish to bring him back,” suggested Jack sadly.

“I fear it will be too late,” said Sir Oswain.

“A wish,” I said wildly. “Jack! Jack!—when you first lit my lamp, did you tap it?”

Jack stared blankly at me.

“Get my lamp!” I urged. “Hurry !”

My bag had fallen to the ground. Jack scrambled to retrieve it, loosing the lamp from

the strap. He looked confused as he held it out, and I snatched it from him. There was no time to explain. I gripped the lamp.

“I wish Beran to live,” I said, squeezing the lamp hard between my desperate hands .

Nothing happened. I watched the man keenly, his dark head cradled on my knees. I willed him to breathe or stir.

“We used all the wishes, Miss Lily,” Jack said sadly.

“No,” I murmured. “No. No. We didn’t. I’m sure you tapped the lamp the first time.

Tapped it three times. You did. You did.

” I began tapping it. Three times for the light to come on.

Three times for the light to go out. I was growing frantic.

This was too terrible. I could not accept it. I cast the lamp aside in despair.

“His name is not Beran,” said Sir Oswain, squatting down beside me.

I threw him an angry look. “It is,” I said. “It is Beran. He’s my Beran.”

“His name is Eadric. Prince Eadric.” He picked up the lamp and held it to me. “You said the fae are particular about names.”

Suddenly I understood. I snatched it up again. “I wish Prince Eadric to live!”

A long moment passed.

“Does he breathe?” Jack asked, bending closer.

Agony passed through me as I watched the prostrate form in my arms. Perhaps he did not choose to live. He would only come back to me if he wished to. Perhaps he did not feel the connection to me that I felt to him. Perhaps there was no calling him back.

There was a sudden sneeze. Jack jerked back, wiping his cheek, his eyes wide.

It took a moment for me to understand what had happened—it was not Jack who had sneezed.

A pair of dark eyes opened, unfocused at first, but slowly settling on my face.

“Lil-y ?” croaked the man in my arms in a rough, gritty voice .

“ Yes. Oh, Beran, you’re alive .”

He shivered, for his bearskin had split open and fallen from his body. Sir Oswain hastened to unclasp his cloak.

“Forgive me, Your Highness,” said Sir Oswain as he draped the heavy fabric over him. “If you are able to rise, my lord, I respectfully suggest that we make haste and depart from here.”

When I protested that Beran needed time to recover, Sir Oswain said quietly but urgently, “His Highness would make an excellent hostage to leverage against the queen’s advance. As would you.”

Jack sprang into action, gathering up our bags.

“But there is one thing I must do,” said Sir Oswain. He bent over the body of the dwarf lord, folding the lord’s hands across his chest in a gesture of respect for the dead before removing the crown from his head. “This does not belong to you,” he said gravely.

“Look!” Jack called, pointing at the margool. It was perched on a large wooden chest before the throne, for the dwarf lord had used the chest as a footstool. The margool’s scales were glowing golden.

“I wonder...” murmured Sir Oswain. “Jack—bring the sacks!”

Sir Oswain took up the dwarf lord’s sword, grimacing at the blood smears on the thick blade as he used it to force open the chest. It took effort, but at last, the lock yielded.

“This is what you came for, Jack, son of Jago, is it not?” Sir Oswain said, panting a little, and looking gratified.

Jack gave a half shout, half laugh, and jumped up and down—“ I’ll be jiggered—’tis the treasure !”

Gold chinked as he stuffed his pockets with gleaming coins and glinting jewellery. When his pockets were full, he filled his boots, then our sacks, until they bulged.

Beran was wrapped in his loosened bearskin and Sir Oswain’s cloak, his makeshift clothing secured with Sir Oswain’s leather belt.

Now we were ready to make our way out of the stronghold, moving slowly, for Beran was weak, and Jack was almost bent double under the weight of the treasure. The margool flew ahead, leading us through the maze of stone corridors.

“Must drink,” gasped Jack, emerging into the valley. He sank down, his sacks of treasure clinking as they hit the ground.

We all needed to drink. We had borne heavy burdens through the passageways of the caves. Even Sir Oswain was breathing hard as we let Beran sink to the ground.

Beran said nothing, only making a low groan now and then.

“Are you in pain?” I asked him. A gap in the bearskin draped over his upper body revealed a dark red line where the dwarf’s sword had delivered the lethal blow. Yet it looked like a wound that had long since knit together.

He shook his head and tried to say something, but his speech was difficult to understand, sounding more like growls than words.

“Don’t think he’s quite used to being back in his body,” said Jack.

“Seventeen years is a long time to live as a bear,” agreed Sir Oswain .

I watched Beran fumble with the flagon of water. He drank clumsily, drops spilling down his bearded chin.

A look of concern passed over Sir Oswain’s face, and I knew what he was thinking—he was wondering if the crown prince of the Westshires would ever truly be a man again after so many years under enchantment.

A rush of anger burned through me at the dwarf lord and Amara. What a wicked thing they had done to him. They had stolen his childhood. Perhaps his whole life was forever blighted.

I watched him cram a piece of bread into his mouth like a ravenous animal. He



certainly had the manners of a bear. His dark hair fell in long, tangled locks, obscuring his eyes, so that he had to shake his head back to see.

He caught me watching him, and I smiled, reaching up to lift a strand of hair from his forehead. “You need a haircut when we get home.”

He attempted to smile back, but it was a wry twisting of the mouth that looked more like a grimace, as though smiling was something else he had forgotten how to do.

“We must find our mounts,” said Sir Oswain, rising. “It is not safe here. The battle might spill out to this side.”

I too was anxious to leave. All I wanted was to be home.

The future was uncertain, and I could not think about it right now.

Home was all that mattered. Now the terrible anxiety for Beran’s life had lifted, I remembered how little time was left before the border closed.

If we did not hurry, we might not get home at all.

“Hope the horses haven’t left us,” groaned Jack as he struggled under the weight of the treasure.

“Don’t think I can walk home with all this.

Can hardly wait to see Jory’s face. He’ll never call me a numskull again when he sees me bringing back the loot!

” He laughed, despite his burden. “We shall live like kings! Roast beef every day! A fine horse—a whole stable of fine horses! No more holes in our boots. No more

sleeping under hedges. I shall keep cows. Don't care what Jory says—he can have his hunters and his dogs and hawks, but I've always had a liking for cows.

Meadows full of 'em! The best-fed cows in the kingdom. They'll make butter and cream fit for the king! ”

And he rambled on about all the sheep and pigs and chickens he would have when he was a very rich man, while we retraced our steps, searching for the fae horses.

“I see one,” cried Sir Oswain. “Down there, by those white boulders behind that line of trees.”

We picked our way cautiously down a stony slope.

I felt bad for Beran, walking barefoot, and tried to lead him along the least rocky path.

He moved clumsily, still adjusting to two feet instead of four paws.

I paused to peer at the boulders below. There was a telltale shimmer over what at first glance appeared to be large, white rocks.

“I don't think those are boulders,” I said.

“Then what are they?” asked Jack, pausing to catch his breath and wipe the sweat from his brow that trickled into his eyes.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:36 am*

I squinted, trying to see past the glamour. “A large tent. An encampment.”

“Whose encampment?” Sir Oswain asked, shading his eyes against the sun.

“Hope no one’s stolen our horses,” muttered Jack. “Thought none but the queen’s folk could ride them.”

“Then it must be the queen’s camp,” said Sir Oswain.

“Oh dear.” I sighed. “We may be in trouble.”

“We shall have to go down there,” said Sir Oswain. “We cannot get home on foot.”

“With any luck we’ll find the camp empty,” said Jack optimistically. “And we can take our horses and be gone.”

“They are not our horses,” I reminded him. “And we are not supposed to be here. We were told to go directly to the border.”

But there was nothing for it. We cautiously approached the camp.

“Sure it’s a tent?” asked Jack. “Looks like a big white rock to me.”

“It’s a tent,” I assured him. “A white pavilion. Squint and look out of the side of your eyes.”

He did so, his face contorting comically. “Well, I’ll be jiggered! ’Tis a tent! A

whopper of one!”

“Keep your voice down,” I urged. “The fae can hear us long before we hear them.”

We continued our apprehensive approach.

“Think our luck’s in after all,” whispered Jack. “There’s our horses, grazing at the back of the tent. We can get away without anyone seeing us.”

“It all seems too easy,” said Sir Oswain.

I thought the same.

“We’ve got the prince,” Jack said in a buoyant whisper. “We’ve got the crown, and the treasure, and the princess is home safe and sound. Our luck is turned good and proper.”

But as I neared the horse I had ridden that morning, a deep voice rang out.

“Halt !”

And I knew our luck had not turned ‘good and proper’ just yet.

The soldier stepped into view, a drawn sword in his hand.

“Greetings,” I said, trying to sound confident. “I am a Rose Daughter, under the protection of Her Highness. We require the horses assigned to us.”

The guard gave me a cursory glance. “I see no royal rose,” he said, then let out a high-pitched call, sharp and piercing, like a bird’s cry. Four more soldiers appeared. “They attempted to steal Her Highness’s steeds,” he informed them.

“We did not attempt to steal,” I argued. “We were loaned the steeds by order of the queen.”

“The queen can confirm your word,” said the soldier, seizing my arm. His grip was firm, though not as bruising as the dwarf guards’ had been.

Inside the pavilion the queen stood in consultation with her general. She looked magnificent and fearsome in her silvery armour, her eyes as hard and green as emeralds.

I bowed with the utmost gravity and thought it wisest to wait for her to speak first.

“What have we here?” she queried, her gaze shifting past me to Beran.

Sir Oswain rose from a deep bow. “We have recovered the stolen crown prince of Westshires, Your Highness.”

“We were preparing to ride home,” I added quickly. “Just as you ordered.”

The queen ignored my words. “My general found the dwarf lord slain,” she said. “Which of you mortals has dared to slay a lord of Faerie?”

Her voice was edged with danger. I faltered. Beran tried to speak, but his voice emerged in a low growl, his words incomprehensible.

“The prince was himself slain by the dwarf lord’s blade,” said Sir Oswain. “They struck one another a fatal blow. ”

“A fatal blow?” The queen’s sharp eyes flicked to Beran. “Yet he stands before me.”

“I revived him,” I said. “With a wish.” My fingers brushed the lamp hanging from the

strap of my sack, which Jack bore.

Jack gave a little groan and let all three sacks drop with a heavy thud, rubbing his sore shoulders.

The queen's gaze flickered to the red scar visible beneath Beran's loosened cloak and the remains of his bearskin. Her expression hardened.

"It is a transgression punishable by death for a mortal to slay one of the fae," she pronounced.

"It was in defence of his own life, Your Highness," Sir Oswain protested.

"He is a faeslayer," she declared. "The law is the law."

At her words, the soldiers standing at attention drew their swords.

I instinctively stepped in front of Beran. "He was not a mortal man when he slew the dwarf lord, Your Highness!" I said quickly.

Beran growled and tried to push me behind him. His dark, glittering eyes were fixed on the soldiers, his stance showed him poised for a fight despite his weakened state.

The queen raised a hand, staying her guards. "How so?" she asked.

A sudden understanding struck me: the queen was bound by the strict laws of Faerie—this was not necessarily her will. She needed a way out that would satisfy the law.

"He was not a mortal man," I repeated, forcing my voice to sound clear and steady.

"He was an enchanted bear, cursed by the sorceress Amara at the dwarf lord's

command .

“Had the dwarf lord not bound him under enchantment,” I pressed on, “His Highness—” how strange it felt to call him that “—could not have struck him down. In the mortal kingdom, Your Highness, it is a transgression punishable by death to kidnap and hold hostage a prince.”

A long silence lingered over the pavilion. The soldiers waited.

The queen’s eyes passed again over Beran’s makeshift clothing—the ragged bearskin secured by a belt, the bear’s head hanging at his hip like some grisly trophy. She stared at the empty sockets, where once his own eyes had looked out from.

Slowly, she lowered her hand.

Relief crashed over me so powerfully I had to blink back sudden tears. Not now. Do not show weakness now.

“May we ride home, Your Highness?” I asked, then immediately regretted my words. I had asked for a kindness. Irritation flickered across her face.

“You were ordered to ride back to the border at dawn,” she said coldly. “You disobeyed. Your journey here on my steeds was not sanctioned.”

There was little use in begging for clemency. I had to offer something in return.

“Would Your Highness accept a gift in payment for the use of her steeds?” I asked carefully.

“What gift?”

I took up my sack of treasure.

Jack's face flooded with dismay. But there was nothing else of value I could offer. I placed the sack at the queen's feet.

The margool circled round the pile of gold and jewels, its scaly skin glowing golden .

"A gift of treasure," I said. "It is worth the value of many houses and horses in my kingdom."

Jack whimpered, and Sir Oswain stifled a sigh.

The queen barely glanced at it. "All the dwarf lord's wealth falls to me," she said coolly, "for he transgressed against my rule."

"But this is not his treasure," I argued. "This was stolen from our king."

"Then it is not yours to give."

"The king promised it as a reward to any who recovered his crown. It is mine to give."

"Very well," she said at last. "You may redeem yourself with it. But these—" she gestured to Sir Oswain and Jack "—must redeem themselves."

Jack's face fell, his mouth opening as if to protest, but no words came.

Sir Oswain squared his shoulders. "I yield to Her Highness my share of the treasure," he said steadily. "But I am honour-bound to keep the crown I vowed to return to my king. The crown is not mine to give."



Jack hesitated. He could not withstand the queen's terrible stare for long. His shoulders slumped, and he mumbled his surrender and dropped his sack at her feet.

"Is that all?" the queen asked. Her green eyes gleamed as they fixed on a glint of gold dangling from Jack's pocket.

Jack swallowed, mumbled an apology, and miserably emptied his pockets.

A long silence followed. We waited.

"Go," the queen said at last, with a dismissive wave. She turned back to her general.

Outside the pavilion, Jack sighed deeply. "Should've asked for a fourth horse. "

"I dared not ask for anything more," I said. "I am sorry you lost the treasure, but we escaped with our lives."

"Jory will call me a numskull for letting all that slip through my hands."

"Then Jory is ungrateful. You saved his life. Twice ."

"First time was by accident."

"The first time was because you have a good and loyal heart, Jack, son of Jago. And that is worth more than any treasure."

But nothing I said could dispel his disappointment.

"If Your Highness permits it," said Sir Oswain to Beran, "I offer you a seat on my mount, for it is the largest of the horses."

But Beran had other ideas. He shook his head and gestured toward me.

“I will ride with him,” I told Sir Oswain. “The margool will help ward him against travel sickness.”

Sir Oswain looked relieved. Clearly, the prince, with his long, unkempt hair, wild beard, and bearskin, was not his idea of an ideal riding companion. And he smelled decidedly of bear.

In truth, so strongly did his bearskin smell that I might not have desired him as a riding companion either, but I knew that once our mounts were at full stretch, my senses would be too overwhelmed by the journey to notice.

What I did find disconcerting, however, was that it was no longer the arms of a bear around my waist. Nor was it the heavy limbs of a beast pressed close against me, but the form of a man. And I had never touched a man before. I had certainly never been held close by one, as I was now.

My back was warm against his chest, my calves, bare where my skirt had rucked up to my knees, brushed against his legs. His large hands settled over mine as he reached around me.

The margool flew onto the strap of my empty sack and settled there. Beran gave a low growl of protest as the margool’s tail brushed against his head, and was flicked away.

I braced myself for the ride ahead and gave the order for our fae mount to carry us to the open border between Faerie and the mortal kingdom.

I only hoped that the border was still open. Time was impossible to track here. If the passage had closed, we would be trapped for another year.

### Half a Heart

Dusk was falling as we reached the border. I could see the shimmer of green light wavering between the kingdoms—a light so thin that I realised with a shock that the door was about to close for another year—we had only minutes remaining before sunset.

The fae steeds let us slide from their backs, then turned and were gone, leaving a flurry of leaves dancing behind them. The canopy above trembled as their royal magic shook the branches as they passed beneath them.

“Hurry !” I urged, seeing the evening shadows stretch toward us like grasping fingers.

Sir Oswain crawled across the border, unable to stand; Beran and I somehow dragged poor Jack by the legs. We all collapsed, watching as the final shimmer of green flickered from the Faerie side of the border.

As the last ray of sunlight withdrew from the sky, I felt the shift in the air. A nightingale in the ash tree I lay beneath began warbling an announcement—it trilled out that the gateway had closed.

We lay sprawled among curling ferns, waiting for the world to cease spinning and the travel sickness to pass. Jack suffered the worst, for he had neither a margool nor a rose to ease the effects.

Beran groaned, and as my head cleared I realised I was lying within the circle of his

arm, my hand resting against his chest. If it had been his bearskin, I might have been perfectly at ease, but it was the unfamiliar warmth of the skin of a man, not a bear.

I jerked my hand away and sat up too quickly, making my head spin round again.

Beran looked at me, a question in his eyes at my reaction.

“You smell,” I said, trying to laugh away my embarrassment, though my cheeks burned.

I put my head in my hands for a moment, waiting for the last wave of nausea to pass. Beran gently stroked my hair back from my face so he could see me.

I understood his look of concern, and forced a smile to reassure him. Then I glanced around, recognising our surroundings, even in the gloaming, and my smile turned to a laugh of joy.

“Oh, Beran, we are home!”

He stood and pulled me to my feet, and tried to form a word.

“H-o-m-e,” he said with great effort.

“Yes! Home !”

Sir Oswain insisted on shaking hands with everyone by way of congratulations. But when he offered his hand to me, I abandoned formality, throwing my arms around him. Then I hugged Jack and kissed him soundly on the cheek.

Beran caught my arm and pointed to his own face. Still laughing, I kissed his bristly cheek, then the other.

And then he grabbed my face and kissed me full on the mouth. This was going a little too far, I thought as I pulled away, blushing again. And besides, he still smelled of bearskin.

We were a happy, if tired and hungry, party as I led the way along a familiar track through the woods.

I wanted to run all the way home, but my body was weary and still readjusting to the mortal world; everything felt a little strange.

And every time Beran's hand found mine, intertwining our fingers, pressing our palms together, a different kind of strangeness ran through me.

We stopped at the bubbling stream that flowed underground from Faerie, drinking deeply. The margool leapt into the stream, flapping its wings and rolling in the water like a chicken taking a dust bath.

We passed the guardian tree, its leaves rustling a welcome as we neared the cottage, I heard the jackdaw call out—" Home ! Home !"

And there were the willow fences—there, the thatched cottage with roses rambling up its walls.

I took a deep breath of rose-scented air, and another scent mingled with it—one just as familiar.

A scent as evocative as our roses in winter, bluebells in springtime, honeysuckle in summer. The smell of pipe smoke.

The cottage door stood open to the summer evening. Sitting on the topmost step was Mother.

“You are late,” she said, as though I’d simply missed supper. But I saw the flicker of relief pass over her face.

“And you are early!”

She stood, holding out an arm to gather me to her. I buried my head in her shoulder, inhaling the scents of tobacco and the outdoors, and something else; something I had never been able to name before, but now I knew exactly what it was: the scent of green magic.

“Beran is here,” I said, when she released me.

“So I see,” said Mother, her pipe still between her teeth.

“He’s the crown prince,” I added.

“So he is,” she said calmly, as if this were not news at all.

“Is Jory with you?” Jack said eagerly as he greeted Mother.

“He is.”

“Lily!” came a voice from the doorway.

“Rose!”

There was laughter and exclamations as my sister rushed to greet us. Jory limped forward and grabbed Jack, first cuffing him upside the head and calling him a sapskull for going off on such a scrape without him, then pulling him into a fierce hug.

“Sir Oswain!” said Rose after she had hugged me and then a blushing Jack, and exclaimed over the margool that had followed me home. She made a little curtsy, her eyes glowing and her cheeks flushing almost as deeply as Jack’s. “I am so very glad to see you returned safely.”

“Your Highness,” said Sir Oswain, bowing low. “I hardly dared hope to see you again. It is like a dream that I never wish to wake from.”

I groaned inwardly. I much preferred the manly, courageous Sir Oswain of our adventures to the lovelorn swain he became in Rose’s presence.

I noticed that Rose was not surprised by this royal greeting. “Did Mother tell you?” I asked.

“About who I am? Yes, she did.”

“Am I supposed to curtsy to you now?” I said, a little wryly .

“You are still my little sister, Lily. Nothing can ever change that. Though you are welcome to curtsy if you like.”

I managed to smile, but it was not easy, for everything would change between us now. “Do you know who this is?” I asked, bringing Beran before her.

Rose regarded the dark-haired man with his unkempt beard and eccentric attire.

She looked down at the bearskin belted about his waist, the long clawed paws and huge head hanging down against his legs. “Beran?” she said confusedly. “Beran is not dead. Is he?” She looked up at the face of the dark stranger, her expression full of confusion.

“Does she know?” I asked Mother, glancing between Rose and Beran.

Mother gave a small shake of her head.

“Know what?” said Rose. “Tell me. Quickly.”

“It is Beran,” I said, taking hold of Rose’s hand and squeezing it to impart courage for the revelation that was about to come.

“Beran is dead?” Rose looked ready to cry.

“Beran was under an enchantment. Now he is free. He is the crown prince who was stolen as a child. He is Prince Eadric.”

Many emotions passed across Rose’s face. She and Beran regarded one another. She was the first to speak.

“ Brother ?” she said, her voice and fingers trembling as she reached to take one of his large hands in both of hers. “All this time I had a brother visiting us, and I never knew.”

“His speech is slow,” I warned her. “He has almost forgotten his language. ”

“Eadric,” said Rose, looking up into his dark eyes, so like her own.

“E... El ...” Beran struggled to enunciate. Rose encouraged him, sounding out the syllables of her true name until he managed something that sounded like “ Elaine .”

“Well, blow me down,” said Jory softly, who had been watching this meeting. His voice lifted. “The crown prince is alive ?”



“And Sir Oswain has the crown,” said Jack, grinning at all the happy reunions.

“And the treasure?” said Jory eagerly.

Jack’s face fell. “We did find it. But then we lost it again.”

“You lost it?”

“Had to hand it over to the queen to pay our way home. Three sackfuls. My back still hurts from carrying it. Sorry, Jory.” Jack hung his head.

“So close,” said Jory. He was silent for some moments as all his crushed ambitions dissipated like sand through his fingers.

He sighed. “Could you not have shoved something in your pockets? Ah, well. You made it home. That’s the most important thing.

” He slapped his brother’s shoulder. “Come and eat, Jacko.”

Jory turned to go into the cottage.

“Wait!” cried Jack. He was staggering about on one leg.

“What are you hopping about like a jackrabbit for?” said his brother.

“Trying—” said Jack, holding on to one foot, “to get... my boot off!”

His boot flew off, and a shower of gleaming gold coins and jewellery scattered to the ground. Jory’s eyes widened, and he limped hastily back to his brother .

Jack tugged his other boot free, stumbling backwards as more treasure spilled out.

“ I filled my boots !” he crowed. “These fae-made boots are so comfy they fit like a glove no matter what you put in ’em! Ha !”

“Jacko—you are a champ !”

“So I’m not a numskull anymore?” said Jack, grinning.

“Oh, you’ll always be a numskull. Little brothers always are. But you’re the best numskull of a brother a fella could wish for! And a rich numskull at that!”

“We’ll have to split it three ways,” Jack reminded his exultant brother as they gathered up the treasure. “Miss Lily and Sir Oswain are owed a share.”

“What use do I have for jewels?” I said, laughing at his grinning face. “You can keep my share, Jack.”

“Keep it all,” said Sir Oswain magnanimously. “My reward is to return the crown to my king.” He glanced at Rose. “And to see my king’s heirs restored to their father and their rightful place.” He managed to look sorrowful as well as devoted at the same time. Rose rewarded him with a gracious smile.

“I did fill my pockets,” said Jack, “but I had to empty them out.” He pulled out the lining of his pockets in demonstration, and something small fell out, glinting as it hit the ground. “Well, I’ll be jiggered!” said Jack, picking up the object. “A ring got left behind!”

“A lady’s ring,” said Sir Oswain. Jack held it out to him for examination.

“A good-sized ruby,” said Sir Oswain. “The colour of a red rose,” he added, and looked thoughtfully at the ring for a long time, prompting Jack to say, “Take it, sir. ’Tis but a small share of the spoils. ”

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:36 am*

“I will,” said Sir Oswain, still thoughtful, and he pocketed the ring.

The smell of food drew us all inside, where a large pot of stew and a mountain of oatcakes awaited us.

Mother brought out a flagon of spruce beer that we only drank on special occasions.

It was something of a crush for us all to fit in the cottage, but we managed.

Sir Oswain, Jory, and Rose sat at the table.

Jack took the stool. Mother sat in her fireside chair.

Beran refused a chair, staring at his bowl of stew in one hand and the wooden spoon in the other as though he could not remember how to use either.

“You may eat on the steps if you wish,” I suggested. I understood his discomfort. He turned away to sit on the steps down to the garden.

“We cannot let him eat alone,” protested Rose.

“He feels awkward,” I said. “It will take time to get used to living as a man and not a bear.”

“He shall soon learn,” said Sir Oswain. “But he must be clothed before we journey back to the palace on the morrow.”

“On the morrow!” I said, appalled. “You cannot take him to the city so soon, he needs time to recover!”

“His father would wish it,” said Sir Oswain. He looked at Rose. “The king will be anxious to have both his children returned to him without an hour’s delay.”

“My father the king,” said Rose wonderingly. “It does not seem real. The palace. The city. Oh, Lily, what a new life we shall have.”

“We?” I said.

Dusk had deepened into night, and my faerie lamp rested between me and Jack, giving us light to eat by.

The cooking fire flickered over Mother, and the table held one of our beeswax candles, casting soft yellow light between Rose and Sir Oswain.

The shutters above me were wide open to the balmy evening air.

A rose growing around the window twined inside, brushing my forehead with velvety petals, as though welcoming me home.

The margool had wolfed down stew and oatcakes and now lay curled up like a cat before the fire.

“Yes,” said Rose. “Us. Me and you.”

Her expression shifted to dismay as she saw my look and realised what it meant. I did not say the words aloud, for I did not want to dampen the happiness of the homecoming. But Rose knew my thoughts: I did not belong in a city. I did not belong in a palace. I only belonged right where I was.

We ate until we could eat no more, then exchanged stories of all we had done and seen since we were separated.

It was a festive evening, and the spruce beer did not run out—I suspected some kind of charm upon the flagon.

I was beginning to notice all manner of small magic in Mother’s ways and doings.

I wondered that I had not noticed it before.

Beran sat beside me after dinner, listening to our conversations as though trying to discern a foreign language, watching everyone talk and laugh. His hand sought mine, and I let him take it.

Sir Oswain was the first to rise. “I must leave you ladies and retire for the night.”

“Where are you going?” Rose asked.

“To see if any of my men have waited for me at our encampment.”

“But you will not find your way to the meadows in the dark,” she said.

“You may borrow my lamp,” I offered .

“But what if your encampment is not there?” said Rose. “I have not seen any of your men.”

“Come up to the treehouse,” said Jack. Then he turned to Jory. “You been sleeping there?”

“No,” said Jory. “But I’m ready to try the climb now you’re here to push me up.”

“Beran may have his old spot on the rug,” I said.

“The crown prince sleeping on the floor?” said Sir Oswain, appalled.

“He can come up to our treehouse,” offered Jack. “ ’Tis mortal comfy,” he promised. “The leaves whisper you to sleep. Don’t they, Jory?”

“I suppose one night in the open must be endured,” said Sir Oswain, making an apologetic bow of the head to the prince. “Tomorrow we shall journey to the palace and seek better accommodation on the road.”

“Don’t warrant even a palace bed would be as good as our treehouse,” said Jack.

I quite agreed.

Beran rose and followed the others. Sir Oswain bid us good night.

Jack waved cheerily. Beran turned at the door to look back at me.

He made a low growl. I knew he was trying to speak, and I knew he was frustrated that he could not form the words easily.

I smiled reassuringly and replied, “Good night, my friend.”

I watched them go. The lamplight Sir Oswain carried bobbed up and down as he sauntered away, a little merry from the spruce beer.

Rose stood beside me. She gave a little sigh as the garden gate clicked shut, and I closed the door.

“You go up to bed,” she said sweetly. “You look fit to drop. I shall wash the supper

dishes. ”

I did not argue. I tried to thank her, but could only yawn, so she pushed me toward the ladder.

The call of our cockerel roused me next morning, and I hurried down to the garden, eager to watch the dawn break, and listen to the birdsong.

The margool sniffed around the garden. The bees in the meadow began their work, our hens emerged from their roosts, our gentlemanly cockerel fussing over them and flapping his wings at the margool and explaining vociferously that all the hens were his.

Jenny brayed for attention, so I took her and the goats a helping of oats from the sack in our pantry. The goats butted the margool away, and I scolded them for being jealous. Jenny only flicked her ears at the new arrival, she was more interested in her breakfast.

I returned to the cottage to find Jory perched on a stool, wincing as Mother applied ointment to his leg wound.

Jack was making himself useful by stacking up armfuls of logs at the side of our fireplace.

Rose was stirring the porridge. I had picked two roses, one red and one white, and I put them in a little jug in the centre of the breakfast table.

“Where is Beran?” I asked.

“Gone with Sir Oswain,” said Jack.

“They’ve left already?” I felt my stomach twist. Surely Beran would not leave without saying goodbye?

“Gone to the encampment to see who’s there.”

“His name is Eadric ,” said Rose.

“ Prince Eadric,” added Jack.

“He’s still Beran,” I said, sinking onto a chair, the quiet pleasure of the morning overshadowed by the coming separation. “He will be gone forever soon, so it hardly matters what I call him.”

Rose put a bowl of steaming porridge before me, but I had suddenly lost my appetite.

The cottage doors were wide open to let in the mild, fragrant air.

A shadow fell across the doorway, and I looked up to see a tall, broad figure filling the frame.

I stared as a handsome man with a neat, close beard, dressed in a belted tunic, riding boots and breeches, walked in.

His dark hair was still long, but now it was neatly tied back, falling in smooth waves like Rose’s rather than bedraggled locks.

“Beran?” I exclaimed softly, getting up to meet him.

“You look princely ,” said Rose approvingly, bestowing a kiss on his cheek.

I wanted to kiss him in greeting too, but a deep wave of shyness came over me, so I



sat back down. I could not emulate Rose's sisterly kiss; I did not feel sisterly at all toward this tall, imposing man.

Sir Oswain beamed, full of what he considered good news . I sat in increasing dismay as he told of the six loyal men who had waited for him at camp, and how pleased he was that his horse had been recovered.

“We have no sidesaddle, my lady,” said Sir Oswain to Rose, “but if Your Highness would permit the temporary inconvenience, I offer you a seat on Ablican.

He is sixteen hands high and will bear both of us if we journey slowly.

Your brother, His Highness, is the most proper escort for you, but he is an inexperienced rider, and your safety would be compromised.

“One of my men has already set off for the palace to take the news to the king. I expect to be met on the road with a carriage, guards, and every convenience. The king will not delay in dispatching a retinue to meet you and His Highness.”

“Why not wait until the carriage arrives?” I suggested, feeling a rush of dislike for Sir Oswain. “ You go and meet the retinue.”

Sir Oswain looked to Rose. “Whatever you wish, my lady, that is what shall be done.”

Rose's eyes had that dreamy look. “I should like to set forth,” she said. “And there is no one I would trust more with my comfort and safety than you, Sir Oswain.”

I got up in disgust and went out to the back garden to sit on the mossy stone by the henhouse, my head on my knees.

A strong arm rested across my back, and I turned to shed hot tears onto Beran's shoulder.

"I'm fine," I mumbled. "I'm just sad that Rose can't wait to leave us, and I'm cross with Sir Oswain for hurrying her away, and... I did not think you would be gone from me like this."

Beran struggled to sound out words. I listened patiently, watching the look of intense concentration on his face as he forced his mind to make human language.

"Go—fa-ther," he said, pointing to himself, then gesturing westward where the road lay.

"I understand," I said, still sniffing. "You want to see your father. Of course you do."

He pointed at me. "Co-me," he said, the word drawn out slowly in a growl. He pointed to himself. "Wi-th m-e."

I shook my head sorrowfully. "I cannot leave Mother. I don't belong in a city, Beran. I would pine away. I know I would."

There was nothing more to say. We sat for a long time, my head on his shoulder, his arm around me, until Jack came to find us and tell us that all was ready. It was time to go.

The horses stood harnessed in the bridle track outside our gate.

Jack and Jory were to ride a pair of mules left behind by the fleeing party of rough men before the border had opened.

Their mounts looked unfavourable compared to the sleek horses of Sir Oswain's

stable, but Jack did not care.

He laughed that it would be a slower ride than on a faerie queen's steed.

"Sir Oswain wants us there when we present the crown to the king," he said, his eyes shining. "Says we should have a share in the king's thanks. What a grand fellow he is, to be sure! Of course, you should be there too, Miss Lily. Sure you won't come? Wish you would."

I shook my head.

His eyes clouded. "Shall miss you, Miss Lily. You're the bravest girl I know. Won't ever forget you. Try not to forget me."

"I will never forget you, Jack, son of Jago."

Mother had woven a fresh wreath of red roses for Rose to wear.

"Wait," I said, and I ran to gather an armful of roses, red and white—one of each for every rider.

"Will it stop me getting travel sick?" joked Jack as I tucked two stems into the clasp of his cloak.

I could not answer, for I was struggling to keep back tears. I gave Jory his roses, hugged him, and wished him well. I even managed to overcome my annoyance with Sir Oswain long enough to shake his hand and wish him a safe journey.

I knew Rose was waiting to speak to me.

"Thank you for the cloak," she said, fingering the soft, strong, faerie-made cloak I

had given her for the journey. “It is infinitely better than our homespun ones.”

“I would like it back,” I said. “For you won’t need it when you get your new wardrobe.”

She gave a little laugh.

“Send it with news,” I added. “I will be longing to know how you are. Promise?”

“Of course. I promise. I shall send a courier to you. Oh, Lily, won’t you come with me? A whole new life awaits us!”

“I cannot leave Mother, even if I wished to leave, which I don’t.”

“Then I shall come and visit you very often if you will not come to me.”

I forced a smile and nodded, but I knew it was unlikely she would return often, if at all. Her world would become far larger, and busier.

We hugged, and I squeezed my eyes tightly shut. I felt something soft falling on me, and we drew apart and looked up as a shower of red petals rained gently down upon us.

“Thank you,” she said to the red roses that had protected her all her life. “Farewell.”

She dashed away tears as she took Sir Oswain’s waiting arm and let him lead her to his horse.

Beran had waited until last.

I could hardly stand any more goodbyes. I felt as though my insides were being

grazed by a sea monster or pierced with a dwarf lord's sword, nothing I had known of danger or discomfort in the past days compared to this sudden and horrible sense of loss, except for those long minutes when I had thought Beran lost to me forever.

He might yet be lost to me forever .

He reached for me, but I stepped back, shaking my head. Red petals floated to the ground.

“If you hold me,” I said thickly, “I won't be able to let you go.”

He made a groaning, low growl. I could distinguish the word Li-ly , but that was all.

I could not look at him, for I knew his eyes would beseech me to change my mind. But I could no more leave Mother alone than he could fail to go to his father.

He rode away with half my heart. My other half was bound to my home.

Could I live with half a heart?

I would have to.

Rose tried to look back, but Sir Oswain's cloaked shoulder obscured her view.

I stood at the gate, red petals still falling down upon me, until I could no longer hear the hoofbeats of the horses.

Mother led me slowly back to the cottage.

The garden was strewn with a carpet of scarlet. On the walls and thatched roof, around the doors and windows, twined white roses.

But not a single red rose remained.

### Autumn

Mother and I did not talk much in the days that followed Rose's departure, for our loss was raw.

She kept me busy. Too busy to give way to grief. I was glad of it. I knew if I let grief have its head, it would charge away, out of control; better to work hard and be too tired to think. Better to be weary and fall asleep at the end of the long summer days.

Life went on as usual. We foraged, I milked the goats, gathered eggs, brushed Jenny, tended the garden, chopped wood, cooked, and studied.

Mother went out on her solitary walks, checking the border.

In the evenings, I read aloud while she spun goat's hair and smoked her pipe.

Sometimes she told stories, but not Rose's favourites.

Outwardly, all carried on as usual, but inwardly, everything was different. Several days passed before I could speak Rose's name for the first time. I still could not speak Beran's name yet.

"I wonder if Rose has reached the palace," I mused one evening, letting my knitting drop into my lap and watching a moth fly in through the window to dance around the faerie lamp on the table beside me.

"If she was taken up by carriage, she would have arrived some time ago," said

Mother. She glanced over at me from her chair. “You miss her.”

I sighed. “Nights are the worst.”

I had never slept alone. Rose was always there to talk to before we went to sleep.

“Fetch me the book.” Mother nodded at our two bookshelves. “The one at the top.”

“The locked book?” I said in surprise.

As children Rose and I had wondered about The Book , imagining what lay in the pages of the mysterious tome that we were not permitted to read. Rose had imagined it full of secret beauty recipes. I imagined it full of stories with pictures too scary for us.

We had attempted to look inside it once.

We dragged the table across the room so I could stand on it and reach up.

But the book had a little lock on it. We marvelled at such a thing as a locked book, the lock so neat and tiny that we knew it must be fae-made.

I had kept an eye out for a tiny key, but I never saw one.

“How did you know it was locked?” asked Mother, but I could tell by the little twinkle in her eyes that she knew the answer.

“I was a very inquisitive child, was I not?”

I looked around for something to stand on to reach the top shelf. My eye fell upon the margool.



“Help me,” I said, picking it up. “It’s about time you did something useful. All you do is lie around snoozing and eating oatcakes. Take hold of that book.” I put the margool on my shoulder.

“She understands you very well,” observed Mother, when the margool stretched out its neck and used its muzzle to inch the book from the shelf, fluttering its wings to gain a little extra height. I caught the book as it slid into my arms.

“She?” I said, handing her the heavy book and pulling up a stool so I could sit beside her. “How do you know it’s a she?”

Mother took a little key from one of her many pockets, and the lock opened with the softest of clicks. I held my breath, feeling like an inquisitive child again as I watched her turn the cover. Long years of curiosity were about to be satisfied.

She searched through a section, then laid the pages flat so I could see, pointing to an ink drawing.

“A margool,” I said, examining the drawing. I read aloud the description beneath, written in a careful hand:

Maioir-ghaol. A sanguine, omnivorous creature, frequently mistaken for a juvenile member of the draco family, bearing metallurgical properties, and a powerful negater of untoward magic.

The male maioir-ghaol is discerned by its red eyes. The female is smaller than her male counterpart, with amber eyes. Only one or two eggs are laid in the maioir-ghaol’s lifetime, thus rendering it a rare creature, not commonly seen.

The maioir-ghaol habitually bonds with a mortal who is marked. The chosen one enjoys the benefits of the maioir-ghaol, such as protection from untoward magic and

the discernment of precious metals, frequently employed to gain wealth.

I lifted my eyes from the book to look with fresh interest at my margool. She had resumed her spot on the rug, curled up like a sleeping cat or a long-tailed fox.

“A mortal who is marked,” I said. “What does that mean?”

“Fae-marked,” said Mother.

“Am I fae-marked?”

“You are a Rose Daughter.”

“So is Rose, but she does not have a margool. Nor does she have any roses.”

“Her roses were temporal. For her protection. And she did not save a margool’s life.”

“Are mine temporal?”

“They are yours as long as you abide here.”

“Why would I ever leave? You could never leave either.” I looked up at Mother.

“Could you?”

Mother took out her pipe and tobacco pouch. I watched as she packed her pipe bowl. I knew she was packing it slowly because she wanted to gain time as she decided how to answer me. A sinking sensation began to stir in me.

She sat back in her chair.

“Before my assignment as guardian to Princess Elaine,” she began, “I was assigned

as guardian of the woodlands along the border.”

I already knew this.

“It was a humble posting. It did not require much of me. My guardianship over the princess was far more weighty. Now it is completed, and the Council is promoting me.”

I waited again while Mother lit her pipe. She did not light a twig from the embers but ignited it with a flicker of her fingers. I watched in fascination, wondering again how I could have missed all the little signs of magic around me as I grew up.

“Are they going to give you a wand?” I asked, thinking of Amara and how she had wielded stolen magic.

“I already have one. ”

“You do? Where?”

She wagged the pipe in her mouth.

I stared at it. “You smoke your wand?”

“I smoke out of it. It is usual for godmothers to disguise their wands. Unless they are royal or great-godmothers, who are prone to showiness. Most godmothers turn their wands into a walking stick or staff. I knew one who kept hers as a rolling pin. She said it made the best pastry.”

“Do they mind?”

“Who?”

“The Council. Do they mind you turning your wand into a pipe?”

Her eyes twinkled. “How would they know? It makes an excellent pipe. It was Mother Vetch and her rolling pin that gave me the idea.”

I brought the conversation back to the most important part, though I was apprehensive of the answer.

“So, how is the Council promoting you?”

Mother shifted her pipe to the other side of her mouth, her words twining with little spirals of smoke.

“With a new assignment. In the north. I shall have the honour of studying under Great Godmother Angelica, a renowned healer and guardian of the northern forest.”

“That certainly sounds like a promotion from a woodland cottage,” I said quietly.  
“When do you leave?”

“Soon.”

I felt a flash of irritation. Why could Mother never give me a straight answer?

And why was I so easy for everyone to leave?

I closed the book in my lap, intending to go out for a solitary walk, for there was a full moon, and my thoughts and feelings were too loud for sitting still. Mother’s hand on my arm stayed me.

“I do not want to leave you, Lily. But I cannot refuse the Council. I am subject to their orders. That was the choice I made as a godmother. But as my ward, you can

come with me. If you choose.”

I glanced up, the crinkling of the lines around her eyes visible to me at such proximity.

I met those steady eyes with irises the colour of acorn shells tinged with mossy green, holding that unusual blend of humour, wisdom, and cool detachment.

I had never entertained the thought of living anywhere else.

But then, I had never thought I would be alone.

“What about the border here?”

“A new guardian will come.”

“And live here? In our cottage?”

Mother leaned back again. “You could be the new guardian, if you wish it,” she said quietly. “The queen has acknowledged you as a Rose Daughter. The Council will accept you on those grounds.”

“Because it is only a humble posting,” I said dryly. “I am not a godmother. I have no magic.”

“You have grown up eating and drinking in the midst of magic. And you were always very sensitive to it, even as a baby.” She leaned forward again to lift a strand of my long, white hair. “You have not met many people in the world, Lily. You do not know how unusual you are.”

“Is white hair so unusual?”

“It is not common. Neither is your affinity with the woodland, nor your sensitivity to magic. It would not surprise me one whit to learn that you have woodland fae in your ancestry.”

I stared at her. This was a new thought altogether.

I did feel a strong affinity with the woodlands.

I loved every leaf, every stone, every shift in the seasons as the land shed one garment and put on another.

But if I was the result of a forbidden union between mortal and fae...

Mother seemed to read my thoughts, for she interrupted them, saying, “Whatever the circumstances surrounding your birth, Lily, it does not change who you are. You are good, and you are loved.”

We sat in silence for some minutes. The air felt heavy with change.

“You can go to Rose,” said Mother. “You will always have a home where she is, if you choose it. And... Beran is there.”

I winced at his name.

“Three choices lie before you, Lily.”

I turned these three choices over in my mind. Pain lay in all of them.

“If I were to leave here,” I said slowly, “it would be like uprooting a tree. One that does not survive being planted in foreign soil.”

Mother nodded. "I have thought the same about you." An uncommon look of sadness passed over her face.

"I did not know it would end like this, Lily. I have thought over and over whether I should have done differently by you. Perhaps I ought not to have kept you. Perhaps I should have given you up to some village woman to raise. You might have had a family then. A real family."

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:36 am*

I considered this while Mother finished her pipe. I knew she was waiting for me to make a decision. But there was no real choice for me.

“I will stay,” I said at last. “I cannot leave. I would not survive an uprooting, not in the city with Rose, not in a northern forest with you. I will be the new woodland guardian. I have my margool. I have Jenny, and the goats, and the hens. That must be enough. And, Mother,” I added, waiting for her to meet my eyes, “I am glad you kept me. I don’t wish for any childhood other than the happy one I had with you and Rose.”

Mother exhaled softly.

“Then I will teach you the ways of a guardian. Open that book. At the beginning. Everything you need to know is in those pages. Study. Study diligently. There is much to learn, and not much time. Tomorrow you will come with me, and I will show you what to do.”

If I had thought Mother kept me busy in the days following the departure of Rose and Beran, it was nothing compared to the busyness of the weeks that followed.

She woke me before dawn to begin long days of tramping the border of Faerie, followed by evenings of study from the book.

There was an urgency to these weeks. I suspected she should have left for the north already and was delaying her departure to instill in me years of knowledge condensed into a few short months.



She was patient, but relentless in driving me on.

If I had not been a willing novice, I would have crumbled under such rigour.

But I walked mile after mile, learning to distinguish between the signs and markings of woodland birds and creatures, and those of Faerie that had crossed over.

I learned to follow the tracks of fae, looking for evidence of enchantments or curses laid down like traps.

And when I did find a spell, I learned how to detach it, like pulling apart the threads of a spider's web, tossing it back over the border and cleansing the tree, bush, or ground of any stray strands of untoward magic.

I did this by speaking to it, ordering it to come into line with the law of the Faerie queen, who did not permit untoward magic outside the border, in accordance with the agreement between the kingdoms.

I had always been sensitive to glamours, but my sight sharpened as I developed it. I could now spot a glamour cast over anything, even the most innocuous-looking beetle could be a pesky little sprite looking to cause mischief.

Wherever we went, Mother announced to all that I was the new guardian of the border, bearing a rose crown as my sign of authority.

The margool was no longer a useless, oatcake-stealing pet.

She was invaluable to me in her absorption of untoward magic, particularly when I encountered an overwhelming amount, such as an illicit faerie ring, created for nights of revelry outside the Faerie calendar.

She would absorb all the tangled webs of magic enmeshed in the dancing, allowing me to disentangle it without the creeping compulsion to dance and dance until my legs collapsed, as poor Rose had nearly done under the sorcery of Amara.

I thought I caught a glimpse of Amara once, beyond a crop of saplings over the border.

She looked like an old crone, bent and shuffling along, foraging for wild mushrooms. She saw me, and we stared across the boundary.

When her gaze fell on the margool, she grimaced.

When she saw my rose crown, she winced and shuffled away.

I also saw the roamer with his swaying cart and stubby horse, encamping in different spots. Doubtless, he had loaded up on pilfered goods, ready to sell to gullible mortals. He would leave for town before the season turned.

But while my world grew larger with my new labours and studies, my heart still mourned.

The last thing I thought of as I lay in my lonely bed was of Rose and Beran—what they were doing, how they were faring.

I told myself they were where they belonged, and I was where I belonged. But it did not comfort me much.

Mother did not rouse me before dawn as usual; instead I woke to see the sunshine creeping across the walls, and I knew by the colour of the light that the last day of summer had passed away in the night. Today was the beginning of autumn.

I scrambled out of bed and hastened down the ladder. Mother was ladling out porridge, but I saw her cloak and bag by the front door, and the bag was packed.

“Just in time,” said Mother, placing a bowl of porridge on the step to the garden. The margool pounced on it before it had time to cool.

“Where are you going?” I demanded.

She glanced at me as she moved to the table, but did not meet my eyes. “Are you going to breakfast in your shift?”

“You’re leaving. Aren’t you?”

She sat down. “Lily,” she said quietly, and I could hear the persuasive magic in her words. “Don’t make this more difficult.” She nodded at my bowl. “Come and eat with me. Please.”

I sat down, but a lump rose in my throat, and I could not swallow anything .

“I am sorry,” said Mother, still in that quiet way. “I will come back and see you.”

“When?”

“When the snow melts from the forest and I can travel.”

“Spring?”

“Late spring. I hope.”

Seven or eight months seemed an aeon.

“Go to Rose if you find it too lonely,” Mother reminded me. “Ride Jenny into town and hire a courier to take a letter to her. She will not delay in sending a carriage for you.”

This mention of Rose only tightened the lump in my throat, especially as it was painfully entwined with thoughts of Beran.

Why am I so easy to leave?

“Why aren’t you taking Jenny? You have a long journey. Too far to walk.”

“A carriage is coming for me.”

“A carriage?”

“Something like a carriage. More of a sleigh.”

“A sleigh? In autumn?”

“Not a usual sleigh. The guardian of the north has high magic at her disposal.”

There was a strange sound outside. I glanced toward the window. It was a golden day, with only the slightest breeze, so why did it sound as though a great gale was roaring through the trees in the distance?

Mother was listening too. “Here it is!” She got up hastily. “One cannot keep a great godmother, or her carriage, waiting.”

I hurried after her. The sound of the wind grew tempestuous, as though a giant were trampling through the woods, shaking the trees. The margool shot past us through the open door, eager to see what was happening.

“Have a care! Have a care!” squawked the jackdaw before diving for cover. Our bees hastened away to their hive in the meadow.

“What is it?” I marvelled, watching as the treetops shook and clouds of woodland birds fled with noisy calls to their nests.

Mother was too busy fastening her cloak to answer. At the top step, she turned and clasped my face in her large hands.

“Never go out without your rose crown,” she urged. “I have left some small magic around the cottage and garden to aid you.”

She kissed me firmly on the forehead, and I felt the magic of her blessing imprint upon me. Then she hurried down the steps and along the path to the gate, her cloak billowing behind her.

I could not follow, for the wind was too strong. It pinned me in place as though to bar my approach.

As the gale descended, I saw the form of a sleigh pulled by a pair of winged creatures—half horse, but with the heads and wings of large birds of prey.

Even from where I stood, I could feel the strong magic flowing like invisible waves.

I shivered and crossed my arms over myself, for the air had grown sharply cold.

Something soft brushed my cheek, and I looked up to see a feather-light fall of snow.

Mother stepped into the sleigh as the creatures stamped their hooves. She had barely settled, pulling a thick fur covering over herself, before the creatures shook out their powerful wings and began to rise. Snowflakes swirled as the wind lifted with them,

shaking the branches of the trees.

She was gone. Leaves showered down onto the woodland floor, and the snowflakes, glinting in the early autumn sunshine, melted away.

“Gone, gone,” squawked the jackdaw, hopping out from its shelter and shaking snow from his black feathers. Where the sleigh had been, a flush of snowdrops remained.

She was gone.

I gave my porridge to the margool and cried.

### Old Friends

It was the end of September. I awoke suddenly to the sound of someone sobbing. I sat up, listening hard. Who had been crying? I could hear nothing except the soft snore of the margool down below. I was confused. I felt my cheeks. They were damp. I had been dreaming of Beran again.

But it was not the old dream of him in chains, nor of the dark-haired man dying in my arms. In this dream, he morphed between man and bear in that strange way things happen in dreams. Always there was some form of separation between us, a chasm, or a river too wide to cross.

Sometimes I would see him in the distance and run after him, calling his name, but he never looked back, and I could never reach him.

I dressed, fed the animals, and milked the goats. I was finding evidence of the charms Mother had left for me all over the cottage and our land. There was one on the corn barrel and another on the sack of oats, for no matter how many cupfuls I scooped out, they never diminished .

There was a charm on the axe by the woodpile so that every log split effortlessly into the perfect size for my grate. There were charms all over the cottage to keep things neat, clean, and orderly. Even the knitting needles Rose had left behind were charmed to never drop a stitch.

Mother had thought of everything. But that only made me miss her all the more.

I checked the border. It was a quick morning's work, for I found nothing to repair or undo.

As I neared home, the sky darkened, and rain began to fall, heavy and sudden.

I had forgotten my cloak, so I shimmied up the guardian tree to wait out the shower.

Its thick canopy of broad, evergreen leaves made a kindly shelter, and the patter of rain on the leaves sounded like a lullaby.

The water-loving margool stayed below, exulting in the rain shower.

I had not visited my treetop den for many weeks.

I had been too busy, first with Mother, and lately with autumnal foraging.

I sat with my back against the trunk, noticing the little signs of Jack and Jory's prior habitation: a fishing hook, a wooden spoon, and Jory's whittling knife.

I picked it up, running my fingers over the wooden handle with a letter J carved into it, and wondered how they were.

Our adventures in Faerie seemed half a lifetime ago.

I thought back to the first time I had set eyes on young Jack—thin, hungry, and ready to rush headlong into Faerie. I remembered evenings by the fire, listening to Jory's tales, Mother spinning or smoking, Rose sewing or knitting.

The rain ceased, and a gleam of golden sunlight broke through the branches, turning the raindrops into countless tiny jewels. When we were children we'd pretended they were diamonds, to be threaded onto string for a necklace. I sighed heavily.



This heaviness would not do. Perhaps I should go to Rose for the winter?

Would the confinements of courtly life be better or worse than my lonely woodland home?

Perhaps I did have woodland fae in my blood, binding me to this place, but I had all the mortal needs for friendship and family, and I felt them acutely.

I looked over the willow walls to the view below. I had not grown used to seeing my cottage without the bright, red roses clambering over its walls.

The rooster emerged from the bushes, crowing for his ladies to come out now that the downpour had passed. I could not see Jenny and the goats in the meadow, for they had sought shelter in their wattle-and-daub stable.

Above me, a pair of squirrels began chattering excitedly, joined by an extended family of starlings. I listened absently, until my heart quickened with excitement at their words—for they were speaking of someone coming .

Shielding my eyes from the shaft of midday sun, I peered toward the road from town.

The animals were right—someone was coming.

Someone riding either a donkey or a small horse.

It was too far away to tell, but they were moving quickly.

Joy bubbled up in my chest—for the squirrels and birds were not speaking of a stranger coming—they were speaking of a friend.

I ran down the bridle track past my cottage.

“ Have a care ! Have a care !” squawked the jackdaw, as the margool’s wings knocked him from his perch as she flew past.

My first wild, wondrous thought was that it was Beran—but even before I saw the lanky figure waving at me from the saddle of a horse, I knew it could not be him—crown princes did not come riding alone across the countryside.

“Miss Lily!” called Jack, his face beaming.

He urged his horse forward and soon met me, though his mount did not take kindly to the margool flitting about her head. The horse reared up sharply, and Jack yelped—“Whoa ! Easy !”—before falling unceremoniously from the saddle. He narrowly missed a bramble patch and landed in a clump of sedge.

He scrambled to his feet and shook his fist at his horse, but then he laughed at himself as he said, “Was going to ride up to your cottage looking as fine as a new pin, Miss Lily, and impress you with my neat little filly and my new toggery!” He threw out his arms to show off his well-cut surcoat, trimmed with fur and fastened with large brass buttons.

The feather in his hat was a little spoiled, hanging limply down.

“Got caught in a shower,” said Jack, trying to shake his feather dry before replacing his hat.

“You do look fine, Jack!” I exclaimed, laughing in turn. “And this is a very pretty horse, it’s not her fault she’s never seen a margool before!”

I caught hold of the horse’s bridle while Jack retrieved his hat.

“Oh, Jack, I am happy to see you! Come home and sup with me!”

Jack led his horse along the track while I almost skipped beside him. How badly I missed company!

“You still look like a prince!” I said. “Where is that skinny, underfed urchin I met last spring?”

“Oh, what it is to never be hungry!” Jack cried cheerfully. “I’m as rich as a lord, Miss Lily! The king heaped such rewards on us! We’ve got a mortal fine house and land and stable! We’ve got servants, and I could have a carriage if I wanted one, but I don’t, for I like to ride.”

“And how is Rose?” I asked. “And Jory and Sir Oswain, and...” My voice wavered a fraction, but Jack didn’t seem to notice. “...and Ber—Prince Eadric?”

“Princess Elaine is more beautiful than ever.” Jack sighed, the old lovestruck glow lighting his eyes.

“I’ve got a letter from her to give you, and she said to send it with all her love.

Jory’s leg still gives him some trouble, so he can’t walk far, but he’s ordered himself the best carriage that can be made, and he’s always at court, hobnobbing with the courtiers and flirting with the ladies.

Sir Oswain is always at court too, and the king has made him a duke, so he’s Lord Somershire now.

Jory says that though Princess Elaine could have her pick of any man in the kingdom, it’s Lord Somershire she lets squire her about, so the gossip is there’s a marriage in the offing—especially seeing as she’s taken to wearing a ruby ring, the colour of a red rose, that Lord Somershire gave her. ”

“And the prince?” I prompted. “How does he get on?”

“Terrible.”

“How so? Why? What is wrong? Is he unwell? Tell me!”

“He just can’t get along with courtly life, Miss Lily. He’s come a long way with learning speech, but he can’t make a princely speech, and Jory says there’s a deal of gossip at court about how bear-like he still is.”

“Well, what do they expect?” I said, full of indignation at the gossips and courtiers. “He’s spent most of his life living as a bear!”

“In short, Miss Lily, he told his father he couldn’t be king after him. ”

“Couldn’t be king? But what will happen?”

“Princess Elaine will take the crown when the king dies. Not that anyone wants the king to die, of course, but since his children have come home and the crown’s been returned to the kingdom, the old king’s like a new man.”

“The king has agreed? He has let Ber—Prince Eadric relinquish the crown to his sister?”

“The court, the parliament, and all the people are happy as a court jester about it. No one wants a king that growls like a bear and still has a wild look about him, even though he’s been spruced up.

” Jack shrugged. “Even the ladies say he’s too wild, but Jory says they only say that ’cause he won’t show any interest in any of them. ”

“But what will he do?”

“Do? Why, he says he’s going home . ”

I shook my head, feeling confused. “But he is home.”

Jack grinned. “He will be. His horse threw a shoe, so he left it at the smithy in town, but he told me to go on ahead, prepare the way for him. He’s a half-hour behind me—perhaps not even that if he rides like the wind once his horse is shod, and knowing him, he’ll ride like a whirlwind!”

I stood still in the middle of the path. Jack looked back at me.

“He’s coming here ?” I said, hardly daring to believe it. My heart began to race.

“Yes! Did I—?”

I did not wait to hear any more. I turned around, then spun back, saying, “I need your horse!”

“Oh! Why? But, of course, let me take off the packs, and—”

“Oh, never mind!” I said, seeing how skittish his horse was with the margool circling above us. And I turned and ran.

My heart pounded in time with my feet and with the words in my head.

He’s coming! He’s coming! —every particle of me shouted as I raced down the track toward the road.

### Vows

I ran as far as the threemilestone that marked the distance to town, and then I had to stop, catching my breath, waiting for my ribs to cease heaving and the fire in my chest to abate.

I perched on the large stone. The margool circled round me, brushing against my legs as though to soothe me. But nothing could tame my anticipation.

It felt like an age, but finally, I felt the soft vibration under my feet. A horse was coming, riding quickly.

I stood on the milestone, waving to catch the approaching rider's attention so he would not thunder past.

His horse was enormous, but it suited Beran, for he was a tall and heavy rider. He saw me and pulled on the reins, not even bringing the mount to a full stop before he leapt from the saddle, taking long, quick strides toward me.

A sudden shyness overtook me as he neared, for this was not my wild, bear-like friend, but a young man, clean-shaven, his black hair neatly cut, his shirt of the finest linen, his tunic embroidered, his cloak lined with velvet, his riding breeches and boots of the finest leatherwork, this was a prince.

But the voice was still Beran's. And the dark eyes meeting my own, as he cupped my blushing face, tilting it toward him, they were Beran's.

“You came back,” I said, which sounded foolish, for it hardly required pointing out.

“I came back,” he agreed.

He still spoke haltingly and gruffly, but his speech had greatly improved.

“Are you glad?” he asked, searching my expression.

“Oh, yes.” I laughed, half with joy, half from nervousness, for I still could not reconcile my childhood friend with this princely man. He seemed to be waiting for me to say or do something. He was as uncertain of me as I was of him. “Yes!” I reassured him. “I am so very glad!”

And he broke into a grin as wide as my own and suddenly scooped me up from the milestone, catching me under my knees and shoulders.

I laughed in surprise. “What are you doing?”

“Taking you home.”

He set me sideways on the saddle, then mounted his horse in a smooth, practised bound. The margool swooped over us, but Beran’s horse, unlike Jack’s, was not so skittish, and only flicked his ears at the creature.

“You look well,” I said, my shyness returning again as I examined his face while he urged his horse into a walking pace. I ran a finger over his smooth cheek, then blushed and dropped my hand.

“You do not,” he said bluntly.

I flinched. What girl in love does not want to look well in her beloved’s eyes ?

A sudden image of ladies in silk gowns and jewels sashaying around the palace flickered in my mind, and I realised I must look like a wild, hoydenish thing in stark contrast to the company he had lately kept.

But the dark eyes examining my features did not express distaste or disappointment.

“You look...” He searched for the right word.

“Wild?” I suggested. “Peasant-ish? Uncivilised?”

He frowned. “Lonely.”

I swallowed. “I have been lonely. I miss Rose and Mother. And you.”

“Me last?”

I took courage and touched his face again, feeling the need to assure myself that he was really here and not some wonderful daydream.

“You most of all.”

“Good. I am not going back.”

I blinked. “Not going home? To your family?”

“You are home, Lily. You are family.”

We may as well have glided home like the margool, for I knew nothing of the rest of the short ride, for I was carried on a bright, floating bubble of joy.

Jack had put his horse in the meadow. His saddle was laid on a chair, and packs of goods littered the cottage floor.



He had been busy laying the little table with food—rolls made of fine white flour, slabs of something he called game pie, sweet, rosy apples, golden quinces, and a fruitcake with a generous slice missing.

“Shall we wait for Mother Hazel?” asked Jack, brushing a cake crumb from his chin before pouring mead into cups .

“Mother is gone,” I said.

“Gone where?”

“Gone north. On a new assignment.”

Jack stared. “You don’t mean to say you’re all alone, Miss Lily!”

“I’m not alone,” I said, taking a sip of mead. It was sweet and thick. I smiled. “You are here.”

I forced myself to eat a little of everything to please Jack, but in truth, my stomach was doing somersaults. I had to keep touching Beran’s sleeve, and when he looked at me questioningly, I said, “I am checking that you are really here.”

Jack handed me a fat letter from Rose, sealed with the letter E encircled by a garland of roses impressed into blue wax. I scanned the lines quickly, eager to read all she had to say. I would read it again and again later, at a leisurely pace.

“It sounds as if everyone adores her,” I said. “She would enjoy that.” I sighed, folding the missive up. “What is the other letter?” I asked, for Jack had taken two large, sealed documents from his pack.

“Not a letter,” said Jack, grinning and sharing a look with Beran that I could not interpret.

I took it, noticing a different imprint in the scarlet wax—the seal of the king.

I unfolded the thick paper with its deckled edges, admiring the beautiful penmanship and elaborate flourishes. I read aloud the words at the top of the page:

“Contract of Marriage .”

I glanced up at Beran. He was watching me carefully.

“It’s for getting hitched,” said Jack, still grinning.

“Can’t read it myself, but Princess Elaine says you just have to sign your name at the bottom there, and His Highness has to put his name there, and I have to put my mark as your witness.

I’ve been learning how to do my name. Can’t do it fancy like these letters, but I can write it. ”

He looked very pleased with himself, and with everyone else.

When I did not respond, but only stared at the document, his grin dimmed.

“You do want to get hitched, don’t you? Princess Elaine said it was important. Said it weren’t the thing for her brother to live with you. Had to be done proper. And,” he added, “said it would make you her sister good and proper, though you were already her sister good and proper in her heart.”

“She said that?” I murmured, feeling tears rising. What a watering pot I was becoming of late!

Beran placed his hand over mine. “Marry me?” he said in his gruff, halting speech.

“You would leave everything?” I asked. “The palace, the fine food and luxury, for life in a cottage?”

Beran struck the table with his palm, making Jack and me jump. He still had not realised his own strength.

“Home,” he said firmly, taking my hand again and squeezing it. “With you. Say yes.”

“Yes,” I said, smiling and crying at the same time. “But don’t squeeze my hand so tight, Beran, you’re not a bear anymore.”

Jack’s grin returned as he handed me a quill and a jar of ink engraved with gliding swans.

“Princess Elaine thought of everything,” he said. “Right down to the ink.”

My hand was a little shaky, but I managed to write Lily of Rose Cottage at the bottom of the document. Beran printed Eadric of Westshires in large, childlike letters .

Jack, his tongue sticking out of the side of his mouth as he concentrated, carefully wrote his name.

“Jack Jago of Lady Rose Acres,” he read proudly. “That’s what we called our land. And the first filly born in my stable shall be Lady Rose, but the second will be named Miss Lily.”

“Thank you, Jack,” I said, touched. “So... is that it? Are we married?”

“All legal and binding! That’s what Princess Elaine says,” Jack declared, folding up the contract. “I’ve got to take it back to the palace.”

“Ring!” Beran said firmly.

“Oh! Yes!” Jack rummaged inside his coat. “Can’t forget that!”

He set a small box on the table. I lifted the lid to reveal a beautiful gold ring, its wide band engraved with roses.

“Princess Elaine had it made,” said Jack. “As a wedding gift.”

“It’s beautiful,” I murmured. “Such exquisite engraving.”

“Only the best artists work for the palace,” Jack assured me.

I held out my hand, which trembled slightly, and let Beran slide the ring onto my wedding finger. He kissed my fingers once it was in place, pulling me toward him.

“Ahem!” Jack coughed, jumping up. “I shall be off now.”

“Off where?” I asked. “You cannot ride back at this hour.”

“Had a hankering to sleep in my old tree house for many a week,” Jack said, snatching up his cloak and bag of belongings. “See you in the morning, Your Highness. Miss Lily—no, I’ll be jiggered!—I daresay I shouldn’t call you Miss Lily now! You’re a highness too! ”

I began to protest against being called anything other than Lily, but Beran had risen and bundled Jack out of the door.

“We’re not quite alone yet,” I said with a nervous laugh, as another enormous wave of shyness rushed over me.

I nodded at the margool, who was curled up on the rug with her belly full of royal delicacies.

I looked again, startled. It was not the old handwoven rug that Rose and I had made as children. It was a large, black bearskin, with splayed paws and an eyeless head.

“You brought your bearskin,” I murmured.

Beran did not answer.

It was only three strides between him and me, and I stood, feeling a little shivery and apprehensive at his approach.

But when he gathered me into his arms, holding me close, I began to relax.

He was not a stranger, this man in fine clothes, smelling of perfumed soap, laundered linen, and the crisp scent of a long ride. He was Beran.

My friend. My husband.

When he pulled back to look at me, I gazed into those familiar eyes the colour of deep autumn, ringed with black.

Eyes that had once stared out at me from an enchanted bear’s face, filled with sorrow and yearning, trying desperately to communicate what his stolen voice could not.

Now his voice was no longer stolen. Now he could tell me in words what I could already read in those eyes.

“I love you, Lily.”

“I love you too,” I whispered as his head drew near to kiss me.