

# Fantastic Tales

**Fantastic Tales, Volume 1**

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FANTASTIC TALES

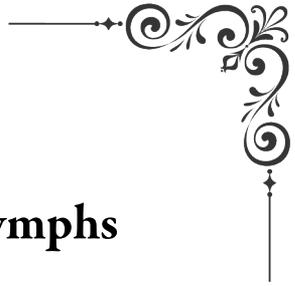
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## The Lord of the Nymphs

‘I’m coming with you.’

‘No, you’re not.’ Her brother sat on the edge of his bed, took up his whetstone and rag and began to sharpen his sword with clean, deft movements. It was once their father’s sword, old and rusty and notched. The hilt was cracked, the grip falling apart, but Jaslyn eyed it enviously.

Sitting on her bed opposite, she dropped her head onto her fist. ‘Why not?’

‘You know why.’

‘If I were a man—’

‘But you’re not a man. You’re a maiden, destined to marry and have children. Not to fight.’

The sharp zing of the sword against the whetstone filled her ears. ‘I’m older than you,’ she said.

‘By one minute. And what does that matter? Chief Druston wants the oldest, able *man* of each household to accompany him. What use does he have of a woman?’

‘Barely a man,’ she pointed out.

He paused in his sharpening. ‘But I am a man nonetheless. With Father dead, I am all there is.’

She sat up straight and clasped her hands to her knees. ‘I am useful. I am skilled with the arrow. I can throw a dagger and pierce an apple over thirty feet away. You’ve seen me.’ She jabbed a finger at him. ‘Let’s see the men in the village do that.’

He looked at her with his mossy green eyes, the same as hers. They were twins: the same dark, wavy hair, the same olive skin, the same full lips. But that was where the similarities ended. When they were children, it was hard to tell them apart. Jaslyn had worn her hair short like Aidan's, and she had been fast and strong, faster and stronger than her little brother. But recently—

Aidan was over a head taller than her now. His shoulders strained against his tunic. His hands were big and strong. It was six months since they had raced each other up the Schofield steps when Aidan had beaten her for the first time.

She looked down at herself, at her long flowing locks her mother never let her cut anymore, at the ample swell of her breasts against her tunic. She wrapped her arms around herself, hating them. They had grown rapidly over the past year, ever since her first blood. Almost as rapidly as Aidan had grown tall. She winced and hugged herself more tightly. The village men were looking at her now, whispering, winking. It wouldn't be long before one of them asked to court her.

Aidan put aside the whetstone and got to his feet. 'Here,' he said, holding out the sword hilt first.

She gazed at him in confusion, then hope. Would he let her go after all? She stood up and grasped it. Her father had never allowed her to touch it. She smiled at him. Then her brother released his grip, and she tripped and stumbled, the full weight of the heavy iron blade yanking her forward. She lost her grip, and the sword clattered to the floor.

'See,' her brother said.

Jaslyn clutched at her strained wrist, tears filling her eyes, not from sadness but from rage. 'It doesn't prove anything!'

'It proves everything!' Giving a sigh, he picked up the sword and went back to his whetting. 'I know you want to protect me, Sister. And I love you for it. But the swamps are no place for a woman.'

'I used to walk them with Father every day.'

‘As did I, but things have changed. Something terrible inhabits them now. If you can’t even lift a sword how do you intend to defeat what’s out there?’

‘An arrow in the eye.’

‘But what if our enemy doesn’t have eyes? Rumour tells it’s a monster, made of the swamp itself.’

She lifted her chin. ‘If that is true, then what of its heart? How can your mighty sword kill it if it hasn’t one?’

He paused in his whetting, his eyes shining with anger. He might be stronger than her now, but she had always outsmarted him. ‘Leave, Sister. This discussion is over.’



THE NEXT MORNING, AIDAN sat astride Iago, the family horse, and left the village behind, one man in a long ribbon of men coiling along the trail that led into the woods. It was a cold, dreary morning. The fog was thick and low, his breath came out in a mist and the ice in the air caught in his hair and crept beneath his gloves, making them wet. He drew his cloak tighter and looked back over his shoulder to see the women of the village gathered and watching. His mother was crying. His sister stood by her side, red-faced, arms folded, looking askance. He turned back and nudged at his mount. The trees loomed overhead. A turn in the path, and the village was lost behind him.

The trail was the surest, quickest route to Daingean, a neighbouring village, and beyond. It had once been used every day, but that was before the mysterious disappearances, before the rumours. For the past three weeks, those who went in didn’t return home.

It was a three-day journey through the woods, the beaten dirt track slippery with ice, threatening to break a horse’s ankle. At each passing hour the path grew grimmer, the trees thicker as they arched overhead and blocked out much of the sunlight. They were halfway through

when the stench of the swamps assailed them, lying thick and heavy on the air.

Aidan shivered and tightened his grip on the reins. They had stopped moving, and he wasn't sure why. The horses stomped their hooves and whickered nervously. The men's eyes darted between each other and the trees. Whispers filled their ears, sweet whispers speaking of soft hands, smooth hair, supple skin. Aidan shifted in his saddle, feeling himself go hard. He pulled reflexively at the reins, making Iago nicker.

'Steady men,' Chief Druston said, a crack in his voice.

They all froze, letting the whisperings brush over their skin like the stroke of a lover's touch.

Chief Druston was the first to climb from his mount. He stood at the edge of the trail, gazing into the trees as though in a trance.

'Chief?' spoke one of the men.

Chief Druston looked over his shoulder, his eyes strangely dark, his hair and beard silver against a spill of sunlight trickling through the leaves. He turned back. He hesitated, took a step, then left the trail, following the whisperings.

There were grunts and scraping and whickering as the rest of them did the same, Aidan too, his heart pounding so hard it thundered in his ears. Hand on the hilt of his sword, he left Iago and his supplies behind and followed Chief Druston and the rest of the men into the woods.

A short distance from the trail, and his feet sank into something warm and wet—the swamps. He yanked out his leg and shook it. He was never meant to leave the trail. The swamps were treacherous, thick and sucking and rancid, and could drag a man under within minutes. And yet—

He peered closer, squinting against the gloom. Beneath the swirl of leaves and woody debris, the water was clear and blue. It looked almost drinkable. And it was so warm. He sighed, heat rising like a wave from

his wet feet to the top of his head, chasing away the bitter cold from his bones.

He hurried ahead, splashing alongside the others, weaving through the trees. His legs tangled in brambles. Sharp branches scratched and poked.

The whisperings were becoming louder, the water deeper, his heart pounded harder. Then he broke into a clearing and stopped at the wondrous sight before him. Gone were the swamps. In their place was a little paradise: sparkling blue water, waterfalls, waterlilies, sunlight cascading onto flawless white skin and shining hair. There were women. And not just ordinary women, but beautiful women—slim and pale and perfect, with long flowing locks that coursed over their shoulders and breasts or sometimes looped around their thighs. They were swimming in the water, giggling, splashing each other, bathing, or lying across exposed rocks or small, muddy islands in all their glorious, beckoning perfection.

Aidan released the hilt of his sword.

Chief Druston was in the water, submerged to the waist, embracing one of them. She giggled and squirmed in his arms as he planted kisses all over her face, his laughter echoing hers.

Aidan unbelted his father's sword, letting it drop into the water. It sank and disappeared. The men around him were doing the same—unbelting, unbuttoning, unbuckling, until their bare skin glowed against the light. Laughing and shouting, they splashed deep into the water.

Aidan found himself in the arms of the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, breasts supple and perfect beneath his hands, lips soft and sweet against his. She had bright green eyes, like the rolling hills on a Spring day. She wrapped her arms and legs around him and buried her face into his chest. She didn't speak, only smiled and giggled. Aidan didn't care, his interest far from conversation. He looked around, found a soft spot to lay her down and slid into her with a cry.

Her hair streamed around her, shining in the sunlight like polished bronze. Vaguely, he heard the laughter, groans and shouts of the others as they took their pleasure. The pressure in his hips and groin built, and he plunged harder until he thought he must have caused her pain, but she only giggled and thrust her hips against him, pulling him deeper inside.

Then the screams came, the shouting, the crying. He looked up. The men were thrashing in the water, drowning, dying. A red blush floated along the surface around him. Something awful was happening. He had to do something, fight, run away, anything. And yet, he kept thrusting, harder and faster, driven by a mad urge he couldn't control or understand. He knew his death was coming and there was nothing he could do about it. He didn't even feel fear, only a dull resignation.

Then he ruptured into her, and the spell broke. The woman was gone, as were the rest of them. There was only the swamp, thick and sucking and rank, just as it was supposed to be. He fought against its grip, head to foot in filth, numb with the freezing cold. But he hadn't the strength, and he was already up to his chest.

The others' shouts and screams filled his ears. There was a terrible gurgling as someone was pulled under. He tried to swim, tried to thrust himself desperately to the surface, hands clawing at the muck, at the empty air, but it was to no avail. He was up to his chin now. He craned his neck, looked blindly into the overarching branches above, as he gasped his last breaths.



IT WAS LATE INTO THE night, and Jaslyn was standing at her bedroom window gazing towards the woods. It had been four days since her brother and the rest of the village men left to confront whatever horror was lurking within. They should have been back by now.

She sat on her brother's bed. Tears filled her eyes at the sound of her mother's sobbing coming through the thin walls. She gripped her

knees, her nails digging into her skin. She would be brave. She would search the woods, fight the monster and win. Wiping her face, she got to her feet and stood once more at the window. She felt no fear, only determination and resolve.

She would bring her brother back or die trying.

After writing her mother a note, Jaslyn left before first light, before her mother should wake and try to stop her. With the family's only horse vanished along with her brother, she would go on foot, a pack full of provisions at her back, quiver and bow over her shoulder, dagger at her hip. It was a warmer morning than when her brother left. Nevertheless, her nerves had set in, and she trembled.

It was a long walk, and lonely. There had been no rain to wash away the hoofprints of Chief Drustons's party, and her throat swelled at the sight of them. Which ones were from Aidan?

There had been no surprises all day until late afternoon when there came the sound of something large moving through the woods: branches snapped, bushes ruffled, something snuffled. Jaslyn froze and reached for her bow.

She braced herself, arrow at the ready, string pulled tautly. Then the 'monster' revealed itself, and she lowered her bow, laughing in relief. It was a horse, doubtless from Chief Drustons's party, bridled and saddled and unscathed, if a little jittery.

Jaslyn put aside her bow and opened her pack.

'Here,' she said, holding out an apple. It was a young chestnut mare, and she snatched the apple from Jaslyn's fingers. Jaslyn patted her on the nose. 'Good girl.'

From then, Jaslyn's journey was swift, the mare tired but strong as she carried her the rest of the way.

The trees grew thick and tall the further she travelled. The darkness grew. She clutched at the mare's reins, shivers rushing down her spine. She didn't like this, and for the first time began to doubt herself. Just

like Aidan said, what was she going to do with just a bow and a dagger against a monster?

She gasped at a sudden whispering in the air. It seemed to come from everywhere. She spun the mare in circles, trying to determine the source.

‘Who’s there?’ she called.

They were masculine voices, deep and resonating, and dare she think it—desirable. The whisperers were somewhere close, waiting for her, ready to sweep her in their arms and protect her from the unknown. She got down from her horse.

As she left the trail, she hissed and yanked out her left foot when it sank ankle deep in warm water. Her father had told her never to stray from the path, but the whisperers beckoned, and she splashed ahead.

She stopped with a gasp. So much beauty: the gleaming water, the bright sunlight, the flowers and waterlilies strewn across the surface. And the water was so warm she could have laid down and floated away.

Her heart fluttered at the sight of a man standing tall and broad and beautiful in the middle of it all. He had long brown hair cascading down his back, a beard neatly clipped. He had a strong jaw, a kind face and eyes that shone as they bore deep into hers.

‘Who are you?’ she asked.

He didn’t respond.

She readied her bow and nocked an arrow, aiming at his left eye. ‘I said, who are you?’

He held out his hands and stepped towards her, barely making a ripple in the water, as though he were a part of it. She drew back her arrow, and he stopped.

He was naked, and Jaslyn blushed at the sight of his manhood, standing as tall and broad as the rest of him. He wanted her, and it made her heart thunder madly. She gasped as a sudden heat coursed through her body. Her grip on the bow weakened, shook. She became

sticky between the legs. He was still holding out his arms and they looked warm and strong and comforting.

She took a breath and tried to harden her grip, but the bow slipped from her trembling fingers. It dropped into the water with a soft plunk. She couldn't do it. She couldn't resist him. Horror washed through her at the thought of what she was about to do. After all her promises to her mother, her brother, herself, after all her *arrogance*, she was going to fail.

'What is this ungodly power?' she trembled.

He didn't answer.

She took a step towards him, then another and another. A myriad of sensual thoughts invaded her mind: what she wanted to do to him, what she wanted him to do with her. Something strange was happening. She had never thought this way before. Her mind was not her own.

She looked down at herself. Why was she covered? What was the use of clothing out here? She shrugged off her coat and swept off her tunic. She gazed down at her breasts, and for the first time saw they were beautiful. She cupped them, touched them, massaged them. Her nipples were tingling. They were so soft and filled her hands perfectly. How could she have once despised them so much? She ran her hands down her waist, her hips. She had a lovely figure, feminine, womanly. She unbuckled her belt and let it drop into the water, dagger and all.

Next came the britches. And then she was naked. She should have been cold, but that strange warmth burned like a fire within. She undid her braid and let her hair flow over her shoulders, her breasts, thankful that her mother had stopped her from cutting it. She ran her fingers through its lengths. Never in her life had she felt so beautiful.

She went deeper into the water until she stood before him, submerged to the hips. She touched him, brushed her fingers across his nipples. Smiling, he took her into his embrace. Jaslyn sighed, pressed her head into his chest and held him back. His penis throbbed against

her navel. Wet heat trickled down the inside of her thigh at the feel of it, and she moaned. Then he tilted her chin and lowered his lips.

She reeled back. 'No!' He looked at her, a hurt look on his face. 'No,' she said more feebly, sagging in his arms.

He smiled and met her mouth. He was soft and warm and insistent, his tongue gentle. There was a mild shot of surprise as she realised it was her very first kiss.

She moaned, then squirmed, then thrashed in his arms. Shoving him away, she wiped at her mouth and spat. 'No.'

Again, that hurt look on his face, and it almost destroyed her. All she wanted to do was wrap him in her arms, but she closed her eyes and shut him out.

She took a deep breath. 'I will come with you, willingly, openly, if you release my brother and everyone else you've taken.'

'No,' he said, and his voice was the sound of trickling water, the patter of rain against the leaves, the rush of the tide along the sand.

'Release my brother then.'

'No,' he said.

With an effort almost beyond endurance, beyond agony, she unstuck her foot and stepped back. Tears streamed down her cheeks. She clutched at herself as a terrific pain ripped across her chest. She couldn't breathe. It reminded her of when her father died. It was as though her heart was breaking.

She took another step. A sob and a cry, and she took another.

'Wait,' he said. She stopped but didn't dare open her eyes. 'Your brother then, for you.'

She tilted her head back with a gasp, letting the tears fall away. 'Release him, and I am yours.'

Her eyes flung open, and she clung to him with a cry as he picked her up in his arms and lay her down on a soft island of wet grass that seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. He traced his fingers down her face, then spread her legs.

‘Wait,’ she said. He paused. ‘I—I’ve never done this before.’

His smile broadened, and he crawled on top. Panting, she braced herself. She winced at a sharp pinch as he pushed through her maidenhead, winced some more as he thrust again. Tears pricked her eyes, and she gasped, but then he kissed her, and it somehow eased the worst of the sting. They rocked together, Jaslyn biting her lip at the pain, her lover silent and rhythmic as he plunged into her. His biceps clenched and smoothed at each thrust. His hair cascaded around her. His eyes gleamed like shining stars into hers. She grasped onto his waist with a cry, pleasure mixing with pain as her vagina tightened around him. She wanted it to end and yet never wanted it to stop. Then he came, and he did so with a grunt and a shudder, and it was like he poured himself into her, some kind of magic that rushed up her torso, her shoulders, her neck, down her thighs, her legs, until she was completely enveloped.

She lay sprawled beneath him, heaving for breath. Smiling, he grasped her breast and sucked at her nipple.

‘What have you done to me?’ she gasped, but he merely smiled some more and brushed his fingers through her hair. She looked at him. ‘Your oath. My brother.’

He straddled her, his penis lying wet and swollen against her belly. He took her hand and kissed it, then stood up, guiding her to her feet.

He pointed his finger at the swamp. The water swirled and bubbled. She grasped onto him when the grassy island shifted beneath her feet. A sudden gusting wind tossed and whipped the nearest branches. Then it all stopped: the wind stilled, the water calmed, the branches silenced. Moments later, there came splashing. Something thrashed in the water. There was a lung-rattling gasp, a hideous choking.

‘Aidan!’ she cried.

Coughing and spluttering, more gasps. Kneeling in the water several feet away, her brother was almost unrecognisable: dripping wet, eyes bloodshot, hair matted, face sunken and looking terribly old, chest

heaving like the dying. But then he looked up, and his face caught alight.

‘Sister?’ He coughed, spluttered, gagged.

She smiled but didn’t go to him; the Lord of the Nymphs was waiting.

‘Jaslyn?’ Aidan said, stronger this time, eyes wide at the sight of them together.

‘Tell Mother I love her.’

‘No!’ He thrashed and splashed, coughed and spluttered, but he hadn’t the strength to save her and slumped back into the water, gasping for air.

Ignoring him, she took her lord’s hand, and he pulled her against him and wrapped her in his powerful embrace. Something dragged at her feet. The water bubbled and hissed around them as they and the island began to sink. She clutched onto him.

‘Have no fear,’ he said in her ear.

She tried to steady her heart, but as the water rose past her breasts, up to her neck, terror overwhelmed her. She struggled against him, tried to throw him off, but he was far too strong and pinned her to his chest.

‘Aidan!’ she screamed.

A jolt of energy exploded through her spine, and she flung back her head. It blinded her, burned through her mind, until all memories of Aidan, her mother, her home and everything she had once known were gone.



THE LADY OF THE NYMPHS lay on a shallow island just above the surface of the swamp, combing her fingers through her long, bronze locks, watching as her sister nymphs played and gambolled in the water.

‘Come, milady. Come and join us,’ they giggled, splashing one another.

She smiled but kept brushing her hair. They asked her all the time, but she would never join them. She would only love one man, and the Lord of the Nymphs had no equal.

At the sound of clumsy splashing, they all looked up. Two men from the village approached, pushing a boat through the trees. That was strange. Where were the rest of them? And nobody had possessed the sense to bring a boat before.

Her sisters looked troubled but still tried to coax them over. They exposed their breasts, flicked back their hair, arched their graceful necks. They were all so beautiful, and she was proud of them. The men, however, didn't seem to notice. They paddled between them, purposefully avoiding them, and beached onto her island.

One of them leant over and seized her wrist.

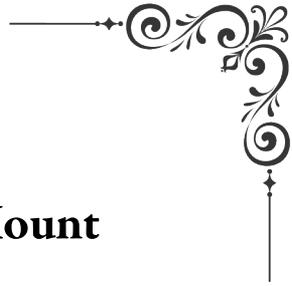
'Let go! I am not for you.' She tried to pull away, but he wouldn't release her.

'Jaslyn,' he said. 'Stop it. I've come to rescue you.'

She frowned. The name sounded oddly familiar. He looked familiar too, *very* familiar.

'Come on, you must remember,' he said.

She looked at him more closely, and something unlocked in her mind. 'Aidan?'



## The Monster of Mount Draken

Lance pulled back his hand with a wince, his knuckles grazed and bleeding. Bending lower, he tried again, thrusting his arm between the rocks, his fingers scraping again as he tried to seize his dinner. Mushrooms were often difficult to reach, growing in the cold and dark, between rocks, deep within holes, under roots. They liked to hide away, much like himself.

He grumbled happily when his fingertips brushed against their softness. He grabbed a handful, stuffed them in his sack and moved along.

It was a warm and bright afternoon. Birds chirped. A light breeze brushed through his hair. He pulled over his hood, concealing his face. There was no time to enjoy it. It was dangerous away from his mountain, from his cave, where he could hide and keep safe from the village men who often camped close by, fighting and shouting and cursing.

His mother had taught him to stay away. ‘You are a monster, hideous and deformed, they would kill you before they barely looked at you. Do not trust them.’

Now many years after her death he had never forgotten.

His ears pricked and his heart skipped a beat at the sound of a voice. He turned and was about to hurry away when he stopped. It was an unusual voice: light and high, soothing and delicate, as it carried softly on the breeze.

He followed it. It was coming from the stream. Staying safely concealed within the trees, he peered through the leaves.

It was a boy, tall and lithe with short black hair, dressed in a tunic and pants that were dusty and torn from what must have been a long and difficult journey. At his feet was a bulging bag. He sat down and unlaced his boots, singing all the while.

He had a beautiful voice, enough for Lance to stay despite the danger. He closed his eyes, listening to his lilting words, imagining knights and princesses, castles and dragons, everything he had never known and could never know stuck up in his cave, reviled and isolated.

The singing stopped, and he opened his eyes. The boy was on his feet, wriggling his toes in the water, naked from the waist down. Then he swept off his top, and Lance sucked in a breath. A woman. He was a *woman*. He stared at her breasts, her hips, her thighs, and that's when he realised the flatness between her legs. It had been a long time since he had seen a woman, not since his mother, and the old witch hardly compared to this one. She was young and lovely, smooth and pale, so slim and petite he could probably wrap both his hands right around her waist. He lost his grip on his sack, and it dropped with a soft thud.

She slipped into the water, her fingers tracing the surface, breasts sitting on top like two ripe plums. Then she dunked and resurfaced, the water trickling down her neck and shoulders, between her breasts.

Shaking and sweating, he clutched onto a branch. The leaves rustled. The wood creaked beneath his immense strength.

'Who's there?' the woman called, squinting fearfully in his direction, arms wrapped around her breasts.

Lance stilled, the tree stopped rustling, but it was not enough; the woman dashed out of the water, straight for her bag. He *must* let her go. He *couldn't* let her go. His legs carried him over before he could stop himself. His feet sank into the muddy ground, blood pounded in his ears, his hood flew back. The girl abandoned her bag with a scream. She

made for the trees, but he caught her, wriggly and slippery and soft in his arms.

Trapped and helpless, she stared at his ravaged face, mouth gaping like a fish, eyes a light blue, the colour of the stream, wide and terrified. Then they rolled back into her head, and she slumped in his embrace.



ROSLYN OPENED HER EYES, then sat up with a start. She gasped and scuttled away at the sight of the monster, gasped again when she realised she was naked. The monster had laid her clothes over her after she had fainted, but they had slipped off. She quickly pressed her shirt against her breasts as she hunched over, concealing her groin.

‘Keep away!’

‘I’m not going to hurt you,’ it said in a low, growling voice.

She backed away to the cover of the trees. The monster was hooded now, its wretched face concealed in shadow.

‘Wait.’ It held out her pants.

‘Throw them over,’ she said. It did so, and it landed halfway between them. ‘Turn away.’

It obeyed, which surprised her. She crept over and snatched up her pants before disappearing into the trees again.

‘My boots,’ she said once she was redressed. ‘And my bag.’

It turned to face her, a big hairy hand gripping her boots, her bag at its side. ‘You should stay here.’

She would have laughed if she wasn’t so frightened. ‘I’m not staying with *you*.’

‘You don’t understand. It’s almost dark now and a full moon. The village men will be making camp.’

‘Good.’

It lifted a massive hand, palm outwards. ‘Please. They’re not nice. They’ll hurt you.’

‘And you won’t?’

‘No.’

‘You’re a monster, and you attacked me.’

‘I didn’t attack you.’

‘Then what were you trying to do?’

It hung its head, unable to answer. Roslyn felt a strange surge of pity. Clearly, it was lonely. Then she pushed it aside. *Absurd*. It should have left her alone. It had no right to touch her. It didn’t deserve her pity.

‘Bag,’ she said again.

It stood with a sigh. Her heart thundered. It was big, far bigger than any ordinary man. If there were such thing as ogres—

It backed away several steps. She eyed it warily, then dashed for her things. She thrust her bag over her back, picked up her boots and fled through the trees.

Her bag swung and banged against her as she ran. Her ankle rolled, but she bit her lip and pushed through the pain. She glanced behind her, but the monster wasn’t following.

Breathless, feet throbbing and bleeding, she stopped to put on her boots before carrying on, hissing at every limp, dragging her sprained foot as pain burned up her leg. Night descended, darkness pooling between the trees, making her journey doubly difficult as she tripped and stumbled and groped her way ahead.

She must have been hours into her journey when she looked up at a bout of wild laughter. She smelt smoke.

‘Help,’ she cried, limping towards it. The laughter snapped off. ‘Help!’

There came the snap of ground litter underfoot, the thud of footsteps, as people approached. She slumped to the ground in relief.

There were five men, all young and strong and curious.

A man with long, greasy hair held a burning torch. ‘Who’s this then?’ he said, thrusting it in her face.

‘I’m Roslyn,’ she panted.

'You're a girl?' One of them grabbed her hair and wrenched her head back. 'She is! What's a pretty little thing like you doing out here, huh?'

'I'm a traveller, but I'm lost, and I've just run for hours. You must hel—'

'You're alone?' They all grinned at each other.

'Come on then, let's help you up.'

Before she could object, two of them hoisted her up under the armpits, none too gently as pain shot up her ankle. 'Wait! It hurts.'

They just laughed and dragged her between them. She struggled against them, stomped on a foot, kicked a shin, until someone slapped her hard in the face. Her ears rang, blood trickled from her nose.

'You'll pay for that,' someone snarled in her ear.

Their encampment was in a small clearing: blazing fire, cushions and bedding, a simple awning overhead propped up on stakes.

They threw her down by the fire, laughing and shouting and arguing over who was first. She snatched a burning stick out of the flames, but it was promptly kicked out of her grasp, and she grabbed her wrist with a cry.

The man with the greasy hair pushed her down and straddled her. 'Time for some fun.'

Roslyn's eyes widened at the sight of the knife in his hand glinting sharply against the flames. Grinning at her, he sliced open her shirt.

There was hooting and whistling and laughing from the men standing over them.

The man with the greasy hair licked his lips. He had just grabbed onto her breast when there came a roar, a thud, then a crash, as the awning fell on top of them. In the confusion, Roslyn wriggled away. There was shouting and hollering, a scream, a gurgle. Something heavy fell on her, flattening her against the ground. She coughed and spluttered and gasped, smoke filling her lungs as the awning caught fire and the body on top of her pushed out the last of her air.

Then the weight lifted from her back, and she could breathe again.

It was the monster. No. Not a monster—a man. His hood had fallen back, but she barely saw his ugliness, too glad to see him. The awning was gone, smouldering in a heap. There was crying and screaming and groaning from two men lying wounded on the ground. The rest had apparently fled.

He helped her to her feet. ‘Hurry, we must—*oomph*.’

A figure hurtled into him, and the two men tumbled to the ground with a heavy thud. It was the greasy-haired man, face covered in blood, sneering as he braced his dagger above the big man’s chest. Roslyn screamed as it came down.

There was a grunt, a gasp, as the dagger plunged. Then the greasy man’s head flung back with a nasty crack as the big man slammed the base of his hand into his chin. He fell limp to the ground.

Roslyn stood amongst the devastation, shivering, clutching her torn shirt to her breasts. One of the stricken men grabbed at her ankle. ‘Help me.’

She turned and sped through the trees. The bag on her back had split and its contents flew everywhere. As she ran, her panic faded and she slowed, then stopped. She leant against a tree as she caught her breath, then looked back. She couldn’t just leave him.

Upon her return to the encampment, she saw one of the stricken men had died, the other still groaning. The fire had burnt out, and the big man was sitting with his back to a tree, gasping, hand clutched to his side as blood trickled through his fingers. He had returned his hood.

After all the commotion, the quiet was startling. He looked up as she crouched beside him, the flickering light of the sputtering fire glinting in his one eye.

‘You came back,’ he grunted.

‘Of course.’

‘Why?’

She ignored him. 'Move your hand, let me take a look.'

'It's fine. He only nicked me.'

'Show me.'

He moved his hand, and she frowned. There was a lot of blood and the wound was deep. 'That's more than a nick.'

'To a normal person maybe, but I am not normal.'

'Still, we must treat it.'

'No.' With a grunt and grimace he pushed himself to his feet. 'We must go. More will come to take their revenge.'

'Go where?'

'To Mount Draken, my home.'

Struggling at his side, his heavy arm curled around her shoulders, Roslyn looked up. It was a steep climb, the top of the mountain a slim horn of rock puncturing the twinkling sky. At least they could see where they were going, the moon full and bright.

He groaned, and she tightened her arm around his thick waist as he stumbled. 'Are you all right?' she puffed.

He straightened himself out. 'I'm fine.'

'We should stop.'

'No. It's not safe. My cave is hidden. It's not far now.'

They reached their destination an hour later. He nodded ahead. 'Through there.'

Roslyn squinted at the sheer rock face. 'Where?'

He dropped to all fours and parted a tangle of creeping vines, revealing a dark gap. He crawled through, and she followed, knees scraping against the rock.

'Wow.'

The cave was large. Moonlight streamed through cracks in the ceiling revealing an assortment of basic furnishings: sheepskin against the walls and spread upon the floor, a big bedding of furs and animal skins, pots and dishes made of smoothed stone, amongst an array of other things she couldn't identify.

'I need your help,' he gasped. He had a shoulder braced against a large boulder as he tried to push it in front of the entrance. 'I haven't the strength.'

She joined him, and together they moved it. He smiled, then slumped against it, panting. She gasped and made a grab for him as he sank to his bottom. His head lolled. Blood soaked his shirt.

'What—your name?' he mumbled.

'Roslyn,' she said, kneeling beside him.

'Lance.'

'Hi, Lance.'

He grunted, then slid sideways. She tried to guide him to the floor, but he was too big and landed heavily.

Unable to move him, Roslyn propped some bedding under his head. She searched the cave, found a dish of water and tried her best to clean his wound, but with no linen, she couldn't staunch the bleeding. She glanced down at her torn shirt. It was useless anyway.

She removed it and carefully tore strips off it, plugging the wound and binding him around the waist. He grunted and groaned at every ministrations but didn't wake. When she was done, she stared at him. She had pulled up his shirt to get to his injury, revealing a heavily muscled abdomen. There was a swathe of dark hair on his chest with a trail of it running down from his belly button into his pants. He might have been overly large, his face deformed, but there was nothing wrong with his body.

Her eyes drifted to his head. It was turned to the side, hidden in its hood. She touched the cloth, pushed it back a little, a little more. He grabbed her wrist, and she froze.

'Let me see,' she whispered.

He released her, and she pushed it back all the way. She gazed at him. She couldn't see well in the moonlight but remembered what he looked like at the stream: only one eye, the other lost beneath a large pink growth which covered almost half his face and tugged at the cor-

ner of his lip, curling it into a snarl, revealing his upper teeth. She touched it. It was raised and hard and cold. He watched her, his eye glinting in the moonlight.

She smoothed her fingers through his tangle of long hair. ‘Thank you for saving me.’

He blinked, dropped his eye to her breasts before quickly meeting her gaze again, shamefaced. She chuckled.



‘HOW LONG DO YOU THINK we’ll need to hide?’ Roslyn said a day later as she knelt beside him cleaning his wound. He had given her one of his shirts. It was prickly and itched against her nipples and was so long it hung in folds over her knees.

‘I’m not sure,’ he answered. ‘For as long as we need.’

‘What about food and water?’

‘I have salted meat and smoked fish, dried fruit and pickled vegetables. Enough to keep us going for probably two weeks if we’re cautious. And there is water. It rains plenty.’

‘You’re very prepared.’

‘Always. There is no telling when I might need to hide myself away.’

Daylight streamed through the cracks in the ceiling, bringing out the pink in his face. He didn’t wear his cloak anymore, and Roslyn no longer found it difficult to look at him. He was a kind man, gentle and sweet, and it eased his ugliness, particularly when he was looking at her the way he was looking at her now—eye soft and twinkling, mouth curved into a small smile.

Clearing her throat, she dabbed around his wound. ‘How long have you been living up here?’

‘My whole life. Ever since the village saw fit to abandon me here as a baby.’

She frowned. ‘That’s terrible. Why would they do that?’

He raised his eyebrow. ‘Why do you think?’

'You were born this way?'

'Yes.'

'So you've lived up here all alone?'

'Not alone. I had a mother. Well, not a real mother. An old witch used to live here. She took me in, cared for me. But she died long ago. Then I was alone.'

She leant into him, feeling his warmth as she wrapped a length of clean linen around his waist, covering his wound. 'There,' she said, tying it off.

He looked down at it. 'I'm impressed.'

'I've treated my fair share of injuries, travelling as I do.'

'Do you travel a lot?' he asked.

'Lately, I have.'

'On your own?'

'Always.'

He frowned at her. 'That's dangerous.'

She smiled. 'I can't disagree with you there.'

'Don't you have a family?'

She nodded. 'My father. He's expecting me home before next Summer. *If* I get home.'

'You'll get home, I promise you.'

They both looked up at a shout somewhere in the distance. She grabbed his arm when somebody shouted back, much closer.

'Just keep quiet,' Lance whispered.

She gasped and bunched up against him when a third called out 'I've got the East!' fearfully close. They both stared at the ceiling as somebody walked overhead, sending trickles of dust and dirt into the cave through the cracks.

They searched for a long time, calling out to each other, scouting overhead. Someone even fumbled at the rock at the entrance but quickly gave up.

It was hours when they finally ceased their search. A gathering gloom replaced the streams of light as darkness fell. Lance and Roslyn were holding each other, warm in each other's arms. She could feel his heart thundering, but she doubted it was from fear, not by the way he was looking at her, so hungry, so surprised, so filled with doubt.

She touched his cheek, tangled her fingers in his hair. Then she leant in and kissed him, and it was like she sucked the life out of him; he sagged against her, quivering, his immense strength reduced to a flaccid heap. She pulled off her enormous shirt and smiled as he stared at her breasts, her pale skin catching the last of the sunlight.

'You can touch them if you like,' she said.

When he didn't move, she picked up his hands and pressed them against her. He groaned, whimpered, then closed his fists over them, gently, carefully.

She ran her fingers over his shoulder, down his sternum, along his bandage. He was panting, still grasping her breasts, afraid to let go, afraid to do anything but hold them.

'Lie down,' she whispered.

He obeyed, and she straddled him. She opened his pants and took him in her grasp. He groaned, eye rolling in his head. He wasn't as hard as she expected. As she explored him, she realised he was wet and sticky. It appeared he had already come, probably when they were holding each other. She smiled, stroked his shaft, teased his balls. He rapidly engorged, lengthening, swelling, until he was hard as rock in her hands. He was astonishingly big, thick and long. There was certainly nothing wrong with his body.

She stood up and tugged open her pants. As she dropped them and kicked them aside, his panting turned to gasping. She straddled him again, wet against his hardness.

'Ready for this?' she asked.

'Uh.'

She grinned. 'What did you say?'

He swallowed and gasped. ‘Uh.’

She took hold of him and slid over his length. He cried out. She froze and looked up, but the village men were nowhere around. She rocked. It stung at first, but as her vagina eased around his size, it soon turned to pleasure.

Lance stared up at her, mouth open, eye wide, hands bunched at his sides. She rocked faster until his gasping turning to grunting, ‘uh, uh, uh, uh,’ and he swelled so big inside her she could feel herself stretching.

He came with a shudder and a groan. Closing her eyes, Roslyn groaned too as her muscles clenched hard around him.

Panting, they gazed at each other. Though it was dark, Roslyn could have sworn she saw a tear trickling down his cheek. She snuggled into him.

Clutching her hard against his chest, Lance rolled onto his side and buried his face in her neck. ‘You can’t leave. Promise you’ll stay with me.’

She froze in his arms. ‘Uh, stay with you?’

‘Promise me. I don’t want to be alone. I *can’t* be alone. Not after this. Promise me.’

He grabbed her head and looked into her eyes, and when she didn’t answer, kissed her.



ROSLYN SAT WATCHING as the sun slowly set. Not for the first time she was feeling guilty over her decision. It wasn’t easy to leave someone she loved. But sometimes, difficult things had to be done. She wiped at her cheeks. She promised him she’d return, but that had been over three years ago and her life had changed so much, *she* had changed so much. Would he even recognise her?

‘Mummy.’

She looked behind her and smiled as her daughter came toddling over.

‘Careful,’ Roslyn said, pulling Madeleine into her arms, ‘you’re too close to the edge. Where’s daddy?’

‘Here,’ he said, appearing around a pinnacle of rock, carrying a bundle of blankets—their baby son.

Madeleine giggled and squirmed, pink face lighting up, as Roslyn tickled her belly. She was ‘deformed’ like her father, but Roslyn thought she was the most beautiful thing in the world.

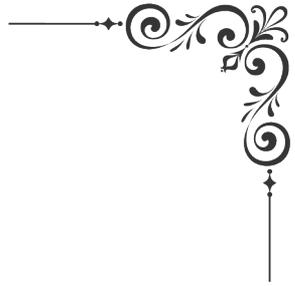
Lance sat on the rock beside her near the cliff edge, little Quentin yawning in his arms. Above them, Mount Draken’s tall, spiralling horn disappeared into the pink clouds. The villagers hadn’t returned and neither did they make camp close by anymore, too afraid of the Monster of Mount Draken. They had been left in peace.

‘You look sad. Still thinking about your father?’ he said.

‘Yes.’

‘Then you should go see him.’

‘Soon,’ Roslyn smiled, stroking Madeleine’s cheek. ‘I’ll go soon enough.’



## Missy

‘**W**hat the hell do you think you’re staring at?’

John looked up with a start. ‘Uh—no—no—nothing.’

‘Nothing is it?’ Michael sneered, towering over him. He was massive for fifteen: six-foot, broad-shouldered, fingers like sausages. ‘Doesn’t look like nothing. It *looks* like you’re staring at my girl.’

John swallowed. Sweat broke out on his brow. He glanced over at Brook. She was standing at the bubbler, chatting and laughing and flicking her long, blonde hair back over her shoulders.

Michael slapped his hand hard onto the bench. ‘I said, stop staring.’

He grabbed John’s shirt and yanked him up. Everyone was watching now, Brook too, the lunch area deadly silent. Michael dragged him over to the bins by the shirt, John clutching at his big fist, stumbling over his feet.

‘No, no, no,’ he gasped. Michael hoisted him up with a grunt and slammed him into a bin. ‘Urrgghh.’

He was sitting in something moist. He lifted his hands, brown muck dripping down his arms.

‘Listen close, cheese-dick. Look at her again, and you’ll see the bottom of my shoe smashing into your face. Got it?’

Sniggering, he kicked the bin and left.

Later that day, after school, John walked home. It would take an hour, but he couldn’t face the bus, not after what happened. He tied his sports shirt around his waist. He looked like a fool, but at least it concealed the big, brown shit-like stain on his arse.

It was a hot day. A warm breeze brushed through his brown hair. He took off his prescription glasses, wiped them on his shirt and put them back on again. Cars zoomed by, fumes thick in the air. He picked up his pace, needing to get away: away from the town's stink, away from the arseholes, away from civilisation.

When he reached his house, he eased the door open. All was quiet. His mother was out. His sister was nowhere around. Good. He didn't want to be seen. He hurried to his room, quickly changed and ducked back out the door.

He shouldered his backpack and breathed in the scents. The bush was his real home, his sanctuary. Sticks and dry leaves crunched underfoot as he weaved his way through the trees to his favourite spot.

'Hello again,' he said.

The tree didn't answer, its topmost leaves fluttering in the wind. He had passed right through the bush and was standing at its edge, the trees crowded behind him, open space ahead, houses in the distance.

He dropped his backpack by its roots, took off his glasses and put them in his pocket so he wouldn't scratch the lenses. Wrapping his arms around the tree's trunk, he pressed his head against it with a sigh.

He always came here, to talk, to find comfort, to think. Life was hard when no-one liked you. But out in nature, everything was simple: birds sang and chirped, the sun beat down, the trees loomed still and untroubled.

He pulled back and looked at the tree again. 'Missy,' he said.

That was what he called her and it matched her perfectly. She was certainly a Miss, with her long, leafy vines that looked like hair, the dips in her trunk that looked like eyes, the crease that looked like the curve of a lip. And below—

He touched them—the two smooth, shiny burrs that looked like breasts. And they were just at the right height too. He closed his eyes, gripped them, rubbed them, as he grew hard between the legs. He leant

in and brushed his lips against hers. She was so sweet-smelling—eucalypt and sap and the woody scent of bark. So fresh.

He licked.

The crunch of leaves, the snap of a branch, and he jerked away and wiped his mouth.

‘John!’ his sister called through the trees. He dropped to his bottom and grabbed his backpack. ‘John?’ she called again, closer this time.

‘Over here.’ He pulled out his sketchpad, poised his pencil upon the paper and squinted into the distance. Sketching—always the best ruse.

‘Thought I’d find you here,’ she said, brushing aside a branch as she stepped into view. ‘Mum’s looking for you.’

Jacquelin was seventeen. Long brown hair pulled into a shiny ponytail, tall and slim, she was athletic and smart, pretty and popular, and easy-going with the opposite sex. He loved—and hated her.

‘I’m busy,’ he said.

‘I see that.’ Her eyes drifted to his sketchpad. ‘What are you drawing?’

‘Nothing,’ and he flipped it closed and looked up at her. ‘What does she want?’

‘She needs help with her laptop.’

He sighed. ‘Again?’

She shrugged, then leant her shoulder against Missy. She glanced at her trunk and pulled a face. ‘Hideous tree.’ She looked around the bush and shivered. ‘I don’t know why you come here. It’s so spooky.’

John shoved his book into his bag, stood and swung his bag over his shoulder. ‘Come on then. Let’s go.’

One last glance at Missy, and he left.



JOHN WANDERED THROUGH the bush, arms outstretched, hands brushing against the rough trunks. He lifted his nose and smelt

the air. A breeze whispered through his fringe. He was dreaming, and it was a good dream. The sun had almost set, the last of the sunlight trickling in a haze through the leaves.

When he reached his favourite spot, darkness had completely fallen. Above, the moon was enormous and bright, far too bright for reality.

‘Missy?’ he said.

He studied the hole in the ground where she used to stand so tall and elegant and lovely. He looked around, at the bush, at the hills rolling into the distance, but nothing moved, and there was only silence.

He crouched in front of the hole and dragged his fingers through the dirt. It was moist and recently disturbed. She hadn’t been gone for long.

‘John,’ floated a whisper on the breeze.

He shot to his feet and squinted between the trees. Movement. A shadow. Then a figure stepped into view.

‘Missy?’ he croaked.

He froze. Human. She was *human*. And so beautiful: long bronze hair falling past her hips, smooth pale skin bright against the moonlight, eyes the colour of the earth. He stared at her breasts. They were so soft looking, so lovely, the nipples pink and glorious. His palms tingled, aching to touch them. Then he dropped his eyes to her bronze thatch, and his penis pushed hard against his pants. She smiled, and her lips looked just like they did when she was a tree—plump and perfect and begging to be kissed.

He wiped at his face, his brow slick with sweat. She walked gracefully towards him through the long grass, toes pointing at every step. He started to gasp, wiped at his brow again. His heart was hammering and his penis was so swollen he struggled not to explode right there in his pants.

She stopped in front of him, close enough he could hear her breathing, see the shine in her eyes, smell the eucalypt and sap and bark on her skin. Then she touched him on the chest, looked up with those shining eyes, and John was lost. He pulled her against him, wrapped his arms around her and sank his face into her hair.

‘Oh, Missy.’

He tilted her chin and kissed her, and her lips were soft, her tongue sweet, her breath warm. So much better than her cold, scratchy trunk.

He lowered her to the ground. He had never had sex before. He should have been more nervous, but this was a dream. Very little was as it should be. He straddled her as she stretched out her beautiful body beneath him, smiling, her breasts upraised and aglow against the moonlight. He took them into his hands with a moan. They were soft and supple and heavenly, better than he had ever imagined. A woman’s breasts—only in his dreams. He rubbed them, tickled her nipples. She laughed and squirmed. He laughed too. She was so wonderful in every way.

He dared to reach between her legs, and she groaned as he ran his fingers along her cleft. She was warm and wet. He took off his shirt and threw it aside. Then he stood and yanked open his pants. His penis burst free. He winced and gripped onto it. It was as hard as rock and throbbing.

He lowered himself on top of her. She spread her legs, and he nestled between them.

‘Oh, Missy,’ he groaned, face in her throat.

He nudged at her opening with his length. She was wet against his tip, hot and soft and wonderful, and he prayed he wouldn’t erupt all over her. This part had always frightened him the most. What if he couldn’t find it before it was too late?

‘John,’ she whispered, and her voice was like the rustle of leaves against the wind.

She gripped onto his hardness, and he jerked, almost coming in her hand. Gazing at him, smiling, she lifted her hips, arched her back and drew him inside.

‘Uhhhhhhh,’ he cried. *God*, she was so warm, so smooth. His penis throbbed against her walls as he thrust. Her breasts rubbed against his chest. Her hair tickled his nose. He couldn’t think, couldn’t see, all he knew was the pain, the pleasure, the pressure building in his balls. Three more thrusts and he erupted, his orgasm shooting down the length of his shaft and exploding inside her.

He collapsed against her, gasping, pulse pounding in his ears, in his throat, between his legs. He looked at her, and she looked back.

He gripped her hand, entwining his fingers with hers. ‘Never leave me.’

Smiling, she looped her arms around him and pulled him against her.

‘Hold me, love me, and you can be mine forever,’ she whispered in his ear.



JOHN WOKE WITH A START and sat up.

‘What the—’

It was deep into the night, and he was outside in his pyjamas, bare-foot, cradled between Missy’s roots. The moon was full and bright, not as bright as in his dreams, but enough to dim the twinkle of the stars. He stumbled to his feet and looked down, feeling soggy around his crotch.

‘Erk.’

He had come in his pants—like a firehose. He shivered and gripped onto himself. The night air was cool, and his wet pants were icy-cold against his crotch. It wasn’t the first time he had sleepwalked, but it was the first time he had left the house. He blinked, his vision strangely clear. He was wearing his glasses.

‘John,’ came a whisper.

He looked up and stepped back. ‘Missy?’

Her leaves fluttered in the cool breeze. Her eyes gazed emptily. She was silent.

Her last words sprang into his mind: *Hold me, love me, and you can be mine forever.* He shivered again. She seemed to whisper it into his ear. He took a step towards her and placed his hand against her trunk, against the crease that was her lips. Her blank eyes stared back. He took off his glasses and tried to put them in his pocket but his pyjamas didn’t have any, and they slipped to the ground. He leant in and kissed her, and there was warmth, a softness, that had never been there before. He wrapped his arms around her, felt her breasts press against him. Her leafy hair tickled his cheek.

When he tried to pull away, he found he couldn’t move. He was stuck, his arms wrapped tightly around her, chest pressed hard against her trunk. He gasped, struggled, called out for help, but there were only the bush, Missy and the open sky. His heart beat madly as his body stiffened. He could barely breathe. A coldness trickled up his legs, his waist, his chest, his face. His sight went fuzzy. His hearing went dull. Then his heart began to slow. He looked into Missy’s eyes—and they were an earthy brown, alive and shining, just like in his dream.

He closed his eyes and let her take him.



JACQUELIN FLASHED HER torch through the trees as she rushed along the trail through the bush. It was seven at night, and the sun had set. An icy chill shivered down her spine, but it wasn’t from the cold. They hadn’t seen John since he went to bed last night. When he didn’t rise for breakfast, they checked his bedroom, to find it empty. Assuming he had already gone to school, she and her mother had left for their day, not thinking something terrible might have happened.

‘John!’ she cried.

It wasn't unusual for her brother to stay out all afternoon doing whatever he did, so when she had arrived at an empty house, she wasn't worried. But now it was night time, and he always came home before darkness fell.

'John!'

She raced to the edge of the bush, chest tight, hopeful he had simply switched his phone off and was listening to his music. But when she reached his favourite spot, her heart dropped.

It was empty.

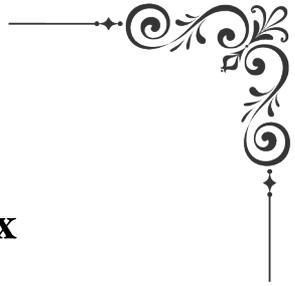
Tears pricked her eyes. She looked into the distance, across the empty expanse, to the houses far away.

'Where are you?'

'Jackie,' rose a whisper on the wind.

She spun around with a start and stepped back. The ugly tree—it wasn't alone. She dropped her torch. There was another tree, uglier still, and it was pressed hard against the other, branches twisted and looped around its trunk as though embracing it. There was something familiar about it, about the way it stood, so awkward, almost slouched.

Something gleamed against the torchlight on the ground. She picked it up—John's glasses, cracked and broken. She looked up at the tree again, and ice filled her heart.



## Silver Phoenix

**B**ig Cliff's hooves pounded the earth beneath her as she fled. Christine looked over her shoulder, but they were still chasing her. She kicked Big Cliff hard in the flanks. He snorted and shook his beautiful mane but could go no faster. He was a large horse, built for strength not speed.

She looked behind her again. They were closer now, close enough she could identify Prince Randolph amongst his score of men, hair whipped back, sword at his hip, bent low over his horse's neck.

He was determined, Christine couldn't deny him that.

Ahead, there was nowhere to hide, all rolling fields and blue sky. There was a copse of trees to the East, but that was no good, not with Big Cliff's size.

They were closing in, the sound of pounding hooves loud in her ears. Then a hand grabbed onto her bridle from the left, another tore the reins out of her grasp from her right, and Christine clutched onto Big Cliff's neck as he reared up with a neigh before his hooves hit the ground again with a heavy thud.

'Lady Christine.' Prince Randolph dropped from his mount, his tunic's golden buttons blazing in the sunlight. He grabbed onto her bridle and smiled up at her. She tried to kick out, but the knight next to him seized onto her ankle so tightly she had to stifle a gasp. 'Why must we play these games?'

'They're no games to me,' she said.

'Come down. Join me. Let's stop this silly fighting.'

When she refused, he seized her around the waist and pulled her into his arms. She struggled against him, but he merely laughed and held her tightly. Her arms pinned to her sides, and surrounded by his knights, Christine could do nothing but let him kiss her.

He sniffed at her hair, sighed. 'You have no idea how long I ache for our wedding night.'

'You have no idea how much I loathe the thought.'

He laughed again and kissed her on the nose, then turned to his knights. 'Let's be off.'

He hoisted her onto his grey stallion and sat heavily behind her, arms on either side of her as he gripped the reins. He turned the horse around and nudged it into a trot. She could see Castle Greyton, a dark smudge in the distance. She loved and hated the place, home to both her greatest love and her greatest enemy.

Prince Randolph kicked his horse, and they galloped towards it.



PRINCE RANDOLPH WAS no fool. Though he looked the part of a pompous prince, he was also a knight, skilled with the sword and trained to sniff out any danger.

He was sniffing now, and it stank. The church was overflowing with people: the pews, the aisles, the balconies upstairs, the steps outside, the rest spilling out into the courtyard beyond, all waiting to view a royal wedding.

He looked hard at his groomsmen: friends Sir Wentworth and Prince Valden of York. Could it be one of them? Then he looked at his best man, his brother Prince Christian, who smiled at him. Younger by two years, he was next in line to the throne. Prince Randolph loved his brother, and he thought his brother loved him, but was he wrong? Could it be he who was conspiring against him?

He glanced over at the bridesmaids and dismissed them. His ugly, big-jawed sister sat with her husband, Prince Hannagan, in the front

pew below. Beside them were his parents, the king and queen. He dismissed them too. His eyes trailed over the crowd of lords and ladies, princes and princess, barons and dukes and knights. Bright sunlight coursed through the stained-glass windows above, shining on their hair and clothes. It could be anyone. He locked eyes with Sir Henry standing in the shadows below. He too had been scanning the crowd carefully. His best knight dipped his head at him, hand on his sword, ever watchful.

The news that someone had been conspiring to disrupt his wedding was both a shock and unsurprising. If that made any sense. It was not unusual for someone to attempt to unseat him. He wasn't the most liked prince in the world. But for someone to steal his bride—

He shook his head. Who would be stupid or mad enough to risk their head for love? Political gain, yes. Riches and ransom, of course. But for love? Ludicrous. Nevertheless, he kept a wary eye. A crazy foe could be just as dangerous as a sane one.

The procession began. Trumpets sounded, the organ played and the crowd stood as the bride entered. Her arm hooked in her brothers, she glided down the aisle, her long sweeping dress gathering the petals strewn along the carpet. His attention strayed as he focused on Christine. She might not have been of the purest royal stock, but there was no doubting her loveliness.

Her brother gave her away with a bow, and she stood before him, small and quivering. He frowned. She had better not be crying behind her veil. The crowd sat, and the bishop's deep voice lifted to the rooftop.

Prince Randolph listened, repeated the Bishop's words, one eye on his bride, the other on the crowd. But nobody stirred. Perhaps his source had been wrong, or perhaps the traitor had backed out. He smiled. Coward.

They exchanged rings and when it was time to kiss, he lifted her veil. She hadn't been crying. In fact, she was cold and stern, her eyes hard. Her lips were like ice, and he began to wonder whether he mis-

judged his little princess. She was only young, and he had thought her innocent, but there was something behind her eyes that hadn't been there before. Perhaps, she had finally resolved herself to the inevitable.

The deed was done, and they were wedded. Dancing and dinner and celebrations followed, but Prince Randolph was anxious for only one thing—his bedchambers.

It was late into the night when they finally ascended the stairs, Prince Randolph buzzing with wine, his bride's little hand tight in his grasp. Against tradition, he had dismissed her maids and his manservants, neither needing nor desiring assistance. He could manage quite all right on his own, he was sure. The closest he allowed anyone to witness their lovemaking was outside his doors, where he posted three guards, including Sir Henry.

The three knights stood aside as the couple entered. He closed the doors, and they were finally alone. His chambers were lavish: large fireplace with a crackling fire, glowing candelabras, walls covered in portraits from floor to ceiling of family members long dead. Everything was trimmed in gold. The furniture was only the best—built of mahogany and great oak, crafted by the greatest cabinet maker on the West side. Then there was his bed—four-poster and fit for a king.

He took her chin, smiled and kissed her. She was looking pale now and trembled in his arms, but she still had that hard look in her eye.

'So, you've come to your senses,' he said when she didn't resist. 'Good. There's no point in fighting. We're wedded now, and you'll commit to your wifely duties.'

Her hair had been tucked into an elegant bun for the wedding. He unpinned it, and long, bronze lengths flowed down her breast. He brushed some aside and kissed her neck. She smelt of lavender and soap, and her skin was so soft. He turned to her gown. It was billowing and puffy, and he fought to open it—all laces and buttons and ties.

'You women are ridiculous.'

Maybe he should have kept a maid after all. She was panting, breaths light against his throat, as he struggled and cursed. Partway down, he'd had enough. He reached into his boot and took out his knife. She gasped as he sliced open her dress. It slid to the ground in a heavy heap, revealing the shift underneath. No loss. It was ugly anyway.

He smiled hungrily. Now he could see her properly: slim hips, full breasts, long graceful neck, flawless smooth skin. She was blushing now and trembling harder. He dropped his knife and brushed the sleeves from her shoulders so the shift slithered to the floor in a shimmering puddle.

He whistled under his breath. His manhood throbbed and swelled. She had perfect, brown nipples which puckered and hardened as he pinched them. His mouth watered. Then he reached between her legs. She sucked in a breath but didn't pull away.

He smoothed her wetness between his fingers. 'I thought you said you'd loathe this night.'

Looking at her feet, she didn't answer, her bronze hair falling over her face in a soft curtain. She was having trouble with her nakedness: folding her arms over breasts, placing her hands over her brown thatch before dropping her arms to her sides again, hands twitching.

'No need to be nervous,' he whispered, taking her chin and forcing her to look at him. For a moment, her big brown eyes were filled with fear, then they iced over. She stiffened as he dragged his finger down her arm. 'I'll be gentle if you don't try me.'

She gasped as he lifted her into his arms. He lowered her onto the bed, then began shedding his clothes. His attire wasn't much better than hers: heavy velvet and voluminous cotton, stiff collars and buttoned cuffs, layers of pointlessness. His sword thudded to the floor, something ripped, buttons popped off, his boots flew across the room. Then he was naked and as hard as iron between his legs. He looked down at her lying on his bed, her hair splayed out, her legs tight together and angled slightly to the side so he could see the curve of her

rump; the light from the candelabra above glistened against her supple breasts. He gripped onto his length with a wince when it gave a hard throb.

He crawled over her. ‘Open up.’

She did, slowly and with a whimper. He kissed her, grabbed her breast. Her eyes bulged as he prodded his penis against her opening. He nudged and pushed deep inside. She cried out, he felt something pop inside her, then he tilted his head back as cold steel pressed against his throat.

‘Release her.’

He raised his hands in surrender and slowly slipped off her. Christine scrambled to her feet, clutching the sheet to her chest. A hand grabbed his shoulder; the blade pressed hard against his throat until he felt a sting. He raised his hands higher.

‘Are you such a coward as to kill a man while his back is turned?’ Prince Randolph said. ‘Might I not at least see my murderer before I die?’

There was a moment’s hesitation, then the blade released, and he turned around. He dropped his hands, stunned. Then he laughed, a great chortle that echoed around his enormous room.

‘You’re *kidding*,’ he said. He glanced at Christine who was glaring at him, then turned back to his sister and laughed some more.

‘Stop laughing,’ she said, gripping the knife tighter, ugly face blazing red.

She had braided her hair and knotted it at the back of her head. She wore men’s clothes: tunic and britches and dusty boots. His eyes flicked to the sword at her hip. He immediately recognised it. Its silver sheath was engraved with a phoenix—their family’s insignia, his own sword. He used to practice with it every day as a man almost grown. He could nearly feel the pommel pressing into his palm. Light and sharp, its balance unequalled, it was perfect for a woman—*if* she knew how to use it.

He backed away, still laughing, teasing her until her face became as red as her hair.

‘I said stop laughing!’ she cried.

Christine went to Emily’s side and slipped her hand into hers, sheet wrapped around her. They looked at each other in that way, and he silenced. Blood rushed into his face.

‘This is obscene, a travesty against God,’ he spat. ‘Both of you will go to hell.’

‘I have no fear of hell, Brother. I’ve lived it every day, ever since Mother and Father saw fit to hand me over to that pig Hannigan.’ She gave Christine the dagger and unsheathed her—*his* sword. ‘Now you too can see what hell’s like, along with my dear husband.’

They stared at each other. The light from the candelabras flickered against their faces. Then she charged. Randolph dropped to the floor, rolled and seized his sword, still sheathed. Emily slashed at his face, but he blocked it. She slashed again. He rolled away, the sword thudding against the floor behind him, and leapt to his feet. He unsheathed his sword, and they clashed, steel upon steel. For a moment, they held against each other’s might, but he was stronger, and with a shove, sent her stumbling back. Now it was he who was slashing and she who was backing away. She blocked every thrust, every slice, every jab. She was good, but not nearly good enough. He grinned when he saw the panic flash across her face.

She managed a thrust at his belly, but he blocked it hard and swept the sword out of her grasp. It skidded across the floor. She backed into the wall, chin raised as he pressed the tip of his sword to her throat.

‘Dear Sister, how I love you, even now.’ He tightened his jaw as he prepared himself for the kill. ‘But you’ve messed with the wrong brother.’

He dropped his sword with a yelp as a sudden, sharp agony ripped through his right side. He turned around. ‘Christine.’

She was glaring at him, ashen-faced but determined, bloodied dagger poised in the air. He looked down at the gaping wound and pressed his hand against it. It was agonising but not fatal. He looked up, sneered, then charged with a roar. She stabbed at him, but he dodged and seized her wrist, crushing it in his grip until she dropped the knife with a cry.

Fire tore through his back, through his stomach, and he released her with a scream. He grabbed at his belly, the tip of his own sword poking out between his fingers. It pulled back, and blood gushed in his hands. He staggered, dropped to his knees. He stared at the blood trickling through his fingers, warm and dark and sticky. He looked up as a shadow fell across him. His sister stood before him, lips pressed together in a hard, white line, his silver phoenix hanging loose in her grasp.

He tried to say something, but his mind wouldn't obey. Blood filled his mouth. He slumped onto his side, clutching himself as wave upon wave of agony coursed through his body. He choked and spluttered as blood poured from his mouth. Vaguely, he saw the women flee his room, their footsteps thudding against the floor. He curled into a ball, began to shiver, soiled himself. He stared at Christine's dress, his eyes following its ridiculous creases and puffs as the room faded, grew dim, then finally blackened.



CHRISTINE HASTILY PULLED on her shift before exiting the room, gripping tightly onto Emily's hand as they stepped over the guards at the door. Sir Henry stared up at her with vacant eyes, the side of his head bloodied and sunken. She looked away and swallowed a swell of vomit.

'How did you—?'

'One of the few advantages of being a woman—' Emily began—'everyone underestimates you. Quickly, we must move.'

Christine followed, tensing at every corner, sure they would run into someone. But having grown up in Castle Greyton, Emily knew every secret corridor, every shortcut, every creaking step, and they fled the castle without detection.

Their mounts were waiting for them. A warm breeze gusted through Christine's shift. Moonlight glanced on the silver sword at Emily's hip.

'You got Big Cliff,' Christine said, tears in her throat as she petted him on the nose. He snuffled against her hand.

'Of course. I know how much you love him.' Christine wiped at her cheeks and pulled Emily into a hug. Emily smiled and kissed her. 'Come. There's no time to lose.'

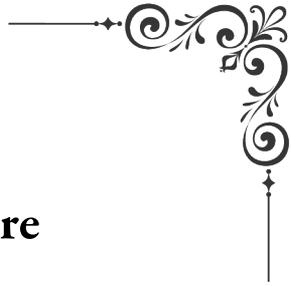
Emily threw over a cloak, and Christine covered her shift.

Their mounts trotted sedately as they passed beneath the portcullis. Christine tensed and drew her hood but nobody stopped them, and the gate didn't come crashing down. Clearly, Prince Randolph hadn't been discovered yet.

The castle was at a distance when the horns finally sounded. As they kicked their mounts into a gallop, clouds gathered over the horizon. Christine glanced behind her, fear clutching her heart. The odds were against them. They would surely be caught, if not in the following days, then in the weeks or months or years to come. It would become clear who killed Prince Randolph, and the king would be vengeful. He would never let them get away. Not even his own daughter.

She locked eyes with Emily, who smiled. Her heart swelled. Then she glanced at Emily's sword, and her fear turned to determination. If death were to be their fate, then they would be like the phoenix—die and start over as something greater. There were powers in this world she didn't understand, forces beyond comprehension. Nothing would stand in the way of their love. Not the king, not even God. She would find a solution.

She spurred Big Cliff on.



## Dragon Treasure

Princess Alandra sat chin in hand as she gazed through her tower window. It was a beautiful night. The moon's bright light made the rolling hills shine. A cool fresh breeze blew through her fringe. The distant Pontine Mountains were a dark, mysterious shadow against the twinkling horizon.

'Come, your highness,' Lily, her handmaiden said. 'You must hurry. You mustn't keep you lord husband waiting.'

Princess Alandra snorted. 'I doubt my dear husband will mind.'

But she rose to her feet and let Lily finish dressing her.

It should have been a simple process, making love to her husband. A silken shift, long golden hair brushed and flowing down the back, a touch of rouge on the cheeks, should have been all that was needed. But nothing was simple when one had a face like Princess Alandra's.

Born with a long, hooked nose, eyes too close together, a broad jaw which jutted to one side and bearing the ravages of the pox, Alandra was more than plain—she was ugly.

She was dressed in a long, silken shift but beneath it was a pair of ankle-length, crotchless pantaloons so her husband could do what he had to do without having to touch her diseased thighs.

Lily applied yet another layer of powder against her cheeks, then stopped and stepped back to take a look. She frowned, and was about to apply more when Alandra said, 'that will do.'

'Yes, your highness,' she said, with a bow.

A pair of diamond earrings and a green, velvet gown finished her outfit. Alandra lay against the pillows on her bed and smoothed out her golden hair so it flowed over her breast. Her hair was the only beautiful thing about her. ‘Tell him I’m ready.’

Lily left, and Lord Berrick entered, closing the door behind him. ‘Why are the candles still lit?’

Running her fingers down her velvet gown, Alandra didn’t answer.

He circled the room, blowing out the candles one by one and drawing the drapes until only a sliver of moonlight entered.

Alandra had been fifteen when she had accepted Lord Berrick’s hand in marriage. As fifth in line to the throne, she had had her pick of eligible men: lords, barons, dukes and all sorts of noblemen. Some were ugly or crippled, many were too old for her with white whiskers and potbellies, others were drunks and obscene. She had thought herself lucky when her father had chosen Lord Berrick. Only seven years older than herself, he was tall and strong, a fearsome knight, admired by his men and adored by the ladies.

She knew better now. Maybe if her father had chosen one of the old, ugly ones, she might have known, if not a great passionate love, at least a little tenderness.

His tall figure approached the bed. A strip of moonlight glittered over his handsome face and glistened upon his long, dark hair.

‘Stop looking at me,’ he said.

As she turned her face away, she heard him drop his pants. She desperately wanted to look, to see him, but it was always dark with Berrick, and she always had to look away.

The bed groaned and creaked, the mattress sank beneath his weight. He smelt of horses and steel. His heat seemed to burn right through her velvet gown, making her sweat. She gasped. Her heart pounded. They had been together a year, and her love for him hadn’t faded.

‘Spread your legs,’ he commanded.

She did and was glad. He would be on top tonight. Often, he did it from behind, and she never got to truly feel him.

He pushed up her shift, crawled over her and thrust into her. Alandra gasped. She was only slightly moistened and his hardness grated inside her. Berrick didn't care or notice, plunging into her until she was forced to become slick.

'Don't touch me,' he snapped.

She released his hips, and he pushed her face into the pillow. He was quick and efficient, like always. He needed an heir and would get one with the least amount of discomfort as possible. Even so, Alandra closed her eyes and enjoyed it as much as she could. He came with a growl and a shiver, his penis pulsing inside her. Alandra moaned at the feel of it.

He pulled out with a grunt, his seed trickling out of her. He didn't say a word as he put his pants back on.

'Berrick? Should I expect you tomorrow night too?'

'Doubtful,' he said and left, the door slamming shut behind him.

The next morning, Alandra took Starlight, her beautiful white mare, and rode across the fields and farms, away from the town, away from Castle Anton. Her two loyal knights followed at a respectful distance. They were her father's men, duty-bound to protect her, but they too couldn't bear to look her in the face for long.

She missed Castle Deakin, her home. She missed her loving father. She missed her little spaniel, Rufus. *They* had never turned away from her. Her father had loved her, kissed her, held her without hesitation. Rufus used to curl up at her side, even lick her face. Rufus had been hers, but she had to leave him behind because Berrick didn't like dogs. She missed him so much.

With a kick and a flick of the reins, Alandra pushed Starlight into a daring canter, jumped a high hedge, skirted a brook. She laughed, her tears drying on her cheeks as she forgot Berrick's disgust, her ugliness,

all her troubles. All there was now was Starlight, the glorious blue sky and leagues of rolling hills to explore.

At the sound of shouting, she slowed her horse and looked back. Her knights were galloping towards her, Sir Ganton gesturing desperately towards the sky. She looked up and the breath caught in her throat. There was a monstrous figure, dark against the sun, enormous wings outstretched, claws sharp and savage and at the ready.

A dragon.

She spun her horse around and kicked it into a gallop, hair and skirts streaming behind her. Her knights raced up to her, kicking up billows of grass. She met them halfway, and together they galloped back towards the castle, Sir Ganton's hand on the pommel of her saddle, Sir Desmond's sword unsheathed and upraised. Alandra could have cried. The castle was so far away, and what was a sword against a dragon?

She heard its great flapping wings, the air whooshing and clapping around them. Then its long, cool shadow fell across her, and at that moment, she knew all was lost. Her strength left her, and the reins slipped from her hands.

'Princess!' Sir Ganton cried.

She gripped onto the pommel, but now Starlight was out of her control. Sir Ganton made a desperate grab for her bridle but missed, and her horse turned off course, away from the castle. Her loyal knights kept to her side, their mounts bumping into either side of Starlight as they tried to guide her back towards the castle. Starlight screamed as the dragon approached. The knights' mounts were little better, frothing at the mouth, lathered with sweat, tossing their heads. They were losing speed.

There was a loud whoosh as the dragon plunged for the kill. Alandra screamed. Sir Ganton shouted. Sir Desmond waved his sword. Something collided with her back and then she was soaring high into the air. Sunlight blazed below her feet, green hills rolled above her head, clouds and horses and green, leathery skin whirled around her,

as the dragon carried her far away from Starlight, from Castle Anton, from Lord Berrick. In a daze, she could see Sir Ganton and Sir Desmond watching from below, still mounted, heads tilted up, hands shielded against the bright sun, growing more and more distant until they were nothing but black dots against the green.

Then Alandra fainted, and everything was lost to darkness



PRINCESS ALANDRA ROLLED over and sat up with a gasp, then gave a small shriek at the sight of the dragon resting beside her. It grunted, snorted in its sleep, and Alandra clapped a hand to her mouth. She looked at it in horror. It was huge and hideous, covered in green, leathery skin that stank of the Mantric Swamps. Its thick, lizard tail was curled around them both, long savage spikes along the top. Its massive bat-like wings were now tucked against its back, and she would never forget the horrible sound they had made as it chased her down. Then there were its teeth and its claws.

She stifled a yelp. She was sitting in its foot, its black claws surrounding her like terrible bedposts. She scuttled away.

She glanced around. She was in a huge cavern. Her eyes widened. Sunlight poured through a giant hole in the ceiling where the dragon must have entered and shone upon mountains of gold. There were enough riches to run an entire city for years. But there wasn't only gold: jewels, glittering armour, mirrors and silverware, anything that gleamed.

*Slide.*

Alandra shivered at the sound of the dragon's tail sliding across the floor. The dragon huffed, snorted, and plumes of black smoke coiled from its nostrils.

She backed away, then turned and ran. There wasn't anywhere to escape to, but there were plenty of places to hide. She tripped over a goblet. It rolled away with a metallic ring. There was a grunt. A gleaming

eye opened. Alandra leapt behind a jagged stalagmite of rock and held her breath, skirts clenched in her fists.

*Slide. Thump. Slide.*

A terrible growl boomed around the cavern. She gasped. It could speak!

‘Come out, little princess,’ it said, its massive tail sliding against the floor as it searched the cavern. ‘You can’t hide from me in my own lair.’

There was a roar of heat and wind as it blew its fiery breath somewhere behind her. Alandra clapped her hands to her ears with a squeal, then coughed and spluttered as black smoke fell around her in a thick blanket.

The dragon fell silent.

*Slide. Thump. Growl.*

Alandra pressed her hands to her eyes, shaking. Its monstrous breaths rumbled around the cavern. Loose rubble fell from the ceiling. In a burst of wild courage, Alandra glanced over her shoulder to meet a big orange eye glaring at her.

She screamed and ran. She raced around the perimeter of the cavern, the dragon at its centre. It was standing at the foot of its mountains of riches, following her with its orange gaze. The sunlight streaming through the hole in the ceiling illuminated her way and made the dragon’s golden plunder glitter.

She searched for a crack in the cavern wall, fingertips cutting against the jagged rock, skirts catching and tearing. With a gasp, she found an opening, tried to squeeze through, only to be torn away, ensnared by one of the dragon’s clawed feet.

Screaming and struggling, kicking and squirming, she was hauled high into the air. The floor fell away, the ceiling rushed to meet her. Part way up, she stopped with a jolt that flung back her head. She hung flaccid in the dragon’s grip, weeping, gazing through the hole to the blue sky above.

‘Look at me,’ it said.

Alandra didn't move. It shook her, and she squealed. She forced her head forward, long golden hair hanging in front of her face. She glimpsed its long snout, its sharp teeth, its spiked tail, its enormous wings, and shut her eyes. Her arms rested along a massive forefinger, her elbow pressing against its savage claw. She pulled her arm away with a start.

*Slide. Thump. Purr.*

Alandra whirled through the air, whimpering, as the dragon turned around. It stopped, and she jerked backwards with a cry when it gently brushed back her hair.

'So beautiful. You will be the crowning jewel of my collection, my little golden princess.'

She opened her eyes with a start. 'You—you think I'm beautiful?'

*Slide.*

She whooshed through the air again, her stomach knotting with sickness, and was sat atop the dragon's tallest mountain of gold. She was eye to eye with it now, and this time she didn't look away.

It snorted and huffed, sending more plumes of smoke coiling into the hole above.

'What—what are you going to do with me?' she said.

*Slide.*

'Nothing,' it said. 'I only want to keep you.'

'For what?'

'As part of my treasure.'

'That's all? You're not going to eat me?'

The dragon huffed. 'There is better food to eat.'

It sat on the floor. Alandra's lip twitched. It sat like her Rufus used to when he wanted something. Even its tail swished like a dog's.

She looked around the cavern, at the piles of treasure, the jagged rock walls, the hard, cold floor. 'Where am I going to sleep?'

'With me. You'll find me very comfortable.'

*Slide.*

‘What am I going to eat, to drink, to comb my hair with?’

A snort, and black smoke wafted in her face. She winced and coughed and waved it away.

‘You’ll eat what I eat, drink what I drink, and *I’ll* comb your golden hair.’

She looked at its sharp, black claws. ‘You’d tear my head off.’

*Slide. Thump. Groan.*

The dragon lay down, dropped its head onto its feet and looked up at her, tail sliding along the floor. ‘I can be gentle.’

Alandra couldn’t help but smile. She bit her lip. ‘Do you really think I’m beautiful?’

‘More beautiful than my gleaming treasure, more glorious than the glowing moon, more astonishing than the blazing sun.’

Tears pricked Alandra’s eyes. Nobody but her father spoke to her like that.

Coins slid and skittered across the floor as its voice rumbled through the walls. ‘I saw you with your golden hair, your shining skin, that glow on your face, and knew you had to be mine.’

Her throat swelled, and she gasped. Looking up to the sky above, she wiped at her streaming face.

‘And now there are diamonds on your cheeks.’

‘They’re not diamonds,’ she chuckled. ‘They’re tears.’

‘Diamonds, tears—’ the dragon huffed—‘all the same to me.’

She looked at the dragon. It was gazing at her, like nobody but her father gazed at her. Or Rufus. She smiled at it, then looked down at the steep slide of gold beneath her feet.

‘How do I get down from here?’

*Slide. Thump.*

‘Here,’ it said and held out a foot.

She climbed into it, and it lowered her gently to the floor. It dropped its head back onto its feet so its eyes were at her level. She was

close to it now. Close enough that it must see her scars, her ugliness. But it didn't turn away.

'My name's Alandra.'

'I'm Gor.'

'Are you going to keep me forever?'

'Yes.'

Alandra coiled her hand through her golden lengths as she gazed at the dragon. The thought didn't distress her. She smiled.



'SIR GANTON, TAKE THREE knights and search that mound of rock,' Lord Berrick ordered.

Sir Ganton looked up. The mound of rock Lord Berrick referred to was high above at the top of a steep, treacherous climb.

'Yes, my lord,' he said. Sir Desmond promptly joined him, gripping onto the nearest handhold. Sir Ganton turned to Lord Berrick's group of watching knights, 'Sir Laurel, Sir Montmount—'

Sir Ganton, Sir Desmond and Lord Berrick, along with twenty other knights, had been trekking through the Pontine Mountains for over a month in search of Princess Alandra. It had been gruelling, the days hot, the nights freezing, the way difficult and perilous. But they would not give in. Not until she was found.

They began to climb. It was mid-afternoon. Their chainmail reflected the burning sun. Wind gusted against them, throwing leaves and wet earth into their faces. It had rained recently, and the rock face was slippery and tricky.

He looked down at a shout. Sir Montmount had slipped. He was clinging to the rock face, legs dangling in the air. With a heave, the knight found a sturdier foothold and regained his balance. Taking a moment to steel himself, he then grabbed the next handhold and resumed his climb. Sir Ganton gave a grunt of respect. Sir Berrick's knights were well trained.

Sir Ganton met Sir Desmond at the top. Shortly, Sir Montmount and Sir Laurel joined them. Below, Lord Berrick and the rest of his knights had dispersed to continue with the search.

‘What do you think?’ Sir Desmond said, studying the mound of rock.

It was huge and round, and from what Sir Ganton could see, impenetrable.

‘It’s worth a look,’ he answered. ‘You take the West face,’ he told Sir Desmond. ‘Sir Montmount, you take the East, and Sir Laurel you take the rear. I’ll take the North.’

They parted ways. The North face was the most perilous of the four. It faced outwards, a steep drop below, Castle Anton little more than a black dot in the distance. After giving his gloves a good wipe, he clung to the rock face and sidled along it, chin and chainmail scraping against the surface. The wind was fierce here, plucking at his pants, tangling in his hair. But Sir Ganton was brave and strong, and soon he was halfway along, stopped in front of a vertical body length crack. His ears pricked at the sound of giggling coming from somewhere within—Princess Alandra.

He entered, the crack wide enough for him to slip into side-on. He stepped into a great cavern. It was filled with light: a giant hole in the ceiling, piles of gold and jewels. He ducked and scrambled out of sight. The dragon!

Unsheathing his sword, he peered over the slab of rock he was hiding behind.

It was monstrous, at least sixty feet long from snout to tail, and twenty feet high from the floor to the top of its out-jutting wings, and that was while laying down. Black spikes, taller than a man, ran along the top of its tail. There were smaller horns along its brow and snout too. Its eyes were orange with vertical slits for pupils.

It was the epitome of evil, a terrible beast, destined to die at the end of a sword. And that’s why it was so shocking to see Princess Alan-

dra with its tongue in her lap, giggling and shrieking. She was naked, her long golden hair trailing down her back, a jewel-encrusted crown on her head, a large golden necklace with a giant emerald dangling between her breasts. At a distance, he couldn't see the scars and deformities. At a distance, she was smooth, young and innocent and undeniably beautiful.

His grip tightened on the hilt of his sword. He must save her. It was obscene, disgusting. What else had the dragon done to her?

He watched in horror as the dragon lapped at her breasts, between her legs. She laughed, and it laughed too, a dreadful cackle that boomed around the cavern. Sir Ganton shook his head as dust and bits of rock dislodged from the ceiling and fell into his hair.

Princess Alandra lay down and spread open her thighs, hands on her breasts, groaning and squirming, as the dragon licked at her golden thatch.

The blood drained from Sir Ganton's head, and without thinking, he charged towards them. Neither the princess nor the dragon noticed his advance until he was upon them, sword upraised. With a cry, he cut down on the dragon's foul tongue. Blood spurted. The princess screamed. The dragon roared and pulled away its head. Its tongue was thick and tough, the sword only nicking into it, but it was distraction enough for Sir Ganton to grab the princess and haul her away.

'No!' she screamed, thrashing against him.

He heaved her over his shoulder and ran for the crack. She was slippery with the dragon's saliva, but he held her tightly, sword dripping red, as the princess screamed and punched at his backside.

He didn't make it, skidding to a halt with a shout when the dragon's tail slid across his escape route, barring his way like a tall, leathery wall.

He spun around. 'Release us—*oomph*.'

Pain shot through his body as the princess kicked him hard in the groin. He let her go with a grunt. Breathless and gasping, he made a grab for her, but she scampered away, back to the dragon.

With a terrific roar, the dragon lifted an enormous foot, about to squish him. He ducked, and the princess cried, 'No!'

The dragon stopped, glowing orange eyes filled with rage, foot hanging above Sir Ganton's head. It pulled back with a growl and stood over the princess protectively.

'Leave with your life, Sir Ganton,' she said. 'I'm not going back to Lord Berrick.'

'I cannot, Princess. You cannot stay here with this demon.'

'Gor is not a demon,' she said, resting a tender hand against its leg. 'We love each other.'

'You do not.'

'We do!' Sir Ganton shook his head and gripped his sword with both hands. 'Leave, Sir Ganton. Know that I'm grateful for all you've done for me. You are a fine knight, but I have no need of you now.'

'I cannot. I have sworn to the king to protect you.'

'And you have. Now go. Gor's patience is wearing out.'

The dragon lifted its tail, and with a growl, smashed the slab of rock Sir Ganton had been hiding behind.

Backing away, Sir Ganton said, 'I will come back for you, Princess. I will take you home. I swore an oath, and I intend to keep it.'

The dragon lifted its tail again, and Sir Ganton scrambled for the exit. He slipped through the crack and stepped outside, the wind blasting against his face. He sheathed his sword and quickly sidled along the rock face. When he reached safe ground, he sped over to Sir Desmond and the others.

'You must find Lord Berrick now.'

'Why?' said Sir Desmond. 'Did you find her?'

'Yes. The dragon is holding her prisoner inside.' He grabbed Sir Desmond's shoulder. 'We will need all our strength to defeat it. We must—'

They all turned, unsheathing their swords at the sound of a sharp crack. Dirt and rock exploded out the top of the cavern. Amongst the

pall of dust was the dragon, wings beating against the air, clawed feet gouging at the cavern until the whole thing collapsed with a boom and a shudder, burying the riches within.

It took to the sky, treasure spilling from one of its clawed front feet, a small golden figure clasped in the other. Helpless, Sir Ganton could only watch as the dragon flew away, first a monstrous beast, then a smudge in the sky, then a dot in the distance.

Princess Alandra was gone.



## The Birth of Spring

**I** hate Winter.

‘Oh—I don’t know. Winter’s not so bad,’ her friend Micah said, gazing up at the sky as flecks of snow fell upon her face. ‘It can be beautiful—all that rolling white, the perfectness of life reborn.’

‘Hmph,’ Loralee grunted. ‘The cold, the ice, the deadness of everything, the lack of food.’ She closed her eyes and sighed. ‘Give me Spring, give me Summer, any day.’

Her horse nickered as she led it down a small slope. Micah followed close behind. The trail was deep with snow, and its hooves sank into it with a wet slosh at every step. In the Spring the woods were full of life and flowers and beauty. The village could catch conies and small deer, and pick fruit. Now, it looked dead: leafless, lifeless and stark against the snow.

Loralee tugged at her cloak and shivered. ‘How much further?’

‘Another hour, if the weather holds up.’

Loralee looked up with a frown, the sky grey through the branches. She nudged at her horse. It was usually a two-hour journey between their home village and the neighbouring village of Dunrow, but it was Winter and they had to take it slow.

‘Do you believe in the old legends?’ Micah said as they levelled on to flat ground.

The trail widened, and they trotted side by side.

Loralee scoffed. ‘My Grandmother used to speak of them—old wives’ tales.’

Micah held out her hand, catching snow in her glove. ‘Perhaps. Perhaps not.’

‘Don’t tell me you believe them?’

She shrugged and wiped her hand on her cloak. ‘How else do you explain the fierceness and the length of this Winter?’

‘It happens. Just like some Summers can be unusually long.’

‘Eight months long?’

Loralee didn’t answer.

Micah looked towards the sky again and began to sing.

*Spring is a princess, innocent and free,  
Hair of dandelions and gold, she’s a beauty from forest to sea.  
Proud and bold, Summer blazes across the land,  
A lord of remarkable strength as he takes the world in hand.  
The Lady of Autumn, wise and careful, brings forth the chill,  
Cooling Summer’s fun and fever as he bends beneath her will.  
Then Winter descends, all harsh and might, a god of unequalled power,  
Only through him, beginning and end, can Spring come to flower.*

‘Can’t believe you still remember that,’ Loralee said. ‘I haven’t heard it since I was a tot on my grandpa’s knee.’

‘My family never lets me forget the old legends. There is always wisdom behind the words.’

They walked in silence. The sky grew steadily darker, the falling snow thicker, the wind frostier. Loralee gripped onto the reins hard, heart pounding. The snow was so thick she could barely see ahead. An icy wind blew off her hood and gusted through her hair. Her horse neighed and shook its head.

‘Micah, how much further?’ No answer but the howling of the wind. ‘Micah!’ As she spun around in the saddle to look behind her, the reins slipped from her hands. There was the crack of a snapping branch, and her mount bolted.

‘*Oomph.*’ Plunging through the slushy snow, she hit the ground hard, the wind knocked out of her.

She gasped for breath, the air so icy it seized her chest and froze her lungs. The wet snow seeped through her cloak and through her clothes, freezing against her skin. She struggled to sit up and squinted against the white. Other than her raven hair coiling and twisting on the wind, she could see nothing.

‘Micah,’ she coughed.

She heaved herself to her feet, slipped, stumbled, and fell again. ‘Micah.’

She gripped onto herself and shivered. Her gloves were soaked through, her cloak was heavy with wet and her boots were soggy. She had to get home and get warm—*now*. And where was Micah?

‘I hate Winter,’ she sobbed.

She yanked herself to her feet and trudged into the white. She only hoped she was heading in the right direction.

She got nowhere fast, legs aching with the effort, heart thumping, breaths ragged. It wasn’t long before she fell to her knees and slumped over, so frozen she could barely move her fingers, barely take a breath, shivering so violently she cracked her teeth together. She closed her eyes—*so tired*.

The slosh of a footstep, another slosh, and another. She groaned and opened her eyes a slit as someone lifted her off the ground, strong arms around her, warm breath against her cheek. It was a man: matted beard, tangled brown hair, eyes the glorious blue of deep ice.

She parted her lips to speak but no sound came out. Slumped in his arms, she squinted above. The branches were invisible in the swirling snowfall. Then she sagged against him and knew no more.



LORALEE YAWNED AND drew her blankets around her tightly. Micah was right. There were things to like about Winter, such as being curled up in a warm bed while the weather raged around you. She opened her eyes with a start. *Micah. The storm. The cold.*

She sat up, then scrambled to her feet with a cry. ‘You!’ It was the man with the beard. He was lying in a bed of furs, where *she* had just been lying, tight in his embrace. She wrapped her arms around her breasts with a gasp and squatted, hiding her pubic hair. ‘What have you done?’

He lifted a big hand, palm outward. ‘Warm,’ he said, pounding a fist to his chest. Then he pointed a finger at her. ‘Cold.’

She looked around the tent. It was small, barely large enough to stand in. A tent flap, currently hooked closed, was the only exit. Furs and bedding were strewn in layers across the ground, soft and warm against her feet. Sacks of supplies and goods were stacked on top of each other in the opposite corner. There was a ring of stones and kindling where a small fire flickered, the smoke blowing through a hole above. Her clothes were laid out around it. She sidled over to them in a crab-like walk as she tried to hide her nakedness, eyes never leaving his, arms wrapped around her breasts.

She threw on her clothes, now warm and dry, and wrapped her cloak around her. She looked at him and braced herself. He hadn’t moved, his blue eyes looking right back at her. Then she scurried to the exit, unhooked the flap and fled outside.

The force of the wind and snow almost sent her crashing back against the tent. She squinted ahead but couldn’t see more than an arm’s length away. The horizon had vanished behind a pall of white. The air was so chilled it hurt to see, hurt to breathe. The freezing wind cut through her clothes, icing her skin.

She looked back at the tent—there was no choice. She reached into her pants and felt around: no blood, no wetness, no pain—no rape. Maybe it really had been innocent.

Taking a breath, she dropped to her knees and crawled back inside. She hooked the flap closed and crouched in front of it, ready to escape if she had to.

‘Who are you?’ she asked. She gazed at him, trying to determine his age. Somehow, he looked old and yet looked young—ageless.

The man thumped a fist to his chest. ‘Winter.’

Micah snorted. ‘No you’re not.’

He sighed and shook his head. Lorelee’s eyes lingered over him. The blankets had fallen around him, exposing his bare chest and the top of his britches. He was handsome: broad shoulders, powerful arms, strong jaw, kind deep eyes that gazed at her with a gentleness she had never seen in a man before.

Hot, flustered and tingling, she dropped to her bottom. She cleared her throat. ‘I’m Lorelee.’

‘Winter.’

Lorelee smiled. ‘Fine. Winter, then.’

The bad weather didn’t cease. For most of the day, they stayed in the tent together as the wind howled and gusted. Lorelee was wrapped in layers of wool and furs, while ‘Winter’ was warm enough in only his britches. Twice he left on errands, returning the second time late in the afternoon with a dead coney slung over his back.

‘How’d you find that?’ Lorelee asked.

He simply smiled.

Later that night, Lorelee huddled in her furs. They were sleeping separately, Lorelee by the fire, Winter at the far side of the tent. Despite the fire, despite the furs, she couldn’t stop shivering. She looked at Winter as he lay bare-chested, his layers tossed aside.

*You’re being ridiculous. Join him. He won’t touch you if you don’t want him to.*

Her heart began to pound. Cold sweat beaded behind her ears. *But if I go over, I will love him*, she argued with herself.

*And so what? He’s far from the first man you’ve had.*

She climbed to her knees, then to her feet and padded over. She crawled in beside him and pulled the covers over them both. He opened his eyes, smiled, and drew her against him. Quickly, the shiver-

ing stopped, and she relaxed in his arms with a sigh. He was so warm, so comfortable. She pressed her nose into his shoulder and breathed. And he smelt so darn good.

They didn't move for a time, listening to the crackle of the fire, the pull and snap of the tent against the wind, to each other's thundering hearts, until Lorelee bunched up the courage to press her lips to his chest. Winter grunted, shifted in her arms, then lifted her chin. Eyes sparkling, he leant in for a kiss.

He was gentle, his beard brushing against her chin. He tightened his grip around her and rolled her beneath him. He brushed at her hair as he gazed into her eyes, his own hair hanging around him in a tangle. There was something unworldly about his eyes—a depth, an age, a wisdom that didn't fit his lonely and rough existence in the snow.

Minutes later, their clothes were off, their skin slick against each other as they rocked. Winter was a big man, both in the broadness of his shoulders and the size of him inside her. Just as he was a man of few words, so was he quiet while he made love. While Lorelee's cries of ecstasy echoed around the tent, he made no sound except for his ragged breathing, the occasional grunt, the smack of a wet kiss.

His grip on her wrists tightened as he came, his seed filling her up. Lorelee gasped.

They lay alongside each other, chest to chest, Lorelee's arms tight around his back, his around her waist, sweating at their shared heat.

Flushed and throbbing with pleasure, Lorelee brushed at his beard. 'You can't be Winter. You're nothing like the song—harsh and cold. How can something built of ice and snow be so gentle and warm?'

He smiled and entwined his fingers with hers but didn't answer.

'When the weather calms, you must come home with me,' she said. 'It is lonely out here.'

His smile broadened, and he nuzzled her cheek.

'When do you think it will calm?' she said, nuzzling back. 'Where is Spring do you think?'

‘Dead,’ he said.

She tightened her arms around him. ‘Dead? What do you mean?’

‘Dead. Gone. None.’

She pulled away. Of course, she didn’t believe him, *couldn’t* believe him. There was no such thing as the God of Winter or the Princess of Spring, and yet when she gazed into his eyes, there was sadness and heartache and grief.

She shivered.

He pressed a hand to her navel. ‘Spring,’ he said, and patted her belly.

Loralee thought about the old legends, of Micah’s song, and her throat swelled in fear, then excitement and gladness. She placed her hand on top of his and swallowed. ‘Spring.’



SNOW AND SLEET CONTINUED to fall. While Lorelee’s belly swelled, the frost gathered, the rivers iced, the sky swirled grey and white—and she and Winter made love.

Between their lovemaking, Winter hunted, and Lorelee would accompany him, wrapped in several layers as she walked at his side, hand in his. When the worst of the wind and snow let up enough for Lorelee to see, she marvelled—the rolling white hills, the icing on the trees, the flawless snow. It was all so glorious. Then she would look up at Winter himself, and she could see all that beauty condensed in the ice-blue of his gaze, in his gentle look, his smile.

When Lorelee went into labour, it was during one of the worst storms yet. A howling wind threw piles of snow against their tent, and it was so cold not even the agony of birthing kept Lorelee warm.

But then their baby arrived, and there was nothing but the golden tuft on her daughter’s head, her pink and perfect skin, her tiny fingers and toes, her heart-wrenching cry. Suddenly, Lorelee stopped feeling the cold.

Winter placed a big hand under his baby's head as Lorelee held her in her arms. He gazed down at her, smiling, a new light in his eyes. 'Spring.'

Lorelee stayed in the tent for the next several days while she recovered and Spring grew stronger. It was on the seventh day when she decided to go for a walk. Spring was tucked safely against her chest, warm in layers of fur. Winter had left earlier in the morning, probably to go hunting. It was an unexpectedly warm day considering how bad the weather had been: water dripped from branches, the snow turned to slush, rivers of ice cracked.

'Shhhh,' Lorelee shushed as Spring squirmed and squeaked in her arms. Her golden tuft was the only part of her visible outside her swaddling. She began to whinge, then cry. 'All right, all right.'

Lorelee loosened the furs and Spring blinked against the brightness of the day. She reached out a little hand and smiled. Lorelee looked at her boots as she walked, gasped, then laughed. The snow was peeling back, flowers and grass blooming in its wake. She looked up and laughed again as life and colour burst on the branches. Birds sang, bees hummed, dandelion spores drifted on the air.

'Spring,' she cried, nuzzling her daughter's head. 'You're doing this.'

They walked all day, Lorelee looking around her in amazement as the whiteness and gloom of the past seventeen months rapidly fell away around them. The sun burned brightly, animals returned to their homes, the scent of flowers and new growth carried on the wind.

Lorelee was enjoying herself so much that by the time she turned back for home it was mid-afternoon. She had shed her furs and walked in only her shirt and pants. She gazed around her. The woods had exploded with life. Except for the occasional gust of cool air and a handful of snow caught in the rocks and branches here and there, it seemed Winter had never been.

She stopped. 'Winter!'

Clutching Spring to her chest, she rushed back to their tent. Darkness had fallen by the time she reached it, the full moon casting it in a blue glow. She crawled inside. There was no fire, no food, no scent of her lover. It was empty.

Winter was gone.



‘COME, MICAH!’ HER LITTLE sister cried, bursting into her room, flustered and flushed, curly red hair stuck-out everywhere. ‘Come see.’

‘What is it?’

‘It’s Lorelee. She’s back.’

‘What?’

Micah joined the shocked crowd outside, standing on her tiptoes to see over their heads. ‘Lorelee,’ she cried. She shoved ahead, pushing people aside. ‘Lorelee!’

‘Micah!’ They pulled each other into a fierce embrace. ‘I thought you were dead.’

‘I thought you were lost.’

Micah kissed her on the cheek, then pulled back as something squirmed and fussed against her. Her jaw dropped. ‘You have a baby.’

‘Yes.’

Micah touched the baby’s golden hair. ‘But, how?’

‘How?’ Lorelee giggled. ‘How do you think?’

Micah shook her head.

Lorelee smiled. ‘We’ll talk.’

Later that night, after everything had calmed down and village life returned to normal, Lorelee and Micah sat at the river together, feet dangling in the water.

‘You just vanished,’ Micah explained. ‘One moment you were there riding beside me and then you were gone. We searched the woods for days but only found your horse. By the end, we lost all hope.’

'I got lost in the storm,' Lorelee said, tickling Spring under the chin as her blue eyes, clear as the sky, gazed up at her.

'What storm? The day was clear.'

Lorelee raised an eyebrow. 'Truly?'

Micah nodded, then smiled as she looked at Spring. 'How is it she should have golden hair while yours is so black?'

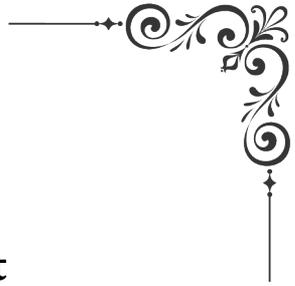
Lorelee shrugged.

'Fine, keep your secrets.' Micah drew her feet out of the water and clasped her knees to her chest. She gazed at the sky. 'The abruptness of Spring has taken everyone by surprise. It's strange.'

'You're complaining?'

'Certainly not. It's only—with Spring here so suddenly, might not Winter be equally as sudden? I dread its coming.'

'Really?' Lorelee looked down at her baby and smiled. 'I can't wait.'



## The Land of Enchantment

‘What are you painting?’

Wayne’s big sister, Sandra, looked up from her canvas. ‘The Land of Enchantment.’

‘What’s that?’

‘A place where the faery folk live.’

Wayne dragged over a stool and sat chin in hand as he watched her paint in a man’s face. ‘Who’s that?’

‘He’s the faery king.’ She added a blush of red to his cheek. ‘He rules the land and all fear and love him.’

‘But he doesn’t have wings.’

‘*Faery*—F-A-E-R-Y, not fairy. They’re magical beings from a magical place. They don’t necessarily have wings.’

She stepped back, considered a moment, then picked up another brush, dipped it in some black and began on his hair.

‘Don’t make it too long,’ Wayne said. ‘You’ll make him a woman.’

Sandra smiled. ‘Trust me. It’s how he looks.’

He watched as she put down her brush and stretched. His sister was old—almost eighteen, eight and a half years older than he was. She was tall and thin with blue eyes and long blonde hair. His best friend Mark thought she was hot. Wayne grimaced—*gross*.

‘I think that’s enough for today,’ she said. ‘What do you think of it?’

Wayne stared at the painting. ‘I don’t like it.’

‘What do you mean?’ she said anxiously. ‘Is there something wrong?’

His sister was an awesome painter. Next year, she was going to the city to study and become a famous artist. At least, that’s what their parents said. He usually loved his sister’s paintings, but this one was different.

‘It’s scary.’

Nine people were sitting along one side of a big table piled with dishes of food. Half of them were hideous—fangs and horns, tails and claws, pointed noses and long ears, and wrinkled, ugly faces. The other half were beautiful, but he liked them even less, particularly the faery king who sat tall and black-haired at the centre. Wayne gazed into his dark eyes, and the faery king stared straight back.

Wayne shivered.

‘Oh, you mean the ugly ones,’ she said. ‘That’s good. They’re supposed to be scary. You see, faeries can be hideous and beautiful, good and evil, just like regular people.’

‘They aren’t regular people.’ He shook his head. ‘I don’t like it.’

Sandra laughed and hugged him. ‘Don’t worry Wayne. You have nothing to fear. As long as you don’t eat their food or drink anything, they have no power over you. But what do you think of the painting itself? Is it real enough?’

Wayne dared another glance at the faery king. ‘Yes.’

*Too real.*



SANDRA STOOD IN FRONT of the canvas, brush in hand. It was late in the evening, and a storm was raging: thunder boomed, lightning flashed, wind and rain lashed her window. Usually, Sandra didn’t paint at night, finding it too difficult to see, but she couldn’t get the faery king right and she just had to fix him now. He lacked something—life.

‘Come on,’ she said. ‘What is it?’

She picked up her smallest paintbrush and dipped the very tip into some white. She considered the painting again, leant in and carefully flicked it over his left eye. He almost seemed to blink, and she stepped back with a start. She laughed and threw her hands up in the air.

*'Finally.* Let there be life.'

A flash of lightning, a ground-shaking crack, and the lights went out. Sandra put down her paintbrush and groped her way to her cupboard. More lightning flashed, more thunder grumbled. She opened the door and was about to grab her torch when she froze, catching movement in the corner of her eye. She blinked. She was imagining things, had to be. It was just a trick of the lightning.

More movement, and she grabbed her torch and spun around. 'Who's there?' She clicked it on.

No-one.

Lightning flashed against her painting, drawing her gaze. Something was wrong. Squinting, she went over. Yes. One of her characters was different. The one on the end. She had painted him face-on but now he was in profile, turned to the woman beside him, a grin on his hideous face. He was holding a goblet, as though in a toast. She had never painted that.

She looked at the faery king, heart thundering so hard she could barely breathe. She stepped up close, nose to the canvas. There was something different about him too. Something so subtle she was surprised she'd noticed in the torch's dull glow. There was a slight quirk to his lips, an almost sneer.

'Impossible,' she whispered.

The faery king stared back at her, eyes dark and shining and very much alive.

Taking a breath, she reached out to touch him.

Sandra tumbled into blazing daylight and rolling hills, soft grass beneath her knees. She scrambled to her feet and looked behind her, but

there were only more fields, more blue sky, a distant horizon. Her painting, her room, her home—all were gone.

‘Come join us, why don’t you?’

She spun back around. Faeries. *Her* faeries. They had appeared out of nowhere and looked just as she had painted them. They were sitting at the same table, one side empty, the other occupied by nine figures: four ugly, four beautiful, with the faery king tall and perfect in the middle.

‘Please,’ the faery king said again, gesturing across the table. A chair appeared directly opposite him.

She sat. They were all staring at her, some sneering, some frowning, but she only had eyes for one person and he was smiling.

‘You’re—you’re real,’ she said.

His smile broadened, lighting his beautiful face—and oh, was he beautiful. His hair was sleek and long, so dark and flawless it was blue. And his eyes—deep purple with rings of indigo. She knew those eyes so well. After all, she had painted them. He wore a simple cotton shirt, white and to the elbows, the top three buttons undone. She didn’t realise she was staring, until a woman two seats over sniggered to the monster beside her.

Still smiling, he placed his chin on his long-fingered hands and considered her. ‘You have a wonderful talent, Sandra.’ He had a musical voice that made her head hum. To hear him say her name made her tremble and sweat. ‘It borders on the magical.’

‘Th—thank you.’

He pushed forward a bowl. ‘Please, eat.’

It was the bowl of apricots she had painted, her favourite food and the most succulent she’d ever seen—plump and shining and swollen with juice. Her mouth watered.

‘Thank you, I’m not hungry.’ She pushed it back. To taste even a drop of faery meant an eternity in their world. And though it looked lovely on the outside, with its blue sky, beautiful king and rolling hills,

she knew better. She had read the legends—betrayal, pain, loss, even murder. She only had to see the monsters at the table to know the truth.

Horned and fanged, tail swishing behind him, the monster at the end of the table grinned at her and drank from his goblet.

She turned back to the faery king and saw a flicker of displeasure.

‘Why did you bring me here?’ she asked.

‘To sup with us, to talk, to be merry, to enjoy life’s simple pleasures. Please,’ he said, gesturing to a goblet, ‘drink.’

‘No. It will doom me.’

This time there was anger, quickly gone. ‘You think this doom?’ He stood gracefully, revealing skin-tight pants. Sandra blushed at the sight of his bulge. The table shook as everyone laughed—screeching, cackling, roaring—everyone but the faery king who gazed into her eyes, so handsome, so powerful. She sagged beneath the force of his stare, her defences crumbling.

‘Will you not come with me?’ he said with a dazzling smile.

A hot flush rushed through her body, making her flustered and dizzy. She couldn’t speak, her brain fogged. He laughed, and it was like the chime of hundreds of bells tolling in perfect harmony. He turned and walked away, dark hair streaming behind him.

The rest of the table ignored her as they feasted and chatted and laughed. Sandra got to her feet.

He was waiting for her in a copse of trees, sitting with his back against a giant oak.

‘Sit,’ he said.

She did, curling her legs under her, close enough she could see the indigo in his eyes.

‘So, tell me, Sandra. What do the legends tell about making love to a faery?’

Sandra coughed and spluttered as she choked on her own saliva. She dropped her face into her hands.

He chuckled. His skin was warm and smooth as he eased apart her hands. Sandra stared into his eyes, unable to look away. Her whole body tingled as he traced circles into her palms with his thumbs.

‘Is it safe?’ he whispered. ‘Or is there doom in that too?’

‘There is—nothing, I’ve read,’ she panted.

He smiled. ‘Touch me.’

She shook her head.

‘Come now. I know you want to. I know you’ve been dreaming about me, fantasising about this moment. Why else would you paint me? Don’t deny yourself. Touch me.’

She raised a hand, hesitated, then brushed his cheek. There was the slightest hint of stubble.

His eyes sparkled. ‘Not there.’ Sandra swallowed. He took her hand and lowered it. He smiled as she rubbed him. ‘See how you affect me? Don’t fear me. In the end, I’m still a man.’

Sandra stopped touching him and brushed her fingers through his hair. It was so soft, like black silk. He caught her hand and kissed it, then rested it against his cheek. She traced her thumb over his lips, and he opened his mouth and took her inside, sucking. She pulled it out with a gasp.

He chuckled, his eyes flashed and the rings of indigo almost seemed to spin, like little wheels of light. He leant in and kissed her, and a rush of heat chased away her fear. He tasted sweet, his tongue was wet, his breath warm. He gripped onto her arms, too tight, his fingers digging in as he kissed her neck, her collarbone. Then he found the buttons on her shirt and ripped them open. Braless, Sandra instinctively put her hands over her breasts, nipples hard against her palms. He smiled, gently pushed them aside and kissed each breast, tongue curling around her nipples, before lowering her to the ground.

As he turned to her pants, Sandra lay in a daze. The faery king. *She was making love to the faery king.* She must be dreaming. This couldn’t be real. She pinched her arm and yelped.

She lifted her hips as he slid down her pants, her knickers. Then he spread her thighs wide, and she gasped as he entered her with his tongue. He sucked and gnawed, his tongue darting in and out, until Sandra's whole body tingled and burned. She thrust her hips at each penetration, her body throbbing to the point of pain. She cried out as she orgasmed, her voice lifting beyond the treetops.

The faery king sat back on his knees and licked his lips. Sandra gazed at him between her thighs, panting. Then he stood up, and she saw the shape of his hardness against his skin-tight pants. He didn't seem affected at all by the effort of their lovemaking: tall and cool, not a hair out of place, his locks midnight black against his pale cheeks, reminding her how truly inhuman he was.

He watched her as his long fingers undid his pants and shimmied them down to his thighs. Sandra stared at his penis. She hadn't had much experience with men, but as penises went, his surely must have been perfect—not too big, not too small, the right thickness for his length, hairless and smooth.

'What are you waiting for? Don't you want my love?' he said, running his hand over it. Something in his voice, in his look, disturbed her. There was something wrong. This wasn't love. She could see it in his eyes—a darkness, a coldness, a cunning.

It had been over two years since Sandra dated Michael, and she was lonely. To have someone hold her again, be inside her and fill her up, particularly someone as beautiful and wondrous as the faery king, made her tremble and ache.

He waited, hair whispering in the breeze, the rings of indigo spinning like little galaxies. She could feel his power, his impatience. Everything in her mind screamed no. All her good sense willed her to resist. But her body was throbbing, her heart was pounding and she salivated at the thought of the taste of him.

She got to her knees and crawled over. He grabbed her head, fingers coiling through her hair, as she took him in her mouth. Sandra's lips ran

up and down his length as he thrust into her. Her tongue coiled around him but there was no taste. Neither did he smell. It wasn't natural. It wasn't right. But Sandra kept going, knowing he was up to something, knowing somehow she was doomed.

He didn't shudder or groan or gasp to announce his pleasure but simply ejaculated in a hot gush, taking Sandra by surprise. She pulled away, gagged, then swallowed. She wiped her mouth, looked at him and shivered.

He was smiling, but it was a cold smile, pleased and arrogant. It was a smile of triumph. Sandra clapped a hand to her mouth in horror. To taste even a drop of faery meant an eternity in their world, and she just swallowed its very essence.

The faery king's smile became a sneer, then he tilted his back and laughed and laughed and laughed.



WAYNE STOOD AT THE threshold of his sister's room, suitcase in hand. He hadn't been inside since her disappearance, almost ten years before, his parents keeping it locked tight. Cobwebs spanned the corners of the ceiling, a thick coating of dust lay on every surface and there was a stuffiness that made it hard to breathe. His old room was a games room now: pool table, jukebox, arcade games, and his father was loath to give it up. After a brief, fiery argument, his parents had decided it was time to open Sandra's room.

Wayne put his suitcase on the bed and opened the window, then turned back and sighed. It was a hard thing coming back to his parents after years living on his own. Well, not on his own, with his boyfriend Jeremy. And that was the whole point of his return. They had broken up, and he couldn't afford to live by himself. So now he was stuck with his parents, in his sister's dusty, depressing room filled with ghosts.

He sat on the bed's flowery duvet and stared at her empty easel. Her disappearance had almost destroyed their family: his father had turned

to drink and lost his job; his mother was an angry griever and had taken out her rages on his father and himself until Wayne couldn't take anymore and left to make his own way at sixteen. It was surprising his parents managed to stay together. Things were better now but the tension, the sadness, had never left.

It was a bizarre case and had been all over the news for weeks. An ordinary, seemingly happy girl with a great future ahead of her goes to bed one night only to vanish by morning: bed not slept in, wallet and phone and car left behind, room locked up tight. The police were baffled.

He went to the chest of drawers, emptied out his sister's clothes and put in his own. Next, he went to the cupboard and began unloading the rack. He had just lifted away half a dozen long dresses when he stopped. There were several canvases stacked against the wall behind them. He put down her clothes and removed them one by one.

He sat on the bed and studied them. His sister really had been a great artist. He brushed his hand over a little girl's pink cheeks as she dipped her hand in a cookie jar, grinning mischievously. So beautiful. He put it aside and studied the next and the next one. When he came upon the last picture, he stopped. He remembered this one. It was the very last she had painted.

'The Land of Enchantment,' he whispered.

He stared at it, pulse beating in his neck. He got up, put it on the easel and stood back. It was Sandra. It seemed she had painted herself into the picture but in the strangest way. She was sitting beside the faery king, hands in her lap as she stared at the table, long blonde hair trailing down one shoulder, looking sad and miserable. Wayne touched her face. She was so much older—a woman. Why would she paint herself like that? He looked at the faery king who stared back at him, one hand clutching a goblet, the other gripping his sister's arm.

He shook his head, picked up the picture and put it back in the cupboard. The other canvases followed, and he pushed the door shut. He had never liked that painting.

Later that night as he lay thinking about Jeremy, his thoughts suddenly turned to the picture. He sat up, hesitated, then got to his feet and opened the cupboard. He pulled it out and stared.

‘What the hell?’

He put it on the easel and switched on the light. It had changed. His sister wasn’t sitting with the faery king anymore. She was sitting one seat from the end between one of her monsters and a beautiful, laughing woman with long bronze hair. This time, she was terrified. The monster was laughing too, a long muscular arm curled around Sandra’s waist, claws digging into her side.

‘No,’ he said.

A click, and the light went out. He lifted his arm against the glare as the painting blazed with light. A man’s laughter filled the room, and there was a small voice—his sister’s.

‘Wayne. Stay away.’

He stared into the painting, right into the faery king’s eyes. ‘Not a chance.’

He thrust an arm into the painting and was yanked forwards, tumbling head over feet, landing in soft grass. He leapt up and spun to look behind, but the room was gone.

‘Wayne, no! I told you to stay away.’

He turned back. ‘Sandra.’

Everything was just as it was in the picture except all eyes were now on him, monster and beauty alike.

‘Have a seat,’ the faery king said, gesturing across the table. A chair suddenly appeared.

Wayne stood beside it and folded his arms. ‘Let my sister go.’

The corner of the faery king’s mouth twitched. The rest of the table roared and shrieked with laughter.

'I'm afraid that's not possible,' the faery king said. He pushed over a plate—roast dinner, Wayne's favourite. 'Please, sit.'

'Way—' Sandra began before the monster slapped a paw over her mouth.

'Don't worry, Sandra. I remember.' He considered the plate, then looked at the faery king. He was a beautiful man: strong yet slim, powerful yet graceful, face as striking as man's yet as lovely as a woman's. He was designed to be adored, and despite his anger, Wayne felt himself go hard. Little wonder Sandra had fallen for him. He took a breath and steeled himself. 'I'll join you if you like—in my sister's place.'

The table stopped laughing. Sandra struggled furiously against the monster. The faery king smirked. 'Like I said—not possible. She has tasted faery. She cannot leave.'

'But you are the faery king. Don't you rule over this land? Or are you just a sham? Does the land, in fact, rule over you?'

The faery king narrowed his eyes. 'I am the king. What I want, what I say, goes.'

'Then release my sister and take me.'

The faery king relaxed back into his chair and smiled as he considered him. 'And what more can you offer me that your sister cannot?'

'My youth, my looks, my love.'

He raised a perfect dark eyebrow. 'That's all?'

Wayne nodded at his sister. 'Look at her. She's almost thirty and looks much older than that. You've snuffed the life out of her. Pretty soon, you won't be able to stand the sight of her. I, on the other hand, am much younger, much more vital, stronger.'

The faery king rubbed at his chin, dark eyes glinting, then looked over at Sandra still wrapped tightly in the monster's arms.

He turned back. 'Done.' Sandra's muffled screams were lost behind the shouts and hoots and laughter of the other faeries as they celebrated. The faery king pushed over a goblet, smiling. 'Now, eat, drink and be merry. We have an eternity together.'

‘Not until I know my sister’s safe.’

The faery king glared at him, then looked across his shoulder at the monster holding Sandra. He spoke something in a guttural language that lifted the hairs on the back of Wayne’s neck. The monster stood up and carried Sandra over to where Wayne had first appeared. Sandra struggled and kicked and bit. She managed to wriggle free of his paw around her mouth and screamed, ‘Wayne!’

‘It’s all right, Sandra. Go home. Live your life. This is my choice.’

She was still fighting and screaming and calling his name as the monster tossed her in the air. There was a flash, and she was gone.



SANDRA HIT THE FLOOR with a cry. She twisted over, blinking in the darkness. The old smells, the softness of carpet beneath her hands—her room, her home, *her life*. She scrambled to her feet and switched on the light.

She sank onto the bed as she gazed at the picture. Wayne was sitting alongside the faeries, a goblet in one hand, a fork in the other, the faery king’s long graceful arm encircling his shoulders.

‘Oh, Wayne. What have you done?’



## Black Thunder

‘Rescued by her courageous prince and his glorious horned steed, the princess escaped the monster’s clutches and lived happily ever after.’ Her mother shut the book. ‘That’s enough, Lucy, it’s getting late.’ She stood, tucked Lucella into bed and kissed her on the head.

The lantern flickered on the shelf behind her mother’s head, making her auburn locks glow and throwing frightening shadows around the room. They looked like monsters, with teeth and horns and claws, just like the one from her story.

‘Do you think I’ll ever see a unicorn?’ Lucella squeaked, clutching her blankets to her chin, trying to ignore them. There was the clatter of hooves as a carriage passed her shuttered window.

‘If you’re good,’ her mother said, ‘and if you are in need. Unicorns are wild and majestic and wondrous and will only protect the purest and most virtuous of maidens.’

‘Have you ever seen one?’

‘No.’ Her mother picked up the lantern and approached the door. ‘But I’ve never needed protecting. I have your father for that.’

‘Mammy?’

‘Yes?’ she said, hand on the door frame.

‘What does virtuous mean?’

‘You will find out when you’re older.’

Lucella sat up. ‘Mammy?’ she said as she was closing the door.

Her mother sighed. ‘Yes, sweetheart?’

‘Am *I* virtuous?’

‘Of course.’ Lucella smiled and lay back down. ‘Now, good night.’

The door clicked shut, snapping off the light. Though the shadows descended, Lucella closed her eyes and imagined her beautiful white saviour with his pearly horn and goodness and strength carrying her away, far away, where there were only flowers and rolling fields and blue sky and where no monster could touch her.

She clenched her fists around her blankets. No matter what happened in her life, she would be pure and true and virtuous or whatever that meant and would find herself a unicorn.

Smiling, she drifted asleep.



‘MAID! HIS LORDSHIP is asking for you,’ Davensby said.

Lucella straightened out her skirt and nodded. Eric Davensby, his lordship’s greasy-haired, sour-faced manservant, held open the door. As she passed through it, he sneered, ‘have fun.’

The door clicked shut behind her. Lord Braya’s chambers were immense and lavish: wall-to-wall golden-framed portraits, heavy curtains with gold tassels, ornate Persian rugs, crystal chandelier, a giant four-poster bed with silk sheets, and a mahogany work desk with felt matting which his lordship was currently sitting behind.

The room was dark, but a lantern glowed upon his desk, drawing out the lines and hollows of his face. He didn’t bother to look up at her entrance as he sliced open an envelope with his letter opener. He matched the room perfectly: austere, wealthy, high class. When he went out, he would always leave with his top hat, cane, sash, pocket watch and coattails. Always stylish and refined. A proper gentleman. Lucella knew better.

Head lowered, Lucella gazed at her shoes. They were so thin and overused they were almost worn through. Somehow, she would have to find the money to buy another pair.

‘Come here,’ he commanded.

Eyes still on the floor, she shuffled over to the desk. She looked up cautiously beneath her brow. He was looking faintly amused, the corner of his mouth curled mockingly. She looked away as he stood up. The floor creaked beneath his slippers as he rounded the desk. He was already dressed in his nightclothes: white shirt flared at the arms and open at the chest, exposing a spattering of dark hairs, hair brushed out, sideburns long and thick and whiskery.

He took her chin and lifted her face, and the curl in his lip pulled back into a genuine smile.

‘So beautiful,’ he whispered, pushing back her maid’s cap and untying her hair so it flowed in blazing locks down her shoulders. He brushed his fingers through it, gazing at it, then turned to the buttons on her shirt, undoing them one by one, his breath hot and eager against her face.

Lucella’s heart hammered in her chest. It was far from the first time they had made love. Usually, it was nice, sometimes even pleasurable, but occasionally it turned brutal. She still bore the wounds on her back to prove it. What would it be tonight? She could never tell.

He found her breasts, his palms rough against her skin, then pressed his face into her throat and sucked. She gasped as he pushed her against the desk, the hard timber ramming into her backside.

‘Turn around,’ he said in her ear, his voice thick with lust. Lucella’s heart hammered harder. ‘I said turn around!’

She cried out as he flung her around and threw her onto the desk, her rump at his disposal. The lantern toppled and fell to the floor with a crash, snuffing out the light. The tears flowed as he shoved up her skirts and yanked down her drawers. Moonlight streamed through a crack in the curtains, catching upon the silver blade of the little letter opener, and her tears dried up.

No more.

As he released her to unbutton his pants, she grabbed it, and in a whirl of skirts and screaming, stuck him under the chin. But that wasn’t

all. She yanked it out and stabbed him again and again, in the chest, in the cheek, in the hardness between his legs, until blood gushed and spurted all over the fine, Persian carpets and turned her maid's white uniform red.

'I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!'

She stabbed him for every bit of rotten luck, for every hurt, for every abuse, for the death of her parents, for her life as an orphan and now as his whore and maid, for her lost virtue, her lost childhood, her innocence.

When she came to her senses, he was sprawled on the ground, blood pumping from his neck, twitching and gurgling. Gasping for breath, knife clenched tight in her fist, she gazed down at what she had done.

There was a booming knock at the door, a shout, 'Your Lordship!'—Davensby, alerted by all the noise.

At the sound of a key scratching in the lock, she dropped the knife and pulled up her drawers. Just as he opened the door, she barged into it, knocking him to the floor. She stumbled over him, grabbing at the wall as her legs threatened to give way.

Moments later, she was on the street, her shoes pounding the pavement as she dodged carriages and horses and late-night walkers. People pointed at her in horror, her uniform covered in blood.

The moon was bright and full and glistened on the wet leaves and grass as she sped through the woods. Sobbing and shaking, she ran until the trees closed in so tightly she was forced into a stagger. Soon, she couldn't catch her breath. The tears swelled in her throat. Her legs bowed and wobbled. She collapsed.

She didn't know how long she lay for, gazing into the treetops, numb to the cool Autumn air and the horror of the terrible thing she'd done, when she blinked and turned her head at a sudden rustle. There was a thump, a crack of a snapping branch. She sat up. Light blazed

through the trees, as bright as the moon but shining in the wrong direction, flooding the woods.

She got up with a gasp. 'What are you doing here?'

The unicorn stood at least eighteen hands tall, strong and formidable and as black as midnight. Its long, pearly horn was as sharp as a blade and glowed with that blazing light. She lifted her hand against the glare and squinted. The unicorn bobbed its head and pawed the ground. It seemed to understand her discomfort, and the blaze ebbed into a warm glow until she could see again.

'I said, what are you doing here?' Tears coursed down her cheeks as she thought of her mother. 'You're too late. I am a virtuous maiden no longer. I am tainted. Guilty. Impure. I will only sully your beauty.'

It merely stared at her with its deep, black eyes.

'Didn't you hear me? I am no maiden. Did you want a filthy whore's crotch rubbing against your back?'

She picked up a rock and threw it. It went wide, hitting a tree.

'Go away! I don't want you.' She threw another as more tears flowed. 'Where were you, huh?' She threw a stick. 'Where were you when the sickness took my father? Where were you when those men took my mother, brutalised and killed her. Where were you when Lord Braya—when Lord Braya—'

Out of things to throw, she sank to the ground and wept. The unicorn didn't move, watching her. She lifted her head at the sound of shouting. The unicorn pawed the ground and whirled its head, sending its black mane flying. She looked over her shoulder. Flaming torches shone through the trees. She scrambled to her feet. The unicorn was already on its knees, ready for her to mount. She leapt onto it, and they fled, leaving Lucella's pursuers, her suffering, her life, far behind.



LUCELLA LAY IN A FIELD of flowers, green fields rolling into the distance, as she stared into a glorious blue sky.

They had travelled for months, across vast distances, through countless landscapes, across seasons, until they reached a place where no pain, no murderers, no Lord Braya, no monster of any sort, could touch her.

She closed her eyes and laughed when Black Thunder nuzzled her cheek, his long mane tickling her face.

‘All right, all right. I’m awake. Time to ride is it?’

She gripped onto his neck, and he dragged her to her feet with a pull of his beautiful head. She pressed her face into his cheek, breathed in his horsey scent, his mane flowing around her in a black waterfall. It was so soft, nothing like an ordinary horse’s mane. She gripped his horn, pulled his head down and gazed into his eyes. When they had first met, she had thought them black, but deep in the centre was an astonishing ocean-blue, like a tiny flame in the dark.

She kissed his horn. ‘Let’s go.’

He bent his knees, and Lucella vaulted onto his back with practised ease. She had ridden him so many times he felt a part of her now.

As they rode, Lucella laughed. Ever since her mother died, she had never laughed. Now, she couldn’t stop. He jumped over a hedge and galloped over the hills, towards the horizon. He rocked between her legs, sending shivers down her spine. She rocked with him, back arched, thighs clenched hard against his flanks. She couldn’t laugh anymore; the tingling between her legs stole her voice and froze her thoughts. As he galloped faster, she rocked faster, her pleasure building and building until she couldn’t hold on any longer. She flung her head back with a cry.

Soon night fell, and they hunkered down together. There was a clear sky, a new moon, stars twinkling. A city stretched out in the distance.

Lucella looped her arms around his neck and buried her face in his hair. ‘I love you so much, Black Thunder. More than any man could

hope for. But I wish—I wish so much I could hold you like a woman. If only for one day.’

She lay down and snuggled against him. Black Thunder rested his head upon her breast, horn as bright as the stars.



LATER THAT NIGHT, BLACK Thunder gently pulled away from Lucella and stood. He trotted over the hill, and once he was out of earshot, galloped into the distance.

He came upon a dense wood and disappeared inside. It was thick, the roots and vines threatening to trip him up, but he avoided them with ease, slipping through like a shadow.

Soon, he stopped before a small hut built of thatch and timber. A dank smell came from within. The door was open, as though he was expected.

‘Well, what have we here?’ the witch said as he entered. ‘What is a fine specimen such as yourself doing at my little old door, hmmm?’

The unicorn bobbed his head and nickered.

‘You want something? A spell?’ The witch scratched at the wart on her pointed chin. ‘And what do you want? Hmmm? Immortality? Beauty? Strength? Power?’ There was a glint in her dark eyes as she grinned. ‘Wealth?’ She cackled, went to her cauldron and stirred the contents within. It hissed and bubbled, frizzing up her straggly grey hair. ‘They’re the usual requests, but *you*, unicorn, have all that you need and more. What is it then? Speak up.’

Black Thunder stomped his hoof and shook his head, black mane whirling around his face.

The witch stopped her stirring. ‘A woman, is it? A *human* woman?’

He stomped his hoof again.

‘I should have known. It’s about love then is it?’ She fondled the wart on her chin and grinned. She looked between his legs. ‘Or maybe it’s about sex?’

He reared up with a whinny and slammed his hooves down on her wooden floor.

‘Very well, very well! It’s love. Don’t destroy my home. If I help you, what will I get in return, my handsome boy? Hmmm? What can you offer *me*?’

He lowered its head and nickered. The witch gazed at his horn and licked her lips. ‘You would do that? For a *human*?’

Black Thunder bobbed his head and stomped his hoof.

‘To be in possession of such a thing, even if it is just a taste, is a grand payment indeed.’ Her eyes glinted. ‘She must be very special, this woman.’

The unicorn bobbed his head, his tail swishing from side to side.

The witch stirred her cauldron, lifted a spoonful to her mouth and tasted. She smacked her lips. ‘It just so happens I have finished the very potion you need. Remarkable coincidence, isn’t it?’

Black Thunder shook his head with a snort.

‘Not fooled? Think I knew you were coming?’

He reared up and slammed his hooves down again.

‘Very well! So impatient. Let’s get it done then.’

The unicorn trotted towards the cauldron.

She raised a clawed hand. ‘Hold it. Do you take me for a fool? Payment first.’ She picked up the butcher’s knife, her eyes gleaming against the shining steel. It had been polished and sharpened recently, no doubt in anticipation of his coming. ‘On the barrel.’

Black Thunder bent his knees and curled himself on the floor, then lowered his head so his horn rested flat across the barrel.

The witch seized his horn in a gnarled fist. She raised the knife. It came down with a thud and the tip of his horn spilt into her hand. She dropped her knife and cackled greedily at the little pearl shining on her filthy palm. The floor creaked as the unicorn thrust himself to his feet. His horn, once so sharp, was now blunted an inch from the tip.

The witch closed her fist around her payment as the unicorn approached the cauldron once more. ‘This will only last one night, my handsome boy. Make it count.’

The unicorn gazed at the thick, bubbling slop within. It stank. Nevertheless, he lowered his head and drank. When he was done, he reeled back with a whinny and shook his head, baring his teeth.

The witch laughed. ‘I never said it would taste nice. But I promise you, it’s potent enough. A wish from the heart is powerful, and she wished fiercely. Even the bats in the sky heard it.’ She looked out the window. Morning was coming, the darkness brightening. ‘The spell will begin to work at sunup. I suggest you get back to your lady love bef—’

But Black Thunder was already out the door, hooves thudding into the distance.

He galloped through the woods, pounding the soft earth, snorting for breath, whisking through the trees so gracefully the leaves barely trembled in his wake. By the time he returned, he was shaking and lathered in sweat. But he had made it in time, the blazing sun only just peeping above the horizon.

Lucella looked up and grinned. ‘You’re back.’

She was kneeling by a small brook, naked, as she washed herself. Long, red hair curled wetly over her shoulders and between her perfect breasts. A trickle of water ran down her abdomen and into her belly button before disappearing into the crimson thatch between her legs. A sexual heat, such as he’d never known before, stirred in his loins, then whipped, then blasted along his flanks like fire. Whinnying, he paced the clearing.

Concerned, Lucella got to her feet and approached him. ‘What’s the matter?’

The unicorn backed away, snorted and shook his head, unable to look away from those shining, wet mounds. The water must have been cold because they were covered in goosebumps and her nipples were

tight. He had only noticed them as a curiosity before, but the sun had almost risen and he was changing.

Lucella's eyes widened, and she grabbed his head, face dropping in horror. 'Your horn! What's happened to your horn?'

He yanked his head out of her grasp, reared onto his hind legs and screamed. *The pain.* The witch hadn't warned him about the pain. He dropped back to the ground with a thud, then reared again.

Lucella backed away. 'What's happening? What's wrong?'

He reared again, kicked out. Then his back legs gave way, and he dropped with a terrific thud. Sprawled on the ground, he thrashed and kicked and squirmed. His hooves punched at the air, beat at the earth, kicked up leaves and grass and gouged deep troughs through the dirt. He screamed again, whinnied, frothed at the mouth.

'Stop!'

Quickly, his thrashing turned to twitches as he sagged into himself. His hooves spread into fingers and toes, his tail coiled and twisted and pulled back into his rump. His ears and snout shrank into his head. His body hair went slippery and lost its softness. He grasped at his horn with his human hands at a terrible blast of agony as it shot back into his brow. He shrank, and shrank some more, twitching and moaning, the pain easing until he lay naked and cold and curled into a ball, and he was still. The day had finally risen. The birds chirped and the grass rustled in the wind, disguising his ragged breathing.

'Black Thunder?' came a tentative whisper.

He opened his eyes and looked up. Lucella was standing at a distance, clutching at herself, eyes shining with fear.

He sat up with a groan. A strange vibration coursed up his throat. 'Lucy?' he coughed.

She gasped and took a step towards him. 'What's happened? You're a—you're a—'

'A man.'

He gazed down at his hands, straightened out his legs, wriggled his toes. He was broad and well-muscled and yet felt so light and weak. He twisted around his forearms, traced his fingers down his ebony skin, wrinkled his face, smiled, frowned. Everything was gone, all except his flowing mane which hung about his face in a black curtain.

He stumbled to his feet, staggered. She rushed to him, catching him in her arms.

‘Thank you. Two legs—’ he shook his head—‘how can you do anything?’

She laughed. ‘I don’t really know.’ She ran her fingers through his hair. ‘How?’

He took her hand and brushed his lips across her fingers. ‘Can we talk about it later? Let me hold you, talk with you, love you, just for this one day.’

‘I can’t believe it,’ she whispered. ‘My Black Thunder.’ She brushed her hands over his broad shoulders, down his arms, then took his hand and pressed it to her cheek with a sigh. ‘My dreams come true.’

‘And mine.’

Playing with his fingers, she looked into his eyes. ‘You heard my wish.’

‘Yes.’

She frowned. ‘But you were such a beautiful, wondrous, magical beast. Don’t you feel sad?’

‘Let’s not talk about it now.’

And he pulled her against his chest and kissed her. He had never kissed before, but he somehow knew how. It was a powerful spell, like the witch said. Lucella sagged into his arms with a moan, exposing her long, graceful neck. He was more than strong enough to take her weight, but he wasn’t used to his legs and overbalanced, and they tumbled to the ground.

Laughing, Lucella rolled on top and straddled him. ‘What use are legs anyway? We won’t need them, at least for today.’

He laughed too, a noise so strange to his ears, a feeling so alien. It was wonderful.

She lay on top of him and held him, cheek pressed against his. She was so warm, so soft and smelt so perfect. He took her hand and entwined their fingers, something he'd been aching to do for too long.

Lucella looked at their hands and smiled. 'Your skin is so black against mine.'

'Is that a problem?'

'No. I prefer it. Lord Braya's slaves always treated me kindly.' She looked at him and brushed her fingers along his chin. 'You even have stubble. Like a real man.'

'I am a real man.'

She grasped him between the legs. 'Oh,' she giggled, 'you certainly are.'

He grunted and placed his hand over hers. He was so hard it was painful. Smiling, she sat up and tucked him inside.

'Uh,' he said.

He had mated before, of course, but never like this. He could touch her, feel her, with his remarkable hands. He had never known such softness before. He could look into her eyes, see the pleasure in her face. Humans were so lucky. Despite all his power and wonder, he could never know love like this.

She rocked against him, hair streaming over her shoulders in a river of fire, head tilted back, breasts shining in the sunlight. She rocked faster until her breasts bounced and he couldn't hold on any longer. He grabbed her hips with a grunt as he came.

She smiled, then lay beside him, and they talked the day away, the sun hovering above like a glowing eye.

'I felt you, you know,' he said.

'Felt me what?'

'Today, when you were riding me. Your pleasure.'

Lucella sat up, face flushed. 'Oh.'

He laughed. 'It felt good. I enjoy your happiness.' He entwined their fingers again and pulled her against him.

'Why did you save me?' Lucella asked, eyes shining. 'With the way that I am?'

'What do you mean?'

'You know—impure.'

'You mean—a woman? Strong and brave and beautiful?'

'Well, yes, I guess. My mother told me—'

'Humans don't know anything. I came for you for what's in here—' he pressed a black finger between her breasts—'not what's between your legs. Give me some credit. I am legendary, not some puerile fantasy.'

She gazed at him, tears rolling down her cheeks, then pressed her face into his throat and wept. He held her until she stopped shuddering and her breaths grew regular and even, watching as the sun sank below the horizon.



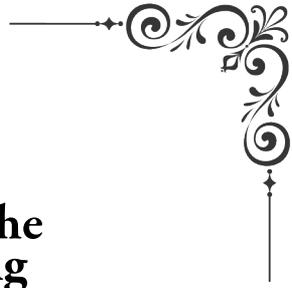
LUCELLA WOKE STRETCHING and smiling. She opened her eyes and sat up with a gasp.

'Black Thunder, no!'

The unicorn looked at her, horn broken, sadness in his eyes, but as glorious as ever. She clapped a hand to her mouth. 'I'm sorry. I just thought, hoped, but—no. I only wished for one day, didn't I?'

She took a shuddering breath, looped her arms around his neck and buried her face in his mane so he wouldn't see her tears.

'Let's go for a ride.'



## In the Hall of the Mountain King

‘You give those back, Peer!’ his aunt cried, waving her wooden spoon after him. ‘Or you’ll get it.’

Peer stuffed a muffin in his mouth as he fled into the woods. His aunt had been planning to put him on a diet for months, and for the last few days she had finally taken action. While his cousins and uncle ate pie and rabbit stew and soft cheese and all manner of sweets, all he’d been left with was cabbage soup with the occasional soggy green, and he was starving. What did she expect? Leaving a basket of muffins within his reach was asking for trouble.

When the house was at a distance, he plonked his fat arse amidst the leaves and snatched another muffin from the top of the pile. He missed home, but his mother and father were poor now and couldn’t afford to feed him. He sighed and took another bite.

He looked up as he ate. The mountain stretched into the darkening sky, clouds gathering around its heights like burnt marshmallows. The woods were filled with the sounds of crickets and frogs and the pounding of a nearby waterfall, while an eager owl hooted at the setting sun.

It wasn’t long before he scraped the bottom of the basket, his fingernails gathering the last crumbs. His shoulders slumped. He was eighteen in a year, and he couldn’t wait. Once he was an adult, he would move away, find himself an equally fat girlfriend who liked to cook and they would eat all the muffins they damn well pleased.

Peer sniffed and licked his lips, then looked up and sniffed again—somebody was cooking. He stood, closed his eyes, letting the scent gather in his nostrils—stew. It smelt like *stew*. Like Auntie's rabbit stew. What he wouldn't give for a bite. He glanced back towards the house, but the smell was coming from the opposite direction—from the mountain.

He hurried ahead, pushing through the brush, nose lifted. He picked up his pace. Night was approaching, and he didn't want to get caught out in the cold or lose his way in the darkness. He burst into a clearing and stopped. His mouth watered. The smell was thick now, and yet he was alone. There were only the trees and the mountain above. He looked around, confused. Where was it coming from? He searched the branches, the bushes, high and low. Then he came across a curtain of hanging vines. He pushed it aside, and *Eureka*—an opening.

Wiping his mouth, Peer glanced over his shoulder, then crept inside. It was warm and bright. Flaming torches flickered in their sconces every few metres, illuminating his way and making him sweat more heavily than ever. It was a surprisingly large corridor, the walls so far apart he could hold out both his arms with only his fingertips touching either side. The ceiling was so high he had to crane his neck to see it. The path underfoot was worn smooth. He passed a couple of openings, one on his left, one on his right, but he ignored them; they were dark, and the smell was thickest ahead.

His ears pricked at the sound of a mad cackle. He paused, uncertain. Maybe he should go back. More laughter followed—many voices. His stomach growled, and he kept on. It sounded like they were having fun, maybe even celebrating. Maybe they would enjoy having someone extra for dinner.

Shortly, the corridor widened into an enormous cavern. He stifled a gasp and quickly hid behind a pinnacle of jagged rock. *Goblins*. Hundreds of them. And they were celebrating, just as he suspected. They were lounging and chatting and laughing around a large vat. Billows of

steam coiled towards the ceiling. Peer's appetite shrivelled to the size of a walnut. He swallowed a swell of muffin-tasting vomit. It wasn't rabbit he was smelling. He gazed in horror. There were bones with flapping tissue; disembodied heads with jagged stumps for necks; piles of arms and legs. There was even a backbone with the ribcage still attached dangling from a rock like a windchime. He swallowed and gasped. The goblins crunched and gnawed, sucked and chewed, tore at gristle and joints. He could hear their grunts and grumbles of pleasure even above the laughter, and it made his stomach turn.

A party of men had gone out camping about a week ago. They weren't due back for days—weren't due back at all by the looks of it now. Barely daring to breathe, he carefully backed away, trying to keep to the shadows.

He shrieked when a heavy hand thumped down on his shoulder, making his knees buckle. A goblin stood behind him, so enormous Peer was little bigger than a toddler against him. He was hideous, with great yellow eyes and leathery skin which sprouted long wiry hairs. There were tusks coming out of his mouth between broken yellow teeth, and they were grinning down at him eagerly. He wore only a disgusting loincloth to conceal his nakedness, and he stank like he had just stepped out of a sewer. Peer swallowed his muffins again.

The goblin's grin broadened, then he grabbed Peer by the scruff of the neck and hauled him into the centre of the cavern, bellowing his excitement.

'Looky what I 'ave.'

Hundreds of yellow eyes turned his way, and the chatter and laughter ceased. Peer quivered in his grasp. Something warm ran down his leg, and he realised he had just pissed himself.

What must have been the biggest, ugliest goblin of all rose from his seat. He wore a crown and clutched a golden sceptre. He was clearly the leader. Unlike the goblin holding Peer, he didn't have tusks but enormous flapping ears that trailed down his barrel chest. He was covered

in sores and blisters, and there seemed to be something growing out the side of his hip. Peer dared to look closer at it, and finally vomited, spattering chunks of muffin all over the cavern floor. *It had eyes.*

‘What is this?’ spoke the leader. ‘Did some food escape?’

‘No, my king.’ The goblin shook him so hard Peer blacked out a little. ‘Methinks it wandered in all its own.’

‘Did it now?’ The goblin king licked his swollen lips. ‘A fat one. Lucky us. Add it to the vat.’

Frozen with terror, Peer didn’t resist as the goblin dragged him to the simmering cauldron. Another goblin added more kindling, sending more smoke coiling into the ceiling and such a gruesome stench of cooking flesh into Peer’s face that it stuck in his nose and made his eyes water.

The goblin lifted him up, and Peer gazed down helplessly at the boiling, pink slop with its bones and blood and floating bits of hair and teeth. His bowels loosened.

‘Wait, Father, he’s mine!’ cried a voice. He felt himself flowered, and he breathed again. ‘You promised I could keep the next one.’

Peer looked over to see another goblin, female by the looks of her, tugging at the arm of the goblin king. She was no fair thing to look upon with her great drooping breasts, rolls of fat and hideous face, but at least she didn’t have anything growing out of her. She had long, straggly greyish hair but was bald at the top, and her smooth green crown shone in the firelight.

‘That I did,’ her father agreed. He sighed and smiled at his daughter, a grisly grin. ‘What I do for love. Fine. Take it. Schlen, give it to her.’

She snatched Peer from Schlen’s grasp and hugged him, crushing him into her enormous breasts. Peer coughed and gasped and spluttered. *Oh God, the smell.*

‘Thank you, Father,’ she shrieked. ‘I’ll take good care of him.’

‘You’d better because if it tries to escape, into the vat it goes.’

She was still hugging him as she skipped away.

‘We’re going to have lots of fun together,’ she said, her deep voice rumbling in her chest. At every step, his face rubbed up and down against her hard and leathery nipple. ‘My last human didn’t last long. He was naughty. But you won’t be naughty, will you?’

She stopped skipping and finally held him away. He gasped and choked, sucking in the air. Grinning, she gazed down at him with her yellow eyes and sat him atop a shelf which seemed to have been carved into the wall.

‘I’m going to call you TimTin,’ she said. ‘And you’re going to be mine forever.’

His head spun. It was clearly her room: stone bed with a filthy pink quilt, a rotting torn rug on the floor, a blazing fire in a stone hearth, and dolls, dolls everywhere. He turned to the doll on his right and almost shouted. It wasn’t a doll, it was a man. It might have been wearing a dress cut to size from a filthy loincloth, but it was a man nonetheless. Peer slowly reached out a trembling hand and touched him. He was as hard as stone—petrified, a look of utter terror on his face. It was the same on his left. He swallowed. It was the same with all of them.

Peer could still hear the other goblins continuing with their celebrations in the distance as she combed out her hair, great sheets of it falling onto the floor. Then she applied what looked like lipstick. It was a bloody red. She smacked her lips and grinned.

‘Am I pretty?’ she said.

Peer nodded quickly.

Giggling, she picked him up, and together they spun around the room. Then she kissed him on the head and lay down on her bed, Peer on top of her.

‘Now,’ she said, putting her hands behind her head and arching her back. There was flesh everywhere: sagging breasts ahead, a mound of fat behind, wobbling thighs. ‘Suck my nipple.’

‘Wh—what?’

‘I said suck my nipple.’

‘I—I—’

‘Suck me, or I’ll send you to my father.’

Her breasts were sagging over the sides, pooling in puddles of flesh. Her nipples were dark and the size of dinner plates and sprouted more of those long, wiry hairs. Trying not to cry, he gathered over her left breast and took it in his mouth.

‘Deeper,’ she moaned.

He closed his eyes with a whimper. She tasted like sick and her nipple grated against his tongue. She began to purr.

‘Good. That’s enough,’ she breathed. ‘Now—’ she spread her legs and lifted her loincloth—‘pleasure me.’

Peer stared. He had never been with a girl before, but he had learnt about the female body at school. There was supposed to be a clitoris, but he wasn’t sure what it looked like and whether she even had one. He looked away, wincing, as he pushed aside the flesh on her thighs. He felt around for a moment, found her labia, gagged at the wetness. *There*, he thought—engorged and hard and twice the size of his thumb.

She moaned as he masturbated her.

‘Harder,’ she said.

*There is no God*, he thought as he rubbed harder and harder, his hand now clamped between her thighs as she squirmed. He pressed his other hand to his mouth, trying not to be sick. Her breathing turned heavy. She started to growl. She thrust against him, hands clenching the pink quilt, thighs and belly and breasts wobbling. Then he felt her spasm, and it was over. She sagged into her bed, panting. Peer was panting too as he pulled away a hand covered in goop. He broke out in a cold sweat and shivered.

‘You shall sleep with me tonight,’ she said. ‘And we shall sleep like lovers.’

She rolled onto her side and squashed his face into her breasts.

Peer didn’t move, listening as her snores turned long and even and the din outside lessened to babble, then murmuring, then silence. The

fire in the hearth crackled and snapped as it steadily died. It grew cold, even when pressed up against the goblin's hot flesh.

Very slowly, carefully, he eased out of her grasp. He slid to the floor. She hadn't moved. He backed out of her room and had almost reached the doorway when he tripped and stumbled. He gripped onto the shelf to steady himself. One of her damn dolls. Its eyes were wide, its mouth agape in a silent scream. He froze as she murmured something and rolled over. His shoulders sagged in relief. She was still asleep, eyes closed, her arms clasped around herself, hugging a body that wasn't there.

He snuck out the door, keeping to the shadows as best he could. His feet scuffed against the smooth stone, sending rocks skittering about. The torches along the corridor were low now, some burnt out, others wavering in the breeze as he passed. Several corridors split off from his, and he could only hope she hadn't taken any turns.

It was with terror and relief and exhaustion that he reached the immense cavern. There were goblins everywhere, splayed out along the floor, snoring and grunting and snorting, concealing his gasping breaths. The king was slumped in his stone throne, crown askew, head in his hand, snoring the loudest.

The corridor leading home was ahead. But it would be no easy feat to get to. He grimaced; there was no clear path, goblins strewn everywhere. He would have to creep between them. He swallowed, took a breath and started ahead.

The goblins were restless sleepers: rolling over, kicking out, hollering. Once, a goblin grabbed his ankle, and Peer almost wet himself again, but the goblin's eyes were closed, and he released him moments later before turning over with a grumble. Several times he had to step over a sleeping goblin because they were pressed so close together there was no way to go around.

By the time he reached the centre of the cavern, he was dizzy and sweating. His eyes strained so hard against the flickering fires that tears

fell onto goblin backs and hands and faces. A goblin snuffled and wrinkled his hideous brow when one dropped onto his nose.

Peer ducked to the floor at the sound of a great bellow. 'TimTin!'

He curled into a ball as the goblins around him stirred from sleep.

'TimTin,' came another bellow.

The cavern seemed to shake around him as they hefted their great bodies from the floor. Rocks and debris clattered from the ceiling. He peered up fearfully between his arms, keeping himself in a tight ball; none of them had noticed him yet.

The female goblin came wailing into the cavern. 'Father!'

'What is the meaning of this, Kezna?' the king snapped.

'My human—he's disappeared.'

'What! Search the mountain,' the goblin king roared. '*It must not escape.*'

Pandemonium ensued as goblins charged around the cavern, howling their outrage, their great feet pounding against the floor. It was like rolling thunder, and it made Peer's whole body vibrate. An enormous rock dislodged from the ceiling and crushed two of them with an ear-splitting crack. Blood and debris and bits of bone flew in all directions. More rock rained down as the cavern shook. A large, hairy foot slapped down right beside his head. Peer scrambled to a crouch. He had to get out or be crushed himself.

He weaved and wound his way through waddling, fat legs. Loincloths brushed at his head, feet thudded around him. He was accidentally kicked and sent skidding across the floor.

'There!' roared the goblin who kicked him. 'I found it.'

'CATCH IT.'

'SEIZE IT.'

'KILL IT.'

A goblin made a snatch for him, but Peer dodged him, keeping low. The cavern groaned, more rock smashed, dust billowed, as the goblins chased him down. Peer was screaming as he dodged snatching fin-

gers, swerved around kicking legs. One swung a metal-studded club directly at his face. He dropped and rolled, tripping over a goblin who knocked over several of his comrades like bowling pins. They crashed to the floor, their successive heavy thuds making the cavern groan again.

‘BREAK ITS BONES.’

‘SPLIT ITS SKULL.’

The floor began to shake. More rocks fell. Peer coughed and spluttered as a haze of dust fell around him. He locked eyes on his goal. The tunnel leading out was just ahead. *He was almost free.*

‘SKIN IT.’

‘BITE IT.’

‘SHRED IT.’

He reached the tunnel, and with every ounce of strength he had left in him charged for the exit—and freedom. He could hear the goblins thundering after him. He glanced behind. They were making chase in a mad crush. Their shoulders crashed through the walls. They swung their clubs, threw their fists, sending more rock flying. Two fell and were trampled beneath. Another smaller goblin was tossed in the air and sailed back over their heads.

Peer’s heart was pounding so hard he thought it would burst from his chest. Tears streamed down his cheeks. His throat ached, his lungs were on fire and his legs were beyond pain. The tunnel shuddered, and he almost crashed into the wall to his left as he overbalanced. He glanced up in horror as the ceiling slumped. Dust and bits of rock fell in a shower. *The cave was about to collapse.*

The goblins bellowed in fear as they too realised the danger. They kept running, but now they were running for survival.

Then leaves brushed around him, sunlight glared and Peer’s shoes hit soft ground. He was outside. He hadn’t taken a few steps when the earth shuddered, and he was knocked off his feet. Squinting, he looked up in horror as the side of the mountain slumped, then slipped. He leapt to his feet and ran again as an avalanche of earth and uprooted

trees and rock came tumbling down. A goblin made it outside. He bel-  
lowed in triumph, but his relief was short-lived when he looked up and  
realised his fate moments before he was crushed beneath a flood of de-  
bris. Rocks and branches flew, more debris came raining down. Peer  
took cover amidst the trees, dropped to the ground and covered his  
head. Branches snapped, there were several heavy thuds, a roar as more  
earth shifted, a hiss of dust, then silence.

Peer's ears rang in the quiet. Everything was so still he could have  
believed he was dead. It was several minutes before he dared look up,  
and much longer still before he got the courage to return to the cave  
entrance. He slumped against a tree, legs buckling. Buried beneath a  
wall of earth and shattered rock, the Hall of the Mountain King was no  
more. His nightmare was over.

He was in a daze on his journey home. He stumbled and lurched,  
his legs like wooden pegs, so parched he couldn't swallow. Then the  
trees peeled away, and the house came into view, and he saw his uncle  
and auntie and cousins standing outside, their hands lifted against the  
glare as they viewed the spectacle. He looked behind him. The haze of  
dust was still settling, but he could see that a chunk of the mountain  
was gone.

'Peer!' Anya, his youngest cousin suddenly squealed, pointing at  
him.

'Peer!'

'Peer, where have you been?'

And they all rushed over.

He was peppered with questions, hugged and kissed by his auntie,  
tugged at by his younger cousins, frowned at by his uncle.

'Please,' Peer said, tripping on his feet. 'I'm exhausted.'

'And you stink,' his older cousin said. 'You smell like sh—'

'Lucas,' his auntie warned. Wrinkling her nose, she smiled at Peer.  
'Of course sweetie, but I suggest you bathe first.'

Peer did, and when he was done, he slept all day, not waking until after darkness.

They were all sitting at the dining table, waiting for him. The table was set, and his auntie was busy in the kitchen—dinner was coming. Peer pressed a hand to his belly. He couldn't wait. He hadn't eaten in almost a day.

They all stared at him as he sat.

'So,' Lucas said finally, 'are you going to tell us what happened?'

At the sight of his younger cousins watching him eagerly, Peer pursed his lips. 'Maybe later. It's not a tale for kids.'

Howls of protest followed.

'That's not fair!'

'I'm almost seven!'

Anya gazed at him, tears in her eyes.

'That's enough,' his uncle said. 'Leave him be.'

'All right, everyone,' his auntie called, carrying a steaming pot into the room. Her hair was in a frizz, her apron covered in stains, but she was smiling. 'Dinner is ready.'

Peer rubbed his hands together. It looked considerably more than his usual soup and greens.

His auntie grinned at him and lifted the lid. 'Your favourite.'

*Rabbit stew.*

Peer swallowed a surge of vomit. He began to shake. Sweat prickled his brow. *That smell.* The smell of cooking flesh, of petrified men and sagging breasts, of swinging clubs and collapsing mountains—of death and fear.

He watched in a daze as his auntie ladled several spoonfuls into his bowl. It was pink too, just like the vat.

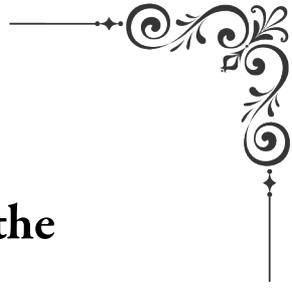
Peer wiped his forehead, took a deep breath and exhaled as his auntie ladled out bowls around the rest of the table.

When she was done, she sat and looked at his dish with a frown. 'You're not eating. Something wrong?'

‘I’m really sorry, auntie.’ He gave her a quivering smile and gently pushed the dish away. ‘It looks delicious, but I—I guess I’m not as hungry as I thought.’



*NOTE TO THE READER.* This story is based very loosely on Henrik Ibsen’s scene six, act 2 of his 1867 play, *Peer Gynt*, and was inspired by Edvard Grieg’s classic song, *In the Hall of the Mountain King*, both of which are public domain.



## The Sinking of the Nightingale

*Sister. Join us. They come.*

Drifting lazily at the sandy bottom, SwiftStream flicked her head up at her sisters' call, their voices whispering in her mind. Dropping the bones and seashells she was collecting, she kicked her muscular tail and soared towards the ocean's surface. She was far below, darkness all around her, alone. Few fish dared to keep the sirens company down in the deepest trenches.

She wasn't named SwiftStream for nothing. Strong and fast, she pulled away from the darkness. Colourful fish darted away from her. Kelp tangled in her hair and around her outstretched arms. Her green hair streamed behind her. She narrowed her eyes against the growing light, her white skin almost glowing against the brightness.

One, last strong kick, and she broke head and shoulders through the surface. The cool air slapped against her face. Her skin puckered into goosebumps. She gasped at the air, then gasped again as pain seared through her lungs. Her gills snapped shut. It was always a shock to leave the embrace of the sea.

*Hurry.*

SwiftStream thrust herself forward with a kick and skated along the surface. She dipped under again and with a flap of her tail, propelled herself across the gleaming water. She could hear her sisters singing already, their voices carrying on the wind. She plunged back into the water, kicked, then soared again, heart thundering with excitement, in ur-

gency. They needed her. She was the highest note. Without her, they risked failure.

She glimpsed the horizon. It was a cloudless day, the sun bright, the wind gusting. Good; the sea gods were on their side. She could see their target. It looked like nothing—a black dot in the distance. But Swift-Stream knew better. The humans' ships were usually enormous, often containing fifty or more men. Still, they were no match for Titan. A stab of jagged rock located close to an island, it made a graveyard of their mighty ships.

*Sister.*

*I'm here,* she returned.

She breached the surface and grabbed onto the nearest handhold. Salty spray hissed in the air as the water slammed and smashed all around. She pulled herself over Titan's rocky platform and slithered on top, dragging her tail heavily behind her. She sat for a moment to catch her breath. Her sisters' song vibrated through the air, calling the humans over, calling them to their deaths.

*Come to us, we await thee,*

*Hear our sweet voices,*

*Taste our salty lips,*

*Stroke our flowing hair,*

*Come to us, we await thee.*

SwiftStream caught her breath and joined in, her voice lifting alongside her sisters, the song now in perfect harmony.

Waves crashed all around Titan. White frothy water whirled and seethed upon the concealed rocks just below the surface. So many humans had made it their watery grave, and there would be more yet today.

The ship steadily took form amidst the spray, lifting and dropping over the swell at full speed, sails unfurled. The sirens lifted their song to a higher pitch and a faster pace, their fins writhed in excitement, and

their long dripping hair tangled around their arms as they gestured the humans urgently over.

Above their song and the crashing waves, SwiftStream could hear the humans shouting, the ominous creaking of the timber, as the ship rocked and swayed in the rough sea. White water smashed against the prow, seethed around the keel. As the ship approached closer, it spilt a cool, dark shadow across Titan and her sisters.

SwiftStream could see the men now as they rushed across the deck. They had finally seen Titan and were desperately trying to turn the ship around. There came an almighty groan, then a bang, followed by screams and shouting. The sirens ceased their singing, watching as the ship slowly turned around in a circle, the timber creaking and groaning. There was a great rip in its side, and it was filling with water. Masts fell, sails ripped, the keel rocked. Men climbed onto the edge and jumped into the water.

SwiftStream could feel her sisters' excitement as they leapt in after them. SwiftStream joined them, slicing through the surface. Her gills opened in a stream of bubbles as the air left her lungs. She kicked her tail hard, catching up with her sisters. It was hard to see, the turbulence turning the water frothy.

Close enough now, she breached the surface in an explosion of noise. Men screamed and wailed at the sight of them, hands slapped through the water, legs kicked fruitlessly, as they tried to get away. SwiftStream grinned. Launching after the nearest one, she seized his ankle and pulled him under.

It was so quiet beneath the surface. So peaceful. The human didn't think so as he squirmed and kicked and thrashed in her grip. She dragged him deeper, his dark hair lifting against the push of the water, bubbles streaming from his mouth. His clothes billowed and puffed outward. His eyes were wide and terrified and such an astonishing blue that SwiftStream stopped her descent.

They were the colour of the sky.

She had never seen it in a human before. Not even in a siren. Humans usually had dull brown eyes turned black when they drowned.

She released his ankle. He kicked towards the surface, but she seized him around the middle before he could get too far.

*It's not safe,* SwiftStream said in her mind. *My sisters will drown you and wear your bones.*

She spoke in her mind automatically. She knew he couldn't hear her. And yet, he stopped struggling. She smiled at him, but he didn't smile back. His eyelids drooped, his head lolled, a thick stream of bubbles poured between his lips.

In a panic, she tightened her grip around his middle and hauled him to the surface. The moment his lips touched the air, he opened his mouth, his eyes, and took an enormous gasp, then choked and coughed and spluttered. Fear lit up his wondrous blue gaze when he saw her, and he thrust himself away.

'Wait!' she cried in her real voice, striking out for his ankle. 'They will kill you.'

They didn't speak the same language, but he heard the fear in her voice, heard her sisters screaming their bloodlust from all around, the shouts of the other men, and understood. He went back to her, and she took his hand and guided him away.

*Hurry,* she called to him uselessly in her mind. He was so lumbering and heavy and slow.

She pulled him away from Titan, from the sinking ship, from the screaming men, from the floating bodies, riding the swell to the island.

They crested a wave and were dumped into the shallows. The man crawled out of her arms, coughing and spluttering and moaning, wobbling on his knees, clothes and hair torn and sopping wet. SwiftStream wanted to help, but she feared to leave the water. He collapsed onto the beach with a sigh.



OFFICER JOHN JONES, First Mate on the *Nightingale*, woke up sprawled on the sand beneath the burning sun. He blinked, confused for a moment, then sat up with a gasp. *Shipwrecked. His men.* He leapt to his feet, staggered, tripped and collapsed to his knees. The ship was gone, buried beneath the water. Debris collected along the shore around him: driftwood, luggage, a bloated body. He looked away with a grimace.

‘Mermaids,’ he spat in disbelief.

Only his grandfather had believed in such nonsense. He rubbed the salt from his eyes. He was confused, disorientated, his dreams mixed with reality. Too much salt water. That’s what it was. But what about that singing? And where did that giant rock come from? It seemed to have come out of nowhere. It was a bright, cloudless day. How could they have not seen it?

Something odd was afoot.

He scanned the shoreline, then further out towards the jagged piece of rock that had taken his ship. A word rang in his brain from somewhere he couldn’t fathom—Titan.

He shook his head, looked around. He was stranded on an island somewhere in the Ariantic Sea. No other survivors. No inhabitants. It wasn’t even along their route. Why they had even come this way, he couldn’t understand.

He looked towards the water with a start. There was a splash amid the waves, pale green hair that looked like seaweed. That *was* seaweed, he told himself. He shook his head again. Then a white face appeared, dark eyes watching, and it all came tumbling back.

He leapt back to his feet, staggered backwards, fell again. He coughed, spluttered, vomited. He wiped his mouth.

‘Mermaid,’ he whispered.

His grandfather was right. The legends were true. He looked towards Titan. How many other ships had been taken before his? He looked back to the shore. Another splash, and the mermaid was gone.

He stayed still, afraid to move. Big, burly and brave First Mate John Jones, frightened of a mere water maiden. He shrieked as she reappeared again close to the shore. He clapped his hand to his mouth, appalled and embarrassed. It was no way for a man to act, particularly an officer. He reached for the knife at his belt, but his belt had been swept away, along with his gun.

She drifted in the shallows, green hair streaming over her shoulders, dark eyes staring, a long pale arm outstretched. He looked at her breasts, pearly white and perfect with pink nipples that begged for his touch.

She might have been faery, but she was still part woman—and beautiful.

‘Hello,’ he said.

She cocked her head and smiled as the water rippled around her. The push and pull of the waves massaged her back, leaving a shine on her skin. A droplet clung to her left nipple and stayed there.

He swallowed, took a breath and jabbed a thumb at his chest. ‘First Mate John Jones.’

She didn’t answer. Instead, she broke out into a grin, revealing pointed teeth. He reeled back, then steeled himself, forcing a smile in return.

‘Errr—perhaps Shelley will do.’

It was a terrible name. Shells? He could have slapped himself in the head. But he was being foolish. What did she care? She lifted a long, white finger and curled it towards him, gesturing him over.

‘Uh—I’m not a good swimmer,’ he lied.

Her smile broadened, revealing those pointed white teeth again. But Jones barely noticed, his eyes gravitating to that droplet of water on her nipple. How had it not washed away? She gestured him over again, and this time he got to his feet.

He waded into the water thigh-deep. Shelley curled around him. Her fishtail was a silhouette beneath the water, large and muscular like

a dolphin's, with green, translucent fins floating on the water's surface. She tugged playfully at his pants.

'Why did you save me?' he asked.

She smiled, then dipped her lips beneath the water and looked up at him with hungry eyes, and he understood. He broke out into a sweat. He shouldn't be doing this. He shouldn't be in the water with her. Her kind had sunk his ship, killed his men. But he couldn't stop gazing at her. He had been four months on the Nightingale without a woman and could feel every day of it like a twist in his balls.

'God help me,' he said and sat in the water.

She drifted around him, tail curved around his body, watching him with those beautiful eyes crinkled up, her smile hidden beneath the surface. His breath caught in his throat as he felt her drag her fingers along his back. He swung an arm around her waist and pulled her against him. She curled in his lap, one slender arm looped around his neck, and gazed into his eyes. He felt around her waist. The smoothness of her skin merged with the slipperiness of her scales. Her tail looked as heavy as any great fish's tail, but it was light and free in the water. He glided his hand over it. It was one of the most wonderful things he had ever felt, maybe even more wonderful than the supple breast of a woman. Maybe. Shelley threw her head back and laughed as he cupped her left one. Maybe not. Jones laughed too.

She stopped laughing and looked back into his eyes. Her hair was wet and lank, fringe dripping into her face, but he could imagine it bright and beautiful in the water as the sun caught in its lengths. He grabbed the back of her neck and kissed her. She tasted of salt and fish and mystery. Everything he loved so much about the sea. Her lips were surprisingly warm, just like the rest of her. Even her tail. She was no fish. He kissed her harder, his tongue sliding along her pointed teeth. She was a gentle kisser, with soft sweet lips, just like a woman.

She pulled back, smiled, then pushed her hand under his shirt. The waves crashing further out were like distant thunder in his ears. Shel-

ley's hair moved back and forth in time with the rippling water. At every passing wave or swell, her breasts sank beneath the surface before revealing themselves again when the water pulled back, soft and supple and shining wetly. He touched them again, then bent his head low and took a salty nipple into his mouth. Shelley tightened her arm around his neck and pressed herself against him so he could take her in deeper. Then she turned to his crotch. She fumbled, having trouble with the buttons.

'Here, let me,' he gasped, his penis pressing painfully against the front of his pants.

He yanked them open, popping off several buttons. She looked into his lap. His cock was underneath the water, dark hair floating, so rigid it stood immovable against the waves. She touched it, stroked it with the side of her finger. Jones swallowed. He was about to fuck a mermaid. Nobody would believe him.

'How—' he swallowed again—'how are we supposed to do this?'

She grinned, curled her hand around his hardness, then seized him in a crushing grip. He yelped and grasped at her wrist but didn't push her away. Their eyes met, and she eased her hold.

She opened her mouth and made a sound, shrill and piercing and incomprehensible.

'What?' he winced.

She pulled out of his lap and gestured him to stand. He obeyed. She drifted away from him with a careless flick of her fins, closer to the crashing waves, deeper into the water. She curled a finger and bade him follow. He hesitated, but only for a moment. He followed until he was hip deep. The crashing waves were dangerously close now, so close that salty spray hit him in his face. The strong white water almost swept his feet from under him. Shelley barely noticed, her eyes trained on his penis, her face directly at its level. Then he realised. She had taken him out deeper so she could—

He gasped, seized onto the back of her head, his fingers tangling in her green hair, as she took him in her mouth.

‘Shelley!’

He gasped again, tightened his hold and flung his head back as she enveloped his entire length. She sucked and teased, then pulled her mouth back until her lips sat softly against his foreskin. She licked his hole before taking him in again, his tip brushing against the back of her throat. She wrapped her arms around his hips fiercely as she suckled. Her tail curved around him. Her green fins slapped the surface of the water. He thrust into her mouth with a cry. A large wave of white water slammed into them, but he stepped back and braced himself, and it only drove them more tightly together. He thrust more quickly, desperately, his pleasure almost equal to his pain as months of pent-up sexual energy threatened to explode out of him. An immense wave crashed, throwing spray high into the air. A wall of white water hurtled their way. He thrust into her hard, mashing his pelvis against her face, and erupted into her mouth.

The wave hit, and Jones lost his feet. He tumbled beneath the water, over and over, fingers scrabbling against the sand. Pain ripped through him as his shoulder jarred against a rock. Clawing his way through the froth and sand, he breached the surface with a gasp. He shot to his feet, looked around, caught sight of Shelley much further out, her head and breasts above the water. Calling her name, he yanked up his pants and rushed towards her, his injured arm dangling at his side.

She looked up, smiled, then spat into her hand, catching his seed in a white sheen. She cupped it, then dunked her hand beneath the surface. She did something with it, but he couldn’t see what.

‘Shelley!’

With a slap of her tail, she thrust towards him, gliding beneath the water. When she reached him, she burst through the surface and

wrapped her arms around his waist. He sank to his knees, holding her back. Smiling, she caressed his face with her slippery fingers.

‘Oh, Shelley.’ He kissed her nose.

She froze, then cocked her glorious head, as though listening. She looked at him, frowned, then pulled out of his embrace.

‘Shelley,’ he said, grabbing at her arm.

But she slipped out of his grasp and dove back towards the deep, disappearing beneath a rushing wave.

She breached the water one more time, then dove again, slender arms outstretched, and she was gone.



‘HOW’S THE SHOULDER?’

‘Healed, thank you, sir,’ Officer Jones said, instinctively rotating it.

It was almost four months later, and he was standing in Admiral Jenkin’s chambers, nervous as the Admiral considered him from behind his polished oak desk. The Admiral was ageing, bags under his eyes, balding, walrus moustache white, but his mind was as quick as ever and his hands still looked strong enough to crush a boy’s skull. He wore his naval uniform, similar to Jones’s: black and red tailcoat, silver buttons down the front, white gloves. The only difference was a purple sash pinned to one shoulder, denoting him as Admiral. Clasped in the Admiral’s big left hand was Jones’s report on the Nightingale’s ill-fated voyage.

The Admiral put it on the desk and smoothed out the top page. ‘It’s a shame what happened.’

‘Yes,’ Jones said.

‘You say a freak squall blew you off course.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Fifty leagues distance?’

Jones didn’t answer.

‘If your report is to be believed, you smashed into Ravenhoe Island, the ship sank and somehow out of a crew of forty-five men you alone survived.’

‘Yes, Admiral.’

The Admiral leant back into his chair, his foot tapping the floor. ‘A little fantastic, don’t you think?’

*Not so fantastic as the truth*, Jones thought to himself.

‘What are you saying, Admiral?’ he dared.

‘I’m saying nothing, Officer Jones, nothing.’ He sat up straight in his chair and steepled his fingers together, elbows resting against the papers. ‘The Council appreciates the timeliness of your report. You have shown much bravery and fortitude.’ He pulled out a drawer and removed a black cloth. ‘With Captain Dwyer’s death, it seems we are now short on leaders with experience such as his.’ The cloth was folded around something, and he opened it, revealing a golden badge. ‘How do you feel about commanding the Reprisal?’

Jones’s eyes widened. He lifted his chin. ‘It would be an honour, sir.’

The Admiral stood up, rounded his desk and pinned the badge to Jones’s coat. The Admiral saluted and Jones saluted back.

‘Congratulations, *Captain* Jones.’

Captain John Jones left the Admiral’s chambers in a daze. He smoothed his fingers over his captain’s badge, straightened his uniform. He had never expected the promotion. In fact, he had never expected to be believed at all. Of course, he had to lie. Not only to avoid demotion and the madhouse but to protect Shelley. Word would get out, and there were plenty of seafaring men who still believed in the old myths.

As he walked the three blocks to the harbour, the coastal city of Farrington Hill steadily opened out. At the smell of salt on the air, he quickened his pace. Replacing the buildings were ships: brigs, cargo ships, cogs and caravels, their white sails now tied fast to the masts. A gusting wind blew and the rippling water sent some of the smaller boats rocking. He paused in front of the Reprisal, the Navy’s newest warship:

large and gleaming, white masts furled high above, carronades polished and ready for battle. As its captain, he would have the honour of commanding it on its maiden voyage.

He continued walking through the harbour until he passed the last ship, giving him a clear view of the ocean. It was beautiful, the blazing sun sparkling against the surface. Much like it had the day he had met Shelley.

He sighed. *Shelley*. He leant against the balustrade, gazing across the gleaming water. Where was she now? What was she doing? Was she thinking of him too?

Jones had been stuck three months on that godforsaken island before he was finally found and extracted. He had only been three weeks home and already his memory of that time was fading. He barely recalled the pain in his shoulder, his hunger, his thirst, the biting insects, the weary days that seemed to go on forever. All he could clearly remember was sitting in the sand and scanning the waves, but not seeing Shelley again.

It was a long journey to the Ariantic Sea and fraught with danger: rough seas, krakens, pirates. He needed a big ship and lots of men. Never would he have thought he'd have a chance to go back and find her. He looked towards the Reprisal standing tall and mighty amongst the other ships.

He had a chance now.



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## About the Author

Morgan Tonkin has been an avid writer and reader since as far back as she can remember. If there wasn't a pencil in her hand, there was a book. She can recall her first manuscript. She was six years old, and it was her very own Choose Your Own Adventure. It was called The Last Unicorn. Even right at the beginning, fantasy was in her soul. It's been a long time coming to send her work out into the world. To have others enjoy what she creates is a dream come true. Morgan is thirty-two and lives a small, happy life with her partner and two cuddly dogs on the Gold Coast, Australia. In-between her writing and reading and painting, she likes to travel, daydream, play the piano and work as little as possible.

Read more at <https://morgantonkin.com/>.