

Fantastic Tales: Love & Sex

Fantastic Tales, Volume 2

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FANTASTIC TALES: LOVE & SEX

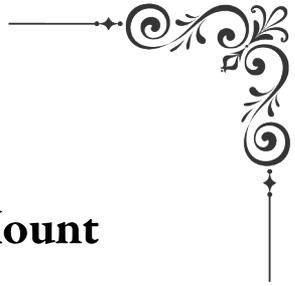
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Written by Morgan Tonkin.

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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 and 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 help—’

‘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.

She looked up. 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, binding 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.’



Love in the Darkness

Meridiah flew from flower to flower, collecting their precious nectar. It was sticky and sweet and there was so *much* of it. Lulitha was right; it was going to be a bountiful spring this year. She squinted up at the mountain. Its tallest peak glinted icily in the sun. There, winter never ended. Elsewhere, it was beautiful: bees hummed; baby animals frolicked; fields of waving flowers fluttered in the light breeze; and though the air was still crisp, winter having only just passed, the sun was full and bright. The day was hers for the taking.

She mashed some nectar in her mouth, smacked her lips, then buzzed to the next flower, her translucent, azure wings carving through the air. She was fluttering around the flower's tall stamen, the nectar glistening wetly in the sunlight, when she looked up at the sound of her name.

'Meridiah!'

Dark against the bright sun, Davensong came flying down. He landed lightly on a petal, his silver hair shining, silver wings glittering. He held out his hand.

She looked over at another voice. 'Meridiah!'

Then another. 'Meridiah!' And another. 'Meridiah!' 'Meridiah!'

Quickly, she was surrounded. The flower swayed and tilted beneath so much weight. They were all looking at her hungrily, holding out their hands: silver, red, yellow, gold, green, a rainbow of colourful hair and wings, each male fairy as beautiful as the next. It was spring after all—mating season, where all the males sowed their seed wherever and

in whomever they could. Meridiah grinned. It was her third year since she had first bled, and after three babies she still couldn't get enough of it. The thought of it made her heat up, made her heart swell with excitement. Their eyes raked over her, lingering over her breasts, over her blue thatch, over the way her long blue hair curled around her hips. Meridiah stared at their erections, all the same—hard, long and thick, and all making her burn between the legs.

'Catch me if you can!' she cried, shooting up into the sky.

She glanced over her shoulder and laughed. They all flew up as one, leaving a flurry of pollen and petals in their wake. The poor flower's stem snapped against the force of their thrust. She turned back ahead, eyes narrowed against the light, head hard between her rigid arms, as she shot into the sky. They weren't going to catch her so easily. She would be with child by the end of spring and that meant two months of a swollen belly, sickness and boredom. At her heaviest she wouldn't be able to fly for two weeks. Two weeks! It was not something she was looking forward to, so she was going to get as much flying and fun out of today as she could. She would make them work for it.

She heard the buzzing of wings all around her. Silver, gold, red and green glinted in the corners of her eyes. They were gaining on her. The only problem with her plan was they were too damn fast. Yellow wings fluttered ahead—Tristant. She dodged, ducked and escaped his grasp, laughing as his long fingers brushed over her. She arced, then darted towards the ground. Her skin froze and pimpled against the cold air, but its icy touch didn't cool the heat within. She skimmed the blades of grass, weaved between flowers and bushes, the males chasing her in a trail.

There was screaming and laughter somewhere up ahead, a flash of purple.

'Lulitha!' Meridiah called.

'Meridiah!' Lulitha called laughingly back.

Another female, Lulitha had her own trail of males to contend with. The two females flew towards each other, both skilled at the game, azure and lilac blending together as they hooked arms and swung each other around before suddenly letting go, using each other's momentum to shoot away at high speed in opposite directions.

There were several thuds, shouting and cries of frustration as the two groups of males crashed into one another.

Meridiah sniggered then squealed with laughter as she shot into the air again. The fairy's life was great: sex, freedom, light and laughter. There was nothing better.

She cartwheeled, tumbled and flipped playfully, then darted to the left at the sound of beating wings—not quick enough. She shrieked and looked back as someone caught her ankle—Zackaree: green wings, green hair, green eyes.

He pulled her against him, her back against his chest, his erection hard against her backside. Her wings were trapped, and they ceased their fluttering, hanging limp. He took her weight, holding her tightly as he floated down and landed in the embrace of a soft, pink azalea. Meridiah lay down in its folds, gazing up at him, legs spread wide. He lay on top of her, and she moaned at the feel of his penis pressing against her groin.

He grunted, nuzzled her neck. She seized his hardness, ran her fingers over its velvety smoothness, then directed it to her opening. She gasped as it slid inside her. Zackaree plunged without a word, a silent lover. The azalea fluttered and shook beneath them, pollen falling over them in a golden shower. It stuck in their hair. She felt its softness beneath her fingers as she squeezed Zackaree's thrusting backside. Soon it was a thick blanket on top of them. She gazed vacantly into the blue sky. The other fairies zoomed overhead, male and female alike, as they continued with the chase. Laughter and shrieking and the moans of the other couples echoed around her.

He was gasping now as he plunged fast and hard. Meridiah cried out as Zackaree arched his back and erupted inside her. He smiled at her, then pulled out. His penis, slick with her juices, shone in the sunlight as he stood. Meridiah felt the flower give a little as he thrust himself upwards and away, his translucent green wings beating through the air. A moment later, he vanished into the distance, after another female.

Meridiah hopped to her feet and took off without delay before the next male could catch her too quickly, Zackaree's hot seed still dribbling down her thigh. She was slower now, fatigued, and it wasn't long before she was claimed again, this time by Davensong. He wrapped his arms around her, silver hair floating in the breeze as he drew his fingers along her cleft in mid-air and licked at her ear.

Unlike Zackaree, he took her in the bushes. Soft nettles and small hairy leaves brushed against their skin as they moved as one. The bush shuddered around them, sending a willy wagtail chirping angrily into the branches of the tree above. He smoothed his hands over her thighs, her hips, the stretchmarks over her tummy. His silvery hair glittered in her face. He closed his eyes, craned back his head and groaned as he came inside her.

Then he too pulled out of her and flew away. It was the same until sunset. She didn't count how many males she mated with. There was no point. All she knew was she was sore inside, and so tired she dragged herself through the air, her wings struggling to hold her up.

The sun glared in her eyes as it settled behind the horizon. She needed to hurry. No fairy stayed out after dark. It was dangerous and cold and ugly, a time of shadows and fear, a time when monstrous things lurked, ready to ensnare a wayward fairy and eat it for dinner.

She forced herself into a faster pace.



MORGEAN WATCHED THE orgy from sunrise to sunset, hidden amidst the rocks, his erection so painful it brought tears to his eyes.

He ducked when a male buzzed overhead. He turned his head at the sound of high-pitched laughter. Two females used each other to fling across the sky, escaping their male pursuers—one blue, one purple, both young and beautiful and fertile. He grabbed onto his penis with a moan. It was spring, and it was his instinct to mate. The need surged through his veins, fogged his mind, made his heart pound, but unlike the other males he couldn't partake. He was a dark fairy: dark wings, dark hair, dark skin, reviled and despised. Fairies were meant to be bright and beautiful, everything he was not. He had dared to join in the year before only to be attacked by the other males. They had savaged him, beaten him, torn at his wings, until he struggled home, bleeding and injured and barely able to fly. He would not make the same mistake. This time, he had another plan.

He watched the females, waiting patiently until the sun began to set. He would take the weakest, the most wary, the one most unable to fight. As they began to disperse, his gaze centred on the blue one—Meridiah, they called her. She had fallen well behind the others, so tired she couldn't even fly in a straight line.

He narrowed his eyes. His body tightened. His heart hammered.
Mine.

He streaked into the air, kicking up a plume of dust behind him. He glanced left and right, up and down, but no other males were around. She was unprotected—and his.

She shrieked as he yanked at her ankle. He pulled her against his chest, her eyes wide with fear at the sight of him. She opened her lips, but he slapped a hand against them before she could call for help. She squirmed in his arms but he held her tightly. He could feel her breasts press up against him, feel the heat of her breath against his hand. Her smell sang to him. He moaned in anticipation. He had never even touched a female before, much less held one in his arms.

He drifted down and laid her in the soil. The flowers stood tall above them, swaying slightly in the breeze, their long green stems creak-

ing. He straddled her. Her breasts were full and round and flattened nicely beneath his hands. Her blue nipples grew hard. Her azure hair was spread along the dirt like water. He held her down as he positioned himself, ready to penetrate.

‘No,’ she moaned, squirming beneath his grip. ‘Please, no.’

‘Why not? When you’ve had everyone else. What’s so wrong with me?’

‘You’re the darkness.’

He grunted angrily, prodded his penis between her legs, seeking her opening, but stopped when she began to cry. She was even more beautiful when upset; her eyes shone in the light of the sun, her tears glistened as they spilt down her cheeks. She was so lovely and so vulnerable. He shook his head. *What am I doing?*

He pulled back with a sigh. ‘I’m sorry.’ She stared up at him in surprise, soft blue lips slightly parted. He held out his hand. ‘Come with me.’

‘I’m not going anywhere with you.’

He ran his fingers through his hair irritably. He glanced at the sun and an idea struck. ‘The sun has almost set. You won’t get home in time before darkness descends. Like you said, I am the darkness and can protect you against the darkness.’

She looked at the pink sky, at the blaze of yellow already half beneath the horizon. She paled. Her chin wobbled as more tears threatened to fall, but she sniffed them back. ‘You’ll protect me?’

‘Yes, and I won’t hurt you. I swear.’

‘You’ll let me go home tomorrow?’

He hesitated. ‘Yes.’

She gazed back at the sun, undecided, her face filled with fear and longing.

‘What choice do you have?’ he said. ‘Can you brave the darkness alone?’

She blanched at the thought. He held out his hand again, attempting a kind smile. She looked at him, blue and black eyes meeting. Morgean's heart leapt as she slipped her hand into his.



THIS IS A BAD IDEA, Meridiah thought to herself. *But what else can I do?*

She shivered as it grew cold, the darkness closing in quickly.

'Are you all right?' the dark fairy called after her as a gust of wind blew her off course. 'Can you make it?'

'I'm fine,' Meridiah huffed, straightening herself.

The sun had set, casting a chilling red glow across the horizon. It spilt along the ground, reflected off the dark fairy's wings and hair, making him appear more frightening than ever. But he wasn't as frightening as the monsters in the dark.

They left the fields of flowers and entered the forest where the trees stood thick and tall and gathered the shadows. Just as the last of the light pulled away, the dark fairy descended, landing in front of a pile of rocks. Meridiah followed, hitting the ground a little hard in her tiredness.

'Home,' he said, gesturing her over as he crept into a gap.

Meridiah stared at the rocks in disgust. This was no place for a fairy. Fairies lived in tree trunks and flowers, in the nests of friendly birds or the burrows of warm and cuddly animals, not in a place like this where it was dark and cold and hard.

But then she entered and gasped. There was so much light—and blue, dotted all around, like the stars in the night sky she had only heard about in legends.

'It's moss that glows,' he said. 'Beautiful, isn't it?'

Meridiah glanced at him and paused. He was no longer black but the brightest blue, bathed in the light of the moss. She felt herself relax and smiled.

They lay down together in a bed of soft mushrooms, first side by side, then in each other's arms as Meridiah grew cold. She had never slept with a male before. Lulitha was her usual sleeping partner. Males only stayed long enough to plant their seed before flying away. Meridiah watched him beneath half-shuttered eyelids as he gazed at the light above. He was so strange. So unexpected. First he stopped the rape, then apologised, and now this. Any other male would have done the opposite.

Strange.

Her eyelids grew heavy, and she slept.

She woke early the next morning, refreshed and alone. She sat up, went to call for him, before realising she didn't know his name. Above, the dazzling blue of the moss had dimmed against the sunshine pouring through the entrance. She rose to her feet and followed the light outside.

He was a few steps away, his back towards her as he leant against the rockpile, gazing at the rising sun and the first few early risers already buzzing around. Long black hair flowed down his dark back. His dark wings fluttered, the golden light turning the edges red, like they were on fire. Meridiah caught her breath, having forgotten his darkness after all the blue. He turned at the sound, frowning as she stepped back. Then she caught the look in his eyes, the hurt and fear, and her heart dropped, her wings drooped. *Poor thing. He is so alone.*

She pushed her fear aside and joined him, slipping her hand into his. His gaze softened, the hurt and fear replaced with surprise. 'I don't even know your name,' she said.

'Morgean.'

'And I'm—'

'Meridiah,' he finished for her, smiling at her startled look, gazing down at her in a way that made her shiver. 'I know who you are. I've watched you enough. Heard the others call your name.' He frowned again and looked back at the fairies. 'You going home?'

‘Maybe later,’ she said, and he turned back to her with the broadest smile. She laughed.

They spent the day together, exploring the forest, steering clear of the fields of flowers where the others flew. The trees weren’t so scary; tall and looming they might have been, but their shadows hid no monsters.

She had never travelled so far before, too afraid of the unknown, but with Morgean she felt little fear. They passed over a large pool of water—‘A creek,’ he told her—so clear and still she could see the rocks beneath. The only water she had ever known was that collected in flower petals or the dew on a cold morning or the light sprinkle of rain she could cup in her hand. Heavy rain she had to hide from; it could beat a fairy to death. She never knew water could be so expansive.

‘What’s that?’ she said, pointing at something moving tranquilly on the surface, leaving gentle ripples in its wake.

‘A boat,’ he said.

‘What’s a boat?’ She squinted. ‘And what’s that moving in it?’

Morgean grinned at her, black hair whipped back over his shoulders, dark eyes bright, as he flew alongside her, a flitting shadow over the water. ‘Ever seen a human?’

‘A human?’ She laughed. ‘There’s no such thing.’

‘Isn’t there? Why don’t you see for yourself?’ He took a sharp right and darted towards the ‘boat’.

Meridiah shot after him.

‘Not possible,’ she whispered as she joined him, hovering over the reeds amidst the dragonflies. There were *two* humans. And so *big*. They wore strange things over their skin, odds things over their hair and they had no wings, but otherwise they were like giant fairies. ‘They’re only legends.’

‘Do you doubt your own eyes?’ he said.

The boat slowed to a drift as the two humans put their heads together.

‘What are they doing?’ she asked.

‘They’re kissing.’

‘Kissing?’ She pushed aside a reed, watching them more closely. ‘Why?’

‘They love each other.’

‘Love.’ She touched her lips. Her tongue tingled. She began to salivate. Faeries never did that, not kissing, not loving.

‘They’re interesting—humans. They live a long time, you know. So much longer than us, one hundred years almost. And their babies take years to grow.’

‘One hundred years?’ she said, aghast. Fairies only lived six years and were fully grown within one. Her youngest had been living her own life for the past two months. She shook her head in disbelief. ‘How do you know so much about them?’

‘I watch them all the time—and listen. I can understand them well enough now. And they aren’t the only two. There are many more.’ He hovered beside her, wings beating lightly as he watched them. ‘What else am I to do when alone?’

Meridiah frowned. Something softened in her heart. Tears welled in her eyes, and she reached out a hand to touch him.

‘Come on,’ he said and flew away.

By the time they began their journey home, darkness was falling.

‘Hurry up!’ Meridiah called, but he didn’t seem anxious to return, lagging behind, taking his time. She wanted desperately to zoom ahead but didn’t know the way. ‘Hurry up!’ she shrieked as the sun dipped below the horizon.

‘Have no fear,’ Morgean said, suddenly at her side, gently grabbing her arm. ‘You’re with me, remember?’

‘The monsters!’ She yanked out of his grasp, but he pulled her against him, arms wrapped tightly around her, as he guided her to the ground. She moaned and squirmed in his grip, shivering and shaking.

‘Trust me,’ he whispered in her ear. ‘The darkness is nothing to fear. The only monsters are in your mind. Look at me. Am I a monster?’

She shook her head, and he gave a gentle laugh as he pressed his mouth against the tears on her cheeks.

A sudden warmth coursed through Meridiah’s veins, peeling away her fear. She pulled back in surprise. ‘You kissed me.’

‘Yes, I did.’

She stared at him. ‘Do it again.’

And this time he kissed her on the lips. Heat flooded her body, from the top of her head to the tips of her toes, and she kissed back, somehow knowing what to do. His tongue was warm and wet against hers, his breath hot, his lips soft, and he made sexy little grunts which made her tingle all over.

He pulled back, smoothed away the hair from her face as he gazed into her eyes. Meridiah gazed back, unable to look away. Something strange was happening to her; she wanted him, needed him, she ached between the legs. But there was something more. Something that ignited in her heart and chased away the last of the cold, the last of her fears and doubts. It was the way he was looking at her, the way he was touching her. She had never experienced anything like it. And then she knew—love. It was *love*.

They made love out in the darkness, out in the open, out where the monsters were supposed to lurk, and dangers abided. But Meridiah didn’t care. She was with Morgean and that was all that mattered.

She laughed as he kissed her all over, on her lips, on her breasts, her navel, between her legs. She cried out as he licked. Then he entered her, and she had never known such pleasure. She craned her neck. Moonlight streamed through the branches, glancing against their skin, and it was beautiful and delicate and bright. She didn’t have to squint like she did with the sun; there was no pain. Then there were the stars dotted between the leaves. She had never seen something so beautiful.

She wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him in tightly, wanting to be a part of him, wanting him to feel the deepest part of her. He thrust harder, pushed in deeply, and they came together, Morgean with a groan, Meridiah with a gasp.

They clung to each other, still united, waiting until their bodies ceased their throbbing. Morgean stroked her hair, touched her lips, then pulled away with a start when he brushed at a tear on her cheek.

‘Why are you crying?’ he said, panic in his voice. ‘Did I hurt you?’

‘No,’ she said, wiping away more tears. ‘It’s just—’ her lip trembled, her throat swelled—‘I’ve only just found you.’

‘So?’

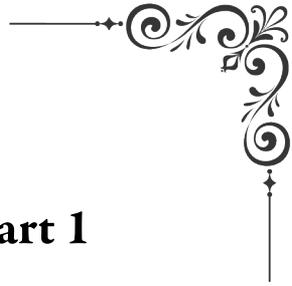
‘I’m four years old, Morgean.’ Never had she thought of her death before, and it frightened her. To lose him so soon. ‘Why couldn’t we have met sooner? Why couldn’t we be human? We’d have forever. It isn’t fair.’

She looked away as more tears rolled.

He sighed, gently grasped her face and pressed his forehead against hers. ‘Then we’ll just have to live and love forever in the time we have, won’t we?’

Meridiah touched his hands, trying to heed his words, but only felt grief. She looked past him, up at the sky. Stars twinkled. The moon glowed. A cool breeze fluttered through the leaves. Fear had made her avoid the darkness for so long, needlessly, pointlessly, and look what she had missed. She turned back to Morgean and entwined her fingers in his, gripping him tightly. She would not let sorrow do the same.

‘Yes,’ she said and kissed him.



The Barbarian: Part 1

‘Go fetch more water from the well. And when you’ve done that, the cow needs milking. And when you’ve done that, bake some bread. Your father and brothers will be home shortly and they’ll be hungry.’

‘Yes, Mother,’ Grinda said, picking up the pail.

She stepped outside into the burning day. The village was a bustle of activity. Women hauled along their pails of milk or water or grain. Children fetched eggs and tended the family gardens. Men made their way to the farms, carrying scythes and spades and shears, on foot or mounted on donkeys or mules. Grinda could hear banging from the blacksmith as he shaped his iron blades. There was the stench of shit as a woman shovelled manure into a wagon. From the oldest woman to the smallest child, everyone was hard at work.

Just another day in the small village of Quay—long and dull and difficult.

Grinda reached the well, put down her pail and pulled on the rope, hand over hand, the rope scratching against the pulley as she hauled up a full pail of water. She glanced up at the mountains, pale and stark against the sky—the Stone Mountains. A world away, where the wind blew cold and the village was nothing but a dot below, and where there were no cows to milk or bread to bake or heavy pails of water to carry.

If only.

She tipped the water into her pail, careful not to wet her skirt, then lifted with a grunt. Staggering with the weight, she was about to

make her way home when she stopped at the sound of a horn. Deep and booming, it echoed across the fields and through their little village, making everyone take pause. For several moments the village was still and quiet, the quietest it had ever been.

A crowd of mounted men had gathered atop the hill to the east. Weapons gleamed against the sun. Bronze skin shone with sweat. Then the horn sounded again, and they galloped down the hill towards them.



MOCK BLEW THE HORN, then licked his lips, grinning as the men around him shouted and whooped. Their target was a large village, rich with women and supplies and maybe even gold. It would be a great day for the Quarthi.

Villagers scattered, screaming and shouting. Most tried to run. Others hid in their houses, mostly women. Some of the men stayed back to fight. *Good.* He unsheathed his sword.

His first kill bent beneath his strike, head arched back, eyes wide, as Mock split him from groin to chin. Blood exploded out of him, spraying Mock in a red shower. The man didn't even have time to cry before he hit the ground.

His next kill decided to drop his weapon and run—too late. Mock ripped him up the back, his blade grating against his vertebrae. More blood splattered his face, and he licked his lips again, savouring his kill, the death, the thrill. *Abbbb.* There was little better than a pillage: the sound of men screaming, the satisfaction of sinking his blade into flesh.

He had made seven kills, his sword bloodied from point to hilt, when the village was taken and the real fun began. Women screamed as the Quarthi rushed into their houses and dragged them outside, or else rode them down, sweeping them onto their horses.

There—he saw her. His victim. Petrified to the spot, staring straight into his eyes. She was only young, barely a woman, her face white against her pale hair.

She didn't run from him, didn't even gasp as he curled his arm around her waist and hoisted her onto his horse. Claspng her against him, pinning her arms tight to her chest, he galloped through the village, passing other Quarthi as they looted homes and robbed the dead, stealing belts and boots and any coins they could find. Bodies were strewn everywhere, most still, some squirming. Several he leapt over, others he trampled, bouncing in his saddle as he did. The girl gasped as she almost slipped from his grasp, but he clutched her tighter, cock pressing hard against her back.

By the time they left the village, he was barely able to keep control of himself. The best fucks he ever had were after a killing. And he had killed seven today.

He reigned in. Several other Quarthi had the same idea, their horses grazing as they thrusted in the grass, bronze arses gleaming with sweat in the midday heat. Women cried out, screamed or moaned.

Mock slipped off his horse, pulling the girl into his arms before throwing her to the ground. Straddling her, he unfastened his pants. His cock sprang free, blushing and hard and moist at the tip. The girl was whimpering quietly, white as the clouds above, trembling violently between his legs.

He hoisted up her skirt. The girl yelped as he tore at her underclothes, ripping out a few of her hairs. He brushed his hand through her thatch with a sigh. Pale, like the rest of her. Then he pushed his finger inside her. She gasped. Dry as a bone. Not that it would stop him.

He lay on top, groin to groin, face to face. She had blue eyes, rare for these parts. Her hair shone in the sunlight. Tears glistened on her cheeks. She squirmed beneath him, trying to push him off, but he seized her wrists and pinned them to the ground. Her blue eyes looked up at him, begging, pleading.

Grabbing his cock, Mock went to thrust into her, but something was wrong. 'What the—?'

His cock was flaccid. *Impossible*. He smoothed it in his hands, jiggled it about, tried to masturbate, but nothing could make him hard. *Embarrassing*. If a Quarthii couldn't rape his spoils, he was no man. Mock straddled the girl, glaring at her. She had done something to him. Maybe she was a witch. He pulled a knife out of his boot. Not for long.

The girl's eyes widened in terror. Tears made her eyes glisten. She babbled something in her language, pleading.

He pressed his blade to her throat. She silenced, arching her neck and freezing beneath him. A droplet of blood trickled down her neck, so red against her white skin. Her breast heaved at every breath. More tears streaked down the sides of her face. And her blue eyes looked up at him, still begging.

He steeled himself, pressed the blade down harder. The girl whimpered. *Kill her, kill her, kill her, kill her*. But his hand wouldn't obey. He released her with a snarl, plunging the blade into the earth beside her head.

Getting up, he yanked her to her feet.

Mock dragged her back to his horse, heaving her onto it. He retrieved his knife and slipped it back into his boot before refastening his pants and climbing up behind her. He would take her back to camp, where everything would be right again. Nothing to worry about.

Nothing to worry about, he told himself, though he didn't quite believe it.



GRINDA WEPT, THE WIND turning her tears cold on her cheeks as they galloped away from the village. What of her father and brothers? *And what of my mother?* she thought in horror. Had she been raped and murdered like the others? Grinda closed her eyes, trying not to think about it.

She desperately wanted to look behind, to see her village one more time before they burned it to the ground, but she didn't dare, fearing

what the barbarian might do if she met his eyes. Life at Quay might have been difficult, but it was still her home.

They rode for what felt like hours until her tears of heartache turned to tears of pain. Her backside was rubbed raw and little shocks of agony shot up her back and neck and along her shoulders at every bump. More barbarians rode ahead and behind, waving their hands and shouting.

She was taken deep into the Mobic Woods where nobody would find her, the trees spindly and twisted, the canopy thick enough to cut out most of the light, leaving their surroundings cool and dark. By the time they stopped, Grinda could barely move and the barbarian had to pull her into his arms to get her down. Through the trees to her left she saw what looked like a small tent made of sticks and hide. The barbarian held her against him for a moment, breathing deeply as he gazed down into her face. Grinda kept her eyes averted, praying to God for his protection. She sucked in a breath when he gripped her chin, tilting her face so she was forced to look at him.

He was younger than she first thought with a full beard and long wiry hair. Like the rest of the barbarians, he was overlarge, bursting with muscle and so tall she had to crane her head back to look at him. Grinda recoiled. Blood was spattered all over him.

He was gazing into her eyes now. Swallowing in fear, Grinda could only gaze back. She saw his eyes were moss-green with flecks of gold around the pupil and couldn't help but wonder how someone so savage could have such startling eyes. He released her chin to touch her cheek. He stroked his thumb over her mouth, pressed it between her lips, pushing in gently until Grinda tasted sweat and blood. He swirled it in her mouth, before pulling it out with a grunt and grabbing her by the back of the neck. Other hand at her waist, he pulled her against him, chest hard against hers, eyes darkening with passion as he leant in for a kiss. Grinda closed her eyes with a whimper.

Warm breath against her cheek. A rush of cool air as he stepped away. She opened her eyes. He was frowning at her, surprised. The corners of his mouth deepened as his surprise turned to confusion, then anger. He looked her up and down, his mouth tightening into a sneer. Snarling, he seized her wrist, and Grinda squealed as he dragged her to his tent. He shoved her onto the ground and booted her in the backside, forcing her to crawl inside.

It was a small tent, barely high enough to crouch in. There was a bundle of furs at the back, a dish of water and a few bits and pieces she didn't care to study closer. She huddled in the corner, arms wrapped around her knees, expecting him to come in after her and do the inevitable. But the light blinked out as the flap dropped over the entrance. The groundcover crunched underfoot as he walked away.

Grinda took a deep breath, suddenly alone.

For hours she just sat there, staring at the entrance, waiting for someone to throw open the flap, whether it be the barbarian who kidnapped her or one of the others. She could hear them somewhere close by, laughing and shouting. At the sound of crying, she clutched at herself. A woman was begging for her life. Grinda shivered, trying not to think who it might be, almost certain it was a woman from her village. It was hard to recognise who, and Grinda was grateful for that at least.

She clapped her hands to her ears and lay down on her side as the woman's begging turned to screaming. They sounded like animals, and Grinda tried to drown it out by humming a lullaby her mother used to sing to her when she was little. Curling into a ball, she wept. Doubtless her family was dead, either slaughtered or burnt to death.

Darkness was falling when the barbarian returned. The flap ripped open, and his big muscular body squirmed inside. Grinda sat up, holding her breath as she huddled in the corner. He was still looking angry but not murderous—or anything else. He looked clean, his chest and arms and face washed free of blood and grime. The ends of his hair dripped water onto the earthen floor, as though he had properly

bathed. Her eyes dropped to the parcel he was carrying under his arm. Her mouth watered at the smell.

He sat cross-legged in front of her and placed it between them, unwrapping the bark. 'Grat,' he grunted, gesturing at it. He pointed his finger at her. 'Nuk.'

Grinda didn't move, staring at him wide-eyed, heart thundering in her chest. He shook his head, annoyed. He touched the bundle of flesh. 'Grat.' He pressed his fingers to his lips. 'Nuk.'

Food. Eat. Tentatively, Grinda crept over. What more did she have to fear? If he wanted to hurt her, he could do so anytime whether she ate or not. The flesh was warm under her fingertips. Blood pooled in the bark beneath it. It had been a long time since she last had meat, her family too poor to eat anything outside of bread and stew.

'Nuk.' He stripped off a piece from the bone and ate it. 'Grun.' He patted his stomach, then pointed at the meat. 'Grun grat.'

'Grun grat,' she repeated. *Good meat?* She stripped off a piece. He was right. It was so good she had to wipe the drool from her chin. She had no idea what it might be and couldn't care less. Her stomach roared for more, and she had eaten several mouthfuls before she realised the barbarian was watching her intently. She paused, meeting his gaze, the grease wet on her lips. The corner of his mouth was curled in satisfaction beneath his beard. She pushed the wrapping of meat over to him. 'Yours.'

He shook his head and pushed it back. 'Rin.' He feigned picking up the bone and gnawing at it. 'Nuk. Rin a nuk.'

Grinda dared a smile. 'Okay.'



MOCK LAY ON HIS SIDE, staring at the woman as she slept wrapped up in his bundle of furs. She had first resisted his urgings to enter his bed, no doubt fearful he would join her in them, and she would have been right if he were his usual self.

He dragged his hands down his face. She had complicated things. His brothers wouldn't be impressed by his newfound weakness.

He stared at the girl harder, trying to stir something more than weak, womanly emotions. But there was nothing. His coldness, his fury, his lust—everything that made him a great raider, were gone. All that was left was the desire to hold her. It was overwhelming—and frightening. He clenched his fists, resisting the urge to go over and touch her pale hair. What would she feel like wrapped in his arms? His cock swelled at the thought. He had been hard all evening, ever since she had smiled at him. *Take her now. Take her now. Take her now.* But he couldn't. The thought twisted something deep in his stomach.

He turned on his side with a growl, facing the wall of his tent. The earth was hard and cool beneath his hip as he seized himself. Three hard pulls and it was over. He groaned as his fluid jetted onto the ground. His whole body began to relax. Maybe now he could get some sleep. Maybe a good night's rest would clear his head, and he would be more himself.

Maybe ... He could only hope.

But tomorrow proved no different, and neither did the following morning and the mornings following that.

He spent every waking moment he could with her, though *her* waking moments were fewer than he'd hoped. For some reason she slept a lot, and he wondered if she was sick. But when she woke, her face would light up at the sight of him and they would spend the evening together, trying to speak in each other's language. He learnt her name was Grinda and she was sixteen years old.

'Grin-*a*,' he said, his tongue curling around the strange letters.

She chuckled, and something lurched inside Mock's chest. She reached out, touching his cheek with her fingertips. 'No. Grinda.'

Her touch was like fire against his cheek. The breath caught in his throat and he coughed out, 'Grink-aa.'

This time she threw her head back and laughed, a wild clear peal that sent his heart racing. He had never really heard a woman laugh before and certainly not when around him. They were usually screaming. He didn't laugh either, outside of cruel cackles and sneers. He suddenly got the mad urge to crush her against him and mash his mouth full onto her warm pink lips. Maybe if he were lucky, some of that sweet laughter could fill him up too.

Though things were going well with Grinda, the same couldn't be said about his brothers. Every night Mock brought Grinda meat, knowing how much she enjoyed it, but it was becoming harder and harder to get. He couldn't hunt; it was too dangerous to leave her alone, so he had to steal from his brothers.

Needless to say, they didn't like it much.

Mock approached the fire. It was boar tonight. Good. Grinda loved pig. The fire hissed and spat as grease dripped into the flames. Mock's gut growled. The carcass was already mostly eaten but there was still a sizeable chunk of rump left. His brothers were sitting in a circle around it, eyes gleaming against the flickering light as they watched him. They were quiet, the air thick with tension. One of them had a naked woman in his lap, his arms wrapped around her quivering body, chin on her shoulder. She was turned away, facing the trees, her back covered in welts and bruises. It looked like somebody had been at her with the chain. Another woman whimpered as Croki fondled her roughly between her legs. Her pale hair hung in a knotted veil around her face, shielding her tears. Mock tightened his mouth. She could have been Grinda.

Mock glared at them all, daring any of them to challenge him. A couple of them whispered to each other, sniggering. Mock stiffened, his lip curling into sneer. *Rukta*, they called him—a womanly man. His right hand twitched, his mind on the blade strapped to his back. One false move and he would take off their heads, all their heads if he had to. They were fast losing respect for him, he knew, but he could still

see the uncertainty in their eyes, the fear. His heart might have grown weak, but he wasn't their most brutal fighter for nothing. He had already killed three brothers over minor squabbles, and he would do so again tonight just as happily.

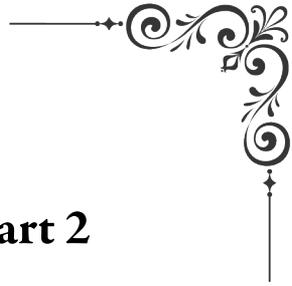
He unsheathed his sword, ready to carve off his portion, when Croki leapt to his feet. 'Hands off!' his brother roared, the woman spilling out of his arms with a cry.

Mock glared at him, sword at the ready, as Croki took up his war hammer. Croki was a big man, close to seven feet and the biggest of all his brothers, but Mock held little fear. Mock had always been the better fighter, and he could see that Croki knew it too.

Mock sneered at his uncertainty. 'Want to fight me, Brother? Come on, then!' He chopped his blade through the air. 'I'll bathe in your blood and wear your pretty head for a hat.' He feinted a lunge. His brother didn't flinch, but nor did he retaliate, glaring at him with a ferocity as hot as the flames, his hammer tight in his grip.

Mock straightened and spat. He turned his back on him, showing Croki and the rest of his brothers how little he cared for their threats. He hacked through the spit, splintering the wood with a sharp crack. The fire hissed and crackled as the pig flesh rolled into the flames and onto the ground. Sheathing his sword, he picked up his dinner and turned to his circle of watching brothers. Nobody tried to stop him. Croki gripped his hammer, his eyes glinting beneath his heavy brow. Mock could see the hunger there, and it wasn't for the meat. It would only be a matter of time before he would stake his claim as the Quarthi's fiercest fighter.

Sneering at them all, Mock turned and stalked away.



The Barbarian: Part 2

Grinda huddled in the corner of the tent as the wind howled, snapping and whipping at the walls. It was late in the day and almost as dark as night, the clouds black, the rain thick. The trees rustled and creaked. Large droplets pelted down, and she wondered how the tent didn't leak. Her home had leaked all the time—before the barbarians had burnt it to the ground at least.

She could hear the other women screaming as the men took their pleasure. The storms were making it worse. It meant the barbarians were stuck at the camp with nothing to do but drink and fight and rape.

All the women suffered. All of them, except Grinda.

She looked up as the tent flap opened. Mock smiled at her as he entered, carrying a parcel under his arm. He was saturated, dripping everywhere.

'Food,' he said in his language. Grinda knew basic words but little more. He crawled into the middle of the tent and unwrapped the parcel, revealing nuts and berries. She smiled at him as she helped herself. He frowned. 'No meat. Too wet,' was all she understood.

She shrugged, smiled. 'That's fine.'

As Mock dried himself off, Grinda gazed at him. He could break her neck if he wanted, rape her until she bled, like the other women suffered. But he hadn't touched her since that first time. It was so strange. She had thought him a monster. When he had laid her out in that field, she was sure her life was at an end.

Now, her life had never been better. Mock always made sure she was fed, warm and safe, and she didn't have to work: no baking bread, no milking cows, no carrying pails or serving the men. For the most part she just slept, for hours and hours, as though catching up on years of lost sleep. And he let her. Sometimes she woke to see him watching her, but he never touched her, never violated her, just watched.

That first day he brought her to the barbarian settlement, he seemed to hate her, throwing her in his tent like she was a flaming torch. But day by day he became more tender, the sharpness in his eyes softening, the anger in his voice blunting, until his frowns turned to smiles, though he never seemed to laugh.

How could she not fall in love with him despite the terrible things he'd done?

'Mock,' she whispered.

He looked up.

She lay down in their bedding, holding out her arms. 'Hold me.'

There was silence a moment, then rustling as he crept over to her. He gazed down on her, much as he had done out in the field, but this time she felt no fear. He lowered himself and she wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders.

His kiss was soft, and she giggled as his beard tickled her chin. He grinned, kissed harder, his tongue pushing against hers, then slipped his hands under her shirt. Grinda gasped as he rubbed his thumbs over her nipples, so gentle and soft, turning them hard and making her whole body erupt into goose bumps. Then he pushed his hand between her legs. She stiffened.

He stopped kissing. 'Grinda?' He said it with such an accented 'a' that it made her chuckle. She smiled, touched his face, brushing her fingers through his beard. He waited, trembling at the strain of keeping control. She kissed him, took his hand and pushed it back between her legs. He stroked her opening, making her tingle, then pushed his finger deep inside. And this time she was wet.

He quickly unfastened his pants. And there it was. Grinda stared at it. She had only seen an erection once before, on Pentash, the village stallion. But this was very different. She touched it, tentatively at first, then ran her hand along it, more confident. It was hard and yet so smooth and velvety. Everything she had ever learnt from her parents, from the church, from the other village women, told her to abstain, to protect her virginity. It was the most valuable thing she would ever have. But as she gazed up at Mock, none of it seemed to matter anymore.

He tried to be gentle but Grinda still hissed, digging her nails into his shoulders, as he slid inside her. He pressed his cheek against hers as he thrust, planting light kisses on her face at every hiss and grunt and gasp she made. She gripped onto him tightly, tried not to express her pain, but it was impossible. The stinging only got worse until it became more than just painful, but agonising. She held her breath, bit back a cry and was on the verge of telling him to stop when it was suddenly over.

He grunted, gasped, then slowed his thrusting, and the sting began to ease. Grinda closed her eyes, finally able to enjoy the feel of him inside her, the heat of his closeness, the smell of his skin.

‘Grinda?’ he said. Grinda opened her eyes and Mock brushed away a tear trickling down her cheek. ‘Hurt?’

She shook her head, and he smiled and wrapped her in his arms.



MOCK WOKE THE NEXT morning to a grey dawn. The storm had finally passed.

He sat up. ‘Grinda?’

His bedding was empty. He stared at the patch of dried blood. There was blood on his penis too. Maybe she was out relieving herself or cleaning herself up. He froze at the sound of a small shriek. Quickly, he seized his sword and wriggled out the tent. He looked around but

the woods gave him no answers. Between the trees he could see the other Quarthi tents—but no movement and no Grinda. Everything was still. A crow cawed.

‘Grinda!’ he bellowed.

‘Mock,’ came a muffled cry.

Left. Away from the rest of his Quarthi brothers. He sped towards the sound, his bare feet slapping through mud and puddles of water. Who was it? Pith? Khun? Croki? They were the more untrustworthy of his brothers, but they still should have known better. Grinda was his and no one else’s. He had made that very clear. His grip tightened on his sword. Whoever it was would pay.

He burst into a small clearing, sword raised. Croki sneered, already on the defensive, waiting for him. Grinda lay unmoving on the wet ground, still naked from their lovemaking last night, hair knotted and matted, eyes wide with fear. There was blood between her legs and through her pubic hair, but he couldn’t know if it was from him yesterday or from Croki.

Rage flooded his body at the thought.

Croki gave nothing away but simply met Mock’s slash with his war hammer. Croki was strong and the sword jarred in Mock’s hands as it struck the hammer’s iron head. But Mock was strong too—and furious.

He cut and slashed and chopped, forcing Croki to back away, turning Croki’s sneer into a snarl. Croki might have been the biggest of the Quarthi, but Mock was the fiercest. *You should have known better, Brother.*

‘Die, die die!’ Mock cried as he cast blow upon blow upon Croki’s hammer, driving him to his knees. Finally he smashed the hammer from Croki’s grasp. Croki dropped to the ground, avoiding Mock’s slash, then rolled back to his knees. Baring his teeth, he whipped out a knife from his boot and jabbed Mock in the side. Mock grunted. Blood spurting. Agony ripped up his left side. But he swung his sword again, and this time Croki wasn’t so quick. Mock’s sword was sharp and it

sliced through Croki's neck in one sweep. His head hit the ground with a thud, rolled and settled upright.

Mock clutched at his side, warm blood welling through his fingers. The sword slipped from his grasp and he fell to his knees, bowing over Croki's headless body as blood pumped from the dead man's stump.

'Mock!'

Grinda dropped to her knees beside him. She touched his bloodied hand as it gripped his wound, then looked up at him in despair. He shook his head. 'I am strong.' He gently touched her between the legs. 'Hurt—?' He almost choked on the word.

She shook her head. And he knew the truth of it; his fingers came away dry. No new blood. No rape. He grabbed the back of her neck and pushed his face against hers in relief. 'Grinda.'

They had to flee before his other brothers realised what had happened. He wasn't concerned about revenge—none of them would care about Croki—but if they knew Mock was injured, there was nothing stopping them from slaughtering him and taking Grinda for their own.

He wouldn't let that happen.

They dressed quickly, grabbed a skin of water, then Grinda mounted his horse. He tried to climb up behind her, but it was difficult and painful. Croki had wounded him deeply and blood gushed down his horse's flank, coating its pale hair in red. But he succeeded, gasping for breath and so dizzy he had to wrap his arms around Grinda's waist lest he fall.

Grinda flicked the reins, and with a 'Ha!' they galloped through the trees.

The sun was blazing by the time they left the woods and sped over the grassy fields. Mock glanced behind him but his brothers weren't following. Grinda looked across her shoulder too, her gaze distant, and he knew she was thinking of her burnt village many leagues away.

Mock gave her a gentle squeeze around the waist, and she turned away, facing the mountains ahead. They reared high above, sharp and distinct against the gleaming blue.

He tightened his grip as Grinda flicked the reins and drove in her heels, spurring their horse into a faster pace.



GRINDA WAS WORRIED. Mock's wound was deep—and crippling. She could feel the weakness in his arms around her waist, the increasing weight against her back as he sagged against her, the catch in his throat at every panting breath. He was slipping away. She flicked the reins again, but the horse was already grunting and lathered with sweat. She looked up. Their destination was approaching fast but not fast enough. The horse slowed as the ground inclined. By the time they reached the mountains' rocky foot, Mock slipped from his perch.

'Mock!' Grinda cried.

She dropped to the ground beside him, hovering her hands over him helplessly. Her heart skipped a beat. Blood coated his pants, and he was so pale he was almost white. *What do I do?* His eyes were closed, and he had his fist jammed hard into his wound, trying to stem the flow of blood. It appeared to be working, but he couldn't do it forever. A tear glinted on his cheek. Another slid down to join it. She sucked in a shuddering sob. Mock opened his eyes a crack, that beautiful mossy green so bright against his pallid cheeks. He was in so much pain, so weak, maybe even dying and yet he smiled, lifting a hand to stroke her cheek.

She took it and kissed him lightly on the palm. 'Mock. Please, don't leave me. Not now. Not after everything.'

'Grinda,' he murmured, closing his eyes. He stopped smiling and his hand went limp in hers. The fist in his side slipped to the ground. Blood poured.

'No!'

Without thinking, she jammed her own fist into his warm, slippery wound. Blood continued to trickle, so she pushed harder. He winced, groaned. She held, watching carefully, and to her relief he stopped bleeding.

She leant over him and brushed her lips lightly over his. ‘I won’t leave you.’

She didn’t know how much time passed, all she knew was the ache in her knees, the trembling in her arm and the peaceful look on Mock’s face. Overhead, the sun began its descent, casting its bright light against her face. Sweat trickled down the back of her neck. She must have been as red as a beetroot by then. Carefully she eased out her fist, holding her breath. It was the third time she had made the attempt. She almost cried out—no more blood.

Grinda staggered to her feet, her mind awirl with things to do. *I must bind his wound, find food, shelter, water. But where to begin?* She looked down at her skirt—*my only skirt*—struck by an idea. She unfastened it and let it slip to the ground.

Minutes later, she had laid out several long strips of linen with the help of the dagger in Mock’s boot. Kneeling close beside him, she bathed his wound as best she could in the water from his skin, leaving a little to moisten his lips. Then she carefully packed the wound and tried her best to bind it as tightly as she could. It was difficult: he was still unconscious and he was thick and heavy. After several attempts and lots of struggling, she was satisfied. She stood, water skin in hand, taking a moment to gaze down on his sleeping form. Her heart clenched. He was so beautiful: his handsome face, strong arms, sculpted stomach, his lips, ears, beard and fingers. Even the scar under his eye. Everything about him sent a shot of warmth through her chest. *How did I get to be so lucky?*

Evening descended quickly. She had found water, but they were still out in the open and it was getting cool, her skin prickling with goose bumps. Grinda almost despaired. It was too dangerous and difficult to

move him. She gazed at the trees, thinking. If she couldn't bring him to shelter, then she would bring shelter to him.

It was dark by the time Grinda put her finishing touches on her project. It had taken her several hours but she had finally managed a crude little shelter built of branches and fronds and rocks and whatever useful thing she could find. She looked down at her skirt, shaking her head. She had used more strips of linen to tie the shelter together and now all that was left was little more than a ragged loincloth. She glanced up at the full moon, hoping the weather would hold. The little shelter was enough to cut out the cold during the night and provide shade during the day, but she had small confidence it would survive even a light shower of rain.

Grinda wriggled inside and snuggled in close to Mock. She had draped him in the pelt he used as a saddle. It was thin and worn but it was better than nothing. Outside, the horse whickered softly. She took Mock's hand. It was cold and limp, and she could feel him shivering. She snuggled in close, head against his chest, wrapping his big arms around her. She took comfort in his pounding heart. It sounded strong, and his breaths were long and deep. There was a chance—a good chance.

Tomorrow he will be well, she told herself, squeezing his hand gently. She pressed her nose against his skin and filled her lungs with his sweet smell. *I know he will.*

Waking the next morning, Grinda stretched and looked up at Mock hopefully. It was bright and warm in their little shelter, light breaching the gaps in the leaves. Her face split into a grin, his eyes bright, glorious and full of life.

He stroked her hair. 'Grinda.'

Grinda's eyes fluttered at his touch. The sound of him saying her name sent a shiver down her spine. She squirmed up to meet his lips, gripping the sides of his head as she gently kissed all over his face: cheeks, nose, forehead, repeating his name after each smack of her

lips—‘Mock, Mock, Mock’—until his name was like sugar on her tongue.

Mock grinned but didn’t do anything more than that, still too weak to pull her into his arms and make love to her the way he did before, the way she could see he wanted so badly to do again.

He tried to sit but Grinda pushed him back. ‘Rest.’ She checked his bandages. Dry. He smacked his cracked lips together. Grinda handed over the skin of water. Half sitting up, he gulped it down like a dying man. He handed it back, took a breath and briefly studied the little shelter she had made.

He looked impressed. ‘Good.’

Grinda smiled.

He improved quickly. By mid-afternoon Grinda relented and let him crawl out the tent, so he could stretch out his big body beneath the sun. Grinda watched him hungrily. He was still pale and drawn but bit by bit he was becoming more himself. The only issue was food.

Nigh on darkness, he patted his stomach ‘Nuk’, then pointed at his blade. ‘Quith.’

Grinda shook her head, puzzled.

‘Quith,’ he said again and went to grab it.

‘No,’ she snapped, suddenly realising. *Hunt, he means hunt.* He couldn’t, he would rip open his wound. She jabbed a thumb at her chest. ‘Me.’

He raised his eyebrows but didn’t stop her as she took up his blade. It was heavier than it looked, dragging down her right arm, but she hauled it outside.

Hunt. I can’t hunt. She gazed in despair at the trees. Her eyes lingered over the horse.

They feasted that night and for the next two nights after. The horse-meat was tough and she knew almost nothing of skinning or quartering or cooking over an open fire, but Mock didn’t tease or complain. He stared at her across the flames, eager, hungry, as he always was, but now

there was something more—interest, curiosity, even a glint of respect that she had never seen from anybody before, not her mother or father or brothers or from the people in Quay. Heat flared between Grinda's legs. The horsemeat didn't seem so tough anymore.

They made love that night. Straddling him around the hips, Grinda eased him gently inside, wincing a little as he filled her up. She rocked slowly, careful she didn't rip open his wound. Mock groaned. He tried to half sit up so he could see her body, but he was still too weak and had to content himself with staring at the ceiling. He didn't seem to mind.

She closed her eyes. It was nothing like before: no pain, no discomfort, only pleasure. At every forward motion, his penis would rub at the very top of her channel, sending waves of pleasure through her body. She rocked faster. She could feel Mock swell inside her, hear the breath catch in his throat. Right at that final moment, he sat up with a cry, grimacing as he dug his fingers hard into her hips. Wet heat filled her up, and Grinda pulled him against her as she came too. She held on to him as those waves of pleasure crashed and crashed again until she could barely catch her breath.

Then it was over and all that was left behind was their ragged breathing, the warmth of each other's arms and a love so sweeping it felt like Grinda's whole body was on fire. They held each other, faces buried in each other's necks, simply enjoying the sensations, the smells, the beat of each other's hearts, until Mock eventually pulled away. He gazed at her, a dazed almost helpless look in his eyes. She had never seen him so vulnerable, not even at his weakest. Something burst in her heart.

Grinda ran her fingers through his beard. 'Mock.'

He squeezed her waist. 'Grinda.'

Grinda put a hand to her heart. 'Love.'

He stopped, smiled and placed a big hand on his chest. 'Love.'

Her heart lurched. She squirmed around his member, giggling. Mock's face split into a broad grin, and he joined in, his laughter so

booming it rustled the leaves of their little shelter and echoed around the mountainside.



IT WAS TWO WEEKS BEFORE Mock had strength enough to ascend the mountain. His wound still pinched when he moved a certain way but it was long past a concern. He would wear the scar forever—and proudly. A reminder of how he and Grinda had come together. A reminder of when he first learnt how to laugh and love and hold a woman. A mark he would show his sons and daughters in the years to come. *Children*. It was an odd thought, a strange feeling.

He paused, holding out his hand for Grinda as she struggled over a trail of slippery rocks. She smiled up at him, that pretty smile that sent his heart pounding. He never would have thought a woman could have such control over him. How swiftly things could change.

Grinda was puffed and even Mock was tired, still not fully recovered from his injury, so they stopped for a break. It hadn't rained since that night he almost lost Grinda to Croki. The sky was so clear he swore he could see the Kraken Sea glinting like a jewel on the horizon. Sitting hip to hip, they looked into the distance, as though gazing into their pasts, the world they had left behind spread out before them: a patchwork of crops, the blurry shadows of faraway villages, farms dotted here and there, the green expanse of the forest. Grinda was quiet beside him, panting lightly, and he wondered if she was thinking of her family—or maybe even regretting her change of circumstances. Her village was long gone, burnt to cinders, and Mock's Quarthi brothers would have abandoned their camp days ago, off to raid another village, to destroy more people's lives, maybe even murder someone like Grinda.

Frowning, he gripped onto Grinda's hand, small and warm in his. The girl looked up at him, smiling, and his dark thoughts vanished. If

she felt any grief or regret, she didn't show it. She squeezed his hand and he squeezed back.

After a few minutes, they had rested enough and continued with their journey, leaving their pasts and woes behind as they picked carefully through the rock, the mountain and their future waiting patiently above.



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,’ Lorelee 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.

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

‘Another hour, if the weather holds up.’

Lorelee looked up with a frown. The sky was 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.

Lorelee 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 Loralee’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 Loralee 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 Loralee 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 Loralee 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 Loralee 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, Loralee 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?’

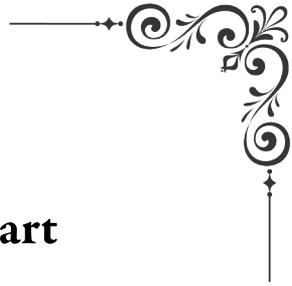
Lorelee shrugged.

‘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.’



A Feathered Heart

Benjamin Farmstone crept through the brambles, his young nephew close behind him. Though he was a big man, his footsteps were light against the ground and the leaves barely rustled as he passed. He wasn't the greatest hunter on the West Side for nothing. Even so, the hart lifted its head, its nose to the air, nostrils flaring. Ben froze. His nephew held his breath. The wind had shifted. The hart bobbed its head, ears flicking from side to side, eyes wide, but it did not run. Instead, it lowered its graceful neck and turned back to the bushes.

Ben lifted his bow, knocked his arrow and pulled the string taut. It was a powerful hart with rippling muscles, a fine white coat and such a glorious twist of antlers that he salivated. It was a prize catch and almost a waste to kill. Almost. He took a breath, slowed his heart and relaxed his stance. He would not miss. He never missed. He released, and the arrow flew. At the soft twang of the bow, the hart lifted its head. His aim was true and deep, the arrow piercing it just behind the shoulder with a satisfying thump. It gave a startled bleat, kicked its back legs, then darted away.

'Good shot!'

Scott made to charge after it, but Ben slammed a big hand against his chest, almost knocking his nephew to the ground. 'Wait. Let it die.'

'But you'll lose it.'

Ben looked at his nephew. He was only young, no more than twelve, his cheeks pink in the cold, his blue eyes bright with excitement. 'Who is the hunter here?'

Scott dropped his head and folded his arms. Ben removed his quiver, put aside his bow and sat, listening as the creature crashed through the trees, its hooves pounding into the distance. He could see his nephew glaring at him through his fringe. Ben ignored him, removed the flask from his inner coat pocket and took a swig of ale.

While they waited, Scott paced and Ben drank. It was a frigid morning, but the sun soon glared through the trees as it climbed into the sky, thinning the light padding of snow on the ground—the last of the winter frost.

When enough time had passed, Ben hefted himself to his feet.

‘Finally,’ Scott said.

Ben seized his nephew’s arm before he could hurry ahead. ‘Wait. I don’t want you mucking up its trail. Keep to my side.’

Its trail wasn’t difficult to follow: leaves and vines streaked with blood and fur, hoofprints clear in the melting snow, broken branches and trampled bushes left behind in its wake. Ben’s arrow had dislodged and was lying on the ground, its shaft pink with blood. He picked it up and sheathed it. He sniffed. It was close, its musk thick on the air.

It was a strong beast, and it was almost three hundred yards before they found it.

‘Oh,’ Scott grunted.

It lay on its side, limbs akimbo, almost as white as the snow, except where the blood stained its coat in a deep red blush. Scott stared at it. Its eyes were open, a light shade of blue, empty now.

‘What do we do with it?’ his nephew asked.

‘We skin it, then quarter it.’ Ben pulled out his blade and knelt beside it.

Scott paled. ‘Here? Now?’

‘Unless you want to drag it back whole.’

His nephew looked over his shoulder, then dropped to his knees beside him.

By the time the deed was done, Scott was vomiting into the bushes. Ben shook his head. Little wonder his brother had sent him Ben's way. The boy had no stomach. Clearly, living in town had pampered him. He tied up the sacks and hefted one over his shoulder, staggering a little under its weight. It was going to take a few trips.

Dusk was approaching by the time they got the last sack home. A short time later, his brother arrived to collect his son, and he was alone again.

Finally—solitude, until Friday at least when his nephew was set to return. He went over to what was left of the hart and ran his hand through its fine pelt, his finger along the smooth edge of one of its antlers. *Magnificent*. But where to put it? He glanced around his shack. Nobody could deny it was the home of a hunter: pelts rolled out along the floor, horns and tusks and antlers attached to the walls, a big stuffed bear standing in the corner bearing its great yellow teeth. There were so many stuffed heads, so many shining eyes watching as he went about his day. He was proud of his kills, and they deserved to be put on display, even if it were only himself who could appreciate them.

He looked across the room. *There*—just above the hearth. Perfect. It was his best trophy so far and deserved a central spot. It would be hard to top, but it could be done. He wasn't the greatest hunter on the West Side for nothing and tomorrow was another day.



WINDDANCER SOARED INTO the heights, flapping her great golden wings. The sun was bright, making her long yellow hair gleam and her feathers shine. Beneath, her shadow passed darkly along the clouds as she darted across the sky. She was the fastest of the Skybirds. Nobody could catch her. Not even Falcon, their fiercest and most powerful warrior. She dropped through the clouds, her skin pimpling against the frozen water. She shivered and laughed, flipped over, twisted, then shot to the earth, arms outstretched, head tucked tightly be-

tween her elbows, wings hard against her back, until she was as straight as an arrow.

The wind roared past her, chilling her cheeks and icing her nose. It stole her breath and stung her eyes until the world was little more than a blur. The earth flew up to meet her: rolling fields, luscious forests, gleaming water. She kept plunging until she must surely crash into the trees, but just at the last moment rolled over, twisted again, brushed her fingertips along the topmost leaves, before arcing upwards in a streak of gold, using the force of her plunge to thrust back into the sky. She laughed, revelling in her skill. She rolled and flipped and danced, then plunged again. She was told never to risk exposure, to think twice before revealing herself to the land creatures, but it was summer, the day glorious, and she was young and strong and beautiful.

She flew across the landscape, her shadow wavering against the trees and rocks and the strange wooden habitats the land creatures made for themselves. Ahead was the mountain. She arced upward, following the steep climb, arms outstretched as she soared, hair streaming behind her. Every now and then, she flapped her great wings, thrusting herself forwards. Then something strange happened. There was a whizz, a dull thud, then her right wing slumped. She tried to flap it, but it would not obey and dragged her down. She cried out as she fell. Now the earth really was flying up to meet her. She crashed through the trees. Branches ripped and scratched and tore, catching against her hair and wings and robe, slowing her descent until she hit the ground hard in a shower of golden feathers, and she knew no more.



BEN SHOULDERED HIS bow and hurried through the trees. He had been watching the golden bird closely, hoping it would fly his way. It had seemed to almost tease him as it looped and ducked and danced just out of range, gleaming like a jewel against the sun. But now it was his—an unequalled shot, a beautiful kill, a perfect day.

He slowed his approach. The branches above were snapped and broken. Leaves and feathers were strewn below. He sniffed the air, and a strange scent tickled his nose, an almost perfume. Strange. He stopped, listening, but there was no sound: no squawking or hissing or flapping of wings. The creature was either dead or severely injured.

He found it crumpled on the ground beneath a tall oak in a bed of golden feathers. It was enormous. He had never seen a bird so big. He knocked an arrow and approached with caution. Injured animals could be savage. His boots crunched through the leaves, but the bird did not stir. He stopped and lowered his bow. There was a pale slim arm, yellow hair, tattered clothing—a woman. His heart thundered. Had he killed a woman? He looked around, afraid someone was watching. He looked at her again and saw his arrow. It had lodged deeply, high up in her right wing, just short of her shoulder. A blush of blood coated the feathers beneath. A lucky shot—for them both.

He sheathed his arrow, put aside his bow and knelt beside her. Her eyes were closed, and she was breathing gently. He smoothed her hair, brushed his hand along her feathers. She was so soft. His heart pounded harder. He needed to get her home.

Even with his immense strength, she was heavy in his arms, her wings probably weighing more than she did as they dragged along the ground. By the time he kicked open his front door he was sweating and staggering and gasping for breath. Still, he was steady and gentle as he laid her on his bed, careful not to knock her injury. She moaned, eyelids flickering. He would have to remove that arrow as soon as possible.

He filled a tub with water and retrieved his kit, then sat by her bed and waited, gazing at her. What kind of creature was she? He knew about dragons and mermaids, of fairies and monsters, but flying women? He scratched his head, trying to think back to his boyhood and his mother's stories. Vaguely, he recalled her speaking of a floating island high above the clouds that circled the land. Had she spoken of

bird people? He shook his head, unable to remember. It didn't matter anyway. They were only stories.

She shifted and moaned again, then opened her eyes. They were yellow, like an owl's, and beautiful. She blinked, stared at him, not afraid but curious. She tried to move and cried out. More blood trickled through her feathers.

'Don't move. We have to take out the arrow,' he said. She looked at him blankly. 'Do you understand?'

She blinked, pursed her lips and tried to get up again. This time she screamed and grabbed at her wing. When she saw the arrow, the little colour left in her face drained away. She looked at him, then around the room, at the animal heads, the pelts, the horns and tusks—all the death. She stiffened, and when she turned back to him, her eyes were filled with horror.

She tried to get up again, shrieking at the pain.

'No, don't.' He took her shoulders and eased her back. She was so weak she barely resisted. 'I'm not going to hurt you. I'm sorry for what I did. I didn't know what you were. Please, let me help you.'

She lay back on the bed, panting, small hand gripping his thick hairy wrist, her yellow eyes gazing into his.

'Please,' he repeated.

She released her grip and turned away, hissing and wincing as he gently prodded her wound.

He leant back. 'The arrow has gone straight through. I will have to break off the fletching and pull it out through the back.'

She looked at him. There was no understanding there, so he did his best to show her what he meant. 'Break,' he said, snapping an imaginary arrow in mid-air. 'Pull.' He yanked at it.

She grimaced but nodded and turned away, pressing her face into the pillow.

It was quick, but it wasn't painless. She grabbed at him as he pulled, screamed, thrashed. Then it was out, and she slumped back into the bed ashen-faced and gasping.

She slept, and by the time she woke again, he had cleaned and packed the wound and bandaged her as best he could, her feathers bent and crushed beneath his dressing. She touched it.

'Feel better?' he asked.

She just stared at him with those yellow eyes of hers.

He swallowed and wiped his mouth. 'Hungry?'

She ate in bed, and when she was done, Ben carefully helped her up. She swayed on her feet.

'Careful,' he said, catching her as she sagged against him. 'You lost a lot of blood.'

She was warm in his arms, yellow hair tumbling around her. He could feel her heart beating against his chest, her breath hot on his neck. He brushed at her cheek, and she stepped back with a start.

Ben watched as she walked around the room, the ends of her wings dragging along the floor, her right one slumped, the other held high against her back. She looked down at her feet at the pelts on the floor, looked up at his trophies on the wall. She touched the hart's antlers above the hearth.

'Magnificent, aren't they?' he said.

She frowned at him, and a hot flush burned his cheeks. He cleared his throat and dropped his eyes.

She took the bed again that night while Ben slept on the floor, rolled up in his blankets. When she woke, there was colour in her cheeks. She looked at him, then around the room.

'Yes,' he said. 'I took them all down.'

Gone were all his kills, stacked up in the shed outside. He had even hauled out his bear, though with great difficulty. For some reason, a desperate need for her approval had roused inside him, and so when she

looked at him with those yellow eyes no longer dark with doubt and smiling her pretty lips, his heart soared.

She stayed with him for the next seven days as she recovered. He changed her dressings, they ate together, spoke as best they could, smiled and laughed, and when he touched her she no longer shied away. He learnt her name was WindDancer, and she learnt his name too, and every time she spoke it in her sweet voice, his heart would swell to bursting.

On the seventh night, she invited him into her bed, and they made love. He was gentle, anxious he should not hurt her wing, but she merely smiled, brushed at his stubble and pulled her against him. He felt like a bear against her perfect pale smoothness—all hair and muscle and sweat, but she didn't seem to care, winding her fingers through his wild mane, sucking at his neck until he cried out. It had been a long time since he'd been with a woman and when he released inside her, it was with fear and hope and gladness.

'I love you,' he said, head tucked against her breasts as he ran his fingers through her feathers.

He knew she meant to return to the skies, but he didn't have to be happy about it. It was two days later when he unwound the dressing, and WindDancer looked up into the blue. He kept back as she carefully flapped her wings. More confident, she flapped them harder, then harder still, until the leaves circled around her and her yellow hair whipped about. She seemed ready, but when she tried to take off, she cried out and dropped to her knees.

'WindDancer.' He rushed over and gently lifted her chin. 'My love?'

He brushed aside her fringe, revealing the tears in her eyes. He checked her wing and saw to his horror the sheen of pus deep within.

She deteriorated quickly. First, there was the weakness, then the drowsiness, then the fevers. Then her feathers began to fall out, following her in a golden trail whenever she had the strength to walk. She

turned off her food, and no matter how much Ben asked or encouraged or begged, she refused to drink. She became delirious and suffered such terrible nightmares she woke screaming in the night. As for the wound itself, it broke down faster than he could treat it. It wept so much pus he ran out of dressings. It stank, turned green, then blackened.

She died within the fortnight.

He buried her in the morning. Ben stood at her grave, staring into the woods, leaning on his shovel. It was a bright warm day, the sun beating on his back. WindDancer would have loved it. He didn't know how long he stood there, just gazing into nothing, but darkness had fallen by the time he went back inside.

The next day, he returned his trophies to their rightful places and went on the hunt as though nothing had happened. But something *had* happened, and he couldn't deny it. Rabbits, deer, ducks, even a dim-witted moose—every shot he took he missed, and he never missed.

It was the same over the next two days. No matter how hard he focused, no matter how hard he tried to want it, he could not get a kill. On the evening of the third day, he returned to his shack, clutching at his stomach, nauseated and feverish and shaking with rage. He slung off his bow and snapped it in half against his knee. He did the same with each of his arrows before flinging them across the room. Next, he stormed into his shed, grabbed his axe and attacked his trophies. Horns, pelts, heads, not even the stuffed squirrel on the windowsill escaped his madness. His bear crashed to the ground, and he smashed it until it was nothing but fur and teeth. Then he saw the antlers. He yanked them off the wall. He recalled how pleased he had been that day. *Damn fool.* He took a good grip on them and tried to break them with his bare hands. Failing that, he threw them into the hearth, set fire to them and watched them burn.

By the end, his shack was no longer recognisable, *he* was no longer recognisable. He sank to his knees and wept.



‘YOU’LL BE PROUD OF me, Uncle. You’ll see. Thanks to you, I never miss.’

Ben grunted.

It was a month later, and they were on the hunt. Ben had been training his nephew twice a week throughout the spring before stopping his lessons only days before he shot down WindDancer. By then, the boy didn’t need his uncle any more. He shot well, tracked better and no longer got sick quartering his kill. He was a hunter now—and a man. He didn’t need to prove anything to Ben. But if he wanted to show off, Ben would let him. It was his birthday after all, and he had a right to be proud.

It was mid-summer, and he was sweating. It was another fine day, the sun high and bright, the air heavy with heat within the confines of the woods. There was no breeze. It was a good day, a great day to hunt.

‘There,’ his nephew whispered.

Ben stopped, watching as he knocked his arrow. It was a doe: tall and lithe and young, if a little anxious, shaking her head, hooves dancing. The boy had good posture, a fine bow and unwavering focus. He would not miss. Ben had taught him too well.

‘Wait,’ Ben said.

‘Uncle?’ Scott said, poised for the kill.

‘Leave her.’

‘Leave her?’ he huffed. ‘Why?’

‘Do as I say.’

The boy frowned. ‘No way. She’s mine.’

‘I said wait!’

Ben shoved at his nephew, who tripped and fell. The arrow released with a dull twang and the doe darted away. The two hunters looked at each other, stunned. Except for the blood pounding in Ben’s ears, it was eerily quiet.

‘Uncle Ben?’ Scott said, face white as bone. Ben looked down in mild surprise at the arrow lodged in his abdomen. His nephew scrambled to his feet. ‘I’m sorry! I didn’t mean it.’

‘Leave me,’ Ben said when the boy reached to help.

‘What?’

‘I said, leave me.’ He clutched at himself with a groan as the pain suddenly caught up with him. He spat blood and wiped his mouth.

‘I’ll go get help,’ the boy said.

But Ben seized his throat before he could run away. ‘No. No help. Let me die.’

Scott’s blue eyes were wide. Ben released him, and the boy stood away warily. Then Ben turned and staggered into the trees.

He hadn’t gone far before he collapsed, coughing and spluttering and groaning. Blood wept between his fingers. He was dizzy and nauseated, and his heart was pounding so hard it hurt. But it was nothing to the pain in his gut. It would take a long time for him to die, and he prayed his brother wouldn’t find him too soon.

He got his wish. The world darkened, though it was not yet noon. He grew cold and shivery, became so weak he couldn’t move. He closed his eyes.

‘Ben,’ whispered a voice.

He opened them again. The darkness was gone. In its place was WindDancer, golden wings outstretched, flowing hair, owl eyes, shining so brightly he had to squint.

He smiled, then laughed, and there was no pain. ‘How I love you saying my name.’

He got up and found he had strength again. He cupped her cheek, ran his fingers along her right wing. No festering wound. No pain. Flawless. She was whole again.

And so was he.



SCOTT'S CHEEKS WERE wet as he, his father and three of his father's friends, rushed to find his uncle. He wiped at his face, feeling so sick his breakfast swelled in his throat. He couldn't understand what had happened. What had gotten into his uncle? He was mad. That's what he was. Why didn't he want him to make the kill?

After the incident Scott had wandered the woods aimlessly, not knowing what to do, frightened he would be blamed for his uncle's murder. When he eventually saw sense and amassed enough courage to approach his father, two hours had passed.

And now, here they were, and it was almost like they were on an ordinary hunt, tracking their injured target, following a trail of bloodied leaves and broken bushes, except Scott had never desired so little to find a kill. He didn't want to see his uncle's bloodied corpse.

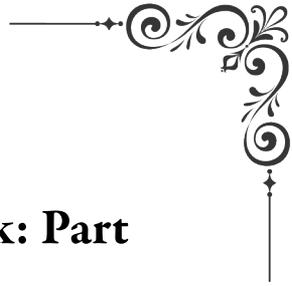
But find it they did. He was sprawled on the ground, blood soaking his shirt and the leaves around him. Scott's arrow was still stuck in his abdomen, the fletching bloodied and broken as though he had tried to rip it out.

It was any fallen hunter's wish to be found as he once lived, grasping his greatest love, his most prized weapon, prepared to hunt even in death. For his uncle, it should have been the bow. And yet it lay beside him, apparently forgotten. Instead, he had his fist clenched hard at his breast, something crushed within. Curious, his father knelt beside him and prised it open. They all stared.

'What is that?' Scott breathed.

It was something golden. A feather?

They all looked at each other in wonder as Uncle Ben gazed up at the sky, a ghost of a smile on his lips.



The Crippled Hawk: Part 1

Fera tripped and stumbled. She fumbled for the dish, but it slipped from her grasp, shattering against the floor with an almighty crash. She jumped away as hot soup and ceramic shards flew everywhere.

‘Clumsy girl!’ raged Cook Weira, flailing her wooden spoon, cheeks flushed, hair wild and frizzy from the steam. ‘No, you damn fool, clean it up later. Lord Tyron is waiting. Here.’ She grabbed another dish, ladled out more soup and handed it over. ‘Drop it again, and you’ll be scrubbing chamber pots for the rest of your life. Well, what are you doing? Don’t just stand there like a lackwit. Go!’

Fera handled the dish as carefully as a newborn as she climbed the twisting servants’ stairs. She had been a servant at Appelwhite Keep for the last two years, ever since the barbarians had murdered her parents and stolen her voice and maidenhead. Where once she had worked on a farm and been loved, now she slaved away at a host of gruelling tasks, all beneath the cold hard eyes of Cook Weira and the other senior servants.

She had climbed her fair share of stairs during her time, so when she reached the great hall she was barely puffed.

Only rarely was she sent to serve Lord Tyron directly; ‘If she can’t speak, what use is she?’ Analise, the head maid, had sneered. She was supposed to keep her eyes to her shoes, to focus on her task and mind her own business, like any good servant. But Fera couldn’t help but look around her, at the colourful tapestries, the polished furniture, the brass

candelabras, at the great wooden table where Lord Will Tyron and his men sat. It was a small gathering, only five, including Lord Tyron himself. All knights and all his closest friends.

As always, they ignored her. She placed the soup in the centre of the table without notice, refilled their mugs without thanks, as they ate and drank and laughed.

She tried not to stare as she circled the table. Lord Tyron sat in the middle, hair loose and wild, eyes as green as a forest lake. He was broad-shouldered and tall, and Fera would oft daydream what it felt like to be lost in his strong arms, to feel his stubble scratch lightly against her face. She bit her lip and lowered her eyes. *I must stop thinking like this. He is a lord, I am a maid—and a damaged one at that. He will wed a noble Lady, and I a commoner from the village. It can never be.*

And she knew it was true by the way those green eyes stared through her, like she mattered less to him than the half-chewed gristle on his plate. It was only fitting. It was her place.

When she had completed her tasks, she climbed back down the stairs, tugging at the scarf wrapped around her neck, her scar itching beneath.

‘Back are you?’ said Cook Weira, looking up from her pot. ‘Good. Now clean up your mess, and when you’re done you can do the washing.’

Fera glanced at the tower of pots and plates in dull resignation, then sank to her knees and began gathering up the pieces of broken dish.

Early the next morning as Fera scrubbed the keep’s cold stone floor, she lifted her head at the sound of clashing swords coming from the courtyard. She put down her brush and hurried to the window.

Lord Tyron laughed as he parried Sir Chaprey’s blow, the blades sliding against each other with a loud scrape. They circled each other, the hot sun beating down on their heads. They wore light chainmail and gripped leather shields. Their swords gleamed. Sir Chaprey thrust-

ed at his abdomen but Lord Tyron dodged and circled behind him, so fast he was almost a blur. Before Sir Chaprey had a chance to defend his back, Lord Tyron kicked out and the young knight was sent sprawling to the ground. Lord Tyron laughed again, his deep voice echoing around the keep. Fera's heart skipped a beat. He looked so beautiful with his face lit up like that. His hair was loose and blew lightly in the wind. She loved his hair. She loved everything about him, from his muscular calves to his slim hips to that sexy little dimple at the left corner of his mouth that deepened whenever he smiled.

Fera leant against the window frame with a sigh, resting her chin on her hands as she watched him. Sheathing his sword, Lord Tyron helped haul the young knight to his feet. Sir Chaprey shook his head in disgust, red-faced and grim. Lord Tyron slapped his back good naturedly and said something Fera couldn't hear. Then they stepped apart and Lord Tyron unsheathed his sword, ready for another round.

Their swords clashed again but this time Lord Tyron took it easy on Sir Chaprey, giving him the opportunity to land easy blows. Fera was quietly admiring how Lord Tyron's muscles bunched up in his arms, the taut shape of his arse in his tight-fitting pants, when there came the sound of a tortured horn blast. She looked up with a start. Two more blasts followed—a warning. Something was wrong.

Lord Tyron and Sir Chaprey raced to the portcullis. Everyone else in the keep paused, the air suddenly thick with unease. Grinda hurried outside so she could see, making sure to keep out of sight. Analise would wack her knuckles with her wooden rod if she knew she was forsaking her work.

Lord Tyron had his hand raised against the glare as he gazed past the lowering portcullis. Armour gleamed in the distance. Another three short blasts.

A mounted knight galloped inside, pale and shaking, dragging something behind him which scraped against the cobblestones. Fera swallowed. Where were the rest of the knights? Twenty had left that

morning to scout Lord Tyron's borders. He was dragging a board, something on top of it. Fera struggled to see. Somebody cried out. Others gasped. Fera clapped a hand to her mouth. Body parts—legs, arms and a head were pinned to the board with iron stakes. Fera stared at the man's bloodied face before turning away with a wince. The barbarians—she knew their work. It was a message, loud and clear.

Lord Tyron began shouting orders. Fera dodged into the shadows as everybody rushed about, making their preparations for battle. Sir Chaprey hurried away to gather the rest of the knights. Fera kept her eyes on Lord Tyron, no longer caring about her work or fearing Analise. The only important thing was him.

An hour later, the men were armoured and mounted. Lord Tyron hefted up his shield. On it was painted a hawk—his family's sigil. They were an old family, renowned for their bravery and valour. His father was a hawk, as was his grandfather, and now he would fly into battle.

Fera watched as he kicked his horse into a gallop, his knights following in a tight group behind him, her heart beating in her throat.



THE SERVANTS GATHERED in the courtyard at the sound of a horn blast, the third for the day. It sounded again, as impatient as the last. Three short blasts, again and again, as if the blower didn't know when to stop—or couldn't.

'Something's wrong,' Analise whispered, twisting her long red hair around her fingers. 'Something terrible has happened.'

Fera clutched at her skirt. *Please, not Lord Tyron. Please.*

Cook Weira stood beside her, pale as her apron, still holding her wooden spoon as it dripped sauce onto the cobblestones.

Horses clattered into the courtyard, and Fera was relieved to see that so many knights still lived. Haggard and bleeding and some gravely wounded, but alive. But where was Lord Tyron?

There was a collective moan and cries of fear as Sir Chaprey galloped inside, Lord Tyron clasped to his chest, limp and grey, blood down his right side, his arm twisted and dangling.

Sir Chaprey was shouting orders but Fera didn't hear a word, her ears ringing, watching as they hauled Lord Tyron from the horse and carried him away. Somebody tugged at her arm. Fera turned her head numbly—Analise.

'Hurry,' the head maid shouted in her ear, lips white with fear, as she dragged Fera after her, and it was the first time there wasn't a snarl in her voice.

For the next several hours, Fera filled tub after tub with water, only for them to return crimson time and time again. She washed and steamed and dried bloodied dressings. She climbed the stairs alongside the other servants, hauling up those same tubs, bearing trays of newly washed dressings to be used again. They weren't just for Lord Tyron; the knights screamed as the healers tended to them, grey, tortured figures on their straw pallets, hard to see in the dim light of the great hall and harder to forget. Lord Tyron had been taken to his own room. She stared at his door and tried not to fear.

It was well into the night when the last tub returned untainted, and the servants could rest. Few found sleep easily. She could hear Cook Weira weeping from across the way. Others murmured fearfully to each other. Fera stared at the ceiling, rubbing at the scar on her neck, tears coursing down her cheeks.

She slept, and her dreams were filled with tubs of crimson water, each one bloodier than the last.

Days passed. Knights healed or died. The news of what happened circulated through the castle. The barbarians had been routed. The land was safe. But at great cost. The savages had already sacked and burned several villages before Lord Tyron reached them. He was the first to charge, as Fera knew he would be. Barbarians fled in his wake, so fear-

some was he, sword slashing left and right. But an axe took him hard in the shoulder, and he fell badly from his horse.

Initially, the servants spoke about him reverently. They loved him and were happy to serve him. But their talk soon turned dark and sullen the further the week passed.

‘Ungrateful.’

‘Cursed man.’

‘Rich and spoilt.’

‘I don’t deserve to be treated like that, not even by a lord.’

‘He’s lost all hope,’ Cook Weira wailed as she sat trembling in the kitchen. ‘Don’t know what’s good for him no more. His own Mama Weira.’ She dabbed at the broth on her blouse. ‘Took special care with his food, I did, and he threw it in my face.’

‘He’s grievously crippled now, and angry,’ Fera caught Analise whispering to a stable hand while on her way to the gardens. ‘Apparently, he won’t let anyone tend to his wounds. And he threw his chamber pot at Lord Crandish and it was full!’

It was only inevitable they eventually turn their eyes on Fera—the last resort, the lowliest of the low. Let her be abused and insulted like the rest of them. Just because she was an unfortunate, didn’t mean she should escape the lord’s insanity.

The other servants watched as she ascended the stairs, carrying Lord Tyron’s breakfast tray. Weira looked worried. Analise was excited. ‘Watch that chamber pot!’ she cried after her. None of them held any hope. If they couldn’t speak sense to him, how could a mute?

Henry, Lord Tyron’s manservant, stood outside his door just in case his lord needed anything. Though Fera doubted he did much more than remove his empty trays and chamber pots these days. Tall and thin, with jowls that wobbled every time he moved, he frowned at her approach.

Fera stopped by the door, waiting. Henry’s frown deepened as he pushed it open with a skeletal hand.

It was dark inside, the curtains drawn tight. And it stank—of rot and sweat and human waste. The door clicked shut behind her. Fera squinted, barely able to see. She had never been allowed in his room before, and the thought of it made her heart beat a little harder. It was large, the ceiling high. There were the outlines of grand pictures on the walls, the shapes of furniture, as she tiptoed around the mess on the floor. She tripped and squelched and slid over a host of nameless things. When was the last time the room had been cleaned? She nudged something with her shoe and a puff of stink made her stomach turn.

Fera approached the head of the bed. She thought she saw a shape but couldn't be sure. Was it him? Was he asleep? Was he even here? She opened her mouth, closed it again, then put down his tray on a trestle table and drew open the curtains. Light flooded inside.

'Aaarrgghh. Close it!'

Fera stepped back. Lord Tyron was sitting up in his bed, squinting, hand shading his face. He was far from the man she once knew: eyes sunken and red, skin the colour of old cheese, hair an oily knotted mess; food had stuck in his ragged beard and had been left to rot.

'What are you, a halfwit? I said, close it!'

Fera could only stand frozen, staring at the stump that was once his right arm. It was wrapped in a soiled bandage and had a fly buzzing around it. He threw his bedding aside with a grunt and staggered over to the window. Fera blushed and looked away; his chest was bare, and he was only wearing a thin pair of britches. She could see the outline of his—

He paused before he drew the curtains shut. 'Who in God's name are you?' Fera lifted her eyes, and for the first time they looked at each other. She opened and shut her mouth, touched the scarf around her neck. 'I asked you a question. Answer me.'

She gripped her throat and shook her head.

He ripped the curtains shut with a growl. 'Am I so repulsive they have to drag a blockheaded slattern from the street to serve me now?'

He lay back down on the bed and rolled on his side. Tears filled Fera's eyes and she fled the room. He hated her. More than that, he despised her, just like everyone else. It wasn't her fault she had been tortured and brutalised.

She returned to the servant's quarters and was about to throw herself onto her bed and sob until she was sick when she passed by Analise. She was leaning against the wall, arms folded, looking smug. She had expected Fera to fail—likely hoped for it. The head maid had always treated her like something that had crawled out of a chamber pot, and Fera had always bore it quietly, letting it chip away at her soul bit by bit. But not today. For some reason something roused inside her, a hot, flaming need to prove herself, to succeed where everybody else had failed.

Fera glared at her. *I will bring Lord Tyron back. Even if it means I'm doused in a dozen chamber pots. I'll prove them all wrong. I am no useless thing.*

The next morning Cook Weira looked up in surprise as Fera approached, holding out her hands for another tray. Her heart pounded as she climbed the stairs and it only got worse as she waited for Henry to open the doors, but she didn't let it stop her.

Inside was as dark and rank as the day before. She could see his faint form lying sprawled on the bed, breathing lightly. She put down the tray on the same trestle table, took a breath, then flung open his curtains for the second time.

Lord Tyron sat up with a roar. 'I said n—' He paused, his eyebrows shooting up into his fringe. 'You again.' He frowned, his knuckles turning white as he gripped his blanket. 'You dare disobey me? I should have you thrown out the castle.' His voice went low and dangerously quiet. 'Close them.'

Fera shook her head.

'I said, close them,' he repeated in the same dangerous voice.

Fera folded her arms. He stared at her, aghast. She could feel his rage build like a wall of heat, but she would not waver, though her heart pounded so hard sweat trickled underneath her arms and she found it hard to think straight.

'I am your lord, obey me or I'll have you flayed!' He flung off his blanket and leapt to his feet. He reared high above her, menacing and tall, but Fera didn't budge, blocking the window.

She knew Lord Tyron far better than he knew her. He was a good man and he would never hurt a woman. Besides, she knew when to be afraid. She had been ravaged and almost murdered by the barbarians, after all, and Lord Tyron was no savage. She could see it in his eyes; his threats were false.

Still, it was a difficult predicament. What would he do?

He glared at her, but when she still didn't move, his anger began to fizzle, replaced with surprise, then curiosity. He rubbed his whiskery chin. 'Who are you?'

Fera frowned, unable to answer.

'How long have you worked here?'

She held up two fingers.

'Two? Two months?'

Fera shook her head, jabbed her two fingers in the air.

'Two *years*?'

She stared at him.

'You've been here two *years*? Impossible. I would know your face.'

Frowning, she folded her arms.

'Why can't you talk?'

Arching her neck, she pulled down her scarf.

He was silent. 'They slit your throat.'

Fera lifted her chin, trying not to cry. She *wouldn't* cry.

Lord Tyron studied her with those green eyes, taking in her thin woollen dress, her brown wavy hair loosely pinned beneath her wimple, her nut-brown skin darkened from her years in the sun. She was much

younger than him, barely a woman. She dropped her gaze, feeling uncomfortable.

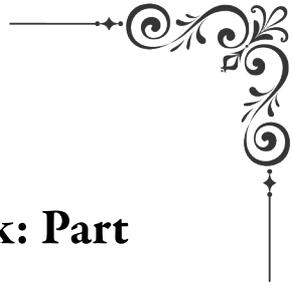
‘I’m sorry.’

She looked up.

He was gazing hard through the window, a muscle in his jaw ticking, his long hair sticking to the sweat on his broad back. ‘I am your lord and master. It is my job to protect you, and I failed.’

She dared to touch his hand. There was a filth-encrusted bandage wrapped around his wrist. Another injury, and infected by the smell of it. If he wasn’t careful, he would lose that hand too.

He grimaced and pulled away. ‘Leave me. Thank you for the food.’



The Crippled Hawk: Part 2

Fera returned the next two mornings, staying only a few minutes to set down his tray. He no longer shouted when she opened the curtains but he didn't talk to her either. Still, she looked forward to seeing him, even if it were only for a moment and though he cared nothing for her.

On the third morning Henry stopped her at the door. He stooped over her, a thin eyebrow raised over a sunken eye. Fera frowned up at him, expecting trouble.

'Wait a moment,' he said in a croak that echoed though the hall. He disappeared behind a tapestry, returning with a basket filled with bandages, ointments and dressings. He placed it on her tray. 'The physician says he needs his wounds anointed and his bandages changed every day, particularly the one around his wrist. He fears it's infected, but Lord Tyron won't let anyone touch him.' A shadow of sorrow passed over his face as he pushed the door open for her. 'I've known Lord Tyron since he was a boy. Help him.'

Fera nodded, surprised. The door shut behind her, snapping off the light. She set down the tray and opened the curtains. Lord Tyron's breathing changed but he didn't budge. Fera gazed at his bare back, his bronze skin gleaming in the light. She had a host of tasks to complete this morning and Analise would punish her if they weren't done, but she no longer cared. There were more important things. Fera watched Lord Tyron's gentle breaths, quietly admiring the contours of muscle

across his back and shoulders, aching to touch him. She took up the basket of bandages and sat on the edge of his bed.

She felt Lord Tyron stiffen, heard his breath catch. The bed sank as he rolled over. 'What do you think you're doing?'

Fera didn't respond, keeping her back to him.

He sat up with a growl and seized her arm. Fera looked at him with a start. His eyes were bloodshot, his cheeks drawn and his hair hung around his face in a greasy curtain. He dropped his gaze to the basket and tightened his mouth. 'You presume too much. I want you to leave.'

Fera just stared at him, heart thumping in her chest.

He threw her arm away. 'I said, get out!'

When she still didn't move, he leapt to his feet with a roar. Fera sat frozen, head bowed, as he went about destroying his room: punching walls, tipping over furniture, throwing things. The stench of old urine stung her nose as his chamber pot hit the floor with a crash.

The door opened ajar. 'Lord Tyron?' came Henry's small voice.

'Out, old man!' The door clicked shut. Lord Tyron turned on Fera, his eyes flashing. 'And you!' Fera reeled back as he loomed over her, pushing his face so close to hers she could feel his hot breath against her face. 'See what I've become? Nobody should have dealings with me. I can't fight. I can barely even pull up my pants. Much less run a kingdom.' Straightening, he swung around his stump, glaring at it in disgust. 'Look at this! Nobody should live like this. I should have died out on that field like a proper knight. Not left to live the life of a cripple.' He spat on the floor. 'I've become everything I hate—half a man.'

Fera glared up at him, tears swelling in her eyes. Is that what he thought of her? Half a person? She had lost a part of herself. Did he hate her too? Bandages rolled across the floor as she sprang to her feet. She jabbed her finger into his chest, then tugged down her scarf so he could see her scar. She gasped and coughed and made strange noises in her throat as she tried to vent her outrage.

How dare he! Self-pity, self-loathing, self-indulgence—she had never had the luxury. Nobody cared that she woke up sweating and crying. Nobody cared that she had been raped so brutally she still ached deep inside. Nobody cared that her parents had been murdered right in front of her eyes or how she struggled day in and day out to survive. He lost an arm? She had lost her whole life!

Fera bared her teeth, fists clenched at her side as her fury washed over her in waves. Lords! They knew nothing.

Lord Tyron stared at her, aghast, speechless that she should dare to be so forward. No matter how hard Fera tried she would never make him understand, she could never make anybody understand, and it infuriated her. She would have given anything to get her voice back and shout out her pain to the rooftops, even her right arm.

She turned on her heel and stormed out.

Fera threw herself into her duties, but her fury didn't last long and all too soon regret and fear ate a hole in her guts. By late morning her stomach had knotted into an anxious ball. What had she done? She had overstepped her place. What would Lord Tyron do? Would he throw her out? Would he punish her? She should go back and bow her head in apology like the good submissive servant she had always been.

Fera hunched low, bunching her shoulders tightly against her neck as she scrubbed the floor. *No. Just don't see him again. Keep yourself hidden away. Work hard with your head down, arse up and hopefully it'll all be forgotten.*

But it wasn't to be. It was three days later when Lord Tyron sought her out. It was a warm sunny day, the keep filled with the noise of servants hard at work: barrows rattled along the cobblestones, horses whickered and stomped in the stables, there was the murmur of low conversation as men and women crossed the courtyard. Bees buzzed from blossom to blossom in the keep's garden as Fera pushed through the bushes, searching for strawberries.

‘Miss Fera,’ came Henry’s croak. Fera started, dropping her basket. Strawberries rolled everywhere. Red-faced, she hastily bent to pick them up. ‘Leave them. Lord Tyron wants to see you.’

Trembling, Fera followed the old manservant up the stairs, head lowered as she gazed at his heels. This was it. Lord Tyron would throw her out for sure. Panicked thoughts chased each other in a circle in her head: where to live, how to earn money, who to trust. How would she survive?

Glimpsing the room as she entered, she folded her hands respectfully in front of her and bowed her head. Henry pulled the door closed behind her. The room was so different she almost hadn’t recognised it. Light reached the darkened corners, the floor had been scrubbed and all the broken furniture had been replaced, polished and new. The big four-poster was neatly made with new satin sheets. And the smell was gone.

‘Fera,’ came Lord Tyron’s voice. She looked up, startled. *He knows my name.* He was standing by the window, looking out, silhouetted against the light. ‘Fera Louise Catrell. Daughter to Frederick and Louise Catrell. Farmers.’ He turned to face her. Her heart skipped a beat. It was the Lord Tyron she had fallen in love with: strong, beautiful, regal. He had bathed and shaved and was fully dressed in a velvet tunic and a pair of beige britches, the ends tucked into his leather boots. The end of his right sleeve had been tied neatly around his stump. His hair was washed and combed and hung in curls over his shoulders. His green eyes gleamed into hers. ‘Both her parents murdered by the barbarians,’ he continued. ‘She, herself, raped and tortured and left for dead, her throat slit from ear to ear, so deep nobody thought she’d live. Come to Appelwhite Keep for refuge.’ Fera stood frozen, not knowing what to say. There was nothing she could say. He lifted an eyebrow. ‘Surprised? Didn’t think I would care to find out who you were?’ The corner of his mouth twitched, threatening a smile. ‘The block-headed slattern who dared disobey me?’

He left the window and approached her. Fera looked up at him. He was smiling at her—and it was beautiful. Heat swept up from the soles of her feet to the top of her head. Her knees buckled. The room spun. Then he put his hand on her shoulder and it took all her effort to keep upright.

‘I was a weak fool,’ he said. ‘And I’m sorry.’ She gazed into his eyes, unable to look away. His hand was so big and warm and it sent little zaps of wonderfulness through her body. ‘No longer will you be scrubbing floors and pots and pans. Now you will be relegated to the great hall, tending to myself and my men, and of course any Lady who should visit these parts. You will also earn a wage and no longer sleep with the rest of the servants. You’ll have your own room.’ He released her. ‘What do you say to that?’

Fera opened her mouth, shut it. It was all so overwhelming. For a moment she was at a loss at how to respond, her mind whirling. She dipped into a low curtsy. Lord Tyron laughed and Fera’s heart pounded at the sound of it. She smiled back.

Her room was a level below Lord Tyron and his knights and on the other side of the keep. It was basic, little more than a nook with no door, but for the first time in her life she had privacy and it was Lord Tyron’s gift. She no longer had to deal with Cook Weira or Analise. Now she answered to Henry. Every day she tended to Lord Tyron, cleaning his room, drawing his bath and when she served him meals he would always look at her and smile.

But rarely anything more than that.

Like a good lord and gentleman, he kept her at arm’s length. Only once did he meet her in the garden for a brief chat, to see how she was faring and if she was enjoying her new quarters. She could feel the other servants’ eyes on her as they strolled together. She heard their whisperings, knew the rumours; it wasn’t proper for a simple maid to be treated so familiarly by a lord. Fera ignored them. *Let them be jealous.*

As she gazed up at him amid the flowers, her heart swollen to bursting, she couldn't help but feel a little heartsick. Didn't he care for her at all?

'What's wrong?' he said, frowning, his hair gleaming in the sunlight. 'You look a little sad.'

Fera shrugged and turned her head, willing herself not to cry.

Lord Tyron watched her a moment, then took her chin, forcing her to look up at him. He gazed down on her, his eyes dark as he stroked her cheek with his thumb. 'The last thing I want is for you to be sad.' And he kissed her on the forehead.

Later that night Fera sat on her pallet, touching her cheek where he touched her, touching her forehead where he kissed her. She felt so hot and agitated. Fire blazed between her legs, her breasts ached. She couldn't take anymore!

Dressed in only her shift, she slipped on her shoes and padded lightly through the keep. It was dark and quiet, most asleep except for the guards patrolling the walls. It was a big castle and she climbed several stairwells and passed innumerable doors. Grabbing at her arms, she picked up her pace, anxious she might be discovered.

She stared at Lord Tyron's door, trembling, heart pounding so hard she found it difficult to breathe. At least she was alone. Henry no longer sat at his door. With Lord Tyron well again he no longer needed to be at his master's beck and call.

Fera pushed the door open, wincing as it creaked, and slipped inside. Moonlight streamed through the open window, though she had no need of the light, knowing his room too well. She tiptoed over and stood beside his bed. She held herself more tightly, gazing at his still figure. He was so close, she tingled all over. Even the sound of his breathing filled her with heat.

She teetered with indecision, filled with terror, desire, anticipation. Finally, she released a shuddering breath and slipped between his sheets.

Lord Tyron rolled over and Fera froze, staring at him wide-eyed. 'It's about time,' he told her.

Pulling her into his arms, he kissed her, and Fera could have wept at the joy she felt. Cupping her cheek, he rolled on top of her. She was nervous at first, the memory of her abuse rising quickly to the surface, turning her insides cold. But he was tender and slow as he gazed deeply into her eyes, checking she was all right at every thrust. He murmured quietly in her ear, words of love and comfort and sweetness until she felt so utterly safe she clung to him.

Afterwards, they held each other close, his arm wrapped tightly around her. Fera gazed into the moonlight, hoping it would never end.

She saw him every night for the next five nights. Usually they would make love, but sometimes they would simply hold each other, their skin bright in the moonlight, as they lay in each other's arms. He was a beautiful man, kind and gentle, and his stump never bothered her. Though it still bothered him. Sometimes she caught him staring at it when he thought she was asleep, moving it up and down, a frown on his handsome face.

She was supposed to escape back to her quarters before first light, but on one particular morning she slept in. She woke with a start, hurried to get dressed, then paused, noticing the basket of bandages sitting on his table.

'What is it?' Lord Tyron yawned, rubbing at his head.

Though Lord Tyron was comfortable being naked around Fera, for some reason he never let her see his wounds. Fera picked up a bandage and gestured at his stump.

Lord Tyron shook his head. 'No.'

Fera shrugged at him.

'Because I don't want you to see.' He threw off his blanket and pulled on his britches. 'Henry dresses them for me.'

Fera went over and helped him with his buttons. When she was done she looked up at him, hands on her hips and tapping her foot. He

tightened his lips, the corner of his mouth lifting, then rubbed his face irritably. 'Fine. But be quick about it.'

He sat on the edge of the bed and let her unwrap his stump, face turned aside. The bandage fell away, revealing the wrinkled, puckered skin. It wasn't pretty but it was pink and healthy looking and Fera lovingly rubbed in the ointment before rebandaging it as best she could. Next, she turned to his wrist. Fera frowned as she undressed it. The wrapping stuck to the wound and she wrinkled her nose at the stink. What she revealed made her heart lurch. She looked up at him fearfully.

'Have no fear. It is infected, yes, but the physician said it should pass if it's washed and soaked in the ointment every day. Best leave that one for Henry. He knows what to do.'

Fera nodded but couldn't ignore the anxious knot in her stomach.

Though they did their best to keep their relationship secret, the rumours quickly began to build, and Fera soon found herself at the centre of attention. How could she not be? An affair between a lord and a scullery maid was a juicy scandal. The other servants would whisper as she went about her chores. Whenever she needed to deal with Cook Weira, the woman would look at her funny and never dared to threaten her with the wooden spoon again.

Once, Analise stopped her in the stairwell.

'I know about you and Lord Tyron,' she hissed.

Fera shrugged. *And?*

Analise shook her head in disgust. 'You're just a plaything for my lord while he's recovering. You, a mute, plain and despoiled. Just you wait, once he's stronger he'll find a better woman and toss you aside like dirty bathwater.'

Fera merely gave a gasping laugh: *you, you mean?* And the head maid left with a scowl.

What the servants thought or said didn't matter to her, but sometimes Lord Tyron's men would eye her curiously where once they had

ignored her. That made her nervous. Did they speak to their lord about it? If they did, he didn't show it. He was never reluctant to smile at her when she served in the great hall and was just as passionate a lover as ever, his bed always waiting for her at night.

Despite the building tension in the castle, Fera was happy. Not since the death of her parents had anyone treated her so kindly or loved her so deeply—and he loved her deeply, Fera could tell. Analise was wrong. It was so much more than sex. She could see it in his eyes, could feel it in the way he touched her, hear it in the gentleness of his voice.

At least, she had to believe it.

Then one day Lord Tyron fell ill. As usual, she was walking through the great hall carrying his breakfast, when Sir Chaprey stopped her at the door. Henry stood beside him, looking grim.

'You cannot enter. Lord Tyron is in a bad way.'

They all turned at a bellow. Fera dropped her tray, dishes smashing against the floor. She threw herself at the door but Sir Chaprey caught her before she could crash through.

'There's nothing you can do. His other arm has taken the rot.' She struggled against him, gasping and grunting, but he simply held her tighter until she stilled in his arms. 'I know who you are, and I know you love him, but the best thing you can do for him now is pray.'

So she did. Throughout the day and between her tasks she would get on her knees and clasp her hands together. She saw the other servants doing it too. The castle was quiet, the servants pale, his knights downcast. But Fera kept hope he would be well.

He had to be.

When darkness fell she went to see him. The door creaked as she pushed it open. Henry woke in his chair, blinking rapidly at the sight of her. Fera paused, thinking he would stop her. But he didn't, giving her a nod and turning away. The door clicked shut behind her. It was pitch black, the curtains drawn tight again. She went to the window

and opened them. The air was cool against her face and the moon so bright she was forced to squint.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’ came a hiss. ‘I said *no one* is to see me. Especially you.’

Fera froze, gazing at him, not at the stump of his right arm, not at the stump of his left hand, but directly in his eyes. They were black against the moonlight, filled with sorrow and rage.

‘Get out,’ he growled. She shook her head. ‘Get out. Get out! GET OUT. GET OUT. *GET OUT!*’

Fera approached his bed, unfazed. He wasn’t angry, he was in pain. *And I am here for you*, she wanted to tell him. *Here to love you and hold you and grieve with you*. There were so many things she wanted to say, so many things she couldn’t say. Nobody understood his agony like she did. Her hands ached, her heart lurched. How badly she wanted to touch him, to hold his face and kiss the tears on his cheeks, to curl up against him and let him weep into her hair.

He sat up. ‘Where’s Henry? Henry! Get this woman out of here!’

But his manservant didn’t answer and Fera crawled up onto the bed beside him. Exhausted, Lord Tyron sprawled onto his back, flinging out his stumps. He was panting, his skin slick with sweat. The bandage around the stump of his wrist was dark with blood. Tears glinted on his cheeks.

‘Look at me,’ he gasped. ‘I’m not even half a man anymore. I’m disgusting. Keep away. You don’t want me now.’

But Fera didn’t listen. If anything, she wanted him more than ever, but how could she tell him that? Kneeling close to his side, she gently took his face. He looked up at her, eyes shining as more tears streamed down his cheeks. She stroked the stubble on his chin, ran her fingers through his hair.

‘Leave me, Fera. Find yourself a real—’

Fera silenced him with a kiss. And it wasn’t a kiss of pity—but of passion, a kiss no *man* could refuse, especially a man like Lord Tyron.

His lips quivered and they were wet with the salt of his tears, but they were soft and wonderful and hungry against hers.

She pulled away, their lips still brushing. Lord Tyron was silent, panting lightly against her cheek, wide-eyed and astonished. Fera kissed him on the forehead just like he had kissed her in the garden, then lay down beside him, curling into him and pulling his arm gently around her. Lord Tyron didn't resist, holding her tightly against him, his wet face pressed deep into her hair.

They stayed that way through the night, saying nothing, neither budging, enjoying each other's touch, not even when dawn's light blazed hotly against Fera's back. Birds chirped outside. A cart rattled against the cobblestones. There was a burst of laughter. And still Fera and Lord Tyron held each other. Then Lord Tyron stirred, gently pulling away, and Fera saw that his eyes were bright again, as green as a forest lake. He smiled at her, and Fera smiled back.



LORD TYRON CANTERED into Appelwhite Keep, his arm curled around Sir Chaprey's waist as he sat mounted behind him. It had been weeks since he had left home to attend his sister's wedding and he had ached to return the whole time. It wasn't easy leaving those he loved behind for so long.

Lord Tyron slipped from his horse before anyone had a chance to offer to help him dismount. He was getting used to it now. He didn't really need his arms all that much. His two legs were sufficient, at least for getting down. Mounting was another matter, but he didn't let the thought bother him. Very little bothered him anymore. There was too much to be excited about.

'Lord Tyron—!' Henry called after him as he raced up the stairwell. Servants squashed themselves against the walls as he took the steps two, sometimes three, at a time.

Three weeks was far too long to be away. He loved his sister, but he wanted so badly to stay home. It wasn't fair he should be taken away so soon, but duty called and after all the drama surrounding his and Fera's relationship, he had no choice but to go. It was either that or face his father's wrath. He was already on the brink of losing his land. No lord openly took a commoner as his partner. It was one of his duties to marry a lady with good connections.

But that would never happen. Appelwhite Keep, or no.

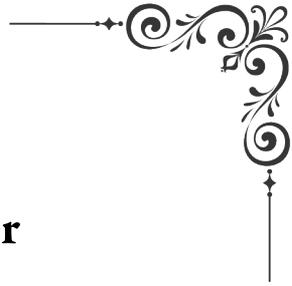
He threw open his bedroom door. 'How is she?' he demanded, striding inside.

Fera looked up with a grin, and Lord Tyron's heart leapt into his throat. She was aglow in the sunlight pouring through the window, eyes bright, hair gleaming, so happy she showed all her teeth. Then he lowered his eyes and his heart beat furiously.

Little Marigold squirmed in her arms, only five weeks old and already more beautiful than all the gold in the land, lovelier than all his possessions, even more valuable than Appelwhite Keep. He dropped to his knees before Fera and curled what was left of his left arm around the squirming bundle. As Lord Tyron gazed into the bright blue eyes of his daughter, he had never wished more than to have his hands back, to brush his fingers against her face. He found himself wishing for that simple touch more than anything in the world.

He couldn't understand how something so perfect could arise from such two broken people. How in a world filled with so much turmoil and sorrow and darkness, she could bring so much light.

'My little miracle,' he whispered, kissing her on the cheek.



Black Thunder

‘**R**escued 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 tightly 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, 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.

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 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.'



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 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 flawlessly 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.

Don't miss out!

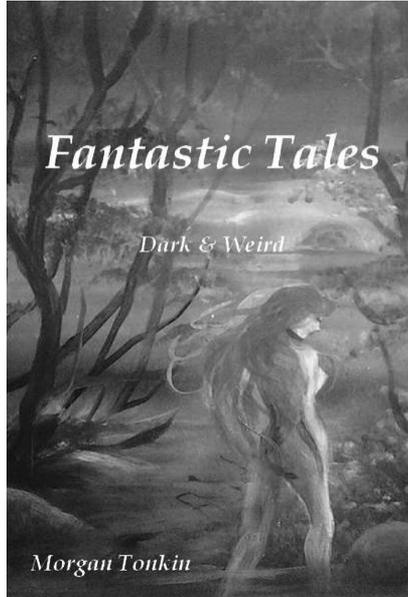
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