

“And Iron is Very Brittle” by Sarann Spiegel

For Stella.

“For he comes, the human child,
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than he can understand.”

— William Butler Yeats, “The Stolen Child”

“Did you hear?”

“Hear what?”

“The Knight of Spring, he’s come to the Wilds!”

A pixie, perched on a rose blossom, turned to the goblin beside her. He gnawed anxiously at a stick, peeling bark off with hole-ridden teeth. “The Knight of Spring?” She knew more than she liked of this knight. Because their grove was near the border of Spring and Summer, they overheard news from the newsworthy themselves and spread the word so quick that reputations arrived at destinations before those boasting them. Willie traveled faster than sound. Few could compete with that.

The goblin smiled with green chapped lips. “The dryads told me,” he said, and as if on cue, a wind whistled high through the trees, rustling their branches. All together, they sounded like whispering voices. *He comes, he comes, he comes...*

The pixie’s crepe-colored lips pursed delicately, flower-like. “Did the dryads tell you whether we will benefit from his visit?” Most stories spun about the knight were contradictory. He rebuilt fae communities decimated by an influx of falling iron, he slayed the Selkie Queen and all of her children. He was a hob, a banshee, a redcap, a changeling. He was human, mortal, fragile, fallible. He blessed fae with children using forgotten rituals and herbs. He impregnated fae and cut the babies from their wombs, slicing stomachs and throats indiscriminately. The fae could not lie, yes, but spread truths thin enough and they changed form, like a tree leaf folded into a small sailboat for evening trips down the creek.

Cursebreaker, cursebreaker, cursebreaker, the trees hissed. Their voices sent chills up the pixie’s spine, causing her to slip off the rose. The goblin caught her in his clawed fist. He held her tight, leered down at her with that scraggly face.

“Release me,” the pixie said. She tried to sound demanding, but being held captive made that slightly difficult.

He leaned in close, lips brushing the iridescent hair dusting her skull. “What if...”

“Goblin.” She knew not of his name, he knew not of hers — despite living by the same creek for almost a century now and their relationship’s resemblance to that of friends, neither was foolish enough to *trust* the other. Trust was not a word familiar to their lexicons. “Release me this instant!”

He glanced sideways at the tangled bushes of yellow coltsfoot. The flowers shimmered in the sunlight, wet with dew.

“No one will suspect,” the pixie said. “No one knows.”

Cursebreaker, cursebreaker, cursebreaker.

“The trees know,” the goblin said. The trees weren’t quite *one*. They were many. “So the woods know. The Wilds may know soon enough.”

The pixie shook her little head; it rang delicately, like a bell. “Eating me will not mean their ignorance, Goblin. Now release me or I will put you in a bush, too.”

He set her back on the rose blossom. She scoffed in disgust, leaped into flight towards the creek. She’d be washing his filth off for days. “Keep your rotting mouth shut, you beast. We took an eye for the many lost. If the king gets word, he will try her for her crimes and she will hang and the revelers will laugh and knock her body about. You have done nothing to deserve his attention.”

Spring comes, he comes, he comes.

“Are you quite sure? We could have told him to begin with, rather than-”

“We thought we might save him the trouble.” She smiled. “That is what we can say.”

“And the knight?”

He comes, he comes, he comes.

“If I say nothing, and you say nothing, who will say anything? The bush?”

The coltsfoot bush shook as if in anticipation.

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Judith’s back ached. She tried to shift, but the branches bit down, threatening to cut off her circulation. Thirteen days passed since the pixie trapped her here. The goblin’s beefy hands held her down and covered her screaming mouth as she thrashed while the pixie put the curse in place. Whoever taught the pixie to build curses would face Judith’s wrath soon enough — perhaps a human witch tried to empower someone they perceived as helpless. That was the thing about humans: Their moral superiority. Fae didn’t fret over morals until a human wandered too

close and declared them lacking. Faeries operated on desire, greed, and vengeance. One did not take a puzzle piece from another box and force it into the one they struggled with — you solved the thing by using what you had. Morals did not fit. When Mother Mab ruled, faeries ran amok and led humans astray and rivers ran red with blood. Then Mab went and fell in love with that Bill fellow, and a glorious disarray came upon them, and then someone suggested kings and queens and courts (an idea they got from *humans*), and then came the smothering. Judith almost preferred her flower prison. She would, anyway, if she could lay on her side every so often without being strangled to death.

The trees began to whisper two nights ago, prattling on about the Knight of Spring. Judith retroactively thanked her father for demanding she study every tongue in use and those long-forgotten. She remembered little more than the common niceties and curse words of most, for she got the most practice with someone other than her tutor Micah at balls and political soirées. Micah was fluent in most fae languages, specializing in dryad dialects. “Few faeries care to understand the voices of the trees,” he told her often. “They hear the rustling leaves and accept it as noise. But trees are the most populous species in all of Faerie by a wide margin. Dryads outnumber the populations of almost every other species *combined*. We are fools to not know their language intimately. They bear witness to more than you could possibly imagine. If your father knew their tongue, he would not just have taken the Summer Court — he could have taken them all. He could have been Mab’s successor.” Micah’s worldview blurred the lines of sense and fantasy, but his statistics did not err; the trees were dense. Judith took to the dryad tongue quickly, immersed as she was in their world. The goblin knew a little as well. He heard the discussions of the knight, he understood the summoning of the “cursebreaker.” All of that meant little, however, if the pixie was rather clueless. She headed this whole operation.

Judith understood. She listened close (not that there was much else to do) and learned the Knight of Spring was only a few hours out. Which meant only a few more hours of being wrapped in these stupid coltsfoot branches. Early on, rather desperately, she ate a single petal. Her mouth recalled the sour tang that soaked into her tastebuds. She spat it out, teeth scraping against her tongue. Micah would shake his head and say, *How many times did we memorize common poisons?* Judith wondered if her mistake made his corpse roll in its grave. If it did, well, at least his corpse could roll.

In the distance, Judith heard the thumping and rustling of someone walking through the brush, along with the slight squealing of metal. She grinned. She didn’t know how the knight survived this long with a loud suit of armor, but she considered herself lucky. Slowly, she slid her hands up towards her chest, settling them around two thick branches. Gritting her teeth, she shook the branches three times. A thorn pierced her skin, pushed through green flesh.

Another squeal — the knight turning his head?

“Help!” she cried. A flower tried to sneak its head inside her lips, but her hand was close enough that she managed to grab it and break it off. The bush howled, continued to squeeze and strangle, unrelenting. Branches and thorns dug in, peeling skin from flesh and threatening to move towards bone. Judith couldn’t help her agonized scream. “Help! By Mab, help! This bush will kill me!” If her whole body wasn’t pulsing, she would consider the stupidity of her situation. Maybe later. If she lived. “Help!”

Clanking steps thundered through the trees, followed by the telltale swish of a sword coming unsheathed. A flower brushed the shell of Judith’s pointed ear and dove inside.

“Fucking pixie,” she said, tasting fresh poison on her tongue. “Fucking goblin,” she said around the yellow blossom.

The sword stuck the bush so hard it shook. The flowers paused in their invasion of Judith, providing a moment of respite. The sword struck again. Coltsfoot blossoms turned to each other, considering, and then resumed strangling. The sword struck; the branches tightened in response.

“Not- working-” Judith choked out.

“This is a curse, isn’t it?” His voice was- no, Judith didn’t have time for this. “Is this a curse?”

She tried to push the flowers out of her mouth with her tongue, but they reached down further and further. She coughed out as best she could: “Clear-ly.”

“Okay.” He sheathed his sword. *He sheathed his sword?* And then the sound of another sword coming free, a metallic *thwip* ringing in the air, reverberating like applause.

Cursebreaker, cursebreaker, cursebreaker.

This new sword did not strike the bush — it sliced right through it, strangling branches falling away as frail stems. Judith inhaled sharply. The knight’s sword stopped just above her heart, metal edge of the glass blade glinting in the afternoon sun.

She looked up at the knight’s face, covered by his visor. A beautiful purple plume erupted from his helmet and quivered in the breeze. “Cursebreaker,” she said. The trees were not referring to the knight but to the sword he carried. Fascinating.

“No,” the knight said, sheathing the glass sword. Few blades so glorious were molded from such fragile material. Who designed it, who welded it, and what fool gave it to this human to wield? “I can’t break curses. Only the caster can do that.”

Judith sat up. “I imagine you freeing me from those wretched flowers means the curse is broken. Sir,” she tacked on, belatedly remembering her manners.

“I didn’t break the curse, I bent it.”

“Meaning what?” She need not have asked, because just then, the withered coltsfeet melted into a terrible sludge and snuck up onto her person. She screamed, “Get it off, get it off!” but the knight watched, transfixed. The sludge inched, like a caterpillar but five hundred times

faster, along her bruised and bloodied green flesh, and settled on her hands. She swiped at it, rubbed it off against her now-tattered dress. The sludge came off easily. Judith breathed a sigh of relief, pressed a hand against her heaving chest. “By Mab.”

“Um,” the knight said.

“What? What is it?” Judith looked down. Where she wasn’t bleeding, she was caked with mud. Her gorgeous ivory slip with cream lacing was shredded, gaps revealing more black bruises and a forest green nipple. For a moment Judith believed the knight to be referring to this “impropriety,” as he was human, and she mentally prepared a speech about how majority of the fae were naked a majority of the time.

Her eyes caught on her hands.

Free of sludge, but not free of its stain. From the tips of her fingers to the balled joint of her wrist, her skin had turned a deep, deep red, like she’d dipped her hands in a pool of mortal blood.

Judith was out of shrieks to shriek. She could only stare at her once-glorious flesh, marred by whatever curse that beastly pixie placed on her.

“See?” The knight’s armor creaked. “Not broken, just bent.”

She wouldn’t be proud of it later, but gazing at her crimson hands, Judith wept.

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The knight poked with his curse-bending sword at the small fire he’d started by rubbing talkative twigs together. Judith sat off to the side, hoping her glare would earn a mean comment from her newfound companion. Immediately following her bout of tears (the knight had tilted his head and said, *There there*), she searched for the pixie and goblin, ready to clutch their throats and thump them into eternity. She mistakenly muttered her violent fantasies aloud. The knight followed so closely that the silver toes of his sabatons sometimes brushed her heels, stinging slightly, and once it became clear to him that she intended to commit murderous acts, he slung her across his royal steed’s saddle. “I can’t let you murder anyone on my watch, miss,” he said. His voice was husky, designed for late-night murmuring. “And you need to cool off.” So he took her to his camp and she watched, sun setting, as he set up a tent, started a fire, and fed baby mice to his horse that looked a lot like a kelpie Judith had a fling with a few centuries ago. When kelpies faced royal punishment, most were forced to serve as a steed until deemed fit for society. Whoever this kelpie was, Judith wondered what they did to become the Knight of Spring’s slave.

“If I knew you were going to hold me captive, I would have thought twice before asking you to break my curse,” she spat, curled in a ball away from the fire. As a princess, she trained in the art of sulking. Some would deem her skills equal to those of a grandmaster. While the knight

built the fire, she had bathed a few feet away in the creek, scrubbing at blood and dirt. The knight did not glance over once. He apparently took the chivalry thing seriously. She returned and threw her destroyed dress in the newborn flames, smiling innocently when the knight looked up. His purple plume stood up straight. She wished she had seen his expression. How was one to know if they were being effectively bothersome without witnessing the reaction? Instead of commenting, he went to the kelpie and searched in the saddlebags strapped to its sides. He removed something and threw it at her. She spluttered, unfolding the ammo to reveal what Judith believed to be a... *tea shirt*? It was grey with a few small holes, faded letters reading, "NIRVANA," and an equally faded and disgusting fleshy angel. She frowned at the knight, imagined him smiling challengingly at her. His plume wiggled. She put it on. The thing was so large that the hem almost brushed her knees.

The knight sheathed his sword. "You can go whenever you want, lady," he said. He plopped down by the fire, silver tassels clanging against the silver on his thighs. "Do you want any food before you go?"

Judith's stomach grumbled. Hunger twisted through her body — the true curse had been the inability to eat. "How could anything delectable possibly exist in that travel bag of yours?"

Again, she thought he smiled, unsure why she felt so certain. "I have fruit, pies, and soup, m'lady." Every time he addressed her, he used a more asinine term: First miss, then lady, now *m'lady*. She scowled, and he scoff-laughed inside his helmet.

She lifted her chin. "Pie does not sound so terrible." It sounded quite delectable, actually.

"I'd have to agree, madam."

She turned on him with dead eyes, and he laughed properly now, from deep in his gut. "You're a bastard," she said as he stood to collect the pies.

"I actually think you're right on that count." And then his silver back was to her, reflecting the sliver of moonlight visible in the clearing. He clanked with every step. Judith stayed silent as he went, returned, and reheated the pies above the fire. She pursed her lips when he offered her one. They were rather small for pies, meant to be eaten alone. Hers was pumpkin, his blackberry. She dove in with her hands. He chuckled, said, "Worried you hurt my feelings?"

Spitting pumpkin purée chunks: "Faeries do not care for lowly mortal emotions."

The knight shrugged. "You're so sure I'm mortal?" He opened a small hatch below his visor, a little metal door perfectly sized for his fork to sneak through.

"Are you not?" *You speak like one.*

"I am, but I've heard the rumors." He turned to gaze at her. "You sure you don't care?"

She would not feel remorse for declaring him annoying. It should not matter if he was actually a bastard, left to be raised by his mother alone, his father not there to say he deserved a beautiful future full of freedom and bliss. She swallowed some pie, a sharp edge of crust slicing

down her throat. “Rumors like the one about you fucking fae women, impregnating them, and then killing them and the unborn child? That one is rather gruesome. Is it true?”

He shook his creaky head. “I don’t know who started that one. I couldn’t impregnate anyone if I tried.”

“Did the Spring King cut your penis off?” she asked, and the knight choked on his pie. “It is a rather archaic operation, but some say it is still done.”

Coughing, he said, “Something like that, I guess.”

The vague nature of this answer — *something like that* — made her frown. He did not have to tell her the truth; it was not part of his nature like it was hers. Anything he said thus far could be entirely false. He might not be a bastard. He could have a family wealthy in both love and money and have only said he was a bastard to try and guilt her. She would not feel guilty. She lived this long without feeling guilty before, why would it get to her now?

More worryingly, perhaps she could not go whenever she pleased. If she tried to turn and run now, he might chase after her, tie her up, and sell her to the king as a slave for her crimes.

She finished her pie in silence. The knight, reading her mood, did not make any more efforts toward conversation. He offered her the tent to sleep in. She declined. The fireside was pleasant enough, and she did not want to take anything more from the knight. Taking the pie was foolish enough — was it poisoned? She would not sleep in his enclosed tent. He could snatch it (and her) up, leaving her at his mercy. No, she would sleep by the fire and consider her options.

She could run off and try to make it out of the Wilds, she could hunt down the pixie and make her pay, she could kill the knight somehow and steal his identity. Murder would be easy with the Spring King’s name on her side — though she’d do a poor job of answering questions. And at being a knight. There was always the option of returning home to her brother’s rule, her dying father’s bedside, and her mother’s grave. She could be a princess again, wear silk dresses spun by the finest spider tailors, fuck visiting lords and ladies under the Summer sun. Maybe drown human wanderers in the Sea of Memories. She could return to the monotony, the manners, the misery. She would be glad to see Aubrielle, to hold her in red hands until her sister pinched herself free. Col would shove Judith underwater and bully her into confessing why she skipped his coronation. No, Summer was not the answer. Quietly suffering Col’s temper tantrums was standard practice. Judith could not bear whatever Aubrielle would say about her curse. *You did always reek of death*. She hadn’t seen either of them in decades. Not since Emmett’s ashes danced in the wind and Aubrielle asked, *Why didn’t you do more, why didn’t you try to stop him, how could you let this happen?* Judith did not answer. Leaving was sufficient.

In the morning, upon seeing Judith laying awake by the long-dead fire, the knight said, “I’m going further into the Wilds to get something for the king. To the Witches Three. You’re

welcome to join.” With a light slap, his tent folded into a small square that he tucked under his arm.

Judith pressed a red finger to the lingering ashes. The grey dust was dull against her skin. Some specks drifted away when she blew on them; she had to rub off the few that’d wedged into the ridges of her skin. Emmett’s ashes swirled among sand and silt at the bottom of the sea. She recalled his smile, nausea curling in her gut. “I will,” she said, and that was that.

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The Witches Three were older than the Wilds. Some believed they were the Fates incarnate, and that an ill-timed visit to them meant your eternal life cut short. Others said they were Mab’s siblings, born with the old Faerie Queen at the dawn of time, who chose to live on the sidelines rather than make merry with their sister. Judith, despite her long, long life, never dared to meet them. Her mother recounted tales of their exploits while running green fingers through Judith’s ginger hair. Masters of ancient magic and everything since, the Witches Three were not to be trifled with. Those who misstepped in their presence ended up frogs that could only un-frog after consuming a horsefly kissed by Mab or something similarly impossible. Worst of all were their prophecies. With one glance, the Witches Three could see your whole life, tug on the thread and topple you by delivering a deceptively simple warning. You’d spend the rest of your days wondering, *Is this the moment? Is this the moment?* that you wouldn’t notice the moment passed.

The knight, who gallantly offered up his steed for Judith to ride, trod slowly beside the kelpie through the brush. Every so often, he used his sword to cut away low-hanging branches and grimaced when they squealed. “You’re telling me every reason to be afraid of them,” he said during a pause in her long-winded rambling regarding their destination. “And yet you’re here.” He looked up at her, and through the visor, she glimpsed eyes the color of chestnuts before you popped them open and ate them up.

Judith tucked the short length of her hair behind her ears — it was just getting long enough for her to do so — and tousled her little bit of fringe. She had no intention of telling him that few better options had presented themselves. By his side she had free food, a fire, and someone to annoy when she got antsy. She would stick with him until she came up with something better. “I have seen a lot in my time, but never the Witches Three. Why not finally get a glimpse?”

“Fair enough.” He pulled on the kelpie’s reins, forcing them to a stop. “I need a break. And to talk to my horse.”

Judith shrugged. “Fine.”

He cleared his throat.

“Are you dismissing me?” A smirk played at the corners of her mouth. She wondered what it would take to make this knight tick and if she had time enough to find out.

“For, like, fifteen minutes, yes.”

Judith rolled her eyes and slid from the saddle, dropping silently to the ground. “I see. I will wander the surrounding area in search of a sharp stick to stab you with.”

“Whatever you wish, m’lady.”

With that, Judith slipped into the trees.

The Wilds got their name not because of the wild ways everything grew (and things did grow wildly) but because it was one of the few relatively anarchic places remaining in Faerie. Under Mab, Faerie was one court. After she disappeared and the realm was quartered, Spring used their sway as direct descendants of the Faerie Queen to lay claim to the land Mab had occupied. They renamed her land the Wilds. The Spring Court had jurisdiction, though few cases made their way into the crown’s hands. Laws were loosely enforced in the region to “honor Mab’s memory.” The last time law came to the Wilds was almost thirty years ago. The Spring King’s intervention shook up the Summer Court’s post-coital conversation, which was a real blow, and not in a good way. Whoever had done the wretched thing was sentenced to servitude. Judith herself could not remember the crime, only the sheer publicity of the whole debacle.

After a quick bout of urination, Judith went looking for a sharp stick. While she did not intend to retrieve one when she made the joke, and although she knew the stick would not fare well against the knight’s armor, she could not think of any other way to pass the remaining ten or so minutes. She parted bushes and crawled around, reaching blindly for something stabby.

Something rustled a few yards over. Judith glanced in the direction of the sound, brow drawn when nothing revealed itself. Pushing to her feet, she walked toward the rustling, big toe catching on a protruding tree root.

Judith fell face first into the dirt. “I loathe this day with every fiber of my being,” she said to the fire ant crawling beside her nose.

“Watch your step, dearie.”

Jolting, Judith looked up to see the sniffing wet nose of a doe. The doe’s round, swirling eyes blinked once, twice, thrice, and her foot stamped the earth where Judith’s head previously laid. The fire ant cried softly, and then a cool breeze whisked the sound away.

The doe shook her head. “You know not who you walk beside.”

Judith gaped, mouth hanging open. The doe’s eyes swirled and spun, changing color and hue and saturation. Nausea roiled in Judith’s gut.

“Soft hearts make for easy targets,” the doe said. Her voice was that of one million weeping angels. “And iron is very brittle.” The doe turned away, amber body snaking around a thin tree, and leaped into the high grass. Judith saw her lithe figure jump twice, and then nothing.

The wind whistled high through the trees.

Soft heart soft heart soft heart

Judith turned and ran. She moved between tree trunks and over roots with the agility and lightness of a western wind. Floating over grass and rabbit holes, she swiped the dirt from her face and glanced backwards, looking for a doe she knew would not appear.

Rather than slow to a stop, she smashed right into a suit of armor. Arms windmilling, Judith fell backwards, hitting the ground with a dull thud. The skin that touched the knight's armor erupted in painful bubbles. She released an agonizing cry at the searing pain.

The knight bent down to greet her. "That wasn't fifteen minutes, and you're stickless." He clicked his tongue. "Promises, promises."

Judith could not believe he chose this moment to be less than chivalrous. "What in Mab's name is your armor made of?"

"Silver, mostly. And some well-glamoured iron so folks like you don't smell me coming."

Which explained the cooling bubbles and boils on her skin. Iron was one of the few substances fae were vulnerable to (that and salt, hardtack, St John's Wort, and four-leaf clovers. Humans discovered other tricks over the years, like turning their clothes inside out to avoid being led astray). Her poor complexion was suffering jab after blow recently. Judith was lucky she healed quick, otherwise getting back on that horse would be brutal. Imagine the chafing.

"Who managed to *glamour iron*?" Glamours were the most common type of magic fae could perform — a little shift here, a little touch there, and an old boot became a glass slipper. Many attempted to glamour iron in order to wield it against one's enemy, but the sickness was too great and the goal too impractical. Fae magic could not work on the exact substance used to thwart it. Or, it had not worked previously.

"A cohort of human and fae smiths. The Spring King's best, you know."

Judith sighed, pain slowly leaching away. "That should be impossible."

The knight shrugged. "And yet."

"And yet," Judith agreed. "Fuck." Then, remembering a sword slicing through a cursed thicket, and the same sword later prodding at flaming branches, "Is your curse-bending sword also iron?"

"The edges are, yeah. Wrapped around an enchanted glass blade."

"Enchanted as in..."

"Cursed." The knight was definitely smiling now — his teeth clicked together. "It can cut through anything, but it can't destroy anything. It's a curse that's a curse loophole. The blade can slice through a curse—"

"But it fails to break it."

The knight nodded. “No one’s quite figured out how to break a curse they didn’t create. I guess you get yourself into and out of your own messes.” He leaned back. “You okay?”

Pain mostly receded, Judith nodded, then glared. “You should have warned me not to touch you.”

“It’s only an advantage if it’s a secret.”

Judith shakily pushed herself to her feet. She clambered onto the kelpie’s back and pressed her tired face into its soft green mane. “What is your name?” she asked the hair, knotting her fingers in it. She thought of the doe, of *you know not who you walk beside and soft heart soft heart soft heart*. All hearts were soft — it was the nature of the organ — but over the past few centuries, Judith had made an effort to calcify hers. She hated to think that all those years boasted paltry effects.

The knight hummed beside her as he pulled the kelpie into a strut. “Isn’t that a disrespectful question here?” His eyes glinted behind his visor. Names equated to power; if her name fell from his lips, he could order her to do anything he wanted, and she wouldn’t think to fight him. She would simply yield.

“The lady asked for your name, Sir Knight,” the kelpie grumbled. The deep timbre of it shocked Judith into removing her face from the soft hair and barking a laugh. “It would be rude and rather unchivalrous to refuse her.”

The knight laughed, turned to his kelpie and said, “Fucking traitor.”

Judith nodded and returned to the mane. “Indeed, Sir Knight. Or is it...” Her mind grasped blindly at a possible human name. “Lorenzo, perhaps?”

The knight shook his head. “Lorenzo, sure.” As in: *Lorenzo is definitely not my name*.

If he would not let Judith get to know him, she would force both of them into it, starting with this. “Well, *Lorenzo*, onwards. Time is passing and I assume the Spring King wants you back as quickly as you can manage.”

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Judith did not know precisely what she imagined the Witches Three’s house to look like, so as they trod up a hill, Lorenzo pushing branches aside, she was both surprised and unsurprised to see the small cottage at the crest. The building was partially hidden by the weeping willow whose trunk emerged from its center, leafy branches acting as curtains. Through the leaves, Judith glimpsed round windows. Warm yellow light flickered inside. Something spread through her body then: An awareness of age, warmth, and peace. She yearned to step inside, to fall asleep by the hearth and never wake up.

Lorenzo pulled the kelpie to a stop. “This is it,” he said, untangling a knot in the reins. “At least I think it is.”

“It is,” Judith said, stepping off the saddle. The grass was dewy wet, cool under her feet, midday sun hot against her back. “Can you not feel it?” The house thrummed lethargy like a decaying heart.

Come in, the world whispered. *Stay out*, the trees hissed.

Lorenzo busied himself with folding things up, adjusting the bags and goods within. “Maybe it’s because I’m covered in iron, but no.”

“It feels glorious.”

“It looks dangerous. Your eyes are hazy, like you’ve been hypnotized.”

She turned to him slowly — not meaning to, that was only how it happened, body aching with drowsiness. “Do they *really*? That is fascinating.”

Lorenzo shook his head. “Hopefully we’ll be in and out.” He slapped the kelpie’s side, said to it, “I’d invite you in, but I can’t afford having two out of three people down. You understand, surely.”

The kelpie whinnied as if unable to speak. Lorenzo nodded, checked that all his swords were in their proper places at his side, and rounded the kelpie to where Judith stood. “I’ve never been here before but I do know at least one of the women in there. I don’t want you to touch anything or mess with their setup or anything like that, okay? Especially because you’re obviously more vulnerable to it than I am. Be careful, be smart, and if you feel like something’s wrong then tell me. Okay?”

Distantly, Judith took in his words. How could *she* be more vulnerable than *him*? He was the human. *He* was the fallible mortal one, not her. She was born to this place and knew it better than he ever could. What she said, however, blinking slow, was, “Does it get hot under there? Metal *is* a conductor.”

The kelpie snorted.

Lorenzo squinted underneath his visor. “It’s mostly fine.”

“Hm.” She went to poke his breastplate, remembered the bubbles and boils. Luckily, her finger missed him by a wide margin. “Why do you not want to tell me your...” Judith trailed off, trying to listen to the trees’ renewed hissing and humming. Tugging on her earlobes got her nowhere. All she heard was *whishwhishwhishwhishwhish*.

“Let’s go.”

Lorenzo headed for the round door, a glimmering navy blue, swiping away the willow branches as he went. Judith stumbled after him, unfocused. The branches Lorenzo released slapped at her skin. She yipped. Lorenzo did not look back or ask if she was hurt. He reached the door, and mid-knock, Judith said:

“I think there is something wrong-”

The door opened on a small, rotund woman with russet, reddish-brown skin and shimmering golden curls. She peered at them with pale green eyes that made Judith think of her own. Her eyes were green! What exact shade of green? Darker than this woman’s, surely. She reached up to her eyeball with a limp hand, pressed a finger to the soft under-eye skin. This did not help her inquiry much.

“-with me.”

“Good afternoon,” Lorenzo said. The hand behind his back was waving in a gesture Judith would normally understand to mean *keep calm and act normal*. Right now she understood it to mean *my silver is itchy*. “I am one of many humble servants of the Spring King, or the House of Callaghan. I am here to retrieve the tincture one of my cohorts called ahead for.”

The woman’s pale eyes landed on Judith, who straightened. Spine straight, chin up, shoulders back; a reflex from Micah’s Court training. “And who is this?”

“A friend. No one to concern yourself with.”

A dark smile came over the woman’s face. “You’ve concerned yourself with her. You should be careful, child. This world is not meant for you.” She pushed the door open, gestured them inside. “Come in, come in. Careful what you touch.”

“Of course,” Lorenzo said, and through the haze Judith knew he was talking to her.

The cottage was just as small inside as it appeared on the outside. The place was quite round, with wood tables rubbing against ceramic tables rubbing against gold tables. Every spare surface bore cauldrons, vials, caged animals, and books. Cats lingered in the shadows, staring up at Judith with slitted eyes. Thin walkways wove, maze-like, around tables. Lorenzo followed the golden-haired witch through them. He clanked into almost everything he passed by. When he knocked things over, the witch waved a finger, and the object slid black into place. She discussed the tincture as they moved deeper into the cottage.

Judith stayed by the door, trapped by the staring cats.

Another witch appeared on her left. This one was thin as a reed and entirely silver. Face, hair, skin, robe — silver. You could melt them down and turn them to coins. “Do you need help, little one?”

Judith was not little, she was very old. She pressed her hands against the dark blue door in hopes it would ground her. “I actually...” Her mouth moved, but she did not know what shapes it intended on making. “I actually have a question.”

The silver witch nodded. “Ask away and we will see if I have an answer.”

“Well, I...” Her eyes drifted over to Lorenzo, who looked to be listening intently to the swirly-vile-waving golden-haired witch. “I was wondering...” She looked back to the silver witch, whose eyes were wide and curious. “I was put under a curse recently.” Judith held out her

crimson hands. She would ask if the witch could remove such a thing, or once again change the curse's form. Her mouth had other ideas. "And I was hoping you could tell me how curses worked. How I might curse someone." *How I might curse someone?*

The silver witch smiled, revealing silver teeth and a silver tongue. Nodding, hands clasped, they said, "Curses are easy to deliver but quite complicated when you look closely at them. There are a lot of interwoven parts. A curse is almost like an organ in that way. Its purpose is defined by its chemical and biological makeup, and all parts need to be in order to maintain functionality. Are you following, dear?"

Judith nodded.

"All right. So, it seems your curse initially had you trapped in a bush before changing form and staining your hands with the blood of your victims, correct?"

"How- how did you..."

The silver witch's laugh was the twinkling of wind chimes. "The curse you carry is rather irregular. It denotes the caster as unfamiliar with the usual process. The pixie did not learn from a trained sorcerer it seems, but-" the silver witch's hands twirled in the air- "improvised her own. Most curses come in the form of potions, an edible product, or in a gaseous state, because it is easier for the curse to activate if it is *inside* the victim. Curses, yet again, are biological. They are chemicals that the body's enzymes will break apart, absorb, digest, and then suffer from. It is like eating a virus. Anyone can voice a curse, can enchant branches or hands or knives. Your curse was so easily bent by your gallant knight because of its externality. The spell is visible on your skin rather than cleverly hidden in your intestine. A curse is stronger and less malleable when inside the victim. When it is internalized. Say the words, insert it, and there you have your curse. Does that make sense?"

Judith's mouth opened and closed, opened and closed. "I suppose. Do you mean to say I can invent any curse I like?"

"There are more common curses, of course. For instance, a *sleep for one thousand years* or a *live as a monstrous beast*. And there are coinciding salves for each, like true love's kiss. That one is rather famous, especially among mortals. But yes, you can create whatever curse you can imagine. The true test of a curse is its originality. A skilled caster invents a curse that they expect none to be able to circumvent. Sorcery is an art, you see. We are artists. Masters, if you like."

"Right." Judith nodded, nodded, nodded. Her eyes locked on a cat. "Right. How interesting."

The silver witch bent forward slightly. "Yes, very. And I am unsurprised by your interest, Judith, as you have proven yourself to be the unforgiving sort." That silver smile dazzled.

Judith looked up, heart racing. "Who told you my name?"

“No one had to tell me, *Judy*. We know all. You know that. Your mother reminded you often. Almost as often as she warned you never to step foot in this cottage or the Wilds. If I were you, I would have listened. Your mother was a smart woman, if only because of all the pain she endured before your father swept her away. She knew the dangers of her kind better than most.”

A terrible laugh bubbled up in Judith’s throat. She wished this witch’s lips would melt shut. “My mother did not have a painful life. She was a courtier. She was happy with my father and happy before then, too. She was queen.”

“It seems someone dealt you half-truths and left you to fill in the rest, my dear.”

“Shut your fucking mouth,” Judith spat.

The silver witch laughed that chiming laugh again. “Oh ho! You really are careless. Do you have no fear for what I could do to you? Those red hands are only the beginning of what you have coming, Judith. There is little I can do that you won’t do yourself.” The words settled over Judith’s skin like red-hot iron.

It was then that another door at the back of the cottage swung open, and an amber blur rushed in, hopping over the tables and swerving neatly under them, familiar with the perilous geography of the place. The silver witch turned to watch, smiling and clapping. The blur snuck around corners and appeared, sniffing, beside the witch.

Judith’s mouth fell open. It was the doe from this morning. She was sure of it — what other deer had those unnatural topsy-turvy eyes? Her stomach turned just looking at them.

The silver witch looked back to Judith, leaning down to caress and scratch the doe’s back. “Our sister and third, as you may have guessed.” Judith glanced up in horror. Silver eyes swirled in her vision. “She was out hunting game.”

“Was she out hunting game or was she the game being hunted?” The golden witch said, coming back through the tables to meet them. Lorenzo followed, posture deflated. Judith felt chestnut eyes boring into the side of her face. She closed her mouth, swallowed, hoping she did not look as rattled as she felt. *You know not who you walk beside. Soft hearts make for easy targets, and iron is very brittle.* They weren’t the words of a nosy doe or a general statement Judith related to. It was a prophecy, a warning of a moment to come that would define her life forever. Or perhaps the moment already passed and Judith stood in the wreckage.

“The Spring King appreciates your kindness,” Lorenzo said to the Witches Three. To Judith, “We should get going.”

“Oh no,” the silver witch said.

“You shouldn’t,” the golden witch said.

“Why don’t you stay a while?” the doe said.

All three blinked in time, eerie smiles sliding over their faces. The doe's smile was particularly awful, revealing too-human teeth, a remnant of what came before. Or had she always been like this?

Judith could almost hear the gears turning inside Lorenzo's silver head. "We should really leave," he said.

The witches blinked. "Stay." Six eyes landed on Judith, swirling and endless and warm, so, so warm, a bath she yearned to fall into. She was so tired and her arm burned where Lorenzo's side brushed hers. Here they could nestle inside cozy blankets, sit by the fire, and sleep for millennia. Judith considered the old options: Kill the pixie and go on a bender, kill the knight and go on a bender, go back to Summer and on the way go on a bender. Staying here seemed like a pleasant alternative.

She turned to Lorenzo. "We should stay," she said, smiling lazily.

Lorenzo looked at the four of them, deliberating. He sighed. "Where do we park?"

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The golden witch led them up a hidden stairway, down a hall crowded with creepy portraits whose eyes followed Judith (really, they did) into a large bedroom. The walls were the same midnight blue as the front door had been. Wine-colored dressers sat against the wall opposite the bed, cloaked in blue sheets. Nightstands with large lamps atop them sandwiched the mattress. Curtains hung over the small window; through it, Judith could see a sliver of dark sky.

Judith ran over to the bed, collapsing on top of it. She moved her arms and legs like she was making a snow angel. "It's beautiful," she said.

"You've got to be kidding," Lorenzo said. He sounded horrified.

The golden witch laughed. "Nine bells for breakfast tomorrow morning." Her brown hand twitched on the doorknob. "Sleep well." The door shut behind her — and was that the sound of a lock clicking shut?

Judith glanced at Lorenzo, who had not moved. "What is wrong?"

"We're going to die here. That's what's wrong."

She turned her face into the sheets and shook her head. By Mab, were these sheets made of spider silk? Not even the Summer Court bedsheets had been this soft, and Judith's father had each strand collected from the smallest spider tailors he could find. Oh, her father. He was young when he had her, still learning the ways of the throne. It was the three of them — Mother, Father, and Judith — for a long, long time. Col wasn't born until after the Winter Court completely dissolved. And then Emmett and Aubrielle, one after the other, both born to different courtiers, Mother mentally vacant as she occupied the second throne. Judith remembered the day Mother

withered in her hands, skeletal and almost human in her susceptibility to glamours. Her hair went white and so did her skin. When she died, Father refused to release her ashes into the sea, as was tradition. He held the charcoal urn close as he got sick, closer even when Emmett died and Col was crowned. She last remembered him in bed, wrinkled like a date, drifting off to sleep. She'd pressed a kiss to his forehead and left the palace, walking along the shoreline towards Spring.

Judith shifted, eyebrow touching a wet spot on the sheets. She blinked, touched a finger to her cheek. She was crying. It had all been so long ago, and yet she was crying.

Metal clicked across the room. She glanced over to see Lorenzo's suit of armor unfolding. Gaping, she watched as a young girl stepped out, tall and lithe and gorgeous. Lorenzo's hair fell in luscious dark curls that ended mid-chest. Underneath the suit she wore a simple white tank top, matching white underwear, and white socks turned inside-out. Her skin, appearing soft and supple, glowed bronze across a round human face. Her eyes were the same chestnut brown they'd always been, though now the long spiders of her eyelashes were visible. Her lips, pinkish and plush, thinned out slightly when she frowned. "Why are you crying?"

Judith's damp red hands fell to her lap. "You're a woman," she said.

Lorenzo shook her head. "I'm Jess," she said. Her mortality stretched out before them, wide as the sea. She *looked* mortal, looked delicate and full and bursting with the free-floating glee of transience. Born to a short life made longer by her presence in Faerie. In that suit of armor, one could easily forget the knight's humanity. You could imagine anything you wanted beneath silver skin. Outside it, Jess — *Jess* sounded far more pleasant than the human reek of *Lorenzo*, *Jess* like the yellow bells of jessamine — was undeniably, unforgettably human. "Now why are you crying?" She moved to the bed, perched on the edge. This close, Judith could see the rectangular glass locket that hung from her neck, silver clasp trapping a four-leaf clover and shifting salt.

Judith stared. "I think they have done something to me. The witches," she clarified. Micah trained her in the art of answering questions without answering them. "Something here is affecting me."

Jess laid back against the bedspread. "Oh, totally. You're super fucked up. You have been since we got here." When she spoke, a gap between her two front teeth was visible. It was oddly endearing.

"Help me," Judith said, hating the whiny way it came out. By Mab, how had she become the weak one in this situation? First the coltsfoot, then the red hands, then the boils, and now whatever the witches had done. Humans were supposed to be the fallible ones. Faeries were untouchable and invincible, especially in their own realm. "You are fine. Help me."

Brown eyes flitted across Judith's face. "I think some sleep would help."

Judith scoffed. She rubbed red hands over her eyes, galaxies exploding until she blinked and they dissolved. Death might be like that — stars and galaxies and meteors. Emmett always liked the cosmos. He'd studied with the astrologers for years. "Why did you take your armor off?"

A shrug. "I can't wear iron if we're gonna sleep in the same bed."

"This bed is large enough that we will not touch."

Jess glanced at her. "You sure about that?"

Judith shook her head, baffled, and said, "Yes, I'm sure." She glanced at how Jess propped herself on one elbow, leaning a cheek on her hand. Her dark armpit hair brushed the sheets. There would not be harm in this, Judith decided. She was already, as Jess so kindly put it, "fucked up," and yet Jess made no move to worsen her condition or sweep her off into the night. They could sleep in this bed together, which was very large. Four Judiths could fit in this bed without touching. The two of them would manage easily.

She crawled up the bed, dropping her face into an ultra-soft pillow and groaning. Jess snickered, also shifting, mattress dipping and bouncing beneath them. Aubrielle used to climb into bed with Judith when they made trips to other Courts. She bemoaned Judith's cold feet and hands, with which Judith probed her half-asleep sister with until she shrieked. Judith woke up warmer those mornings than she did others.

"Tell me a story," Judith said, throat hoarse with forthcoming tears. She hated this place, regretted going along with Jess rather than slip back to the cave she'd been living out of the past few months. Or years. It was hard to keep track of time when your life was no longer scheduled. "Your kind love those."

"Doesn't everyone?"

Judith could feel Jess' breath on her cheek, but that didn't make sense. Jess was on the complete opposite side of the bed. "Humans have a particular affinity," she said instead of *yes*.

A long sigh, more of a weary exhale than anything. "I'm not good at telling stories." She shifted, cushioning her head on her hand, once again exposing her armpit. Judith cringed at the scent of body odor — which, again, didn't make sense, *why was nothing making sense?* "It's always either super boring or super confusing. Heath used to ask me to tell him stuff, like about movies and drive-ins and Doritos. I don't know. I never had anything good to say. I don't really remember much." Jess squinted at the ceiling. "Of my life before being here, I mean. I think my mom was good at telling stories. I think that's kind of... what she did." She shook her head. "I don't know. When I try to remember, my brain turns to mush."

The deep timbre of Jess' voice threatened to lull Judith to sleep. She nestled back into the pillow, started to lose awareness of her limbs. "Tell me what the witch said to you, then," she mumbled.

Jess hummed. “She said I’m on track to go home. That... that I should, if only for a little. Because my parents miss me.” Far-off, from the ship on which Judith drifted over the sea of sleep, she could hear the melancholy in Jess’ voice, stalling breaths between the words. She meant to say something, to reach out a hand and attempt... *comfort*? But then a wave rose up, claiming Judith’s ship and its captain, and everything was dark.

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The bed was not large enough that they wouldn’t touch. Judith realized this when she awoke from a dream in which Mother never got sick but still went bone-white. She and Mother swam in the ocean, bodies glowing in the water. Mother was younger than she’d been when Judith was born, and she dared Judith to race her to the rocks a couple hundred feet away. Judith, a child again, warned Mother that those rocks separated the sea from the Sea of Memories, a small inlet you avoided lest you be overwrought with grief. Mother called her a coward and swam off anyway. Judith followed, kicking desperately. She was too slow. Mother reached the rocks first, climbed atop them, white limbs stark against grey stone. Laughing, she called Judith a soft-hearted baby. This was when Judith realized neither of them were speaking a language she recognized — and Judith knew most languages. Micah taught her them. Then Micah was walking towards them, sobbing, feet dragging in the sand. Mother slipped backwards, scrabbling for something to grasp. Judith shouted; Mother fell in; Micah walked in, eating water. Neither resurfaced.

Judith’s face was wet, and so was her pillow, which had turned firm in the night. The sheets were no longer silk but... skin.

She opened her eyes.

She was lying on top of Jess.

Judith yelped and sat up, hands covering her face. She took three deep breaths, removed her hands, and studied the room. It was no longer large, beautiful, or glorious. The walls were not midnight blue; they were grey and decaying, spider mafias operating on webbed corners, a mouse nibbling on a bit of plaster. Two clothing piles towered where the dressers once sat, one leaning sideways into the other. The nightstands were two stacks of three bricks, each with a mostly burnt candle on top. Worst of all, the bed was nothing but a narrow cot shoved inside a large closet.

“Fucking hell,” Judith said.

Jess’ mouth did a tight-lipped thing that Judith supposed was a fake smile. “Morning.”

“This is a decrepit cesspool.”

“Yeah.”

“You knew,” and as Judith said it, she realized it was true. “You could tell. You said we would die here and you thought that the bed was small. It’s not even a bed.” Everything was awful. Judith folded in half, groaned into her knees. “Why am I only realizing now?”

Jess tsked. “Well, I’m all sweaty from where you slept on top of me, so you probably got a bit of that in your mouth.”

Judith pressed a shaky hand to her lips, asked, “What?”

“I sweat salt.” Jess swung her legs around the side of the cot and walked to the window, pushing the moth-eaten curtains to the side. “Salt plus glamour equals no more glamour.”

She licked the inside of her lips, felt little pimples with her tongue. They must have risen up in response to the salt. Judith winced, imagining Jess’ sweat in her mouth, and then felt a pinprick of gratitude. At least she now saw the place for what it was. Her head felt lighter, more regular. She jumped from idea to idea without getting caught in the riptide of her thoughts. She recalled her dream, Mother, Micah, and the memories came and went without dragging her under. Judith looked to Jess, who scowled at the window.

Jess turned, eyebrows drawn. “How long do you think we’ve been here?”

Judith pursed her lips. “The witch said she’d call for us at nine bells.”

“And you believe that?”

“...No. I guess not.”

Jess released the curtain, letting it swing side to side, casting various shadows across the floor. Her hand went to her hip. “She said nine bells. As in nine in the morning. We got here mid-afternoon latest, noon earliest. Remember?”

Judith recalled dewy grass tickling the arches of her feet and the sun on her back. “Yes,” she said slowly, horror dawning. “You are correct.”

Jess pointed to the window; her finger caught in a curtain hole. “It’s bright out. The sun is *high* in the sky. But I remember it being night when we got up here.” The sliver of darkness just visible through the curtains. “And now it’s sunny. And no bells. No call. No knock. And I bet—” Jess crossed the room, which wasn’t hard given the room was approximately seven feet wide, hand trying the doorknob- “the door is locked.” She turned the knob right, left, pulling, pushing. It did not budge. Arms akimbo, Jess bared her teeth. “What do we do now?”

The answer was rather simple: Jess slipped back inside her suit, and cut the door in half using her glass sword. Judith shielded her face from flying wood shards, cringing as Jess kicked the door in, reached through the giant hole she’d made to twist the doorknob and open the door. She smiled with crooked teeth. “Ta-da.”

Judith frowned and followed Jess through the broken door.

They moved cautiously down the hall, steps slow and quiet. Luckily, the sound of the door breaking did not travel. Jess held her sword out in front of her, head turning at the slightest

noise, suit of armor barely squeaking. Over her shoulder, Judith scanned the portraits they'd passed the previous night. She recognized one as her father, Tiernan, King of the Summer Court, tan face smiling down at her. Col followed soon after, pale and grim. Had his smirk been that devious, or was that artistic license? Both kings wore Summer teal. After them, Judith saw the Spring King and Queen, dressed in deep plum. The King smiled kindly while the Queen looked on with dead eyes, all sharp features and cruel lines. An acorn broach clung to the fabric covering her left breast. More faces passed by, only somewhat identifiable by their court colors. Judith's eye caught on a family portrait. Judith could tell they were the last Winter royals before processing the black robes or the gaunt, bone-white faces. Each of them had long hair like falling snow. The father's eyes were purple, the mother's grey, and the daughter's green. Despite the white hands on her shoulders and the stern faces looming over her, the daughter looked sweet.

Jess' arm whipped out in front of Judith, keeping her in place.

"I hope you don't mind," a voice said, too loud and brash to be one of the witches. Judith looked to the stairs, candlelight dim against rotting wood. "I'm a weary traveler. I have not found my friend. I worry. My friend can be the violent type when in a certain mood. And I am so hungry."

A kettle shrieked.

"And what do you want from us?" It was the silver witch. Something clinked — a fork against a plate, or a teacup being set down.

"If you know where my friend is," the voice started.

Another clink. "How would we know?" The golden witch.

"You know all." The voice laughed awkwardly.

Jess' hand returned to her sword. She met Judith's eye, tilted her head towards the stairs, and made the universal gesture for *quiet*. Judith rolled her eyes — she *was* being quiet, had been this whole time — but said nothing. They headed for the stairs.

Someone huffed. The doe, probably. "And who is your friend? We need to know who to look for."

"I don't think you'll need to look very far."

A clink, and a pause, air gone out of the room. "Oh?" the silver witch said. "And what do you mean by that?"

Jess leaped down the stairs, landing nimbly on silver feet. Judith cried out in shock, running down after her and tripping on the second step. By the time she reached the first floor, Jess had started swinging. A moss-green man stood in the entryway. He bent in half, tripled in size, horse hooves thrashing violently. He struck the golden witch, who fell to the ground. The doe leaped in, sniffing her face, and hissed in an extremely undoelike manner at the horse.

Kelpie. Jess' kelpie, the royal steed, come to save them at the precise moment he was needed. Maybe there was a signal Judith missed.

The doe bit the kelpie's leg. The kelpie kicked the doe's head; she crumbled on top of her sister. The cats howled and leaped from under the table. Biting at their fur, the kelpie shook them off.

The silver witch jumped from table to table, Jess' sword darting out to knock them off-balance. Books, vials, and cauldrons toppled to the ground. Jess managed the terrain easily, dancing over the mess as she jabbed and thrust. The silver witch moved to kick the sword from her grip — Jess caught their foot in midair, silver foot in silver hand, and the witch let out a bloodcurdling scream. Their skin boiled and bubbled, corroded like rust.

"The king appreciates your kindness," Jess said, grip tight. She pulled the witch's legs out from under them. They groaned, back slamming against the table. "Now, as I said, we will be going." Jess released the witch and glanced at Judith with a raised eyebrow. "You coming?"

Coughing, voice hoarse, the silver witch said, "Leave here now and your fate's decided." They rolled onto their side and spat blood. A line of it ran along their bottom lip. "There will be no avoiding the approach of certain doom." *There is little I can do that you won't do yourself.*

"Yeah? And what?" Jess smiled mockingly. Her head tilted to the side, a predator ready to pounce. Judith could not look away. Hypnotized, mouth falling open, she watched Jess' smile become a hollow laugh. "What would happen if we stayed? What were you gonna do? Eat us?"

The silver witch did not answer, which was answer enough.

"Hm." Jess laughed again. "Right. Because that's not certain doom." Sword in gauntlet-covered hand, she sliced at the table legs, silver witch dropping to the ground with a grunt. Their landing was punctuated by more coughing. Jess sheathed her sword. "Ready?"

Judith understood the question was for her. She closed her mouth, swallowed, and nodded. The kelpie whinnied, lips trilling.

Jess stepped easily over the various bodies, held the door open for the kelpie and Judith. "Feel better soon," she told the Witches, grinning.

The midnight blue door slammed shut behind them. Jess and the kelpie headed back toward the trees, the former grabbing blindly for the latter's reins. Judith barely made it a few feet before halting. She sat in the grass, pressed her forehead to her knees, and tried to get her bearings.

In the last few days, she'd been ensorcelled, sentimental to the point of weeping, wrapped around a human (she wanted that whole event buried beneath centuries of dirt but she couldn't stop thinking about how little clothing they were both wearing and how unaware of being *on top of Jess* she'd been), a hostage, and then a witness to human violence. The last point was, oddly enough, most shocking to her. Jess came across as the mannerly sort. Yes, she had swords

strapped to her sides at all times, but she never gave off an air of violence. Not like Judith did with her red hands. Jess was perfection carved from silver. Judith was a murderer. And yet, there Jess was, holding onto the witch's leg longer than she had to, slamming the witch's body around for the fun of it. Judith did not know who she traveled and slept beside. Had Jess killed people? Did she delight in murdering faeries? Was Judith next?

Eventually, Jess must have realized Judith was not keeping up, because sabatons appeared at the edge of her vision.

"You good?"

Judith grunted.

A beat. Then, "I'm taking that as a no."

She sat up. Jess stared down at her with patient eyes. Judith thought she might scream. "Who are you?" she asked, hands clasped in her lap. "Who are you? Both of you?"

Jess blinked. Frowning, she pointed to herself. "Jess Ferro." She pointed to the kelpie, who stood up on his hind legs and shrunk into his two-legged form. The saddlebags previously strapped to his sides slid to the ground. "Richie." She pointed to Judith. "You," because she did not know Judith by name.

Richie waved hello.

"I was locked in a room with you," Judith said, watching Jess' hair blow in the wind in a frankly unfair manner, "and I do not know you. You're the Knight of Spring. You're human. You have no memories of your life before Faerie." She shrugged. "That tells me nothing of who you really are. I am traipsing around the Wilds with you and... Richie and you play at chivalry and then burn a faery's leg for fun."

Jess' eyes narrowed. "I was fighting for my life. They locked us in their house and wanted to *eat us*. That wasn't *fun*, that was self-preservation."

"You hurt them far longer than you needed to."

"You're one to talk."

Judith stared.

"Fuuuck," Richie breathed. He smiled, entertained.

Jess shook her head, sighed, and pressed a hidden button so her right gauntlet would slip off. With a calloused hand, she scrubbed at her eye. "That was a low blow. I'm exhausted and hangry and I shouldn't have said that."

"No, I am glad to know how you really feel." Judith chuckled, wiped away snot that wasn't there. She could not find it in herself to be surprised. To think she'd imagined Jess might see past (or through) her curse was pure naïveté. Bloodshed marked her. "Of course. Do I make you uncomfortable? Do I *scare you*?"

Jess' expression hardened, lips a grim line. "That's not how I really feel."

“That is what you said, no?”

“Not everything I say is what I mean.”

“Then how am I supposed to know when you mean what you say?” Judith shrugged, held up her red hands in surrender. “I can only tell you the truth. You can lie to me. You likely have already.”

Jess shook her head, looking close to tears. “I don’t lie.”

“No? Then you think of me as having red hands.”

“No, I- well- you have red hands,” Jess said in a rush, cheeks reddening. “You have red hands. So yes, I think of you as having red hands, but that’s not all I think of you having. Or being. You’re not just red hands. I was mad you were mad that I was being violent, which I wasn’t, because I was protecting myself-”

“Mhm.”

“But you’re just as violent,” Jess continued. “You’re just as violent. And I’m not- I don’t mean to- I’m not judging you. I’m not saying you’re anything. I just thought that was... unfair of you to say.” Judith did not answer. Jess sighed. “I haven’t lied to you. I don’t lie to people. It’s not a thing I do. But I need you to trust me if you’re going to stay with us.”

Judith studied the curve of her crimson thumbnail. “Who says I am staying with you?”

Richie and Jess looked at each other. “Are you not?” Richie asked, Jess’ glance communicating *I can’t be the one to ask, she’s pissed at me*.

Judith shrugged. She did not know if she was staying. Her options were bleak, and little had changed, besides the fact that the one somewhat alluring option was now less so. She did not know if she felt safe with Jess, who could turn her back at any moment.

“Do you not trust me?” Jess asked, wounded.

“You keep talking about this... thing. What is it?”

“What thing?”

“Trust,” Judith spat.

Jess reared back, whole face turning down. “You don’t know what trust is?”

Judith put her hands up as if to say *fucking obviously*.

“Um.” Jess pursed her lips in thought. “It’s like- it’s like believing in someone. Or something. Because of... their behavior, and because they show themselves as wanting good things for you, you trust them. You rely on them and ask things of them and believe that the good things they’ve done will continue, because they’ve done good things before. You believe they aren’t lying or that if they are, it’s for good reason. You believe they want you happy and safe and wouldn’t do anything to hurt you on purpose. You trust them. I don’t know.”

Richie piped up then, picking at the dirt under his overly long cracked fingernails. “I expect us fae do not have need for such a concept when we are unable to tell lies.” He sucked up the dirt in his mouth and Judith gagged. Jess was unmoved. “Why trust when your word is law?”

Judith rolled her lips into her mouth. *Trust*. Richie was right about trust being a foreign concept. You did not need to believe if someone could not lie. Of course, the truth could be twisted, but most fae expected trickiness of language that allowed for loopholes. No one trusted one another. Judith never trusted her siblings to not rip the hair from her head or stab her in the back if it meant the throne was theirs. She never trusted her father, despite his well wishes, or her mother, who disappeared for days at a time, then rolled back over the shore like a fog going out and coming back in. Her life was not built for belief in others. To rely on, to believe in, to *trust*... Humans must be exhausted.

“I guess,” Jess said. “But my word isn’t. I can lie. You’re both here with me. Do you trust me?”

Judith considered the question. Horribly, she’d already relied on Jess; from the very beginning, Jess fed her, provided shelter, communicated plans, and protected her when possible. Judith persuaded Jess to stay with the Witches, and Jess hesitated because Judith was vulnerable. Judith cried and Jess didn’t probe, talked of her own life so Judith wouldn’t have to. They shared a cot and Judith awoke in a better state than she had gone to sleep in. Jess was given every opportunity to kidnap Judith and hand her over to the king. She hadn’t. But humans were not allies — they were inherent liars. *Who is more prone to tricks*, her mind supplied, rather unhelpfully. *Who made efforts to keep you happy and safe?* Ugh. Trust was already twisting its way inside her like a parasitic worm. Humans were a plague. She opened herself up to their diseases when she agreed to accompany one.

Richie tilted his head from side to side. “I trust you.”

“That’s good,” Jess said, grinning at the ground. “I’m glad.”

They both looked to Judith, who faced them with a flat smile. There was only one true way to discover if she trusted them, and that was to do it anyway. “I am Judith Innes of Summer, daughter of the former king of Summer and sister of the current king.” She raised an eyebrow. Giving over her name meant relinquishing control and placing power directly into the hands of a possible traitor. Two possible traitors. “Does that satisfy you, Jess of Earth?”

“Of Spring. And yes.”

“You cannot be *of* Spring.”

Jess released puffs of air in small, silent laughs. “Then what am I knight of?”

Caught, Judith shrugged. “Fair play, human.”

“Jess.”

“Jess,” Judith repeated, liking the taste far too much for her own good.

The human in question licked her lips, bit her bottom lip in a failed attempt to keep from smiling, and clapped her hands. “Okay, crew. Listen up. First thing on the docket-” she clicked her tongue- “we have to figure out how long Judith and I were in there.”

Richie raised his hand. “I know that one. It has been three days.”

Judith’s face crumpled. “No,” she said, not wanting it to be true.

Jess pulled a pocket-watch from the saddlebags. Whatever she saw in its face, she didn’t like. “Yes. I think the windows were spelled. And we’re at the edge of Faerie, so we’re also dealing with time dilation.” She sighed. “Fuck us, I guess.”

“Fuck us,” Richie agreed. He nodded sagely.

Jess smiled a thin, gap-toothed smile. “Great. Second thing on the docket... Hm. I’m going to go get firewood. You two... do whatever. Rich, don’t eat her.” With a wider smile, she walked off into the green.

Richie started rifling through the saddlebags. He lobbed an apple at Judith’s head — Judith stumbled through the motions that eventually led to a precarious catch — and took a bite out of another. Upon noticing her stillness, he showed off his horse teeth, thin gaps boasting apple chunks.

Judith sat down in a patch of grass, tucked her knees in close to her chest. She nodded at Richie as she spun the apple in her hands. “So. What’s your story?”

Richie glanced up. “Must I have one?” He quirked an eyebrow, daring.

She had no time for his bullshit. “Well, you are a slave to the Spring Court, are you not?” Gesturing to him, “You had to have done something to wind up here. Do you think you deserve it? This life?”

He grinned. “And what about you, green one?” Judith decided to ignore that comment, given that Richie was also green. “Hm? What did you do to wind up here, following our dear knight after she saved you from that curse?” Richie laughed to himself. “How did you end up in that bush? Do you think you deserved it? That life?” Judith felt herself scowl. Richie just laughed again, almost neighing. “You want to know my crime, fine. I’ll tell you. If you tell me yours.” He gestured to her hands.

An exchange. A deal. For once, this was familiar territory. “Which one?”

Richie giggled, pointing at her with his apple. “I have to say, I like you. I do.” Another giggle-laugh-neigh. “Any, I suppose. Whatever you’re willing to share.”

Judith looked down at the apple in her hands. Her hands were redder than the fruit, patchy as it was, changing from red to yellow and back again. Her palms were just one shade, fingers the same. No variation.

Any crime? There were so many to choose from. “When I left home,” she said, thinking of Aubrielle’s rage and Emmett’s body and Col’s bright leer in the crown’s shadow, “I killed a

guard who found me. He was following me along the shore, calling after me. I don't know what he meant to do. At one point he said he would tell the king I was gone." Judith pierced the apple's skin with a sharp red fingernail. Juice bubbled up, spilled down the side, sticky against her fingers. "He might have meant my father. But he could have meant my brother, whose coronation was the next day. I turned on him and slit his throat with a broken seashell." She licked the juice from the apple and her hands.

"Did you throw his body in the sea?"

She shrugged, frowning. "He would have washed up anyway."

A slow nod. "Why didn't you want your brother to know you were leaving?"

"They were all going to *know*." A guard would come to her door, and at not receiving an answer, would enter, demanding she attend the coronation. The room would be empty. The guard would tell Aubrielle and Col. Her sister would sulk in confusion and her brother would roll his tongue over his teeth, smile, and possibly be impressed by his older sister sneaking from his grasp. "I wanted to leave the Court before they could follow me. Anyway, that was more than just crimes. Those were questions. Do I get the same honor?"

He smiled and bit the apple down to its core. "Those weren't the terms. But if you like."

Judith waited.

Richie blew air out of his nose, nostrils flaring. "I used to live in the river."

"The Iron River?" Flowing through the Autumn Court (and a small section of Winter), the Iron River was where human technology went to die. Old televisions, computers, toasters, and the like piled up. Judith had never seen it, only smelled it; the reek of iron floated over acres of land to the Autumn palace, strong enough to turn stomachs.

"Before it was iron, it was water. Then the iron rain came and my kind were displaced. I crossed the border over to Spring. I took up in a creek — right near where you were staying, Judith, what a coincidence — and ate a wandering human or two, not knowing the Spring King's odd predilection for their kind." He winked at her as if in reference to a shared joke. "And so I was brought before his Court and stood trial. They found me guilty. I did not do much other than carry little royals around for a few decades, and then Jess came along and selected me as her steed." He smiled. "So that is our story. The grand affair."

"You were the one from the Wilds they put on trial all those years ago," Judith said.

"That is what I said. I am not Narcissus; I don't need an echo. I mean, maybe I'd like one. It has its draws—"

Judith interrupted. "Are you not... enraged? Do you not want to kill the king for what he did to you?" She'd spent every hour since Jess cut her free imagining life under the king's thumb, brushing his imaginary daughter's hair, getting humiliated for his court's entertainment. The entire time, she rode on the back of someone in that exact situation.

Richie chomped away at his apple with the blissful ignorance of a child. His brow furrowed. "I do not think I have it in me to be angry. I made a decision and this is the consequence. And Jess is kind. I am almost better off now than I was before."

"You cannot believe that."

"It is the course of my life."

"It is unjust."

"Yes. But the king shows no signs of changing the rules. This is my life until he does."

Judith licked her lips over and over, searching for the words. "Jess could free you if she wanted," she said eventually. "She could let you go. You could go back to your life."

"She's good to me," Richie said. "I like her companionship."

An idea struck. "We could kill the king, you and I." Judith nodded in agreement with her own plan. "We could. We could replace the tincture and topple the Spring Court. We could both be free."

Richie guffawed. He laughed so hard he fell over, apple core falling from his hand and rolling away. A stray white rabbit passing by took it up and hopped off. "You could not kill the king if you tried. Not with Jess around. They're close. She's practically the king's kin. And what about the Queen? You are free now, little faery." Richie shook his head, suddenly sober. His eyes darkened. "As someone who was once in your position, I say you should leave the Spring Court while you still can. Stepping into that palace will only bring you doom, no matter what Jess tells you." He reached out for the apple and frowned when he found nothing.

Judith ran over his words in her mind: "I do not think I have it in me to be angry" could be about anything; "Jess is kind" was just a judgement of her character; the "almost" in "I am almost better off" implied Richie was not actually better off; "the king shows no signs of changing the rules" was the most direct, expressing dissatisfaction with the king's judgment. Having Jess as her sole partner in conversation as of late led Judith to forget how trickily faeries spoke. Richie strung separate but true sentences together as if he was talking about one thing and not many. Perhaps he practiced this calm demeanor for Jess' sake, or his own. Whatever it may be, his dark look and his warning were the most honest he had been thus far — Judith should already be running.

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Judith set up the tent, only struggling a little, and crept inside following Richie and her's back and forth. He spoke no more after delivering that final warning, disapproving of her remaining at their camp. Judith pulled at the loose strings along the hem of her shirt, mouth twisted up. Richie told her to go, her own worry told her to go, the silver witch spoke of impending doom. How was

Judith supposed to know if the doom was a consequence of staying with the Spring party or leaving it? The doom could arise from returning home to a murderous brother and a sister who'd resigned herself to life under his thumb.

Jess returned to the camp shortly. Her presence was announced by Richie calling out, "Why, is that the most gallant knight in all the land?" To which Jess responded that she was the *only* knight in the land, and Richie said that she must also be the least gallant knight then, and also the most middling. They both laughed and there were varied sounds signifying some playful scuffle. Abruptly Jess' voice turned low and questioning; Richie went quiet. Jess muttered something like "I see how it is," and then her silhouette grew as she approached the tent.

The tent flap flicked open. Jess tucked her luscious head inside. "All good in here?"

Judith nodded, fearing that if she spoke she would spill every fear she kept inside, or accidentally turn Jess against Richie.

"We're heading back to the palace tomorrow morning," Jess said, face impassive. "We can stop anywhere along the way you want to." It was the exact question Judith asked herself over and over without a satisfying answer. *Where is home for you, where do you want to go, what do you want to do next?* The only thing she imagined satisfying her was the possibility of violence. Snatching the pixie up in one hand, hearing the sharp crunch of her bones. It would be easy. Familiar. Predictable.

Hey, that was an option. "Take me back to where you found me. I want to see if the pixie and goblin are there."

Jess smirked. "Only if you promise not to murder them." Judith's face must have expressed her dismay, because Jess continued, "I wasn't going to let you murder them before, and I'm not going to now. Promise you won't, and we can go. It's not out of the way."

Judith frowned. "I promise I won't."

"You promise you won't what?"

A deep sigh. "I promise I won't kill the pixie and goblin who cursed me." Plan: Nullified.

Jess grinned. "Great. And here's dinner, if you want it." She set a plate on the ground by Judith — pie, some sort of meat, and rice. "Sleep well and I'll see you in the morning for a murderless day."

"You do not..." Judith started, unsure where she was going.

"What?"

"I... We are not eating together?"

Jess' head tilted. A slow smile came over her face. She laughed, showing that adorable gap between her front teeth. "You want to eat with us? I thought you didn't see the pleasure in our company." She stuck her tongue out slightly, a little bit squeezed in that gap.

Judith looked at the roof of the tent, face hot for no good reason. A bad reason. She wanted to eat with Richie and Jess. She was interested in their closeness despite not exactly delighting in their company. Mostly, she wanted to listen to Jess talk and laugh with someone she so obviously cared about. Glimpse a little more of that gap-toothed smile. There was something oddly mesmerizing about her, and Judith felt moth-like, drawn to danger, unable to turn back.

“Are we eating in here, or out there?” Jess gestured in either direction.

She did not answer quick enough, because Jess nodded and said, “In here, then.” She stepped into the tent, turned her head to the flap. “Richie! We’re having family dinner in the tent.”

“We are not a family,” he called.

Jess shook her head despairingly. “Not with that attitude.” She put up her hands, surrendering — though what she needed to surrender, Judith did not know. “What are we gonna do with him, Judith? Huh? What trouble our son is.”

Judith choked. “Our son?” And her name, fresh from human lips. She’d forgotten how beautiful her own name could sound.

Richie came through the tent flap then, large mouth twisted into a frown, balancing two plates and three cups in his arms. Jess put her hands on silver-clad hips and shook her head. “Speak of the devil,” she said. Her armor folded away from her skin; she let the suit lay along the side of the tent.

“The devil is not so handsome as I.” He leaned towards Judith (she took a cup), then Jess (who took a plate and cup), and sat, legs crossed, on the tent floor.

“Your mother and I were just talking about you,” Jess said, head still shaking.

How easily she lied. “I am not his mother and I was not speaking of him,” Judith said.

“If you’d known my mother, your bones would be one thousand grains of sand among the billion floating down a now dry riverbed. Some of you would be the sand underneath a beaver’s dam, other bits of you would be caught in an oyster’s lips before harvesting season. Once harvested, you would of course be spat out by some spoiled brat entirely unaware that your remains were in his mouth. Traces of you would abound, but my mother would never think of you again, not even in a dream.” He stuffed a saucy rib in his mouth, pulled it out clean.

Jess’ grimace was so large it might have broken records. “Wow. Wow.” She sat down, blinking back disgust. “Wow. I don’t know if I can eat now.” She looked to Judith. “Judith,” she said again, false horror on her face, and Judith’s heart fluttered, “what if I take a bite and it’s sandy but really it’s bones? What if I get bones in my mouth?”

Somehow she managed to say, “I had your sweat in my mouth and I ended up all right.”

“Hm.” Jess nodded. “I guess that’s fair.” She picked up a rib, frowning.

Judith shoveled rice into her mouth, thought of Richie's *Stepping into that palace will only bring you doom, no matter what Jess tells you*, and looked at Jess and warmed ten degrees. A smile formed, and Judith was unable to suffocate it with rice, meat, or pie. She met Richie's dark eyes, Jess' laughing ones.

They talked long into the night. She listened to them retell old stories (Jess: *I was an eagle once*; Richie: *You were an eagle for fifteen minutes*; Jess: *That's once*) and laughed with them over jokes she half-understood. As the night wound down, Richie on track to falling asleep in Jess' lap, Judith told a story or two of her own. Jess had seen little of the Summer Court and was curious. Eyes glittering, she listened as Judith detailed the capital city Fenora, with its tall glass skyscrapers that gave way to seaside villas. Jess had never seen the sea, either. She asked what made high and low tide different, and when was the best hour to swim? Judith liked to swim in between, and said so. The conversation eagerly turned to the Sea of Memories. Judith's throat caught when she started to explain, and Jess' brow furrowed.

"What is it?"

In her mind's eye: Her pale mother scrabbling for purchase, Micah walking into the sea. The first bit had only been a dream. Micah, however, truly did drown himself in Memories following a heart-shattering romp with a human man. They'd spent a decade together. Then, one day, the man woke up and confessed he no longer loved Micah and no, he did not think there was anything to salvage. He left for his own world that afternoon. Judith was almost seventy and walking back to her villa after a nighttime swim when she saw Micah's shadow approaching the water. She called out for him, concerned. By the time she reached the sea, it was already over.

Judith cleared her throat, eyes watering. "It is like... walking into your own mind. Except you cannot control it. The memories berate you and you cannot walk back out without someone else's help. You become immersed in the past and your own grief."

"No, I meant-" Jess made a sound of discomfort as she ran a hand through Richie's hair and Judith tried not to dote on that caress- "what's making you upset?"

Judith tugged on loose strings along the hem of her shirt, stopping when she realized she had begun to unravel it. "My friend went in, once." She swallowed. "It is the kind of place you only go in."

Jess' hand halted in Richie's hair, and his lips trilled sleepily. "Have you been in?"

It was hard to remember the water at her ankles, knees, chest, shoulders. It was hard to be aware of it then, screaming for Micah, when images of her parents and baby siblings were bearing down on her. She was not old enough to see Aubrielle covered in Emmett's blood, screaming for help, Col too serene by her side. Most present was the memory of her, extremely young, less than ten years old, throwing pebbles at a tree in the garden. Her aim was horrid, and a stray toss knocked a baby bird from its nest. It plummeted, quivered, and then stopped. Judith

prodded it, trying to summon it awake. Father found her like that. He'd explained that not all things were close to invincible and practically immortal, impervious to life's battering rams. Judith did not understand. She grew frustrated, kicked the bird amidst her temper tantrum. Father cried out, picking her up in his arms, and was teary as he carried her back into the palace. *You have to be careful when overwhelmed, Judith*, he'd said after sitting her on the edge of her bed, *because you can cause a lot of pain. You can cause devastation.* He'd tucked her hair behind her ear. *I do not want that for my little girl.* That day played over and over as she dragged Micah's body out of the water, a guard having run over from the villa to aid her. They pulled him out together, both sobbing, and Judith slammed her fists against Micah's chest as if that would force the water out.

"Yes," Judith whispered. "It is not something to speak of."

Jess nodded, lips downturned. "Do you want a hug?"

"You'd have to wake Richie."

"We can hug around him. Come on."

Hesitantly, Judith scooted towards her. She was not as close as she could have been when Jess reached out and pulled her in, bare arms gripping tight. Judith halfheartedly wrapped her arms around her, too afraid to settle into the hug. Jess seemed to read her mind, because she said, "A real hug, Judith, not whatever lame shit you're pulling right now." Inhaling shakily, she tightened her grip and rest her chin on Jess' shoulder. Her fingers brushed Jess' sides, thin white cotton the only barrier separating their skin. They sat like that for a long while. Eventually, Jess pulled away, a small smile on her face. Judith tried to smile back and realized she already was.

By the time she considered leaving before morning, a natural fatigue claimed her limbs, and the cot was right there. She could rest a while and sneak out early. Climbing into bed, Judith quickly fell asleep, smile curled around her lips.

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Richie was already in horse form when Judith emerged from the tent. Jess turned to see her, smiled softly, and said, "Let's get on with it." She collapsed the tent, stowing it in a saddlebag. Judith went over to Richie — who glared at her — and stuck one foot in a stirrup.

Jess' hand appeared by her side, bare of its normal silver gauntlet. It was smaller than her suit suggested, brown and calloused and scraped. Judith glanced at it, at Jess' smiling eyes, and took it, sliding easily onto Richie's back. She was not quite sure how helpful the hand up had been, but she appreciated the gesture. The whole morning she watched Jess walking beside her, brown hands gripping the reins, tightening, flexing, and twirling around the leather strap. Jess

caught her watching once, looked at her for a long moment with a creeping grin and then guffawed. Judith blushed.

The grove, unsurprisingly, looked the same as it had just a few days ago. Sprites and pixies floated about, releasing high, shrill keens as they went. A goblin bathed in the creek, though it was not the goblin Judith sought — this one had longer hair and was broader in the shoulders. A white rabbit hissed at the imp pulling its ears. The scene was customary of Faerie as a whole; a pang of warmth swept through Judith's body, sudden affection for the place she'd lived her whole life.

Richie halted, whinnying and fervently shaking his head. Judith slipped from his back without checking to see if Jess offered a hand, and stepped into the grove. To the goblin bathing: "Have you seen a goblin about yea high and yea wide?" She gestured with her hands, smiling in a hopefully polite manner.

The goblin rolled her eyes and splashed creek water at her.

"How about a pixie then? Short iridescent hair and the demeanor of a, well, pixie?"

Judith asked a few dryads, who all murmured *Nonononononono*, as well as the ear-pulling imp and the rabbit, the former running off with a snicker and the latter muttering about timetables. The sprites and pixies, none of whom were *the* pixie in question, all supplied conflicting answers. Their *this ways* and *that ways* and *I'd say to ask Willie, but he ran off some time ago* were of little help. Judith nodded through it all, ignoring the frustration boiling over in her gut.

Jess stood off to the side, feeding Richie a carrot. Upon Judith's return, she asked, "No luck?"

"They are all being rather unhelpful and I am sure they know it," Judith said loudly, earning frowns from nearby eavesdroppers. "It appears the ones I seek have up and left and no one knows where they have gone off to."

Richie chomped violently on his carrot.

Jess nodded. "So, do we leave you here, or are you coming back to the palace with us? Or is there another place you want us to drop you?"

Richie stared at Judith.

She peered at her red hands, stained and yet not with the blood she would have liked to spill today. Judith tried to imagine every time her hands were this red, every time she'd cleaned them off after delivering a bare-handed death. She could barely remember if her hands were this caked the last time, and that was a little over two weeks ago. Old redcap friends of Judith's remembered their kills, hats rusted with blood and kills logged in mental and physical files. She cared less about the lives she took than a redcap. How monstrous.

“We can eat lunch first, if you want,” Jess said, shaking Judith from her train of thought. “And you can decide after.”

Judith agreed. Perhaps the faeries in this grove dismissed her questions because they watched what she had done or heard about it from their friends. They looked at her and saw a murderer, which, despite not being an uncommon kind of person in this world, was not anyone’s favorite. Most faeries killed, but they killed sparingly, or for good reason, or because they took pride in it. Was Judith part of that last camp? Did she kill simply because she enjoyed it? Had there always been another way? “That sounds fine.” Her voice was quiet in her own ears. “I could eat,” she said, not hungry at all.

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Judith picked delicately at the end of her sausage. She tried not to look at her hands as she ate, avoiding the blinding crimson of them, causing her to sometimes miss both the sausage and her mouth. Jess ate rabidly, as did Richie, once again in person form. No one spoke. A breeze rustled tree leaves, a bird chirped here and there. Though she knew it wasn’t true, she thought she could hear the trees muttering (*murderer murderer murderer, killer of babes and adults and ancient ones*). Her stomach flipped forwards, backwards, and sideways, but the thought of putting the sausage down and not having something to occupy a sliver of her mind terrified her, so she continued to pick.

Richie stood, webbed hands patting his gut. “I am in desperate need of a swim,” he announced, a wicked grin on his face.

“You just ate,” Jess said.

He shrugged. “There is always room for more. Would you like to join me, Sir Knight?”

“Last time I made you promise you wouldn’t eat me and you tried anyway.”

“I did not try to *eat* you. I tried to *chew* you. I would have spat you back out.”

“How kind.” Jess shook her head, stuffed the last of her sausage in her mouth. “Enjoy yourself, Dickie. You’ll be running it off later anyway.”

Richie headed east towards the creek, leaving Jess and Judith alone.

Jess turned to face Judith, brown hands tucking darker brown hair behind her ears. “Why were you crying?”

Judith frowned at her sausage. “What?”

“You know, yesterday. Or three days ago. Whenever. You were crying at the Witches’. Why?”

So the probing had made its way back around. Judith shook her head. "Family drama. I do not want to talk about it." She didn't want to talk about anything, just wanted to chop off her hands so she wouldn't have to look at them anymore.

"Oh, I get it. You're a grump."

Judith looked up, face all twisted. "I am not a grump." Grumps were small, ugly things that sat on tree stumps and cried for hours. She would not stand for such a comparison.

"Yes you are. You're in a bad mood." Jess smiled, like the thought of Judith in a bad mood was funny to her. "I thought your kind was above moodiness."

"We are."

"Mhm," Jess hummed, laughing to herself. She walked around the put-out fire and sat beside Judith. "What's wrong?"

Judith threw her sausage to the ground. "Have you happened to see my hands?" She held them out, sparkling red in the sunlight. "Have you?"

"You didn't seem so mad about it before. I mean, except for the crying, you kinda seemed to forget about it. I thought you didn't care."

"I didn't. I did not. And then..." *You're one to talk.* "I don't know. They are awful. Like I dipped my hands in your blood."

Jess shrugged, reaching for one, running a thumb along the long red lines of Judith's fingers. "I think they're alright." She flipped it over, ran a finger along the line that curved around Judith's thumb. "You're gonna have a long life. Well, you've had a long life." She laughed, and Judith found herself laughing too, stomach flipping again for different reasons. "And..." Jess squinted, leaning down to peer closely at the red skin. "Wow, you're gonna have like four million kids."

"No I will not," Judith said immediately. "What are you basing this on?"

Jess shook her head, shrugged again. "Nothing. Absolutely nothing."

Scoffing, Judith moved to take her hand back, but Jess held it tightly in place.

"You're really very pretty," Jess said, eyes wide.

Inside Judith, something settled. "I thought humans were supposed to be afraid of us."

"Yeah. But you're just... kind of regular."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"That I like you," Jess said. She smiled again. Judith had known beautiful humans before, a few intimately. All of that was entirely physical. Jess was physically attractive, yes, far more beautiful than a human should ever be, but she was patient, and kind when she should not have been. They'd argued and Judith's fears were confirmed, and yet Jess clearly was not hung up on her hands.

Judith had come to trust her.

“Do you like me?” Jess asked.

She shook her head.

“No?” Jess’ smile grew. “You don’t like me?”

She shook her head more vigorously, forcing a pout.

“Hm. I thought you did.”

She shrugged.

“The way you curled around me that night at the Witches’ really made me think you did.”

Judith’s mouth flattened.

“Oh well. I guess I’ll let you go then.” Jess released her grip on Judith’s hand, started leaning away.

Judith pushed right into Jess’ face, pressing a kiss to her — *yes, soft!* — pink lips. Her red hand went naturally to Jess’ shoulder, forgetting all about the iron in her suit. Judith flinched, hissing as she shook out her bubbling hand, and Jess blinked lazily before frowning.

“Forgot about that,” she mumbled. She reached around herself and pressed a button of some sort, because the suit of armor opened up, folding away from her white clothes and brown skin. She scooted sideways and pushed the hunk of metal into the grass. It rolled over, laid out on its side like a silver corpse.

And then her brown hands cupped the side of Judith’s green face and she kissed her again. They went on like that for quite some time, only stopping once for Jess to say, “If I’d known it was this easy, I would’ve revealed my psychic powers ages ago.”

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Richie returned about an hour later, bemoaning his failure to capture a second meal. After much whining, he asked, “Where are we headed now?”

Jess turned to Judith, chestnut eyes alight. “Up to you, m’lady.”

It was probably not a good sign that the “m’lady” did not bother her as much as it previously had. She studied the smile on Jess’ swollen lips and said easily, “The palace, I presume.”

Jess’ smile lit a fire in Judith’s heart. She refused to face Richie, whose glare was once again a tangible weight. Jess removed the sword belt from her suit of armor, strapping the leather around her cotton-clad waist, sheath tips hitting the backs of her scarred knees. She pressed another hidden button on her suit of armor, causing the silver body to fold up into a miniature square with a tiny hoop that Jess slid through a pierced ear. Richie dropped, sullen, into horse-form, and Jess climbed onto his back easily. Leaning down, she reached out a hand for Judith to join her. She did. Judith fell into place behind Jess, wrapping her long, thin arms around a firm

(and warm) human body. Jess was surprisingly thin underneath her suit of armor, though her lithe limbs were corded with muscle.

And they were off.

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Judith last visited the Spring palace for the king's coronation. It was a brilliant, flowering structure spread across three great hills, with many arches, spires, turrets, and every other palace staple. She was still playing princess then, attending events and making polite chitchat with fellow lords and ladies. The king was younger than she expected — his mother, who Judith knew to be a couple hundred years old, had plenty of reign left in her, and yet she abdicated for a boy that surely could not be more than twenty. The years had come and gone so he was older now, though not by much. He was now pushing... fifty? A child, by fae terms, was the most powerful person in the realm, ruling the oldest Court on the map. Judith could hardly believe it, but that was why it made sense. Rationale was sparse.

They arrived at the palace late into the night, moon in the sky pregnant with the coming month. Richie sped through the Wilds and the court proper, moving faster than he had since Judith joined the party. They'd only stopped once — a quick bathroom break by a small, twilight market that Jess ventured into. She returned with a small paper bag she tucked into the saddlebag without any explanation. Judith did not bother asking, too absorbed in the feeling of Jess' lips and the handful of warnings she'd received over the past few days. *Soft hearts make for easy targets. Your mother knew the dangers of her kind better than most. There is little I can do that you won't do yourself. Stepping into that palace will only bring you doom.* Jess promised little, but her efforts sent a clear message: *I care, I want, I trust.* Judith wondered whether she should trust so easily, if there was a carelessness she practiced without being aware of it. There was nothing to be done, however; they'd already arrived, and Jess was already helping her to her feet, and Jess was smiling that perfect smile Judith would be a fool to turn away from.

Laughter echoed down the sloping green hills from within the palace. The full moon revel would not wane until noon the next morning, if at all. The king, young and fruitful, likely sat atop his ivy throne, laughing as his subjects danced and drank themselves into oblivion. Judith missed the cross-court revels. The cavern pool at the Summer palace exploded with life once every month, tourists slipping inside, laughter echoing off the walls. That was the draw for Col: The parties, luxury, and sex.

Red hand in Jess', Judith asked, "Why did we dismount here? Now we have to climb all the way up those hills."

Jess' face turned mischievous. With the hand not holding Judith's, she unstrapped the saddlebags from Richie's sides and slung them over her shoulder. "You've only gone in the royal way, Judith of Summer. Today you enter with the rest of us lowlives." They headed for the foot of the closest hill, Richie ambling along. Jess reached a hand into the grass and pulled open a stable door Judith would not know to look for. Richie trotted inside, and the two women followed.

They entered a tunnel carved into the hillside. Worms crawled in the walls, ecosystem unimpeded by the servants hustling to and fro. Richie turned a corner and trod off. Judith moved to follow but Jess pulled her back, yelling down the hall, "I'll call for you in a few days!"

Richie did not whinny a goodbye as he disappeared into the stables. Judith watched him go, suddenly overwhelmed and unsure of herself. *You are free now, little faery. Stepping into that palace will only bring you doom.* Richie killed like she had. Perhaps she should have taken his words with more weight.

"Come on," Jess said. She tugged Judith onward.

They moved silently through the tunnels, passing fox-faced guards and satyrs in bowties. They traveled up stairs and ramps and ladders. Judith could not comprehend how she had spent so many nights in the Spring palace over the course of her life completely clueless to the web of tunnels beneath. When she asked Jess about it, halfway through their ascent, the answer she received was, "Only people who work for the king use them, so no one else needs to know. Some royals do, but that's it, really." Judith wondered if similar structures existed in the Summer palace, and if they did, how she had been so blind to an expansive network of labor.

To Judith's surprise, they did not climb out of the dirt halls and up into the marble ones she knew to line the palace halls. Jess pulled her down a hall lined with torches, stopping at a large, though unremarkable, wooden door. She pushed it open easily, Judith following close behind.

"Be quiet," Jess said, "and don't step fully into the room."

Judith nodded despite her confusion.

It was only a few more steps until the wallpapered hallway ended. They had walked into a bedroom. The stone ceiling was grandly painted with a scene of a revel: Dancers twirled, imps laughed in dark corners, brownies worked silently under tables, and gremlins prodded musicians mid-play. There was a wall of plum curtains, an extremely large (occupied) bed sandwiched by nightstands, and an open door that led off to a small bathroom. Dimly lit sconces hung from every wall. In the far corner sat an enormous wardrobe, open door revealing a mess of shelves overflowing with clothes. It was a stunning room, though why it was below the actual palace, Judith did not know.

Jess released Judith's hand, gestured for her to stay put, and walked towards the bed. She crouched next to the occupant, quietly dropping saddlebags to the floor. She removed a small

glass vial from one — the tincture, Judith recognized, from the Witches Three — and gently shook the shoulder of the sleeping figure.

The figure, wrapped up in plum and gold blankets with only a tuft of short blonde hair showing, groaned.

“Heath,” Jess said softly, shaking the faery’s shoulder. “I’m back.”

The sleeper grunted, pale hand grabbing at Jess’ wrist. “I’ve missed you, Mickey. It’s been so long,” they said, voice hoarse from sleep.

Jess’ brow furrowed. “It’s Jess, sir. I’m back from my trip and I’ve got your medicine.” She shook the vial in her hand.

All at once, Judith understood: This was the Spring King. He was not up with his revelers, but hidden away down here, fast asleep and suffering from a mysterious ailment Jess was expected to heal. The king turned over, flopping onto his back. He looked ancient, unlike the young king who’d leaped spryly onto the throne, throwing a dazzling smile over his shoulder. His forehead wrinkled and his hair greyed at the roots.

“I’ve been waiting so long for your return, Mick,” he said as if Jess hadn’t spoken. “Why now? Why put me through all that trouble? Why the wardrobe, Mickey?”

Jess’ chest heaved, lips moving soundlessly. “Heath, it’s me, Jess.” She picked up his frail hands, held them tightly. “Who’s Mickey? What’s happening? Talk to me, sir. It’s your old friend, Jess.”

The king — Heath, it seemed, a rather unusual name for a faery and a rather unusual piece of information for a knight to be sitting on — blinked, and finally came back to himself. Heath, as in the faery who asked Jess for stories of the human world. Why was the king interested in humans? “Oh, Jess, my dear.” He slipped a hand from hers so he could pat her wrists twice. “I apologize for my confusion.” *Apologize?* Faeries did not apologize. What had happened to this boy? “Mickey is another old friend of mine. You remind me of her, sometimes. Hence the mixup.” His thumb skimmed Jess’ bronze skin. “You brought my tincture? Did the Witches give you any trouble?”

“None, sir,” Jess said, and Judith was amazed at how easily the lie fell from Jess’ lips. “I was in and out. No trouble at all.”

“Good, good. I can administer the drops myself.” He gestured for the vial.

Jess huffed a laugh. “You can, but I will,” she said. She uncapped the vial, put her hand under the king’s chin. He opened his mouth and she squeezed three large drops onto his tongue.

“Tastes like the good old days,” he said. He did not speak like a king — if anything, he spoke like Jess. Like a human. “Thank you.”

Judith's gut roiled. Faeries did not say *thank you*. It implied a debt to be paid at a later date, same as an apology. Something horrible had happened to make the king this way. Something had gone terribly wrong.

"Of course, Heath. I'll let you sleep." Jess left the vial on the king's nightstand and returned to Judith's side.

On their way out, Judith asked, "What is *wrong* with him?"

Jess misinterpreted the question. "He's been sick for a while now. No one knows why. That's why I went to the Witches Three — one of his advisors thought their magic would mean they'd know the antidote. The Court medics ran out of ideas months ago, so this is kind of our last try."

Judith made no attempts to clarify her meaning as Jess led her back through the tunnels. They walked down a long hall, descended a spiral staircase carved out of soil, and then Jess was pushing open another unremarkable door to a small but handsome room. The curtains (which took up less of the wall) and bedspread (covering an adequately sized bed) were red instead of the king's plum, and the en suite bathroom was simply a toilet, a sink, and a bathtub, arranged oddly in the closet-sized space. A slim wardrobe occupied the same corner the king's had. The wallpaper depicted warriors off to battle, the ceiling plain ivory, and two simple sconces lit the room.

"Not bad, huh?" Jess said, dropping the saddlebags by the foot of the bed.

Judith leaped onto the bed, bouncing slightly on the mattress. She shrugged. "It'll do."

Jess smiled. In the low light of the room, her human softness shone through: The slight curves of her body, the dimpled cheeks, the long dark hair. Judith knew herself to be harsh lines and edges, corners rather than curves. She could not believe how someone so different had come to exist in the same corner of the world she occupied.

"I'm gonna take a bath," Jess said. "Unless you want to first?"

Already Judith had pulled back the blankets and stuffed herself inside. "Uninterested."

"Okay." Jess knocked the doorway separating the rooms twice with her knuckles. "Be right back." The door rolled shut behind her, a glow underneath the sole indicator Jess' presence.

Judith only realized she had fallen asleep when the door rolled open again, startling her awake. Outside, an owl hooted, and inside, Jess' small body was covered solely by a thin towel. The locket hung from her neck, never removed. Her curls dripped long lines down her bronze shoulders. She really was a study in browns. Judith found herself trying to memorize every shade of her body, from her eyes to her skin to the newly visible birthmark atop the swell of her small breasts. "Come here," Judith said, reaching out with long red fingers. She wondered how that would look, brown and green and red twisting together.

Jess raised a bushy eyebrow, played coy. "What are your intentions?"

“You know what my intentions are,” Judith said. Jess tilted her head back and laughed. “Now come here.”

Jess pressed her knee into the mattress and crawled over until her face loomed above Judith’s. “I am but a humble stable girl, you know.” She put on an accent, utterly failing to replicate the lilting tones of the fae. “I cannot be sullied or the king will do away with me.”

“You say such silly things,” Judith said, tugging the towel and throwing it to the floor.

“I’m lying for two now.”

Jess pressed her mouth to Judith’s, and they both stopped talking.

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Judith awoke to Jess brushing her teeth, once again dressed in her tank top, underwear, and socks, though this set was cleaner, fresh from her wardrobe. Jess smiled at her with a frothy mouth. “Gmori,” she said. Then she spat toothpaste into the sink and went towards the saddlebags. Sat on the corner of the bed, she pulled out the paper bag from the twilight market, handed it to Judith. “I got you something.”

“Oh.” Judith reached for the bag, paper crinkling under her hand. She tried to smile and hoped it didn’t appear as false as it felt. She was unprepared for such a kind gesture — or did Jess expect something in return? “Was I supposed to get you something?”

Jess chuckled. “No, it’s a gift.” She blinked, hand waving as if to say *hurry up*. “Open it. Come on.”

Judith reached inside the bag, afraid of what lurked inside. She had no idea what it could be. She could reach in and find shackles, and Jess would smile and say, “Yeah, you’re a prisoner of the crown.” It could be a jar of glitter. It could be anything. She closed her eyes and removed the gift.

In her hands were a pair of tulle gloves dyed a deep crimson. Thin red ribbons wrapped around the wrist, tied in small bows at the corners, creating a kind of ruffled skirt effect. Not only were they cute, they were the perfect length to cover her stained hands. Or, not cover but complement, making the stain look as if it was just the glove. Her hands would be a fashion statement instead of a curse.

“Do you like them? I thought about getting real gloves, but I thought that would be more suspicious. Like, why is that girl wearing mittens in the middle of a Spring revel?” She shrugged. “I tried my best.”

“They are amazing.” Judith pulled them on, turned her hands over and back again in admiration. “You saved me from embarrassment before the whole Court.”

Jess shrugged again. “No biggie.”

Judith heart swelled; it was, in fact, a biggie. Maybe her heart had not hardened over the years, or if it had, the icy thing was easily defrosted by warm human hands. Her eyes stung. She blinked the feeling away. “I appreciate this more than I can say.”

“You don’t need to say.” She moved over, pressed her forehead to Judith’s. “I have my armor, now you have yours.”

Judith studied her hands rather than dare to look Jess in the eye.

Armor. She could work with that.

Jess leaned back, bit her lip. “I want to tell you something.”

“Tell.” Judith placed her gloves delicately in her lap.

“I kinda think I’m falling in love with you,” Jess said. Judith’s eyes opened so wide she thought they might fall out of her head. “At least I could. I’m kind of obsessed with you. And I know this is too much too soon, I’m really very aware of that, but I just like you so much. You’re funny and honest and you don’t try to play mind games with me like all the other fae do. And you’re really hot.” Jess swallowed, hands shaking. Judith took them instinctively, stared at their intertwined red and brown skin. Was she grateful for that rancid pixie’s curse? Had two weeks in a bush been a gift? “I just thought I should tell you, because I know you don’t know if you can trust me and that’s okay, so I thought I should say something so then at least we’re on the same page-”

“I trust you,” Judith said. And because she said it, it was true.

Jess stopped talking. “Oh. Okay.” She nodded, beaming. “Okay. I trust you too.”

Judith smiled as well. This human could love her. She might already. After witnessing fratricide and haunting the Wilds, Judith’s world was predictable. Every Court had standard weather, every faery tricked, every human lied. She did not, however, imagine she’d wind up in a human’s bed and consider her life better for it. “Jess,” she said, because names were a powerful sort of intimacy, “would you help me put these gloves on?”

“Of course,” Jess said, the happiest Judith ever heard her.

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The sun bled pink, gold, and lavender over the hills by the time revel preparations were in the works. It was announced early that morning “in honor of our beloved knight’s return,” but Judith knew the fae. Simple excuses were found every day to explain the continuance of the previous night’s debauchery. Jess was unbothered by the honor. She shrugged it off, said, “Heath does this every time, I’m used to it.” Judith wondered at Jess’ casual relationship with the king. That name was a tightly kept secret — Judith hadn’t been deemed of high enough status to hear it at the coronation. And here Jess was, uttering it again and again as she ransacked her closet for

something to wear. “No, no, no,” she muttered, punctuating each word by tossing an extremely expensive dress to the ground. She turned to Judith, hands on her hips. “I don’t think I have something that’ll look good with your gloves.”

Judith gaped. “You are looking for something for *me* to wear?”

“Well, yeah. You’re my plus one, and you can’t wear Nirvana merch to my party.”

“I did not agree to that.”

Jess threw another dress to the floor. “What are you talking about? You’re gonna make me go to the revel, *alone*, and sit around here while I make nice with faery politicians?” She shook her head, grabbed for the blanket covering Judith’s bare green body (save the gloves). “No way, José. You’re coming with me.”

Judith tried to squirm away, but Jess grabbed her waist with strong hands. “I don’t want to.” She twisted this way, that.

“You don’t get to be naked up here while I’m stuck down there for who knows how long. If you come with me, I might have *a little* fun. And I’d have a good excuse to leave early,” she said into Judith’s ear. Then she leaned away, stuck out her bottom lip, blinked those big eyes. “Please?”

Judith tossed the rest of blanket off her body. “Fine, you insolent bastard child.”

“Who told you my true name?”

A knock pounded on the door, and before Judith could cover herself, the doorknob was already rebounding against the wall. “Delivery,” the figure cried. They were hidden from sight by a heavy load: Many hangers bearing ostentatious dresses. They kicked the door closed behind themselves and walked into the room.

Judith squealed, rolling off the bed and onto the floor.

The figure dropped the dresses on the mattress. She was brilliantly tall, with skin so brown it was umber and the biggest hair Judith had ever seen — curls so wide and tall Judith would not be able to hold it all in her arms. Her ears were decidedly round, denoting her as human, and the smile on her face was wide and pleased. “If I’d known you had a guest-” for all Judith’s rolling, she was very visible- “I would’ve actually waited after I knocked.”

“You say that like it’s true.”

“It could be!”

“You never wait after knocking. It’s just not you. You’re a barger at heart.” She turned to look at Judith, still very naked on the ground. “You can get up. It’s nothing Kim hasn’t seen before.”

“I am sure she has never seen me before,” Judith said, pushing to her feet anyway.

Kim smiled, batting long black eyelashes. “Just every other faery bitch who’s ever lived.” She put out a hand. “Hi, I’m Kim.”

Judith did not take her hand. “Judy.”

“So you’re not a shaker,” Kim said.

“She’s a full-fledged faery. Not a human instinct in her,” Jess said. Judith understood this to be a reference to an older, and longer, conversation. Jess gestured to Kim. “Kim’s the queen’s consort.”

Kim playfully slapped Jess’ arm. “You’re supposed to keep that low-key, Jessie.”

Jess shrugged. “What’s the big deal? Everyone knows it.”

“Officially, I’m the queen’s in-house designer,” Kim said to Judith, ignoring Jess’ mocking face behind her. “Unofficially... Jess just told you.”

Judith covered her breasts, feeling slightly too on-display in front of the two bustier human women. “The queen’s fucking a human?”

Kim tilted her head slightly, smiling wide. “Aren’t we all?”

Judith had no response for that one.

“I’m not,” Jess said, grinning, and Kim said, “I’m not either,” and then they were both laughing. Judith stood, naked, smiling awkwardly.

“Anyway,” Kim started, “the king had these made for you. Surprise surprise. You sure you’re not sleeping with him?”

Judith’s mouth dropped open, but Jess was quick to brush the idea aside. “Never have and never will, thank you, Kim. How many times do I have to explain the liking women thing? We’re just friendly. He likes me.”

“I think there’s something sexual there. Not for you, but for him.”

Jess shook her head. “I think I just remind him of someone he used to know.” *Mickey.*

“A lover?”

“A *friend*. Maybe a lover,” she ceded. “But it’s not like that.” To Judith: “I promise.”

Judith shut her mouth. The king was distinctly nonsexual the night previous. He had grabbed for Jess with the grip of a desperate, lonely old man, not with any sexual intent. Kim, whose status was a consequence of her relationship with the queen, expected Jess — who obviously received preferential treatment — to be engaging in similar acts. That was how things worked in Faerie: Everything was an exchange. So what did Jess provide? Knightly duties did not explain the dresses piled on the floor and bed. Who was Mickey, and what did the king see of them in Jess?

“I’ll take your word,” Judith said.

Peering at the two of them, Kim pointed to the dresses. “There’s some good stuff in there. I’d know, I designed a lot of it.”

“I believe you,” Jess said. Because humans had to believe each other about these things. “Thank you for bringing them over. And, on the subject: Do you think you have anything that’d fit Judy? I got her these gloves but nothing I have matches.”

Kim reached for Judith’s hand, and this time, Judith let her have it. She studied the tulle, rotating Judith’s hand and humming to herself. “I might have a few things. I’ll have someone else bring them over — someone who knocks without barging.”

“Oh, fuck you,” Jess said. She pulled Kim’s body into hers, hugged the other human woman tight. With two quick pats, she released Kim, both of them smiling. “See you tonight.”

“See you two,” Kim said. And then she was gone.

Judith fell onto the bed, crushing quite a few dresses. “So you have found a way to keep the company of humans here.”

“You don’t like her,” Jess said.

Judith shrugged. She did not know enough of Kim to make a fair judgment, but being in the pocket of a royal was always a bad sign. With Jess... she needed to know more. How did she learn the king’s name? Did he give it freely? “I don’t like most humans,” she said simply. “And I am naked.” *You put me in an uncomfortable position.* Good thing Judith had no shame.

“Kim is good. She’s nice. I think she was a changeling.” Jess dropped onto the bed next to Judith, crushing even more dresses. She ran her hands through her hair. Judith reached for one, took it in her own, and attempted to study its creases. “She’s older than me and I think she figured out pretty quick that the only way she’d get by here is if she was friends with royals. The king and queen have a... sexless relationship, so she filled a niche. And she gets to do what she loves. Make clothes. I think she’s happy.”

All of that made a good amount of sense. Judith had known a few changelings in the Summer Court. Those that lived long enough were dull and sad, and made for uninteresting playthings — a shift from their childhood existence as faery toys. Kim was lucky to have avoided that fate.

Happiness, though, did not exist for long in Faerie.

Jess’ head lolled to the side, turned to face Judith. “Whatcha doing there?”

Judith pouted at Jess’ hand. “I am trying to read your palm. Like you read mine.”

“The only thing I *actually* know is that the line that starts above your thumb on your palm and curves downwards is your life line. I made the rest up.”

“Hm,” Judith said, tracing the ‘life line’ with a tulle-clad crimson nail. She held up her own hand for comparison. “There is a break in your line.”

Jess sat up. “What?”

“Look.” Judith traced along the line; it started out like Judith’s, continued down for a bit, and then nothing. The break. And then, just as suddenly, the line continued. The gap was about half an inch long. “I wonder why.”

“Huh. That’s so strange. Do you think it means anything?”

“You are the one who reads palms.”

“I told you I was faking it,” Jess said, laughing. “It’s probably nothing.”

Judith did not answer. Very little was *nothing*, but she would not take Jess’ comfort from her.

A knock came again at the door: Kim’s second delivery. Jess went to get the door and Judith traced her own life line through red tulle, frowning.

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Judith wound up in a long, thin black dress made of velvet that trailed behind her as she walked. Jess’ shoes were too big for her, and she preferred being barefoot anyway, so she went without. Her gloves provided a pop of color against the black, matching her short hair somewhat (which she left down, messy from Jess’ hands).

Jess selected a tulle dress in order to “kind of match” with Judith, though hers was cream-colored. The top was unlined, two lace roses settling over Jess’ nipples, leaving little to the imagination. The tulle skirt was lined with a cream silk underneath, lace flowers blooming upwards towards Jess’ torso. She wore simple brown slippers and strapped knives to her inner thighs. In her pocket — *Kim doesn’t make dresses without pockets* — she put her salt and four-leaf clover locket. From her ear hung her folded up suit of armor, and slung around her waist was her sheathed curse-bending blade. “It may be a party, but I’m still a knight.”

They walked up through the dirt hallways, Judith holding the tail of her dress so as not to dirty it, winding their way into the palace. Quickly enough, the dirt gave way to marble and ramps gave way to staircases. At the top of the steps, Jess stopped in front of a door and turned to face Judith.

“Ready for the most memorable night of your life, Judith Innes?”

Snorting, Judith said, “I want to dance with you.” Humans weren’t supposed to dance with faeries, given that most humans who were led astray on paths through the woods wound up dancing at faery camps until they dropped dead from bleeding, exhaustion, or a mix of the two, but Judith thought she could manage to keep Jess out of trouble. And Jess trusted her to do so. Jess might *love her*.

“We can do that.”

Judith nodded, leaned over to press her lips to Jess’. “Let’s.”

“Okay,” Jess said, and pushed the door open.

The revel was sheer pandemonium — Judith’s eyes darted from the new grass floors to the familiar high arches of the marbled ceiling. Faeries filled the hall: Decadently dressed goblins discussed a second-coming of Mab, nude elves lounged about, selkies leered from a small pool of salt water. The grass floor rose into a small throne-bearing hill at the end of the hall, atop which sat Jess’ good friend Heath Callaghan, the King of the Spring Court. Perhaps it was the party, the distance, or the dark blue dress shirt that hung open on his pale chest, but he no longer appeared ancient. He was young again, the same boy he’d been all those years ago. It was the throne and the Court’s magic at work — Judith recalled her own sickly father appearing healthy before his subjects, as if their strength was his.

The door slammed shut behind Jess and Judith, and silence descended on the hall.

“Ah,” the king said, quiet but audible across the floor. “It seems the guest of honor has arrived.”

Jess stuck up a hand, lips forming a thin, polite smile as she bowed shallowly, then once more. “And it seems my party is already in full swing, Your Majesty,” she said. *So this is when your manners appear*, Judith thought.

He tapped ring-clad fingers against the throne. “Quite, yes.”

Jess gestured to Judith, took her hand. “This is-”

“Oh, how pleasant! You brought our little murderer along with you!”

Judith forgot how to breathe.

“What, Sir?” Jess asked, eyebrows drawn, mouth ajar. Was the confusion real, or was this all part of a game? Jess could pretend, could lie where others couldn’t. *I’m lying for two now*. Had this all been planned? Had the Witches known? Had Richie, when he told her to run?

You’re one to talk.

The king clapped his hands together. “Our murderer, the green one, with red hands. You have brought her,” he said. He wagged a finger and a will-o’-the-wisp appeared beside him, glowing gold and bright. “Willie here — *that is your name, yes?* — Willie arrived days ago with word of a murderer his friends-” he gestured at the crowd- “who are here *somewhere*, I don’t know where, his friends captured having gotten away. They described her- oh here they are.” The goblin and pixie, dressed to impress, climbed up the small hill, horrible grins on their faces. “They described her, and your guest fits the bill perfectly. I should not be surprised, as you are my best knight. That is why we throw revels in your honor!”

The crowd thundered, shrieking and applauding. The marble walls shook.

“How brilliant of you to bring her upon your return,” the king continued once his subjects quieted. “We were worried we would have to scrounge her up from the Wilds as I have before. You have given us a gift we will not forget, Jess Ferro. Free entertainment for my glorious

Spring folk! Shall we take a tiny intermission, have a quick trial, and then continue with our revelry, my children?"

If the walls shook before, the crowd threatened to topple them now.

Judith remembered how to breathe then, recalled the motions as her chest heave-hoed, every inhale ragged and uneven. She tasted blood at the back of her throat, and didn't know whether or not she should look at Jess. She did not take her hand back — she wanted the comfort, wanted the feel of that familiar calloused hand against hers — but she could not bring herself to turn her head. This whole thing was terrible, and if she turned to see Jess not looking shocked or appalled or terrified but instead looking satisfied, successful, *happy*, Judith just might drop to the floor and die.

The night would certainly be memorable.

"Let's begin," the king said.

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Soft hearts make for easy targets. This, Judith turned in her head like a mantra when the queen said, "brush my hair" or "rub my feet" or "bring me a pot of boiling honeysuckle from the kitchens and do not spill a drop on your way back and move quickly; if you fail you can sleep in the stables with the horses." Judith ran the brush through the queen's hair, long and soft strands the color of leaves falling from trees; she massaged the balls of the queen's tan feet, shaving off callouses and painting her toes a deep purple; she ran down to the kitchens for a pot of honeysuckle, spilled a quarter of it on the way back up, and after receiving a cruel smile from the queen, crawled into Richie's stable, weeping to such an embarrassing degree that he dropped the *I told you so* look, shifted into human form, and rubbed her back until she fell asleep. All the while, she cursed herself. *Soft hearts make for easy targets, and you surrendered years of hardening in an instant for a stupid little human. How old is she, anyway, compared to your hundreds of years? How much of a fool are you to let a twenty-something-year-old girl take your freedom from you?* She took to sleeping in Richie's stable after that first night, stole some pillows from an empty bedroom to make the damp corner a little more comfortable. Richie had not remarked on her mistake, recognizing that Judith suffered enough by her own hand.

The trial — if you could even call it that — had, quite obviously, gone poorly. The king's first question was, "I am correct in my understanding that you, upon arriving at the grove these three faeries inhabit, took pixie children up in your hands, bit their heads off, and threw their bodies into the creek?"

Judith, who'd decided to not look at Jess, looked. Judith could not deny the king but Jess, the liar, could. She hoped the clear devastation on her face would communicate her thought

process. Jess did not look over — she stared at the king, horrified, mouth ajar. This expression clarified the course of events for Judith: No, Jess had not known Judith made the Spring Court's "Most Wanted" list, but she was not going to speak for Judith when her eyes were filled with *murderer murderer murderer*. Did Jess not understand why Judith's hands were red? *You're one to talk*. The most brutal part of the curse was its accuracy; a reminder to Judith that she killed readily, without worry or a second thought. She was mistaken to understand it as a curse. The spell simply enlightened them all to Judith's true inability to cleanse herself of her crimes. And they were crimes, even in Faerie. The trial was a long time coming.

"If you do not answer, I will have to assume I am correct," the king said.

"You are correct," Judith mumbled.

Jess' hand fell from hers, and Judith barely heard the words that followed — the night was already lost.

"So it was a marriage of convenience," Kim said, running a hand through the queen's hair. They splayed across the enormous mattress, limbs twisted in the bedsheets (which depicted either an orgy or a gross display of violence).

Judith faced away from them, tasked with gathering and organizing all the queen's jewelry. Because of the glamour the king forced her under, she would not be able to remove herself from the task until it was complete. She was tasked with this particular chore three days ago. Pieces of jewelry laid, at random, throughout the palace. Worry needled at Judith as the order might pertain to jewelry outside of the palace as well. She did not want to walk all the way to the Autumn Court — the queen's birthplace and second throne — to collect a stray earring.

"More inconvenient than anything," the queen said. "I left my home for a husband with no romantic interest in me. He's never wanted me that way. What a pair we make." Her laugh was humorless.

Judith picked up a necklace and grimaced upon noticing its entanglement with many others. She needed tweezers to do this properly. Standing, she walked around the bed and into the connected bathroom, grabbing the tweezers from the third shelf in the second mirrored cabinet. After almost a week of service, she knew the queen's rooms backwards and forwards.

Kim hummed in sympathy. "Do you know why?"

"I have my own theories, though none will grace your round ears, my sweet," the queen said. Judith could hear the conniving smile in her voice. Oddly, she found the queen's behavior comforting. Following her bout with a human, a kelpie, and her peek from behind the curtain at the king, the queen's brusque cruelty and blatant manipulation was a return to the Faerie Judith had known and loved her entire life. The only kind of sincere the queen managed was sincerely awful, making her predictable. Everything was predictable. Judith felt like one of the Witches Three, watching her life spool out before her: Sleeping in Richie's stable, serving the queen,

getting tossed around whenever the woman liked. Part of Judith yearned for the coltsfoot bush. She missed the wretched branches and wished she'd resigned herself to strangulation.

"Maybe next time, then." Kim seemed to believe she could worm her way into the queen's heart, achieve whatever the Mickey that felled the king had. And yet Judith circled them in their every waking moment — and she meant *every* moment — without ever hearing Kim utter the queen's name. Kim would get nowhere without the intimacy that name represented, and the queen was not the intimate type. Judith could be convinced that the queen executed anyone who learned her name. Most royals did. Col likely took to it, drowning faeries in the pool surrounding his throne.

Judith started to unravel the necklaces. A few came away easily, though two resisted. She settled into her unforgiving wooden stool and leaned in, squinting as she selected chains to pull on.

Knock knock.

The queen sighed as if she was the most overworked soul to exist. "Get that, Judith."

Judith stood. It was not a choice; she did not will herself to walk to the door, intricately carved with gargoyles and angels. She simply reached for the doorknob, unable to comprehend why she would do anything else.

It was Jess. She was back in her suit of armor, freshly polished if that glow under the sconces was any indicator, and she held her helmet in the crook of her elbow. She frowned as her eyes landed on Judith.

A sob rose in Judith's chest. What did Jess think of her now? Was she still someone Jess could love, or did she only see a murderer? Her brown eyes darted to Judith's hands now, where they rested bare on the doorknob, and Judith quickly clasped them behind her back. *You're one to talk.* Jess said she hadn't meant it — she had, if only a little. She was a liar, after all, and Judith assumed it was easy to lie without knowing it.

Soft hearts make for easy targets, and Judith was now as soft as they come.

The queen raised a rust-colored eyebrow. "Yes?"

Kim did not speak, only glanced between Judith and Jess with an expression so torn Judith had to look away, though that meant she was looking at Jess again. She decided to stare at the queen's vanity and all the work she had left to do. That was Judith's sole purpose now. To serve.

"The king wanted me to notify Kim that a changeling boy's been found wandering at the border. He hoped she would join the party setting out tomorrow to recover him and, hopefully, make a place for him here."

The queen, head in Kim's lap, looked up. "Your answer, then?"

"Of course I will join," Kim said. "Whatever will please the king."

“Whatever will please the king,” the queen echoed, mouth twisting into that horrible grin of hers. “Anything else, dear knight? Do you want anything of our new girl, Judith here? She has performed well thus far and I am sure she would happily do whatever you asked of her. Am I correct, Judith?”

Judith studied the knotted necklaces resting on the vanity. She would pull the gold one next. Yes, that looked right. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

Jess’ frown deepened. “I only ask that if I’ve left something with Judith, she return it.”

The queen cackled then, clapping and sitting up, duvet falling away from her bare chest. “Ah, what a brilliant demand. What will you return to her, Judith? Her heart, perhaps?” She cackled again, leaned sideways into her pillows. “Knight, you slay me, you do. I am forever grateful my husband brought you into our service, if only for that remark you just made.” She sighed. “How brilliant. What entertainment you two have provided for us here in the Spring Court. I almost forget about Fall.”

Judith pressed her lips together, unwilling to answer the queen’s question. Luckily, there was no glamour in the words, so she didn’t have to. She had nothing to return to Jess. She was the one who had given everything away: Her time, her energy, her trust. Even the gloves, which the king forced her to give back before the entire Court. Her crimson skin was now public knowledge. The other servants took to taunting her for it, pretending to faint when she passed them in the hall.

In the corner of her eye, Jess twitched. “That is all, my queen,” she said.

“Yes, yes, take your leave, you are dismissed.” The queen waved a flimsy hand in the air. “Be gone.”

Jess nodded and disappeared from view. Only then did Judith turn, eyes glued to her absence. She could reach out and touch where Jess had once been. The air might still be warm and carry the sting of iron.

“Close the door, Judith,” the queen scolded.

Her hand moved back to the doorknob.

Twinkling in the shadows, she glimpsed it: Jess’ iron and glass sword. The curse-bender.
I only ask that if I’ve left something with Judith, she return it.

Towards the end of the trial, when Judith and Jess were “invited” to step up to the king’s throne, he had delivered her punishment. On her knees before him, she bore the words like a head bore the guillotine’s blade. Something inside of her died, shriveled up, rotted. Her heart, probably. Soft and puny as it was. “You are to serve the Spring Court until the end of your days, or until I or another royal dismisses you. You will serve under the Spring and Autumn Queen as her personal handmaiden. However, if the Knight of Spring, Jess Ferro, desires or demands

anything from you, you will default to her command, regardless of what the queen says.” (Judith supposed that one slid by because the queen was away that night.)

Jess raised a hand. “Um, sir-”

The king turned cold blue and green eyes on her. He raised an eyebrow, daring her to interrupt him mid-speech. It was obvious then to Judith that if their friendship was true, the sincerity of it existed in the Court’s shadows, in the dark maze of hallways hidden from everyone’s eyes.

Jess dropped her hand, pressed her lips together, looked away.

“Fucking coward,” Judith hissed. Only Jess and the king heard, and maybe the will-o’-wisp, pixie, and goblin standing off to the side, beaming down at her with vengeful smiles. Jess’ jaw clenched.

The king smirked, continuing on. “Whatever is asked of you, you will do, and you will fulfill each command to the highest order. Any task gone unfinished will result in your death. Understood?”

She considered using his true name to her advantage, leave a little chaos in giving that power to every one of his subjects, but she didn’t. A slave with the king’s name had more of an upper hand than one among many with the knowledge.

Judith simply stared at him until he said, “Say, ‘Yes, Your Majesty,’ if you understand the terms of your punishment.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Very good.” He clapped again, perfect kingly smile on his face. Despite the transferred health of his subjects, Judith could see thin lines on the king’s forehead, around his eyes and mouth. Something was aging the king, and she had an odd instinct that the tincture was not the solution. “Jess, take Judith to the queen’s quarters, and when you return our revel will resume.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Jess said. And that was that.

Only she’d left the sword. Was Kim’s order from the king real? Had Jess made the entire thing up just to leave the sword, give the order, and ensure Judith followed her, wherever she might have gone?

Judith stared at where the tip of the sheathed blade dug into the dirt floor. She glanced out the queen’s window, open to the twilight air. The setting sun spilled magenta light across the grass. In the distance, something silver glinted, stopping halfway towards the trees before turning back and pausing.

It did not matter the distance between them — Judith knew Jess was looking at her, could feel those chestnut eyes like iron poking through her skin, threatening to kill her.

“Judith, close the door,” the queen repeated, voice rising in volume.

“The knight left something, Your Majesty,” Judith said, already stepping out the door and

reaching for the sword's hilt. "I must return it." She did not wait for the queen's answering cry. Sword in hand, door slamming shut behind her, she ran down the hall and out of the palace hills, jostling other servants as she went. She slammed into one servant particularly hard, a selkie out of water, and the platter in the selkie's hands crashed to the ground.

"Hey, you bitch!"

But Judith kept running, only slowing once she reached the bottom of the hill. She stepped out through the door she had come in through a week ago. It felt like forever and no time at all had passed.

Upon seeing her, Jess turned and walked directly into the trees.

Judith followed. At a distance, she weaved behind Jess, climbed over small hills, avoided a family of rabbits. They walked and walked and walked and walked. The sun disappeared beneath the horizon, leaving the waning moon to light the way through the woods. Jess must have had a destination in mind, because she continued on and on, never turning back to check that Judith was following. Judith wanted to believe it was because of fucking *trust*, but the fact of her orders made it impossible for her not to pursue.

Something rustled to Judith's left. She glanced over, spotting a doe. It blinked twice at her, eyes swirling, and then leaped into the brush.

Eventually, pale moon high over the trees, Jess stopped. The trees arched overhead, framing her like a painting: *Silver knight in moonlit grove, helmet in hand*. She turned slowly, sabatons crushing plush grass.

Judith's grip tightened on the sword in her hands.

"You know I didn't mean for any of this to happen, right?"

Judith could not help her terrible laugh. It was humorless, dry, and tinged with cruelty, almost like the queen's cackle. She laughed so hard she fell to the ground, tears springing to her eyes. "You expect me to believe you, even now. You expect me to trust you," she said, laughing again as her tongue rolled over the word *trust*. "I was a fool to believe a single word you said, and not to believe the warnings. The doe, the silver witch, *Richie*." Jess flinched at his name, betrayed. *You're one to talk*. "I am not fool enough to play this game with you again, Jess Ferro."

"I'll tell you everything you want to know," Jess said. She shook her head vigorously, hair shifting against her armor. "I've never lied to you. And I'm not lying when I say I didn't want this and I didn't know this was going to happen."

"The witch said this world *isn't meant for you*, Jess. Walk away now, and I will spare you."

Jess' eyelashes quivered, a gasping butterfly. "You wouldn't."

"What do you mean, *I wouldn't*? Have you seen my hands, Jess?" She held them out. "Really, truly, have you seen them? Have you looked upon them and considered how much blood

I've had to spill to be stained like this? You heard the king. I saw your face," she said. "I'm one to talk, right? I terrify you. And I should. You should be scared. Because this place will devour you whole and there will be nothing left to rot. I cannot wait for that day. I wish to see you ruined, and afraid, and fully aware of your mistake in coming here. For every mistake I have made, you have made tenfold. You should never have crossed me. You should know who you are dealing with before you make promises of love." When a faery said *I love you*, it was rare and true, because love was hard in a world where lifetimes flit by in seconds and honest bonds did not come easy. When a human said *I love you*, like Jess did, it was often and flimsy. They spewed love out of every orifice, grabbing onto the feeling with the utmost purpose before their lives slipped away like a log down a river. Judith had witnessed humans lie about loving. She'd seen faeries die from it, believing the lie until the human came back with hatred in their eyes. The fae were cruel, yes, but Judith thought it crueler that a human could wake up one day and not love you and still be able to say they did.

She would not be foolish enough to die from this.

"I never lied to you," Jess repeated. Tears rolled down her cheeks, and Jess made no move to swipe them away. "I didn't want this. I want to get you out of there."

"And why should I believe a word you say?"

"Because this world may not be meant for me, but it is mine. It's all I know. I haven't spent my whole life here without learning anything. If I thought it'd be easier to lie my way through this place, I would. But it's not. You expect me to lie. The only way I can avoid your tricks is by being honest. One-hundred percent honest one-hundred percent of the time. I told you I could love you and I meant it. I love you, Judith, and I'm going to get you out of the Spring Court."

Judith pushed to her feet, shaking. "No, you are not."

"Yes I am."

"No," Judith said, shaking her head. She stepped closer and closer, unsheathing the sword in her hand. For all her cowardliness, Jess did not move away, though her mouth shook and tears dripped onto her armor, salt leaving little round stains behind. "You are not."

"I am." Her little human voice was so, so fragile. Practically brittle. "I will."

The true test of a curse is its originality. A curse is stronger and less malleable when inside the victim. When it is internalized.

Say the words, insert it, and there you have your curse.

I only ask that if I've left something with Judith, she return it.

Soft hearts make for easy targets. And iron is very brittle.

In one swift movement, Judith plunged the blade into Jess' iron and silver armor, through her fleshy chest and heart and lungs, and out through the other side.

Jess choked on air. Her helmet fell to the ground.

"I curse you, Jess Ferro," Judith spat. "With your curse-bending sword, I curse you. I curse you to sleep forevermore, lying in this grove, frozen in time and undying, until one of three things occur: First, the world ends; second, the Fates decide that *I* am in need of aid and *you* are the only one that can help me; or third, your true love settles a kiss upon your lips. If you awake, this curse will be black stain on your chest, visible to all. The stain can only be removed by said true love's kiss." Judith grinned as something dark spilled from the blade, spreading across Jess' chest and armor. "Does that satisfy you, human?"

Bloody saliva dripped from the corner of Jess' mouth. "When I wake up, I'll prove—"

But Judith would not know what Jess intended on proving because she choked on her words, fell backwards into the bed of grass, and slipped into a deep, unending sleep.

A tremor went through the trees, muttering expletives and *oh dears*.

Judith pulled the sword from Jess' chest. A little blood spurted out, and Judith wiped the sword clean against her servants' clothes — a simple plum shirt and matching plum pants. She returned the sword to its sheath, tied the belt around Jess' waist. "Consider your sword returned," she muttered. She did not wipe her hands. If Jess' blood had gotten on them, she was unable to differentiate it from the usual crimson skin. She plucked dirt from under a nail, admired the long shape of her fingers, dark red in the moonlight. "I might grow fond of you," she said to her hands, smile sinister.

Before she left, she picked up the helmet and shoved it back onto Jess' head, tucking long hair into armor. Judith shook her bubbling hands. She imagined another painting: *The Sleeping Knight*. Hair hidden, Jess was once again that unknowable silver suit. She was nothing. A silver corpse laid to rest.

Judith walked back to the palace, returned to her seat at the queen's vanity, and pulled on the gold chain. The knot came undone. She set the necklaces inside their drawer, slipped downstairs into Richie's stable, and fell into the first peaceful sleep since her days as a coltsfoot bush. (Jess had been a horrible bedfellow, complaining often about the night's silence.) Judith dreamed of determined knights and faeries full of tricks and queens gone missing and brokenhearted kings. Upon waking, she wondered if a cursed knight dreamed the same dream.

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The knight would wake up, of course. But that is another story.

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