

There were no happily ever afters. If anyone turned out to be a long-lost princess, a budding sorceress, a chosen one of some kind it should have been her. She lived in a mountainous area that filled with mist if anyone so much as thought 'rain,' she knew how to spin and weave and all those traditional skills that were supposed to get you bespelled into a fairy coma. She knew how to ride horses. She even had three years of archery under her belt, one of fencing. She'd prepared all her short life to be whisked away to a magic land where everything would be all right again and adventures would always end with everyone home safely.

When the adventure finally came it was over in a night, it involved her scratching her nails till they were raw and broken on stone walls and floors, skinning her knees, going hungry for an entire day, and getting so mad her face flamed up in that awkward, pre-tears way. With puffy eyes and cheeks and an urge to kick a guy in the balls, paired off with the shameful feeling that she was overreacting. Unbearable smugness is not an offense punishable by violence, she heard her mother say. Which might be true, but she never got points for resisting the urge to punch someone.

Unsatisfying.

She got back safely, and in the final confrontation decided that kicking him in the balls was an overreaction. But if there was a proper gesture for ew gross get away from me combined with why can't you be a normal boy and ask me to a movie like the rest of them, she didn't know it. She wanted him to be just as hurt and frustrated and confused as she was, though she knew it was unfair and felt guilty afterwards for that, too.

And then nothing happened. Anti-climax. Everyone was safe and her parents were none the wiser, and all she had to think about was next year's college applications and the English test that Monday. Normal, except that she still pulled feathers out of her mouth some mornings. Saturday afternoons where she used to think about going to the movies by herself she now sat at her vanity, twirling a feather that started from gold and faded into a soft puff of white.

The school bus dropped her off where it picked her up; at the foot of the hill with a long march up to her house. It was a safe neighborhood, it wasn't that her parents didn't trust her, it was more that she didn't trust herself with the tree shadows reaching out for her ankles, the leaves whirling up to her fingertips. Every time she heard birds taking off out of the trees she looked around. Noisy buggers.

"You all suck!" she turned and screamed at the empty street, the blue jays and cardinals evacuating the bushes at the sound of her voice. She hadn't meant them. Okay, yes she had. Them too.

And then she was at her front door, stomping through and out of the rain, locking it behind her. It should have made her feel safe, but after being abducted from her bedroom for late night adventures in other worlds, it was hard to feel safe anywhere anymore.

Out of spite and belligerence she'd worked to fix that. Now she had all her protections up, her friends facing outwards at the windows and the door. The mirrors on her vanity were covered unless she needed to use them. The white banners up along the edges of the ceilings did their work. She'd read every book she could get her hands on about magic, or magick, depending on which publishing house you looked at. She knew how to defend herself now.

She shucked off her shoes and crawled onto her bed, tucking her feet under the folded blanket at the foot. Homework before dinner, dinner before books. Books would soothe her to sleep, stories of people who went through hard times but came out alive and on top of things in

the end, and most importantly had their lives together. Hers had fallen apart.

Summer vacation meant she could stay out at the stables where her family boarded their horses till after dark, as long as she could get a ride back with someone. Jude had her license but no car of her own and her parents weren't sanguine about her ability to navigate the curvy roads in the dark, especially as distracted as she'd been since the incident. It was a flat-out miracle that she got her driver's license at all, and the next day she scraped the undercarriage of her mom's suburban driving it into a shallow ditch. They'd given her the cost of the tow to get it out, but from then on she wasn't driving either of their cars without an adult present. She could get a job and save up for her own car.

That conversation led to a threat of keeping a horse in their backyard and riding it alongside the freeways when she needed to go somewhere. But it was so absurd they hadn't believed her, though at least they hadn't laughed, and she'd stomped upstairs to her room in disgust. With herself more than anything.

Tonight she had a ride; the stable bookkeeper or whatever his official title was had decided to stay over in order to clear out the month's accounts, and all she had to do was knock on his door and let him know when she wanted to leave. So she called her parents, stole a burrito from the stable fridge, and went into the tack room to get her horse's saddle. She hauled pad and saddle with bridle draped over it down from the oversized peg, puffing feathers out of her mouth as she staggered.

Always with the damn feathers. Was somebody's saddlepad or overnighting pillow stuffed with them? Had there been a horrible bedding item accident here that nobody had told her about? They might be escaping from somebody's left-over coat, the horses did chew on the arms. It was more possible here, with down jackets and fancy saddle pads. She preferred not to think about the unmistakeable meaning of waking up with feathers in her mouth when all her pillows were polyester. At this point he could be standing there with a wind machine behind him blowing them into her face and she'd wonder aloud who'd opened up a featherbed factory.

"You suck and I'm not coming back," she said to a stable half full of horses, just in case he was lurking in there. One barn cat, a nest of sparrows, the horses, and a lost and possibly drunk blue jay heard her. He did not. "Stupid jerkface."

Jude had to modulate her swearing; the bookkeeper was elderly but in stark contradiction with every other old guy she knew, somehow had the vulgar capacity of a mouse. He always gave her shocked and rebuking looks when she swore. When she'd realized what was going on, when she'd had her little adventure, she'd cussed a blue streak right to the bastard's face and he hadn't blinked an eye.

Her horse, Apple Pucker, was an easy-gaited horse who used to be on the show circuit with her mother, back in the day. She also was prone to starting before her rider had got her leg fully over the saddle.

"Stupid fucking horse!" she yelped, getting her other foot in the stirrup quickly and her hands on the reins before she slid off. By the time she thought about the old man's poor sensibilities she was already out of the barn and walking around the first ring, down to the trails.

Pucker slowed down once she got past the ring and the familiar territory of the stable grounds. Around and down to this corner of the stable was all park land and conservationists, she

was allowed to ride there so long as she didn't go wild and start chopping trees down or pulling up all the plants. She kept Pucker to a trot at most, not knowing where the dead roots or gopher holes were, but riding along the trails helped clear her mind.

She and Pucker were both nodding off when she realized they were off the trail, too. Not heading back to the barn, they were going in the completely wrong direction, the moon was on the wrong side. Years ago, she would have assumed they were lost. Years ago she would have been with her mother, a flashlight, and a compass.

"Hey, you jackass," she screamed to the unfamiliar sky. "This isn't funny anymore!" Pucker didn't think it was funny anymore, either. She bolted.

After the next moments she couldn't think how it started and had no idea where she was going. The sounds of branches breaking and hooves pounding were lost on her. She knew to keep herself facing front and leaning forward, but beyond that it blurred. The horse knew to keep from running into things. She wanted to stop running away.

After the second or third downed tree, which Pucker nearly unseated her jumping over it, she managed to pull the damn horse up to a jouncing trot, then to a walk. And now she had even less of an idea where she was. She'd saddled her poor horse with the intent of getting lost on the mountain, and now she was. Not for long, with any luck. When she didn't come home by midnight her parents would call the police, they'd get searchers out, or someone would be wandering around with a flashlight. Something she could see, rather than hear, with the way sound echoed out here. But for now she was really damn lost.

"I'm sorry if I scared you," she apologized to her horse as she slid off, patting its lathered neck. Pucker had run hard enough that she was sweating all over. Not hard enough, Jude noticed gratefully, that her breathing was labored. So the stupid thing hadn't managed to kill them both yet, and that was something. "When we go back we'll go slower, yes? Assuming we can find our way back..."

The horse said nothing, lowering its head to crop grass.

Jude sighed, looked up and around to see if she could recognize any landmarks, find any kind of a beaten path. Or an unbeaten path. A goat track. People had goats around here, they would go wandering, eat people's bushes or front door mats or trash bags. If she was near any of the farms there should be a path back to civilization and home, shouldn't there?

No. Nothing.

As the sun lowered itself onto the mountain she realized it hadn't been the smartest idea to go tearing out of the barn without a blanket or a bite to eat or anything. "At least you can eat grass," she told her horse, who went on ignoring her. "Stupid horse." She could wrap herself up in the saddlepad, but that wouldn't go very far around her shoulders. Maybe if she curled up under it. The important thing to do when you were lost, especially out here, was to stay put. She'd be out here all night.

Half a lean-to later she was out of the wind but was too distracted by hunger to want to finish it, and she ended up sitting with her arms around her knees and her back against the rough side of a tree, rubbing her arms to keep warm.

The blanket that fell on top of her was both unexpected and too heavy for her to react to that surprise. She froze underneath it, waiting for some sort of explanation. After a second to get

used to it she wasn't sure it was a blanket at all. Which demanded even more explanation.

"You're a tiny thing to be out so late with a horse for company."

The voice was hoarse and shrill all at once, and she couldn't tell if it belonged to a man or a woman. It made her not want to peek out of the whatever it was that had been dropped on her. She wrapped her hands around the edge and felt the outside of it. It felt like feathers just plucked from the chicken, with bone and down and everything still attached. And the inside felt like soft leather. She thought of stories about selkies and pulling off their skins and decided not to think about it anymore. At least the feathers were too big to push her over that last precarious edge. Too long, wrong shape, wrong texture. She decided that and then put it out of her mind before she could focus on how she knew what his feathers felt like.

"Thank you," she managed to say, because manners were important when you were talking to fairies. She'd learned that one good and hard. She'd also learned that their idea of manners was different from humans', and remembered it too late. Maybe he, if it was a he, would take pity on her because she was from the uncultured mortal world.

The owner of the voice was behind her and the tree now. "And what are you doing out here in the woods at night?" it asked again.

She climbed to her feet and tried to circle round the tree. "It wasn't night when I came out." She thought this was a reasonable argument.

"But you haven't gone back. Surely you know the way home." It wasn't on the other side of the tree, whoever he was, or she. The voice no longer sounded so much like a man's. "Or are you lost?"

"I'm not lost," she told her. Him. Too quickly, but she wasn't lost. She was out in the park land, most likely, in a national forest, she couldn't have gone that far. So she was probably up the parkway some. Big deal. All she had to do to get back home was find which way the sun was moving and pick her point east by that, and keep going. She'd hit the highway or the river sooner or later. "I'm just..."

"Out of doors when you shouldn't be. Disobedient. Unruly."

Cold fear tightened her throat. The free folk took away disobedient children, that's what she'd already heard, and her encounter a couple years ago seemed to prove it. She hadn't been running away from home exactly, she'd been catching some bit of freedom outside of home in an allowed manner. The horse had run away from her, and it wasn't her fault. "I am not. I went out for a ride. This is my own horse, I didn't steal her."

It came around the corner now, and she saw that it was a man, but without his cloak he looked stick-thin and had a pointy face. He was dressed in half-cured leathers that looked like they had been snatched off the stretching racks and stitched together with bare sinew. He still had gray-black down shed from his cloak dripping from his neck and shoulders, and his feet were bare and covered in scars and fresh scratches.

"I know that," he told her.

She wondered how much he knew. "Then why did you ask?"

"I didn't ask."

No, he hadn't. She took a couple of steps towards him, wanting to give back the cloak except the night was even colder now that it was full dark, and the cloak of feathers and skin was the only thing keeping her warm. "What do you want?"

"To meet the girl who got away." His arms had been wrapped around his waist as though they were bound there, but now he freed one hand to catch her chin and tilt up her head so he could look into her eyes. She shouldn't have stepped close. She wanted to pull away, but his fingers ended in talons and she was afraid they would cut her deep if she moved. "Why are you out here?"

She was too scared to lie to one of the free folk of the woods. "I hate being inside," she babbled, her lower face caged by the owl-man's claws. "I hate going to school, after what he did to me, what he put us through, it's all boring. I don't get to see my friends anymore, because he said so. They're my friends, not his." She stopped because the owl-man was laughing at her. "It's not funny!"

"Of course your life was the very pinnacle of excitement and interest before you were so challenged."

She thought about all those hours spent daydreaming, all those hours wasted on homework or waiting for other students to figure out what a single file was. Lectures on English grammar. Minding her manners for endless boing holiday dinners with her grandparents. She pulled the cloak tighter around her again. "It doesn't matter. I beat him. I'm free."

"Yes," the owl-man agreed. "Which is why he is asking for your help instead of commanding."

She wasn't sure she called dragging her out here to an unknown woods and then accusing her of running away asking. But you didn't argue with the free folk. And when he looked at her all sharp points and hard edges like a picture in a book that was supposed to be only a story, she remembered that.

Something pinched the curve of her ear, till she listened. He had accused her of running away, which meant he didn't know how she came here, assuming he was sincere and not trying to scare her with that. He had then said that His Lordliness Samael needed her help. But one of the ways you became Samael's was by running away, by getting lost, all he needed to do was scoop her up and take her off to his castle. Again.

"He can't come and ask for himself, can he?" She felt slow, like she was trying to put the pieces together but either she didn't have all of them or she was too stupid to understand what she was looking at.

The bird creature looked at her like she had done something surprisingly smart. "No, he cannot. And before he disappeared he asked us to find you, if something were to happen to him. If you could best him, he guessed, you could best the one who has taken him."

Jude pulled the feather cloak over her head and put her face into her hands and didn't say anything to that patently ridiculous assertion.

"Where are we going?" She followed behind on her horse, and they should have caught up with him easily but for the way he moved through the trees. It wasn't human, this jerky swiftness that made her nauseous when she stared hard at him. Wasn't like anything she had seen outside of movies. That herky-jerky blur of motion and then he was somewhere else thing. There was a technical term for it, but she'd never been much interested in the making of movies.

He didn't seem much interested in answering her questions. She cleared her throat and asked again, more obnoxiously this time. She was a teenager, she was good at being obnoxious.

"Where are we going?" And. "Doesn't this count as running away?"

"It's different," he called back to her. "You were invited."

As though that would explain everything. It didn't explain why it was different, it didn't explain why she had been invited, or by whom, since Samael was out of the picture for a while. That was her guess, otherwise he would have come for her in person and with some kind of big dramatic entrance. Especially with some kind of big dramatic entrance that involved enough sparkles and lens flares to make an 80s fantasy artist blush.

So the spindly twerp had gotten himself into some kind of trouble. So there were problems with the neighboring kingdoms, and she was the only girl smart enough to get him out again? How did that make sense?

One of those Kid in King Arthur's Court type books came floating back to her as she pictured herself, a modern teenager, dealing with the free folk and their weird ways. In the book, Lancelot had been mocked for jousting against a girl and getting beat. Was that what was going on here? The other kings or princes had found out that Samael had been beaten by a fifteen year old girl and they were taking it out on him? Did that make any kind of sense?

Maybe to them. It didn't to her. "Where are we going?" she asked for the umpteen billionth time. "And what's your name, anyway?"

The creature man thing didn't turn around and look at her, he turned around and flat out wasn't there, and in the next second he was crouched on the thicker of two branches right in front of her face, glaring at her.

Name. She'd asked for his name, and names had power. Stupid, Jude, stupid not to remember that. "I mean, what should I call you?" Always asked what he or she or it or they wanted to be called, never what their name was. That meant you were asking them to give you power over them, and only one of the free had ever done that to her. And that had been a power play, too. Not genuine. Spindly, sneaky bastard. Their first conversation he'd tricked her out of her full name by giving her one of his, knowing he had more names than her. Another thing to want to kick him for.

"You may call me Raven," he said after another minute or so of staring at her to make sure she got the message about not asking free folk for their names. Message received loud and clear, yes, sir.

Message received so loud, in fact, that she didn't say anything out loud about how that was a stupid, clichéd name for a raven creature and couldn't he pick something more interesting like Diabolus or Blackheart or whatever. She didn't say that. She certainly balled up the thought and threw it at the back of his head, though, just in case he was telepathic. If he was, she didn't see him feel it. Maybe she was just crappy at throwing telepathic missiles.

Maybe she was thinking about this to avoid thinking about the fact that they were going deeper and deeper into the woods. Apple Pucker wasn't panicking, though. Did that mean it was safe or the horse was stupid? "I'm Jude," she called up to the bird-man. He didn't stop to reply. She couldn't even tell if he'd paused in his weird hopping flitting pace. "Jude, short for Judith. Why do I bother, again?" But she kept her voice low and hoped he couldn't hear her.

"It's not much further." He darted back a little ways, to make sure she was following without delay or to reassure her? Or both, considering he was gesturing her onwards. By the end of her first tour of the kingdom she'd gotten used to reading the body language of her new friends. This guy had a completely different set of gestures.

And that wasn't what she'd asked, but now that he'd called attention to it she could see the trees starting to thin out, the grass receding into the ground and everything coated in spider webs with mushrooms growing out of the sides of trees. Even the rocks had bigger than usual lichens on them. The kind of lichen that looked like it would crumble or slime your fingers if you touched it. Up by the gates to the city there had been barely a few scrub trees, a bunch of rocks, some dirt or mud or sand that suggested water underneath but definitely no grass growing, nothing green. The green stopped abruptly, like he'd thrown up a huge bubble around his land and said all of this is mine, and to prove it I will kill everything here.

Of course she hadn't thought that until she was safe at home and thinking and drawing everything she'd seen. She was glad she hadn't thought of it until after the fact.

The sky had been orange. Purple and orange, like a vibrant sunset that never ended until she came out of the castle and it was pitch black. What color was the sky now? Dark blue in evening? No, yes, it was starting to turn purple.

The sound of Pucker's hooves on the ground changed. Judith slumped over her neck and let her plod on, following the bird-man whose name couldn't be Raven, it couldn't be that simple or that dumb. But okay, it was the simplest and easiest answer to give when it was just the two of them and she had to call him something.

"Hey, Raven." Like now. He stopped, too. So he'd answer to it even if they both thought it was silly. "Are you going to tell me what's going on before or after we pass the towering walls and big thuddy gates?" Heavy and cast-iron and probably weighed more than her Mom's car.

He looked back at her and didn't blink, then tilted his head and did. Now she knew he was playing up the bird thing to bother her, since he'd acted human when he was walking around the tree and dropping shit on her head. Though she was pretty sure ravens and crows and blue-jays did that dropping thing too. "After," he said. Then, when she pulled Pucker back and dug her heels downwards in the stirrups, he laughed. "You will be safe within the walls, I promise. On my honor as a Prince of the Air, if you wish to leave, you may."

She couldn't find a good way to object to that, knowing how seriously the free folk took their word. It was one of the reasons why running away was considered grounds to abduct kids. That and the betrayal of the caregiver being punished by the abduction, and a few other things less noble-sounding. "Okay." She had his word, that'd have to be good enough.

They reached the gates, which stood closed but unguarded. They hadn't been unguarded when Samael had first brought her here. She was surprised they weren't broken. She was surprised about a lot of things right now, none of them related to her traveling from a perfectly ordinary park in an ordinary hillbilly town to an orange-skied fairy land. There was no one at the gate, no towering spider-thin guards in black steel armor, no squat stone gargoyles, no one to greet them or guard against them. There were cobwebs everywhere on the doors and the posts along the walls, but they looked like the residents had abandoned them. The dripping water no longer dripped, and it smelled stale.

"Where did everybody go?" she whispered. She hadn't meant to whisper, it just came out that way.

The bird-man shrugged, shook his head. He sounded tired and sad. "Retreated inwards. Fled to safety, where they could find it."

"Safety...?" she asked, but she didn't want to know. Safety from what? No, better not to ask. She didn't want to know.

Everything looked smaller as she came through the door of the palace. Sure, the door was grand as ever, and the tall stone walls that formed a corridor for several feet outside of it. But once she was inside the hallway, passing the antechambers and into the throne room itself, it all looked smaller. Like she had grown a foot or so in the many months between her last visit and this one. She didn't know if that was because she'd grown up, because she'd defeated him and now his magic no longer worked on her, or if that was just a feeling she had rather than the reality. If she perceived it that way because she'd defeated him and learned he wasn't so tough after all.

Or because he was kidnapped and gone and who knew where, or killed, or worse, and now his magic no longer worked on anyone because he wasn't in a position to work it. She found that thought more disturbing than he deserved.

"Wait here," Raven told her, and she didn't argue because there wasn't anything there.

Goblins and rats and ferrets and a couple other things she couldn't identify had poked her and cavorted around her legs the last time. That was definitely the right word for it, cavorted, shaped like something out of a Renaissance book and with a good hard 'v' in the middle for sinister emphasis. The goblins had cleared out, and the rats hadn't even left dropping pellets anywhere. It smelled musty. It smelled like the bottom of a hamster cage, but nothing so much as twitched a nose under the piles of discarded armor, padding, extra bits.

Raven didn't come back soon enough for her to keep from getting bored, so she found a spear propped up in a corner and used it to start poking through the piles of stuff. She'd learned, watching movies and reading books, that you didn't poke piles with your fingers and hands when you didn't know what might be lurking in them. And a good thing too; after a couple of piles a hissing, irritated snake gave a couple of good strikes at her spear. She stopped poking after that and went and flung herself into the throne.

"Trying it on for size?" Raven asked, with the dry amusement of stuffy old men in British comedies. "We're ready for you now."

Her heart pounded too hard for her to catch her breath, let alone ask him who the 'we' was. Of course, now that she was here and in the throne she found it difficult to get out again. "That chair is hard on the ass," she muttered, hauling up from it. It was stone, like the rest of the wall and the pit in the front of the room. In fact, it looked built into the wall. Which didn't mean anything here, necessarily, but there were other things she wanted to know about it. "Has it always been there? Just that... shape? And there's no queen throne either."

Raven led her up a winding staircase into one of the protruding towers, she assumed by the archway and the direction of the stairs. But they were so narrow that when he stopped to turn and stare at her she almost fell backwards down the stairs. The only reason she didn't was because tilting backwards slammed her into the wall. The steps were skinny, too. Not enough room for her small feet. "Are you applying for the position?"

"No!" she shouted. It didn't echo as she'd expected. "What? No. Keep going," she added, grouchy. Grouchier.

He laughed to himself as he went up the stairs, continued on to the smallest landing she had ever seen. She was pretty sure she'd fall off of if the wall on the spiral staircase hadn't been so close behind her. At least the door opened inward. She wasn't sure there was room enough for

the door to open and someone to stand on the landing.

Goblins, sprites, and fairies, she reminded herself. They were all smaller than a human girl, but he had been taller than she was, and would have scraped his head on this ceiling. Were they coming in the back way?

The servants' entrance, she decided, when the door closed behind them and melded seamlessly into the wall. Servants' quarters had those invisible doors to them, these were the servants' quarters for whom?

She got a good eyeful when she stepped through the door and saw the little council sitting cross-legged in a circle on the floor like some mad fairy tale sleepover. The bed was canopied at the top with faded gray and a velvet roof, the same cut velvet on the curtains at the windows. She hadn't noticed those curtains in any room she'd seen before. The rug was even more worn, it looked out of place with how threadbare and shabby it was. A souvenir from home?

Which might mean this wasn't his home originally. So where had he come from? Or was this just some gift from longer ago than the bed curtains.

There was a wooden trunk at the foot of the bed with a few dents in the sides, a wardrobe, and that was all she had time to see before Raven or whoever he was tugged her to sit down at the council. "Everyone, this is Jude. Jude, this is..."

"Linden," one of them raised a hand, and another one grunted. "Pebble." And they went around the circle and introduced themselves with ordinary sounding names and ever more extraordinary appearances.

Jude stayed quiet throughout the council meeting except for a couple of sentences worth of suggestions, mainly out of not having a clue what was going on. She understood alliances and uneasy, unspoken truces, and she understood that some of what they talked about involved names of different groups and some were people's names, but she didn't know who any of them were.

Only one of the people in the circle looked human. A man who had to be in his sixties, with his steel-gray hair cut in a Beatles-style and his clothes almost as old looking. She couldn't help thinking that he must have gotten stuck here as a kid, too. Some bratty teenager, but there the image failed her because she couldn't think of a man old enough to be her grandfather as a bratty teenager.

The rest of them were like Raven. There were two goblins, Linden and Mort, something with webbed hands and feet and a sucker-like mouth that kept sucking on a clay canteen, a talking cat named Molly the size of a German Shepherd, and a brown woman whose skin looked more like the outside of a tree than human skin. She resisted touching it, but she wondered if it would flake off in her hands like wet bark. When she shook her head, strands of hair wisped off of her and floated around the room. The second time that happened Jude flinched from it; she was grateful it seemed to be a seldom thing.

She looked around the room at one point, not realizing they'd fallen silent. "Yes?" said the cat, with the kind of disdain she should have expected from a cat.

"I just thought there'd be fairies. Or dragons. Don't you guys have dragons?"

"Weren't you listening?" Molly sighed, as Raven chuckled and said "No, we have no

dragon allies at the moment."

"Well, how was I supposed to know that," she muttered. The rest of them seemed to think that was a valid point, excluding the cat, of course.

The gist of it, if she understood it correctly and as she went over it with Raven after the meeting, was that someone had called Samael out to meet on what was supposed to be neutral ground, tricked him, and run off with his body. Or the man, assuming he was still a man, himself. The cat had reported in for the witnesses who had been there, the only time she saw the cat act with any kind of humility. Ears and tail down and back, belly to the ground, the cat seemed as much ashamed as angry.

Everyone had ideas about who the opposing number was, but since they didn't carry standards or signs, no one could know for sure.

"We should have known from that moment," Raven admitted to her, chasing the last of the stragglers out and giving quiet orders to the goblins to bring food and drink. "No one conceals their colors who has good intentions... what? Why are you looking at me like that?"

She kept up the staring at him like he was the dumbest kid in school. "You want me to eat fairy food? Really? After everything he put me through?" Okay, he hadn't trapped her in fairyland or wherever this was, for six months out of the year, but that was no reason to get careless. "I read that story when I was a kid, and I hate pomegranates."

"How could anyone hate pomegranates?" he shook his head sharply, side to side and completely on the vertical, like a bird's. Obviously like a bird, what a stupid thing to say even in her own head. She still felt stunned, disoriented down to grasping at strongly held ideas and literary cliches for survival. "No, I promise, this is just food. We expect you'll be here a while, so you might as well eat and get some rest."

He wasn't saying anything that gave her reason to stop staring at him. "Rest? Where? All I've seen is the throne room and..."

No.

"No way." She backed up all the way to the door. The real door this time, not the servants' door, which she could barely see. "No, I'm not sleeping in his *bed*."

"Unfortunately, as you saw, we're a bit short on folk your size here, and his is the only bed large enough and unoccupied. Unless you'd rather..."

She had a sudden flash of sharing a bed with the old guy, and in so many ways that was flat out unacceptable. "No. Fine. But can you... he didn't sleep in that anytime recently, did he?" She made a face the birdman interpreted correctly, even if he found it funny.

"The sheets have been changed. We'll have to find you some clothes if you're to stay here, and the food should be up shortly."

He left while she was in the middle of formulating all kinds of objections to being left here for days. Among other things, her parents would completely and totally freak. Then again, if the Pevensies could grow up and become kings and queens in Narnia in two seconds flat, maybe she would come back in time to get driven home by the old stable caretaker. Didn't fairyland work that way in all the old stories?

She had to hope that was the case or she'd go stark raving bonkers. And she still didn't see why they needed her help, of all people. Or maybe it really was just that she'd gotten the better of him the last time. Was that such a rare thing that they remembered her, thought she had some

kind of special intelligence or power or something to do that?

"Boy are you guys going to be disappointed," she muttered. And if she had a few minutes before anyone else came to interrupt her, she might as well go rummaging around his room. People who kidnapped kids for their amusement got no right to privacy, she decided, to soothe her conscience. The police did it all the time.

Either unfortunately or to her relief, she couldn't decide which, it turned out that Samael was the most boring fairy king in the world. In this world or her world. His trunk was full of clothes, his shelves were full of books about plants or history or whatever, his desk was full of dust and empty papers and the occasional ink vial. Which she put back when she realized how full it was, because the last thing she needed was to get ink all over her hands and thus get caught.

The goblins came up the stairs with the food just as she'd closed the desk drawer. She hoped she didn't look as guilty as she felt when she turned around to pretend she'd sat at the desk because it was the only eating table shaped thing in the room. "Hi." Barely polite. "Thanks." She couldn't decide whether or not to be more than civil. She hadn't exactly been kidnapped this time around. Of course, she hadn't been given too much of a choice, either.

And she still didn't know if that was Raven or someone else.

"How much trouble do you think he's in?" she blurted out as they were turning to leave. "I mean, I know you went over it all earlier, but I don't know any of these people. I don't know what any of this means."

The goblins looked at each other, and one of them went over to the bookshelf and pulled out a book the size of its chest, a size that would, when opened, fill the entire desk. Fortunately he (or she? Jude couldn't tell) didn't try, dumping it on the bed instead. "The history of the thirteen kingdoms," the goblin said. "Don't worry, it's got pictures."

"Thanks," Jude snapped, and would have slammed the door behind them if it was a door that slammed instead of ashamedly swooshing forward to close with a muted click after a long wait. She threw herself back into the desk chair and chewed the fruit and bread, pretending it was their fingers between her teeth.

She read. She slept. She ate their food because she didn't have much choice, and other than to make sure she had enough to eat and drink she was left alone for almost a day, to learn what she could about these people and their society.

She learned that there were seven houses, each with their own demesne, and a bunch of other smaller realms that didn't have much difference between her world and theirs. Time ran at mostly the same pace, the descriptions of their land and buildings sounded like something she could see out in the country, and there were things like governors and mayors and town halls. And while there were only seven major houses, or kingdoms or whatever, there were somewhere around a couple hundred of the minor ones and that was just as far as she'd counted. The seven houses were located in some kind of shadow underground, some dimensional pocket that could be gotten to through entrances, all of which seemed to be conveniently located around major cities. Old major cities.

The rest of the kingdoms were scattered all over the place, in underground warrens that weren't really underground but that seemed to cover space roughly the equivalent of the upper

lands. She still wasn't prepared to accept the terminology of the historian, whoever Timothy Linnaeus was. A relative of the guy she learned about in science class or just conveniently named the same? The gist of it was, what seemed to be going on was that Samael had pissed off someone in a neighboring kingdom and when she defeated him in one of their stupid riddle contests, this neighboring lord saw that as weakness, and took advantage.

She refused to look at the part where it might be weakness, the weakness they called human feeling, and the subject of half a dozen movies she'd seen recently and thousands of romance novels. This was not a romance novel. She had no intention of doing whatever it was people did in those books. And she sure as hell wasn't pulling anyone off their horse, hadn't then, wasn't going to now. She still wasn't sure what had happened, how baby Johnny had gotten himself into the mess and how she'd gotten dragged along after. Just because the fairy world was interested in her didn't mean she had to be interested back.

But if she had gotten Samael into this kind of trouble, maybe she could help get him out, too. Time seemed to run pretty much uniform in the underground, and that was very different from how it ran up top. A lot faster. Or slower, making sense of the direction gave her a headache. Faster, if she could go through days and weeks down here before her mother noticed she was missing.

She needed a conversion table. How many weeks did she have before she was gone enough hours for the old man to go looking.

If she was lucky it could all be done in one night, like last time.

"What do I have to do?" she asked, coming down the stairs to the main hall, where everyone seemed to congregate when they didn't have anything else to do. The main stairs, this time, none of that creeping around back stairwells the width of someone's washing machine. Several of the goblins looked shocked, and some of the animals. If the animals could look shocked. She wasn't good at reading animal faces.

Raven, on the other hand, looked about ready to do a victory dance. "We'll have to go and present our case, and petition for his release. I understand you've done that before."

Oh. And now that she heard it summed up in a sentence or less she could see where he got that impression, but that hadn't been what it felt like. "Actually I slogged through several hours of his crap in order to stand in front of him and yell at him, but sure, if you want to put it like that, I guess I can go do that for someone else." She wasn't sure she wanted to do that on his behalf, in front of someone else. And she was pretty sure it wouldn't work the second time. But if they wanted to try.

"You'll need to be clothed properly," the badger-raccoon-thing sniffed. Or was this a different badger-raccoon-thing than the last one. Who was called Sester. She had to remember that they had names. "We'll have to find you something. Or alter to fit."

"Alter to fit is more likely," and that was a squirrel the size of a housecat. All right then. "Someone bring me a measuring rope."

Before she could ask what clothed properly meant or protest being manhandled - or animal-handled - she was grabbed and spun around in place by two squirrels and the raccoon-thing. They held up a faded measuring tape, an actual measuring tape and not one of those knotted rope things, and the squirrels crawled all round her like she was a tree. The raccoon-thing took notes, and then all three of them trundled off down another corridor muttering the whole way.

Everyone else seemed to have taken interest in other things, except Raven, who was sitting on the steps up to the master bedroom. "Something a little more formal than your riding clothes," he explained. "Though those will do to get there."

"What's happened to Pucker?" she asked, feeling stupid and useless for not asking sooner. "Is my horse all right?"

"She's fine, she's in the stables with the other animals. A bit unnerved, I think, but she seems well. We've been feeding her," he chuckled at her expression. "She's not the first horse we've had in our stables, nor I think will she be the last."

Jude decided she didn't want to know what they kept in stables instead of horses. Centaurs? That seemed too cruel, somehow, since centaurs were supposed to be people, too. Unicorns? Winged horses? Hippocampuses? Hippocampuses were water horses, weren't they? Never mind.

She came over and sat near him, on the steps to the throne itself. "What am I supposed to do? I mean, what makes you all think I can negotiate with this other prince or king person any better than I did with Samael? I pretty much just told him to screw off."

He outright laughed at that, a sound that wasn't at all human but wasn't as frightening as she'd expected. "Well, we would like you to be a little more polite about it this time, but I expect with fair warning you can manage that."

Jude thought about all the books she'd read and movies she'd seen where a person was able to deliver swift, accurate, and cutting remarks on cue and then walk out with perfect timing to leave the other person speechless and mortified. "I have no idea if I'll be able to manage that," she said honestly. "It's opening night and I barely know my lines. I can try."

He nodded, satisfied. "It's all we ask. We'll get you some proper clothes, Jasmine can teach you the formal modes, and the rest will be yours to prepare."

She heard something different under that, but she would have to work with it. She'd already said she'd try. "Is it really that simple? Just walk in and demand to have your king or prince or whatever back?"

"King. Of the Lost, Keeper of the Forgotten Wisdoms, a few more titles besides. And yes, sometimes it can be that simple, if the person asking is believed to be powerful enough to demand it. And remember, you faced him down and defeated him, and took what he had claimed for his own. This is no different. You might be thinking about it more, taking more time to prepare, but in the end it may well come down to an angry young woman and a ruler who doesn't know what she's dealing with."

"*She*," Jude yelped. Once again, she had the feeling what Raven said and what she heard were two significantly different things. "It wasn't just being angry." She'd been showing off for her baby brother who, at a whole ten years of age, hadn't realized his big sister wasn't the coolest thing ever. In current lights, that might have been a bad choice

"*She*," he nodded. "The lady Ember. She is the Mistress of the Southern Wanders, and her domain is a fenn not far from here called the Whisper Glen, or sometimes the Poisoned Glen. She has other titles as well."

That sounded dangerous. She called him a few names she'd heard from the theatre kids and ran upstairs again to look her up in the books.

"This is not going to go well," she muttered to Apple Pucker as she shook out the saddle blanket. Checked under the saddle for burrs, made sure her tack was intact, clean. It kept her from swinging it around and hitting someone in the face with a snaffle bit. "This is not going to go well. I'm going to walk in there, and I'm going to sound like the bitchy ex-girlfriend, and she's going to laugh in my face."

Pucker snorted and pushed her nose into Jude's shoulder, which she resisted out of habit. Of course the mare had left a giant slobbery spot on her shoulder, good thing she was wearing her own clothes to ride out in. They were being sensible about that. About a lot of things. She just didn't want to admit that, because that might mean that picking her for the job of freeing their king might also be sensible.

"Are you ready?" Raven hadn't saddled anything, but if he was going to do what he'd done when he led her here, she didn't think he needed a mount. Other than that there were unicorns, riding goats, and giant cows they called aurochs, and a couple other things she didn't recognize right off but that had four legs and could be saddled. No water horses. No winged horses either, they were going over ground, and she wasn't going to say how disappointed she was by that.

Jude shrugged. "As ready as I'm going to get, I guess." Looking around didn't give her any refuge. She made sure the girth was tight and everything was strapped and buckled down and swung into the saddle.

Several of the assorted townsfolk, goblins, whatever they were, stared at her as she rode at the head of the column. Was that what they were called when they weren't a military unit? She decided on company, looking around at them, no two alike. Well, there were three goblins and two of what she decided were fairies, but then there was the cat Molly, and one of the badger people, and something called a Boobrie that looked ridiculous and made her think of that albatross poem.

None of them could help her. She had to do this on her own.

"Why is that?" she asked out loud, then nudged her horse to the front when several of them looked at her funny. "Raven, why do I have to do this on my own?"

"Who said you were on your own?" He gave her a funny look, and since they were still at a walking speed he could keep pace alongside her. When he caught her out like that it made her feel small and stupid. She felt better that he had to look up at her while she was on the horse.

"I thought that was just how it was done." That was how it was done in all the stories. But they were stories for a reason, she reminded herself, hands tightening on the reins to keep herself from thunking her forehead or any more obvious gesture. Then Pucker slowed because her head was pulled down to her chest and she had to loosen her grip again. You couldn't get upset on a horse, not too upset, they'd sense it and do something unexpected. It was one of the big reasons she liked horseback riding, once she'd learned to appreciate the self-control.

"Well, that's one way to do it, but it's not a very easy way," he shrugged. "The final conversation, yes, will likely be just the two of you. But that doesn't mean we can't ride with you, take the lay of the land and the tone of her court with you, and explain things to you on the way."

"That's not what I meant." But that was kind of what she'd meant. Even the first time, she hadn't defeated him alone. She'd made friends along the way.

None of those friends had been at the palace, either. She didn't know if they had fled or

not; she knew they didn't live at the palace. And she'd forgotten about them in the heat of the moment, when she could have visited them and talked it over with people she knew and trusted, rather than these strangers. Now it was too late to call them safely; they were beyond the borders of the kingdom and she wouldn't drag her friends into this mess.

Raven let her think, walking on ahead as she and her horse both slowed. She could ride for another couple hours in silence like this, except the silence bothered her. Scared her, not that she would admit it out loud. She was surrounded by strangers and not having anyone to talk to only emphasized that.

No matter what Raven said, she was still alone. In the middle of a traveling company, she didn't have anyone to talk to. Her horse had more company, nickering to the other riding beasts and getting answering sounds and the occasional touch of a muzzle."This sucks," she muttered. No one paid her any attention.

More riding followed by a brief stop to eat some sandwiches and fruits. The sandwiches were wrapped in enormous leaves that felt like palm leaves or elephant ears. "What are these?" she asked, before she remembered that she was supposed to be on her own with no help or conversation from the others.

"Shelter tree leaves," Whisper said, taking them back as Jude unwrapped them off her sandwich. "They grow on the other side of the castle, you wouldn't have seen them, but if there's time after this I expect someone can take you around the garden."

"There's a garden?" She felt stupid for asking. Of course there was a garden, they didn't have grocery stores around here that they could buy fruit from.

Whisper nodded, brightening. "There are orchards, and there is an ornamental garden and a food garden. They're really quite lovely, or they used to be. They're somewhat run down now, there hasn't been anyone out to care for the ornamental garden in a season or more."

Whisper could go on like that for hours, Jude decided, but they had to saddle up as soon as they'd eaten and had something to drink, and watered the horses.

Whether or not she had to do all of it alone or just the final confrontation, she did admit to enjoying that she found herself in good company on the way there. She was lucky, just as she was last time. Which only led her to the thought that her luck could only take her so far. She would have to be good from here on out.

The palace, and this one much better at being a palace, was the grandest thing she'd seen in person. There were no cobwebs, and the stones were a proper pale gray color, not stained from the dirt under their feet. It was big, and it was ornate, and it made her feel every inch of sweaty grubby skin under her worn and insufficiently formal jeans. Then again, she wasn't sure even model strength jeans would be formal enough for this. And she didn't know how to wear a dress if it didn't involve standing in a corner of a crowded room and nibbling on very tiny snacks.

They spoke to a gate guard and were walked a quarter of the way around the perimeter of the city. Instead of a wall of stone there was a wall of hedges, with thorns operating on the upper edge as razor wire. She wondered how many of them were tucked in the wall, in the entryways, and whether or not the openings would close on an unwelcome person and stab them to death with angry, large thorns.

Or she'd just seen too many movies. That would be more possible if she wasn't walking through an underground fairy realm with its own sun. She squinted up again. Suns? Or moons. Celestial bodies, circling.

"What do we do?" she asked. There was a door in the hedge, sort of a door, a place where all the vines and branches came together to form a wall so intricate and tightly packed that it might as well be a foot thick of solid wood. It was door-shaped.

Raven smiled at her like he knew what he was saying. "Knock, and..."

"And the door will open, I know, I know." Jude rolled her eyes and waited another few seconds for someone else to move. But this was her mission. So much for, you don't have to do this alone because that's the way things are done.

The pitted- and pie-faced guards stopped them a few feet from entrance and asked their business. Raven stepped forward, he seemed to know all the right things to say and how to say them. She knew they were there to get their King back, but she didn't know how to say it like he did. There was a code or a sign and countersign to it. She bit her lip to keep from cracking up and offering James Bond passwords.

"You'd better come in and ..." the Queen's gate guards or whoever they were, whatever function they served, they looked them over like they were ragged trash at the door.

Raven gave them the withering oh-please stare Jude wished she'd been capable of in school. "We have brought clothes with us that we had no intention of getting dirty on the road. If you can provide us with a place to refresh ourselves and change, we'll offend your sensibilities no longer than we have to."

They were surrounded and led to facilities while Jude thought that over. She'd gone to school with girls like that, girls who didn't think you were dressed until you had foundation, bronzer, toner or whatever that was, finishing powder, three shades of eyeshadow, lipstick, mascara, pencil, and ten other kinds of thing on your face, hair, and hands. Who looked down at anyone who didn't feel like putting in the time and effort to figure out what labels were "in" this year and, okay, some of the other girls in her class had fun with it, she could tell. She passed them in the halls, she was friends with one chick who could talk for twenty precious minutes on their lunch hour about the new purse she scored for a fifth of the price on sale. And while Jude appreciated her enthusiasm, the only leather tooling she was interested in was the work on her saddle.

This queen sounded like one of the former, though. One of those who didn't take you seriously unless you did everything the way she did, and didn't see you as an equal unless you could do it as good or better. And to her surprise, that made her feel better about the whole thing.

"Tell me about your, uh, Queen?" she asked the girl bringing their bath water, making sure they had enough linens. Trying, too, not to gawk at the idea of taking a bath in a tub filled from buckets. "What's she like?"

The girl didn't bother not gawking. It made her look closer to what Jude thought of as a girl, and less like an even tinier goblin with long pointed ears and whiskers for eyebrows. "What's she like?"

"To work for," she clarified. Tried to clarify. "Does she have a bad temper, is she picky about everything, is she nice?"

"Oh!" And just like that, everything made sense to the girl again, and she started chattering a world of information as she filled the tub. She didn't have a bad temper but she was very picky

about everything. She could be forgiving of one, maybe two mistakes, the people who were most often forgiven were the people who could figure out what they'd done wrong and fix it in half the time it took her to give a lecture on the right way to do things. And as long as they didn't do it too often. In other words, Jude understood, she was all right with people being overtired and harassed but she didn't like it when people tried to do it a different way, whether on purpose or out of ignorance.

Servants taught each other the so-called right way to do things as they came through, and there hadn't been any big upheavals since the time when one group of servants in the kitchens had insisted, led by the cook, that they knew the right way to serve a banquet. The maid didn't know how long ago that had been, it had been before her time, but many people had been flung out of the city and it was rumored heads had literally rolled.

"Actually! Rolled. Right down the palace steps. Cor, if she didn't kick them down herself. Stains were a whole season getting out."

But if that had been before her time, how did she know? Had she lived near the palace? Jude didn't ask, she went to high school, she knew how stories got around, but she wondered.

"What was that all about?" Bowman asked her, curious but not deriding. She was starting to see these people differently, to understand that when they looked at her with wide eyes and wrinkled mouths it wasn't because they thought she was an idiot. Rather it was because she was so different from them they didn't know what she was doing or, often, why she was doing it.

Jude shook her head and went towards the window, towel pulled around her, and looked out towards the back of the castle. The grounds were meticulously kept and it looked like there were figures, gardeners of some kind, running around still keeping it. "I'm not sure. But I think I might know how to talk to this Queen person. I think," she added. "It's not all that different from being back in school."

"Never went to school," she replied. "But if you mean it's not that different from being in a litter of clutch-mates, I think you're right. Some people just never seem to grow up."

She bit her tongue to keep from saying anything, but the Boobrie popped her head out of the water and said it for her. "Like King Samael?"

All three of them laughed. When Jude pulled the towel around her like one of his ridiculous feather cloaks and started strutting around giving speeches, they laughed harder. They laughed so loud and long that Raven poked his head into the doorway to find out what was taking them so long, and then everyone had to scurry to cover themselves and get dressed in time for their audience. But given how much better Jude felt about her ability to deal with this Queen, she didn't mind so much.

"You'll do fine," Burberry said, brushing her hair out in lengths and pinning it back in strategic falls with combs and decorated, bejeweled pins. It would fall out in a few hours without enough hairspray to choke on, but it only had to last for two. "You'll get her measure, you'll both retire to consider things, and you'll have a deal struck by dinner."

"I hope so," Jude said, still turning over what strategy she had and if there was any leverage in being an unknown from the human world. "I really hope so."

They were announced. Not by trumpet, as Jude wildly imagined for the few seconds they waited outside the throne room doors, but by a herald whose voice was pitched to carry above

the murmur of the room. It wasn't a very big room. Tall ceilings, good acoustics if you stood in the right spot, but not very big and he hadn't spoken very loud. She found herself less and less impressed by the minute.

Her coterie, as they had been announced, remained by the door. Raven, who turned out to be Lord Allan of the Ravenswood and the Kingdom of the Lost, Prince of the Air, walked with her. She was announced as Lady Judith of the Realms of Man, and everyone seemed to know what that meant.

Everyone also stared at her as she walked up to the throne. All the drama lessons that she'd dragged up in her mind she'd run over before she went through the door, and now they played through her mind like a last-minute test litany. Back straight, shoulders down, chin up, core pulled in. Walk steady. Stop at the foot of the throne, back straight, shoulders down, bend at the knees. Right leg behind left. Drop head, don't tuck your chin to your chest but bow it forward just a little, lift again, there you go. "Your Majesty." And she stopped herself before she could drop a sarcastic, what a nice surprise.

"Well, well." The Queen looked her over with a stare Jude had seen in the halls of high school, so she had that much right. It was the exact disdain of a girl who expects to be prom queen being approached by a schlubby little bookworm with tape on her glasses and her backpack. "What have we here?"

"Begging your majesty's pardon," she spoke up, even though it was meant to be a rhetorical question, and with a stare that said she was unimpressed. "But though I'm of a different people I believe I am a who, not a what."

The entire room went silent. She had corrected the queen, which should have resulted in a tantrum, but if she had corrected her on a matter of protocol did that mean the queen would consider herself to be in the wrong? Even if Jude didn't know the politest words to use. She gambled on it, and hoped her direct phrasing won her points either for being sure of herself or for letting the queen feel secure and superior. What part two of this plan was, she had no idea.

"You are correct," she inclined her head at a fraction of the angle as Jude had, but it was still a big gesture in terms of impact, if nothing else. The whispers jacked up a couple notches. "My apologies."

"Your Majesty is most gracious," Jude bowed again, because a little ass kissing couldn't hurt. "And I'm sure it can't be often that a Child of Man comes down to visit your fair city."

"No, indeed, Children of Men very rarely make it past the gate." She smiled. There was nothing in her statement to suggest violence, but everything in her smile told Jude that humans who came down to this part of the underworld found a quick, terrifying adventure and a short death by arrows or thorns at the end of it.

"The people of the Kingdom of the Lost asked for my assistance and my representation," she crammed that second part in there at the last minute even though she had no idea what it could help. "And I was happy to give it." And there she had to stop because she knew she wasn't supposed to ask directly. But she had no idea how to ask 'hey would you mind giving them their king back we know you have him in a dungeon somewhere' without just asking.

The Queen took her silence to mean she had done speaking, and smiled. "How lovely." A more condescending set of syllables had not yet been invented.

"It is only fair. I did get him into this by defeating him in a public and humiliating way."

Or that was what she'd been told, but she'd also been told that no one really talked about

these kinds of things directly and openly. Which gave her something like an advantage, and right now gave her the shocked gasps and full attention of the court that she'd wanted. Not that she hadn't had their attention before. She had it extra now, they'd remember her.

Jude would worry about whether or not that was a good thing later. The Queen was still smiling, but now she was giving the young girl a more measured look, as though she'd remembered appearances could be deceiving, especially down here. Was she wondering whether or not Jude was really from up above like she'd claimed? God, she hoped so.

"And you came here to do the same to me?" she asked, more open and less conciliatory than she had been a couple questions ago. Still playing politics, though.

Jude spread her hands instead of shrugging. Chin up, shoulders down, back straight. "I hadn't decided yet. I hope you won't make that necessary. I am here to take back what has been stolen, and that is all." Amazing how easily her words fell right back into a theatre cadence. Any second now she'd be breaking out the received pronunciation. She didn't know what the court would make of her if she switched accents in mid-sentence.

The Queen didn't reveal what she made of that, except that she was taking Jude more seriously than she had to begin with. "I will consider it," she said, and raised her hands to clap to end the interview.

"So you admit to the theft," Jude interrupted as soon as she saw the Queen's shoulders move and, yep, there went the received pronunciation. Now she sounded like a posh British person. With any luck that would have the same effect here as it did up above in her world. The last time she'd pulled it out and waved it around out of annoyance the sales clerk had assumed she was actually *from* England and got very apologetic.

The Queen was not apologetic. She was now irritable, which was still a point in Jude's favor if not in her good fortune.

She dug in her heels and stood her ground and hoped the fear of imminent fairy death was not written all over her face. They stared at each other for several minutes, while Jude tried to plan for every next possible line and the Queen thought whatever she was thinking behind her ice mask.

"I said, I will consider it." This time she did clap her hands to end the audience, and Jude let her with a curtsey that did not drop her head for her due respect. "I trust we will see you at dinner?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," she grinned, dragging out her lack of fairy manners and beating her in the face with humanity. A sudden shift in tone and accent, which ought to be good for some confusion. And then she turned and stalked on out of there as though she was the Queen and the Queen was the guest she'd left gaping in the halls. The only one gaping was Raven, who had the courtesy to wait until they were in their supposed guest quarters to yell at her for all the stunts she'd pulled.

"What were you thinking?" The yelling happened after the door was closed, so no one would overhear them without having their ear actually pressed to the wood and thus being terribly obvious about it. One of the others leaned against the door to make sure no one stepped up to it from the hall. Nonchalant, but Jude still noticed.

Though Raven was doing his best to occupy her complete attention. She sighed at him. "I

was *thinking* of getting her off balance so I could get something out of her. I was thinking maybe it wasn't a good idea to have her thinking she could do anything to us and get away with it. I was thinking she openly admitted to kidnapping him in front of the entire court."

"She did," Whisper said, bringing out a tray of snacks. From their bags, Jude noticed, not anything they'd gotten in the kitchens here. She couldn't tell if that was paranoia or not. "She also learned not to take you for granted, and we could have used her complacency."

Jude winced. That hurt more than any of Raven's startled yelling, she knew it was the startlement that made him yell. She'd gotten the same from her parents when she was out too late or did something stupid on one of the horses. "I was hoping the trade-off would be worth it."

"It might," Raven settled down and shook his head. His hair actually seemed to be standing less on end when he did that. "We'll have to see. Where did you learn to do that?"

He was curious. Everyone was curious. Jude was staring at them as though they'd all gone stupid. "It's just like high school. She thinks she's the queen bee, she thinks she's supposed to have everyone in their place, and no one's supposed to push back. Only I'm not worried about getting to my next class or making sure I've got my homework, so I don't have to ignore her so I can make sure I've got all my books and keep walking."

"... Huh."

"Clearly you've never been a teenager before." She walked the edges of the room, trying to think. What she wanted was to sit on her bed with a good old-fashioned spiral notebook and some different colored pens and make a diagram of who liked who and who was going where with who and on and on like that. But she didn't have pens, a notebook, or the information. Walking wasn't helping either. "What do we know about this court? I talked to the bath girl, did anyone else talk to anyone?"

They looked around at each other. Jude waited for someone to come up with something more than the Queen of the City was the Queen Bitch, and waited to be disappointed. "There's nothing out of the ordinary about the way she rules. Her word is law, and that's the end of it, and that kind of authority makes a lot of folk worse than they would be otherwise."

"Brings out the bad in people," Jude rephrased so she understood it more clearly, finding the edge of something to sit on and picking out one of the snacks to nibble. It tasted halfway like trail mix from home, but some of the nuts and at least one of the dried pieces of fruit were wrong. "So she isn't used to having her power questioned, which is why I annoyed her so much."

"And she doesn't know if she should excuse you because she'll look better if she does, because of course you don't know any better, or if she should call you out for the pretense." Burberry nibbled delicately on a stick of something that seemed to be oats held together with honey and spices. "I would, if I were you, continue to pretend not to know any better. If you can admit that you take your manners from stage dramas that might help."

"How will that help?" She looked down at her trail mix and wished it wasn't almost gone. Dinner would be soon, a dinner which she was afraid to eat lest something terrible happen, she'd heard the stories about what happened to people who ate fairy food and by the way everyone around here was acting they were half true. And she was making it up as she went along. She had no power here.

Would something that simple work on a Queen who didn't know her from the next tea girl?

"It will help because, whether or not you feel out of your depth, she won't know if you're pretending or not," Burberry picked up both of their wrappings and tucked them away in a bag.

For later washing, it looked like. "Or whether to take you at your word, or when to try to push. There, you will have her off balance."

Raven considered this, now much less ruffled and if he still watched Jude with quite a bit of concern it was now protective rather than wondering if she would get the job done. "Do we know where she came from? Was she born here, or has she had dealings with humans before? It's not recorded in any of these." He waved a hand at the few books lining the walls.

Everyone shrugged or shook their heads, which surprised neither Jude nor Raven by the look of him, but it had been worth a guess. "You mean, does she have any idea of what I'm supposed to know or not know," Jude said, guarded but starting to feel better.

"If I had to say, I would say that she knows nothing about you except that you are the human girl who defeated Samael and stole his prize, and now you have forced her to admit something she did not mean to in the public hall, therefore forcing her to deal with it openly. She will assume you know far more than you claim, are cannier than you seem, but she will not know how or in what direction."

"How do I make that work for me, though?" Diggle, one of her tailors of earlier, was pulling dresses out of the wardrobe and eyeing her; Jude eyed Diggle right back. Dinner. Dinner meant she had to get dressed up, didn't it, to show proper respect to the Queen of this place. She didn't know what to do about that. Or what they had for makeup here. They didn't have much in the way of clean mirrors here either, which could only work in her favor.

Diggle kept eyeing her and holding up dresses and trying to make things work while she discussed it with Raven. "Give her nothing, as little as you can. Answer her questions with truths that are obvious, answer nothing in detail unless she presses to the point where it would be impolite to do otherwise."

"Dodge, you mean." She wasn't all that good at dodging. It felt too much like lying, which she didn't have a problem with by itself but when she'd seen enough of the mean girls lying straight up with their sweet plastered-on faces and their wide-eyed sincerity, she didn't like the idea of it. She didn't want to be one of those girls.

On the other hand, right now it was do or be done to, so she might as well get used to that. Raven nodded, dodge was what he had meant although he, too, was unsure of her capabilities and what she understood. He'd still never been to a high school.

Which reminded her of something. "I need something not too nice." This was going to suck.

"Yes, dear," Diggle said, in the tone of someone half paying attention because they already know everything that's to do with the situation.

"I need something not too nice, neckline a little too low, hems a little ragged, like they were done by someone who knew how they should be done but not, professional, you know?" Jude thought back to all the time she'd done her own manicures and makeovers. "Sleeves a little too big or something. Like someone had copied a picture out of a book without thinking too much about how it would look in 3D. And a corset. Make me go squish." Her hands closed around her waist.

"Three Dee?" Diggle squinted. Whisper was hiding her face in a pile of tack to be mended, and Jude was sure it was so she wouldn't laugh.

"In real life. Never mind, can you do not too nice like that? It'll help with selling that I'm new to court and courtly ways and all that." Her own manners would do the rest. No one had

ever taught her to curtsy, let alone any of the other stuff.

Raven's thin lips stretched out into a grimace, but a grimace of approval. "I think we can manage to make you uncouth enough to sell the idea, not too much that she'll want to banish you from the room, but can you convey the authority to argue your case with her? And succeed?"

She pulled herself upright and gave him the most withering, despising, who the hell do you think you are stare she could manage. He shook his head and sighed.

"We'll worry about that tomorrow."

Jude never did get a chance to ask him what that meant and how long she would really be staying here, but the answers came as everyone sat down to dinner and started talking. At which point it became obvious within three sentences that no one conducted business at a formal dinner for receiving a guest. She wasn't seated near the Queen, although she was seated at the high table, as was Raven. No one could accuse her of slighting important guests even if she was hazy on what their place in the order of local nobility was.

Samael was nowhere to be found. No one spoke his name; she didn't hear so much as a whisper of him, despite the fact that he was the impetus for the evening's festivities.

If festivities was the right word for it. She wondered for a second if Samael would have had a feast for her like this, because it had the same tone as the detritus in his throne room. The Queen had fastidious, impeccable manners. The two nobles at her side were polite and dignified, but still had accidents down the fronts of their shirts at which they dabbed with napkins, aware of their transgressions. Then there was her and Raven, and she was just trying to make sure she didn't make a mess and used the right spoons and forks, though she seemed to be doing better than the people down at the ends of the table, which curved in a semi-circle. Since they were seated at the periphery, the whoevers they were seemed to feel they could talk with their mouth full, shovel food into their mouths, fling their glasses around and spatter their neighbors.

"Is this on purpose?" she asked Raven, though she didn't have to whisper very much, as loud as everyone else was being.

He cocked his head at her, smacking his lips around his fork. Was it harder for him because he had a face more like a bird's than a human's? She felt bad for judging after she thought of that.

"This seating arrangement." Not much in the way of verbal detail. She'd had a couple of embarrassing incidents where she said something stupid or nasty at just the right time for her half of the cafeteria to go quiet. She didn't want that to happen here. First she gestured with the back end of her fork at the Queen, then she gestured at the end where one person was drinking his soup out of the bowl. If that was soup and not a mess he'd made of liquid and dinner.

Raven's mouth stretched and opened in what she was coming to learn was a smile, a more natural smile than when he pretended to be human. That was good as an answer, though it didn't answer why her court, why not Samael's, whether his was different or less pretending to be civilized or more honest and she didn't know how to describe it. She started to want to know what his court was like. Under normal circumstances.

After the dinner came dessert. Pastries, sweets, puffy sugary things that dissolved in her mouth and filled it with orange, lemon, berry, and other flavors of other fruits she didn't recognize. Something cold that felt like melon but didn't taste like it. Something else more tart

than berry.

After the dessert came dancing.

It was meant to shame her. To point her out as someone who wasn't cultured like they were, was shaped too lumpy to be graceful, but it would have worked better if the Queen had an accurate idea of how graceful her own people were. With the dinner display Jude was already not impressed with the coordination and movements of the court, and three quarters of the table took to the dance floor by the time she'd consulted with Raven and decided it was something she had better do.

It wasn't that she'd danced before. But she'd done a year of cheerleading before she bowed out of the social politics, she rode horses and dodged flying hooves, she'd done physical things before. She knew where all her limbs were, how all her parts worked. Better, it looked like, than they did.

"Shall we dance, my lady?"

Raven hadn't called her that. It felt like a symbol, some way to acknowledge her place or make the made-up titles real even when it was all just words. But every story she'd ever heard or lived, right down to philosophy class, talked about the power of names and words. When Samael had said those few words to her they'd reverberated and shook the whole world down. She'd had to fight to get back into her reality with the echo of those words following her. Something in her had shifted. Or something between her and Raven had shifted. She took his hand anyway, promising herself she'd figure out what had happened later. Right now, she had to pay attention to him and to the other dancers on the floor so she didn't mess this up too bad.

"It's a simple step," he whispered in her ear. That made more sense. That, she could follow, letting him guide her steps with his hands on her body and where he put his feet. It didn't feel terrible. "There you go." And it didn't sound like she was terrible at it, either. In fact, by the surprised smugness on his face, it seemed like she was better than most.

She caught a glimpse over his shoulder, once, of the Queen. Who had not joined the dance floor, who still sat behind the dinner table, alone. She stared back at Jude with annoyance and a wrinkled brow, trying to assess her skill level given this other new information. So she continued to surprise and confuse her, but she couldn't keep that up for long. They needed to find Samael and get him out. Fast. By jailbreak, if she left them no other option.

The party ended late enough that by the end of it Jude was no longer thinking clearly, and worrying instead about how much time had passed, whether or not her parents would go looking for her, what the school would think. Whether she would be able to make it to college if she missed too much school. What her friends would think.

What friends. Be honest.

She went to sleep on those maudlin thoughts and woke up with a slight headache and the sun in her eyes, the blankets and canopy smelling musty and of odd things. There was no one else in the master bedroom, but when she sat up and looked into the room beyond she could see her new friends draped over various pieces of furniture, dozing and snoring. She saw no sign of Raven, and she thought she was glad. He was still a man, whatever species he might be, and she was pretty sure she didn't want him sleeping in the next room when the only thing separating the two was an archway.

"I hate castle living," she muttered, tip-toeing down a cold stone hallway till she found what passed for a bathroom. Which was a small closet with a couple boards with a hole in it. "I really hate castle living." As though she'd ever lived in a castle in the first place.

At least there was a basin to wash her hands in. And a basin to pee in, but the hell was she going to use that, she could make her way to the closet. The sooner they got Samael out of there the sooner she'd have to forgo indignities like splinters and suspicious stains touching her butt.

"We have indoor plumbing in our world, you know. Do you know what that is?"

Diggle chuckled. "Of course we know what that is, we got taps of our own, don't you remember?"

Now that she thought about it, she remembered taps in the city square that she'd passed on her way charging through to the castle. And she remembered hearing the unmistakable sound of water dripping, so there might well have been other taps inside the castle itself. "Then why doesn't she have it here?"

"Oh, she might. But likely that's a luxury she keeps for herself." Her new friend brought up a towel to dry her with, and scrubbed her down as she did. "Most people here don't bathe as much as you do, though. She'll be put out when she sees how much water you're using."

Jude froze as she stepped out of the tub. "Is it rare? Is there a drought?"

"There's no drought, she'd just like her people to think there is. Scarcity brings conflict between themselves, brings them to look to her as a source of water and power." Raven spoke from the next room, where he'd been pacing for the last five minutes of her bath.

"I think I read a comic book like that once," she muttered. All right, she was out of the bath and getting dressed in something that did not include what she thought of as underwear, and therefore was very uncomfortable around the crotch area, but also something that had more layers than she wanted to wear in this environment.

Raven came in once she was half-dressed, impatient and ready to be done with this as she was. Well, Jude considered herself dressed, all the important bits were covered and Bowman was lacing her into her corset, but everyone else in the room look scandalized. She rolled her eyes, and Raven grinned his sharp, slightly open smile. "Ready to discuss today's petitioning?"

"No," she gasped as Bowman pulled the corset laces tight again under Diggle's instruction. "Urk. But it's not going to wait for me to be ready, which would be about ne-ver." Another gap in her words as the upper, then the lower corset strings were yanked. The goblin was far, far stronger than his small self looked. "Not sure the back support is worth the clench."

"I thought these things were coming back into fashion," Raven chuckled. "All right. She'll most likely make you wait again, to bother you. You'll be sitting on a bench which, I'm afraid, will be even more uncomfortable in formal clothing."

She wouldn't be able to slump, he meant. "Oh goodie."

"The good news is she will only be able to make you wait for so long, especially with the anticipation you've built up for your argument. There will be many in the audience who are there to watch and listen rather than make petitions of their own, so the wait may be shorter than it looks at first. When she comes up to you, give greetings with all of her titles and greet her with all of your own. Don't worry, we'll give you some and you'll memorize them."

It was starting to sound like high school again. A combination of high school and Law & Order, the palace guards who investigate kidnappings and the noble fairy people who persecute

the offenders. Or the kidnapped, either one. "Wait, you'll just make up titles?"

"Half of their titles are made up," Diggle sniffed, tying Jude's blouse onto her rather lightly by comparison to the corset.

"I guess politicians are the same in fairy land as they are in my world," she sighed, then nodded to Raven to indicate she was shutting up and listening now.

"She will ask you what your petition is, you will tell her that you request the return of Samael to his kingdom and his people alive and unharmed, in this moment and with no geas or lien or other constraint upon his person. It's a bit convoluted but there's a history of dealing with each other that makes this kind of series of caveats necessary."

She'd read the fairy tales, she understood the principle. "What, like how no one reads the terms and conditions? She's not going to just give him to me."

"No, she'll ask what she can expect in return for him. We can do one of two things at this point, if you think you have something she wants," and Raven's face made it clear that he found this doubtful, but that he was willing to extend the benefit of the doubt to her was something. Helped a lot in building her confidence, even if she panicked a little racking her brains trying to think of a fair value trade when she owned the contents of her room back home and nothing in the fairy world. For those who had nothing a year and a day's service or a first-born child or a true love for something was also an option, but she didn't want to give any of that up either. "Or we can stand on the fact that she has taken a rival ruler hostage and while there is no body politic that will hold her accountable for it, she might be seen as taking hostile action and starting a war against a smaller demesne, at which point stronger lords and ladies might take her for inviting her own invasion."

"And she can't afford to be seen as losing to me because of the same reason as she took Samael," Jude put it together with a nasty, terrified grin. "So that ought to make her both more scared and more likely to make mistakes, and also more scared and, you know. More likely to rip my throat out."

Someone should have said that wasn't literal, or she wouldn't go that far. No one did. Diggle looked up from the hem of her skirt she'd been pinning up for a quick fix, Raven gave her a somber look as though waiting for her to say something or back out.

"Okay, now I have a better idea of what the stakes are. What are the words I'm using to threaten her with other people's authority?"

They went over the various powers. They made her recite the names, the formal phrases, until her head hurt and her eyes were tired enough to blur and water. A bell rang that sounded like lunch, but Raven said it was the bell to start the audiences. "You have a bit of time, they're not going to expect you to show up immediately." But she stepped into her skirt, almost before Diggle had finished hemming. "What is the authority over this part of the world?"

"The House of Ravens. But the House of Red and White may also have an interest in keeping the peace north of their borders, although not likely because we're awfully far north of them."

"Good. And who are the local houses who might take an interest in her kingdom and the fact that she sees fit to encroach on others' territory?"

"The Sky Wardens are most likely, given that they rule a good chunk of the north, and plus they have the forces to come down and stomp her into little fairy cakes." Jude grinned. "There's the Bear Clan, they don't have a single enclave but they have pockets all over the place and one

of them is, what, an hour or so's drive away from here?"

"No one here drives and we don't measure time in the same way you do, not consistently, but yes." Raven nodded. "And?"

And? She'd missed one. There was an and. "And..." They'd made her memorize the whole damn North American group list. "Wide Mouth River Clan is too far south, they're Gulf Coast territory. Echo Callers are the Rockies, Windward is the Midwest, Ice Bears isn't actually a thing I pulled that from a book..." It hit her because it was the thing she hadn't wanted to think about. Because it made her wonder things she didn't want to consider. "The Ghost Talkers."

He nodded. "The Ghost Talkers. They're distrusted even among us, no one's ever entirely sure of where they stand. Talking to the dead for too long drives you mad."

He said it like it was a fact everyone knew, and the rest of the room nodded in chorus, but that got Jude thinking. Even if the subject of her thinking sounded a lot like desperation.

She didn't miss another question. They went through the rest, and then the phrases again, and then there was no more time to stall.

"I knew it. This is hell. It's underground, it's hot, it's sticky, it's full of tortures. I'm in hell."

"Shhht."

Raven's shushing couldn't keep the belligerent clench from her jaw, nor could it keep her from slumping as best she could with the skeletal steel fingers wrapped around her ribs and holding her upright. She hated the corset, she hated Diggle and Bowman for lacing her into it, she hated Raven for making it necessary. She especially hated the Queen for taking so goddamn long to resolve a dispute over borders between a dairy farmer and an apple farmer. The cows were eating all the apples. The apples were on the ground and going to rot regardless. The apples were fermenting and getting the cows drunk, affecting the milk. The debate made Jude want to scream.

Of course, the moment she took her attention away, that'd be the moment the Queen would pick to call on her petition. She had to be watching for it, that's how mean chicks worked, they waited for you to show weakness and then they ripped you open at your belly and pointed out its insufficiently virtuous contents to the world. So she wouldn't show any. She would just come up with creative ways to murder the woman in her sleep instead.

And she would run over the plan. Because it was a crazy, last-ditch plan and it hinged on a few things being true that she didn't like. One thing in particular that she really didn't like, but she had to admit the possibility. And if that were the case, playing these cards would be the only thing that would get her out alive and with her sanity intact. She'd seen all those movies and TV shows and read a lot of books involving fairies driving people mad. They made songs about that shit. She would not be the next airy one-woman-wail ballad.

She had, nonetheless, almost fallen asleep when they called her up. Her ass had definitely fallen asleep. Raven laid a hand on her back in a way that was meant to be comforting and to help her up. All it did was make her want to break every one of his fingers.

So maybe she got a little violent when she got nervous and had to speak and hold her own in front of people. So what.

Jude stood. Wrapped one hand firmly around the other as she stepped forward, back

straight, chin lifted. The whole series of posture adjustments ran on a loop of reminders in the back of her mind, and she hoped it wouldn't come out of her mouth as she spoke.

They'd called her The Human Girl from the Goblin Underground, but she stepped forward and gave her titles that they'd made up earlier. "Lady Judith of the Realms Above and Below, Friend of Ravens and Favored of Samael and Knight Protector of his People, here to seek the return of Samael, King of the Lost, Keeper of the Forgotten Wisdoms and Warden of the Underrealm in the North, to his people. I come under auspice of treaty and with the full authority to represent the people of the Lost, as bestowed by Lord Allan of the Ravenswood, Steward to the King. Having been received by you and eaten of your bread and honey, I request that you release Samael into my custody, alive and in full possession of his mind and spirit and all parts of himself, without coercion or compulsion, in the same state as which he arrived. Failure to do so will convey a warlike intent upon the people of the Underrealm in the North as indicated by the kidnapping and imprisonment of its rightful and appointed ruler and we will respond suitable to that intent."

Behind her she heard Raven hiss warily. That last part hadn't been agreed upon specifically, for all that she'd gotten the idea from him. After they'd agreed her position was weak she'd tried for something else in the middle of the night, pulled that out of her head and it sounded good, didn't it? She hoped. She'd remembered to put in all the specifications, so that they couldn't send him back under the influence of some sort of spell.

Her speech caused the entire room to go silent. It didn't get any response from the Queen at first, except a tiny smile of amusement. It did nothing for the tension around her eyes, and her fingers clenched at the arms of her chair rather than drummed as Jude had seen her do during some of the earlier petitions.

"I am truly sorry if the people of the Goblin Underground took a warlike intent from our actions," the Queen started. Slowly, and Jude waited for her to somehow explain the kidnapping in a way that made it sound different from what it was. How did you explain kidnapping away? "It was certainly never in our thoughts to instigate a conflict between our two kingdoms. Had I known that you were an acknowledged Lady of his courts I would of course have left his care to you."

Jude blinked once and then stopped herself before she could gape like an idiot. "You might have asked," she said softly, seeing where this was going after a second to be terrified and wonder if she'd missed something. Two things occurred to her in all the panic. Firstly, the memory of someone, a famous person or a relative she didn't remember, pointing out that if you spoke softly and forced the other person to speak softly in order to listen to you, that was like winning. And second, if she was claiming she had taken him for his own good she had to also be claiming that he wasn't capable of acting in his own good.

There was a woman, Nellie Bly, who Jude had read about on a whim. Nellie had gotten herself checked into a mental institution and, once there, had found it far more difficult to get out than anyone who had checked *themselves* into a hospital should have. She'd had nightmares for two weeks after that. It had been a part of her ongoing resolution to appear normal no matter how many fairylands she was abducted to.

If the principle here was the same, if that was what the Queen was trying to use as an excuse for her behavior, she might have to adjust her thinking some. The Queen continued to stare at her, and too long had passed between her one comment and any follow-up. She was

being silent to punish her and make her look in the wrong, awkward and unacceptable.

Jude lifted her chin and stared at the Queen, and let the silence draw out further. One one-thousand. Two-one thousand. "Well?" she asked into the space between. Still in the soft voice, received pronunciation starting to creep in as the stress made her corset tight in all the wrong places and loose where she didn't want to feel gaps and the danger of things shifting. "Now that you know, why haven't you presented him?"

Eyes swiveled to her, like a tennis match. A very slow, nail-bitingly polite tennis match. "And how do I know you are capable of caring for him in the manner to which he should be?" the Queen asked, very tight and measured, hands opening over the clawed arms of her chair.

"I have the faith of his people, which is more than I can say for his caretakers here, given that they sought me out to recover him," she replied archly. It was even true, she hadn't thought about it in those terms till she had to believe it with enough force to convince the crowd, but if Raven had come looking for her to rescue Samael he must have some faith in her that she could pull this off.

Back to the Queen. A point for her side, she thought? There couldn't be any way she had the faith of Samael's people when they'd organized a rescue mission for him.

"But it was one of his own people who recommended him into my care," she said, smiling, one hand beckoning someone to come up from behind her. Jude didn't turn around. "What was it you said, Sir Bran the Brave? He needed the comfort of a warm bed and a loving hand after his rejection by the mortal girl."

With the name dropping she didn't have to turn around. Sir Bran, the knight who barely came up to her knee, padded up alongside her with his black-capped head hanging down and his tail drooping along the floor like a wilted broom. His beak hung slightly open in distress. Murmurs broke out all over, and it was all she could do not to turn and glare daggers and punt him into the nearest stone pillar for selling them all out like that.

"Sir Bran was in error," Jude said coolly, forcing her hand to stay open and the other hand not to squeeze her wrist too tight. "An understandable one, given that he was close to both of us and may have wished a different outcome than that which precipitated my return, but an error nonetheless. Twice over in error, knowing as he did that he could have called me to the castle at any point." There were a few pauses in there while she tried to wrap her mind and mouth around the speech. A couple of the girls in Drama had been able to ad-lib Shakespeare if they forgot their lines in mid-play; she'd never managed to do that, but she could come close. She could try to put the pauses where they sounded more natural and less like a William Shatner impression.

Beside her, Bran shuddered all over. Ashamed, at a guess, he was now pulling at the tawny feathers on his chest and she had enough friends with parakeets, all two of them, to know he was bad off. And apart from that, how bad off had Samael been, to scare him to the point of going to someone she wasn't even sure was an ally? Or was this another kind of a trick. If so, who was playing it? How much attention did she have to pay to their excuses?

Enough, she answered herself, to deal with them in this mannerly combat. She'd made her little announcement denying that Sir Bran could be relied upon for good judgment, now she had to see if the Queen decided this was enough of an indictment of her actions that she had to turn him over. If things got desperate, she reminded herself, she always had the Ghost Talkers.

"And now?" the Queen asked, quiet and polished and smiling more. Jude saw that she thought she had her trapped a second or two before the words came out. "If I turn you away, will

you trust that my people are able to care for him in a way that you will not? And if I do not, will you declare war on us for only having his best interests at heart?"

Oh god, that argument again. "His best interests are best determined by himself and himself alone. It is not your place, nor anyone else's, to determine what will suit his needs and how he may be served in such a manner as to please his temperament and his health." That didn't sound coherent. She rushed on through. "If you bring him out and he tells me from his own lips and uncoerced in any way that he would rather remain here, I will abide by his wishes."

Raven sucked in a breath again and, again, couldn't object without seeming unreasonable or drawing attention. Jude didn't look behind her, either.

"Do I have your word on that?" The Queen asked, lowering her voice as well and all but purring.

"You have not produced him yet, so I am not inclined to give you my word on anything. Is there some reason you have not brought him out as early as the night we arrived? If I speak to the Ghost Talkers, will they tell me what he says?" That was her trump card, played too soon but she was starting to be scared of not playing it at all. The room was so quiet everyone heard Raven's beak clack shut, and the Queen's skirts rustle against her legs as she shifted position.

"You silly girl, I have not ordered his death, what do you accuse me of?"

She had an answer for that, too. "I accuse you of nothing. I merely suggest that he is dead, either by the cause of some intervening event or by one of your followers, perhaps, becoming a bit too enthusiastic." That came from the advice of her friends, always leave the monarch an out, so that they could save face and wouldn't blame her for their loss of authority. She didn't think that was at all fair to the scapegoat, but right now she was more interested in getting Samael back. They could worry about a less resource-consuming rescue later.

No, but she had hit a nerve somewhere. No one in fairyland had any kind of servants with any kind of sense, or that was Jude's impression of things. Which was doing an unkindness to Raven, so maybe she should say that it was the rank and file who had no sense and the brains of a five year old, and the rest of them were left to pick up the slack. Either way, whoever the Queen had left Samael with was in real danger of murdering him, or at least she thought so.

"You have no allies amongst the Ghost Talkers," she said finally, playing a visible gamble. "You have no allies anywhere but in your quaint little kingdom..." And she stopped there as all eyes turned to her again, taking it a step too far.

Jude dragged herself as upright and as haughty as she could, then abandoned it in the next instant for the quiet confidence with which she had spoken words that got her free of Samael's games. It had to be effortless, and she wasn't haughty, she was confident. "You don't know that. You don't know anything more than he did when he and I first met. You know that he was defeated in a trial of games by a mortal woman," woman sounded better than girl. "And you thought to take advantage of that, that he was somehow ill or not as strong as he used to be. Don't," she added, shaking her head. "Offer excuses. I think we're past that now."

She could hear Bran chirping with distress next to her. Sweat broke out on her palms and she moved her open hand a little further out from her dress, her other hand down and away from the edge of her sleeve. It was one of those moments where everything could go right or horribly wrong. Either way, there would be a cost for humiliating her like this.

There had been a cost for humiliating Samael, she realized. She was paying that cost now, coming to get him when no one else could.

"You lie," the Queen said. Everything stopped. The only sounds were the drip of water and the slow creak of light fixtures on chains. That was in the stories; they might accuse each other of equivocation or being mistaken or misjudging something, but you had to be very sure you were more powerful to accuse someone of outright lying. There was a specific TV series she was now thinking of, twice other characters had accused the evil monarch of lying or wrongdoing in some way, but because they'd made a full accusation of it they'd died horribly in ways her mother hadn't wanted her to watch. She decided not to tell her mother those episodes had been very educational.

Jude smiled. It was manic and terrified and angry, angry that she was being used and condescended to, angry at the whole thing. "Look again."

The Queen looked, not at her, but past her, to one of the mirrors on the wall. Then down at Jude's hand. She didn't know why, and she didn't dare ask or look around.

The Lady of the Fen broke first. She was, after all, the Queen of only a very small portion of fairyland, and Jude had forgotten that in the midst of all that bluffing. She didn't dare take her eyes off the other woman while the Queen beckoned for a servant, who nodded and scurried off in the direction of somewhere behind the wall against which her throne was sat.

And then he was there. In five short minutes he was there, looking ragged and exhausted but not much worse for however many days in confinement. Jude made herself not react to that too, knowing some part of her was going to explode later. "My lord," she bowed her head. It was all a play, they were just doing a play. "You are well?"

"I am as well as can be expected," he replied with caustic gentility, so he hadn't changed much. "Your retinue?"

Now, finally, she looked back over her shoulder at Raven, who nodded and turned to fetch them. Something moved in the mirror next to the archway, but when she shifted her focus it was just her reflection, though she hadn't realized she was making a fist. Maybe the Queen feared being punched in the snoot. She turned back in the other woman's direction, who looked in a thunderous bad mood. Samael took up a position at her side, with one hand behind her back. He also took over the talking, for which she was deeply grateful.

"I thank you for the extension of your hospitality," he said, with a smile of tiny fangs and a bite to it that she hadn't heard before. "But now I will take my leave. I trust Sir Bran is in good hands here," he added, and though her back stiffened at the thought of leaving him here she couldn't very well argue against it. Not with her limited knowledge, and not without potentially breaking half a dozen other things. "He certainly seems to have made some new friends, I expect he'll be wanting to stay, if that's all right."

"Of course." Her voice promised that Bran would come to regret promising a delivery he couldn't ultimately make.

Everyone had assembled behind them. Samael turned and, feeling as though she was opening herself up for a good solid stab in the back, Jude followed him. "My lady," he offered her his arm, which she took. They swept out of the hall with her back straight and her head high, as if she'd known what she was doing the whole time. And as if she wasn't about to collapse into a pile of pee and nervous sweat, which she was seriously thinking of doing once they got back to his castle. Funny, too. She'd never thought of his castle as a safe place, and she wasn't sure she thought of it that way now. Safer than here. That might be the best she could hope for.

She smoothed her free hand over her skirt as they swept through the hallway and thought

that her hands were surprisingly un-cramped from the fists she hadn't been making.

Jude didn't feel like she could stop looking over her shoulder until they were out of the city entirely. The thorns closed behind them so closely that several of them scratched the hindquarters of the last few ponies, who squealed and capered forward. She gritted her teeth and didn't say anything. It wasn't as though she'd expected anything else.

Samael was uncharacteristically quiet, so she spent the ride back watching how he sat on a horse, how stiff he was in places, how it seemed less like he didn't know how to ride and more like he didn't know how to behave in front of her anymore. He looked straight ahead and didn't answer Raven's questions except in monosyllables, to the bird-man's disgust. Eventually she pulled up in front of him and across his path so he had to either pull up short and go around her or stop entirely.

"You could be less of a dick to the people who went after you, you know." She bit her lip as soon as she'd said it, when he turned a look her way that was full of churning and confusion and some anger, yes. She saw similar looks from news videos of refugees and survivors of natural disasters, never up close like this. Blurted things out came naturally to her. "It's okay. You're safe now, right? We're heading back home."

"I know that," he snapped. She rolled her eyes and nudged Pucker forward. "Sorry," came the murmur from behind her. "I don't like having to be told things which are well known to me already."

She opened her mouth, stopped, took a second to think that over and let the habit of thinking over what words meant sink in. "You..." she started. Stopped. Pucker slowed down enough that he pulled up next to her. "Well." Jude swallowed. "I guess someone or another will be around to tell you for a while."

For as long as you need it, she thought, but it smacked way too much of cuddly reassuring she didn't want to do. And he didn't want to have done, given that he was stiff as a beanpole.

They rode on in silence. Everyone took up positions in a rough circle around them as they reached the territory border, even if some of the riders had to pull ahead to do it. Samael looked up and around as the last of them trotted into place, then laughed softly.

"What? Shut up," she added, the second she got the message. They were treating the two of them like reigning monarchs, which put her at his level and she liked that. It also put her as his queen or lover or consort, and she hadn't even decided whether or not she wanted a boyfriend yet. Even though she was in her last year of high school, which sometimes bothered her. But all the high school boys she knew were so dumb.

The King of the Lost wasn't dumb, he didn't say anything, but he had a knowing look on his face that was almost as bad. It was the same knowing look when he'd made his offer the first time, when he'd taunted her all the way through the quest.

"I see you're back to normal," she said finally, because she couldn't stand the combination of the knowing grin and the silence.

The grin faded, to her reluctant satisfaction. "Am I doing so well?"

At faking normal, she guessed. He could be convoluted to the point of being impossible to

understand sometimes. "It'll get better," she said, after a couple minutes of groping around for anything else to say and not coming up with anything.

"You think so."

Possibly she shouldn't have implied there was anything wrong in the first place. Not in front of other people, but they knew already. Should she not have rubbed it in their faces? "I know so. You're the goddamn ruler of a bunch of fairy land, it'll get better or you'll hex it or something." It sounded ridiculous, but that was sort of the point. Something ridiculous to break the tension, make him laugh. She thought she saw Raven's crest lifting.

"Fairy land?" That wasn't the part she'd meant to make him laugh, but anything in a pinch.

"Well, aren't you?"

"I suppose so." He looked forward again. His fingers played over the reins, clenching, unclenching as his horse's head pulled to its chest in response, then closing tight again when he'd forgotten.

Jude sighed noisily. "Spit it out."

"Beg pardon?"

"Whatever it is you're trying not to say to me. Or ask me. Just spit it out, I hate when you're cryptic and all-knowing like this."

He didn't say anything for several minutes, but since he looked as though he were coming to grips or steeling his nerves for something, she allowed it. "The two of us together make a formidable force," he started, and then she knew what the rest of it was before he said anything else. Fortunately, he glanced at her and shut his mouth, reading on her face what she thought of that idea.

"I'm still in school," she said finally, alternating a firm stare between the pommel of her saddle and the point between her horse's ears. "I'm going to college, Samael. Let me at least get through college before you start going all Prince Charming on me. Let me... Twenty seven."

He blinked again. "Beg pardon?" In front of them, Raven was almost doubled over laughing, but his King didn't seem to notice. Or if he did he found it funnier to play oblivious.

"Twenty seven. You have to wait until I'm twenty seven. That's a big magical number, isn't it? Three threes." It seemed right. And by then she might have grown up enough to know what she wanted. High school boys hadn't seemed dumb, she discovered, until she went through fairyland and came out realizing how much she didn't know. About the world, and about herself.

He shook his head, less in negation and more in wonder, if his smile was anything to judge by. "You would make a formidable queen, you know that?"

"You offered already." She drove her horse into his side. Gently. "That's my counter offer. Nine years." Nine years? Almost, yes. Damn. "Take it or leave it."