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# Episode 2: Wandering Knight, Budding Hero

## K. Arsenault Rivera

From set *Wilds of Eldraine*

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Across the valleys and into the wilds ventures Rowan Kenrith. Atop a stout horse, with a sharp blade hanging at her hip and sparks dancing from her fingertips, she journeys wherever the winds guide her. Gladly the smallfolk take her into their homes, offering what little they have; gladly does Rowan accept their kindness. In the small hours of the night, when they ask her why she is awake, she asks if they've heard where she might find a cure for the Wicked Slumber.

"Are you certain you don't long for it?" asked Royse, whose fine weaves even the fae have come to covet. Rowan has stayed in palaces less well-appointed than Royse's home. The fae bestow gifts upon creators of beauty, it seems. "You look like you could use the rest."

"Rest isn't of any use to me," Rowan answered.

Royse, eyes flashing in the dark, tutted beneath her breath. "Rest will come for you, whether you like it or not. Best to face it on your own terms," she said. "But if you are determined to continue in your quest, brave knight, there is a castle not far from here. Its lord died long ago—longer ago than your kind remember."

"My kind?" Rowan's grip tightened on her sword.

Royse only smiled. The moonlight played upon her skin and the glamor broke, revealing eight eyes, two chittering mandibles, eight arms hidden beneath her stole.

Little wonder her weaving fascinated humans and fae alike.

"You're—" Rowan started.

Royse set her two human hands on her knees. "I have promised you shelter and given you food; we are not enemies."

Rowan relaxed her grip. She did not sleep that night, but she did learn a little of weaving.

In the morning, Royse pointed the way to the castle, wishing Rowan good fortune on her journey.

Its crumbling walls and ancient parapets now welcome her.

Dust cakes her lungs the farther in she goes. Undead servants rise to meet her blade. Heart hardened against such sights, she slays them, their innards slicking the stone floors. When at last she finds the library, its shelves stand empty. There are no alembics here, no cauldrons for potion crafting, no lost secrets—only whatever the looters have left behind.

After all that she has done to get here, all the blood she has spilled—nothing.

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### Hero

by K. Arsenault Rivera

Wilds of Eldraine

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Alone in the abandoned castle, Rowan Kenrith becomes a storm. She imagines what her brother would say if he saw her here, and this only drives her further into a rage. By the time she realizes she has begun to weep, her body is already shaking and weary.

Against all reason there is a bed in this place, untouched by the ravages of looting. When she collapses upon it, she realizes the truth of Royse's words: rest will come, one way or another.

The dream swallows her.

Once more she walks through the doors of this castle—but they are whole, the wood polished and new. Within the halls there are bards and dancers. Fair women and handsome men lead her further. A fit squire removes her armor so smoothly she forgets she'd ever worn it. A warm robe is draped over her shoulders, a tankard of mead placed in her hand. Pulled along by such delights, she finds herself before a feasting table.

Her father and mother stand at the head. Hale, hearty, faces radiant in the golden light of the castle, they spread their arms toward her. "Rowan, you made it," Linden says.

Rowan's chest goes tight. There they are, just as she remembers them—no scars save those they earned in her youth, no bloody wounds. They are so *happy*.

She drops the mead, running to them full tilt. Her father lifts her off her feet and spins her. Her mother smooths her hair and dabs away the tears at the corners of Rowan's eyes.

"You've come so far to see us," says Linden. "We're so proud of you."

Her mouth opens again and again, but she cannot speak.

"You've need of our council, don't you?" her father asks.

Wordless, she nods.

He takes the crown from his head and places it atop her own. "Come to Castle Ardenvale. Your blood awaits you there."

She wakes, alone in the dusty castle. Sunlight filters in through the broken windows. She must have slept the whole night through. Alone, surrounded by death and cold, she allows herself another chance to weep.

For when it is over, she will do as her father asked of her.

She will go to Castle Ardenvale.



Art by: Aurore Folny

“Um. Excuse me, sir, but have you seen any witches lately?”

This man, like all the others Kellan has asked before him, laughs. “Oh, aye, there’s one down the way. Sells the best pies in Edgewall. Tell her Duncan sent you.”

He’s kind enough to toss over a coin. Kellan tucks it away in a pouch, his shoulders slumping, his spirits bruised but not broken. This is only the first step on his journey, right? There are so many people in Edgewall. One of them’s bound to know something. All he has to do is keep at it. With a grunt of effort, he adjusts the pack on his shoulders and makes his way down the long, ambling street.

All his life his mother’s told him stories of places like this—of dwarves, fauns, knights, and mages. They didn’t feel real until now. Across the street from the pie shop, an elven woman sells enchanted wooden songbirds. Up ahead, a Verdant Knight speaks to a smith. There are banners and baubles everywhere the eye can land. He nods to himself as he walks, decided. There’s no better place to live than here.

Already he can see the line at the shop doubled and tripled up. They really must make great pies—but there’s no way she’s a real witch. His mother always told him that cooking is the closest most people can get, though, so maybe the woman who runs it will know something.

Kellan plants himself at the end of the line. As he waits, his eyes wander over the messengers running from one end to the other, the bard playing his lute. He hums along. A group of children in leaf-wrought clothes toss pinecones back and forth in a fit of laughter and giggles. Kellan grins, watching them.

But then he sees the sleeping man standing under the eaves of a shop, a swirl of violet around him. His eyes are closed, his mouth open; as he sways, drool falls on his armor.

This must be the Slumber the merchant told them about on his last visit. Seeing it in person is a strange thing. How long’s he been like that? There’s a touch of rust where his spit hits his armor. Why doesn’t anyone help him?

Worse, someone in a hurry bumps into the sleeper. The sleeper jerks, falls over—and no one helps him up.

Kellan can't let that stand. He takes a step toward the fallen knight.

A hand on his wrist snaps him from his thoughts. He looks up to its owner and finds a girl in a red cloak, her brows furrowed. "You might not want to do that."

Kellan draws his hand back. "Why not? He needs help."

The girl winces. "You're the kid who keeps asking people about witches?"

Kellan puts on a hero's voice, or tries to, but the crack undoes him. "I might be. Depends on who's doing the, uh, asking."

The girl laughs and shakes her head. She takes his hand again and starts tugging him along. "All right, hero, you're coming with me."

"What? What about—Hey! What about that man?" Kellan asks.

"The Wicked Slumber spreads, though no one's really sure how," she answers. "If you touch him it might get you, too. That's if the witches don't get you first."

Kellan looks over his shoulder at the sleeper. As the girl tugs him into an alley, someone slips a wooden baking spatula under the man. With a little effort he is upright once more. Whatever relief Kellan feels is mitigated by his surprise once he realizes what the girl's just said.

"Wait. They're after me?"

The girl looks both ways down the alley before speaking. "They're going to be, if you keep asking questions like that. Don't you know you shouldn't draw a witch's attention?"

"Do you know a lot about witches?" he asks. "If you do, I could really use your help. I just got here, so I don't know a lot, but I've got a quest to finish."

"A quest?" she says, giving him a quick assessment. "You've got a quest. You don't even have a sword."

"Heroes don't need swords," he says. He leaves out that the only sword his stepfather owned was rusty, so he couldn't bring it. "Besides, I got these from my lord, and they said they're just as good as any blade. These mean I'm a real hero!"

He brandishes the pair of basket hilts—Talion's parting gift. Old wood has grown to mimic the worked steel of human smithing, with a peculiar glow proclaiming their unearthly provenance. They're sure to impress *anyone*.

But the girl isn't just anyone, and she regards them with only a raised brow. "Whenever someone insists that something's real, it means it isn't." She sighs. "Anyway, I wouldn't be of much help. You've got to go out to Dunbarrow. My brother, Peter, he knows every inch of that place like the back of his hand. *He* could help you."

Kellan stows his hilts with a bashful sort of gratitude. "Could you take me to him?"

The girl's expression clouds under the brim of her cloak. "I haven't seen him in days. I thought maybe you'd seen him, since you're from out of town."

"Oh," Kellan says softly. "I'm sorry. I didn't know. I, um, I don't think I met any Peters along the way here."

“Figures,” says the girl. She turns. “Well. I wish you all the best on your quest, hero. If you see my brother, tell him Ruby’s waiting for him back at home.”

Kellan, shorter than her by half a head, shuffles after her. “Wait! You can tell him yourself if you come with me.”

She stops. When she turns this time, her brow is raised. “*You’re* going to find him?”

“I might,” says Kellan. “You said Dunbarrow’s where all the witches are. You’ve been there, haven’t you?”

Ruby dusts off her shoulder. “Once or twice.”

“I bet it’s more than that,” Kellan says. “If you can help me find the witch I’m looking for, then maybe my liege can help you find your brother.”

Ruby tilts her head. “And just who is your liege, anyway?”

Oh no. He can’t say it’s the Lord of the Fae. That’s no way to earn anyone’s trust. But he can’t lie, either. Kellan’s cheeks go hot. “They don’t like people talking about them very much,” he says. It’s true enough, right? “But they’re helping me find my father. That’s what I get for finishing the quest—a chance to know who he is. So I’m sure they’ll help you with your brother.”

A pause. Ruby’s studying him. He tries to stand tall. “You’re sure your liege can help?”

Kellan nods. “Sure as sheep’s wool.”

Ruby frowns for a second, then nods, the tension leaving her shoulders. “All right. I guess someone’s got to look out for you, and it might as well be me.”

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Over the heaths and through the barrow in search of witches they go.

From the stories his mother told him, Kellan expected the wilds to be prettier than this. Maybe it’s the aftermath of the war. Ruby tells him that the sharp metallic aberrations dotting the countryside are Phyrexian remnants, hacked apart after the Slumber stopped them in their tracks.

“Those things used to be alive?” he asks her.

“If you can call it alive,” she answers. “You really don’t know?”

Stopping by one of them—what looks to be some kind of walking battering ram—she shows him the oil oozing from within it, the face with its two weeping eyes.

Kellan turns away, preferring the twisted trees of Dunbarrow to the twisted body of the invader. “Where’d they come from?”

“Somewhere else, says the Boy King,” Ruby explains. “Some other Realm.”

“There are other Realms?” As they walk together through the woods, he does his best to keep the ignoble corpse behind him, focusing instead on the flitting shapes of pixies, the black streaks of birds overhead, on darting stoats. “What are they like?”

“I don’t know,” Ruby answers. “If they have those things in them, though, I’m fine without visiting the place. Besides, I’d never go anywhere without my brother.”

Kellan nods. “I’d never go anywhere without my family, either. Anywhere, you know. *Else*.”

Ruby quirks a brow at him. “Even if it was for your quest?”

He lets that one lie, unwilling to even consider it.

Ruby clears a fallen bough with surprising ease, then helps Kellan to do the same. When his feet hit the earth, water splashes onto her shoes. She yelps. Somewhere in the woods around them a pixie laughs.

Since time immemorial it has been impolite to laugh at a struggling girl. It is the purview of a hero to defend such damsels.

Kellan frowns and prepares to shout the impish thing away—until Ruby picks up an apple from her basket and flings it hard as a giant flinging a boulder, as fast as a crossbow bolt. The pixie yelps in misery.

Ruby pouts. “They’re so annoying,” she says, continuing along the unmarked path as if she hadn’t displayed such talents.

Kellan, awestruck, can only follow. “King’s wounds, what a shot!”

She stops just to stare at him for saying such a thing. “King’s wounds. Really?” she says. “It’s just an apple. I’m sure you can do a lot more with those fancy swords your liege has given you.”

It takes concerted effort not to trip when she says this, though there are no brambles in sight. He tries to think of something to say, or what the best way to tell her he has no idea how to turn the hilts into anything useful, but the words are as tricky as the pixie Ruby so easily dispatched. All he manages is an unsure *hmm*.

But it makes little difference, for at that moment an arrow whistles past his face, nicking the tip of his nose before striking the tree nearest him. Kellan covers his face in alarm. Are those war drums he’s hearing, or his own frantic pulse?

Though fear’s gotten the better of him, Ruby is quick to act as ever. She tackles Kellan into a blackberry bush. His mother’s weaving keeps him safe from the thorns thirsty for blood—and the leaves keep him safe from their assailant.

“King’s wounds, what is *that*?” Ruby whispers.

Beyond the border of the thicket they can see him: the man in wolf armor. Beneath the mail, a blood red gambeson seems an omen of wounds to come. The bow that shot the near-fatal arrow is as wicked as the thorns of the bush; at his hip hangs a sword as long as Kellan’s legs. The snarling metal maw of a wolf conceals all but his burning eyes.

And he is staring right at them.

Kellan’s throat is tight. He saw a knight for the first time only hours ago—what is this thing?

The Wolf Knight strides toward them.

“Run!” Kellan shouts.

Ruby doesn’t need to be told twice. Throwing themselves from the bush they scabble to their feet and dash ahead. A wordless howl from the Wolf Knight peals through the forest; crows flee from their nests in terror. Even the pixies who tormented them earlier have cleared away.

Another arrow whistles over Kellan’s shoulder.

“Now would be a great time for those magic swords,” Ruby shouts. “We can’t keep running forever!”

Kellan swallows. Pressure mounts within his chest. He can’t lie to her—but the hilts aren’t swords, either. They’re just ... hilts. Talion said they’d help refine his abilities. Of course, in all the time he’s traveled with them, he hasn’t been able to do anything except punch things a little harder, or ...

Well, it's better than nothing. Turning toward the Wolf Knight, Kellan hurls one of the hilts as hard as he can.

It bounces uselessly off his armor—then flies back to Kellan's hand.

"Oops," he says.

"What was—All right. All right, okay. I've got this. Follow me," Ruby calls.

Her groan hurts, but he can't blame her. It would be great if he *did* know how to use them. He could probably slice clean through an oak tree with a fae-wrought blade, but as it stands ... he's kind of a joke. "I'm sorry, I'm still learn—wait, what're those?"

As they run beneath the massive body of a dead invader, they come upon half a dozen ... creatures. If a toddler's malformed drawing of a wolf were given form, muscle, and fang, it might resemble one of these beings. Their forelegs and haunches are dense with power, their muzzles slick with blood.

"Witchstalkers!" Ruby answers. "You're not magical, right?"

Kellan winces. "I, uh, I'm not sure!"

"Well, it's time to find out," Ruby says.

He expects her to stop, or hide, or lead the witchstalkers back toward the Wolf Knight, but Ruby does no such thing. She runs toward the pack of witchstalkers, weaving between them, her cloak dragging past their faces. By the time she's cleared them, she's wearing a giddy smile beneath the hood.

Easy enough for her to do. There's a pit in Kellan's stomach as he looks at the witchstalkers. His lord's gifts, or his father's blood, might doom him should he risk it.

But he has his mother's love to keep him safe—a thick cloak that's fought off plenty so far. He throws up his own hood. If Ruby can do it, Kellan can, too.

Hard as he can, he runs between the gathered witchstalkers. He's halfway through before he realizes the high-pitched yelling he hears is coming from his own mouth, a sound between the wail of a ghost and the laugh of a child at play. Every beat of his heart feels stolen and glorious. Though he doesn't linger to see if the creatures will attack him, when he clears the pack, he still finds himself doubling over with relief.

They didn't bite him. Not even a nibble. He laughs in earnest. He did it! He really did it. His first brush with adventure!

Ruby offers Kellan a hand up and he takes it, looking back the way they came. The Wolf Knight's stepped into the clearing.



Art by: Pascal Quidault

“Come on, come on ...” whispers Ruby. “He’s got to be magical!”

Two youths, hoarding their breath like a dragon hoards gems, stare down the Wolf Knight. Their pursuer, in turn, lets out another wordless howl.

The witchstalkers answer. As one their heads perk and they turn toward the Wolf Knight, their growls resonating in Kellan’s chest. The Wolf Knight runs into the woods as the witchstalkers give chase.

“I think we’re safe,” he says, huffing. He grins. “You did it, Ruby!”

She stares at the witchstalkers as they take off. It looks like she can’t believe she’s still standing. “Yeah, I guess I did,” she says.

Relieved, Kellan turns and notices the cabin for the first time.

He’s not sure how neither of them saw it before now. Maybe this is what his mother meant whenever she talked about the chaos of a melee—when you’re busy trying to make sure you get out of something alive, you aren’t always paying attention to the horizon. Still, it’s hard to miss. The house is thorny and black, as if made from blackberry brambles, standing twice as tall as those back home. Violet windows pulse with light from within. All around the house there is a thicket of violet mist.

“Ruby,” Kellan says, taking her hand to get her attention. “Look! That’s the witch’s house, it’s got to be.”

It takes her only a glance to agree with him. “I’ll be damned, you’re right,” she says. “What should we do?”

“Those windows are huge. We can try and peek inside, then figure out how we’re going to defeat her,” Kellan says. He hopes Ruby won’t ask for more details than that.

Luckily, she doesn’t.

The two of them slink through the twisting trees and thick bushes toward the house. Burrs cling to Kellan’s cloak; he thinks of each one as a well-wish from his father. He’s so close to finishing this first



witch off. Will Talion give him a hint? Maybe a riddle? The thought of discovering more is as tempting as fresh fruit on a hot summer day.

The brush allows them to get right beneath the lowest of the witch's windows. Here at the bottom the glass is thick, distorting the two figures in the cabin. One, Kellan thinks, is the witch: she walks in a broad circle around a large darkness in the center of the room. Smoke rises from whatever it is she's guarding. The other figure is slumped over, their back to the window.

"A real cauldron," Kellan mumbles. "I wonder what she's using it for ..."

"Eating people," answers Ruby readily. "I've heard a couple rumors that there was someone nearby boiling people's bones into stew. And that's definitely a cauldron, and she's definitely got someone tied up ..."

"Witches don't eat people," Kellan says. "My mom was almost a witch, and she'd never do anything like that."

"Have you considered that maybe that's why she's *almost* a witch, not *is* a witch?" Ruby asks. She tugs on his cloak. "Get down, I think she's coming."

She is. The witch's pacing around her bubbling cauldron brings her toward them now. Kellan and Ruby duck beneath the windowsill in time to avoid her gaze, but only just. Even through the glass her eyes are wicked and piercing, a violet not unlike the glow surrounding them.

"So, what's the plan?" Ruby asks.

Kellan puts a hand to his chin as if he's considering one. The deception, such as it is, lasts a second at most. Then he shrugs. "We're going to play it by ear."

"What?" Ruby hisses, eyes narrowing. "You can't be serious. That's a real live witch in there!"

"We aren't going to be able to win with magic, and we don't have any weapons," Kellan says. He slinks around the corner of the cabin, careful to keep from touching the cursed plumes of smoke along the ground. "And I've got this new friend who taught me the value of improvising."

"Improvising's one thing, but this is asking for trouble," Ruby says, following him anyway.

Kellan waves at her to stay put. He points to his eyes, then to the window. "Let me know when she's facing away from the door," he says.

Ruby frowns, but stays put beneath the window. Meanwhile, Kellan leans an ear against the door. From within he hears a keening song. Delivered without much care for rhythm or melody, the singer is nonetheless enthralled with the sound of her own voice.

*"When I was hungry a knight wandered in, wild at heart and covered in tin ..."*

A knight? She's going to eat a *knight*?

*"How easy it was to beat her, in truth! But how hard to eat her without breaking a tooth!"*

Sweat rolls down Kellan's brow. Ruby was right. This isn't any normal witch—she's nothing like his mother. If they don't act fast, that knight's probably going to die. But what to do?

He doesn't have much time to think. From around the corner, he sees a blur of red—another apple thrown by his new friend. A fine signal, he thinks.

Until he hears the apple *thunk* against metal.

A glance over his shoulder is all he can afford—but he already knows what he’s going to see. The Wolf Knight. Had he already fought off the witchstalkers? Yes—that’s his shape slinking through the mists, covered in blood.

He can’t leave Ruby outside with him, and he can’t let that witch eat the knight. If he saves the knight inside, maybe she can fight off the one outside. And maybe when the witch is gone, the Wolf Knight will just ... fade away. That’s what happened to conjured guardians in stories, anyway.

Kellan plucks a burr from his cloak. “Dad, if you’re listening,” he says, “please make me brave enough to do this.”

He doesn’t wait for an answer, because he knows he can’t. He just has to have faith that it worked.

Kellan opens the door, quiet and quick. As a mouse slinking through a cat’s domain, he scurries over to the center of the room where the witch continues her awful song. Lashed to a rod near the bubbling cauldron is a rugged woman clad in armor, her right arm made from solid wood. Bleary and delirious, she locks eyes with him.

Kellan can see the hope in her when she does that.

*“Oh, brave knight, what shall I do? Boil and bubble, broth and brew—oh brave knight, I’ll make you a stew!”*

The witch is so preoccupied with stirring her foul smelling brew that she has not yet noticed him. She stands before the cauldron, leveling a crooked finger at the knight. For once she drops the sing-song.

“But what spice to use, hm? I don’t suppose you know what you taste best with, do you?”

“Die in a fire,” the knight spits. She glances at Kellan, then gives him a covert nod.

The witch, however, turns back toward the cauldron. She shakes her head, then reaches into her pocket. “That isn’t very kind. I need this fire for cooking you. There’s an art to this, you know. I can’t just throw anything in there and hope it’ll end up gourmet.”

Whatever’s in that bag she dumps in makes Kellan want to vomit, but he keeps it together. He has a job to do—and he has an opening here. Like the rams on his farm, he lowers his head and charges.

“You’re the one that’s cooked!” Kellan answers.



Art by: Marta Nael

He hears the witch howl when he slams into her, and he hears her scream as she falls into the cauldron, but he tries not to think about the implications of any of it. A puff of black smoke rises, the smell so acrid it brings tears to his eyes. Kellan runs toward the knight. There'll be time to think about what he's done later—right now, he needs to make sure Ruby's safe. And the best way to do that is to free this woman.

"Can you fight?" he asks, hands working the knots around her wrists. One of her arms, he notices, is made of a strange, pliable wood that struggles just like flesh and muscle.

"Grrkh ... If you get me ... my hammer."

It isn't an answer that fills him with confidence, but it's what he's got. The ropes fall away. He scans the chaotic mess of the cabin in search of a war hammer—there. It's slumped against a counter covered in all manner of viscera and gore, with jars labeled "Eye of Newt" and "Toe of Frog."

As he runs for the hammer, Ruby dashes in through the door. "He's almost here!"

"The knight's going to save us," Kellan says. He can't lift the hammer, but he can drag it over. "She can still fight!"

He hands the hammer to the knight, who stands.

Or tries to.

But Kellan learns here an important lesson: not all knights can be heroes all the time. This one is far too exhausted, far too beaten. She collapses back into her ignoble seat.

Kellan's heart is somewhere in his throat when the Wolf Knight walks through the door. Covered in blood, his sword freshly used. Had they come all this way only to—?

"Get up!" Kellan says, shoving the knight. "You can do this, come on! You used to defend the Realm!"

"That was a long time ago," the knight mumbles. Yet once more she tries to stand—and once more she falls.

The Wolf Knight stops at the threshold.

Ruby hurls a jar of something foul. Clay shatters against his armor. He turns toward her.

“Ruby,” bellows the Wolf Knight. “I’ve finally found you.”

Ruby’s eyes go wide. She stands from her hiding spot, lowers her hood.

The Wolf Knight doffs his helm. Beneath is the face of a grizzled woodsman, his beard thick and his hair unkempt—yet his eyes are kind, and his smile warm. He spreads his arms. “Ruby, it’s me.”

“Peter!” Ruby shouts. She runs to him, and he is there to meet her, lifting her up and spinning her around before he sets her down on her feet. “What happened? Are you all right?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen this place before today. I went out hunting, and there was this awful song,” he says. “This is a witch’s cabin, isn’t it? She must have enchanted me. I’m so sorry I scared you, but I’m happy you’re safe.”

Ruby throws her arms around him. “Don’t worry,” she says. “I’ll forgive you for that if you forgive me for siccing the witchstalkers on you.”

He tousles her hair. “I’d expect no less from you. You always were the clever one in the family,” he says. Then, he turns toward Kellan and the knight. “You there—boy. You helped my sister, didn’t you? Whatever you ask of me, only speak it, and I will grant it, if it’s within my power to do so.”

“She did most of the work,” he says. “But ... if you want to help, I have to get the cauldron to my liege. They said I needed to show them I’d ...”

“Say no more. You need someone to carry it, and I shall,” Peter says. His eyes fall on the injured knight and he winces. “I must have caused you great harm. My apologies.”

The knight groans. “Wasn’t a fair fight, between you and that crone.”

“Stay here. Once we’ve moved the cauldron to its destination, Ruby and I can make you a healing salve. There are plenty of ingredients here, and I think I remember something of herblore.”

If the knight has any counterargument, her mind is too addled with pain to make it.

Peter enlists Ruby and Kellan’s help with the cauldron; the two of them together hold up one side, while he lifts the other, bearing the majority of the weight. Kellan tries not to think about what’s sloshing around inside. Together they’re able to move it through the threshold—but instead of the violet mists, Talion’s court greets them on the other side.

This time, the Kindly Lord does not make himself visible. Kellan knows they are present only when familiar music plays around them. There are no pleasantries this time: their advice is quick and to the point.

*“Hylda is the next witch you seek. Her magic is great, her skill yet greater; she has concealed herself from my eyes. But consult the mirror Indrelon, and you may yet find her . Torn from Castle Vantress by Gerra Grandsquall, it now lies far from its home. Worry not, my wisdom will save you the trouble of hunting it down. A beanstalk grows not half a day’s ride from here. Climb it, and you shall find the mirror at its peak .”*

No sooner have they finished speaking than the court disappears, forgotten as a dream. The trio stands once more before the cabin.

Ruby’s staring at him. “Your liege is the fae king,” she says.

“Is that ... does that upset you?” Kellan says. “I was going to ask if you wanted to come. I could really use your help. Both of you.”

“I’d be of no help to you, wounded as I am,” Peter says. “I’ll not be in fighting shape for days yet.”

Ruby looks from Kellan to Peter and back again. She sighs. “You helped me find my brother, so I’ll help. But let’s rest for a while. We can tend to the knight’s wounds and figure out what it is we’re going to do.”

Kellan’s fingers are shaking. “But ... do you hate that I’m working with the fae?”

He’s surprised how much Ruby’s scoff sets him at ease. “Are you kidding? That just means you’re braver than I thought.”

And that? That, he can live with.