

The House with Two Halves

A
Fairy
Tale

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The House With Two Halves by Stephanie Van Orman

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ONE

Torsten sat in the window seat in his bedroom. Half of the stained glass window was flung open and sitting so near the window, he gave the whole court something to see. His beauty was rare and rich as he was the youngest son of the King and Queen. He was a prince. However, he had a very different fate from the other princes of the kingdom.

He shook out his blond hair, blinked his coppery eyes, and hated everyone so thoroughly it should have melted the glass in front of his eyes and burned the seat under his bottom. The hate flared through him so utterly that it should have caused him to spit acid, breathe fire, and puke poison.

However, nothing happened.

Instead, he sat there and the world stayed the same around him. The world did not care if it was unfair to him. The wind still blew, the sun still shone, and flecks of dust hung in the air like time stood still. For everyone else, it was an ordinary day, but not for him.

For him... it might be the last night he slept in his bedroom.

Ever since Torsten was a little boy, he had known he was different from his older brothers. They were trained to fight as knights, and given lessons in strategy so that they might lead armies. In contrast, Torsten was taken with his sisters to have his hands groomed.

When he was little, he thought it was because he was too young to engage in warfare, but as he grew older, his schedule didn't change.

Instead of being taught how to sharpen a sword, he was taught how to read and write. Not just the basics, but how to read aloud well and how to write in long curling letters. When he was thirteen, he was sent to apprentice to a painter to learn how to paint. He would have liked it better if his brothers had been included in the exercise, but instead, they were beating dummies in the courtyard while he was instructed to keep his hands free of paint and kept apart from them.

The only lessons he was allowed to attend along with them were the riding lessons. He was taught alongside them how to groom and care for a horse. It was then that he realized that he was three inches taller than his older brother. He would have realized it sooner, but they rarely stood side-by-side.

"Mother, why am I not being trained in warfare? I have a better body than Callum," he complained. "I can see the top of his head."

She turned and looked at him with sorrowing eyes. "Darling... this is a special time that you get to spend with me."

Torsten did a double take. He was fourteen years old and it had never occurred to him that no matter what activity he did, he was always kept close to his mother. He had sisters. They were near her too, but not as close. If his mother reached out at any given time, she could touch him. He sat next to her at the dinner table. His room was closer to hers than any of his other siblings. He would have asked his father his question, except he rarely saw him. He was off with Torsten's brothers.

Something was wrong.

Maybe, he had always known something was wrong.

But he hadn't discovered what it was until the day he spat hatred out his bedroom window. He was nineteen. He was more than a man and his clean hands painted and wrote. His trained voice spoke and sang. His gloved hands handled a horse well and his clothes were unstained in his own blood, which set him apart from his brothers.

Earlier that day, the answer to Torsten's evaded question had been revealed. A bird had arrived at the watchtower. They used carrier pigeons and falcons at the castle, but the bird that perched on the battlements was neither. This bird was yellow with a long tail like a flag, black stripes on its face, and black blots on the tips of its wings.

At its arrival, Torsten's mother fainted and the truth came out. She was taken straight to her bed and the King took Torsten to the armory... a place he had never been admitted to before.

He didn't know what his father was going to say, but he knew that the bird meant the time he had to spend with his mother was over. All children had to part from their parents at some point. Some were sent to rule smaller parts of the kingdom, some were married off in diplomatic alliances, and some... Well, a lot died. He knew he had a sibling who had died... a younger brother who hadn't quite made it. Torsten barely remembered him. What would have happened if his little brother had lived? Would Torsten have avoided the fate of the youngest son? Would Torsten have been taught to fight with his older brothers instead of learning to paint?

Inside the armory, the King closed the door to give them privacy. He was a gruff man with a strong voice, but no way with words. He began by saying something neutral. "That bird was more than an omen. It was a message with no parchment attached to its ankle. Its arrival itself was enough to convey the message. Do you know what it means?"

Torsten shook his head wordlessly.

His father looked sorry. Sorry for everything... but he wasn't a coward and he explained. "In all our fuss about warfare and defending our kingdom, have you ever noticed that we are never attacked from the north?"

Torsten had not noticed. They fought the Barbarians to the east and the Pagans to the south, and they had an alliance with the Mustards to the west, but he had never even thought that they faced a possible invasion to the north. The land northward was wilderness, thick forests, jagged mountains, wild beasts, and monsters everywhere.

"If you need every soldier, Father, I am ready to fight," Torsten said roughly, trying to echo the way his father spoke instead of the way his mother had taught him to speak.

The King's unsettled eyes rested on Torsten's copper ones and he slowly looked down at his frame until his gaze lingered on his son's boots. He put a hand on his shoulder. "I see that you have been raised properly by your mother. I couldn't be prouder that those words are the ones you chose as a response. It is true that I will need you in our dealings with the northern kingdom."

Torsten's chest swelled with pride. Finally, he was going to get what he had always desired—a place with his father and brothers.

"But we will not need to fight them," his father said slowly. "That isn't how we deal with them." Something caught in Torsten's throat. "How do we deal with them?"

His father's eyes glazed over in something like a stupor. "They ask us to sacrifice one of our princes to them once a generation."

Torsten's eyes went wide. It was going to be him. It was always going to be him.

He backed away from his father, taking two steps before he got a grip on himself and cleared his throat. "They're going to kill me?"

"I don't know," his father said, shaking his head like a dazed person. "I know that my father sent my brother away with their knight. The knight came in the heaviest, most beautiful armor I had ever seen. He bound up my brother's wrists, put him on the back of the strangest creature I ever saw come out of the woods, and then he was gone. There was no explanation about what was done with him. The only thing I knew was that he would never come back and we would never hear of him again."

"What was the creature like?" Torsten asked, rushing for details.

"It was like a dragon from a fairytale. It had green scales, horns that parted like an elk's, and fangs that protruded from its mouth. If I had come across it in the woods, I would have run rather than try to kill it. What if it had a kinsfolk nearby? We would all have died. The knight had tamed it and rode a yellow beast—golden—of the same type."

"And you?" Torsten asked. "What do you remember about your brother?"

"I remember him," the King insisted. "I just don't like to talk about him. If I say anything at all, it feels like my father was wrong to send him away. I can't think my father's choice was wrong."

Torsten nodded. "I see. Grandfather can't be wrong because you have to do the same thing."

The miserable, dejected look on his father's face immediately stripped the King of any regality he'd ever possessed in Torsten's eyes.

"When will the knight come for me?" the young prince asked crossly.

"I don't know. Once the yellow bird appears, it could be any day."

Torsten turned from his father and grasped the handle of the door.

"You're not going to try to run away, are you?" the King asked, suddenly sounding like the victorious warlord Torsten had always believed him to be.

The idea did cross the young man's mind.

"If you run," the King said. "It will be an act of treason. You said you were willing to be a soldier for your country and whether or not you were aware of it at the time, that pledge means you were willing to die for our kingdom. That's still true, isn't it?"

Torsten felt like spitting. "I need what time is left to accustom myself to the idea. I'll prepare myself."

If he was honest, Torsten didn't know what that meant. He had read the words he said to his father in a book and that moment seemed like the correct place to insert them, but he didn't know if what he was saying was true. He hoped he'd be able to gain control of himself, but he didn't know if he could. He was too angry.

"I want you to know that what we're asking you to do is important. You know how many quarrels we have with the Barbarians and the Pagans. I do not need to come to blows with the Hollowmen."

"Is that what they're called?" Torsten asked.

"It's what we call them because we aren't allowed to utter their true name. I don't even know it."

Torsten bet they could fill a library with what his father didn't know.

He nodded, kept his back to his father, and sped across the castle knocking things over as he moved.

He needed to check on his mother. He needed to hear what she thought of everything that was happening. She had obviously known his fate and she had chosen his education and lessons accordingly. What was she thinking and feeling?

He came to her bedroom doors, only to be met by several of her ladies-in-waiting. They instructed him that the Queen was ill and she needed to be left alone to recover.

He looked at their faces, each face, each woman, and he suddenly felt sick. This was the part of the castle he knew best. These were servants he knew best. He had never once been denied entry to his mother's rooms. He might have been asked to wait as she changed her clothing. He might have been asked to return when she had awoken from her rest, but the way the women phrased their reply, he suddenly understood that his mother was not going to see him again before he left.

For her, he was lost to her the moment the bird arrived. When she emerged from her bedroom, he would have been taken by the knight of the Hollowmen.

And that was why he was sitting in his window seat furious at everything and everyone. It was lucky he was an educated man because he knew more curse words than the soldiers were taught in the army and he could use them all to express himself quite accurately.

The Extra Tail in the Fairy Tale

The truth was that the King, who had once been Prince Rollo, had been so enraged that his parents had given his brother, Kallisan, to the Hollowmen for their sacrifice that he had stormed out of the castle, mounted his horse, and given them chase into the north woods. He knew he could catch up to the two dragons and the knight if he hurried. He had no fear of slaying two dragons or of killing the knight who had come to take his brother. One knight was only one knight and he had already vanquished a fair few on the field of battle.

However...

Even though he saw the place where the procession of two entered the forest, even though he dove in straight after them, even though everything should have made sense—nothing did. Within ten minutes of entering the forest, Prince Rollo was completely lost. Not only could he not find the knight and his brother, but very soon, it became obvious that he would not be able to find his way out of the woods.

What then began was something more harrowing than anything the prince had seen on the battlefield.

He was trapped in the forest for six weeks before he found his way out. In the meantime, he had to kill and eat monsters he'd never seen before. He used his cape to hang from a sturdy tree branch to make a kind of hammock. He had to sit up inside it to sleep. He also had to map the entire forest, but that never helped. He found his way out of the forest one day completely by accident.

On his arrival back home, his father, the King at that time, beat him soundly and used him as an example to the entire royal family that war with the Hollowmen was suicide. Not only that, but their powers were so far above them that any attempt to rebel against the Hollowmen's request would be considered treason.

“They don’t even ask for a weighty financial tribute to keep the northern border safe,” the King ranted so loudly that he spat in Rollo’s face (Torsten came from a long line of spitters). “One royal child every twenty years is a small price to pay. I’d send one of you to each of our enemies in the south, the east, and the west if that would settle things. Except it wouldn’t!”

A sounder lesson was never taught.

TWO

Torsten was not left to stew in his own juices for long. The knight from the Northern Kingdom arrived at twilight the next evening. Torsten spent the time between receiving the news that he was his kingdom's sacrifice and the appearance of the knight ranting in his room. He trashed the place at two in the morning. That meant, he destroyed four of his best paintings, tore the pages out of seven volumes of very costly books, and turned his bedding into a knotted ladder with which he had some half-contrived idea of escape before he fell asleep in a heap at the foot of his bed.

When he woke up, it was past noon. He was tucked in his bed, which was made up nice and pretty like his night of material carnage had never happened. The items he had destroyed had been removed from his bedroom and his sister Vallis was sitting in a chair next to his bed with a tray of food.

"The Queen is a coward," she said harshly when she saw that Torsten was awake.

He didn't have the heart to glare at his sister. He loved his mother and he knew that what was happening was beyond her power.

"They could have done something to prepare me instead of dropping it all on me like this," Torsten said, his voice pitched a tone above a growl. He picked up a cup on the tray and drank the water from it.

Vallis snorted. "I was prepared for it."

He spat some of the water out. "You were prepared?" he asked in disbelief.

"Yes," she retorted, her nose in the air. "Father didn't think the Hollowmen would ask for a man twice in a row. Didn't they tell you? If a green bird arrives, the Hollowmen want a girl. If a yellow bird arrives, they want a man. Our parents were expecting a green bird and I was trained to expect to become the sacrifice. They were hoping they'd have to give me up and not you."

The look on Torsten's face soured.

His sister Vallis was his most beautiful sister. People were not supposed to think that. They weren't supposed to know that one of their siblings had more charm than another. He had three sisters. Vallis was the middle one. She had the most striking coloring, yellow hair, and copper eyes... like Torsten. She had the most beautiful figure and the prettiest face. Not only that but she had been trained like him—how to act, how to speak, how to enthrall an audience...

He glanced at himself in the reflection of the glass of his window. Did that mean that his parents groomed him for this task because he was the best of his brothers? Not because he was the youngest?

He turned to Vallis and said softly, "When you offer a sacrifice, I guess it is no sacrifice at all if you don't sacrifice your best."

She grasped his hand as fast as an asp lunging to bite. "That's what I think about you. I was their best daughter and you were their best son. You mustn't let the Hollowmen kill you," she said desperately, her eyes full of brimming tears. "You must find a way to stay alive, learn all their secrets, and return here."

He clasped her hand in his two. "I swear."

"While you are gone, I will become Queen," she said fiercely.

"You will?" he asked, surprised and slightly chilled. "How will you do that?"

She smiled. "The ordinary way."

Torsten chuckled. "The ordinary way is to kill everyone. Is that what you're going to do?"

Vallis shook her head. "No. That will be unnecessary. Come back, and you'll see what I've done. In the meantime, let's go down to the library and study the Hollowmen. There must be something we can learn that will help you."

He put a piece of ham in his mouth and got out of bed.

He later learned that Vallis had cleaned his room herself without the help of the servants. Likewise, she had cooked his last breakfast for him.

There was nothing.

No mention of the Hollowmen in any of the books. No maps showing the land northward.

There was nothing.

At nightfall, the knight from the Northern Kingdom was seen approaching from the watchtowers. He rode a golden elk so large and with so many branches on its horns that it was unfathomable. Behind it, he led another elk. It was red.

Torsten watched the two animal procession from the north watchtower. Something was happening. Tiny lights appeared with each step the animals took. It was like the flowers were giving up the ghost and for a moment, their spirits could be seen before they vanished.

The knight himself was the most formidable warrior Torsten had ever seen. Granted, he had never been on the battlefield, but he had seen his kingdom's knights arrayed in their armor before a fray. This knight was something else. Even from a distance, it was clear he was a giant. His armor gleamed like polished pewter.

Torsten felt very small, even with his additional head of height.

The custom was for the sacrifice to meet the knight at the castle's hall, bid goodbye to his parents, allow his wrists to be bound, and for the prince to leave forever.

In the hall, the King was there, looking rough and unhappy. That was all he could give his son, the knowledge that he didn't like any of this. His hands were as tied as Torsten's would be. Literal ties and figurative ties might be all the same.

On the throne of the Queen was not his mother. He wasn't expecting her. She was too delicate for the ordeal, but Vallis was there, looking angry, but not helpless. Earlier, as they scoured the books, she told him what she knew about staying alive. A lot of her advice had turned his stomach, but she believed he could do more than just be a lamb led to the slaughter. She believed he could use the skills he had been given to make himself valuable, more valuable than a corpse.

Her look of bravery did a lot for him... Until he was standing in front of the knight.

Torsten was a tall man, but the knight was not one head taller than him, but two. It was unnerving.

No wonder he hadn't been trained to fight. He could never have fought this man. And no small wonder his parents were giving him up as a sacrifice to these people. The last thing his kingdom needed was an army of these monsters coming down on them. They were lucky to have this alliance and peace so easily won, just as his father said.

That was what he felt as his hands were bound and he was placed on the back of the red elk.

He was led through the streets and, though it was Torsten's last time in his own home, he hoped they would reach the edge of the city soon. He kept hearing things he didn't want to hear.

"They say that if the knight lifts his visor, you won't see anything. That's why they're called 'The Hollowmen' because they're just armor with nothing inside. You can't beat an opponent like that. You'll stab nothing but air."

"I heard the prince will be showered in luxury and then killed when he finally thinks they aren't going to kill him."

"I heard they're going to keep him alive as long as they can as they eat his insides and make him watch."

"You did not hear that!"

"Okay, I made it up. Aren't all you guys making up your stories?"

Torsten didn't hear the end of that rumor mill. The knight in front of him didn't say anything—not one word.

Once the city was behind them, Torsten was taken off the road and into a part of the woods he had always been told he should never go. The leaves of the ferns brushed the bottoms of his boots and the pine needles reached out and touched his cheek.

He breathed and reminded himself that it would all be over soon.

The Extra Tail in the Fairy Tale

Vallis sat down with a quill and paper and rewrote the kingdom's laws. She had been educated in the law and found the work rewarding. At first, her father did not want to adopt the new law book that Vallis created. He thought it would give away his power, and in a lot of ways, it did. Vallis thought there was too much responsibility placed on the King's shoulders. The laws had been written a hundred years ago by one of her control-freak ancestors.

As her father got older, she got him to sign off on the new laws one by one to compensate for his failing health. Mostly, it meant giving a few of his less important powers to other nobles.

One of the laws she snuck in was that the oldest child still living in the kingdom upon the death of the king would be the new ruler.

In her position as princess, she had also encouraged her older siblings to make diplomatic alliances, even selling off her oldest brother, Geoffry, to the most threatening of their enemies. It proved to be a brilliant alliance as he became a person of great power in the kingdom next door. Though he never became a king himself, he was a highly beloved figure in both kingdoms.

Vallis' efforts to lighten her father's load also proved rewarding as she improved his health and kept him alive years longer than anyone thought possible.

By the time she was crowned Queen, she was beloved by all and if Torsten had walked in on her on her fortieth birthday, he would have found her eating pear tarts in a bubble bath and planning the wedding of her niece. She was simply in charge of everything.

THREE

By the time Torsten and the knight arrived at the edge of the Northern Wood, the light had faded to almost nothing. Stars glittered between the branches and leaves above them. Torsten had read such things about walking through a forest at night. Those accounts had been romanticized, but Torsten could see their origins. They did not apply to him. Those poems had been written because something about that particular night made the wonders of nature sweeter. It was the thought of a lover, the joy of victory, the hope of a prize.

Those accounts were not written by men being led to their deaths.

"How are you going to kill me?" Torsten asked the knight riding in front of him.

The plate armor glittered in the sporadic moonlight, but the knight failed to reply.

Torsten tried again. "Are you going to place me on an altar and chop my head off?"

Again, the knight did not reply.

"You know," Torsten continued, finding that the sound of his own voice was surprisingly comforting. "I have spent a lot of time thinking about how I'd like to die. I think getting my head chopped off wouldn't be at all bad, as long as the swordsman could sever my neck in one blow. What do you think? Do you think you could cut off my head with one chop?"

By this time, Torsten had accepted the idea that the knight was not going to answer. The fact did not stop him from talking or wanting to talk.

"If I couldn't die that way," the bound-up prince went on, "I think I'd be okay with drowning. Drowning isn't an honorable way to die. It's not like perishing on the field of battle having given one's all to king and country and all that, but as far as painless deaths go, I think it would be alright. If held under the water, you'd be dead in under ten minutes."

Torsten had been thinking these thoughts unceasingly since he had heard the news from his father. It was nice to say them and sound sour. Sounding sour felt much nicer than sounding scared.

"I guess smothering would be just as good as drowning. What do you think of smothering, Sir Knight? Have you ever smothered anyone?"

No answer.

"After that, I suppose I'd favor a knife to the heart. I'd like it because of the element of surprise. If someone came up to me with a sword, I'd expect them to try to take a stab at me, but a knife is so easily hidden on a person's body." Torsten suddenly realized that he could probably have hidden a knife on his own body if he'd thought of it, but everything happened too quickly, and... he had never been taught about such things. He could always blame his insipidness on that.

The knight in front of him still refused to comment.

Torsten yawned. Occasionally he felt cold as a breeze filtered through the trees, but mostly, he felt snug enough to sleep. He crossed his arms, which he found he was still able to do, even with his wrists bound. Then he tucked his chin into his chest and yawned again.

He didn't think a person could fall asleep in that position and expected to find himself a sore mess having fallen off the elk at any moment, but he didn't fall. He closed his eyes, drowsy and warm. Then he fell asleep.

He didn't dream. He merely partook of blackness as time went by.

Torsten must have been sleepwalking. The next thing he felt was his legs carrying him forward. He was being pulled forward by the knight who was still astride his golden elk and the rope that had been used to lead his red elk was now tied around his wrists as he was led onward. Where was Torsten's mount? He tried to remember what had happened when he had dismounted and started walking by himself, but he couldn't remember. Actually, he wasn't very interested. He yawned again and even though his feet still carried him forward, he fell back asleep.

Later, blinking, he thought he saw the morning light. Had he walked all night? No. He spelled that wrong when he thought it in his head. He had walked all night. The knight in front of him was no longer riding the golden elk. Instead, a little yellow goat was being led by the knight in front of him. Torsten was still being led forward and he had a moment where he thought that he must have turned into the red elk. He had to have changed sizes because the knight who was leading him forward was considerably shorter than he had been the night before. It would make sense if he had become as tall as the red elk.

Torsten stifled his yawn and looked down at himself. He was still a man and he didn't feel any different as he clenched and unclenched his fists.

Morning came as Torsten saw the sun through the treetops to the east and when he turned back to look at the knight, he had shrunk again and was so short now that Torsten could see the top of his head.

Then the knight stopped walking. He stepped up to a tree. Pushing leaves and branches aside, he uncovered a sign. The sign had a mark etched into it.

The knight looked around as if to locate something. When he found it, he pushed through some very dense foliage and pulled Torsten and the goat into the bush with him.

Torsten yowled, as he was scratched in a few places as he was yanked forward.

He was cursing about how it was beyond him how such a small person could pull so hard when he saw something.

There was a stone arch in the middle of the forest. They were obviously meant to go through it. But why? There was nothing around them but forest. There was no well, no buildings, and not even a lane on the ground by which to follow.

The knight bent and untied the goat. Then he straightened and watched as if to see which way the goat would go. Would he go through the arch or run off into the wilds?

It ran through the arch.

The knight pulled on Torsten's rope and they followed it.

On the other side of the arch was a different world. That was the only way Torsten knew to describe it. There hadn't been a house before, but now that they were on the other side of the arch, there was one.

It was a strange house that had two of everything. Two front doors, two chimneys, two kitchen windows leading into different kitchens, two walkways leading to it, and two of everything else. Yet it was not two houses. It was one house with two halves.

The knight let go of the rope. "Untie yourself," a surprisingly feminine voice instructed.

Torsten's fingers went to do as the voice suggested while his gaze remained fixed on the figure ahead of him.

The knight approached a wooden box that was placed on the side of the archway. Then they removed their helmet. They had hair the lightest color of yellow Torsten had ever seen and he

was blond himself. It was done up in masses of braids. The men in his army did their hair in braids sometimes, but not in the style of this knight. Only women braided their hair like that.

Once two red flags were flown (the voice and the hairstyle), Torsten realized the knight was a woman.

She turned violet eyes on him in a challenge.

Within two heartbeats, Torsten had decided she wasn't bad to look at and finished untying himself, which was easy once she gave up her end of the rope. He snuck glances at her while he did his work.

Looking at her was very easy. She had fabulous black lashes that were at odds with her light hair, a nose curved in an elfen point, and heart-shaped lips like the Maker had forgotten to give her a bottom lip. Her top lip looked large enough for a top and bottom lip. If nothing else, it made her look vulnerable and kissable. Torsten had been trained to kiss a lady's hands like it was an art. For the first time, he wondered what it would be like to kiss a lady's lips. He had always known the answer would be no in any situation back at the castle, but out here in the wilds, what were the rules?

What sort of sacrifice was he meant to be? He expected to be killed, but if the knight had wanted him dead, she certainly would not have allowed him to see her in her current form. For the first time, he had reason to hope his sacrifice was not of his blood on an altar, but instead with his body on the bed of a political alliance. Was such a thing even to be hoped for? He certainly had not been taught how to be a fighter. He had been taught to be a helpless sort of man, who beguiled women with a flick of his tongue instead of frightening them at knifepoint.

Maybe everything would work out. Maybe he had already been given the skills to survive like his sister suggested.

"Drop the ropes in there," the knight said, kicking the lid of the box open. She dropped her helmet inside.

He dropped the ropes, but when he looked inside, he saw that the box had no bottom. The ropes and helmet had fallen into shadow and disappeared completely.

It was time to unleash his charms, but not all of them at once. He started with something simple, something merely conversational. "What would happen if I put my arm in there?" Torsten asked, peering down curiously.

"You'd lose your arm," she answered drolly.

He watched her as she unbuckled her gauntlets and dropped them into the box without a sound. Then her breastplate, which was not at all feminine. The box's mouth was wide enough to accept it.

"Are you the same knight who picked me up last night?" he asked, fascinated by her every move. Even though he had been raised with women around him, they never changed more than an apron in front of him.

"I am," she said, untying her sword and sheath. She dropped them into the box as though they were as important to her as the rope—not important at all.

"Why were you so large then and so small now?" he asked with a playful smile on his lips. He realized that if she didn't change sizes, then the villagers who said you would see nothing if you opened the knight's visor were quite right. Her head would have been in the middle of the breastplate of the suit of armor she wore.

He chuckled. He was feeling much more comfortable now that he felt that he was at less of a disadvantage.

"I don't know," she answered, turning on him with a wicked smile. "Why were you so pale last night and so rosy this morning? In truth, you don't have any idea what arrangement your kingdom has with my people, do you?" she suddenly accused.

He swallowed, causing his Adam's apple to bob uneasily. "Uh... I was told I would be a sacrifice."

She nodded like his answer satisfied her deeply. She continued undressing and depositing her equipment into the box. "You're Prince Torsten? They presented you to me last night, but I wasn't sure I got your name right."

He rolled his eyes. "Yes, that's what I'm called. And you are?"

"I'm Fayette."

"And you're a knight?"

She sniffed. "I am not a knight. That was a disguise I used to trick you into coming with me without a fuss. Our people have used that armor to collect the sacrifice your people have prepared for hundreds of years. It pleases both your people and mine. It makes us look too frightening to be toyed with by your people. The imposing nature of the disguise stops idiots from trying to oppose us and it makes little girls like me comfortable traveling alone in an unfamiliar land."

"If you're not a knight, what are you?" he asked, forcing his tone to turn to honey.

"I'm a librarian," she answered vaguely, looking anywhere but in his intrigued copper eyes. "I was told by your father that you've been trained to understand books."

"I have," he replied, feeling his face twitch in odd directions.

By this point, she had finished removing the armor and now she stood in a pair of woolen breeches and a tunic. Torsten realized with a sudden flush that he had never seen a woman in men's clothing before. It was more shocking to him than when she had been clad in armor. However, he tried not to let his shock register on his face. She looked charming in a completely different way than any woman had ever looked before.

"You may as well know," she said pointing at the arch they had just come through. "You can't leave here without me guiding you."

"No?"

She shook her head wearily. "I'm tired. I've been up all night and I want to call this conversation quits for now. I was told I could rest without worrying that you could enter my side of the house and you can rest quite well knowing that I can't enter your side of the house. The left side is yours. The right side is mine. Right is right. Left is wrong... so the left side is for you. Everything you need should be inside. Do whatever you like while I'm sleeping. I've been told you can't screw it up. Good night or good morning... or whatever."

Fayette left him on the path to his side of the house.

"I'll meet you in the gazebo later," she called over her shoulder.

The Extra Tail in the Fairy Tale

Goats have interesting lives, but they don't want you to know that. Thus, it wasn't overly unusual when a woman picked up a miniature goat and cast a collection of little spells on it. First, she made it big. Then she made it yellow. Then she made part of it red. Then she grew its horns. Then she imagined a saddle for it. Then she split it in half and then there were two, a red one and a yellow one.

The goat accepted this, as all goats must. The reason goats have interesting lives is that they are interested in everything around them and, most particularly, they are interested in the thing they are going to eat next.

The woman who picked him up had hair shinier than straw and he was very interested in what it would taste like. It didn't take the goat long to get the opportunity he sought. Her hair wasn't very pleasant. It was like eating wires with electric current still running through them. He spat them out. He had experiences with electric currents because he was always eating things just after they were struck by lightning. He really needed to pay more attention to what was around him. If only he wasn't interested in eating things that throbbed with light. Those were the things he wanted to put in his mouth most, even if they ended with horrible, burned consequences.

When the goat saw a man with blond hair, he was very curious as to what his hair would taste like. The woman had indicated that the goat could go when she untied his rope. She had granted him his freedom, but he wasn't going to go until he'd got a taste of that man's hair.

It was only a matter of time.

FOUR

Torsten made his way into the left side of the house, which meant that he placed his hand on the banister on the left. His hand curled around a round knob at the foot of the porch stairs. He did not notice the blade that suddenly protruded from the knob. It came snapping up between his third and fourth fingers, but it did not catch his attention.

Neither did he notice the dagger that fell from the door frame because he went into the house so quickly that it missed him. It lay on the floor for a moment, waiting for Torsten to move along before it scurried back to its position above the door.

Needles spiked up between the planks of the hardwood floor, but Torsten walked just a trifle too fast to be caught by any of them.

The reason why he was moving so quickly through the house had nothing to do with the blades that barely missed him. He was walking trying to keep pace with Fayette who was already in the back of the house, where the bedroom was. He wanted to hear her moving around, but through the walls of the house, he couldn't hear a thing. If she hummed to herself while she undressed further than she had in the yard, he didn't hear her. If she winced while she undid her corset, the wall blocked the sound.

He put his head right against the wall, but through it, he heard absolutely nothing.

It was a magic house.

He knew that without seeing the blades or the needles that threatened him.

He had studied magic. Not that he knew how to cast a spell or how to work even the tiniest bit of magic himself, but he knew what magic was and how to tell when magic was in place. It was already so obvious from the elk that turned into a goat, from the archway in the woods that led into a pocket dimension, from the size and shape of the woman who guided him to the house. Magic was all around him.

He wasn't bewitched, he assured himself. He couldn't be.

Love...

As a schoolboy, love was all he'd ever been taught he realized with an odd feeling behind his left eyebrow. He hadn't pieced it together before. Even though Fayette had not explained the bargain in more detail, he got the gist of it now. His parents hadn't been preparing him to lay on an altar and be murdered in some pagan ritual. They had been preparing him to be given in an arranged marriage where he could never be a threat to anyone because he had never been trained in warfare. He was being trained to be a consort.

He wished he'd realized it sooner.

He had been trained to write in flourishes, to paint in delicate strokes, and read aloud in even low tones so he could be the plaything of a woman from the North Country.

Was it Fayette?

If it wasn't Fayette, it seemed an odd choice to send a little female who wasn't even a knight to collect him. She did not say she was a princess. He would naturally expect a princess since he was a prince, but she said she was a librarian. In his experience, female librarians were spinsters from wealthy families. They did not want to get married. They wanted to read and organize books. He understood the appeal of holing up in a library, but Fayette did not resemble any of the lady librarians he had known. Compared to them, Fayette was a goddess.

He took his cheek and ear away from the wall, one second before it oozed with a sticky toxin the same color as the plaster.

He didn't notice and he explored the room instead.

He found a piece of polished brass that was obviously used as a mirror though it left his image somewhat distorted compared to his mother's mirrors. He scoured the closet, found very few pieces of clothing, and reflected on the idea that they must not be staying in the house long if there were no supplies. There was nothing in the closet better than what he had on his back, so he didn't bother changing clothes. One of the shirts dripped off the hanger in a toxic mass a moment after he placed its hanger back on the rod, but his back was already turned.

In the kitchen, he found potatoes, turnips, beets, and onions. If he ate the way he ate at home, he judged they would not last more than two days.

Though he did not know the reason for bringing him to a house with such an intense spell cast on it. If they were only staying there for the night and she just needed a little privacy while she did not know him or trust him, the enchantment of the house seemed like overkill.

However, Torsten did not know the plan. He hardly knew the bare bones. Fayette had explained so little before she disappeared. He had let her go since she seemed on the edge of exhaustion. Somehow he had slept while she pressed on through the forest.

He went back to the front door.

He did not notice needles and blades protruding from cracks in the walls, in the floors, and over his head.

Torsten was not aware of them in the least.

The greatest reason he avoided them was that he had a way of making up his mind quickly and then putting his body in motion to follow the quick command of his mind. It made him a slippery opponent for an enchanted house.

Outside, behind the house, he found an enclosed bathtub under a porch. It was filled with warm water, but Torsten did not need a bath. He had been prettied up only a few hours before arriving at the house. At least, that was how it felt to him. Fayette had her own identical area where he assumed she could bathe as well, though he did not circle the house to investigate. Instead, he found the outhouse and noted how incredibly clean it was. As far as he was concerned, the outhouse was where they needed the enchantment the most. That made sense to him.

Turning back to the house, he spotted the gazebo Fayette had mentioned earlier. It was hidden in a very tight cluster of trees.

He went there and followed a pebbled path to go inside.

There were two benches inside that faced each other. He sat on the left side and stretched out his legs.

Out in the gazebo, no knives leaped between the wooden boards to snatch at him or make him bleed.

He couldn't explain why he did not feel comfortable in the house. He couldn't put his finger on it. The only thing he knew was that he didn't need to be in any place in particular while he waited for Fayette and it was alright to rest in the gazebo instead of the house.

The Extra Tail in the Fairy Tale

Fayette was a little librarian, but that was only a small part of her story. She was also a full-blood elven princess. However, that wasn't much to get excited over. All the girls of her kingdom were elven princesses. Each and every one of them was prepared to be a warlord, or a queen, or a librarian, or a sorceress if the role was demanded of them.

Fayette had chosen to be a librarian, which meant that she had put herself up to be a keeper of the woods and the words. The first step in her career path was to learn how to maintain the magical barrier that kept the people of the North Wood from the King's Folk (Torsten's Kingdom).

Fayette was a master.

The second step was learning to keep one's mind active by maintaining a library. Keeping the barrier up was one thing. Staying sane while enduring the lonely community of elvish folk that maintained the barrier was another matter. In their village, the elves had simple needs and they were easily met. Fayette kept raspberry and blackberry bushes. That was her contribution to the community. Everyone had their thing that they did, besides maintaining the library, and in turn, maintaining the magical barrier.

The third step was marrying a man instead of an elf.

They needed drops of human blood for the spells they used to keep the magical force field alive.

It was not the elvish way to tie a human up and bleed them in the basement. That was boorish and ridiculous.

They were elves. They could make rocks fall in love with them... If given a little time.

That was the point of the house with two halves. Fayette and Torsten were alone. There, they could take their time and focus on themselves. He really had no choice except to fall in love with her.

He was probably the kind of idiot who would fall in love with anybody.

Except Fayette didn't want that to be true.

She saw him exploring behind the house as she sat in her bed. She was supposed to sleep, but she was too excited, like a child waiting for fireworks. None of what was happening was news to her. She had known what she was signing up for and every little bit of her body was alive with interest.

She got out of bed and started prettying herself up.

Fayette wasn't going to sleep either way.

FIVE

When Fayette entered the gazebo, she was more magical than any librarian Torsten had seen before. Her blonde hair was set in waves that rippled down to her waist. The clothes she wore were casual but well-made and expensive. The lack of frills and ruffles gave more of a hint as to the shape of her figure underneath the gown than was fashionable back at the castle. The ladies back home kept the shapes of their bodies a secret.

Torsten swallowed a lump in his throat.

He tried to stand when she entered to display his gentility, but she waved for him to sit.

She placed herself in the seat across from him on the right side. "Perhaps we can meet each other more properly now."

He nodded. "I'm Prince Torsten, third prince of King Rollo."

She smiled.

He shut up. Of course, she knew who he was.

"I'm Princess Fayette," she said as a formality. "You may call me Fayette and I will call you Tor."

"I'm not to call you Fay?" he asked curiously, shortening her name.

"You can try. No one shortens my name. If anything, people find ways to make my name even longer. They often add a miss on the beginning and call me Miss Princess Fayette Clearwater."

"Is that your last name?"

"No. It is the name of the library community we will travel to when we are finished here. After our ride in last night, I have the feeling that you do not understand why you were brought here or what your role will be."

"Yes. I said some strange things last night. I've had a few hours to draw new conclusions. I see now I am to take part in an arranged marriage," he said bluntly.

She nodded.

"Is it to you?" he asked, taking a little courage and saying it as openly as if he had lost a bet with himself.

She nodded again, her tongue trapped behind her clenched teeth. Finally, her lips opened and she confessed, "It is to me."

"Who is to perform the wedding?" he asked, looking around as though a clergyman would leap out of the bushes to do the honors.

She turned to her right and with a swirl of her hand, a bit of parchment appeared out of thin air and into her hand. "This is the marriage agreement. It is simple enough if you wish to read it. It merely states that you wish to enter into this agreement and that you will happily serve as my husband. Below, it speaks of what that sacrifice entails."

Fayette handed over the document and allowed him to look it over.

Torsten read it. "I'm not sure I understand," he said after his eyes had gone over the word block several times. "I'm going to marry you, but you also require my blood."

"Yes, it will be leaked once every fortnight to be used in a ritual meant to separate your people from mine. That is how we maintain peace between our people—total separation. Except for you and I. We will never be separated once we have signed this contract."

"We won't be tied together?" he asked, slightly desperate for clarification and trying to hide it.

"No. We will be married and we will live in the library community of Clearwater and neither of us will leave it as long as we live. Thus, you and I are both required to make sacrifices," she said with a level of tranquility as she took the paper back from him and banished it out of existence.

"You don't want me to sign it now?" Torsten asked out of concern.

"We have some time here to get acquainted," she said gently. "There is no going back, but there is time for us to come to terms with the changes in our circumstances. We have all the time we need."

"Who's supplying their blood to the barrier to give us 'all the time we need'?" he asked, sounding more pragmatic than a man who looked like him had any right to be.

"Your uncle. We usually have two of your people at once so there is no shortage. You and I are to be wed because your great-aunt died two weeks ago." It looked like she was going to say that she was sorry for his loss, but the loss had happened for his family in the time of his grandfather. Thoughtfully, she did not say more.

It was kind that she gave him a moment to think. He needed a moment.

What kind of life had his uncle led? Truthfully, Torsten didn't know what he was dealing with or how to deal with it. He was a sacrifice, but it was a different kind of sacrifice than the one he expected. Maybe he preferred the gruesome end to a life killed by dullness and occasional blood-letting.

By nature, Torsten had too much energy. When he was growing up, he should have been out in the training yard with his brothers. He should have been hitting dummies and working out all the excess energy in his shoulders. Too much energy meant that he wanted to go, go, go! He didn't want to stick around the sad little house in the woods and get to know a princess. If he was supposed to marry her, then he wanted to get on with it because married men had somewhere to put their energy. It was in the bedroom. She was his consolation prize. Why wait?

His blood was itching with excess energy, but he wasn't so strung out that he couldn't think clearly.

"Am I expected to be a librarian?" he asked, putting one of his arms behind his head. "Is that what my uncle does?"

She sighed. "I was under the impression that you have been raised to expect and appreciate a life of tranquility."

"I have been taught to paint," he said in partial agreement. "I've been taught to write and appreciate poetry. I didn't realize how those teachings were intended to be used. I'm a little disappointed. If this is an arranged marriage and there is no going back, as you say, I don't understand why we hesitate here making every part of our arranged marriage as slow as the rest of our lives will be," he said, endeavoring to make his complaints sound as little like complaints as possible with his tone of voice.

She looked around uneasily. "I'm not comfortable rushing things. Even if the end is inevitable, I still need time to get to know you and warm up to the idea of you and I being together."

"Do you feel warm?" he said, undoing the top button of his shirt. "When you look at me, do you think you could feel warm in the future?"

Fayette hesitated, obviously unsure where to look or how to answer.

"Do I look good to you?" he said, getting in her line of sight and forcing her gaze upon him.

She tucked her hair behind her ear. "I need time."

He nodded and backed off. "Shall we talk? Shall I tell you about the paintings I've made? Should you tell me about the books you've repaired? Shall I tell you about my family? Should you tell me about the place we're going to live? Shall I tell you how I wanted to live my life and in exchange you can tell me how you envision us reaching this mutual understanding you're suggesting? Maybe then I can make it come true."

Fayette looked at him with violet eyes that were so sad they almost turned blue.

It was clear that the sexual innuendo in his words was not lost on a woman who did nothing but study words. He didn't need to be more flagrant. His meaning was understood. He also understood that he was not approaching the subject with anything like the love a couple usually experienced before their wedding.

He scoffed at her bluish eyes. He was a prince. He had not been raised with anything like the same expectations about marriage. Political unions were political unions. Usually what was required of a prince in his circumstance was the procurement of an heir, so he had to do his bedroom duties no matter how he felt. Except the contract she had given him did not suggest the need for an heir.

He put the two facts together. "If we have children, their blood will not be *human* enough for your ritual. You will need a new person from the royal family once my blood is gone," he concluded. "Is that right?"

Fayette nodded.

That fact made Torsten's stomach turn. In an instant, he felt like he understood the situation completely. They were in the house, an enclosed space, so that she could learn to control him enough that she could take his blood without issue. Like he was her cow that she milked freely.

He swallowed the disgust like a thick cake of dirt in his throat.

If that was all they wanted, then why bother with a marriage contract at all? To remind Fayette that she was to have no other responsibilities other than him? To reward Torsten for allowing her to bleed him?

His mind was whirring the possibilities and the more they whirled the less he wanted to do with her—dressed or undressed.

"This is why we need time," she cried, before getting up and flouncing out of the gazebo with an emotion he did not understand.

He'd messed up.

He knew he'd messed up by letting so many of his feelings show through his face. That was not the noble way, but he was disgusted and he couldn't hide it. His jaw flexed as he stared into the forest rather than watch her cross the yard to enter her side of the house.

He was disgusted that there was a layer under the layer she spoke of. If he was going to have an arranged marriage then he wanted an arranged marriage. He wanted all the benefits that night. He didn't want to wait to fall in love with her. He'd fall in love with her the moment her dress hit the floor.

As for whether or not she'd fall in love with him...

Well, if they were approaching it the way human couples did, then it was obvious that she would fall in love with him. In his mind, that was what making love was all about. That was why it was reserved for married couples. Once they were in the bridal suite after the wedding, all the love that was necessary would click into place.

What more did Fayette want before the wedding?

Control.

He was having a hard time separating the two thoughts. There was his definition of marriage and there was hers. What was the difference? How much time did she need to learn how to control him? It sounded like they'd marry when she had it worked out.

What was she afraid of?

He was being treated like a tiger that needed to be tamed when he had been raised as a toothless lion. He'd been taught nothing except how to be her plaything and now, he supposed, she wanted to check his teachings and see if he was a worthy enough lamb to lead to her life of library duty and bleeding. At the very least, he felt he deserved something worthwhile to paint and the bare skin of his new wife seemed like the perfect consolation prize in exchange for the life of daring adventure he would never have. Would he even have a life where he could paint anything he wanted? Was he meant to become even more helpless still?

The Extra Tail in the Fairy Tale

The clothing that hung in Torsten's closet had melted the hangers. Now it was busy melting the floor. The wooden slats that made up the hardwood floor were fizzling away, exposing the dirt beneath.

The place on the wall where he'd put his face was melting as well, exposing the wooden planks that separated his space from Fayette's.

The food in the kitchen had not started rotting, but the house was allowing itself to heat up to an uncomfortable, food-spoiling temperature.

The knives in the drawers and the knives that hid themselves in the walls were merrily sharpening themselves. They were brainless since they were normally lifeless objects that were incapable of sentient thought, but they couldn't remember the last time they had the honor of killing their guest. They clashed their blades in a happy little chorus of death. All their dreams were about how pretty they would look with Torsten's blood splashed on them.

SIX

"Take your clothes off and get in the water."

That was Fayette. She was the one who wanted them both to have a bath at the same time in their individual tubs while they shared an intimate conversation about their childhoods.

Torsten did not want to talk about his childhood, but he obediently removed his clothes and put two of his fingers in the water. The water was green. There was scum growing on the top of it. It looked like moss. It hadn't looked like that when he had inspected the tub the first time.

Looking down at his bare skin, he couldn't imagine getting cleaner in the water. It seemed like the sort of place you needed to take a bath after having been in... Unintentionally, of course.

Completely naked, he snatched up a butterfly net leaning against the side of the house and started scooping the top layer of scum off the water.

"Are you in the water?" Fayette called through her side of the privacy screen.

Torsten raised an eyebrow no one could see. "Sort of," he said as he raked a scoop of green gunk off the surface.

"What was your earliest memory?" Fayette began.

Her voice was sweeter than he had registered when they had spoken in the gazebo. Seeing her loveliness had left him blind to her other charms. He let his eyes travel upwards as he thought of how he ought to interpret her voice. He did not want to allow her to charm him on principle because he didn't want to make it easy for her to tame him. It was tricky when her voice hit all the right sounds: feminine, unassuming, soft, generous...

With his eyes cast upward, he noticed that the ceiling that covered the tub had an unusual texture. There were an awful lot of knife points pointing downwards.

Why would anyone make a ceiling with points coming down in that way?

Torsten had stopped skimming the tub and was looking upward with a curiosity that had seized him when Fayette reminded him that he still had not answered her question.

"Ah... Yeah... My first memory. It was of my little brother's funeral," he answered absently as he reached behind him to grab his underpants. He thought he might be more comfortable wearing them if he was going to stand on the lip of the tub and inspect the ceiling more carefully.

"It was?" Fayette asked, her voice filled with concern.

"He was a baby," Torsten answered as he finished tying his ginch at the hip. "I wasn't allowed to see his body. I also was not allowed to carry his casket, although my two older brothers were given permission. It was strange because it was such a small casket that the two of them could carry it without a problem even though they were only children."

Torsten was standing on the lip of the tub with his hands holding onto a beam that held the edge of the roof in place when Fayette came around the corner.

Torsten stared at her in surprise.

Loose tendrils of hair framed her face while the rest of her hair was held up in a messy bun on top of her head. Her body was hidden by a bath sheet that covered her so efficiently, it was almost shameful.

At least, Torsten thought it was a shame.

"I'm sorry," she said, holding the sheet to her chest and dropping her head in a bow. "I was not trying to stir up painful memories. I just thought it was a good place to begin." When she

raised her head, her expression of sympathy was replaced by one of bewilderment. "Why are you standing on the tub?"

Torsten looked back at the ceiling. From where he was standing, on the lip of the tub, the little knives that had been protruding looked different. He could have sworn they were tiny knife points when he saw them from the floor, but up high, they looked like decorations meant to enhance the beauty of the space. He had got up on the ledge for nothing.

However, the surface of the tub still looked dreadful.

"I was cleaning the tub," he answered, hoping that seemed reasonable, though he didn't know why it would make sense for him to stand on the edge of the tub to clean it.

Fayette came over and saw the state of the water.

"Ugh," she said, giving her nose a repulsed crinkle. "Why does it look like that?"

He jumped down. "It doesn't look like this on your side?"

"No. Why didn't you say anything?" she asked rather crossly, scanning her mind for solutions. It was clearly not how she saw their first real conversation going. "I'll get back in my clothes and I'll help you clean it."

"No need," he said, quick to lay on the charm as he dropped down to the level of the deck. "I could just join you in your tub. It's clean, isn't it?"

Her eyes were enormous as she turned back to look at him. From the look on her face, she saw all of him and, even though the situation was against Torsten, it was clear that she saw him the way he had always wanted to be seen.

To her eyes, he was dangerous. His muscles, which did not bulge like his brothers', were more than enough to put roses on her cheeks. He didn't have a single scar to recommend him on the battlefield, but to her... He was more than enough.

He smiled and hooked his thumb in the front of his underdrawers, pulling the front down a little lower suggestively.

She gasped, turned, and scampered away.

He laughed.

She was never going to get control of him.

The Extra Tail in the Fairy Tale

The knife points in the ceiling over the tub were glaring at Fayette. As far as they were concerned, they almost had Torsten. He was going to get in the tub and when his skin was burned by the acid, they were going to fall on him. Each and every one of them thought that they were going to be the ones to get him in the eye. He had two eyes so their chances were doubled.

Not only were the knife points working their diabolical magic, but the wood that sat under Torsten's clothes had fragmented and splinters were working their way through the weave of his discarded clothing. Except they all had to wiggle out when Fayette appeared.

What was she doing there?

She wasn't supposed to be there.

Torsten was lucky, in that he snatched up his clothes before Fayette had fled the scene completely.

Then the wood didn't get a chance to get back in his clothes.

Each little piece of splintered wood cried like it was the end of the world.

"I didn't even get to scratch him," one bawled.

"I had a dream last night about getting under his skin," one lamented. "And when he discovered me, it didn't matter how much he clawed and scraped at his skin, he couldn't get me out. He bled and bled."

"What a wonderful dream!" another one exclaimed.

"Tell us your dream again," one begged. "It's such a good dream. I want to hear it over and over until I fall asleep. Then maybe, I'll dream a dream exactly like it."

The other pieces of wood hoped all of them would have dreams like that, but not as much as they hoped they would be the ones to cut him.

SEVEN

Torsten was too restless to go to sleep. He was in the bedroom. He was pacing. He was thinking. He was snapping the bones in his wrists impatiently.

If he was honest, even if he was sleepy, he did not want to sleep in the bedroom they'd given him in the house with two halves. It smelled funny... like vinegar or liquor that had fermented too long to be drunk. There was a funny mark on the wall and when he looked in the closet, the clothes were gone.

"I thought she couldn't come in my side of the house," he wondered as he looked inside.

Even if Fayette had reacted so well to the sight of him mostly naked, he did not think she came close to possessing the gumption to enter his side of the house. There was no way she had removed the clothes in the closet. There was something funny about the house. He couldn't stay still. His instincts went berserk whenever he stood still.

True, Torsten had still not noticed the knife blades protruding from between the wooden slats that made up the floor. But neither had he been caught by one of them. They kept missing him because he kept moving. He didn't even pace in regular loops. If the knives in the floor tried to predict which way he would move, they got it wrong every single time.

They were getting discouraged.

Night had already fallen, but Torsten had too much energy. He needed more room to move around. He went back outside. The weather was very mild and even if the sun had set, the warmth clung to the air like body heat that, once given, could not be completely withdrawn.

It was much more pleasant to be out of doors. The evening primroses had opened and their fragrance filled the air. It was a new scent to Torsten, but he preferred it to the stench of the house. He picked a few of the flowers and with no idea what to do with them after he had picked them, he tore them to shreds. He had no questions about whether or not he was loved.

Fayette saw him stalking the yard like a predator of petals and she opened her window to lean out and speak to him. "I'm sorry again about what happened during the bath," she called down to him.

He glanced up at her. Her arms were folded against the windowsill and her knightgown... He spelled that wrong. He laughed at himself and spelled it right. Her nightgown was far less concealing than her dress that afternoon, or even the bath sheet she used to cover herself that evening. It showed the slender lines of her shoulders and the gentle curves her nightgown endeavored to cover, but failed, even in the darkness. The white fabric attracted the lingering light and made her shine like she was the only star in the sky.

"Don't worry about it," he said, thinking that she was trying his tricks on him. He wouldn't blush or turn a hundred shades of red just because she looked completely lovely. He shot her a smile and continued his walk.

Unwilling to be dismissed, she tried again. "What did you have for dinner in your kitchen?"

"Uh..." He hadn't wanted to complain, so he had planned to say nothing, but if she asked, he felt that he ought to explain. "Most of the food was rotten. There was one weird root that looked safe to eat so I ate it, but uh... I almost burned myself five times trying to cook it. I ended up eating it raw." He left out how many times the knife slipped when he was trying to cut it up. It was like the handle was dipped in oil or like the knife itself had a mind of its own. "I was going

to ask you how we're going to live here indefinitely or how I'm supposed to produce blood if there's nothing to feed me."

Fayette was a thousand types of perplexed. "I don't understand. My kitchen made me a stew for dinner and a pie with whipped cream for dessert."

"Well, then something is wrong with my side of the house," he said frankly, but still rather unwilling to admit to any major discomfort. If he complained, acted like he needed something, acted like he couldn't be without something, it would give her fuel with which to control him. Obviously, she needed to feed him at bare minimum, but even so... he had to act like it didn't matter if she fed him or not.

"How could that be?" she asked in wonder, confused at the inequality. "The house is supposed to be the same on both halves."

"Well, was your tub covered in filth?" he questioned sensibly.

"Hang on." She stepped away from the window.

The next time he saw her, she had gotten redressed (in something that efficiently covered all her curves and dips) and brought him a meal that he was forced to eat in the gazebo since there was no other sensible place to eat it. It was the leftover pie she hadn't been able to finish.

It was delicious and Torsten enjoyed it thoroughly. Fruit pies had always been his favorite and though he had never had a peach pie before, he thought it was delicious.

"Why else are you out here?" she asked him as he set his fork on the pretty round porcelain plate on which she had served the pie.

"I don't think I can sleep in *my* room," he admitted, trying his damndest to make it seem like he would be able to sleep perfectly in her room. "Just whisk out your contract, I'll sign it and we'll make it all legal."

He knew instantly that he had pressed too far. She was not going to accept that.

"What's really wrong with your room?" she asked, sounding like a cranky governess who had been given too many child-minding duties.

"It smells. The walls are melting. I feel weird like I'm inside my own coffin when I'm in my bedroom," he said breezily. "You can go in and see for yourself if you'd like."

"You know I can't go in there. What was your bedroom at home like?" she hedged, still trying to work in her agenda of getting to know him before they signed the papers.

He bit his lip and tore off a little skin with his teeth. He did that when he was nervous. "I had a room in a tower. It was high above the castle, high above the forest. I could see everything from there. I was very valued by my household. I had maids who served me whether I behaved well or not. I tore apart my room when I learned that I would be sacrificed."

"You sound like a brat," she said, biting her own lips together.

"I might be a brat," he said, turning his head and pulling on the collar of his shirt to expose his throat at greater advantage. Having read too many romantic books written by women, he knew all the little tricks to get their hearts racing. "I might be too much for you to handle. I didn't know enough about my future to control myself. But it wasn't the maids who cleaned my room that last time. It was my sister who learned that I would be sacrificed instead of her."

When he glanced at Fayette, he knew he had hit her where it hurt. He'd done so back at the bath as well. He showed a part of himself that was wounded and hit her with a dose of sexual need, suggesting that was the way to comfort him. He congratulated himself. When Fayette gave up, he was going to make one hell of a husband if he could get her going so easily.

"Well, don't wreck your side of the house just because you're not getting what you want," she said, refuting him. She stood up and reached to take the plate from him. "I notice you haven't asked me any questions about me."

He held onto the plate and wouldn't let her take it. "Do you have much practice?"

"In what?" she asked, perplexed.

He favored her with a level regard. "In making men do what you want?"

She glared at him but said nothing.

He met her glare with a smile. "You've already done the most important bit," he said as he let go of the plate.

"What's that?" she asked, unable to leave without first satisfying her curiosity.

"You told me you want to drain my blood once every two weeks. We can do that. Where would you like to drain it from? My wrist?" He flipped his hand over and showed a bare bit of skin that had never been broken in all his life. "My throat?" he gave her another view of his jawbone and the side of his neck. "My heart?" He pulled at his collar and was lucky enough to undo two buttons in the motion, giving her a glimpse of his bare chest.

She colored again and raced back toward her side of the house.

Torsten frowned. The little elfin princess wasn't very good at contending with him. Why had they given such a big job to such a little girl?

The Extra Tail in the Fairy Tale

The plate was very disappointed in Fayette. It said as much to the fork when they were drying on the tea towel after Fayette washed them.

"He's *giving* her what she wants!" the plate exclaimed.

"Yes, he's giving her what she wants," the fork agreed, but that wasn't all it had to say. "But it's not *how* she wants it. It's complicated for her. *She* doesn't want to draw his blood personally, but that's the job she's been given."

"It was the job she applied for when she signed up to be a librarian," the plate reminded the fork. "All librarians can be called upon to be the one to marry a human."

"But is it what *she* wanted? Did she want to be the one to marry a human?" the fork asked, unhappy that they didn't have more information. The fork was just cutlery and the plate was just crockery. They didn't know anything.

The plate looked as sage as the moon as it answered. "I think it is what she wanted, but you know librarians. Her head was full of fairy tales and fiction. She thought all this would be romantic."

"She doesn't think Torsten is romantic?" the fork wondered.

"Nah. Torsten is too romantic. Have you seen the way he held his thumb up a little when he talked to her? It's because he's measuring her. He wants to paint her, but she is wildly unprepared to let him paint her."

"Because she'd have to be as naked as you and me," the fork concluded.

"Speak for yourself. I was wearing a pie earlier," the plate pointed out. "I didn't mind him stripping me naked."

“That’s because you’re all showy, doing a strip tease while the guest cuts away part of the pie you’re wearing to show your pattern underneath,” the fork said snarkily under its breath.

“But I agree he’s just moving too fast for her,” the plate said noisily. “Though it’s probably a good thing that he’s rushing. He can’t stay in his half of the house. The other side of this house is not hospitable like us. I haven’t heard a word from the plates on the other side. They are so unfriendly.”

“I just hear knives over there talking. I shouldn’t be able to hear them, should I? Especially if you can’t hear the plates,” the fork wondered. “It’s like there are hundreds of them, scraping against each other. It’s weird. If I listen really closely, I can hear them talk about cutting like they’re obsessed.”

“Well, they’re knives,” the plate reminded the fork. “What else are they supposed to talk about?”

“It still seems weird to me. Our knives don’t talk like that. Maybe Torsten can hear them too and that’s why he spends all his time wandering around the yard.”

“Maybe,” the plate agreed as it settled down into the folds of the tea towel it was drying on. The fork gave the plate one last glance before it fell asleep too.

EIGHT

Torsten did not want to go into the house that night. He wanted to stay in the yard with the fresh air. In the magically enclosed pocket dimension they were in, he was unconcerned about wild animals coming to gobble him up in his sleep. But the gazebo had hard benches and there was a padded sofa in the living room that looked more welcoming than anything in the bedroom. Just before the stroke of midnight, he decided he should give that a try.

He walked in, avoiding a blade that protruded up through the welcome mat and then a poison dart arrow that was fired from one of the hooks in the coat rack.

The living room was possessed by a magical glow. Candles illuminated the space, but Torsten did not light them, nor did he need to tend them. The candles did not seem to burn down.

He approached the sofa like he didn't know what to do with it. He picked up one of the cushions and fluffed it. In so doing he was caught on a razorblade and he dropped it immediately. The blood that oozed from his thumb confused him. What had been inside the pillow that caused that much damage? He picked up the pillow and being a prince with little concern about the things in his apartment, he gripped two edges of the seams and pulled it apart. It was like an egg when it cracked, except instead of dripping yolk, it dripped needles, pins, and razors. There were enough of them to cause a clatter when they fell to the floor.

He stared at them confused, but it was at that moment, when he was finally looking down that he saw one of the knives come up between the floorboards and try to stab him in his shoe.

That interested him too.

Wisely, he did not try to pick up the bundle of needles and other sharp oddities that fell from the cushion. Instead, he strode over to the fireplace. There he found a poker that was used for tending the fire. There was no fire lit until he approached and then a jolly one awoke inside the grate.

Torsten ignored it. Instead, he took the poker and jabbed it between the floorboards where he had seen the knife's point. Kicking and prying, the board came loose and if he thought there were a lot of blades in the pillow, there were more under the floorboards. When they were exposed in that unexpected way, they scattered like night bugs in the light.

With that discovery, Torsten's side of the house stopped playing games.

He dodged an arrow aimed at his head.

Then another.

The poker in his hand went hot like it was on fire and the flame in the grate swelled as it tried to light fire to Torsten's clothes.

The sofa leg hooked his foot and brought him to the ground. He received two cuts on his cheek the moment his face hit the floor.

He got to his feet without another cut, but now there was nowhere to look where a knife's point wasn't staring back at him. They were all coming up between all the floorboards now. They were coming out from behind the frames of the pictures on the walls. The padding on the sofa had given up its pointed treasures and had transformed into a bed of nails. If there were more changes, he didn't see them because he was making for the door like a thief who had been caught in the night.

Outside, he saw two more arrows hit the grass and a throwing star skid across the turf.

He was breathing hard, but he knew he had the luck of a god to have made it out with only the cut on his thumb and the two nicks on his face.

His first instinct was to cross to the right side of the house and knock. He thought he needed to have a conversation with Fayette about what had happened. He raised his hand to grab the knocker and maybe he would have used it if he hadn't been possessed by a thought that stopped him.

They wanted his blood.

The house was filled with things meant to cut him. Creating a house filled with knife edges would not have occurred to him if he wanted to bleed somebody, but he didn't know her culture. Maybe that was how it had to be done, but an arrow to the head felt like overkill.

He stepped away from her door.

He needed to stand up for himself. He had to find a way to defend himself and show Fayette that she could take the blood she needed without the aid of the magic house.

He walked away from Fayette's side of the house and started wandering the grounds with a completely different mission from before. He had been trying to work off some of his boiling energy, but now, he needed just one tool that wasn't enchanted. He needed to see if there was such a thing outside the house. Hopefully, he would find something better than the butterfly net.

Torsten lost a lot of courage to find one when he saw the yellow goat from before. It had climbed a tree and was perched on one of the lower branches like an owl. It bleated, but the sound was so off, it could have been made by an owl.

He wasn't going to find anything that wasn't enchanted.

At least, that was what he thought.

By the woodpile, there was an ax. He expected it to be enchanted, for it to behave the same way the other objects in the house behaved, but the wood that was stacked there was ready to be chopped, not stacked in convenient little piles. A magic ax would have chopped wood ready to go, so he hoped it wouldn't turn on him. All the same, he didn't know if it was an enchanted ax.

He approached it and said, "Here Axy, Axy, Axy, I'm coming to pick you up. I don't mean you any harm." He was mimicking the way his brothers spoke to their horses. He didn't think he was much of a horse whisperer, but that didn't matter. He needed to be an ax whisperer.

As he got closer he got more and more afraid that the ax was just waiting until he got close enough for it to safely cleave his forehead.

A lesser man might have turned away and gone back to Princess Fayette, begging her to draw his blood safely rather than turn her angry house of a thousand knives on him. Except, Torsten simply could not live with himself that way. He would rather die a brave man than live forever as a coward.

He picked up the ax. He held it to his chest with a solid grip in one hand and stroked the long handle like it was a cat with the other. "Ax," he whispered. "I have never been a man of violence, but tonight I'm going to become a man of action. Will you join me? I will break apart everything I see with you in my arms."

The ax did nothing, which was more comforting than if it had spoken up and agreed to what Torsten was proposing.

He was convinced it was an ordinary ax and he went to chop down the support beam that held up the roof over the tub.

The Extra Tail in the Fairy Tale

The ax sat very still in Torsten's arms. It was so happy. No ax had ever been happier. All the other tools had been taken away after the construction of the house with two halves, but he had been left behind. He had been left with his head on the ground and his handle leaning against a tree for so long... he felt like he'd seen all the different sunrises and sunsets the universe had to offer upside down. He'd seen the sunny ones, the snowy ones, and everything in between, even the ones where the day took so long to break, one wondered if it would break at all.

He was so lonely and desperate and... he did not have the same spell cast on him as the blades in the left side of the house. He was free and if a great man like Torsten wanted to chop the house with two halves down to matchsticks... Well, he could not have been more proud to join him.

The moment when his head hit the support beam of the deck roof, the ax thought it was as great as the hammer of god.

Thwack!

Thwack!

Thwack!

It was good to make that sound again!

NINE

Torsten did not know he was an ax man. As a young boy, he'd thought he was more of a sword man. He pictured himself wielding something with a long slim blade, like a rapier. That night, in front of the house with two halves, he changed his mind. A rapier wasn't wide enough to deflect throwing stars or arrows. He was an ax man.

The moon overhead shone like a clean plate that approved of naughty cutlery being put in its place. The trees swayed in the wind like forgotten forks that had been left in a pie on the windowsill to cool for far too long.

The crack and splitting sounds of half the house coming down did not wake a soul. The birds slept and the crickets chirped, but no one noticed the sound of a house toppling to the anger of one overly energetic prince.

In the morning, there wasn't a roof on Torsten's side of the house with two halves. He had only been demolishing a house, but he had been shot at by more arrows than an archer who had survived a siege for six months. He had had more knives thrown at him than if he had dedicated his life to becoming a ninja. And his brothers, who thought they had survived rigorous martial training, had fewer cuts and bruises from years of training than what Torsten received in that one night.

The three walls of the house lay in broken pieces in the grass, their studs had been ripped apart and between all of them, hundreds of loose steel blades had been set free. Once the walls were detached, the knives were confused. The spell that animated them was damaged though not completely broken. Their shiny edges slipped through the grass like fish on the shore—confused and out of their element.

The ax between Torsten's hands had tried to spare him blisters, but it could not in the relentless destruction and Torsten finally had the palms and fingers of a fighting man.

When Fayette came around the corner, she dropped the basket of muffins she was carrying. She hurried across the grass, though she paused over and over again, seeing the steel blades protruding from the harmless blades of grass.

"What happened?" she called to Torsten, lifting her skirt and watching where she was going.

"Well, the walls of my side of the house were trying to draw my blood, but they intended to take a little too much. Was this your doing, Princess?" The way he said 'Princess' was laced with accusations, but he was far too tired after his hard night to get more mouthy. His throat was dry and he needed a drink more than he needed to tell her off.

"I don't know what you're saying," the elfin princess said crossly. When she reached him, she put up her hands and began casting a healing spell on him that began with the two cuts on his cheek and spread out over his entire body. "We weren't trying to draw blood from you."

"Then what do you call all this?" he said, holding his head from a headache that boomed in his skull from having spent the whole night awake. He pointed to the hundreds of blades, perhaps thousands, that had fallen from inside the house walls. Other parts were acidic and melting wood and plaster.

She looked at them in confused silence. "As you said, something was wrong with your side of the house, but you didn't say anything that led me to believe that you wouldn't be safe on your side. I even brought you breakfast since your kitchen didn't seem to be working."

"I would love breakfast," he breathed as he used all his strength to stay still while the blue and yellow light of her spell worked its magic.

Her healing spell finished, but it did not remove the blood stains from his clothes or ease the fatigue in his shoulders. It also did not entirely erase the two cuts on the side of his cheek.

Fayette took him by the hand and led him back to the place where she had left her basket of muffins.

They saw that she really should not have left the basket unattended on the ground because pins and needles had crawled into the basket and wormed their way into the muffins. They could see their protruding heads.

"We can't eat them now," Fayette lamented as she pulled him onward.

"Where are you taking me?" Torsten wondered, though her soft touch was so welcome to his rough one that he went along with her when he did not receive an answer.

She pulled him past her side of the house, down the lane, and all the way to the archway they had entered by. In a sudden act of determination, she pulled him through the archway and into the forest they had traveled through the first morning.

Fayette found the sign she had checked when they first arrived. She pushed at the bushes and branches covering the words. Torsten wasn't positive, but he thought that more characters were visible.

She let go of the branches and declared, "We're at the wrong house."

The Extra Tail in the Fairy Tale

"We're at the wrong house."

That was what the elven princess said, but it was the perfect time for a yellow goat, who had learned to climb trees, to sample the blond hair of the prince.

He was right there.

Chomp!

"Hey!" Torsten shouted before he punched the goat between the eyes and broke three fingers on the goat's skull.

The goat wasn't hurt, but at least he lost his footing and fell from the tree.

TEN

Fayette led Torsten further through the woods. "Sorry. I'm the one who made the mistake. That was house ten. It's a house where you take someone so they'll be murdered by the house. I was supposed to take you to house eleven where we had identical spaces and would each be safe in our own space."

"So you're thinking..." Torsten said, flexing the fingers he'd broken to see if they were really fixed after Fayette healed them. "You're thinking that we can just go to the next house and I'll trust you enough to go in and fall asleep after all the arrows and throwing stars?"

She huffed impatiently. "I told you I was wrong."

"Is that the first time you've ever done that? Told someone you were wrong?" he taunted. "You're expecting that to be enough of an apology that we can just start over in a new house with two halves?"

"I'll go in the left side if that helps you feel more comfortable," she offered and he could tell she was feeling quite magnanimous doing so.

He stopped her from taking another step forward. "That's not going to work. How am I supposed to believe that the right side of a different enchanted house will keep me safe? That house almost killed me. I believe you. It was a mistake, but how do I know you won't make another mistake with another house?"

She let him hold her in place. She stood panting, unsure how to answer him.

"What if it had killed me? Were you just going to send another bird to my father requesting another son?" he pressed.

The look on Fayette's face was one of indescribable horror. She thought furiously as she collected herself. Finally, she let go of him and crossed her arms. "What would you like me to do?"

"There's only one thing to do," he said patiently. "You whip out that marriage agreement and we both sign it here and now."

The look of horror did not diminish. "I'm not ready."

"Look, you can't take me to another enchanted house," Torsten said clearly. "At this point, you have to sign the agreement and take me home with you. I know I'll be safe in your library town. My uncle is still there, isn't he?"

She looked down with a pained expression on her face. "If we go back now... It's only been one day. Everyone will think I'm... easy," she whispered.

He lowered his head to hear her better. "What was that?"

"Easy," she said again, not saying it any louder.

"One more time," she said, putting his ear beside her mouth.

"Easy," she said sadly. "Everyone will think you seduced me instantly and I don't want them to think that."

Torsten blinked. Then that meant the time they were spending alone in the house was not about control. At least, it wasn't about controlling *him*. Fayette had been trying to control herself.

Torsten felt relief wash over him.

"How can they be sure *you* didn't seduce *me*?" he suggested playfully.

"Either one is just as bad," she cried. "I don't want them to think that I was so eager that I got you to sign the agreement on the first night."

His copper eyes peered into her violet ones. "Which would be worse, telling them that you led me into a house that tried to kill me, and it almost did, or that you found me irresistible on the first night? I think the second one makes perfect sense."

His question made her put a hand to her mouth in horror. "Ugh!" she groaned. "If we leave that house the way it is, it won't matter what we tell them. They'll know what happened. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but they'll know eventually and it will be just as embarrassing in twenty years as it is today."

"I'm sure you'll feel better about it in twenty years," he said with a scoff.

She glared at him and he suddenly realized that she was an elf and in her long life, she'd probably been humiliated by things twenty years ago and the burning feeling still hadn't eased.

"Can we fix the house?" he asked.

Fayette slumped her elfin princess shoulders. "I could fix the enchantments, but I couldn't rebuild it by myself, but if you helped me, I might be able to make it close to what it was like before."

"I'll make you a deal," he said, aware he had limited options. "If you sign that document and let me sleep on the right side of that house, I'll do the rebuild for you."

She looked him in the eye, then down the length of his body, and then back to his eyes.

"You said we had all the time we needed," he reminded her. "And if we stay there, no one will think you were so drawn to me that you signed the agreement on the second day."

Torsten liked the way he worded that. It put a little of the responsibility of her deep crimson blushes on her.

She looked him over again, her lips pouting and her control slipping. "And you wouldn't tell anyone that was what we did?"

"No. I wouldn't tell," he said with a humble smile on his face. He crossed his heart with his thumb. "Besides, as you said before, there's no way back."

The look on her face was rather helpless, like things had spun wildly out of her control, and she was powerless to bring them back into line without his help. So he put his arms around her and drew her in for their first kiss.

As first kisses went, it was a wild success. She tasted like new leaves opening and the salt on his lips from his long night of exertion made for a taste neither of them had experienced before. They separated briefly before going for a second round so delicious it was a shame it was not served on a plate.

However, people cannot stand in the woods kissing endlessly. Fayette materialized the agreement and signed it. Torsten signed it.

Then he swept her up in his arms like the princess she was and carried her back through the forest, back through the archway, across the yard of broken blades, and into the right side of the house.

Torsten remembered to kick the front door shut. Even though they were completely alone, he didn't know if any of those wiggly little knives would get in if he left the door open.

The Extra Tail in the Fairy Tale

The ax was the happiest tool that had ever been in a work yard. Every day it was picked up and moved to a different place, so it saw lots of different things.

It saw the elf princess disenchant thousands of sharp pieces of metal and order them into piles like soldiers on the battlefield.

It saw Torsten lift her off her feet and swing her in the air like a bird that couldn't quite take flight.

It saw Fayette repair the wood by returning the broken planks into whole pieces.

Then it saw Fayette and Torsten take a bath where they couldn't stop giggling and splashing each other.

It saw Torsten learn to chop trees and shape wood into planks with the help of the ax.

It saw Fayette fork peach pie into Torsten's mouth and the moment of glee on the plate's face when everything was eaten.

It saw Torsten turn into a builder, who put a house together, all the time rigging it with knives and arrows like he was threading a crossbow.

It saw the lights of their bedroom stay on all night as if the two of them were far too busy to sleep.

And when the house was up and the last enchantment was put into place, the ax was lifted off the ground and hooked in its place in Torsten's belt. They were going to the library village and lovers would not leave the ax behind.

But even still, no matter how happy the ax was, it was not as happy as Torsten and Fayette.

THE END