

JACQUE STEVENS



THE  
SHOELESS  
PRINCE

ONCE UPON  A PRINCE

A PUSS IN BOOTS RETELLING

# ONCE UPON A PRINCE

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A PUSS IN BOOTS RETELLING

The Shoeless Prince:  
A Puss in Boots Retelling  
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*Human children grow up hearing stories of faeries.*

*Fae children grow up hearing stories of humans.*

*This is one of those stories.*



## CHAPTER I



# CAT GOT YOUR TONGUE?

They say cats have nine lives, and Leo was certain he had at least two. There was a time *before*, where many things were hazy but mostly pleasant, and then there was *now*.

Now wasn't pleasant at all.

His heart raced, and his fur stood on edge as he darted through the gates of Castletown just before sunset. Open market stalls towered overhead, casting long shadows. His paws glided across the cobblestone so silently it unnerved him. He had been in the central marketplace before, he was sure of it, but nothing looked familiar. It was all so *big*. So *loud*. And the smells—the human sweat and fish stink wafting off the fishermen's stalls; were they always so poignant?

At the same time, his other senses seemed dampened. Muted somehow.

He slowed his pace. His tail twitched with displeasure. Displayed next to another market stall, a giant pumpkin loomed larger than him. It should have been orange, but it seemed a washed-out brown or mustard yellow.

What did orange even look like?

*Focus*. He had come here for something. Someone. There had been trouble, and he needed—

A pair of boots crunched beside him. Loud footsteps. Large boots. The leather came up to the man's mid-calf but still stretched taller than Leo.

The giant man reached down to grab the giant pumpkin, and Leo startled backward.

“Puss?” the man said, as if he too were startled. “Shoo, puss. Find your master.” His words were dismissive as he turned to place his pumpkin inside a large vegetable cart.

*Master?* There wasn’t a lot Leo was certain about in that moment, but he didn’t have a master. He wouldn’t. He *was* the master, the sort other people should bow and cater to. They should come running now that he was here, showing himself in desperate need of their assistance.

And with those thoughts, a dark and commanding voice echoed inside Leo’s head. “*Kill the rats; serve your master.*”

He couldn’t escape it; something was *wrong*.

He opened his mouth. “Rr-ow?” *Wait*. Was that him?

Leo hissed, his tail still moving. That couldn’t be him. He was able to speak, wasn’t he?

But that was ridiculous. The voice inside his head had softened, replaced with a simple certainty. Cats couldn’t speak. Why had he been so sure he could, and that this lumbering crowd of dismissive giants could be persuaded to hear him? The vegetable merchant had already finished loading all his leftover produce into his cart, closing down his stand for the night, and no one else so much as glanced in Leo’s direction.

The crowd of giant feet would be certain to trample him if he tried to walk amongst them. A wave of upset gutter water could hit him, which somehow seemed just as bad. And even if he could speak ... what would he say?

That there was trouble. Something bad had happened. Worse than being drenched with water. Larger than a black dog with fangs.

Big. Bad. Trouble.

On the tip of his tongue.

“Mer-row?”

No. Now wasn’t pleasant at all.

## CHAPTER 2

# CAT'S CRADLE

If Archie's life were a faerie story, or even one of the old plays, the clouds over Castletown in the heart of the Borderland Kingdom of Umbrae would have been a sad and inky sort of gray, releasing a drizzle of rain and the echoing sound of distant thunder. Or perhaps, as the fates loved irony, it would have been clear and bright as a summer day. But no, it was somewhere in the middle—an unremarkable late winter morning that heralded in the death of an unremarkable miller.

The same death that brought Archie and the miller's other two sons to mechanically spend the day hosting a series of local matrons and curious neighbors, burying the body in a box, and then gathering around their kitchen table when evening came.

"I have the will," Rupert said, the eldest of the three. "It was in his room next to the chest, just where he said it would be. He left the mill and the house to me." He paused and held the open parchment out loosely, as if daring any of the others to challenge the legitimacy of his claim.

No one did.

Rupert had always been honest to a fault, and—absent the meddling of fate or faerie—there was no denying the bulk of the fortune should go to the firstborn son.

It was one of those things that had always been and always should be.

He continued. "Harris. He left you the donkey and cart."

Harris nodded his acceptance silently, not even looking up from his stool. Again, it was the sort of inheritance any second son should expect to receive.

That only left one matter of business that should have been as trivial as a footnote.

“And, Archie ...” Rupert shook his head and held the will out again. A strange action for a man who did not appreciate theatrical suspense in the same way Archie did. “Well, perhaps it’s best if you see it for yourself.”

Rupert pushed the parchment over the tabletop, the rough movement scrambling the ink figures so they more closely resembled a nest of gray mice fleeing from an angry tomcat.

Then, the mice became letters.

Then, the letters became words.

And that was the moment when time seemed to stop, and everything in Archie’s dreary and ordinary life changed.

---

CHASING MICE WAS OVERRATED. Something that a lower, less intelligent creature might do. No, Leo didn’t chase mice. He waited for them to come to him.

The tricky part was not using his claws to tear into the winter’s store of grain. If he did, the cantankerous miller would see the brown tabby cat as another nuisance and attempt to block him from his favorite hunting ground. So, instead, Leo climbed halfway up a grain sack that hung from a pulley, already hoisted and ready to be fed through the central floor-shaft leading to the grindstones in the room below.

But the mill wasn’t moving now. The humans used gates to divert the water from the wheel at night or when the ice proved too much of a hazard. At the very least, the lingering cold of the late winter melt would ensure that the miller and his three sons would make a later start than usual and give Leo all the time he needed to complete his task. After giving the

bag a shake, it deviated from its course enough to sprinkle a few kernels onto the floorboards.

*Perfect.* The bait was set. Now, he just had to wait.

The mill's upper story was a maze of shadows and wooden beams. The predawn light trickled in through the cracks. Leo climbed to the top of the pulley, hiding himself to wait for something small and tasty to walk under his trap. His tail twitched with anticipation. His mouth watered, just thinking of the tender sweetness of a freshly caught mouse-tail. The wait wouldn't be long. The mill was a prime place for mice to assemble through the winter months, and it hadn't disappointed him yet.

It helped that he had learned to keep his expectations low.

Leo still didn't have a master. None of the humans were going to help or even attempt to understand him, and he found he didn't need them to. He had at least a half-dozen homes—including the mill—where he might stop to sleep or eat, and a few humans he liked more than others, but he wouldn't say he belonged to them.

He could find food all on his own, and he needed little more than that.

As for the desperate danger of *before*—well, he never was able to tell anyone about that, and even his partial memories had faded. He knew there had been a voice in his head demanding that he kill all the rats, but maybe that wasn't so strange. He was a cat, and cats killed rats.

And whatever other trouble there had been, it just didn't seem to matter anymore.

Something made a scraping noise below him. Leo prepared his claws, ready to release the pulley and make a tasty mouse pancake to break his fast.

The trapdoor opened from the floor with a *bang*. After straining his senses to pick up any approaching mice, the sound rattled his ears and seemed far too loud.

“Puss?”

Leo's fur rose, a hiss building in his throat. *Humans*. Must they mewl and crash around like overgrown bull calves? The towheaded youth continued to pull himself up and walk toward the central floor-shaft, making more noise in his bare feet than anyone had a right to. "Puss? Puss?"

Archie wasn't a human Leo had any reason to actively dislike, but he was a nuisance. There would be no mouse-tails. No mouse parts of any kind. Nothing Leo could properly smash with the weight of the sack alone, but he released his trap anyway, just to show his frustration.

After all, Archie was also the youngest of the miller's sons and least likely to retaliate.

The sack came down.

"Ow!" the youth cried, nursing his foot. Satisfaction rippled through the brown tabby cat from his pointed ears to his silken tail. Archie stood like a stork, though he had already spotted the grain on the ground and was searching through the shadows. "Puss. I know you're here."

*So what?* The oaf would never catch him. Archie had bulked up in the last year, but the sudden change had left him entirely graceless. Even if Archie tried to shut Leo up somewhere, it wouldn't work. The mill was old and had plenty of loose hinges his claws could exploit.

Much had faded from his memories, but Leo had always been resourceful and excelled at landing on his feet—literally and figuratively. He was a born hunter, and even if he was smaller than the humans, he refused to become their prey. Checking exits, learning to open latches not intended for his use had become a staple in his life from the time *before* became *now*.

But just as Leo was about to dash into the surrounding winter fields and the coming dawn, Archie called for him again. "Puss, I know you're here, and I know you're not a normal cat."

Just like that, Leo froze, fully caught in another man's trap.

## CHAPTER 3



# CATERWAUL

Leo dropped from the rafters to the floor. His tail up in a slight hook, he let Archie corner him without a struggle.

After years of being called “puss” or being completely ignored. After years of dodging dogs and hunting smaller vermin. *I know you’re not a normal cat ...* How did Archie know it? Leo wasn’t entirely certain himself. He suspected. He hoped. He had flashes of *before*—but to know? And if the boy knew that, what else did he know?

Would it be anything Leo longed to know himself?

The very idea was enough to keep his thoughts whirling and his paws still. Archie carried Leo out of the mill and up the hill, standing by one of the neighboring wheat fields that overlooked the river connected to the mill’s waterwheel. Only Leo’s ear twitched like it had a mind of its own.

Really, Leo didn’t like being held. It was constricting and made him feel far too small and ridiculous. Like someone’s doll.

Archie was far too old to be indulging in such a juvenile practice.

But Leo was able to push those feelings away again as Archie began to speak, the words morose and dreamy as the boy frequently was. “Father’s dead. I don’t know if you knew that. I know you don’t come around the mill every day.”

No, Leo hadn’t known the elder man had passed, but he also couldn’t say the news surprised him. The late miller had been overworking and neglecting himself for at least the last

four years—all the years Leo had known him. Unhealthy and more prone to the deadly sort of fevers the winter months were famous for.

“We read the will yesterday,” Archie said, forcing lightness to his words. “Father gave Rupert the mill and house. And then Harris got the donkey and cart, so he’ll be able to deliver our flour all over Castletown and take other jobs as a carrier. There’s enough work for both of them to make their fortunes together.”

He smiled then, or at least he seemed to be giving it his best try.

Archie was like that. Daydreaming. Smiling when he had no proper reason to. A cat would be more sensible. “And you know what? I’m glad for them. My brothers are good, responsible men. They will work hard and use their birthrights to provide a good life for themselves and the women they will marry.”

As Archie continued to caterwaul and spill out all his troubles, Leo squirmed. How else could the cat tell the boy to get to the point without shutting him up altogether?

Archie only patted him in response. *Ugh.*

“Rupert already has his eyes on that goose girl. The one with the freckles? I saw her at the last barn-raising, and he’s not the only boy she’s been winking at, but now that he has the mill, he’ll outstrip all the farmhands and errand boys to win her over soon enough. And that’s just as it should be.”

Archie’s attempts at petting Leo became stiff and wooden.

“Because Father didn’t completely forget about me. I thought he might—he sometimes does. *A man doesn’t really need three sons*—he said that once when he was drinking and missing Mother something fierce. He said I was nothing but another mouth to feed. But right at the end Rupert saw it, and he showed me so I could see it too. Rupert got the mill. Harris got the cart. And I got *you*.”

What? *No*. Leo was no one’s servant and no one’s pet. He refused to belong to anyone, so how could he possibly be

given to someone else? It was absurd. It was criminal. The injustice swept through his veins, and Leo remembered he had claws. The boy knew nothing, and Leo didn't have to put up with any of this nonsense.

He swiped. His weaponized claws tore through the miller boy's flesh in a fluid arc.

Archie yelled and dropped him.

Leo, of course, landed on his feet. He started to sprint through the late winter melt. He would never come back to the mill again.

The boy was madder than a spring hare, and all the mice in the world weren't worth this.

"I know you aren't a normal cat!" Archie yelled, holding his scratched wrist and gasping after Leo.

And like the words carried a spell, Leo found his paws slowing once he was hidden behind the bent brown stalks of the fallow winter field. Enough to hear what might come next.

"You're not normal," Archie said, more confidently, though he didn't try to catch the cat again. "You react to everything we say, and the way you hunt mice? All those traps and things you build?" His head slumped as if caught by the hopelessness of his situation.

"When we read the will, Harris laughed and said you'd be worthless unless I wanted one night's dinner or a fancy new fur muff, but I know there is something—*magic* about you. Like a faerie or even a djinn. And those with magic like making deals, don't they? So I thought, whatever you were, maybe you would make a deal with me. Help me build my fortune, puss, and I'll find a way to help you too."

---

ARCHIE KEPT SPEAKING, like he was reading out the lines from another faerie story or a play. The ornery brown tabby cat might already be gone, and it might already be worthless, but he couldn't seem to help himself. The hollow emptiness

carried him on, though he still wasn't sure if it had to do with his father's death or the change the death had brought to his own circumstances.

Throughout the Kingdom of Umbrae, the business of death had become far too routine—a steady haze that had made it difficult to mourn each loss of life individually. Archie had lost childhood friends and other family members, but it was his mother he had missed these past four years. She was the one who had loved the old faerie stories and taught him to read. She was the one who kept him clinging to the desperate hope that there was some path still open to him, some way to better himself beside the joyless drudgery of the manual labor expected of him.

She was the one who would have loved the idea of a “magic cat.”

That's what his father had called Archie's inheritance—listed after the mill and the donkey given to his two elder brothers. The magic cat. And most men would have called it out of character. From the time Archie was small, his father had been strong, distant, and far too practical, but they had no cause to fight about it until four years previous—the same year the cat had shown up.

*“Father,”* a younger and higher-pitched version of Archie had said, coming down from the mill's upper story, *“have you noticed that new barn cat—the brown tabby with the white paws that look like boots—will kill the plague rats without eating them? He only eats the healthy ones. And he kills so many of them—more than any cat could eat. Like he knows they're trouble. How does he know to do that?”* The cat should have been half-feral—not even a pet. Archie's father never would have allowed for pets. But the cat had wandered into the mill on its own and had been permitted to stay in hopes that a few less mice would get into the grain.

The miller shook his head without looking up from the grindstone. *“What does it matter? Your mother still got sick, so it's not like it's doing us any real favors.”*

A smarter boy might have known to leave it at that, but Archie hadn't. He knew he was right. *"But, Father, have you ever seen it eat or make its waste? It washes its paws first. And it uses the outdoor privy or chamber bucket instead of sand! Harris once shut the cat into the privy without looking, and the cat ruined his blankets the next day—like it remembered!"*

*"It's your imagination, boy. And keep your eyes on the mill. You know the farmers don't like it when you grind their animal's feed as fine as the bread flour."*

Archie nodded absently, his eyes still far away. *"Mother said that in the Fae Queen's court, there are magic animals as smart as you or me. She said Granddad Archer saw a few faerie beasts himself hunting in the Darkwood. Do you think the cat could be one of those? How did it get so far out of the forest?"*

*"Curse it, boy! It's just a cat!"*

Eventually, Archie had learned to keep all cat-related comments to himself. He never said a word about how the cat twisted up a pair of dogs with their own leads or closed a window to keep out the cold on a winter night, but by that point it didn't matter.

The damage had been done.

The new barn cat was the "magic cat," and Archie was the fool who believed in it.

But maybe that was just his fate. After all, Archie had always been a little bit different, and some of it wasn't even his fault. He was the youngest of three boys, and it only seemed natural that his mother kept him home longer than his brothers, teaching him to read and a few other more domestic skills she might have passed on to a daughter if only one had been available.

But the same year the cat came, his mother had gotten sick with the plague, worse than anyone else in his family, and Archie was made to work with his brothers and father more often. And while his father wasn't spiteful or angry with most people, Archie knew he hadn't imagined what came next. His

mother died, and Archie couldn't turn around without his father calling him out for daydreaming, listing all his faults while comparing him to his elder brothers.

He should have been stronger. More focused. Driven.

Like every bit of Archie that came from his mother was not only different, but *wrong*—a painful reminder the elder man just couldn't tolerate.

In that light, the so-called inheritance of a “magic cat” could only be read as a way to continue to rub Archie's nose in it beyond the grave, but with it came something else, like a sign from the fates. The determination for Archie to prove he had been right all along and somehow make something better of himself than his father could have ever dreamed of.

But now his words and all his hopes had slipped out of his fingers, lost to the wind.

The cat was gone, and it might never come back.

## CHAPTER 4

# WHEN THE CAT'S AWAY

“**T**he smith might take you in as a farrier. The farmers always need more nails and horseshoes than he can handle on his own,” Harris said without preamble. Or at least, it seemed that way to Archie.

The two brothers rode together in the donkey cart Harris had inherited from their father, and the streets of Castletown carried a steady stream of distractions. Each uncanny stranger or unknown path beckoned Archie’s eager imagination to join them on a thousand different adventures full of new magic, romance, and a greater life than anything usually offered to a shoeless miller’s son.

Archie really hadn’t been paying much attention to anything else.

But, under a floppy hat and a flat mop of straw-colored hair that made him look like a scarecrow, his brother was growing more impatient and starting to scowl. Like he might use his switch on Archie instead of the piebald donkey pulling the cart. “Archie? Did you hear me?”

Yes, but only in that distant sort of way where Archie had to say the word out loud before it made any sense. “Farrier? You think I could be a farrier?” Not even a full smith, as there might have been something romantic about crafting a sword or a jewel-encrusted goblet. Something destined to complete noble deeds or bring true beauty to the world.

There was nothing romantic about horseshoes.



Harris made a sharp, breathy noise he must have learned from his donkey. He sat at the reins while Archie rode in back with the dwindling sacks of flour they had been delivering to customers around the town. “Only if you stop daydreaming. You might stumble into a furnace, and then where would you be? But you’re still young enough to consider an apprenticeship, and if he sees how much you can lift ...”

What he could lift. It always came down to that, didn’t it? Archie might be able to make his own way, separate from his brothers, but only as grunt labor. It was foolish of him to have any hope a cat could save him from that fate, but in the cat’s absence, life had quickly returned to normal, and Archie had just as quickly been reminded how dreadful a “normal” life could be.

A blacksmith apprentice. And that was with his brother being kind.

“It’s better than digging ditches or cleaning rocks out of fields. And you’ll still be doing more of that kind of work for a while yet—until you find a way to be your own master,” Harris said, sounding just like their late father might. Dry. Lifeless. It seemed Archie would never know if his brothers had come to mimic their father as a way of self-preservation—to avoid receiving the same treatment Archie had—or if they had just been born that way.

Harris was less than two years older than Archie, and the average-height, lanky young man still couldn’t grow a decent beard, but he already spoke like an elder with half a foot in the grave.

“There’s just no use turning your nose up at it, Archie. You’re sixteen; you’ll reach your majority by the harvest, and none of us are children anymore. We all have to work, and if Rupert finds himself a wife, the last thing he’s going to want is the two of us there, eating all his grain. I have the donkey and have already made some extra coin as a carrier. But you—”

“I only have my muscles. I know.” It was nothing Archie hadn’t heard before. Their father hadn’t forced Archie into a formal apprenticeship in the years before he died, but there

simply wasn't enough work at the mill for so many men. So, Archie had taken over the bulk of his mother's old chores, and with fears of the plague lessening in the last year, he had hired himself out to contribute to the family funds as he was able—mostly digging ditches or clearing rocks out of fields for the local farmers as Harris had said. And the muscles Archie had built along the way were a poor consolation for the expectations that came in their wake.

According to his brothers, it seemed there should be no better fortune in Archie's life than to become another donkey pulling a cart for his master. And while Archie didn't scratch his brother in response—like the cat had scratched him—he could now see the reason behind it.

Archie had fumbled his offer; he knew the stray tabby was far more magical and intelligent than it appeared, so why should it be tempted by the life of a pet and the sort of work usually given to domesticated animals and over-muscled miller sons?

It certainly wasn't a life Archie wanted for himself.

But there was nothing for it now. Archie pushed himself off the cart, pulling the last small sack of flour from the wagon bed and putting his only celebrated asset—his muscles—to work. "I'll take this to the plague orphans, then? I can find my own way back."

Harris frowned, indecision warring on his face. With everything else that had been said, it wasn't hard to understand why. Their family used to go down as far as the neighboring town of Carabus to deliver all their flour and grain, but the so-called Ogre Marquis of Carabus was still tyrannically holding to the quarantine restrictions, and the plague had naturally made everyone a bit more conscious of their immediate neighbors. So, when their father was alive, it had become second nature to stay closer to Castletown and give any surplus flour to the local Charity House run by a collection of older widows, spinsters, and other Matrons of the Light who dedicated their lives to the work of the fates. But now the mill belonged to Rupert. And so many years after the plague, he might have his own ideas how the surplus should be used.

Especially now that Rupert had marriage on his mind.

But Archie wasn't going to wait for either of his brothers to give their permission. Not for this. While his father had been alive to provide for his temporal needs, Archie hadn't required the Charity House for its intended use, but its existence fed his soul in another way.

He wasn't about to give it up.

The matrons already knew to expect him, so Archie circled around the back to enter the kitchen directly. Then—like he was afraid of being locked in—he went to the inner door and propped it open with a broom. Right on schedule, a melodious voice filtered in from the main room where all the children had gathered. Even better, Archie knew the voice in question belonged to an auburn-haired beauty with freckles across her nose that could easily put any goose girl to shame.

Someone who never winked just to get attention.

Princess Ainsley.

*“Spurred on by the strength of his true love, the knight drew his sword, glowing with the holy Light of the Fates. He struck the terrible dragon and ...”* the princess read, her voice carrying all the excitement of the fiery tale.

One of the younger plague orphans, a six-year-old with crooked braids, noticed Archie lingering at the doorway and turned. “You almost missed it,” she mouthed.

And Archie smiled, waving for Sophie not to worry. He wouldn't miss this for the world.

Princess Ainsley had also lost her mother—the queen—and her elder brother—the crown prince—in the plague, and despite her rank, she had found her own way to serve her grieving people. Along with nursing many of the sick herself, she came to the Charity House most every week, singing songs and reading faerie stories to the orphaned children, just like Archie's mother used to do for him.

All Archie had to do was bring the flour and start the bread dough rising, and it was like his mother never died. His worries melted away. He thought he could make it through

another week working the mill and everything that came with it. He thought he could even be a farrier or a stable hand, just so long as he still had these stolen moments to escape and aspire to.

Some of the old faerie stories were historical, some were merely symbolic, but they were all given by the fates and preserved by their matrons and holy oracles to bring more light into the world. A world where all the hero's words and actions came out exactly right, and all his dreams came true.

A world of magic.

And if Archie ever had a chance to talk to the cat again, he swore he wouldn't waste it.

---

“WELL, there you are, Tom. Am I finally going to convince you to stay?” asked a young shop assistant. Tabitha put down a saucer of goat milk for Leo and her collection of strays.

Why did everyone want to own him today? The cat might have protested the thought—violently—but over four years ago, when *before* became *now*, Leo had been too disoriented to put his claws and animal instincts into proper action. He hadn't thought to hunt his own mice right away. Tabitha was the first human to do him a good turn, seeing his pathetically thinning frame and putting a dish of her own dinner scraps before him.

She had even found a brush to help him get a stubborn mat out of his fur.

As such, she might be his favorite of the humans he occasionally visited, but he still had never been tempted to stay longer than a handful of solitary nights at the second-hand shop where she currently lived with a growing number of cats.

Tom or tomcat really wasn't much better than puss, and both offers of ownership had been equally distasteful, but for completely different reasons. Hiding behind a silk curtain of sable-brown hair, Tabitha talked to Leo, but she talked to all

her other cats too. She had never indicated she thought him anything other than another stray, something to stave off her own loneliness and provide her with a bit of comfort in her labor. He felt no threat or danger from her, but there was also no intrigue, no flashes from *before* ...

Leo's fur bristled, and Tabitha laughed like he had been responding to her alone. "I know. You have too much spirit for a simple home like mine, but you'll find where you belong soon enough. A family that is equal to you in every way."

Sweet Tabitha seemed so earnest Leo couldn't bring himself to be rude to her, letting her rub his fur longer than usual. But as he did so, he couldn't help but notice the other cats—two black-and-white sisters called Soot and Smudge and another striped tom called Tiger. They sniffed at each other and darted around after beams of light reflecting off the window chimes hanging in the doorway. Sure, they had the normal superior attitude their kind was famous for, but they were just animals.

Nothing but normal cats.

And Leo had never wanted to believe he was one of them.

Leo turned away from the second-hand shop and went farther into Castletown, following an old mouse-trail in his usual fashion. Archie had said Leo could be a faerie. Something about that idea intrigued him, perhaps even tickling at some sort of long-lost memory, but he still didn't think it could be true. He knew about faeries—at least as much as anyone could know about the mysterious and magical beings that lived in the deepest parts of the lakes or darkest parts of the forests. They could be dangerous, but they could be weakened and bound to their rings by certain substances like iron, and they couldn't lie.

True love could always defeat them in the end.

But Leo had never been defeated by love, and he had no trouble lying, at least not to himself. He told himself over and over that he wanted nothing more to do with the mill, that he could find just as much food hanging around the market stalls or the second-hand shop.

Tabitha even brought the food to him, never making him hunt.

He wasn't even sure why he wanted to hunt so much, anyway; since the time Tabitha had provided him with that first plate of food, he had never gone hungry. Maybe it was just a way to work out his rage, the loneliness he felt inside his own head. Nothing soothed his spirit better than a hundred dead rats—either caught by his paws or some other trap he had laid.

But when Leo saw the miller boy leaving the matrons' Charity House, casting glances at the princess's royal guards in their black and silver livery, the cat couldn't seem to help what happened next. Leo had always been curious about the castle—the one place even a stray cat couldn't just wander in uninvited—and he felt the part of his mind that was usually dreaming up new ways to catch mice start scheming in a different direction, almost in spite of himself.

Archie never said what kind of fortune he hoped Leo might give him with his so-called faerie magic; the boy might be too distractible to come up with anything practical or specific, but it seemed it should be something simple enough.

A girl with freckles.

A means to support himself.

Leo could do that and more. After all, he wasn't a normal cat, and just that thought triggered several others. More flashes from *before*. More breadcrumbs he could follow ...

Leo had always been a hunter, but he got the impression that he had once been larger and hadn't used his claws. He saw trees. A dark forest. Even a bow, something like a human might use. Was that even possible?

He shook his head—the kind of shake that misplaced his fur and moved his whole body. Leo's memories just didn't work the same way normal memories did. Humans—simple creatures as they were—had memories that lined up in neat little rows. You're a squalling babe. Then older. And on and on. Leo didn't have memories like that. There never seemed to

be any order or reason behind the flashes he got from *before*, but there were just some things he knew. Things that were important—why else would a creature like him take the time to know facts if they weren't important?

And Leo knew about Princess Ainsley—the beautiful auburn-haired and freckled young woman striding out of the Charity House with her black and silver guards. She had just reached her majority at seventeen, and her father, the king, would be accepting petitions from multiple wealthy and royal suitors. Leo also knew she liked the theater and stories filled with adventure, while the king enjoyed hunting and feasting on wild fowl. You know, the sort of things a potential suitor might want to know to give himself an advantage.

Obviously, Leo was in no position to court the princess himself. And why should he want to? He was a cat. But it seemed it would be a terrible shame for such knowledge to go to waste when someone else might benefit from it. And while the cat still couldn't name the trouble that had first brought him to Castletown, perhaps, if he had finally found someone who thought him smart enough to communicate with, he would find he had even more to say?

By nightfall, Leo was back at the mill. Not only back at the mill but in the shadowed corner of the loft where the youngest miller boy slept.

Though it wasn't without a few misgivings.

A floorboard creaked under the cat's restless paws, and Archie scanned the darkness of the loft. "Puss? Are you here?"

*Leo.* His name was *Leo*. Was that really that hard? Puss. Tom. A few of the Charity House Children even called him Socks or Boots because of the white markings on his paws and hind legs, but no one ever called him by his proper name.

It needled him like a bur in his fur he couldn't quite reach.

At least, he couldn't reach it on his own.

Calling a cat Leo was hardly an uncommon thing, and it wasn't like Leo expected any of the humans to use his full name and title.

Leo didn't even know what his full name and title *was*. All he knew was that he had one, and he might not have thought of it at all if not for the boy's recent revelations.

The boy sighed, rubbing at the scratch on his hand from the previous day. "I know I messed things up when I tried to talk to you before. I should have said I wanted a deal from the first, instead of telling you what my father said. He never believed you were magic; he thought you could be owned, but you know that isn't what I believe. And I promise, if you ever come out again, I will find a way to fulfill my side of the bargain and find a way to help you too."

Archie still believed. Faerie or not, hunter or not, Leo wasn't a normal cat; he never wanted to be owned by a human, but perhaps there would be some advantages to making a different sort of arrangement. A deal. Something where they both benefited. The boy was so passive and vague about his dreams, Leo could become the master himself, the one in control.

And a pet human could certainly be useful. Humans could do a lot of things a cat could not, and if the miller boy could read a will left by his father, he wasn't quite as uneducated as other peasants in this town. In fact, that might be Leo's first experiment. If he could get this stupid human to call him by his name, perhaps they could build more meaningful conversation from there.

His mind busy planning, he went to find himself some grain.

Leo wasn't a normal cat, and he wasn't catching mice tonight.

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AS THE MORNING light streamed into the loft, Archie stretched and turned around. He didn't expect to see anyone. He had moved from the house to the mill when the room he shared with his two brothers had seemed a little too cramped. Now, Rupert would be in their late parents' former room, and Harris



would be in their old room alone—until Rupert had his own wife and children and kicked Harris out here. And then Archie wouldn't have a place at all.

As such, Archie expected the day's work would be loaded with more not-so-subtle hints that he soon would be forced to make his own way. But instead, there was the brown tabby cat sitting on the windowsill, staring at him. "Puss?"

The cat let out an angry *yowl*, then looked more pointedly downward.

On the floorboards of the loft, a handful of grain had been arranged to form three figures. But they weren't just figures. They were letters. Maybe even a name?

Archie rubbed at his eyes, but the message remained as clear as day.

He looked back at the cat. "Leo? Your name is Leo?"

And then something happened that Archie had never heard from the ornery brown tabby before. The cat *purred*.

Archie grinned. "All right. Leo it is then."

Leo the magic cat.

## CHAPTER 5

# CAT AMONGST THE PIGEONS

Leo watched as Archie pulled back the string of his grandfather's old bow and aimed an arrow at a tree. It went wide and landed in the brush, closer to the gnarled thorn trees of the Darkwood.

*Again.*

Leo made a show of grooming his left paw, completely unimpressed. Archie really was terrible at this. This patch of glade near the faerie's forest was always a great place for rabbits, but the boy's shooting would only serve to frighten them away. What were his parents thinking, calling him Archer? Or even Archibald?

But then again, they were humans. *Peasants*. Maybe his name really was just Archie.

Archie rubbed at his crow's nest of sandy blond hair and frowned down at the bow. Since Leo had appeared in the loft that morning, the boy had been biddable and hopeful enough. All Leo had to do was point his tail at the old bow to get his new pet human moving his bare feet in the proper direction, but Archie's enthusiasm for the sport seemed to have rubbed off from him as surely as the skin had been rubbed off his forearm when the bowstring went wide. "Are you sure this is the best way for me to earn my fortune?"

Well, they would have to do *something* to impress the king—he was the key to getting what both the cat and the miller boy wanted most. Leo wanted to get inside the king's castle, and the boy had his lowborn eyes on the princess. Princesses

didn't just *decide* on their own who they were going to marry. They married whoever their royal fathers deemed worthy.

It was a truth so obvious even a miller's son should know it.

Absent of a title, the bow seemed like it would be the boy's best chance of getting his sovereign's attention. Archie might currently be a shoeless, scruffy, and frequently smelly son of a miller, but the king loved his huntsmen. Somehow, Leo knew that in his bones.

"And you couldn't—I don't know—enchant the bow? Help me out a bit?"

Yes. Archie still seemed to think Leo was some sort of faerie. Pointing his tail and moving around grain to form a few letters could only communicate so much. But at least in this case, Archie was asking for something a cat was well-equipped to provide for him.

Leo let out a disdainful *yowl* and went out to the brush, letting the useless miller boy sit in his own failure. A few moments later, the cat returned, dragging a snowshoe hare in his mouth.

And then another.

"Oh," said Archie with a bit of bemusement. "You got them. Good job." He reached down to pet Leo, but the cat stepped sideways, glaring to warn the boy off.

Leo might have accepted Archie as his human pet, but there were still rules. Accepting affection from a comely maiden, a doting matron, or even the occasional child (as long as their hands weren't too sticky) was tolerable, but not from another male with hair on his face.

The thought seemed so natural that it should go without question.

"Sorry." Rubbing at the old scratch on his hand, Archie backed away. He looked at the bow. "Now what should we do?"

Leo sighed. It seemed he would have to do everything himself. Maybe even find his own rucksack and fancy pair of knee-high boots so he could personally deliver their catch to the king.

Instead, Leo picked up one of the stray arrows from the ground and carried it over to the hares pointedly.

Archie's golden-brown eyes widened in understanding. "You want me to say I shot them? Try to make my fortune as a huntsman?" He paused, considering the trees in the distance. "But no one can hunt the faerie's forest without the crown's permission. I might get away with it for a while—as long as I'm only hunting rabbits or quail—but if I really want to make my fortune, I would need to go to the castle and petition the king."

Yes, perhaps the boy could be taught, but they still had a lot more work to do before Archie could pass as a decent huntsman.

And Leo desperately needed to get his new human a decent pair of shoes.

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*PETITION THE KING.* Archie had an old wheat sack full of freshly caught snowshoe hares on his back, and he was going to petition the *king*. The words paraded across his mind in repeat, gaining more power with every pass. He wasn't sure what he thought would happen once he decided to throw his lot in with the cat. Perhaps he had some passing fancy of them both putting on some sort of bard show, the cat doing tricks to prove his intelligence and earn them both some coin? Or perhaps they could hire themselves out as more professional rat catchers?

But Archie should have known Leo would never go for something demeaning and common like that—that Archie would be the one doing tricks on command—but he never thought he would have to do something quite as grand as all this.

More than Archie ever dreamed.

But hopefully Leo knew what he was doing? Archie certainly didn't.

In a bit of a daze, he followed after the cat until it stopped in front of a ramshackle shop on the outskirts of Castletown. "R-row."

Archie frowned at the brightly attired manikins in the window. "That's a dress shop." More of a second-hand dress shop at that. What did that have to do with hunting or petitioning the king?

Did cats—magical or otherwise—even understand about hunting charters? Leo seemed to know everything else, but *still*—

"Oh, there you are, Tom," a young woman said with a bright smile in her voice. She had been standing near the front of the shop and offering a tray of scraps to her collection of stray cats. Right now, she had two. One spotted, one striped. "You brought a friend today."

It took Archie a moment to understand the young woman was talking to Leo and Archie was the friend in question. In fact, Archie had seen Tabitha in town and assisting at the second-hand shop before, but she was usually much more reserved, only having eyes for her cats.

Should Archie still insert himself into the conversation?

It would seem he would have to, because for all of the cat's apparent wisdom and magic, Leo still didn't talk. Archie shifted the sack on his back. "Yes, I'm Archie. The miller's son. We—*I*—caught some rabbits, and we were going to petition the king about a hunting charter, but—"

"I see." The girl's blue eyes brightened, quickly marking his lack of shoes and fraying pants. "You two are going out on an adventure, but you can't go to see the king dressed like that. If you want him to believe you could be a huntsman, you have to look like one."

"Mer-row!" Leo cried, as if thrilled that was one less concept he would have to somehow communicate to Archie

through pantomime, and Tabitha reached down to pet him.

Dread shot down Archie's spine. His hand twitched in her defense. "Don't do that! Leo, he ... he ..." Archie trailed off. The ornery tabby cat leaned into the girl's hand, accepting pets without a bit of his usual ire, and Archie couldn't help but stare.

"Don't worry, Tom," Tabitha said, still stroking the cat and barely giving Archie any notice. "I'll help your friend, no problem. We sell mostly dresses here, but my mistress has strong contacts with the tanners, and we have some fashions for gentlemen too."

Archie shook his head. "He said his name is Leo, actually," he said, though the words came out weak. The cat, still perfectly calm, was giving him one of *those* looks. The kind Archie often got from his father and hoped never to receive again. The kind that said, "*Close your mouth and stop embarrassing yourself.*"

Too late.

"He says?" Tabitha's eyebrows furrowed, but she laughed again before Archie could be too embarrassed. "Don't worry. I'm a bit mad about cats myself. And it certainly suits him. Tom's always so regal. And one of the best mousers around."

Leo rubbed his face against the girl's ankle-boots in appreciation. He even purred. They really *must* be friends. Archie had never seen Leo act so open to human attention; it seemed as strange as hearing Tabitha talk, and Archie couldn't help but continue in the same madcap fashion.

"You saw it too? The way he used to line up all the plague rats in front of the castle gates after he killed them?"

Tabitha bobbed her head in a playful sort of curtsy. "He certainly did us a good turn, that's for sure. Prince of all the Mousers. And any friend of his is more than welcome in our shop." She turned away from the cats to stick her key in the door.

"Well, I don't have much money. Just the rabbits *I* caught." Archie did his best not to look at Leo that time, though he had

no idea how long he could last as a huntsman who couldn't hunt.

He would just have to keep trying.

Archie undid the sack for the girl to see. Tabitha nodded again, opening the door and gesturing for them to follow her into the shop—the place as cluttered and erratically decorated as a witch's hut. “I can certainly talk to the tanners and get you some nice hunting boots for that. And maybe I could use the hares to line one of our cloaks, if you have some time? Come on in, and we'll see what we can find.”



## CHAPTER 6

# A CAT IN GLOVES

Leo heard Archie coming up the hill behind him, still in bare feet and holding the bow hopefully. They both looked down at a mess of felled feathers. “Did you get that one or me?” Archie asked.

Leo could generously say it was a team effort. The boy’s arrow had startled the quail from their nest, and Leo had brought them all down. But he would give the boy full credit so long as it meant the human would keep trying.

Really, Leo knew it wasn’t entirely Archie’s fault he was still so terrible. It hadn’t even been a week, and they had to make do without a proper teacher. If Leo could hold the bow, then he really could show Archie how it was done. The thought seemed automatic and certain, though a cat holding a bow should have been just as ridiculous as a cat wearing boots.

But the flashes of memory were so frequent now. Leo was sure he was on the right track.

Archie shrugged and added the bird to his growing sack. “Well, we can take it to your *lady friend* either way,” he said, his golden-brown eyes brightening with far too much mirth. “It’s been almost a week, and Tabitha said everything would be done today.”

Leo scowled. He didn’t have a “lady friend.” That would also be ridiculous. He was a cat. Tabitha was a human girl. A beautiful human girl with sable-brown hair, blue eyes like the

sea, and a secret smile that could make a pirate blush, but still a human girl.

Not that Leo had ever been interested in courting female cats either ... Just another way Leo was different from the other cats, but Archie had no cause to tease him for it.

Archie was lucky Tabitha had been so willing to assist them. She might be working as an outer-row shop assistant, but she was talented. She had never trained as a proper seamstress—only running the till and sewing up a few seams to busy her hands and earn her keep—but Leo had seen the dresses she had been restitching in her own private loft, and he was certain a team of castle seamstresses could do no better.

Whatever she had made for Archie would be top quality and more than the boy deserved.

And if Tabitha got the boy properly attired, Leo had another plan he could enact. A greater risk than anything they had tried so far, but Leo was certain the reward would be worth it.

Leo was getting one step closer to the castle, and if nothing else, it would put the boot on the other paw and make Archie rue the day he ever thought to tease Leo about his connection to Tabitha.

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LESS THAN AN HOUR LATER, Archie came out of the second-hand shop wearing a fur-lined hunting cloak. He still wore his old shirt and trousers, but the new belt and high boots covered up the frayed seams and made everything look fresh. The cat seemed pleased, and Archie had given Tabitha a few more of Leo's kills in payment, though Archie still suspected she was giving him a deal based on her own fondness for the cat—who seemed to have no problem shamelessly purring for her.

The cat and the girl were always so transformed in each other's presence. Sweet, even if Archie planned to tease the self-important cat for it until one or both of them died.

It was only right.

Either way, Archie had to admit the fresh outfit made him feel a bit better about braving the castle walls to inquire about a hunting charter, though he was just as glad to be directed down a side-hall by the household steward instead of having to face the king himself.

Along with the black background and silver fox representing Umbrae and the royal family, swords and shields bearing the crest of another noble house decorated the walls of the gamemaster's office. The man at the desk had a mustache and introduced himself as Sir Orrick.

"You're a knight? A real one?" Archie asked, barely containing his excitement. He had never been this close to one before, and they seemed almost as magical as faeries.

The gray-haired man squinted at him. "Of course I'm a real knight. Or at least, I was when I was younger. Now I do the forms. And you wish to hunt on the king's land and in the forest?"

"Yes, sir." Archie puffed up his chest. He had at least gotten better at passing Leo's kills off as his own. "I've gotten pretty good at catching rabbits and quail, and I think I could get some deer and make a living of it, with the king's blessing."

"You know the law?"

"Yes. I'm happy to contribute a share of my hunt to the crown and the kingdom's welfare." He handed over the rest of the quail in his sack to demonstrate. "For the king's table."

Sir Orrick nodded. "I'll get it to him. And it's twenty silver crowns to issue your charter."

Archie blinked. "That much?" He wasn't even sure he had seen that much altogether. Even when his father sold the flour and feed, the other villagers often paid them in trade.

"For the season," the gamemaster said. "You can bring it in installments, but no deer until the balance is clear. The king doesn't tolerate poaching." He stiffened then, as if

remembering a time when he had been able to enforce that law with steel.

“All right. I’ll do what I can,” Archie said, though he found himself looking doubtfully at the cat on his way out. He might have preferred to be a huntsman over a farrier or some other menial and much-too-common trade, but he still wasn’t very good at it. Most of his kills came from what Leo could catch. What if he never made enough to make the price of the king’s charter worthwhile?

Instead of earning his fortune, he would be broker than he was before.

And that was even assuming becoming a huntsman was what Leo intended for him. Archie had thought when Leo spelled out his name, that meant the cat was going to help, and their fortunes were about to change, but it had still been a challenge to iron out any of the particulars. No matter how intelligent the cat might be, Leo couldn’t talk, and there were limits to how much he could communicate.

They reached the city streets, welcomed by the bray of Harris’s donkey. The beast lumbered by one of the nearby market stalls before Archie remembered he still had one thing he could look forward to today.

He ran up to his brother’s cart.

Harris’s eyebrows went up under his bangs. “Archie, where have you been? And where’d you get that getup?”

Heat rose on the back of Archie’s neck. It was one thing to wear the new outfit to play another role around strangers, like he was wearing a costume for a play.

But Harris knew the truth.

Archie had never worn anything that his two brothers hadn’t worn first, and they never started out so fine. And now that both his brothers were smaller than him—well, their cast-offs never quite fit, and Archie had stopped wearing their toe-pinching boots unless the snow was up to his knees. Not that there should be anything wrong with that. He was the youngest. A miller’s son. Getting the smallest, meanest portion

was his proper place in life. So how could he explain why he was putting on airs and going against the proper order of things now?

“Well, you told me I should be learning a trade, so now I’m a huntsman. Or at least, I’m working to become one,” Archie said, though the defense still sounded weak.

His fancy of following after a magic cat would never have met his father’s approval, and his brothers weren’t much better.

But really, they had no call to complain. Archie might not be hiring himself out to the local farmers anymore, but he still tended their mother’s garden and saw to all the other domestic tasks, like the cooking and laundry. He was earning his keep well enough until Rupert officially found someone far prettier to marry and replace him with.

Either way, Archie didn’t want to have to answer any more questions, so he grabbed one of his brother’s sacks. “But I have some time now, if you need some help delivering the flour.”

Harris shook his head. “We’re only doing paying customers today. Rupert said. Even if the Ogre Marquis won’t let us bring it into Carabus, we can still try to sell it somewhere else.”

Archie scowled. “I can pay.” He wasn’t going to give up visiting the Charity House every week, no matter what his brothers said. But Archie had already emptied his pockets and knapsack for the king. “Or at least, I *will* be able to pay. I’ll give you and Rupert part of my kill in the morning.” Would Leo be all right with that plan? They had never had the time to discuss charitable giving, but the cat had already disappeared into the crowd.

Archie was quick to follow the cat’s example, turning away from the cart and ignoring any other protest from his elder brother.

He found his normal entrance to the matrons’ kitchen and set to work. He placed the flour by the counter and opened the

inner door to let in the princess's voice, as was his usual habit, when he stopped short. The princess was there in her usual spot—a beautiful young woman with thick curls held together in an elegant knot and a few freckles on her nose modestly contained by powder.

And seated around her was the usual mass of children.

But right in the middle of the crowd was a certain brown tabby cat.

“Leo? What are you doing there?” Archie tried to yell and whisper at the same time.

But the cat didn't even twitch.

What should he do? They were going to be in so much trouble, and there didn't seem to be any way to avoid it. Archie's gaze slid over to the princess's black and silver guards, subtly placed in the corners like shadows, and one of the more formidable matrons who stood mere steps away. If someone thought he had let the cat in to bother the princess, he might be thrown out. But if he made a scene trying to get the cat's attention, he could make matters even worse. He could even spook one of the princess's guards, and as excited as Archie had been to meet a knight at the castle, he didn't want to feel the edges of their swords up close.

So he just stood there, caught in the door frame as the princess's words rolled over him.

Princess Ainsley was reading a well-known play about a princess and a dwarf. The one where the noble dwarf was so deformed and ugly he had decided to woo the princess through a series of romantic letters where he used another man's name, pretending he was as handsome as she was fair. The princess in the story had just discovered the truth, and Princess Ainsley played her part well. “*Why have you sought to deceive me so? Did you not know that it wasn't the height of your stature that won me over but the tenderness of your soul?*”

The princess looked to the next page, but then she frowned. “Oh. The page is missing. I'm so sorry, children. That was the best part too.”

“So you don’t know what happens next?” asked a six-year-old in the front. Sophie.

“Well, I think I might. I just don’t know if I can do the line justice. Let me think.” Her cheeks reddened in sharp contrast to her porcelain skin. She searched through the pages as if looking for sudden inspiration, and Archie couldn’t help it.

He couldn’t leave the princess’s question unanswered.

*“You saw me every day, Princess, and yet you never looked my way,”* he said, the words flowing through him like they had a life of their own. *“I was the one to hand you your cloak before it rained, the one to light a candle when you walked in darkness. The fool and servant of your court. I longed for you to see and accept me as I was, but under the cloak of the pen I had to remain.”* He bowed his head at the end, like he thought the dwarf might, but as the lines from the play had run out, Archie had lost the will to perform. He bowed because he should bow.

Ainsley was the princess, and Archie shouldn’t have spoken at all.

The room was silent, compounding the tension in the air.

“Well, is he right?” asked Sophie.

The princess gave a quick and startled nod. “Yes. Yes, I think he is.”

Little Sophie beamed. “And what does the princess say? Does she forgive him and kiss him so they can all be happy forever?”

“Yes, I think she does.” Ainsley’s surprise settled into a radiant smile, and Archie’s head spun. He shouldn’t be doing this—talking to royalty. It just wasn’t his place, and the princess’s guards were already glaring at him. He was sure of it.

“Excuse me,” he said, grabbing the cat around the middle and retreating into the kitchen where he belonged.



## CHAPTER 7

# THE CAT'S PAW

Archie braced himself against the kitchen door, trying to breathe. “No, no, no. What did I do?”

“*Mew?*” At the noise, Archie released the squirming tabby cat, and something on the floor drew his gaze. A torn page of parchment was under the cat’s paw.

The written lines he had just recited to the princess were on full display.

“You-you stole the page from the book. You wanted that to happen!”

The cat blinked in a way that made Archie feel small, even though he had outgrown both his elder brothers. But his extra size and all the physical prowess in the world couldn’t help him now. Archie grabbed at his hair. “No, that was the princess. I’m going to get in so much trouble.”

Leo huffed and flicked the top tip of his tail, as if to say Archie was being ridiculous. Wasn’t this what he had wanted? To be noticed by a beautiful, sought-after girl and have his fortune changed?

But Archie would never have thought to ask for something like this! He couldn’t talk to the princess; he certainly couldn’t *like* her. She was the princess. She was ... *special*. Sure, he always thought she was beautiful and more than a little intriguing. Sometimes, when he listened to her read the stories of his childhood, it seemed they might share the same soul, but that was a passing fancy. Another faerie story. He never thought he could actually reach her. Like a pretty piece of

poetry or an oil canvas mounted on the wall, her matchless beauty was meant to be admired by everyone.

And if she were to share a stage with anyone, shouldn't she have a prince?

But there hadn't been any prince. Not today. There was just a slew of children and guards who seemed oblivious to the girl's distress. And Archie had charged in like he thought he was a knight in a storybook. What had he gotten himself into?

Leo *yowled* and pawed at the crumpled paper again.

What was Archie supposed to do with that?

Then the door opened behind him, and there was the princess in all her royal glory. "Boy? Why did you run off like that? I wanted to speak to you. How did you come to memorize all that?"

Archie scrambled behind the counter and swallowed several times, frozen again. Bowing again. Princess Ainsley was talking to him, and that meant he had to answer her, right? Or would it be better to flee to one of the other Borderland Kingdoms past the faerie's forest and never look back? "It's Anderdolf the Dwarf," he said, as the character was also the name of the play. "I suppose I understand him." The dwarf was all Archie could think of right now.

"Do you?" the princess said, the words soft. "Sophie said you were one of the miller's sons, that you bring the flour to make them bread every week. *I* eat some of that bread when I take lunch with the children, but I'm still not sure I believe it. I've never seen you here before."

Archie gaped, feeling utterly foolish. She ate his bread? She wanted to see him?

What in the blessed Light of the Fates was going on?

"What is your name?" the princess asked.

*His name?* Archie couldn't think of it for a moment. The cat was still pawing the scrap of paper from Anderdolf the Dwarf pointedly, and Archie had a revelation. Or maybe his mind had finally cracked under the pressure. The princess

didn't believe he could be a miller's son. He could take a page from Anderdolf's book—both literally and figuratively—say he was anyone he wanted to be, but it just didn't feel right.

“I'm sorry, Your Highness,” Archie said, feeling he must be disappointing the cat, the princess, and everyone in Castletown greatly. Like a stage actor who couldn't play his role correctly. “I wish I could say I was some dashing lord out of a storybook, but Sophie was right; I'm only one of the miller's sons. Archie. I know I shouldn't have said anything \_\_\_”

“Why shouldn't you? You seem to know the play better than I do.” The girl laughed at her own foolishness, and it was a beautiful sound. But then, even the mournful sigh that followed the laughter seemed breathtakingly beautiful. “My mother used to love all those old stories. And when she died, I guess I just wanted to do something to keep her spirit alive all these years.” Her hands went to her hair, like the tight and elegant knot was some kind of prison that had her ensnared. “Though sometimes it can be exhausting trying to be her all the time, you know?”

“I can imagine.”

“Truly?”

Archie nodded as the words came more easily. “Well, everyone thinks they know who I should be as well.” They thought of his father and assumed he should be a simple plow horse, or they saw his muscles and thought he should be something of a brute.

They never saw the true depths of his soul.

Ainsley smiled. “But you're showing them they're wrong, aren't you? You're not just a miller's son. You can quote Anderdolf and your clothes ... Are you a huntsman?”

“I'm trying to be.” Archie looked back at the cat. That might be the only lie he was telling, but it still felt like a big one. He just felt trapped inside it, especially as the girl's smile widened.

He would do anything to keep the princess smiling.

“Well, then I might see you more often, Archie. My father loves his huntsmen. And next time you’re in the area, don’t hide away.” The princess then excused herself to return to the children, and Archie was left with a great desire to kiss or kill a certain cat.

## CHAPTER 8

# RAINING CATS

Leo was willing to admit the interaction with the princess hadn't gone *entirely* to plan. He had gone through a lot of trouble to make sure the right book—one of the books at the Charity House that also matched one of the books Archie had from his mother—was on the top of the pile for the princess to find with the page torn out. A trap just as clever as any Leo had used to catch mice over the years, even if it was meant to serve an entirely different purpose.

But the boy was too stupid to take the hint—that he should have embellished his backstory a bit. Ainsley might be easy enough to impress with some poetry, but that would never be enough to win over the king and truly make the boy's fortune.

It would never get Leo into the castle past the stewards' offices, either. He had tried the last time they were there, but it wasn't like stealing through the mill or another peasant dwelling. The locks were new. The doors firmly shut. And there were far too many of those black and silver guards lurking in the shadows.

But Leo just knew that was where he was meant to be—in with the royal family.

Seeing Ainsley up close had only confirmed that somehow.

Leo knew all sorts of things about the princess he had no business knowing. Like the way she hated dresses. Or the way her curls and freckles could never be completely tamed. He saw her running after him with skinned knees. Climbing a tree.

In that light, it really was quite a thing to see her putting on a more matronly display at the Charity House every week.

And the cat had no trouble admitting that the mystery called to him more than any great need to play matchmaker for a reluctant miller's son.

He just had to keep making plans. Something even a slow and bumbling oaf of a human couldn't mess up.

But then, Leo still wasn't a faerie, and there was nothing a cat could do about the late winter rain that descended on the mill the next day.

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THE RAIN SHOULDN'T HAVE BEEN a surprise. In fact, seeing a proper rainstorm like this in other years would have made Archie glad. Just what they needed to wash out the last of the winter frost and usher in the spring. But his hunting companion was a cat, and Archie wasn't about to try to make Leo go outside in the wet. Archie had already been scratched for less.

Archie wasn't even sure a bow would work in the wet—he struggled enough with it when it was dry. If only he could get the rabbits to stay still long enough for him to whack them over the head with a stick. He had used a staff before, sparring with the other boys in town, and though he often thought the weapon was crude and distasteful, it was a lot simpler than the bow, and Archie had a knack for it. And by knack, he meant he was larger than most of the other boys who might have challenged him. Often just holding a staff was enough to get himself out of trouble, even if it led to people calling him an ox, oaf, or even an ogre behind his back.

Either way, Archie would be stuck in the house and the mill all day, keeping himself busy with his normal chores. Which wouldn't have been so bad if it weren't for the company he had to keep. Just about as pleasant as the people who called Archie an ogre, Rupert was in the kitchen, sitting at the table like he had been waiting for him.



His eldest brother was a finger or two shorter than Archie but almost as thick. A short beard helped to fill out his face, and it had always seemed a cruel twist of irony that instead of the blond, limp hair that both Harris and Archie had gotten from their father, Rupert's had a richer, darker hue that could have only come from their mother.

Archie quickly busied himself with the pot for the morning porridge, but it didn't help. He had to move slower in the house—afraid he would bump or break something as he was a larger man trying to fit himself into a smaller space—and that gave Rupert all the opening he needed.

"I don't suppose you are going out today," Rupert said, starting mildly though Archie could hear the storm behind the words. "With it raining buckets out there."

"No," Archie agreed, standing his ground the best he could. "I don't suppose I can."

Rupert nodded. "Good. Because I wanted to talk to you."

"I'll pay for the grain," Archie said in a rush. Harris would have told Rupert that Archie had continued to take the flour to the Charity House against their brother's wishes, and that was likely what had Rupert's hackles raised. Even before their father died, Rupert was a man who liked to be obeyed. "I know it's yours now, but I'm good for it."

Rupert looked down and then up again, wincing like something in Archie's words had offended him greatly. "Are you?"

"Yes. I made good catches all last week. It's just the weather ..." He glanced back toward the window helplessly. Rupert could see the rain for himself.

"You know Father always said hunting was like gambling. And I suppose he would know, since Granddad Archer did plenty of both. You might get a decent catch one year but then spend the next empty."

There wasn't much Archie could say to that. The bow was from their grandfather on their mother's side. As such, their father never seemed to think he had the right to simply throw

the bow out, but it was no secret he disapproved of the man and the inconsistent way he had provided for his family.

Their father certainly never thought archery was a skill his own sons needed to be taught.

Rupert pressed on in the silence, gaining steam. “Father should have gotten you a real apprenticeship years ago and probably would have if not for the plague. But you’re young enough still that you could find something more steady if you looked—Harris and I would help you. We know you drew the short straw with the will, but you’re still our brother, and we never intended to put you out without options.”

“I appreciate it.” But the words came more as a way to break the tension, not because Archie truly wanted to put himself back under his brother’s thumb so completely.

After all, Archie was already well-acquainted with the sort of “options” generally offered to a miller’s third son.

Rupert shook his head as if sensing the subtle defiance. “You know I didn’t want to say it, but legally, the bow is mine. Same as everything else in the house and the mill. All Father left you was that filthy barn cat. So, if I don’t like the way you are carrying on, I can put a stop to it.”

The rain thundered against the roof, rising with the heat of the words, and Leo hissed as if daring Rupert to come and take the bow from them.

Archie hadn’t even realized the cat was in the room, but Leo might have the right idea. Rupert might be asking for a fight. They had wrestled more than once before—with and without staffs. Archie was large enough now he might even win.

But Archie had never liked settling his disputes like that. He might be big, but that didn’t make him an ogre. He’d rather solve his conflicts with words. Poetry. Speeches from the old plays. And sometimes if he sat on the men who challenged him long enough, he could get them to listen.

But Rupert thought he was right, and in the strictest reading of the law, he might be.

All Archie had was Leo, and Archie could barely use the bow. What did it matter if Rupert found a way to take it away? It wasn't worth a fight, but it buoyed Archie up, just seeing the spirited cat continue to take his side. He could surrender this battle without losing the war.

"I understand. I'll keep helping around the house, and I can pay for the bow as well, if you would like me to."

Rupert sighed, like Archie was the one being unreasonable, but he turned away. "I'll be asking Ellie to come and eat with us soon. She'll be bringing her parents with her, and I would like you to be there as well."

The goose girl. Archie had only seen his brother pick flowers for the girl once before, but she seemed a simple girl, and perhaps that along with Rupert's full ownership of the mill was enough to secure her favor.

And just like that, Archie's days here were truly numbered.

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LEO'S TAIL swished as Archie picked him up, taking them both away from Rupert as soon as the morning porridge was done. Or as far away as any of them could get in such a small space.

Archie went to work repairing a few tattered arrows and cleaning other parts of the house, pouring the rest of the lingering tension into his tasks. Leo could appreciate the sentiment; perhaps the miller boy was right to avoid the fight, but Rupert certainly had it coming, and next time, Leo wouldn't hold back. The cat wasn't used to letting anyone dismiss or insult him. He also was never one to make commitments lightly—will or no will, Archie was *his* human now, and Leo took care of his underlings, whoever they were.

He couldn't have someone else discouraging them.

And it seemed that Rupert was a man who was just begging to be scratched.

## CHAPTER 9

# SCAREDY-CAT

The next day the rain had cleared up, but the sky still seemed gloomy and overcast. Archie made a half-hearted try with the bow but shot nothing. Not even a thick oak tree the size of a barn door.

He looked back at Leo. “Well, aren’t you going to catch something?”

The cat stared back at him, reproachfully. Like he knew Archie wasn’t really trying. Like he knew Rupert’s words were still repeating inside the boy’s head.

But Archie couldn’t help it. He couldn’t shoot a single thing on his own, and that made this whole scheme worse than even his brother had guessed. The cat could catch quail or rabbits when he was willing, but they could never take down a deer or any larger and more profitable prey that way. They could get the king’s charter and still not be able to use it. The elation Archie had felt in the princess’s presence mere days ago had crumbled, leaving him lower than he was before.

And then, like the thought had summoned her, Archie heard a familiar voice behind him. “Well, that was less than impressive.”

Archie turned to see the princess striding toward him with one of her guards in tow.

“I thought you might be out here. It’s the best spot for rabbits, and I saw the fur on your cloak,” she said with a bit of triumph in her voice. “But that bow. It wasn’t made for you, was it?” Princess Ainsley brushed back her auburn curls and

took his bow from his limp fingers, trying it out. Archie's heart leapt at even the brief brush of her hand, and when he looked back at the armored guard, his voice left him again.

She *was* the princess.

"Don't worry about him," she said, throwing the careless words behind her shoulder. "Sir Callum's just here to make sure I don't run into any bandits. And I don't think you're a bandit—or if you were, you're a poor one. You already let me take your bow." A bow you can't even shoot, the words seemed to say, but there was a teasing note there.

Archie didn't believe the princess could say anything that sounded cruel.

The middle-aged knight crossed his arms, looking stern. He likely saw himself as a surrogate uncle to his young charge, royal though she may be. "No, Princess, not a bandit, but maybe a mouse." He shook his head, almost sounding apologetic when he spoke next. "He's not like one of your courtiers, Princess. Perhaps you shouldn't play too roughly with him."

Princess Ainsley frowned, looking back at Archie with a challenge in her amber eyes. "Is he right? Am I playing too roughly for you, huntsman?"

*Talk, Archie. She wants you to talk. Open your mouth, and ...* "No, Your Highness." *There. Words!* He wasn't a mouse. Or at least he wasn't a silent one. "And the bow wasn't made for me. It was my grandfather's."

She nodded and happily went back to feeling out the bow. "Still, it's a good bow. Well-made. Was your grandfather also a huntsman?"

"I think so," Archie said, growing more daring. Once the first few words were forced out, the rest flowed more naturally. "He died the year I was born, and my father didn't like to speak of him much. They called him Archer, though I don't think that was his real name."

"And you were named for him?"

“I suppose I must have been.” He really hadn’t thought about it before. It was just a name. It didn’t have to mean anything.

Princess Ainsley smiled and tossed the bow back at him. “Then you should use it. *Properly*. I can teach you.”

Archie blinked back at her. “You?”

“Yes, me. Is anyone else offering?” She laughed and reached back for her guard, signaling him to equip her with her own bow and quiver. It was only then that Archie noticed how she was dressed. Yes, there were the usual well-fitted skirts and styled hair, but also pointed boots instead of house slippers and a leather armguard already in place.

“No, it’s just—I’m honored, Princess. I didn’t realize you liked archery.” It really didn’t fit with his old picture of the princess: elegant, refined, and perfect.

Completely untouchable.

But now that he found the picture being forcibly rearranged into something more approachable, something more *real*, he couldn’t say he minded all that much. There was still the fear it would shatter in another moment, a dream he could still be forcibly awakened from, but he would enjoy the thrill while it lasted.

Ainsley dropped her shoulders, becoming thoughtful. Perhaps even mournful. “No one knows. My mother didn’t think it was fit for a lady. *I might ruin my hands. I might run into bandits*—that kind of thing. So, I had to get my brother to teach me and swear my guards to secrecy.”

Her guard mimed sealing his own lips, agreeably. Ainsley loosed an arrow, hitting the tree that had been eluding all of Archie’s previous attempts.

“Your brother was a huntsman?” The words sounded daft the moment Archie gave them voice. Would he ever not be daft or mute when speaking to the princess? But he couldn’t give up.

Even if he *was* a mouse.

“My brother was a *prince*,” Ainsley said patiently, cuing up another shot. “But yes, he liked spending all his time with the huntsmen—like he was one of those questing princes from a storybook. Why do you think my father favors his huntsmen so much?”

That made sense. And he had already known the crown prince had died at the same age Archie was now, though it had happened years ago. It was just strange to think of the king as nothing more than a grieving father with a son who was dead.

Archie paled at the thought, glancing back at the princess. It wasn’t just the king’s son who was dead. It was also Ainsley’s brother.

Her eyes were distant as she shot at the tree, displaying all the skill Archie lacked. She still was as elegant as a painting, though perhaps one that had seen a bit more of the world—with a few sharp lines and contrasting colors. Milk-white skin and fiery hair. Beautiful but fierce.

He could spend all day just watching her, discovering all her new angles.

And even Leo, still at Archie’s feet, seemed transfixed.

She lowered the bow, answering their looks with a hard stare of her own. “I was getting good enough that I thought we might convince our parents one day—to let me go out on a real hunt. But then there was the plague. Mother died, and then ... Well, it’s hard to argue with a ghost. Going against her wishes or changing *anything* around the castle can feel like losing her all over again. You understand?”

Archie wanted to say he did. Both his parents had died, and when Ainsley had described the late queen, he felt the same ache that had come with his mother’s death, but also the lack of closure and twisted emotions he felt at the death of his father. Emotions he could never quite put into proper words despite all his forays into the finer art of poetry.

Perhaps there were no proper words at all.

“These last few years, I’ve had to shoot alone,” Ainsley said. “I’m tired of shooting alone.” Her words turned sharp, as



if to force away any of the melancholy of before. “Do you want me to show you or not?”

Archie certainly did. He wanted it more than anything else in his life.

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THE SUN HAD SUNK low behind the oak tree when Archie turned back to face the princess, pride warming his face. It wasn't a rabbit or any proper sort of game, but he had shot the tree he targeted the last three times he tried.

It couldn't escape him now.

But the princess seemed too distracted to praise him. The cat had turned traitor, wandering over to her side. Princess Ainsley stooped down to pet his fur as easily as Tabitha had. “He's sweet. Is he yours? I noticed him before, but I wasn't sure if he belonged to the matrons at the Charity House or you. And all the children there seem to love him.”

Archie shook his head. “Leo doesn't really belong to anyone.” And the cat was rarely ever “sweet.” Or maybe Leo only liked girls and small children? Archie had heard of certain animals preferring one gender over the other.

“Leo? You named him Leo?” Ainsley made a sudden breathy sound and turned away, taking back her hand. “Sorry, I think I should go.”

Archie took a step after her. Something inside him longed to hold her, to comfort her, no matter how brief of time they had conversed with each other. He couldn't help it. Ainsley's smile drew him in like honey, but even the threat of her tears left him gasping for air. Though, the guard was looking at him like he might put a stop to it if Archie pushed any further.

“Did I say something to upset you, Your Highness?”

“No.” Ainsley waved her hand behind her shoulder and forced more lightness into the words. “There are just a lot of memories here, but I think it will be good for me—for both of us. Just keep practicing with that bow. And maybe you can

read with me next time at the Charity House? That has to be a fair enough trade. If I come out here to teach you to use the bow once a week, and you give me some help with the children? Not that I mind the children. I just ...” Her words trailed off, but Archie could hear it again. She was tired of being alone.

And somehow, she had decided he was the companion she wanted. It seemed a mystical, magical thing, but he couldn't deny her.

“I'll be there.” Archie might not be able to do much, but he could at least make sure the princess didn't have to read or shoot alone again.

## CHAPTER 10

# CATFISHING

His plans were working so well now that Leo had impressed even himself. Princess Ainsley was teaching Archie how to shoot the bow, and Leo hadn't even had to try to talk to her. She understood the plan like they already shared the same mind. He might have believed the pair of them had enacted countless schemes together.

Familiar but not.

Another piece to the puzzle that was his brilliant brain.

And soon, with Leo's continued help, their game bag was full of enough hares to pay off Rupert and then take another installment of coin to the king. The elder knight looked up at them as he took in the payment and recorded the sums. "You're the boy who brought the quail."

Archie ducked his head. "Yes, sir."

"The king mentioned how much he enjoyed them."

"He ate them himself?" Archie perked up so quickly it was almost comical—enough to make a cat laugh. "And the princess? Did she mention me?"

Sir Orrick raised an eyebrow in a way that seemed both reproachful and amused. "Now why would the princess mention you?"

Archie shifted back. "No reason ... sir."

"I see." He chuckled. "You got spirit, that's for sure. I didn't mention it last time—most of the common boys get scared off just by the silver alone—but if you really want a

hunting charter, you're going to need another huntsman or knight to sign off with you. Someone to show you your way around the Darkwood and make sure you don't lose yourself to a faerie circle on your first hunt."

"Oh," Archie said, looking back at the cat. But Leo hadn't remembered that part either—it wasn't something he ever had to deal with before. He was sure they—or rather he—could make a plan for it anyway, just as long as the boy didn't start sulking again.

For now, Archie seemed curious. "So, it's just like another apprenticeship?"

The gamemaster shrugged. "Everyone starts somewhere, lad. Don't tell me you're afraid of a bit of work."

"No. I'm not." But as Archie said the words, it was clear there was something he was afraid of. Something that came from years of being forced to live far too sensibly. "So, you don't think ... Is being a huntsman like being a gambler?"

"A gambler?" Sir Orrick paused, scratching his graying mustache. "I suppose we are all gamblers in one sense or another. A farmer can't say for certain how his crops will grow. A miller doesn't always know if there will be grain. And five years back, I can't say any of us expected the plague to spring up on us the way it did. But keep being resourceful. Move with the punches, and a real man will find that there are some risks that are smarter than others—play to your strengths and improve your skills so the odds swing a little more to your favor."

"And I can improve my odds as a huntsman?"

"I don't see why not," the old knight said. "Some risks just call to a man, and you already have some of the right eyes looking your way. I imagine you'll find a sponsor soon enough. Maybe try for a bounty next time, if you're looking for something with a bit more color."

"A bounty?"

"Sure." Sir Orrick's gravel-voice cracked as he rushed his words, called in by the youthful sense of adventure. "Didn't

you know that lots of the more specialized huntsmen take bounties? If one of the forest beasts gets too close to the town, or some dark spellcaster accidentally makes his morning porridge into sentient acidic goo?”

Archie brightened at the thought. “Monster hunters. Like in the stories?”

“The stories come from somewhere, boy. And the lesser faerie beasts mill about the town more often than most people think.” The man pointed to a notice board behind them. “Strictly speaking, I can’t show you this. The larger beasts are off limits to someone like you—same as the deer. But a garden gnome or even a water imp? A clever small-game hunter like yourself could easily bag himself a few of them. Let people know you’re serious. Light, I might be tempted to sign for you myself, if only I were a few years younger.”

Archie nodded, and Leo walked around the desk to see what he could find. The old knight might not want to show Archie the notices, but he did nothing to stop the cat.

And Leo was already rearranging a few of his plans and ready to go fishing.

## CHAPTER II

# CAT-AND-MOUSE

Standing on a chair in front of the Charity House Children, the princess let out a high-pitched shriek. A few children covered their ears. The cat ran out through an open window. And Archie was impressed. In only a week, Ainsley had somehow memorized enough of Anderdolf the Dwarf to play her role without a book. And after going through all the comedic and romantic scenes showing the dwarf's anonymous correspondence with his nameless storybook princess, things had taken a slightly darker turn. A handsome and conniving man had taken credit for writing all of Anderdolf's letters and lured the princess into a trap.

Now, Anderdolf had to race to the villain's tower to rescue her, even if it meant revealing the truth of his deception. Archie came in right on cue, crawling around the room on his knees and making a show of hiding behind books and the children in the audience as he approached the princess. Yes, his over-the-top antics made the children laugh, but Archie also hoped it would show that the dwarf had learned to see past his former insecurities and use his smaller size to his advantage. Anderdolf would do anything to help the woman he had grown to love—he said so several times as he poetically narrated his way through the makeshift tower.

It was the way of plays.

But now they had a problem. By unspoken agreement, Archie had taken all the male roles in the play, and Ainsley had taken all the females. And it had worked well enough when they were merely speaking dialogue or moving around



the room, but now Archie was supposed to fight the villain. How was he supposed to fight himself?

Archie cleared his throat and looked around the room for inspiration. He couldn't disappoint the children by skipping over the fight. He couldn't disappoint the princess.

Then the answer came to him.

*"It seems one of the evil villain's spells has gone horribly wrong!"* he cried in the voice of Anderdolf, even as he deviated away from the usual script. It wasn't poetic, but it would get the job done. *"He meant to make himself stronger—to be an equal match for the princess's legendary champion—but he made a mistake. He didn't know I was a mere dwarf, so instead of making himself stronger, he has made himself shorter. He looks like a small child."* It was ridiculous, but then, it was faerie story. And Archie had made eye contact with a few boys in the crowd he knew would take any excuse to wrestle with him. *"Several small children."*

Hamish jumped in to tackle him first. Then the twins. Soon Archie had a whole swarm of "villains" on his back. He let them have their way for a moment, adding to the drama and the enjoyment of the children, before throwing them off one by one and fighting the rest of his way to the princess's side.

Ainsley had her hand over her mouth, fighting her own smile as the matrons helped to resettle all the villainous children, but she was soon in character again. The princess had to look betrayed. Heartbroken, as she tried to determine if Anderdolf was her true love or another charlatan. She wouldn't be tricked again.

Soon, Ainsley was reciting all the same lines she had the week before. *"Why have you sought to deceive me so? Did you not know that it wasn't the height of your stature that won me over but the tenderness of your soul?"*

Anderdolf answered her. He had to answer her. *"You saw me every day, Princess, and yet you never looked my way,"* he said. *"I was the one to hand you your cloak before it rained, the one to light a candle when you walked in darkness. The fool and servant of your court. I longed for you to see and*

*accept me as I was, but under the cloak of the pen I had to remain.”*

Archie bowed his head, just as before, but this time, the scene continued.

The princess stepped down from her chair/tower and came to stand across from him. Their eyes met, him still on his knees and looking upward. Her mouth formed a softer smile. *“I can see you now,”* she said, with so much sincerity Archie lost himself completely.

When he had come to the Charity House to deliver the usual flour and make the bread, he had assumed he would merely wave at the princess from the kitchen. Perhaps recite another line from Anderdolf and see her smile. Sure, Ainsley had said she was lonely and suggested they might read some more together, but after the initial excitement had worn off, he had quickly reminded himself that there were limits. Their previous meetings had been more private, and she was sure to want him to keep it that way.

He knew his place, and he could be discreet.

But that’s not what happened. The princess had dragged him out here for everyone to see. And somewhere along the way, he had given himself over to the fantasy—feeding into their audience of eager children and Ainsely herself. She was the perfect storybook princess and recited her lines with passion. The words and gestures built between them like a dance. Like a dream. Was it too much to hope that she also saw something in Archie that no one else did?

It all seemed far too surreal. Archie had forgotten what he was supposed to say next. And then he realized, there weren’t any written lines left.

Only a simple action that could change everything.

“Kiss her!” the children cried from their seats on the floor, Sophie up on her knees with her excitement. Even the “villainous” boys were starting to chime in.

They all knew what was supposed to happen at the end of any faerie story.

Archie was the only one still trailing behind.

“Kiss her!” the children shouted again.

But there still were limits, right? There had to be. Ainsley was the princess. He was a miller’s son—an insignificant mouse. How could everyone else have forgotten?

“I can’t kiss her.” He couldn’t even use the fake falsetto voice he had adopted for Anderdorf anymore. It was just too much of a lie.

“Perhaps not,” Ainsley said, but she leaned forward with a mischievous glint in her eye. Wearing the mask of Anderdorf, it had seemed Archie had somehow gotten the upper-hand in their interactions, but now—when he felt himself the miller’s son again—their roles had completely reversed. And if Archie Miller was a mouse, the princess was a cat ready to play. “But an accomplished actor such as yourself must know how such things are done in the theater.” She reached out and put her hand on his cheek like they were lovers.

Her lips moved closer, bending down to meet him, and his heart began to race.

Would she really do it? Would the guards come and chop off his head as soon as it was done? But perhaps that was exactly the kind of death Archie wanted ... Tragic. Romantic. And he couldn’t imagine wanting anything more out of life if those luscious, berry-red lips were allowed to reach his, even for a moment.

Then, Ainsley moved her thumb to cover his lips so they couldn’t quite reach her, her hand still on his cheek and providing them cover. A stage kiss.

But she was still close. *So close*. He could smell the lavender in her hair, feel the warmth of her smile. It might only be an illusion, but it was a good one.

And his face was sure to be bright red for all the children to see as Archie was still too young and fair-haired to have grown himself anything but stubble on his cheeks. *Curse it all*.

The children laughed and cheered. Ainsley pulled on his hand, motioning him to get off his knees and regain his former

height—at least a head taller than the perfectly pint-sized princess who still had him completely cowed. He bowed his head while she curtsyed for the crowd.

And when the sound started to die down, he still didn't know what to do with himself.

Ainsley was still holding his hand.

“I ... I should go and make the bread,” he said, looking for a dignified way to make his escape.

She only gripped his hand tighter. “Yes. Let's go.”

Archie blinked. “Do you know how to make bread?”

“No, but I thought you might show me. I *am* showing you how to hunt.”

Archie winced, but even that movement seemed a game as he couldn't stop smiling. “Not so loud, Princess. Some of these children still respect me.”

She laughed. “Then you best take me to the kitchen before anything else slips out.”

*All right, then.* It seemed the princess's enthusiasm was infectious. Noble and nimble, playful and fierce—Princess Ainsley *was* a cat, and Archie was a mouse desperate to be caught.

He kept ahold of her hand, leading her back to the kitchen and opening the door. One of the black and silver guards followed, but he seemed content to sneak some sugar from the bowl and pretend to be a part of the furniture.

Archie was starting to ignore them too.

He found an apron for Ainsley's dress, but even when he tried to keep some decorum with his instructions, the girl would not cooperate. Prattling on about her favorites of the older faerie stories, she dug into the dough eagerly and was especially enthusiastic with the eggs. Archie tried to keep track of all her words, but just watching her seemed enough to overload his senses.

Soon she had a dusting of flour on her cheeks, and Archie couldn't look away.

He wanted to touch her face like she had touched his, but he didn't quite dare.

"Well, what do we do now?" she asked, drawing him from the spell. The dough had already been kneaded into a sticky ball. How had it all happened so quickly?

"Now? Oh, well, nothing. It has to rise, so I usually just leave it for the matrons to take care of later." He quickly busied himself cleaning up the scattered ingredients and doing other small tasks he usually did when he was here. He wasn't entirely sure what game the princess was playing, but he had to get a hold of himself.

"This is fun!" Ainsley said, untying her apron and dusting away the flour on her own. "I wish I could ask you to do it again next week, but I can't. Father wants me to tour the kingdom with him. He does it every year to get some time with his lords—now that the roads have cleared up and before the Spring Festival. It might take us a full month to return. But you will still come and make sure the children get their bread, even if I'm not here?"

"I always do," Archie said, almost offended. Yes, the princess being here was a pleasant bonus, the blessing of a lifetime, but it wasn't the only reason he came. There was also Sophie and Hamish and the twins who were always breaking something ... All of them.

Ainsley smiled. "Always," she agreed, like breathing a vow straight from Anderdolf. "And then we'll have the festival." She hung up the apron, but when she turned back around, her face had slightly fallen. "Or we *should* have the festival. I've been asking and asking my father to open up the castle for everyone, like we did before."

She meant before the plague. It had so many strong feelings attached that people didn't always like to use the word, but everyone knew what "before" meant.

However, it seemed the princess couldn't frown for long. "Maybe I can convince him while we are on our tour. And then we can do Anderdolf the Dwarf on a real stage. Everyone would love it!"

Archie gaped. "You want to do Anderdolf at the Spring Festival? Where *everyone* can see?"

"Of course. Everyone performs for the festival, and I'm sure we can convince the children to come up and tackle you again."

That was not the point. "But you're ... and I—"

"You're my Anderdolf," Ainsley said, in the no-nonsense tone of someone declaring it was sunny outside. "Why would I wish to hide you away?"

Archie had no answer for that. He had just assumed she would want whatever connection she had with him to be private, but maybe that was only because he had no idea how to have any sort of relationship with a princess, let alone a public one.

She still knew he was just a miller's son, didn't she?

She reached for his hand, giving it another squeeze. "I'll convince him. Just keep practicing."

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WITH THE PRINCESS'S words in his head like a royal decree, Archie practiced Anderdolf. Archery. Anything to have Ainsley smile at him like that again, the moment she returned. He kept sending coin and rabbits to the castle, inching his way closer to earning his charter—Leo still caught far more than Archie did, but Archie was slowly learning and doing more.

But after a few weeks, Archie started up the hill toward their normal hunting spot, and the cat turned in front of him. Archie tripped over Leo's back and fell into the dirt.

Archie scowled up at the ornery feline. "Let me guess. I'm not going the right way."

Leo looked heavenward like the answer should have been obvious.

Archie scrambled back to his feet. Between the cat and the princess, he could barely keep up, but he was finding fewer reasons to complain. “Well, all right. I’m coming. But you didn’t have to trip me just to get me to turn around. Maybe just point your tail or something?”

The irate tabby flicked his tail in an overexaggerated way like he was trying to flag down a galloping horse. Could a cat use sarcasm? Leo definitely did.

*Oh well.* The truth was, Archie wasn’t sure if he would have noticed a simple tail wag, even if the cat cared to implement it. Enough of their movements had become routine that some of his old daydreams were back—though now all of them centered on a certain fiery princess who would be due home in another week. And even if he had fallen on his face a few times, he was certain he was the happiest he had ever been.

Archie continued to follow the cat until they came to the home of an older plague widow. She was out in her garden pulling weeds, and Archie had no idea what he was supposed to say to her. “Hello. I’m—”

The woman gave his fur-lined boots and cloak a quick once-over before dismissing him with her eyes. “You’re a huntsman. You’re here about the gnome in the cellar.”

A gnome in the cellar?

Oh. The bounties. *Of course.* Archie tried to straighten his stance and look extra competent. Things always went better when he could wear some sort of mask; this woman didn’t seem to know he was a miller’s son, and here at least, he could play a different role instead. He was a huntsman—or at least, he would be soon. He had trained for this. And, if nothing else, he had a magic cat. “Yes, ma’am. I’m here about the gnome.”

The woman spat on the ground. “Bad enough when it was just after my radishes. Now it’s in there crashing around and

cutting through all my good herbs. I'll give you half a silver crown for its corpse."

Half a silver? Archie rarely made that in a day—no matter how much Leo caught. He tried not to look too excited. *All in a day's work*. He was a huntsman. "And it's in the cellar?"

The woman nodded and pointed him the rest of the way. "I hear it in there chittering away in its foreign devil tongue."

Archie stepped in front of the cat, pulling open the wide cellar doors. At least he and his muscles were useful for something. Both he and the cat descended into the black, the only light coming from the open door above them. Archie could barely see a thing. But cats had night vision, right? "All right, Leo. How do we catch a gnome?"

Leo pawed at the empty wheat sack Archie had tied to his belt, the one he had been expecting to fill with rabbits or quail or other small game.

Now it seemed it would hold a gnome instead.

"Right. I'll just stand here and hold it open for you then? And you'll chase the gnome out?"

Leo didn't answer him, but when the cat slinked forward—only the white patches of his back paws showing up in the dark—Archie figured he had gotten the plan right.

If nothing else, he had gotten rather good at reading the silent cat.

Archie stood in the dark for several moments. He shifted his feet. Then there was a *yowl*, some angry chittering, and a flurry of movement. An ugly, bearded man with a bald head shaped like an angry potato came running to hide behind Archie's boots.

"Oy! Giant! Out of the way! It's every gnome for itself!"

Archie started, nearly dropping the sack. "You can speak?"

"Of course I can. All our chief-gathers can. And those fae-cursed beasts are after me! I'll never touch a radish again if you can get rid of those monsters."



*Multiple monsters?* Archie could understand why a gnome might call him a “giant” and Leo a “monster,” but there was only one cat. What other monster was down here lurking in the darkness?

Archie fumbled to get the sack open again, trying to keep his arms from shaking. This was not how things were supposed to go. The gnome wasn’t supposed to be able to speak—at least not in words Archie could understand. There wasn’t supposed to be anything else in the cellar.

But the next time *something* came streaking toward his boots, the gnome screamed, and Archie was ready for it.

Something thumped into his sack.

Something small but strong and desperate to get out. What if it ripped open the sack?

Archie quickly fell on top of the sack, hearing a slight crunch underneath his chest.

Another thing Archie was good at—falling like a boulder and weighing half a ton.

“That’s right! Squish him with your giant rump!” the gnome yelled, but he stayed behind Archie as Leo skidded to a stop right in front of them, his head cocked.

“Well?” the gnome pressed, pointing at Leo accusingly. “Aren’t you going to squish that one too? It’s full of dark and twisted magic, I swear.”

“No.” Archie straightened up, trying to regather himself. He already had one unknown creature in his sack, and that was more than enough for him. Just because he could squish creatures smaller than himself, didn’t mean he wanted to. He wasn’t an ogre. “That ‘monster’ is on my side.” Or at least, Archie sincerely hoped Leo was on his side, even if he was going a little off-script. “But I won’t send him after you if you make a bargain with me.”

The gnome frowned. “What kind of bargain?”

“No more stealing radishes. Leave the cellar and never come back.”

“That’s it?”

Archie tried to look firm. He was a huntsman. A *giant* huntsman. And that was all the gnome had to know. “That’s it.”

The gnome waved both his hands in an eager dismissal. “Fine. The radishes here aren’t worth all the blighted trouble. And I like you, giant. Come to the forest if you want to bargain with me again.” And just like that, the gnome scurried into the shadows.

That would have to be enough.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Archie said to Leo, no longer feeling like a proper huntsman. “I know we were supposed to kill him, but he could *talk*, and I ... Do you think it’s dead?” Not being able to contain his curiosity for even a second longer, Archie cinched up the sack and peered inside.

A smell like rotten apples reached his nose, and even in the poor light, he could mark its enlarged and rancid fangs, dripping with a deadly lime-green venom he knew too well.

He dropped the sack.

The gnome was right. It *was* a monster—a deadly one at that.

A plague rat.

## CHAPTER 12

# TO SKIN A CAT

Archie held out the sack while the castle gamemaster looked inside, confirming their catch. “You found this in a cellar hunting gnomes?” Sir Orrick asked.

“Yes. It is a plague rat, isn’t it?” The very words made Archie want to shudder.

They were only five years out from the start of the plague, four from when it reached its peak, and three from when it finally seemed to wane. And there had been so much fear. It seemed like people were being struck down with shakes and fevers out of nowhere. The victims sweated and vomited out buckets of water, which left their corpses wrung out and withered like a husk. His mother had hardly been recognizable when her time came.

Then, slowly—much too slowly—the bites were discovered.

The rats were killed.

But not until after Archie’s mother and so many other precious souls had already been lost. The yellow-eyed and rancid-fanged rodents had fueled the worst of his nightmares.

It couldn’t be happening again.

Sir Orrick closed the sack. His expression settled into a controlled and thoughtful frown. “Yes ... but the thing about rats is that they’re never really gone. They breed too fast and can hide themselves too well. It used to be the corpses of infected men and beasts would pile up higher than the snow in winter, but at least now we know to kill these sorts of rats on

sight, and more people have become immune to their special kind of poison. We still get an outbreak here or there, but not enough to trouble the general populous with. Not enough to raise a panic, you understand? We'll certainly send some more men to check that cellar over, but a single rat is not a plague."

He might be right. It wasn't like Archie wanted to believe that the rats were back in earnest. "I'll bring you the corpse of any other rat I see, but I won't tell anyone."

"Good lad." The gamemaster pulled out another form and added another broad stroke in gratitude. Archie hadn't been able to collect a bounty from the widow without the gnome's corpse, but the crown wasn't nearly so particular. "And would you look at that? You earned yourself another half a crown. Another bounty like this, and you'll have your charter in no time."

His charter? Could he really get it done before Ainsley got home? Sure, it might not be the same as fighting through a tower of villains to earn her favor, but perhaps it would be enough for now. More than he ever hoped to wish for. And just like that, Archie had forgotten about the rats and was dreaming about his princess again.

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AS LEO FOLLOWED the boy out of the gamemaster's office, his tail twitched like it had a mind of its own. He didn't care what the doddering, old gamemaster thought. *Leo* was the master hunter here. He caught quail, rabbits, and even the vast majority of the original plague rats—stacking the corpses next to the castle gates so they could be burned in the royal furnace. So *Leo's* opinion was the only one that should matter.

*"Kill the rats. Kill them until you discover the root of your kingdom's curse."* The voice was in his head again, and there wasn't any more time.

The urgency of that thought was unmistakable; it had to have something to do with the unknown danger from when *before* became *now*. That meant slowly letting the boy collect

his coin and gain more royal favor (along with a few more of Leo's elusive memories) drop by drop wasn't enough anymore. They needed something that would open a proper flood.

And if years of catching rats and foiling the aims of creatures larger than himself had taught Leo anything, it was that there was always more than one way to get things done. He had been playing nice with Archie—just as any noble master should provide for his pets and loyal subjects—but the truth was, he didn't need the boy to like him to get them both inside the castle.

He just needed another plan.

The princess and her father would be back in another week, and the time for bolder action had come.

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THE NEXT WEEK, the cat came to their usual hunting spot with a Cheshire smile, and Archie was ready for him—or at least as ready as he ever could be. “What is it, Leo? Do you have another scheme for me today?”

The cat waved his tail and looked back at him in a way that could only be in the affirmative.

Archie nodded and put down the bow. “All right, what do you want me to do?”

It took another moment for Archie to follow Leo back to the river, downstream from the mill and closer to the road that went through the Darkwood.

Far longer for him to understand what the cat wanted him to do.

“You want me to go into the river?” But Archie had learned not to argue with the cat, and it wasn't like anyone else was here to see him. Maybe they would find a water imp and bring in another bounty? Then he might have his charter at last, and he could show it to the princess when she returned. “Fine.”

Archie pulled off his cloak and stripped down to his shorts, ready to wade in. Was catching imps like catching frogs? It was really the only reference he had. The water was now up to his waist—cool with the change of seasons, but not unbearably so. He could swim here for a while if that's what the cat wanted. But how was he supposed to find a water imp? "Leo?"

No answer. Not even an encouraging "meow."

He tried again. "Leo?"

Archie turned and scanned the bank with some annoyance. Where were his clothes?

And where was that cat?

The next thing he heard was hoofbeats, and he had a sudden sinking in his chest.

He was going to skin that cat alive.

## CHAPTER 13



# CAT BANDIT

Leo's plans were always brilliant, but he had a few serious misgivings about this one. He might have been able to throw Archie's old tunic and breeches into the stream with only a passing pang when it came to soiling the local water supply, but he couldn't ruin anything Tabitha had made. That would be a crime against the highest gods Leo knew to worship—the gods of hunting, fashion, and good sense. But the boots were more than half the cat's size and awkward to drag across the dirt using only his mouth. Not to mention undignified.

*The things one must do for fashion ...*

After hiding Archie's clothes under a bush, Leo ran out into the road to meet the royal carriage. The king and his daughter were scheduled to return from their tour today, and he couldn't afford to miss it. And really, he *couldn't* miss it. No one could. Not with the number of guards and servants surrounding the carriage as part of the royal's black and silver entourage.

Leo planted himself in the middle of the road in front of them, and the purebred horses were pulled to a reluctant halt.

"Shoo, beast," the carriage driver tried. "Shoo."

"Why have we stopped?" a female voice asked, the princess sticking her head from the carriage.

"Don't trouble yourself, Your Highness. It's just a cat."

Leo smiled to himself, as he already knew what the girl would do next. It seemed the more time he spent around the

princess, the more certain he became.

She was a girl after his own heart.

“That’s Archie’s cat.” Ainsley sprung out of the carriage before any of her guards could stop her. “I think he wants us to follow him.”

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ARCHIE HAD STARTED to panic when the cat reappeared. Being stranded while half-naked did that to a person, even if he couldn’t see any present danger. “There you are. Where did you take my clothes?”

“*Meow!*” the cat said brightly, and then Archie realized what would happen next.

“The princess is back? But I’m naked!” Or at least he was only wearing his shorts. That was bad enough. He took a step back, ready to dive under the water completely.

But the cat’s trap had already been sprung, and in another moment, he heard her voice. “Archie? Are you here? Are you all right?”

“Um ... yes.” No point in hiding now. “I just can’t seem to ... Well, my clothes were right here.” He gestured to the bank uselessly.

Ainsley nodded, though her eyes were on his chest. She didn’t seem to mind he was built like a bull and couldn’t keep himself entirely hidden. In fact, if she weren’t the princess and therefore the pinnacle of womanly virtue, Archie might have thought her rather pleased. A guard caught up before the princess turned her eyes demurely to the ground.

How dead would Archie be before this was over?

“You were robbed?” she asked, her cheeks aflame but her voice full of concern.

“Yes. I guess I was robbed.” By a cat. He should have followed Harris’s advice and turned the wretched animal into a fur muff that first night.

“Don’t move,” she said. “My father is coming, and we can help!”

*The king.* Now he was going to meet the *king*.

His knees went weak with the urge to bow, and Archie slipped under the water again.

“Archie?” Ainsley cried with concern, but her guard was the one to fish him out, tossing him to land like a beached selkie—soaked and half-naked at his sovereign’s feet.

*Perfect.*

## CHAPTER 14

# WHAT THE CAT DRAGGED IN

Archie had hoped that if he ever met King Randolph face to face, he would have a chance to be more dignified. Perhaps even competent—if he was still allowed a few daydreams. Instead, he was dripping wet and holding the king’s robe around his waist as he sat across from the king and the princess in their upholstered carriage.

He bowed his head, feeling sheepish. “Thank you again, sire.”

The king was stone-faced behind his short beard. He was a thin but well-muscled man descending into his middle years. The sort of man who could look royal without wearing jewels or a crown. He could look royal in a potato sack. And even with a host of guards, he carried his own sword on his back. “You were robbed on the road?”

“Yes.” What else did the king expect him to say? And perhaps more importantly, what did the cat expect him to say? Leo had to have some plan, but Archie had no idea what it was. All the self-important feline had done was jump inside the carriage like he owned the place, sat down on the princess’s lap, and started to purr.

Ainsley was smitten.

But the king was not so easily impressed. In fact, something about Archie’s apparent incompetence seemed to offend him greatly. “And you want to be a huntsman? Why haven’t you found someone to teach you swordplay? Bows are

useless in close quarters, and not every beast you hope to slay will stay at a distance.”

Archie opened his mouth, then closed it again. This wasn't the sort of reprimand he expected to get from a king. More like an exasperated father. And since Archie had exasperated his own father more than once, he knew anything he said would only make it worse.

The king wouldn't want to be told that no one in Umbrae or in any of the other Borderland Kingdoms would bother to teach a miller's son swordplay.

He wouldn't care that Archie knew how to handle a staff.

And the fact that there were no actual bandits involved didn't seem to make a difference. The unyielding silence continued until the princess broke in with an exaggerated sigh.

“Honestly, Father. Not everyone feels the need to swing a sword around.”

“They should. Or they end up in tricky situations like this,” the king swatted back, gesturing toward Archie with a wide wave of his hand. “And we can't have bandits roaming around so close to the town—not when my daughter has her heart set on opening the castle for the festival.”

The princess didn't give ground for a second. “Then I suppose it is a good thing you already have at least two-dozen men at the castle eager for the first spring hunt. Assemble them at dawn. Defending your lands from bandits should not fall to one huntsman alone, no matter how talented he might be.” Ainsley flashed Archie a smile that stole his focus.

It stole her father's focus too.

“Indeed,” the king said slowly, almost absently. His flapping arms had stilled, landing near his sword belt, and his hazel eyes narrowed in on Archie—boring into his soul. “Though, it is rare that my daughter should become acquainted with the skills of a new huntsman before me. Rare that she would raise such a passionate defense. It is an irregularity I cannot allow to stand for much longer.”

Archie had no words. That was it then. The princess had tried to defend him, but now that the king knew of her preference, Archie was going to be stabbed by the king's sword.

And, under the king's robe, Archie was still only in his shorts.

Archie's life might not be much of a faerie story, but someone might still write a song about this particular misadventure. A cautionary tale. The lyrics wouldn't be flattering, but why should he care? He wouldn't be alive to hear it.

He couldn't wear the mask of a competent huntsman or even Anderdolf the Dwarf like this.

The king's hands stayed by his sword, but he smiled. A challenge and an invitation. "So, huntsman, what do you say? Join my two-dozen men at first light, help us search for these bandits, and maybe we can find someone who can teach you to spar."

Still expecting a blow to his chest, a few words were startled out of Archie like a cough. "You're ... you're going to teach me to spar?" And the princess had taught him the bow.

Apparently, such fancies ran in the royal family.

The king laughed. "I did not say I would personally teach you, but why not? I have taken a turn with most of the men in my service, and I can appreciate a man with guts."

*A man with guts.* Archie's guts were in knots. He looked back at the still-dozing cat, wondering what Leo had gotten them into.

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"WHAT IS THIS, Ainsley? Some sort of youthful rebellion?" the king asked the moment they had reached the castle stable grounds and pawned the miller boy off on some passing servants. But Leo was still in the princess's arms and heard the whole exchange. "Here, on the eve of your first spring as a

fully grown woman, I take you on a tour to review all the eligible and noble men of our court, and I even ask for your opinion, only for you to reveal that you already have your eyes set on some half-dressed peasant boy?”

Ainsley promptly raised her chin, matching the clip of the king’s tone like they were performing some sort of dance or a friendly game with a feathered ball ping-pong back and forth. “Honestly, Father. You make it sound like I brought home a tavern rat.”

“No, I think you brought home a flinching rabbit,” the king volleyed back. “You should know better, Ainsley. Your brother has passed, and you will need a proper champion to help secure your claim to the throne.”

“Archie *is* a huntsman, from a line of noble huntsmen. You sampled some of his catches already—the quail. The rabbits. He will look perfectly respectable when you see him next.”

“After you have a chance to dress him up, you mean?”

“You think the men you showed me were not dressed up to show themselves at their best advantage? I can assure you there were no true princes amongst them.”

The king grimaced. “I should hope not. I will not hand my kingdom to a foreign prince. Not while there is still a drop of strength in our own blood.”

“Then we are agreed.” She bowed her head in a mocking sort of curtsy that could only mean one thing. The flying ball of their conversation had landed, earning her a major point. “I will only accept the suit of a noble-hearted champion from within the walls of our own kingdom.”

And Leo hated being held. He hated it more when people started making awkward movements that left his feet hanging and his torso scrunched. Every instinct told him to sound his displeasure and dart away.

But he hung on anyway.

Out in the streets, it seemed he was in a foreign land where it was easy to remain unattached and keep his distance from most humans. Everything was too big. Too loud. Crude and



even smelly. However, hearing the girl verbally spar with her father was different. Someone was finally speaking his own language, even if it wasn't directed at him.

He was on the castle grounds, and a part of him instantly felt like he had come home.

He could hang on a little more for that.

“And now I must go and see to our guest, lest the staff spread rumors of us acting uncharitably,” the princess said with an air of gracious authority.

The king tsked his tongue, but there was some admiration there. Pride. “You have your mother's tongue and the bold pride of any prince. I should warn this upstart away from you, but I might be persuaded to pity him instead.”

Ainsley smiled, but her voice became softer. “Take him on your hunt, Father. Give him the chance to prove himself. What you already offered is all I truly ask of you.”

The king stood silent for another moment, then he nodded his head. “So be it. Go, and on the morrow, I shall see this boy dressed up as you desire.”

Game. Set. Match.

## CHAPTER 15

# CURIOSITY KILLED THE CAT

Archie was in one of the upstairs rooms of the castle where some “proper” clothes were found for him. And by proper, they meant “fancy” and “undersized.” Both the woolen tunic and linen undershirt were far nicer than anything Archie had ever worn but a bit tight on his shoulders. So Ainsley barged in to make him stand while one of her ladies fixed the seams. And even though he was entirely covered, it still felt rather intimate. Certainly improper. “Princess, are you supposed to be in here? Where is your guard?”

Ainsley laughed. “I don’t need my guard to follow me around inside the castle, silly. What bandits do you think would find me in here? Now let me see.”

Archie wasn’t sure what she wanted to see, but he knew he wouldn’t be able to stop her.

And now that he had made his token protest, as he thought he must, he really didn’t want to stop her. He might never tire of watching Ainsley get her own way. She moved around with all the confidence and grace he had always imagined a princess should have.

Like watching a faerie dance.

“There,” she said, still holding Leo against one shoulder and looking at Archie with triumph. “Now you’ll look like one of the noble huntsmen when you go out with the men tomorrow. Father should approve.”

Archie frowned, something about the words stopping him short. What exactly had Ainsley told the king about him? “We’re lying to your father?”

“Not lying. Just dressing up the truth a bit.” She ran one of her hands over his collar and chest as if checking to see if everything fit. Archie’s heart raced, and he tried to think of anything else. Something less ... enticing. Harris’s flea-bitten donkey. The mill churning out flour. *Anything*. “You’re a huntsman; your grandfather was a huntsman, so it’s likely he had *some* ties to a noble family who could find him a sponsor and afford the charter. If we had more information and more time, we might even discover which one. And if my father sees you dressed as a noble, behaving as one, well ... I don’t see why there should be any harm in that.”

He sputtered. “But I don’t know how to behave as a noble.”

“Then it’s a good thing I’m here to teach you.” She winked at him impishly. “Nothing wrong with that. And when you go out with the men tomorrow to find the bandits, you’ll have your bow ... You have been practicing, haven’t you?”

“Yes, but Leo still catches most of it.”

Ainsley took back her hand and stared down at the animal still resting on her shoulder. “Your cat?”

“He likes catching rabbits, but I did hit a few of them this morning.” No, Archie hadn’t meant to let that slip, but here he was. Playing a part on stage was one thing, when everyone was in on the gag, but long-term, he couldn’t maintain any sort of lie.

The princess had put her hands on him, and he completely lost his mind.

But it didn’t sound nearly as ridiculous as he feared now that he was finally saying it out loud. Normal cats could catch rabbits, even if few did it with the zeal and frequency Leo did. And many wouldn’t fault Archie for counting Leo’s prowess as his own. Noble huntsmen used trained hounds, hawks, and horses without a hint of shame. They saw it as another arrow

in their quivers, the same as any other tool. That's how most men viewed their pets, though Archie knew that wasn't how Leo viewed himself.

They were a team, and if anything, the cat might still be on top. Leo had just tricked him into appearing half-naked before royalty, bearing all his truth while the princess dressed him up like a life-sized doll or another charity case. And that might be all Archie was. A stray animal Ainsley had decided she wanted to fuss over—like Tabitha and her cats.

Now that was an uncomfortable thought. At least his heart wasn't racing anymore.

He shook his head. "I just haven't shot a deer yet—haven't even tried. I'm still a few coins away from paying off my charter, and I need a sponsor." And Archie didn't know any other huntsmen. He certainly didn't know any knights, but something about the structure gave the profession a bit more legitimacy. Some talent he might have been proud to earn and eventually call his own.

After all, Archie had always been happy to work so long as it served some higher purpose.

The princess smiled and handed him back the cat—though the cat soon jumped to the carpet because Leo would never let Archie hold him for long. *Stubborn beast.*

"That gives me an even better idea. Just be here in the morning, Anderdolf." Ainsley touched her thumb to his lips before leaving—an imitation of their almost-kiss.

And just like that, his heart leapt free of its flimsy tether. No other thoughts could hold it down. And if she was any other girl, he might have thought or even *hoped* she was asking him to cross another boundary and kiss her for real.

But Archie left the castle without another word. And as he walked home, the fancy, undersized boots he had been given started to pinch—worse than any of his old hand-me-downs. He already had one uncomfortable thought regarding the princess, and soon he had another. He liked Ainsley. *Of course*

he did. The princess of his dreams was sweeter, brighter, and far livelier than he could have ever guessed.

And Leo had given him more than Archie could have even thought to ask for himself.

But it was like asking for a few drops of rain and getting a tidal wave. Ainsley was the princess, and now it seemed as though he was becoming more and more in her debt. Not like a proper courtship should be. So, if he ever didn't like something she did or asked him to do—even something small—would he ever be able to summon the right words to tell her so?

Would she listen? Or would he always be a small and self-destructive mouse in the paws of a playful and high-minded cat?

She was a princess. And he was a miller's son. Perhaps that was too big of a gulf to ever truly cross, no matter how many fine tunics and toe-pinching shoes he chose to wear. And he was halfway back to his house before he realized Leo was no longer with him.

What was that cat up to now?

He was a little afraid to find out.

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LEO WAS BRILLIANT, and thanks to their abrupt entrance into the castle, he had finally been set free.

His triumphant and vaguely brown-and-white blur streaked across the tile in the great hall, only to skid to a sudden stop in front of a familiar portrait. There was the king. The late queen. And Ainsley posed beside them at the awkward age of thirteen. But another person standing next to them had captured Leo's attention. He knew that chestnut shade of brown hair, the hazel eyes he had inherited from his father, and even the pointed and haughty chin.

Painted the same year as his disappearance, that boy was nearly seventeen, carried a bow, and thought he was a man. An

adventurer. A well-dressed and highly fashionable huntsman.

But above all else, he was the Crown Prince Leopold.

Several more memories flooded him in a rush. The scattered drops and pieces bound themselves together with so much force it almost seemed a physical blow. A dark forest, emerald eyes, and then the voice. “*Kill the rats my little hunter, my little prince.*”

There wasn’t any escape. Leo stayed by the portrait for so long a young footman tripped over him, and the cat soon found himself thrown out into the streets, but it didn’t matter.

He already knew far more than he did before.

He walked the streets of Castletown in a daze, as he often did whenever he needed to clear his head. After making sure his normal haunts were clear of rats—plagued or otherwise—he found himself at Tabitha’s shop again. She was speaking with the shop-owner.

“Make sure you sweep up the cat hair and blow out the lanterns before you turn in,” the elder woman said in a husky no-nonsense voice. “We want this place tidy enough to draw our customers in.”

Tabitha mutely ducked her head, hand on her heart. And when the woman left, Tabitha was still fidgeting and pulling at her long hair. Leo hoped she wouldn’t start to pull it out—not again.

But she smiled when she saw Leo.

She always smiled when she saw Leo.

“Don’t worry. She just fusses. It’s nothing like before. I just ...” She shook herself, like shaking off something unpleasant. Something that made Leo want to growl and hiss and swallow a certain *person* whole. A woman from Tabitha’s past who was no better than any plague rat.

But Leo wasn’t a lion or any sort of monster-slayer. Not really. Not anymore. And all he could do was *mew* and rub against the girl’s ankles until she was back with him again.

“You will stay with me tonight?” she asked, as soft as a child’s plea, and Leo knew he had been away for far too long. Perhaps he would never leave again, now that his wanderings had reached their natural end and he had discovered the mystery at the end of a very long tunnel.

Leo might not be a lion or any sort of monster-slayer, but he wasn’t a normal cat.

And he couldn’t escape the growing terror that lived inside his mind as much as out.

He let Tabitha hold and even hug him, because he always let Tabitha hug him, but this was the first time he saw the truth of it—that he needed her as much as she did him.

That they were both broken together.

Leo was the Crown Prince Leopold, and everyone thought he was dead.



## CHAPTER 16

# COPYCAT

Archie was up before dawn the next day, and when he left the mill for the castle in his new clothes, he ran into Rupert. His brother frowned, but all he said was, “Ellie and her parents are coming to eat with us tomorrow night before the festival. Will you be there?”

And all Archie could do was nod.

His new boots might pinch, he might be fighting for breath in a flood, but his life with the princess was still better than anything he had without her. There was only one solution. He went into town and stopped at the outer-row dress shop, searching for the support of a certain brown tabby-cat. Sure enough, Leo was there with Tabitha, and with her encouragement, the cat followed after Archie again. “Goodbye, boys! Have fun on your next adventure!” Tabitha waved with the air of a doting mother sending her young children off to play. The girl was perhaps a bit mad, but Archie was starting to see why the cat should favor her as much as a sunrise.

After a bit of wheedling, Leo showed Archie where he had stashed his fur-lined boots and cloak—because as much as the cat seemed to think it was necessary to forcefully remove Archie from the rest of his peasant attire, it was becoming clear that Leo would never allow for anything made by Tabitha to be ruined. And when they finally made it the rest of the way back to the castle, all the stewards and guards who used to push them off into unassuming side-rooms now ushered them directly to the courtyard and the royal stables.

The familiar smell of hay and manure almost put Archie at ease, though it was countered with more perfume and polished silver. Ainsley was waiting for them with her main guard, gesturing him toward one of the purebred mares. “Over here, Anderdolf. Can you ride?”

Archie could ride Harris’s piebald donkey.

He could ride a plow horse.

This dark beauty wasn’t a plow horse. She had far more spirit in her eyes and power in her hooves.

It didn’t matter. Archie still wanted to ride her. He reached out his hand to pat the horse’s velvety nose when he heard a familiar *meow*. More like a *yowl*. Leo had gotten into a dispute with one of the hounds assembled for the hunt.

Would that be a problem?

Archie looked back at the princess. “Do you think the horse will mind if Leo gets on too? I don’t want the dogs to get at him, and I haven’t hunted much without him. He’s ... good luck.”

Ainsley smiled indulgently, but then the king’s voice boomed over the stable yard. “Ainsley, what are you doing here?”

That’s when Archie noticed Ainsley was also wearing her bow and a wider riding skirt.

She turned to her father and brightened her smile. “Well, I have to be here, don’t I? Sir Callum signed on as Archie’s sponsor last night, so I have to come so he can see to us both.”

What?

The king turned to frown at Ainsley’s guard. “You signed?”

Sir Callum nodded, though he looked a little embarrassed. At least Archie wasn’t the only one who had trouble keeping up with the energetic princess. “I’ve been impressed with the boy’s commitment to the trade, sire, and your daughter can be very persuasive.”

“I can shoot,” Ainsley insisted. “And I can help keep Archie from stepping into a faerie circle. You know I can.”

The guard started in again, his voice a little lower. “Her Highness has been wanting to join one of these hunting parties for a long time, sire. Send her away, and she’ll find a way to do it behind your back.”

Archie expected the king to refuse at once, but he didn’t. He just looked ... sad.

And then Ainsley seemed to understand something Archie didn’t. She ran up and hugged the king with the force of a tide. “I’m so sorry, Father, but you know this isn’t like Leo. You’ll be with me the whole time. I promise.”

It wasn’t like Leo? Archie turned to find the cat had already rebuffed the hounds and sat perched on the horse’s saddle like he had been born to ride. Everything seemed to be happening too fast again, and Ainsley was smiling even before the king started to pull away.

“All right, get on the horses,” he said, facing a small crowd of guards, knights, and noble huntsmen. “All of you.”

And that was it. Ainsley winked back at Archie before finding her own mount, and he quickly smiled for her. Though really, he wished she would have told him what her plans were before all this. Following blindly after Leo was one thing, but Ainsley could have spoken to him if she chose to. Not that Archie really thought he could have refused her, but he was starting to *wish* he could. Accepting so much help from the princess made him feel a little slimy.

The fact that he liked her only made it worse.

He could have finished paying for his charter his own way. He might have even found his own sponsor. And for once, he wished Ainsley was a goose girl, someone he could pick flowers for, take a walk by the river with, and not feel so unbalanced and ... small.

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LEO WASN'T sure why he kept following after Archie. The boy had already served his purpose. And no one could deny that Leo had fulfilled his side of the bargain—perhaps even to Leo's own detriment. Now that the cat knew he was Crown Prince Leopold, he wasn't entirely certain he wanted a lowborn miller boy pawing after his sister.

If Archie married her, he might even take the crown that should have been Leo's.

His own creation could lead to his ruin.

But that was just it. Leo had pointed Archie toward Ainsley. He had pushed the boy toward archery, better fashion, and now even the king. Leo hadn't known at the time that he was trying to piece together his memories by recreating another twisted, counterfeit version of himself, but he still had done it and only had himself to blame.

Well, not *only*. Leo still had one more piece missing, the part where he became a cat. Leopold was a prince. He was a hunter. But he didn't have any sort of magic. He couldn't have transformed himself into a cat, so how had it happened?

He tried to think, but he still came up blank. It was still a dark and terrible thing he had wanted to tell the villagers. Something that could still be lurking out there somewhere, encroaching on his peace like the surrounding thorn trees of the Darkwood.

And until Leo figured out what that was, riding on this horse with his family and his pet human seemed like the only place he should be.

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THE KING ASKED Archie which way he thought the bandits of yesterday might have gone. He, noncommittally, pointed in the eastern direction indicated by a twitch of Leo's ears. But, of course, there were no bandits. So they went down the road for nearly half a day, until they reached the gates of the next town. Carabus. The king called out his greeting to the men on watch.

“We are on the search for some bandits coming from Castletown. Have you seen anything suspicious?”

“No, sire,” a bearded man holding a spear answered. “Nothing like that.”

The king did not look convinced. “I do not suppose you would open the gates and let us in to see for ourselves?”

“We would, but there has been another run of sickness. We wouldn’t risk your health.”

The king frowned. Apparently not everyone had trouble saying no to royalty. “Another one? How is it that every part of my kingdom has rid themselves of the plague except for here?”

The man ducked his head. “You don’t have to tell us of our misfortunes. But if you could send us more aid ...”

“You want my aid but not my troops? Not myself?”

“We wouldn’t risk it, sire.”

The king glanced back at the hunting party and then shook his head. “It is the Spring Festival the day after tomorrow. We will put up a collection during the feast and send you word.”

The guard agreed, and the two men exchanged a quick farewell. The party started to move again, and Archie found the king riding beside him. “Well, Archie, what do you think of that?”

Archie looked to both the cat—sitting on the horse in front of him—and the princess—riding a few feet down the path on her own mount—before finding his voice. The king had spoken to him by name. “I don’t know if they are hiding bandits,”—because the only bandit Archie had actually seen was a cat—“but it *is* suspicious.”

“I agree,” the king said hard and solemnly. “I hate it when people lie to me.”

Archie squirmed. He couldn’t help it. Was “liar” inked across his forehead?

Or did it merely feel that way?

The king shook his head. “This isn’t the first time Carabus has been ... less than cooperative. They are family, you see. These lands have always been managed by the crown prince during his training to become king. So, when my father died, making me king before my son came of age, I gave it to Keagan to manage—my Ciara’s younger brother.”

*Queen Ciara*, Archie quickly supplied in his head. Lord Keagan, the so-called Ogre Marquis of Carabus, was Queen Ciara’s younger brother.

The king continued. “Before the plague, there were some inconsistencies in his reports and a few rumors I didn’t like. Perhaps I should have done more to look into it then, but my son was nearly seventeen—old enough for me to place him on my council and give him the lands of his birthright without it seeming like an insult to my wife’s family. But then ... Well, these holdings are the closest to Castletown, and still, I have not seen Keagan since before the plague. Not even to pay his respects after his sister and nephew died. And the way people speak of him now ... like he is some ogre. I’m close to sending in troops and forcing the issue, but something like that can be *messy*.”

Archie grimaced. He might be a miller’s son, but he was well-equipped to understand how messy family matters could be. Being royalty seemed to only exaggerate the problem.

He couldn’t say he had any other insight to share, but he had to try.

“My father would say that something that smells doesn’t get any better by ignoring it.”

The king laughed, and Archie knew he sounded far too common, but it wasn’t like he could help it. Leo and the princess could do a lot, but they couldn’t speak for him.

“Your father sounds like a wise man,” the king said. They rode on, heading toward the Darkwood. When they reached the first thorn tree, the king reined his horse to a stop. “There has been no sign of any bandits yet, and we’re all out here. Let’s help the boy find his first deer.”

## CHAPTER 17



# CATWALK

Once their hunting party had established a camp near the forest, the hounds were sent out with their handlers to drive the deer forward. The remaining hunters were supposed to wait in the appointed area—quietly, under cover of the surrounding foliage with their bows drawn and ready—but that skill seemed to be beyond the abilities of the jubilant princess. As soon as the hounds were gone, she caught hold of Archie’s hand and dragged him off the main path.

They ducked around a few low-hanging branches until she turned to face him with triumph in her amber eyes. “This is a faerie ring. Don’t step inside it—especially when the moon is out,” Ainsley said, brightly pointing out a few white toadstools that seemed a little too symmetrical.

They even gave off an unnatural glow in the dim light of the shaded forest grove.

Archie held back a laugh. “You mean, I’m not supposed to step into a circle of ominous-looking mushrooms I wouldn’t have come close to if you hadn’t dragged me away from the group and deeper into a faerie’s forest?”

“Yes,” Ainsley agreed, with enough youthful spark Archie might have thought the girl was half-fae herself. Completely incorrigible.

Archie attempted to nod his head gravely. “I think I can manage that, Your Highness.”

“Marvelous. And if you see a fae or any other magical faerie beast out here, be polite, but don’t make any deals with them. Or take anything from them. Or tell them your full name. Or thank them. Or ... well, just *don’t*.”

Archie nodded again. He was certain he would laugh if he tried to speak.

Ainsley turned back to find her guard—shadowing them from a respectful distance. “There, Sir Callum, you see what a good teacher I am? They really should have just let me sign up as Archie’s sponsor myself.”

The man nodded with a show of patience. “It would certainly appear that way, Your Highness.”

Archie snorted a quick laugh, no longer able to hold it back, but then he decided to take pity on the knight, taking a firmer grip on the princess’s hand. “Should we return to the others now, Princess?”

Ainsley let out a long breath, blowing a stray curl out of her face. “I suppose. If we have to. My brother told me I would hate this part—everyone just sitting around silently.”

Archie raised an eyebrow. “You mean the actual hunting?”

“Yes,” she said without a hint of irony. “I like to shoot, but—I don’t know if I will like the blood so much. And the sitting. And ...” She frowned. “Oh, *daffodils*. Don’t tell me my mother was right all along; I’m not really much of a hunter, am I? I just didn’t like the idea that everyone was out having an adventure without me.”

Archie tried to make sense of her words. She had wanted to come out hunting, but she didn’t like to hunt. She had grabbed his hand when her interest had first started to wane. Was it too much to hope that the princess merely came out here because she enjoyed his company?

In that case, he couldn’t disappoint her. He couldn’t just stay silent. But improvising appropriately witty and entertaining turns of phrase wasn’t his strong suit. Not unless he could recite the pre-scripted words of a poem or a play. And before he could put his thoughts together, they had reached

their camp, and a much-too-eager young man came to greet her.

Ainsley's grip tightened on Archie's hand, expanding her royal presence as he was tempted to shrink. The dark-haired lord was dressed similarly to Archie—like a noble huntsman. But the *way* he wore it—chin up, eyes sharp and proud.

He wasn't just dressing the part of a lord; he was one, through and through.

“Now there you are, Ainsley,” he said in a lazy sort of drawl. “I must say, I was surprised to see that you were joining our hunt.”

“And why is that, Declan? You know I can shoot.” And despite what she had previously shared, it seemed she was ready to brave any obstacle—be it blood or boredom—just to prove it.

“Yes, but I suppose I just assumed you would still be ... mourning,” the young lord—Declan—said, and Archie recognized that there were more to their words and benign expressions than he could see. Like they were speaking another language entirely. They were calling each other by their first names, and Declan already knew she could shoot—something Ainsley had said few outside of her family knew.

There was some history there, if nothing else.

Ainsley's expression was certainly more controlled. Perhaps even a little dangerous. A smile on her lips but daggers in her eyes. Not just a princess but a young woman who could be queen. “Well, one cannot mourn forever.”

Declan kept his smile and matched her pace for pace—proving himself far braver and quicker with his tongue than Archie could ever be. Or perhaps simply more foolish. “It is a great relief to hear you say that. Especially since I stand to outstrip the castle record for deer caught this season.”

“Do you?”

He bowed his head with a modesty that could only be false, using the gesture as an excuse to come a few steps

closer. “Yes, well, that record was set more than four years ago. I might have passed it earlier, if not for the plague.”

“Perhaps,” the princess said with the fluid force of a parrying blade. “But were it not for the plague, the current record-holder would be here to defend the title himself, so you still are at an advantage.”

“Indeed. And I do believe a man should take advantage of whatever opportunities present themselves. We cannot mourn forever, as you say.” Declan had gotten much too close to the princess at this point, and Sir Callum shifted, his armor rustling in protest.

It was such a simple gesture, one that didn’t require any words and that a man of any class should be able to understand.

Archie should have protested as well. He was certain he would have—if it were him against a man of his own station. But could he put himself in direct conflict with a lord?

Declan sneered at both Sir Callum and Archie—like he had already lumped the two of them together in his mind—and the answer came to Archie at once.

*Yes.* If nothing else, Archie was happy to have this man assume him to be one of the princess’s silent defenders, and Ainsley was more than worth the risk of offending a lord like this.

But Declan had already turned away—a graceful exit only slightly spoiled when he stumbled over a cat. Or perhaps the cat had tried to trip him on purpose?

It could be hard to tell with a cat like Leo.

Ainsley shuddered, relaxing her shoulders as soon as the young lord had turned his back. “That man. He used to be friends with my brother.” She said the words like that act alone should be enough to condemn him. Ainsley seemed to have gotten along well with her brother when he was alive, but did she not like her brother’s friends?

Archie tried to put the scattered pieces together—all the words that had been said and all the words that hadn’t been.

“And your brother ... He is the one who holds the current hunting record at the castle?”

“Yes, exactly.” Her voice was soft and mournful again. “My brother had a lot of friends like that.” She gestured to the lord’s retreating back. “They imitated or fawned over him one minute and then used him as a stepping-stool or even double-crossed him the next. Like the only thing they ever saw or cared about was his crown. I noticed it more and more after he died—after they didn’t have to put on the act anymore. And then I also noticed ... Well, a lot of my ladies can be like that too.”

Archie frowned. Ainsley had said she was lonely, but it was only now that he understood the whole of it. Ainsley was a princess! Even if she weren’t as bright and beautiful as a springtime rose (which she was), she didn’t have to be alone. One snap of her royal fingers, and she would have her pick of companions. Ladies. Lords. Certainly more than a guard or two.

But at some point, Ainsley had chosen to distance herself from her former companions, and now she was holding his hand instead.

The princess quickly banished the dreariness from her countenance with a laugh that only felt a little forced. “Perhaps I should have started talking to millers’ sons a lot sooner, but then, I never imagined we would have so much in common.”

She wouldn’t have had anything in common with *most* millers’ sons. His elder brothers never had much use for anything outside their own small corner of the kingdom. They learned to read as a proper tribute to their mother, but they only used the words and letters necessary to aid them in their business dealings. Anything else they deemed too trivial or womanly to bother with.

He imagined most of the skilled tradesmen of their class and gender were the same.

A nobleman or a more scholarly trade might have need for more words without it being seen as a blight on his character,

but Archie's interest was always a source of conflict and embarrassment to the other males in his family.

The same conflict that had ironically led him to build up his muscles to defend himself.

Archie shook his head, and since their hands were already joined, he dared to nudge the princess with his shoulder. "So you don't like him, then?" The words were so obvious they could only be said with a hint of playful irony, but for Archie, they encompassed so many mind-crushing revelations that he couldn't hold them back.

Ainsley tittered and rolled her eyes. "Of course not. I much prefer spending time with you. And I don't mean to put any pressure on you, Archie. But if you or even your lucky hunting cat could manage to bring down a stag before he does, I would be most appreciative."

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AT THE TIME of Leo's disappearance and apparent transformation, Ainsley had only just turned thirteen. Gangly limbs and a few youthful blemishes on her face. As such, Leo never gave much thought to the type of man he might want her to marry.

But it didn't take long for him to decide there was a certain type of man he *didn't* want.

And of all the men riding with the king, Declan was the worst—another young lordling who fancied himself a huntsman with a row of trophies on his wall.

A man who liked to own, to conquer, and had looked at Ainsley more than once.

So, of course, when the first deer made its appearance and several hunters loosed their bows at once, Declan was the one to pierce its heart. Leo had run ahead, and he could tell the man's arrow by the color and shape of the fletching. The cat shuddered at the sight. Declan had been tolerable enough as a

mostly friendly rival, someone to test blades and pretty insults with, but Leo did not want him as a brother-in-law.

For her part, Ainsley had been too wrapped up with Archie to notice, and him with her. He might utter one word for every twelve she spoke, the miller boy as simple and wholesome as the bread he was always baking, but he savored her every syllable, watching her with a guileless and unguarded rapture that could not be faked. And Ainsley could shoot. She could ride. But she had no concept of the more practical skills of traveling rough. She couldn't pitch a tent, dig a trench, or clean her own rabbit. Archie had taken care of that for her, too smitten to notice she was leaning on his help and practical guidance just as much as he leaned on hers.

Leo shook his head. If his sister had truly tired of her former companions and their court smiles, perhaps it shouldn't be so surprising she found Archie more to her liking. They might be better suited for each other than the cat would have ever guessed.

And Leo certainly couldn't imagine the soft-hearted oaf ever hurting her.

He looked back at the buck, and he knew it wasn't right. It wasn't fair. But a cat couldn't properly sit on a throne, and unless he found a way to return to his human form, he would much rather leave his sister and his kingdom to an upstart miller's son than a man like Declan.

So, for now, it seemed as though nothing had changed. Leo was going to keep pulling tricks in Archie's favor. He dug the arrow out of the deer and replaced it with the one he preferred.

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ARCHIE and the other young archers rounded an oak to find the fallen deer, and Archie's arrow pierced its heart. Declan huffed his annoyance and walked away without a word, but Archie couldn't help but form his own frown when he saw the cat sitting by the fallen creature's corpse.

He had never thought Leo could help him take down something as large as a deer, but he should have known better. Anything was possible with Leo the magic cat.

But maybe that wasn't always a good thing?

“What’s the matter, boy?” Sir Callum asked after some silence. “You shot the deer. Your princess is going to love this. Her father too. And I get to take all the credit for ‘training’ you.” His voice remained dry, but he ended the words with a hearty wink.

A wink. Not a blade. Perhaps the knight and the rest of the princess’s guard had been rooting for him this entire time without Archie’s full notice.

And Sir Callum and the princess *had* just shown him a faerie ring. There had to be a way to voice a few of his worries without giving it all away.

“I was just wondering ... Tricky things can happen in the forest, and ... well, have you ever seen a faerie, sir? Beyond the imps or gnomes or other small creatures you might see around the town?”

The knight shook his head. “No, and you won’t either as long as you keep your wits about you.”

It might be a bit too late for that. Leo was still sitting by the deer, grooming himself nonchalantly. Archie tried not to look at him as he formed his next question. “But if I did meet a faerie ... would it have to be evil? Couldn’t it also be good and use its magic to bless us if it wished to?” There seemed to be at least a few stories where that was the case, and even the gnome he had met hadn’t seemed *that* bad for a garden pest.

The knight raised an eyebrow. “And what would motivate a fae or any other creature born of magic and chaos to do *good*? They are creatures unlike us, and they have their own reasons for doing what they do. And by the time you discover all their secrets, it might already be too late. Even something that seems like a blessing often leads to great evil by its end.”

Archie nodded, having far too many thoughts at once.



He had been watching Leo for years, and though it seemed clear that the cat used magic—and could perhaps even be called a faerie—Leo never seemed *dangerous*. He helped with the plague rats, and even the more mischievous traps he set seemed almost reasonable—something that had been clearly provoked and equally measured. Something Archie had thought he could manage so long as he did his best to stay in the cat’s good graces.

Archie had never considered the idea that the cat could truly curse anyone, but perhaps he should have? Those sorts of legends were just as numerous as the ones with helpful magical creatures, and they had to come from somewhere.

Archie had made a bargain for Leo’s help. And Archie had sincerely meant it. But the more time he spent with the cat, the more he wondered what he could possibly give Leo that would be equal to what he had received. The cat hunted his own food. He shunned Archie’s attempts at affection—anything a more natural animal might have wanted. What did that leave them except for some horrible and magical consequence Archie would never see coming?

In Archie’s silence, the knight ended his thoughts with a final shrug. “Magic ... It just doesn’t fit inside our world, and some say a man can’t touch a bit of it without being corrupted by its influence. It goes against the order and light that has allowed peace throughout our kingdom and rarely happens without consequence. Best leave it alone.”

It certainly sounded like something Archie’s father would say. It might even be something any proper matron or holy oracle would say. Archie had always been different. He had always longed for at least a spark of magic and chaos, something to give purpose and color to his much-too-ordinary life, but perhaps he still should have been more cautious.

Perhaps he had already taken on more than he could handle, even with just one magic cat.

Sir Callum had said the use of magic often brought unseen curses. Archie didn’t think Leo had intentionally cursed him—*yet*—but he already felt there must be some truth to the

knight's words. Magic seemed to cause just as much trouble as it solved.

Had he really shot the deer that bore his arrow? Did he really deserve the praise of the princess and the respect of the other men on the hunt?

Would every good thing he had gained disappear if he turned his back for too long?

The hunt went until the next evening—the evening before the festival—and though they never found anything resembling bandits, Archie didn't think he had done anything to shame himself too badly. The king and some of the other men waved or nodded at him when it was done.

Ainsley smiled.

But when he finally reached the mill, both his brothers were sitting around the kitchen table waiting for him, along with the baker's family. "There you are," Rupert said. "I thought you might have forgotten."

A fair assumption. Archie had forgotten completely.

## CHAPTER 18

# NO ROOM TO SWING A CAT

The dinner. Ellie and her parents. Yes, Archie had forgotten, and it seemed he had been so preoccupied he hadn't noticed the change. Ellie wasn't the name of the goose girl. She was the baker's middle daughter—the baker's *only* daughter since the plague had stolen the lives of both of her sisters. Before then, and even now, she was a soft-spoken, mouse-haired girl who easily blended into a crowd. Since when had Rupert shown any interest in her?

“Sorry,” Archie said, mostly because it seemed they were all waiting for him to say something, and he had no clue what else it could be. “What did I miss?”

The baker was the one to answer. It might not have been his house, but he was the eldest man there and had one of those booming voices that called attention to itself. “We were just getting started.” He gestured to the food on the table. “Your brothers say that you made the bread. It's not bad. Have you ever considered baking as a profession?”

“No, sir.” Archie was still eyeing everyone at the table in turn. Rupert, Harris, the baker's wife, and even sweet and round-faced Ellie were watching him with trepidation. Like he was something feral that might bolt or soil the non-existent carpet, and they were about to do something awful they thought would be for his own good.

“Well, perhaps you should,” the baker continued with a much too cheerful smile. “I was just telling your brother that I might need another apprentice, once my Ellie is married and gone.”

Archie didn't answer, but it seemed he didn't have to. Rupert was already answering for him. "That is rather generous of you, sir. Isn't it, Archie? Baking is a good and stable profession."

*Baking?* This was an ambush. His brother was going to trade him away to get the bride he wanted, and it seemed Archie only had one choice left. He turned on his heels and headed back through the door, almost tripping over Leo again. "Excuse me."

"Archie?" Rupert called, following after him.

Archie didn't answer. Not even after the third or fourth time his brother called after him. But eventually—after Archie had made it to the mill and grabbed a sack of his belongings from the loft—he had to turn back around and face Rupert.

By then, Archie had settled on what he wanted to say. He had a cat making choices for him. A princess. And now, with his brother, it seemed the dam was about to break. "You own the mill, the house, but you can't just sell me away without speaking to me."

Leo hissed like he agreed.

Rupert scoffed. "Don't be so dramatic. We were just talking, but I *do* think it would be a good opportunity for all of us if you would just listen."

"Since when? I thought you were interested in the goose girl."

"Elsie?" Rupert said the name like he was surprised. "Sure, Elsie is pretty, but now that I have the mill, I don't have to settle for a goose girl anymore. Ellie's father can help us expand our business. He'll take you on as an apprentice and give us a contract for our flour. Harris can keep helping with the mill and doing deliveries for us both, and we'll have enough stable work for all of our families to grow. How is this a bad plan? You always liked baking."

Archie knew how to bake. He didn't mind it. Perhaps a few months ago, before Ainsley and before Leo, he might have considered it over the half-dozen other apprenticeships

his brothers might have tried to push him into. But it all seemed so mercenary. Heartless.

“You can’t love Ellie. You don’t even know her.”

Rupert raised an eyebrow. “Like you think you love the princess?”

Archie gaped. What could Rupert possibly know about the princess?

“I’ve heard the rumors. And I’ve seen it myself—you running off at all hours and dressing like a popinjay. But there is only one reason a princess would be interested in a boy like you. She’s *bored*, but eventually she’ll tire of you too. And then what? What promises could you actually hold her to after you’ve made a fool of yourself? After you’ve dragged our family’s name through the mud?”

Archie glared and forced another question out behind his gritted teeth. “How have I dragged our family’s name through the mud?”

“By becoming the princess’s pet gigolo!”

Archie didn’t punch him. But he couldn’t remember wanting to punch anyone else more.

Leo jumped up and spun his weaponized paw, quickly drawing blood.

Rupert whirled about, shouting a flurry of curse words, but Leo had already found a way to disappear. How could anyone think he was a normal cat?

“You know I’m right, even if it hasn’t gone as far as that yet,” Rupert continued, eyes blazing as he held his bleeding forearm. “And eventually she will make a match in the same way I am with Ellie. Someone who can increase her family’s interests. And then what will you do?”

Whatever Archie did, he would do it without Rupert. He still had his pride if nothing else. “I’m leaving.”

“Fine. But you can’t say I didn’t warn you, and when this all crashes around you, don’t expect us to take you back.”

## CHAPTER 19

# CATCALL

When Leo let himself be seen again, Archie was up by the trees where they usually hunted rabbits. The miller boy threw his sack down with a sigh. “Well, now what?”

Leo swished his tail with nervous energy, but he didn’t have any specific plans for tonight. Was he supposed to? They had both been caught off-guard by the unsightly dinner party, and the cat could only take so much credit or blame. But even if he had been partially responsible, it wasn’t like they lost anything important. A loft bed in a mill? A pair of ignorant brothers?

Leo couldn’t even pretend to see it as any sort of loss.

The cat sat on his too-twitchy tail and licked the traces of the miller’s blood out of his paws. Which—yes—should have been disgusting, but he still had the body of a cat, so he managed it with a haughty and dismissive grace.

At least it wasn’t a hairball.

Archie fidgeted and then kicked at his sack, piling on another round of abuse on all his worldly possessions. “I wish you wouldn’t have scratched him.”

*Too bad.* Leo wasn’t about to apologize. And not just because he couldn’t speak. Leo knew who he was now, and that self-important bumpkin hadn’t just insulted Archie. He had insulted Leo’s *sister*. Legally, Leo could have Rupert hung in the town square for everyone to see. Maybe even throw a few rotten cabbages at his corpse. Or at least there might have



been a rule like that in his grandfather's time for those who dared to insult royalty.

Maybe Leo would bring it back if he ever regained his human form and became king.

"I mean, I was leaving anyway," Archie continued. "I didn't want to stay. I just wish ..." He stopped, slumping his shoulders like a marionette without a proper master to pull its strings. "I don't know what I wish. But I suppose one more night in the brush won't kill me."

Yes, that seemed to be a recurrent thing with Archie.

He didn't make his own choices; his dreams were all so vague. He let others dictate what he did, then blamed them when he got a fate not to his liking. He was a peasant—not just in his circumstances, but in his mind. Even if Leo wanted to keep helping him, without selfishly hoping for more of a connection with his pre-cat life, the task might prove too difficult for one cat to manage on his own.

Everything seemed far more difficult as a cat now that he knew he should be a prince instead. He had a whole kingdom to care for and no one to aid or even recognize his efforts.

Leo could have stayed with Archie out in the cold. Leo had stayed with Archie all through the hunting trip and several other nights besides. But not for the first time, the cat longed to be somewhere and with someone who didn't expect him to be in charge of everything.

So he turned his tail and walked back into Castletown. Out of habit, Leo hunted a few rats as he went, but none of them held the plague. Perhaps the one in the cellar was truly the only one to be found—though that didn't feel right. Rats were rarely so solitary. There had to be a whole nest of them somewhere, though it didn't seem like he would find it tonight.

He continued in random circles until he found himself back at Tabitha's.

Whenever Leo didn't know where to go or what to do as a cat, he always found himself back at Tabitha's.

“Mer-row!” he called for her outside the second-hand shop.

In seconds, she opened the window of her loft and smiled down at him. “Oh, there you are, Tom. Or is it Leo? I guess I’m not really sure which one you might prefer.”

Leo jumped toward the open window, but her words made him pause, unsure how to answer. And—once again—it wasn’t just because he was a cat. With anyone else, he was Leo—no question. He might even insist on his full name or title from someone he didn’t truly wish to associate with. But with Tabitha? It just didn’t seem to matter so much.

He might even come to miss Tom one day if she stopped using it entirely.

She laughed, stepping away from the window and gesturing for him to join her at her work. “Well, come in here, whoever you are. I need a second opinion on this new dress, and you know the others are all useless compared to you.” She meant the other cats, strewn around the loft. There were five of them today, but only because the fluffy ginger-cat named Biscuit had another litter of kittens, and Soot was there to supervise in a way only a true cat would understand.

Leo walked past them with some anticipation. Entering Tabitha’s space was always an adventure. Colorful cloth and bows were erratically draped over every available space, charcoal marks on the wooden floor mapped out the redesigns of a half-dozen new projects, and a headless manikin stood in the center. Who knew where her cookpot or sleeping mat had ended up?

It was pure chaos.

It was art.

And of course, the other cats never had a thing to do or say when Tabitha showed them something she had sewn together, but Leo always had.

“There. You see?” Tabitha spun around, holding a voluminous dress against her slight figure. Her eyes brightened, and she wore a teasing sort of smile as she

gathered up an obscene number of ruffles in her hands. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

Leo *yowled* his displeasure. The dress was hideous, and she knew it. Decades out of style and probably not even worth saving. Only Tabitha would think it was worth saving.

She waved it at him again like tempting a bull to charge.

He did. He kept his claws in this time (What if he hit Tabitha?), but he swiped his paw and hissed. He was in a mood to pull out every ruffle that awful thing had.

Tabitha laughed like she always did, pulling it over to the manikin and out of his immediate reach. “You’ll love it when I finish. Promise.”

She winked.

Because Tabitha talked to cats. She was eccentric. She never seemed to guess Leo was different from the other cats, even when she spoke to him like this. At least, she had never broached the topic and started making demands in the same way Archie had.

She just continued on in her work, smiling, talking, and even singing to herself as she went.

It was a strangely comforting sight. A unique sort of beauty. A prince couldn’t love a shop girl any more than a cat could, but Tabitha occupied a space entirely her own. Not a servant or a sycophant. Not a sister or *any* other relationship he had experienced before.

She rarely needed anything from him except his company, and right now, that seemed such a marvelous thing.

“Will you stay tonight?” she asked him, and Leo couldn’t think of anywhere else he would rather be.

## CHAPTER 20

# CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF

Archie's night outside wasn't too different from when they were still on the hunt, and he still had a home.

When he at least had something to his name that didn't come from a princess or a cat. Now, all he had was the clothes on his back, his grandfather's bow, and a few other things small enough to fit into a single wheat sack. He had taken two of his mother's books with him, but her garden was gone. Another piece of her had been ripped away.

Not that he regretted his decision to leave, but he wasn't sure what was next for him now.

And really, as awful as his brother's words were, were they so very different from some of the things Archie had been thinking himself? That much of his recent fortune was based on lies, and his relationship with Ainsley wasn't all that it should be?

Perhaps he was nothing more than the princess's amusing and mostly silent "pet."

But the fur-lined cloak had been enough to lend Archie some warmth through the night, and the next day was the Spring Festival. The castle gates were open, and the whole town seemed to be out celebrating. Archie was sure his brother would use the opportunity to announce his and Ellie's betrothal to their neighbors, glossing over everything else.

Archie even saw the goose girl flirting with one of the farmhands.

So maybe she wasn't so concerned about the change of events. Maybe he was the only one who thought anything was wrong, and that their lives should be more like a faerie story.

Either way, he was left with a great desire to hit something. He lined up with the other boys taking bets and running matches in part of the open courtyard—a fenced-off arena that usually housed goats or pigs. He grabbed a staff, stripped off the fancy tunic Ainsley had given him, and faced off against another village boy.

His opponent looked Archie up and down, his expression wary. Archie didn't blame him. This was far from his first match, and he had gotten larger in the last year.

Someone whispered in the crowd, putting his coin on “the ogre.”

But Archie wasn't an ogre. Or at least, he was generous enough to let his opponent make the first swing.

Then he grabbed the boy and pinned him to the ground in two quick and satisfying movements.

Time passed. Archie threw a few more village boys in a steady stream. More whispers and jeers came from the crowd. More people dubbed him an “ogre.” Sir Callum came over after a few rounds, shouting over the fence. “Lad, where did you learn that?”

No one had taught him to swing a stick. No one had to. “Not much to know.”

Archie tried to gauge if the knight was actually praising him or not. The first time Archie threw a blacksmith's son, he thought his father might be proud. He wasn't. He just shook his head and said, *“Well, I guess we haven't been working you hard enough at home. Now put that fool stick down before the king decides he needs another foot soldier.”*

Archie might have thought that there could be something romantic about being a knight and fighting for some righteous cause, but his father saw the same thing that his brothers did. Archie was a mouse—albeit an oversized one. A brainless ogre. If he was to fight in a king's war, he would be designated

as arrow and magical fodder. And if he was to love a princess, he would be her fool. Better to live an honest and simple life of a miller where they might not have had much, but they still had their pride.

No, there was no question what Archie's father would think of his activities if he could see him now. The only question might be why he hadn't tried to lock Archie into an apprenticeship when he was younger—like Rupert had tried to do—instead of giving him a “magic cat.”

Sir Callum laughed. “Well, when you are as big as an ox, perhaps you can get away without knowing the finer points, but you could still be better with them.” The knight took another staff from the pile and planted his feet in demonstration. “Try it like this.”

It was only then that Archie remembered the knight had signed on as his sponsor—if only to please the princess. With the shouted advice, Archie threw a few more village boys. He even threw Harris when his brother came to take a turn, but it still didn't make him feel better about anything.

“Good, lad,” Sir Callum said. “Just loosen up a bit. It's all for fun, after all.”

That was true. Not everyone calling Archie an ogre was doing it maliciously. Children from the Charity House had come to join the crowd, and Archie had no problem playing up his performance for them, growling and swinging his arms more as he claimed another victory over one of the younger huntsmen he had met over the last few days.

Declan jumped in next. “My turn, Ogre,” he said with a haughty sort of sneer, but Archie was too far into his new role to care. If the young lord wanted to fight an ogre, then that was exactly what he would get. And ogres didn't have to use any fancy words or titles to get their point across.

Before the match could really get started, Archie dropped his staff, picked Declan up, and threw him over the fence. The young lord landed in the muck.

Being an ogre could be fun.

Then, in jumped the king.

The crowd jeered. Archie frowned and startled back. Could he beat him? Did he even dare try? Most of the rules for these kind of matches were unspoken, but the men Archie had fought so far were only a handful of years younger or older than him.

They weren't the king.

And just like that, the mask was gone. Archie couldn't be an ogre and fight the king.

"Any advice for this one?" Archie asked Sir Callum.

The knight pushed away from the fence and threw up his hands. "Don't die."

*Thanks.* Archie gritted his teeth and circled in, but in the end, the match wasn't much of a match. The king pounded him into the ground, using the staff like a two-handed blade.

"I didn't do very well, did I?" Archie tried amicably.

King Randolph shook his head. "You have some raw potential. Perhaps you *could* be a huntsman or even a true champion someday, though ... I don't think you are being completely honest with me, and you know how I feel about liars. If I find you have caught my daughter's attention by some unnatural means, I'd like you to also know I have the skill to defend my own."

Archie grimaced, but the king didn't wait for a response, and the knight came to thump him on the back a moment later. "Good job, lad."

Archie couldn't hide his disbelief.

Sir Callum shrugged. "He's the king. And he spends more and more of his time in the practice yard since his wife and son passed. You were never going to win but kept your feet and didn't let him rattle you too much. That might be the best you can hope for with him."

*You were never going to win ...* That seemed to be a running theme when it came to his current dealings with the royal family. He could keep swinging his staff, shooting his



bow, but there were so many lies and harsher truths stacked against him, ready and waiting to come crashing down. What if his brother was right, and Ainsley only cared for him because she was bored? What if the king was right, and she only cared for him because of something unnatural, something the cat had done? Was there any way Archie could ever know for certain?

Any magic the cat used and all the masks Archie wore couldn't possibly last forever.

The princess waved her hand from the crowd. Had she been watching too? She must have been, and her smile was more than radiant. Maybe she liked him as an ogre, just as much as she liked him as a huntsman, but it still wasn't quite enough. "Archie! Get over here. You've beaten everyone else already, and we need to clean you up for the play."

And just like that, he was forced back into another fancy outfit and ushered over toward the open outdoor stage. They started *Anderdolf the Dwarf*, and he waddled around on his knees. He heard a steady stream of laughter or sighs from the eager crowd.

The children came on stage to tackle him right on cue.

But when he said the dwarf's words to the princess, the rest of the world seemed to melt away. *"I longed for you to see and accept me as I was, but under the cloak of the pen I had to remain."*

They had reached the final few lines, and Ainsley leaned down again, but her arms were firmly at her sides. He could see her teasing and open smile, daring him to kiss her. Really kiss her. Not the stage kiss they had rehearsed. But a real, steal-your-breath-away kiss. Right here in front of everyone.

Including her father. The king.

And Archie couldn't do it. He wasn't even sure he wanted to. It felt wrong, for even more reasons than simple propriety. *Anderdolf the Dwarf* might have earned his happy ending, but that didn't mean Archie ever would. He wore so many masks

that he wasn't entirely sure himself which one was true, but he knew he wasn't the proper huntsman the princess wanted.

He wasn't an ogre or even a noble dwarf.

So he put up his own hand to cup and hide both of their faces, stage-kissing the princess like the coward he still was.

## CHAPTER 21

# LIKE CATS AND DOGS

Leo had arrived late to the Spring Festival, and he was already sick of it. Tabitha would never venture into a crowd like this, and no matter what the cat did to help Archie now, the boy would not stop sulking. Even when the princess had the miller boy sit with her at the feast and brightly asked for him to teach her one of the peasant dances—a maypole dance meant to mimic the Wild Hunts where the faerie rings would open. The young men and women chased each other around in an endless circle of colorful ribbons.

Screams and happy chaos broke out whenever someone was “accidentally” caught.

Men chased women, like men chased after the fae. Or was it the other way around?

Again, Leo saw a dark forest. Emerald eyes. *“Hunt the rats, my little prince. Kill them, or your curse will never end.”*

Leo shook his head. Cat eyes weren’t as good as human ones, focusing only on movement. The colorful images were blending together with a few of Leo’s elusive memories, and he took it as a sign that he should take a break from the festival and the ungrateful miller’s son.

Leo dodged the feet of the crowd to make it to the castle gates, still standing open as the evening had started to fall. Something teased at his nostrils, sweet and sour like rotten fruit. Or like a plague rat. He glanced over at the table laden with a collection of food meant for Carabus.

Would a display like that attract the vermin?

He turned his tail to investigate. He could use a good hunt. And as if summoned by the thought, a hound bayed in the distance.

That was when the screaming began.

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THE HOUNDS HAD GONE COMPLETELY feral. At least, that was the only thought Archie had before he was called into the fray. He retook a staff to bash one hound and then another, somehow standing side-by-side with Declan and bizarrely grateful to have a real enemy to fight. He could even appreciate the skill the young lord had with his belt axe. One dog fell before them and then another. Anything to preserve the peace of the kingdom and Castletown.

Ainsley was safe, quickly surrounded by a pack of her guards. And Leo was ... tangling a pair of feral hounds with the colorful maypole ribbons.

Because *of course* he was.

Soon there was only one hound left, and when Declan chopped off its ear with his axe, it limped back to wherever it had come from with its tail between its legs.

Declan laughed back at Archie, like it had been nothing but another hunting competition. "Looks like I got that one on you, Ogre."

But even after the dogs had been routed, screams and soft wailing carried with the breeze. Declan went quiet. And while the princess hadn't been allowed to join in the fighting, Archie wasn't surprised to see her helping to gather up the wounded.

"Did either of you get hurt? Archie? Declan?"

Archie shook his head, but Declan immediately took a step back, holding his arm and protesting before the princess could even properly corner him. And for once, the young lord didn't look the least bit cocky. "Don't fuss. I'll be fine."

Archie blinked. Declan had been bitten. When had that happened?

And did dog bites usually make grown men slur and sway?

Ainsley caught hold of him and found the bite on his left forearm. “Declan, it’s turning green. It looks like ...” She didn’t say what it looked like, but Archie had caught the smell of rotten fruit and could already guess. Ainsley steeled her face. “We have to find a healer, and then we have to show my father. Archie, can you ... ?”

Archie immediately helped to steady Declan, but he already knew a healer would not be enough. They might have defeated the immediate threat, but if the feral hounds had been infected by the same plague as the rats, then any wound they left behind would be fatal.

## CHAPTER 22

# PUSSYFOOTING AROUND

It had taken a few weeks after the festival for things to settle and for Castletown to readjust to its new reality—both good and bad. None of the castle hunting hounds were infected. The feral hounds were strangers to the village, simply taking advantage of the open gates. No one knew where the creatures had come from—it had always been rats who spread the illness before—but most of them had been killed quickly. Fifteen people—including guards and villagers of all ages—had been bitten and were receiving treatment at the castle.

In the meantime, most people were sticking to their own houses and their own kind, but more out of habit than actual command. Hounds were larger and more frightening than rats, but they couldn't hide their numbers or breed so quickly. Once they were gone, they were gone.

Or at least, that was all Archie or any other average citizen seemed to know.

Sophie sat on the Charity House's kitchen counter, swinging her feet and watching Archie work. "Matron Granny Thatcher said the princess is coming to see us today," she said in a teasing sing-song voice that wasn't at all subtle. "Are you going to come out and read stories with us?"

"I don't think so, Sophie," Archie said, keeping his head down.

The girl looked scandalized, like he had just said the sun wouldn't be shining outside. "But you're Anderdolf."



Archie shook his head. He didn't know how to tell Sophie that he didn't want to be Anderdolf anymore. That real life wasn't like a faerie story, and his father might have been right all along. The fantasy had become too much, and all he wanted was something real.

After officially being disinherited and leaving the mill, Archie only had one place to go. The matrons' Charity House. He *was* an orphan now, strictly speaking. He was even underage—at least for a few more months. And the matrons liked him well enough. Or at least they knew he could earn his keep—baking, cleaning, or picking up anything heavy. It wasn't a long-term solution; he might still end up hitching his muscles to another man's cart and taking some apprenticeship like he could have had with the bakers, but at least it would be a cart of his own choosing, without his brother, a cat, or even a princess meddling.

Archie kept working, and when the princess came and Sophie left to meet her, he stayed in his place in the kitchen.

He didn't even open the door.

Though he couldn't say he was entirely surprised or even disappointed when the princess came and opened the door herself. It seemed he still wanted her near, even if he feared their relationship might have become an unhealthy one.

But he kept his back to her, letting her voice wash over him.

"Archie," she said, her words tentative and a little sad. "I've missed you. I know I've been busy at the castle these past few weeks, but I sent for you at the mill. You never answered. I had to hear from the children that you came to stay here. And I might have thought—if you needed a place to stay—you could have come to me. That we could have found you someplace better."

Archie couldn't imagine allowing the princess to grant him another grand favor like that. He would never feel like he belonged. He never went out with his bow anymore, even when the cat glared at him like he was no better than a coughed-up hairball. And any time he thought of answering

one of the princess's royal summonses to join her in her work at the castle—he just couldn't do it anymore.

He wanted to help his people recover from the festival attack, but he didn't want to pretend.

There was plenty of work to do at the Charity House, and no one expected him to be anything other than a miller's son.

This wasn't the sort of conversation he wanted to have in full view of Ainsley's guards, the matrons, or even the cat, but it seemed he wasn't being given a choice in the matter. "I've heard stories of you too, princess. So perhaps you could tell me how Declan's doing?"

"He's ... becoming insufferable," Ainsley said carefully, somehow still managing to keep her composure with what must have been courtly grace. She didn't seem offended or defensive. And really, she had no reason to be. The fact that she had been helping tend to the wounded at the castle shouldn't have been a fault, even if Archie had tried to make it into one. "I've heard tell that there should be something romantic about tending to a fallen hero, but he's still Declan. Which probably means he's healing, and we can send him home soon."

Archie shook his head, finally turning around to face the princess. "Healing?"

"There *is* a cure," Ainsley said, looking down at her skirts. "A start of one. The healers and matrons at the castle have been working on it these past few years, and it seems to be helping. A few of the people bitten at the festival have died, but some of the younger, stronger victims are starting to pull through."

"Good. That's good." Or at least, Archie wanted it to be "good," but he couldn't make the words sound sincere. His mother had died. So many others.

Of course it would be Declan who lived.

"It *is* good," Ainsley said, and now he could finally see the dried tears and the curls sticking to the sides of her face. She hadn't been keeping her composure as well as he had assumed.

“Archie, when you never came to the castle to see me ... When I couldn’t find you ... Was it really just Declan? Because I told you I never cared for him the same way I cared for you. I never cared for him at all.”

She *had* told Archie that. And Archie had believed her at the time, but despite all his faults, Declan carried himself like a member of the court and a peer of the princess.

Everything Archie wasn’t. The original masterpiece compared to a counterfeit copy.

Hating a wounded man—whether he was actually dying or not—should have been beneath Archie, but the mix of conflicting emotions inside him morphed into something feral, a part of him ready for the princess to finally see him at his worst and turn away from him.

Even sinking low enough to raise a challenge that sounded petty even in his own ears.

“Well, I’m sorry to have disappointed you, Princess. But perhaps it is for the best. I was never much of a huntsman, and there is no better place for me than this. I won’t bother you anymore.”

“Bother me? Archie, you told me from the moment I met you who you were. Why do you expect me to be surprised by it now?” She bent down on her knees with a flourish. “*Did you not know that it wasn’t the height of your stature that won me over but the tenderness of your soul?*” Anderdolf again, though the words had lost their allure.

There should be something romantic about surrendering everything about one’s self for love—even your name—but it still didn’t feel pleasant.

Archie was ready to use his own words at last. He still couldn’t stand to see tears from the princess, but it seemed this conclusion should have been inevitable from the start, and all that was left was to make the break as quick and final as possible. “You say that, Princess, but from the moment we met, I felt like you were trying to craft me into someone else. And part of me didn’t care. I still don’t. I wanted to learn and

have my life be more like a faerie story. So you can dress me up, help me shoot or dance or anything else you want, and I will be nothing but grateful. I just don't like lying to your father or anyone else. I don't want to feel like my life is built on a house of cards that might someday collapse. That I'm taking a risk too great. I'm not like your brother, and I might never be. I'm Archie Miller. Just Archie. Do you understand?"

"My brother?" Ainsley scowled, and even the cat backed away from her. "I can tell you about my brother. He was a prince and fancied himself a huntsman. He liked fashion and archery and was clever enough to keep everyone on their toes. He was also arrogant, but I don't know if I noticed that so much when I was younger. He felt he had a responsibility and duty to the kingdom that made him risk more than perhaps he should have."

Then the princess pulled for the bow that she always seemed to keep close—a bow that was too large and hadn't been made for her at all. "He didn't die in the plague, you know. So many people died then that it's not always clearly said, but he disappeared after our mother died, hoping to find us a cure by questing amongst the forest faerie. Father would never have let him go alone, but I covered for him, the same way that we always covered for each other. And then ..."

Ainsley shook her head and stowed the bow. "Well, we found his bow abandoned in the Darkwood. He never returned home. And sometimes I still wonder what might have happened if my brother had someone who cautioned him more, idolized and encouraged him less."

Ainsley was still on her knees. Archie never wanted that—even in show. She looked so sad, so broken, that he couldn't help but take a step toward her as the words continued. "I love my brother, and I miss him. I won't deny that at one time, I wanted to be exactly like him, but that doesn't mean I also wanted to marry him or someone I made in his image—even if it would please my father."

Archie wasn't sure who made the final move to close the distance between them, but he was holding her hand as a tear rolled down her cheek.

“And you’re sweet, Archie. I noticed that right away. But you could barely speak to me. I worried that you might never get to the point where you would speak your mind and tell me what you really wanted. And now that you have—and I know for certain how truly kind, steady, and honest you are. That you can join me on an adventure without becoming lost to it. Well, I can’t imagine any sort of man I might want more. And if you ever decided you wanted me too, if you were bold enough to show me ...”

Archie had no words. Ainsley actually cared for him. She wasn’t just bored or overly impressed by something only the cat had done. She had seen beyond all the masks he tried to wear and saw something of his own soul to cherish, even if it was small. And for once, Archie found he didn’t care about the guards or the cat or anyone else. He bent down and kissed her.

And her startled lips were as sweet as he always thought they would be. She matched him touch for touch, breath for breath. Everything narrowed into focus.

“Yes! That was a real one!” Sophie cheered from somewhere behind them before the matrons could shoo her away. Her voice faded with distance, but her excitement was undeterred. “I’m telling the twins. They said it was all pretend and real princesses never kiss anyone like us.”

Ainsley giggled, her face still pressed against his. “You know, they’re right; I’ve never kissed anyone like you before. I’ve never kissed anyone.”

“Good,” Archie said, something primal inside him more than thrilled to be the first and only one to kiss his princess and find yet another area where they were more evenly matched.

But perhaps that shouldn’t matter anymore.

He had been intimidated by the princess’s title. There was no use denying that. He had seen her as a “perfect princess” and admired her like something you might put on a wall. Like the princess in Anderdolf’s tale that never even had her own name. But Ainsley wasn’t her title, and he might have judged her more harshly than she had ever judged him.

She had wanted him to talk frankly to her from the beginning, and he was certain now that if he had simply told her “no” at any point earlier, she would have listened.

He backed up and helped the girl to stand beside him. “Princess,” he said, but only out of habit, and it seemed he might have gotten it wrong. Because she had never asked for him to call her “princess.” Perhaps she had never wanted him to.

Perhaps, just as often as he wished he could treat her as a normal girl, she was wishing it too.

She had been lonely after her brother’s death. She had already told Archie that. But he had elevated the princess far too much inside his head, leading him to isolate and abandon her again for no better reason than his own insecurities. Now he would speak directly to her heart.

“Ainsley,” he said, and she lit up like a spark. “If I ever saw a girl as bright and beautiful as you at a barn-raising, it wouldn’t matter if you were a goose girl or a baker’s daughter. I’d push myself through a crowd of your beaux and ask you if you wanted to take a walk around town. And if you were still smiling at me like that, I’d take you to the river and pick you the prettiest flower I could find. And then, when I was handing it over, I’d see if you’d let me hold your hand all the way back.” It wasn’t quite Anderdolf, but the way Ainsley’s amber eyes were still brighter than a flame, it seemed she hadn’t minded.

She leaned into him, offering her hand eagerly. “And then what? Would you kiss me again?”

Archie stared down at their joined hands, still feeling a bit guilty. “Perhaps. If we were courting. If I had spoken to your father first.”

“I see,” Ainsley said, her words soft but accepting. “Yes, you would be the perfect gentleman. And if I were a goose girl, I’d drop my handkerchief for you to find. If I were a baker’s daughter, I’d save my last slice of pie so you would come see me at the end of the day. But I’m a princess, and I pushed too hard. I’m sorry for that, Archie. And if you were to

talk to my father again, I want to promise you that I would let you say whatever you wanted. Everything you think is true and needs to be said. I just worry—Well, you have a way of seeing yourself that isn't the same way I do. And really, that's the only part I wish I could change.”

They stood together for another moment, everything else fading away to silence.

“And you think I'm a gentleman?” Well, not too long ago he would have agreed.

But maybe both of them were wrong.

Because if he was about to talk to the king about courting his daughter properly, then he might lose his head, and there were a few more things he wanted to do before he died.

Archie found his old bow and turned to the princess's guard, refusing to shrink. Like he was a lord in truth. Ainsley had always insisted her guards were only there to deter bandits, and it seemed it was time to put that theory to the test. “Sir Callum, I know I haven't learned all that I could from you yet, but I wonder if I could still beg for the honor of seeing the princess home.”

The knight gave a solemn nod, faster than Archie would ever have thought possible. “See that you get her there safely.”

Archie smiled, ready to take Ainsley on that walk by the river, try to find a flower that could possibly measure up to her own beauty, and then find a new use for the arrow-scarred oak tree—pressing his princess up against the bark and kissing her until the moon came out.

## CHAPTER 23



# CAT'S OUT OF THE BAG

Before the kissing started, Leo had already left the city of Castletown far behind. He might have resigned himself to the inevitability of his sister's preference for the miller's son, but he still had no interest in watching it all play out.

Especially now that he had his sister's words ringing in his acute and pointed ears.

Ainsley had said Leo was arrogant. Reckless. And fair enough. The trials of the last few years were more than enough to inspire some more critical self-reflection. A few memories might still be out of reach, but Leo had been born knowing that one day he would be king, and it seemed it was the sort of knowing that could never be entirely erased, something that he would know long after he had forgotten his own name.

He didn't need anyone else to recognize his birthright and inherent greatness for him to see it inside himself.

So, perhaps he was arrogant, but it had come to him with an equal measure of duty and obligation. The best way to keep himself on top was to please the men below him. By using a carrot far more than he used a stick. This ideal came to him more from practicality than simple affection. A man who beat his horse (or human pet) to death didn't get very far, and no one should claim to rule a land or people they weren't willing to defend—even risk their life for.

And four years ago, the healers had been at a loss. His kingdom and even his own mother had fallen to a new plague,

and he had to be the one to stop it. The thought was so natural he almost didn't need Ainsley to confirm it with words. When any mysterious and dangerous threat appeared, Leo had always been the one to run directly toward it.

He saw his younger self stealing out of the castle in the dead of night, the image clear enough for him to retrace the same path even as a cat.

Deeper and deeper into the heart of the Darkwood.

The kingdom's healers had said there was nothing more they could do about the plague; the matrons and holy oracles called it dark magic. They were working on a cure, but it was taking so long, and he had a story in his head from his uncle Keagan's last visit, only days before his mother and many others in the castle first caught the deadly curse.

*"I hear you're quite the little hunter now,"* he had said, like he still thought Leo was a boy ten years younger. *"Have you ever tried one of the Wild Hunts? They say there is a white stag who grants a wish to any who catches him, and it's not as hard as you might think."*

Keagan continued his story, boasting of a time he had supposedly shot a fae man with iron and trapped him in his own ring. He had even told Leo where the young prince could find the ring himself, *"If you think you're brave enough."*

Sixteen-year-old Leo had shaken his head and dismissed the story. Only half the things Uncle Keagan said were ever true, and there had been nothing Leo wanted to wish for. Nothing worth tempting fate.

*But now ...*

His paws stopped short of a faerie ring of silvery white mushrooms similar to the one Ainsley and Archie had found on their hunt. His fur stood on edge. It felt so right but so wrong. Leo knew about fae—and not just from his uncle's boastful stories of the Wild Hunts or even the drunken tavern songs about the elusive Fae Queen. And when Archie had first suggested the idea of making a bargain together, it had teased at Leo's missing memories and intrigued him.

But they still hadn't gotten it right. In fact, it seemed that they had gotten it exactly backward. Archie thought Leo was a fae—the ruler and master of all bargains. And perhaps Leo merely wanted that to be the truth, rejecting what should have been plain as day.

When it came to the fae, Leo wasn't the master. He was the dope. The victim.

A cursed animal who should have been a prince.

Parts of his memory were still a bit fuzzy, but Leo knew the laughter that came next—haunting and far too familiar. Like he had been waiting to hear it creep up behind him all these years. Like it was the very danger that had spurred him to run back to Castletown when his form had first been changed, and his human memories had quickly deserted him.

A man wearing an elegant deer-skin jerkin stood in the center of the ring, appearing in the subtle blink of an eye. Except he wasn't quite a man. His cheekbones were too high, his ears were too pointed, and there was something ageless and ethereal about his stance. His white hair—longer than a maiden's—had been tied back in a queue, except for a few pieces strung with beads to frame his face. His eyes glittered like bright emeralds, and stag horns grew out the top of his head.

“So you've come back to me at last,” the fae man said. “Have you finally realized I'm the only chance you have of regaining your human form? Or are you still fighting me, my little prince?”

Leo thought he was strong. He thought he was brave. But something very human inside his cat-body sent out an alarm, and his heart started to race.

He found himself taking an involuntary step backward.

But Leo was safe. The fae couldn't leave the ring.

At least, Leo didn't *think* he could ...

The fae man shook his head. “You don't remember, do you? I wondered if that might be the case. In fact, you should be glad it was just your memories you lost. Some mortals

cannot touch magic without losing their sanity completely. And you ran off so quickly before ... You left the spell incomplete, and see how it has tormented you?" He made a tsking sort of noise, like this whole situation could have been avoided—all while walking the length of the ring with a bit of a limp, and a feral look in his emerald eyes that only made him seem more menacing. A caged bear who thought his captors would make for a fine feast.

But Leo wasn't going near the ring.

He was safe, wasn't he?

The man smiled in a way that seemed to prove the fae could read Leo's thoughts. All this time the cat had been wishing for someone he could communicate with more clearly, and now that he had it, he could only feel violated. "You're right," the fae man said. "I cannot touch you; I cannot chase you. I could call your human name in full, and it wouldn't have the same power now that you have taken a different form. But I can wait—a lot longer than you can. And one day you will come to me, the same way you came to me before."

Leo had come here before. He had asked for magic to counteract the plague, just like he had thought. And the fae had ... turned him into a cat? And his mind couldn't cope. He had lost his memories. Fine. But what now? Was he meant to stay a cat forever, even when most believed the plague had run its course?

Ainsley had just said some of the healers at the castle might have found their own cure.

"Yes, humans are never grateful. I stopped expecting that a long time ago," the fae man said, waving a dismissive hand. "But curing the plague isn't the same as ending it. You have been cutting at branches, but you haven't dug out the root. You haven't killed the one who trapped me here. It should be an easy enough task for you. The man you seek isn't clever, only persistent. Like a mindless, rabid bear." The fae growled as if to add emphasis to the point, and it seemed for a moment that he had also become a bear—a white bear with emerald eyes and stag horns on its head.

And while Leo might still have a few gaps in his memory, he was certain he didn't want to do anything that would make it so the fae could leave the ring.

“Your enemy is my enemy, princeling,” the fae man said with too much teeth and a bit of a snarl. “As I told you once before, *he* gave me your name. *He* sent you to me. And now that everyone believes you are gone, who do you think he will target next? Who has your father made the heir in your place?”

Leo shook his head, backing up again as the words settled inside him. His father hadn't named a formal heir since Leo had disappeared, but there really was only one choice. She had already reached her majority at seventeen; once she was married—or even engaged—the official announcement was sure to follow. All the terrible possibilities cycled inside his head, and soon he was sprinting back toward Castletown.

And not a second too soon. As soon as he crossed the final border of thorn trees, he caught the stink of a feral hound stalking toward the amorous miller's son and the princess.

His sister.

*Ainsley.*

## CHAPTER 24

# HELLCAT

Archie had his bow when the lone hound first attacked, but it had only ever been for show and snapped like useless twig after one swing. Archie hadn't gathered up his arrows or found himself a proper staff. They had left Ainsley's guards far behind. They had made themselves sitting ducks, and Archie could only hope he would be the only one made to suffer for his foolishness.

He dropped the broken bow and put himself in front of Ainsley, bracing himself for the tearing impact of the hound's infected fangs.

Instead, a blur of movement streaked through the forest, rustling the leaves. Leo leapt down from the trees like a specter, claws out. He caught hold of the feral dog's back, latching on.

*"Mer-row!"*

"Archie?" Ainsley said, still behind him. She should run. Or perhaps she should stay behind him—using him as a human shield for as long as she was able? Archie didn't know, so he didn't try to direct her. He just knew Leo was fighting a dog more than three times his size.

Archie needed a weapon.

He yanked down a branch from the tree behind him. It wasn't much better than the old bow had been. The wood was too new, twisted, and thin. Hardly a staff at all. But he still swung it as hard as he could at the blur of movement in front of him.

The dog growled. Leo wasn't on its back anymore, but it had slowed. It seemed to be calculating its odds with its far-too-intelligent eyes.

It's far-too-*familiar* eyes.

It was the same hound Archie had seen at the Spring Festival. The one who had lost its ear to Declan's axe. But the missing ear was the only wound the beast still carried from that fight, and even that seemed a distant sort of scar. How had it healed itself and so quickly? And what had led it back here, to the same place where so many of its fellows had already lost their lives?

Archie believed Leo was a magical and mostly benevolent cat. Perhaps this dog was Leo's cruel opposite, straight from the pits of darkness. It had the same magic, the same cunning.

And it was hunting him, the princess, or the cat.

Perhaps all three at once.

"Oy! Leave our giant alone," a familiar voice called, followed by a flurry of acorns.

Archie was too startled to react, but as the acorns continued to ping off the feral hound's hide from several directions at once. As the forest gnomes appeared carrying other weapons that mostly looked like rusty iron nails, the hound took one last, calculating glance behind before it decided to run.

Archie turned back to check on Ainsley. "Are you—?"

"Yes."

"Oy! Giant!" The child-like voice moved, like someone leaping around branches. "Your girl is fine. Now come and take a look at your cat."

Archie tracked the movement and finally found Leo lying broken and bleeding on the forest floor. His eyes were closed, as if he was using all his energy just to breathe.

The hound must have bitten him to throw him off its back.



Ainsley ran to help Leo first, fluttering her hands like an anxious hummingbird. “Archie, your cat. What can we do?”

Ainsley *knew* what to do. She helped with the healers and matrons often enough. She was just spooked, and so was he, but she needed him to be strong. “Stop the bleeding and ...” Archie forced the emotions out so he could speak, so he could move and look back at the acorn thrower. The gnome. “Can you help him?”

The gnome furrowed his whole wrinkly face and took a pointed step back. “Too much fae magic. We don’t touch the stuff.”

“But you *are* fae, aren’t you?”

“We certainly are not! We’re gnomes.” He gestured out to the forest where others of his kind must be hiding. “How could you think we were fae? You *heard* me swear I wouldn’t steal another radish. I stole five radishes just this morning, and I’m holding an iron nail!”

Archie shook his head. “You’re not fae ... but Leo is?”

The gnome shrugged. “He’s got their cursed magic all over him, just like that hound.”

“And do you know where that hound came from? Where it went?” It certainly didn’t seem like it was going to leave their town alone any time soon.

“Easy. There’s another human colony not too far from here. Didn’t you know? That’s where all the cursed monsters come from.”

Another human colony? *Carabus*.

“Archie, we can’t stay out here,” Ainsley pointedly reminded him.

They still had a wounded cat. The princess had torn off some of her underskirt to wrap around the wound, but that wouldn’t hold for long.

“We need to go,” Archie agreed. “We can take him to ...” Who? Leo was a cat. A stray. A sentimental matron might pet him or give him food, but no real healer would waste time or

medicine on him when there were still human patients to treat. Their only option would be to bring him to someone who had a clear preference for cats over people and hope for the best.

Perhaps someone who knew how to use a needle? Leo might need stitches.

Then the answer seemed far too obvious. “Tabitha. We can take him to Tabitha.”

## CHAPTER 25

# A CAT MIGHT LOOK AT A KING

When Archie and Ainsley appeared on her doorstep, Tabitha welcomed them into her shop the moment she saw Leo in the princess's arms. She didn't seem to mind the blood, but she kept fumbling her words and casting nervous glances at the princess. She even burned herself once, trying to clean one of her needles in the fire.

Archie could understand that. Tabitha loved her cats and should have no problem taking care of Leo or anything with four legs, but Ainsley was human and a stranger.

She was royalty—even if she didn't always mean to be.

So, Archie made their excuses. He told Tabitha he had to bring the princess home to the castle and report the attack to anyone who would hear him, but he would be back to check on her and Leo in the morning. Tabitha was so quick to agree that it was clear he had read the situation correctly, and Archie tried to focus on his next task.

Once they reached the castle, Ainsley maneuvered the pair of them around all the guarded doors and gates. Soon Archie stood in front of the king, the princess and her guard standing at his side. And Archie told them everything. He was too tired to do anything else. He still couldn't bring himself to call Leo a "magic cat," but he didn't hide it either—explaining everything he had seen the cat do over the years, even the parts that made Archie sound foolish.

A foolish miller's son who had fallen desperately in love with a princess.

The king was quiet for a moment, wearing a dressing gown that seemed as stately as a royal robe and sitting in a chair in his study that could have been a throne. “I don’t like being lied to,” he finally said.

“Yes, sire,” Archie said, but he still tried to meet the king’s eyes. He wasn’t hiding anything now, and he didn’t want to look weak or ashamed. He was tired of being ashamed of his own birth—something he could not control. And he would no longer shame himself with lies.

The king sighed, and his words became thoughtful. “And you say the plague rats left by the castle gates were mostly killed by your cat?”

“Yes, sire.” Archie had never seen Leo injured before; he always seemed healthier than most feral cats. Could he have caught the dreaded illness? Was he broken beyond repair? But if the plague hound could heal himself, Archie wanted to believe that Leo could too.

Leo *was* a magic cat.

“But you don’t believe me?” Archie asked. His father never believed him either.

“I don’t want to believe you—but not for the reason you might think. My son was a talented hunter. When he disappeared, when those dead rats started to appear the same week—I suppose there was a part of me that still wanted to believe he could be alive and on the hunt, even if he couldn’t or wouldn’t come home.”

Archie instantly softened. That made sense, and perhaps it should no longer surprise him that King Randolph did not respond to everything in the same way Archie’s father had. “I’m sorry, sire. I wish I could have given you another answer.”

“The whole kingdom has suffered,” the king said, standing up from his chair and moving to a window high enough to look down on some of the streets of Castletown. “I think we’ve taken the first few steps to recover from all that in the last few years, but I don’t know if I really settled on what my

plans for my succession should be. Ainsley is smart, and she would make for a good queen, but I worry our neighbors would see that as another weakness to exploit. I certainly don't want her marrying a foreign prince, but I'd like her to marry soon, someone that can carry himself like my son did."

Archie frowned. "You want her to marry a huntsman?" Could it really be that simple?

But then again, now that he knew Ainsley, Archie couldn't help but agree with the king's assessment. The princess *was* smart. She could lead the kingdom as its queen when the time came. She really didn't need another lord to compete with her in that way, but if Archie could carry a bow or even wave the proverbial and literal stick, using his muscles to stand at her back and enforce her will, then perhaps his suit would be more attractive and better received than he had ever imagined it would be.

Much better than a mouse, he would gladly play the loyal hound to her cat. It was the role he might have been training for his whole life, learning to defend his own eccentricities.

"Perhaps," the king said. "I certainly can't have her marrying a miller's son. But you're young and might be adaptable enough to grow into another role."

His eyes remained distant, studying the city for another moment before he turned.

"You said that cursed hound was headed back toward Carabus. If they are the source of all the recent plague beasts, then the situation there has become far too serious to ignore. I want to put a bounty on that beast's head, but I can't trust their Marquis to follow any command I give them. I can't trust Keagan. So, I will give you a chance to go there first and settle the bounty as a true and noble huntsman. If you handle yourself well enough to solve this matter for me, then I will displace Keagan, name you the new Marquis, and approve your suit of my daughter's hand."

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AINSLEY HAD PROMISED Archie that she would remain quiet while he spoke to her father. She kept her word, though it seemed to be a profound struggle for her. And as soon as they were back in the grand hall, her words came out in a rush. “I want to come with you.”

To fight a cursed hound? To investigate a man everyone called an ogre?

Oh. No. That couldn't be good.

“Don't look at me like that,” she said, focusing her ire on her guard for one blessed moment. “You know it isn't fair. Father can't ask Archie to fight a monster like that just because he doesn't have a title.”

Of course the king could ask Archie to fight a monster! He was the king. And it fit quite well with what the man had said about who he wished for his daughter to marry, someone with the ability to cow her enemies with a reputation of his own. A noble huntsman. A monster hunter. Something Archie would be glad to be, if given the chance.

He would do anything to honorably claim the hand of the girl beside him.

But how could he ever convince that same girl to stay behind? Would she ever listen?

He had to try. “Ainsley, I know you want to come, and after this, I hope we will have all our adventures together, but if I can't meet your father's conditions without also putting you in danger, I won't feel I earned the right to stand beside you. You were the one to help me with the bow. Can that be enough?”

Ainsley shook her head, and he could see the pain in her expression. She looked back and forth between him and Sir Callum before her eyes finally rested on a portrait behind him. It was a portrait of her family—the king, the late queen, herself, and someone else with hazel eyes that looked far too familiar. “It feels too much like the day Leo left. What if you never come back?”

Archie frowned, still staring at the painted portrait and putting the words together. *It wasn't like Leo*—that's what she had said to her father when she asked to join the hunting party. And Archie had been distracted and had only thought of Leo the cat. But even when he had first told the princess the cat's name, she had reacted in a strange way. She had almost cried.

Because just like people rarely liked to speak directly of the plague, the name the cat had chosen for himself had become painful to the royal family, and it was no wonder why.

“Your brother,” Archie said, still chewing on the word and all the possibilities that came with it. “Your brother was the Crown Prince Leopold, but you called him Leo.”

Ainsley looked confused, but she answered him. “Yes.”

Was that really the answer? Again, it all seemed so simple and horribly complex all at once. “Then you don't have to worry. I know exactly how I'm going to defeat that monster.”

He had a magic cat.



## CHAPTER 26

# CATNAP

Leo hadn't always been a cat, and he wasn't always magical. Once, he was human, and he was lost. Pain pierced his heart. And then he had heard a voice, soft and distant, calling him deeper into the darkness. "*Leopold Tamias Lynister,*" it had said, elongating the words so they sank through him, past his conscious mind.

There was nothing to question.

Nothing to fear.

He watched his feet move closer, his boots crushing through the forest loam. A pair of emerald eyes greeted him, sparkling with their own inner light. "*I was told to expect you here. I was even given your name ... told I could toy with you however I wish. How do you feel about that? Do you know who would have done such a thing?*"

Leo had no answer. He was completely fascinated by those impossible, penetrating eyes. Then a hand appeared, long and elegant fingers beckoning him to take another step toward a line of silvery-white mushrooms peeking through the forest greenery. A circle. The whole ring glowed softly in the moonlight, but not as brightly as the eyes.

A chilled breeze ran down his neck, the shadow of a warning stilling his steps.

The fae man smiled. He wasn't just a pair of eyes. He was a man with white hair and an impressive pair of stag horns. All Leo could do was stare, torn between wonder and fear.

The voice started again, sounding more like the purr a cat might make after the mouse had been caught, but the game had just begun. *“Tell me who sent you here, my little prince.”*

Leo shook his head, still staring. He wouldn't lie. *“I wasn't sent. I came myself.”*

*“Is that what you believe?”* The fae man took his own step forward, but the elegance of the movement was followed by a subtle grimace of pain. Like a limping deer. Something dark, like blood, stained the grass below him. He had been hurt. But who could hurt a being like this?

Leo searched his thoughts for the answer, but it seemed just out of reach.

*“Leopold Tamias Lynister ...”* The fae man was nothing but a pair of eyes again, holding Leo's complete attention and banishing any other thought. Something about the glowing irises still reminded Leo of a predator, but also an artisan looking over a blank canvas or a mound of clay. *“I have the shape of you now. The last man came to me with iron and was eager to grasp for things that weren't his own, but that's not who you are. You didn't come here for power, and even an offer of revenge wouldn't appeal to you so much as—”*

*“There is a plague on my kingdom,”* Leo said with a sudden burst of his own eagerness. There was no conflict; this was what he came here for. *“My mother was killed. It seems ... unnatural. Like a curse, and I wanted ... I hoped ...”*

Tinkling laughter filled the glade. *“You are noble then. Well, isn't that delightful?”* The man took another limping step, stopping at the ring's edge and holding out his hand. *“Yes. I would be glad to help you on your quest, my little princeling. But you must swear yourself to me with your full name and blood. The kind of power I wish to give you cannot be bestowed without it.”*

Leo nodded and reached for his boot without thinking. He had dropped his bow somewhere—likely when the voice had first started calling for him—but he had a small hunting knife hidden near his calf. He never went into the faerie's forest without it.

Red blood seeped across his palm before the sting of the blade made him pause.

The blade was pure iron. He had brought iron. Because he had known there would be a fae here—or at least he had hoped to find one. He had hoped to make a bargain where he would somehow come out on top. Such a thing seemed impossible now. The fae already knew his name.

Leo was already bleeding scarlet, mere inches from the ring.

And he still very much wanted to banish the curse on his land, even if it cost him his life.

So Leo reached his bleeding hand out to the fae before he could talk himself out of it. *“My name is Leopold Tamias Lynister, son of King Randolph the First and Crown Prince of Umbrae. I will swear myself to you in exchange for the power to defeat the cursed plague on my land, provided no more harm befalls my family and the rest of my kingdom.”*

The fae man seemed offended. *“Hmm ... conditions. Even now? What a fierce little prince you are.”* He considered Leo’s hand, his nostrils flared like the whole blood ritual was now beneath his dignity. *“But you needn’t be so afraid. I would never hurt you, and I would never ask you to do something completely against your nature. It takes far too much power, and frankly, it isn’t nearly as fun.”*

The fae took Leo’s hand like the strike of a viper. *“Come to me, my noble prince, and let us see what we might do together.”*

Leo stumbled into the ring. His knife fell useless somewhere behind him.

*“Leopold Tamias Lynister.”* The voice had the same power as before—even more. Like the words had taken up his whole chest and gently nudged him out of it. Pieces of himself blinked into view as if asking for approval. Open. Vulnerable. Ready to change if necessary. But for now, the voice only purred with dark delight. *“You are a noble beast indeed. A hunter. A warrior ... I will let you keep those threads for now,*

*but you must understand there is a hierarchy to these things. You might be higher than your human peers ... but there are others higher than you.*”

Leo didn't disagree. He couldn't.

He knelt by the fae man in the ring, nothing but the words to cling onto. *“Yes. That is what you are. So fierce, but yet so small. You believe yourself to be a prince, but I believe I could see you as a cat. A little hunter. A little prince. Can you see it too?”* The fae made an open gesture with his hand, like he really was asking for Leo to add his input and join him at his work.

Leo frowned, but with his mind so adrift, he didn't want to argue. He wanted something to cling to. And the fae could be right. Leo was a strong hunter, but he had always been wiry and favored the bow. There were some in his father's court who still considered him a child—even so close to reaching his majority. So perhaps he *could* be small, and he certainly *should* be smaller than the powerful being before him.

Then it seemed his body was eager to make that change, once his mind was on board.

Something inside him twisted. He closed his eyes with the strain. It wasn't comfortable, but it wasn't really pain. Like being stretched. Compressed. All with the knowledge that he would be more *complete* and more *himself* when it was done.

The fangs were all right. Who wouldn't want fangs?

The claws—just another dagger he could never be separated from.

But he stumbled a bit with the fur.

There was a tsking sound, like he was a disobedient child. *“There now. There is no need to fight me here, my little prince. You always had an obscene amount of hair, and now you will have fur.”* The fae man seemed more insistent now. Impatient. Uncompromising. Fae never lied, but perhaps Leo had never understood before—how it could work both ways.

The fae never lied because any word they uttered had the power to become the truth.

Leo sprouted fur and a tail, and there was nothing more to fuss about. He would only look silly if he stayed between forms and didn't allow the transformation to continue.

As a prince, Leo always wore the latest fashions and would never allow himself to look *silly*.

The voice—inside his head as much as out—approved. *“There. Not such a big change—you are only enhanced. You were always a cat, were you not? You see that now, don't you?”*

Leo opened his eyes. The colors around him had shifted, blending together. His tail twitched experimentally. Perhaps he could believe he had always been this way.

After all, cats were sensible creatures and rarely concerned themselves about anything outside of the present.

He was a cat, and the fae man stumbled back from him—a real stumble instead of an elegantly limping deer. Leo marked the stink of blood and sweat. The emerald eyes had lost some of their inner luster, but the man still held the satisfaction of a fight well-fought and won.

He picked Leo up by the scruff of his neck. *“You were Leopold Tamias Lynister, and perhaps you would like to know me as well. I am also a prince. A prince of shifters. A prince of beasts. And you are a cat. I have given you a part of my magic. A part of me. And in exchange, you will be a fine pet for me. A little hunter. A little prince. So fierce and yet so small. You see it, don't you? And you will hunt for me.”*

Leo kicked his back legs uncomfortably. He didn't know if he objected to the words per se, but the name didn't seem to *belong* to him so much anymore—now that he was a cat.

No. He had always been a cat, and any cat knew that they didn't like being held this way.

*“Sh ...”* The fae man tried to calm him. *“There is no need to worry, little prince. I'm not going to hurt you. You must realize that now. Magic has a certain order to it, and I have made you one of my own. Hurting you? Why, that would be like cutting off my own hand.”*

Still the man's grip tightened, and Leo continued to kick—like a fighting rabbit.

*“However ... there is someone who leaches my power without my consent. Someone who is more like a parasite than one of my own. If you could kill this man for me or bring him close enough that I can kill him myself ... Really, there could be nothing more natural. It is the way of beasts.”* In their exuberance and exhaustion, the emerald eyes seemed more focused on their own desires now. They didn't seem to notice how the words were landing.

Or that his captive audience was fighting for an escape.

The fae man held Leo higher and closer to his face, trying to lock eyes again. *“You will do this for me, won't you? Your enemy is my enemy, and you will enjoy hunting out the rats until you find the root of your kingdom's curse. You will return to me in triumph and then ... I will find a better place for you. I will reward you. You will be my pet but also hers.”*

Leo stopped kicking. This wasn't working.

Perhaps if he was human ... Perhaps if he still had his iron knife ...

But he *was* a cat.

And cats weren't above scratching the face of any prince stupid enough to try to dominate them. His front paw swung. His claws extended.

The fae man dropped him in a manner Leo became happy to repeat.

The cat's mind might be fractured, his memories lost, but he was running back to where he had a semblance of home, determined that any man who tried to hold him and claimed to be his master would feel the sting of his claws.

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THEY SAY cats have nine lives, and Leo was certain he had lost one more. That dog had been humongous and likely riddled

with the plague. Leo had no business charging into its jaws, and any true cat would have known better.

But Leo knew who he was, even if no one else did. He knew who Ainsley was too.

He would always risk his life for her, the kingdom, and even the cursed miller's son.

That's what princes were supposed to do—no matter what state they found themselves in afterward. And right now, Leo was in a whole lot of pain, the sensation stabbing his ribs anew every time he took a breath.

Sleep wasn't an escape. That was when he heard the voice again, the last of his memories clicking into place. *"Kill the rats, my little prince. Kill every one you see. And when you have gotten to the root of your kingdom's curse, you will return to me in triumph. And then ... I will reward you."*

Then came the words, perhaps unspoken but still undeniable. *"I will own you."*

Locked in dreams and agony, Leo twisted in another spasm. Then Tabitha was there with a few light touches and soft words. She had stayed up with him as the night wore on, though she claimed it was hardly a sacrifice. "I've heard tales that when we dream, our spirits visit the faerie realm. Though, if that is true, then the faerie realm hasn't been a kind place for you. Sometimes, it isn't a kind place for me either."

Why should the faerie realm be kind to him? The fae weren't kind. His memories weren't kind. But something of their magic had to be at work to fight off the plague and heal the rest of his body because much of the pain and delirium faded by daybreak.

He was lying on a ruffly pillow in the familiar store loft.

Far too many ruffles. Leo swatted at them even before he was truly awake.

Tabitha turned from her work and smiled down at him. "There is our hero. Selflessly saving us all from rats, hounds, and bad fashion."



Leo squinted at the manikin behind her. No one could call what Tabitha was stitching now “bad fashion,” no matter what it had been only days before. She might not be fae, but she still had that sort of creative gift, even using a few remaining ruffles to their best advantage.

She could make anything better than it had any business being.

She came and rubbed her hand against his whiskered face. “I’m glad you’re awake. And healing better than I hoped. You are truly the most peculiar cat I have ever met. Though if you scare me like that again ...” She shook her head. “I won’t say anything against your huntsman friend or our princess, but you don’t always have to be the hero. You know that, right? You helped so many people in this town, and some of us would like to be able to help you too.”

Help him ... Help him with what?

Leo was a prince trapped by a faerie curse, but Tabitha couldn’t know that, and he couldn’t tell her. Even if he tried to spell out the words, she wouldn’t have been able to read it.

But as he watched her now, he felt a strange sense of unease. Tabitha once said she hoped he would find a family equal to him in every way, but Prince Leopold never would have noticed a half-mute and illiterate shopgirl. All his associates outside of his own small family were simple servants or sycophants, and he never thought he needed anything different.

And Prince Leopold was a fool. Tom knew better, and now Leo did too.

During the plague, some people rose to the challenge and became nearer to the sainted heroes and holy oracles blessed by the Light of the Fates. Others grew closer to beastly devils from the pits of darkness. And many of both types could reside in the same house.

Tabitha was a saint.

Her mother was a devil.

And while Leo couldn't picture Tabitha ever carrying a sword or bow or any weapon greater than a needle, he had seen the evidence of her courage. When she had given him that first plate of food, she still lived in the shadowed corners of her house of origin, and he was there the day she found the strength to leave. Carrying Leo like a talisman, she had faced down several hard-faced strangers until she found her current situation as a shopkeeper.

She lived at the shop and never went home with the shop-owners for propriety's sake, but there were still some tongues that were looser than they should have been. A woman living alone was a curiosity. And Leo had gone to the shop more than once, just to check on her.

Like he could fight a bandit or at least be her talisman again.

As a prince, Leo often felt he was responsible for the fates and happiness of the entire kingdom, but Tabitha didn't really need him like that. If something changed at the dress shop, she would find another situation for herself just as she did last time. But as she petted and cared for him now, he couldn't deny a growing part of him longed to be a man again, just so he could walk more steadily beside her.

Just a man. Not a prince. He had never wanted to be Tabitha's pet, but he didn't want to be her master either. More than his equal, she was strong in every way he was weak.

Like they could only be whole if they were together.

The part of him that was a cat purred almost involuntarily under her ministrations, and Tabitha became firmer than Leo had ever seen her before. There would be no argument. "You will stay here tonight."

## CHAPTER 27

# HERDING CATS

If Archie's life were a faerie story or even one of the old plays, the next sunrise would have been bright with scarlet in the sky. Or perhaps, as the fates loved irony, it would have been overcast with gray. But no, it was somewhere in the middle—an unremarkable spring morning that brought Archie out to meet his brother, barefoot and wearing some old hand-me-downs fitting for a miller's third son. He helped to load the cart with all the supplies the king had gathered for Carabus and then sat in his usual place. "I appreciate this, Harris."

His brother didn't even turn to look at him, hiding behind his floppy hat and long bangs as he steered his cart through the streets of Castletown. "It's an official charter from the king. What was I going to do? Say no?"

"Still, I appreciate it."

Harris shook his head. "You appreciate it—you appreciate the king sending you out like a sacrificial lamb to investigate the Ogre of Carabus and his pet monster. The king's probably hoping you get yourself eaten. It would solve a few problems for him, wouldn't it?"

"Maybe," Archie said, refusing to rise to his brother's bait. Harris was only parroting the same lines both of them had learned from childhood. If Archie was to fight for the king, he would be used as fodder. And if he was to love a princess, he would be her fool. "But I hope to solve some problems for him by not being killed. If I can help it."

He really didn't know how to explain how glad he was to fight a monster. To finally know for certain what he wanted and all the steps required of him to get there. To finally prove his own worth and become his own master, even if he died in the attempt. It was the kind of risk that called to his soul and could make all his work worthwhile. It was the opportunity to do something so grand that he could stand by his beloved's side and no longer feel the need to shrink.

Harris looked over his shoulder for a moment before letting out a breathy sigh. A sigh that seemed to say that he thought Archie was an idiot, but he was still *his* idiot. Brothers. "You and Rupert—you just get under each other's skin, but he'd calm down if you talked to him right. And I told him from the beginning that he needed to be more straight with you too, but he was afraid you would bolt, and then that's exactly what you did ..." He shrugged. "But it isn't a bad deal. Being a baker. Not risking your life. Just being ..."

"Normal?"

Harris kept his eyes on the road. "Nothing wrong with normal."

"I suppose not." Archie was surprised how much truth he found in the words. "And I still want the best for you. For Rupert too." He had wanted something different for himself so badly, but perhaps he had taken it too far, offending his brothers unnecessarily.

He had never wanted to do that.

When his mother was alive, Archie had no reason to begrudge his lot as a miller's son. And even now, could he truly resent the father who had provided so much for him? Resent the brothers who took to their proper work, allowing him to reach for something different? There was still so much of his family's normal, orderly world that he relied on. Even treasured.

Archie might have been born with a different sort of spirit, but that didn't mean he expected the rest of the world to bend over to accommodate him or follow him down the same twisted path. In fact, it was probably better that they didn't.

The world needed good and steady millers—perhaps more than it needed uncertain dreamers.

From the beginning, Archie knew Rupert should inherit the house and the mill. All of it. They were assets that only worked as a unit and trying to divide them evenly would have only put him and his brothers at each other's throats that much faster.

Archie hadn't cared that Harris got the donkey and cart.

But when Archie saw his name listed with the magic cat—well, he had thought there was only one way to read it but perhaps not. Instead of a slight, it could have been an olive branch. Archie was the third son. He was never meant to stay at the mill, but instead of locking him into another sort of apprenticeship, his father had left him with an invitation to chase his own dreams.

To be his own master and find his own freedom.

He didn't have to be *normal*. Not when he had a magic cat.

“And what exactly is your plan?” Harris asked.

It was only an extension of the king's plan, but it rolled off his tongue easily enough. “Let you bring in the supplies. Mix with the servants. Find a way into the keep.”

“And then?”

“And then ...” What would happen then? Perhaps he wouldn't know until he breached the ogre's gates, but Archie felt another burst of hope as they neared a familiar second-hand shop. “You think we could stop here for a second?”

Harris cocked his head. “You want to get yourself another fancy outfit for your day at the ball?”

“Something like that,” Archie said, preparing to jump out of the cart.

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LEO WASN'T surprised Archie came to see him at Tabitha's again. The boy couldn't do anything without Leo's help, already looking like a scruffy, shoeless miller's son again.

But Leo was surprised when Archie reached the porch and knelt on the ground before him.

"You're Leopold, aren't you? The prince, I mean?"

Leo winced. How on earth did the bumbling oaf figure that out? But the question only came to him on reflex, born of his surprise and even anger. Leo knew Archie was smarter than he appeared, smarter than the cat had ever given him proper credit for. So why couldn't Archie have waited until they were alone? *Tabitha* was here.

So, what would she do? Would she gasp and stutter, seeing him only as a prince?

Or would she simply refuse to believe it, seeing him only as a cat?

Leo wasn't sure which reaction would hurt him more. He had wanted to find his name and be recognized as a prince for so long, but now, things were different.

It had always been easy for Leo to see why a boy like Archie might dream of becoming a prince. It had taken longer for him to see why a prince might wish to only be a man, to have a few true friends and not have to feel quite so responsible for everything. The cursed prince and the disinherited miller's son might be opposite sides of the same awful coin, the very idea that their worth should be based on something as arbitrary as class and be ranked against each other.

But Tabitha barely blinked, brushing away the half-dozen cats she had been feeding. "Of course Tom's a prince. What else could he possibly be? And I really should have ..." Then she scooped Leo up and kissed him on top of his furry head.

Well, that was new. But his paws stayed firmly in place.

Tabitha sighed. "That didn't work. But it *always* works in the stories. True love can break any sort of faerie curse." But she wasn't discouraged for long, quickly looking about for

another solution. “But I’ve only known him as a cat. Does he have another sweetheart that we could try? Someone who knew him before he changed?”

Another sweetheart? Why on earth would he want another sweetheart?

Leo shook his head, trying to focus. If Tabitha’s kiss hadn’t worked, then no kiss would. There might have been a few young ladies about the court who had been interested in his title, but none who would bother with him as a cat. And Leo could admit he just wasn’t particularly loveable before he had changed his form. Not in the true and selfless way that kind of cure would have demanded. But Tabitha had tried. She had stayed. That was something.

Maybe he had changed in more ways than the obvious because he knew he didn’t need another sweetheart. He already had the sweetest and most ridiculous girl around.

“I have to go to Carabus,” Archie said, still on his knees like a proper petitioner to his prince. “There is a man there that the king is suspicious of, someone who says the plague is still going on in his lands and might be involved with the feral hounds that appeared during the Spring Festival. I mean, I suppose the Marquis would be your uncle, but his serfs call him an ogre.”

Archie shook his head, like he knew he was rambling. “And I just thought—well, I thought of asking you to come along with me, but I think it might be something I should do alone. I need to see if I can be the kind of man worthy of your sister and make my own magic. I still wanted to thank you though—for getting me this far. You didn’t have to do that.”

Yes, Leo had. Everything he had done to help Archie had only been in pursuit of his own memories. That Tabitha and Archie still thought he was some kind of selfless creature—what was he to do with that? And he still wanted to fight for a very selfish reason.

Tabitha’s kiss hadn’t worked. Leo was still cursed because he hadn’t completed his quest to stop the plague—a plague Archie thought was still going on in Carabus.



That had to be the root, the final piece to everything.

Archie had already turned and started to walk away. Leo only had a few moments if he wanted to hide away in the cart—still wearing the best disguise around. No one ever suspected the cat.

But Tabitha hadn't put him down.

He wasn't going to scratch her to gain his freedom, but then, he never needed to.

"It's time for you to go and be the hero again, isn't it?" she said without prompting.

Leo nodded, tense and ready to spring. But she still didn't release him.

A drop of moisture hit his fur.

"I know you're a prince and that you have some sort of magic, but I just stitched you up. You were covered in blood. You scared me so much, and I'm afraid if I let you go, you'll hurt yourself again, or you won't come back at all."

More moisture drenched his coat like a summer rain. The part of him that was still a cat was repelled.

The part of him that was human was devastated.

He had seen Tabitha cry before, but not like this. Not for something he had done.

Tabitha jerked as if fighting a war inside her own head. "You can't stay here. You're a prince, and you can't be one of my pets forever. But I had to leave my home before too. I was scared, and you helped me. I can't help you fight an ogre or any kind of monster, but if someone else can ... If Archie can ..."

She didn't know what she was asking. Archie had yet to prove himself to be anything but a miller's son; Leo had to do everything himself since the day he became a cat.

"Just come back," Tabitha said. "Promise me that you will come back." She released him, and Leo hit the ground running. He couldn't look back. He couldn't do anything to

stop Tabitha's tears from flowing, and he couldn't stay to watch them fall. He had made his choice four years ago when he had bargained with that fae, and he couldn't go back and change it now.

But by all the fates, he wished he could.

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HARRIS RAISED an eyebrow at Archie when he returned entirely empty-handed. "What were you doing there?"

"Giving away my inheritance," Archie said simply.

And now he truly felt free.

## CHAPTER 28

# A CAT IN HELL'S CHANCE

Archie understood why the king sent him to investigate the Ogre Marquis and kill the plague dog in Carabus. It wasn't just because he wanted to give Archie the opportunity to win a title and court his daughter. It was also because of what happened with the Carabus guards and the royal hunting party. The suspicious guards had been quick to send any of the king's men away, and forcing them to do otherwise was sure to start a bloody conflict the king wasn't quite ready to risk. Still, the Carabus guards seemed only slightly more inclined to allow in two peasant boys who drove a more innocuous-looking cart of supplies.

And once they crossed the city gates, they were surrounded by several noxious spears. Harris gulped, and it was left to Archie to speak for the group.

It was his mission, after all.

He put his hands up. "Hello, sirs. We've brought the king's supplies, as promised. We don't mean you any harm." Archie had a staff hidden in with the supplies, but that was only on the off chance he got to face the ogre's monster directly. He had no reason to want to harm any of the commoners of Carabus—in fact, he was sure the king would rather he did not, or a larger and more capable force would have been sent to do the job.

"I understand, friend," one of the guards said with true remorse in his voice. "But we are under quarantine here. No one who enters may leave, by order of the Marquis, lest we risk spreading our misfortune to others. You understand?"

“You want us to stay here?” Archie looked back at Harris. Archie had intended to stay. Risking himself had been an easy choice to make, but he never wanted to put his brother in danger.

Harris had picked a safer path for himself, and he should be allowed to follow it.

“It’s not so bad,” the guard said, already lowering his spear slightly. “We’re short of men and will need to put you to work as you are able, but we’re not short of women and other comforts. At least, so long as you remain healthy enough to enjoy your share. What is your trade?”

“I’m ...” Archie hesitated for another moment, but then he became determined. He had not meant to bring his brother into trouble, but now that he had, there didn’t seem to be a way to retreat. He would have to press on with the mission the best he could. Save them both. “Our father was a miller, but Harris knows more about that than I do. He’s also a carrier and can work as a plow-hand so long as he and his animal are treated fairly.”

The man with the spear nodded. “And what about you?”

“I’m Archie.” There was another surge of relief that he still could be so honest. “Just Archie. I worked more with our mother, so I can bake, keep a garden, or do other household labor. Perhaps I could find work at your lord’s manor if he has need.”

Archie had tried to keep his voice casual, but the guard still looked suspicious. Perhaps he should have protested more—or frozen as Harris had done.

“I recognize you,” the guard said, scratching at his beard. “You were with the king and his huntsman when the request for aid was given. And now, you were the one he sent.”

Smart guards. That never happened in a proper faerie story. It was disappointing, but Archie still had a ready answer that was hardly even a lie. “I was never anyone important. I truly am only a miller’s son, same as my brother, but the king’s

daughter has been very generous and has done a few favors for me. The king ... doesn't approve."

"I see." The man laughed at Archie's apparent misfortune, and just like that, the spear was gone. "So you don't mind being somewhere your king cannot follow? But I still feel I should warn you: the Marquis goes through staff at his castle rather quickly."

That did not surprise him, if half the rumors Archie had heard about the Ogre Marquis were true. In fact, this might be the best opening he had to ask his own question. "Is he an ogre then? The Marquis?"

"I've never seen an ogre, so what do I know?" The guard's face had quickly fallen into a careful mask that revealed more than his words alone. "He *was* human. Before. Now he's ... Well, I'll let you judge for yourself, but I would do my best not to cross him." And with those final words, another one of the guards called for Harris to get off the cart and follow him.

Harris gave Archie one last look. And it wasn't the kind of look Archie expected. Instead of being angry or even annoyed, Harris seemed to be asking Archie if he was sure he wanted to separate. One last chance for Archie to give up and ask his elder brother to swoop in and rescue him, but he wasn't going to give in. Not now.

He would save them both if he could.

Once Harris was gone, the guard directed their cart to move closer to the lord's castle, Archie sneaking glances at the village square. It wasn't like Castletown. The people of Carabus looked so downcast. Archie might do nothing else, but at least today, they had brought more food for the people—assuming their lord was willing to share.

The cart was sent to the stables to be unloaded, and Archie was directed toward a kitchen not much different than the one at the matrons' Charity House, though it was larger. A few people rushed in and out with their work like they were trying not to get caught in the open, but a middle-aged woman worked in the center of the room, along with a young girl peeling turnips.

The guard called to the woman—Helga—and left Archie to her instruction.

“So, you say you can bake? Start baking.” The woman said it like it was a test. Like she was suspicious of him.

Fair enough. Archie would be suspicious of him too. He moved over to the counter. “I can’t do anything too fancy. But maybe some bread?”

Helga didn’t object. He fumbled around for some flour and eggs and started the same recipe he had done more times than he could count. After a while, the woman seemed to relax, telling him not to skimp on the lard or let the bread get too dry. “The Marquis has a richer palate than you’ll find amongst us commoners.”

Archie nodded, still eager to seize on any opening he could. “And what else should I know about him?”

Helga’s face tightened with her steady frown. “The less you know, the better. Just keep your nose down and do your task well, and you might keep your neck.” Then she turned her attention to the girl with the turnips. “Greta. Keep that knife moving.”

The woman left after that, and it wasn’t hard to see why. She wasn’t just the castle’s cook—she also directed the maids and other castle staff and seemed happy to have another set of hands she could order around so she could busy herself elsewhere. Which made sense if the staff in the castle didn’t last long.

Archie would have to try the best he could with the girl she had left behind.

“Your name is Greta?” he tried as he started to knead the bread dough.

Greta nodded but remained silent. Head down. Even the plague orphans in Castletown weren’t so downcast, but he still hoped he could come to befriend her in the same way.

“Would you like me to tell you a story, Greta? It will help the time go faster.”

The girl didn't agree, but she didn't disagree either. That might be the best he was going to get. Archie started in with Anderdolf the Dwarf, the first story that came to mind. But as he described the overlooked dwarf, he paused. Anderdolf was often played as foolish, even as he won the princess's heart. Someone the children could laugh at, even as they cheered him on.

That wasn't the kind of hero he wanted for Greta.

And it was no longer the kind of hero Archie wanted to be.

The changes weren't large—not at first. He just dropped the falsetto when speaking the dwarf's lines and tried to show how clever Anderdolf's letters to the princess were. How fearless he was to chase his dreams, even the ones that seemed higher than even a normal-sized man could reach. Anderdolf had the heart to be a dragon-slayer, if only he had been given the chance.

And when the girl gave him a hesitant smile, he knew he had gotten it right.

“Do you think ... could a hero like Anderdolf beat an ogre?” Greta said, still addressing the turnips in her hands.

“I don't know,” Archie said slowly, kneading the dough more than was strictly necessary. “What's this ogre like?”

The girl hesitated for another moment. Archie was tempted to let her be—she *was* a child—but he had to know. He had risked too much already.

“You don't mind telling me? If it's just another story?”

The girl thought it over for another moment, but then she started to speak. “The ogre was a man, but he wanted to be king.”

Archie nodded with a bit of his own shame. “A good start. Men often want more than they have, and that can bring all kinds of trouble.”

Greta shook her head. “But he doesn't look like a man anymore. He has some stolen faerie magic, and he can control



any beast he wants. Control them, change them ... or become them.”

The ogre was a shapeshifter? “Any creature? Like a lion? Or a bear?”

The girl nodded. “Anything. But that isn’t enough to beat a whole army, so he had to make another plan.”

“What kind of plan?”

Greta shrank back, whispering her answer to the turnips. “He has rats.”

Rats? “Like the plague rats?”

“They breed,” she said.

“What?”

“The rats. They breed. Sometimes there are a lot of them, and then there are not.”

Archie’s mind spun with all the implications of the girl’s confession, the words running down his back like ice. “But that didn’t make him king either, did it?” The girl didn’t answer, but he had to know. “Did he try to breed dogs the same way as the rats? Did he *become* a dog?”

Could the Ogre Marquis and his monster be the very same creature?

A *thump* sounded behind him. Helga had returned, frowning at them both. “What did I tell you about asking questions? Asking questions is why some people disappear. And you brought Greta into it.”

“It was just a story, Mama. He told me one too,” the girl tried, but Archie couldn’t pretend anymore. Not after what he just heard.

“Your Marquis is a shapeshifting monster. He created the plague. He released it on the other villages using all sorts of beasts. And nothing has been done about it?”

The woman didn’t try to deny it. “Keeps people from poking around. At least it has, these past few years.”

Archie nodded. He had already figured that part out. “But it hasn’t been working so well. People are growing more immune to the plague and know to kill a rat if they see one.”

And in Castletown, they had a cat who could kill a hundred rats in the same day.

A cat who used to be a prince, one who went questing to see if he could stop a plague.

And just like neither Archie nor Leo were all they had appeared to be, the Marquis wasn’t a true Marquis anymore. He was an ogre. A shapeshifter. Someone who wanted far more than he had been given. But it was always a lie, and Archie knew from experience that the only way to maintain a lie was to keep burying it with more stories and even darker atrocities. “That’s why he needed the dogs, but they took longer to breed and were easier to spot and kill when they were released. What will he try next? A whole menagerie at once?”

No answer. It seemed he had the truth of the matter before him.

“And no one has ever tried to stop him?”

“Some have,” the woman said, roaring back to the offensive, “but never in the numbers needed to make a difference. He welcomes it sometimes, going amongst the guards, daring any of them to challenge him, even letting them pick which form he takes before he attacks. And if one of them do ...” Helga shuddered. “Matthew found your staff in that cart you brought. You’re strong enough that you could be a fighter, but the Marquis could still break your bones in one twitch of his wrist or become a lion to swallow you whole. I’ve seen it.”

Archie nodded. He had been sent to kill a hound and find the information the king needed to displace the ogre. About the only good piece of news here was that in doing one task, he could accomplish the other. But how could he defeat an ogre? If it came down to a direct fight, the whole of the king’s army might be able to do something, but Archie shared his monarch’s reluctance to go that route. He never liked that kind

of conflict, and how many people would die in the crossfire? His own brother amongst them.

“We could try something else.” He looked at the food in his hands. “We could poison him.”

The woman didn’t flinch. “I thought about that. But I’ve seen him eat raw and spoiled meat sometimes. What could poison him? And if it didn’t work the first time, and he got suspicious ... It’s the ones who ask questions and cause trouble that disappear, but it’s not me I worry about. It’s my child.” She looked back at Greta.

“I understand. But you know we can’t go on like this. And now that I’m here, you don’t have to take the blame if something goes wrong.” He didn’t have a child to think of, and he had a greater reward promised to him if he succeeded.

Helga hesitated. “It’s a big risk.”

Archie nodded and pulled out the bread dough that had been left to rise. “Then let’s be sure it works. What can we use? What kind of herbs do you have?”

The words sounded brave and bold enough. And then came the cracks. When the poisoned bread had finally finished baking in the oven, the guard—Matthew—ran back in. “You brought in that cart? You’re some kind of fighter? And did you know you carried in the princess of Umbrae?”

## CHAPTER 29

# CATFIGHT

Ainsley was a lot of things. Beautiful. Skilled with both her tongue and a bow. But one thing she couldn't seem to do was mix in with a crowd of servants. And whatever plan she made to come here unnoticed had quickly unraveled. When Archie followed the guard Matthew into the great hall, still holding a tray of food he didn't know if he would actually get the chance to deliver as the Marquis's poisoned dinner, the princess was already there in a peasant's dress, giving a low curtsy to a man she didn't seem to recognize as her uncle.

And it was no wonder as Archie hardly recognized him as a man at all. Along with missing half of one ear, the Ogre Marquis was too bloated, his face too deformed. Coarse brown hair sprouted from the most unlikely places. He was also barefoot and only wore a loose robe as it might have been the only kind of clothing that would fit his monstrous form.

He was an ogre.

"Hello," she tried, rising from her curtsy and speaking to the ogre in a softer tone than usual. No one was holding her—all the guards and servants seemed to want to keep their distance—but they weren't leaving her any opening to escape either. "Are you the lord of this castle? I'm Annie. Annie Miller. I'm sorry I hid in the cart and didn't announce myself earlier, but I didn't want my brothers to see me. I suppose you will be putting me to work as well?"

The ogre didn't blink as he stared her down from his seat at the table. "Princess Ainsley."

Archie's heart plummeted, and Ainsley tried to protest. "No. I'm—"

"Don't play games with me, lass. Just because you haven't seen me in my human form in almost five years doesn't mean I haven't seen you. You're the princess, and if you're here, then the king knows far more than he should. He'll be coming with his army next, but at least I'll have you as a bargaining chip."

Ainsley dropped her hands and raised her chin. "You can't be my uncle. You're nothing but a beast. And those monsters you sent killed your own sister."

The ogre shrugged, already signaling to the men to come and lock the princess up somewhere. "I would have preferred the king, but animals are stupid, even when I take the risk of putting myself at their head."

Archie glanced down at his weapon: poisoned bread. But it was too slow to save the princess. Too risky, if the ogre had already connected them with Ainsley as the ones who drove the cart. What could he try instead?

Ainsley glared. "How has no man come to stand against you?"

"They've all been welcome to try."

Archie dropped his tray, finally finding his voice. He might not have time to think of another plan but wouldn't risk letting the princess out of his sight. "I'll try."

Ainsley turned. "Archie." The word had the measure of a full apology, but Archie blamed himself. He should have known that the princess would try something. Asking her to stay behind in the same way her brother had was far too much for anyone to expect. He had just hoped.

And now he had to abandon all his former plans and cling to another fool's hope. After all, it wasn't just Ainsley who was in trouble. It was the whole of Carabus and maybe even Castletown.

The whole kingdom.

The ogre stood, pushing the table away from him with his girth. The lumbering movements echoed on the cracked tile. “You’re new. Were you the one who came in with the princess?” He rolled his shoulders, already preparing for a fight. “I suppose that gift alone gives you the right to challenge me if that is truly what you wish. Do you want a weapon?”

Archie’s old bow was broken. He had brought a staff—though he had left it in the cart and wasn’t sure where it was now. Matthew seemed willing to hand over his spear, but the rest of the guards and servants were scattering to the edges of the room, taking the princess with them. They cleared the area so fast that it was obvious this wasn’t the first bloody tournament held in this hall.

Archie swallowed hard, but he stepped forward without the spear. Archie had never liked to solve his conflicts this way—to be seen as another ogre—but perhaps he must to save the princess. He would play any role and use any skill he had available to help Ainsley.

That was exactly the sort of hero he wanted to be.

He stretched his arms in the same way the ogre had, like he really thought he could face the ogre all on his own. “I’ve heard that you let your men pick which of your animal forms they fight.”

“That’s true. Do you have a preference?” The ogre cycled through a series of beasts in a grotesque display of stretching limbs and cracking bones.

Each new form was another dark horror.

A huge lion. A horned bull. A twisted, angular bear—all missing half an ear.

But Archie was still scanning the room for an animal of a different kind. Ainsley followed him, so maybe that meant someone else did too? Someone who always seemed to have the same plan she did? And perhaps this time, he and his magic cat could defeat this beast by playing to each other’s strengths and truly coming to work together.

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WHAT WAS the stupid miller boy doing? *Stalling*? It certainly didn't seem like he had any plan, and Leo was itching to jump from the rafters and attack the ogre himself.

He had done it before.

But that was before he knew the monsters plaguing his land could all be traced back to his drunken, braggart uncle. Before Tabitha had cried and begged Leo not to get himself hurt. Torn between Tabitha's tears and his white-faced sister, Leo didn't know which direction to turn, but he could think of a plan. Even if he was still a cat.

Even if he couldn't talk.

Even if he ...

Below him, Archie took another step forward. "I am the strongest man in Castletown, and I wish to fight the fiercest and most deadly beast you can become. Not a dog or a bear—the rats were always the true terrors when it came to the plague."

A rat? Would the ogre do something like that?

The ogre gave a smug smile. He thought the miller boy was stupid, and who could blame him? The boy was showing all the signs. "And why would anyone think the rat is the strongest creature I can become?" the ogre asked.

"Isn't it obvious? The dogs you sent to the Spring Festival were killed in seconds; I killed one or two of them on my own with only a *stick*. You lost your ear by another huntsman with a tiny axe. But the rats ... there were so many of them, and they were so small that no one could see where they would strike next, even a man like me," Archie said, and he seemed he didn't care that he would be surrendering himself to a plague far away from the castle healers or anyone who could offer him treatment. Like he was dumb enough to think his strength alone would save him.



Or perhaps he truly was smarter and a better actor than anyone had ever given him credit for? Leo had never known Archie to be the same sort of braggart the ogre was, but he had the build to play the part convincingly, and no one could deny the truth behind every word he spoke.

Then Leo's sister chimed in. "No, Archie, don't do it!" the princess cried, like she also thought the rat was the fiercest creature the ogre could become. "The plague rats are too quick and small. You'll be bitten before you can escape. Make him pick something bigger!"

And when Archie completely ignored his beloved princess, Leo knew it was a con.

"You wasted all this time trying to breed stronger animals when the rats were the beasts to slay the queen—even my own mother fell to their sting." Archie raised his arm again, expertly baiting his opponent to join him in the fight. "How can I claim a proper victory unless I ask for the highest challenge? Or perhaps it is you who are afraid?"

The ogre snarled. "Then on your head be it. It's a shame, but it seems the strongest men in my service are always the most reckless and eager to throw their lives away." He shifted his shape again, sinking into the form of a large rat. Green fangs. Rotten smell. It scurried across the great room, almost faster than Archie could breathe a single word.

"Leo ..."

The rat was at Archie's boots. It would be enough to panic even the most hardened warrior. But Leo heard the fae's cursed words screaming inside his head—demanding he hunt and kill every rat he saw—and even Tabitha couldn't object to the cat accepting the opening the miller boy had given him.

As a cat and even a prince, Leo planned and did everything himself, but he didn't want to be a cat anymore.

His paws sprang into liquid motion. He *yowled*. He swiped.

And he crunched the rat with his tiny cat fangs.

He never liked his uncle anyway.

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NO MATTER how confident Archie wanted to be in his plan, he still had watched all of his very-short-and-possibly-insignificant-life pass before his eyes, waiting for Leo to appear.

But now the tabby cat held a limp rat smugly in his jaws.

And just like that, the princess was saved. *Archie* was saved. And the kingdom wouldn't have to worry about the ogre and his monstrous creations ever again. Sure, Archie had called the cat in and couldn't take credit for the final kill, but perhaps he shouldn't dwell on that right now?

Ainsley had used the distraction to slip her guard.

She jumped into his arms. "I'm so glad you're safe!"

Archie tried to hold her, but he was too flummoxed. They both ended up on the floor. "Me too. That you're safe, I mean. But what are you doing here? You're a princess! Did you really think anyone would believe that you're a miller's daughter?"

Ainsley jerked back from him with her hands on her waist. But they were still on the floor, so it probably didn't have the effect she was going for. "Well, you said you couldn't take me, but I still assumed you wanted me to come if I found my own way. And can you blame me for worrying? That man was an ogre! Though I will admit that it wasn't my finest moment. I wanted to help you."

Archie sighed. "Well, your presence was certainly ... inspiring."

"Mean. Accurate. But I suppose that's what I get for telling you to speak your mind more. I have created a monster!" Ainsley let off with a dramatic trill.

Archie nodded, but now that the danger had passed, he couldn't help but feel a sinking in his stomach. He reached to get them both untangled and tried for a smile. "I'm glad you're safe, Ainsley. That will always be the most important thing.

But I can't help but be disappointed that I can't claim credit for your rescue or the defeat of the ogre."

"Why not? You told Father all about your cat, and he never said you couldn't have help."

Archie frowned. "I think it was implied that I should be the one to defeat the ogre if I want to say I'm worthy to gain a title and pursue your hand."

"I decide who is worthy of my hand, and as for the title—what is it that you think titled people do all day? Even the king? He pitches in where he can, but mostly he gathers up experts in specific fields to advise him and then sends out whoever he thinks can most expediently get the job done. Then he takes full credit—or blame—for the outcome. If you analyzed the situation and found that the best one to send in was a cat, well, it seems you were right. The ogre is dead, and no one else got hurt. And from what I can tell, many here are ready to follow you as the new Marquis even without my father making it an official appointment." Ainsley looked at the surrounding castle staff expectantly.

Most were standing silently, as if they were still having trouble believing the ogre was gone. Then one of the guards shrugged. "After you have an ogre as a Marquis, any alternative seems preferable."

Ainsley nodded to his point with a dramatic flair. "See? Thunderous and unanimous support. And that is what we will tell my father and see that he agrees to it."

Archie shook his head. He really didn't know how anyone could manage to argue with the princess.

She stood, brushing out her dress. "In fact, I think I prefer your method. Leo was always running off on his own and well ... I prefer your method."

Archie cursed. How could he have forgotten? But there had been an ogre. And a princess. And ... *everything*. But now the space where the cat had been was empty. "We need to find Leo."

## CHAPTER 30

# CATASTROPHE

Archie and Ainsley searched the ogre's castle and finally found the brown tabby cat in the library with a book open in front of him and his prize—the crumpled and bleeding body of a venomous rat. Leo didn't look up when they appeared, just flipping another page from the book. Then he gave an angry *yowl* and ripped out a page, displaying an illustrated frog in a crown to accompany the words of a familiar story.

Ainsley cocked her head in surprise. Perhaps she hadn't seen enough of Leo's incredible feats herself to fully believe in his magical prowess, but a cat reading and systematically destroying a book of faerie stories was hardly the strangest thing that had happened even in the last hour.

"You're upset because you're still a cat," Archie tried, eying the crumpled illustration. "Tabitha's kiss didn't work, and it didn't seem like you expected it to, but you hoped if we defeated the ogre, you would have turned back. That's what this whole thing has been about, right?"

The princess looked back at them, confused. "Turn back?"

"Ainsley, this is Leo. Prince Leopold, I mean. Your brother." Archie hadn't had a lot of time to think about all the implications of the prince's curse, but a part of him had hoped when he made that pronouncement, it would have been after they had already found some way to reverse Leo's condition. Doing it now, with Leo still a cat, might have only opened more pain. But if there was no ready cure available, wasn't it better for her to know the truth? To have her brother as a cat, if

nothing else? “I still don’t know exactly how it happened, but you said your brother disappeared after he went searching for a magical cure to the plague—”

“And we just found out that our uncle started the plague after becoming a shapeshifter.” She took another hesitant step toward the cat. “And Leo ... You really are Leo, aren’t you? Your form was shifted, but you can’t shift back?”

“*R-row.*” The cat threw the acknowledgment over his shoulder, still focused on his book.

“I guess I can see how they’re both connected,” Ainsley said, still sounding more than a little dazed. “But where did all the magic come from?”

Leo ripped out another page from the book, this one bearing the image of a white stag, but it was unclear if Leo was trying to give them another hint or was just in a mood to destroy faeries.

“I don’t know,” Archie said. “But maybe Leo ... Do you know what you want to try next? What can I do to help? I mean, I said I would find a way to help you if you helped me gain my fortune, and I don’t think anyone could deny that you’ve done that.”

The cat gave up on the book and looked back at him pointedly.

“Ainsley?” Archie guessed, and the cat blinked at him in encouragement. It might be little consolation now, but they seemed to finally understand each other. “You want me to take care of Ainsley? Of course. You don’t have to ask for that. But shouldn’t we ...”

Archie stopped; his eyes called by a sudden, impossible movement.

The rat, the Marquis.

He had *twitched*.

“He isn’t dead?” Archie shook his head, slowly processing what he was seeing. “He isn’t dead. Leo ...”

The cat had already sprung. Leo abandoned his book and re-caught the rodent in his jaws, darting away in the same manner he had when Archie had first tried to corner him in the wheatfield.

Gone, just like that.

“He left?” Ainsley sputtered. “But I just ... I wanted ...”

She would have tried to hold him. Which was probably why Leo was so quick to run off. He didn’t want to be held. He wanted to kill the ogre. “Maybe he has a plan? Something he could only try by himself?”

“Or he’s just being stubborn and reckless again.”

Maybe. “But what can we do? I really don’t think any of us could even find him if he doesn’t want to be found. Maybe not even Tabitha.”

“Tabitha? The stitch-girl from that old dress shop? What does she have to do with anything?”

Archie then realized that he still had a lot more to tell Ainsley.

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LEO CARRIED A CRUMPLED rat in his mouth—the root of all his trouble. But he should have known defeating his uncle would be no easy feat. The ogre could shift his form, and he could heal himself—he must have done it dozens of times. That’s why he was so deformed and looked so much like a monster, even in his human shape.

But the dog had run when the forest gnomes had shown up with iron nails, and the only thing that had ever hurt the ogre in a permanent way was Declan’s axe—that had to have been made of iron too, same as the knife Leo had once carried in his boot. Proper hunters always carried at least one small weapon crafted from iron when they went into the forest because of the fae. The magic his uncle had was similar.

But the cat couldn't waste time to find iron now, and there was a very real possibility that it would hurt Leo too. That only left one sure option if he wanted to kill his uncle and protect his people before the ogre regained his strength. Leo had to leave his sister, the miller boy, and even Tabitha to return to the forest. He wasn't entirely sure what would happen there, but he knew he couldn't remain the way he was.

Proper princes always risked themselves for the good of their kingdom, and he had to see this through to the end, even if it caused him more pain.

The tabby cat darted around the thorn trees of the Darkwood until he made it back to the faerie ring, where he knew he would meet the same fae as before. He tossed the struggling rat into the ring. Inside his head, he triumphantly proclaimed Keagan Thornton Valandrian's full name for the fae to hear. Sure, it meant the fae would be free of his cage, but at least Leo had kept his head enough to make certain that the fae wouldn't be able to target his kingdom or his family in the same way the ogre had.

The only one who could still be cursed was Leo, and he was already a cat.

Leo didn't look. He tried not to hear. But whatever happened to his uncle was brief, and when the fae emerged from the ring, his limp was gone. His emerald eyes were bright and seemed far more deadly than he had before.

And even if Leo had tried to run, he wasn't sure he would have been able to.

"So, princeling, you have rid your kingdom of the plague, and, as promised, no more harm has come to your family or your kingdom. You were even able to select another heir to the throne. Now are you ready for your reward?"

Only if it involved turning him back into a human and sending him on his way, but Leo doubted he would ever be so lucky.

The fae clicked his tongue. "There is no need to be so cynical. You only were miserable as a cat because I wasn't at



my full strength, and you fought me at the end. I didn't give you a new name to match your new form, and I didn't adjust as your more feline instincts came into play. I don't intend to leave any threads loose this time, so I can promise you will enjoy your new role immensely."

Leo wasn't so sure about that, but once he heard his full name again on the lips of the fae, he knew he didn't have a choice. This fae man had changed him into a cat.

He could make Leo become whatever he wanted.

And perhaps only in his dreams would he ever be Tom or Leo again.

## CHAPTER 31

# CATALYST

The charging black bear's fur hung in thick patches. Madness shone from its dull, dilated gaze. And the tell-tale sign of lime-green venom coated its fangs. The gnomes had been right. This was another plague beast bred by the Ogre Marquis—though it wasn't hard to see why it had been abandoned in the ogre's quest to bring down Castletown. Bears were too solitary. Too isolated. This one lived in a cave bordering the Darkwood and wouldn't have been a problem at all if its matchless hunger hadn't brought it to harass the local forest gnomes.

And if its last raid hadn't brought those same gnomes to petition their personal "giant" for assistance.

Archie still didn't know how he felt about that arrangement, but he had been eager to hunt down the beast, still searching the borders of the kingdom for any more signs of the Ogre Marquis's leftover magic even three years after the ogre's death. He gripped the sword, well-worn calluses under his hunting gloves. Parrying the bear's wild slashes, he drew a crimson line across its flank and then its hide. He had never fully mastered the bow, but the sword, he liked.

The plague beast bellowed—weakly. This was becoming far too easy.

At this point, the killing blow would only be a mercy.

Archie raised his sword. A rush of air swept past his cloak. Out from the cursed creature's chest bloomed the feathered fletching of an arrow. The bear staggered back, giving its final

death cry. Before it could fully hit the ground, Archie turned to face the familiar archer.

“Ainsley.” He couldn’t even pretend to be surprised.

The princess, standing beside her mounted guard and her own horse, held her chin high in triumph. The breeze seemed to catch her cloak and riding skirts just right, and her auburn hair was braided around her head as regally as a crown. “Good morning, darling. I don’t suppose you were trying to kill the beast without me?”

“Of course not.” Archie still wasn’t much for courtly responses, but he allowed himself a touch of irony on occasion to match the quick-tongued princess. “I know how much you enjoy the hunt.”

Ainsley brightened with her approval. “Don’t worry. I still don’t like the blood. I’ll have Sir Callum mount it on your wall and tell my father the kill was yours.”

Archie shook his head. “And I will tell him that the kill was yours.” They might be teasing, but Archie had become comfortable in his fur-lined boots. At the king’s direction, he had spent the last three years training under the tutelage of other knights and noble huntsmen, and his trophy room was already full. He had no need to even pretend to claim a victory that wasn’t his own.

“And then he’ll be furious with us both,” Ainsley said, still with a much-too-satisfied smile. But then that smile wavered as her amber eyes found the fallen creature’s den behind him. “That is, unless ...” Her words stopped, but her wary expression supplied the rest.

Her father would be furious ... unless it worked.

Her father would be furious ... unless they had actually found something.

No, Archie didn’t imagine the king would truly be furious either way. The king continued to be entirely reasonable in his dealings with his heirs so long as they were honest with him. This fact had even made Archie the favored “child” on occasion as Ainsley was the more likely culprit when it came

to embellishing the truth in recent days. But even the most tyrannical version of King Randolph would falter if the slaying of this final beast gave them the answers they all wished for.

That elusive hope—and fear—permeated the air, smothering any sense of levity. This small cave could hold their salvation or an extension of their current suffering.

And there was only one way to find out which.

Archie bowed, trying to restore his smile. “Well, my lady huntress, the spoils are rightly yours. Would you like to go first?”

“We’ll go together.” Ainsley, with her bow already stowed away, waved back her guard and took Archie’s hand. Her father had hoped Archie would be her champion, but the fiery princess rarely needed him to slay any actual monsters for her.

Still, she was rather possessive of his hand.

Her grip quickly tightened when they took the few short steps to the den that was far too small to require an actual search. Bones, fur, and rancid meat lay scattered on the ground. A rudimentary horde of tarnished armor and colored glass proved the bear had been only slightly more intelligent than a magpie. But there were no signs of any misplaced cats, princes, or any other clues as to Leo’s current whereabouts. No final sign that the curse on their land was at an end.

Archie sighed. They had known from the start that this lead could be another loose end, but it didn’t make the news any easier. And it seemed Archie had to say something before they both crumpled. “We can keep searching.”

“Yes ...” Ainsley said, her expression distant as if that would be enough to stave off even the threat of tears. “Though all this searching, only to be disappointed again and again—to never know for certain ...” She shook her head. “Sometimes ... sometimes I think it was easier when I thought he was dead. Is that completely terrible?”

Archie understood the feeling. He *felt* the feeling. He hated to think Leo might be stuck or hurting somewhere without help, and he had chased down weaker leads than this one in

the last three years, but Leo had also been the one to run off that day, and Archie hated what the prolonged loss was doing to his princess just as much. And while there were so many words he could use to describe the woman he loved, “terrible” would never be one of them.

But if there ever was a time he wished Ainsley was the sort of girl who would allow herself to be completely shielded from pain, it would be now.

It was the only reason he had any small thought of fighting the bear without her.

He pulled at her hand, encouraging her to turn away from the empty den and lean on him instead. She hid her face, and he felt the fluttering movement of her chest.

The silence stretched for several moments until those movements became more even.

Then he asked her, “What would you like to do?” He would do anything she wanted if it would make some of the pain go away.

She looked up at him through glistening eyelashes and regained her smile. “I want to marry you.”

Archie’s eyebrow quirked. “Is that all?” Because he was fairly certain he had dropped to his knees to beg for such a favor once already—the moment he thought his suit had any chance of being accepted. And though royal weddings took longer to approve and plan than he would have preferred, the date had already been set and was almost at their doorstep.

“Yes,” Ainsley said with a bit more fire. “That’s all. I want to put this aside, marry you, and pretend we are happy for at least the next three days. Is that all right?”

Archie paused to give her request adequate consideration. So, perhaps a second or two. “Would we really have to ‘pretend’ we are happy?”

Ainsley reached for his face, preparing for their favorite sort of stage kiss—the kind that had absolutely no hope of remaining that way. “Well, we are both very accomplished

actors, but no, I don't think we will have to pretend overly much."

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ARCHIE HAD ANOTHER FANTASY, one he had never dared speak out loud and had hardly admitted to himself. And of course, most of it focused on marrying the most beautiful girl he had ever known. But after their vows were said, after they had shared their first kiss as a wedded couple—and perhaps a few more kisses just to make sure the first one stuck—eventually there would be time where he could clink a wine glass and have everyone looking at him for a final toast.

And he wouldn't have to say a word. Leo would walk out in his human form, Archie bowing his head while he revealed to the kingdom, the king, and even the princess how he had returned to them their missing prince, proving not only his love for his royal bride but also his humble willingness to renounce his claim to the throne in favor of the one it actually belonged to.

His debt would be fulfilled.

His princess would only cry tears of joy.

And, yes, a man he hoped he could call his friend wouldn't have whiskers any longer.

But failing all that, he would do his best to do the one thing Leo *had* asked of him—seeing to Ainsley's happiness. And she wanted three days of peace.

So, when Archie's habitual pacing through his home castle in Carabus brought him to the library, he knew what he had to do next. Many of the ogre's journals and books still lay open on the table. Archie had searched through them several times—quickly confirming that the ogre had been leaching magic from a powerful fae which allowed him to breed and control the plague beasts in a limited, experimental fashion. Archie still hoped he might uncover more answers someday, but for now, it was time to put the books away.

Ainsley would be coming to live here after the wedding, and though he hoped they would spend the majority of their first few days and nights together locked inside their bedchamber, he didn't want her to stumble upon the books before she was ready for them.

His steward met him with the task only half completed. "There is another seamstress in the great hall to see you. She's from Castletown and says she knows you."

Archie hardly looked up. "Not another one." He had assumed that he wouldn't have to spend so much time with seamstresses in preparation for the wedding as he wasn't the one wearing the dress, but he had been wrong. There were so many pieces to his required wedding suit that there didn't seem to be any end to it. He wanted everything to be perfect for Ainsley, but she always said he should speak his mind more, and it was his wedding too. "Can't you just tell her to go with whatever measurements they already have for me at the castle? I can't have grown much in the last few days."

"I tried. She says it's important, and her cat hissed at me."

"Her cat?" Archie was already standing up from the table. "Tabitha? Why didn't you say so? I'm coming." He only took a slight detour to hand off his task to a younger library assistant—Hamish. The twins were running around the stables somewhere. The castle staff was half-full of former Charity House Children, and Archie would happily adopt them all if he could.

Tabitha was standing in the main hall, holding a long-suffering gray cat in her arms and staring at an old portrait of Ainsley's family. It wasn't on the wall yet—just propped against the table along the first wave of the princess's belongings meant to accompany her into married life. The half-sized figures were almost at eye-level when Tabitha pointed to sixteen-year-old Leo.

"His hair is longer," she said, tracing a line down the prince's painted cheek as if demonstrating the length. "He's thinner too. Or maybe just taller?" She squinted and then shook her head. "No. He's thinner *and* taller. And I thought he



might be fae with the way he was dressed, but he wasn't." Her index finger hovered over his hazel eyes. "He stared at me for such a long time. Then he said my name. And I *knew*. His eyes are the same."

That was when she turned to face Archie, and he remembered to breathe.

"You saw Leo? Human Leo?" Archie had almost stopped believing it was possible.

"You think I'm mad. You don't believe me," Tabitha said quickly, lowering her head to confide more with her cat companion. "I didn't believe me either. I dreamed of him so much I thought I must be dreaming again. And it was always the same dream. I saw him—my Tom, your Leo—but it was like he was trapped. There was a woman ... She seemed—perhaps not entirely evil but *empty*, and I thought she might be hurting him somehow. Keeping him. I tried to hold on to him, but there was always some magic keeping him away."

Archie shook his head. It wasn't that he didn't believe Tabitha, but he was having a hard time putting his words together and processing all the new information at once. "And it was a dream?"

"I thought it was. The same sort of dream for the last three years—not every night, but often enough. Then, I thought I recognized a few of the trees. And I just couldn't stand it anymore. I had to see. I went into the woods, and there he was. Like the dream again. And this time ... I tried to grab onto him, like in all the other dreams, but he left something behind. He had this in his hair." She held up her palm to show off a small colored bead. "It wasn't a dream."

"So he is still in the woods?"

Her shoulders slumped. "I know I should have found a way to bring him back with me, but it was like the dream. He wouldn't come, and I couldn't hold him. There is something there. Or someone? And the way he spoke—like he was drugged or half asleep. He's *wrong*, and I need you to tell me how to fix him." Tabitha met his eyes more earnestly. "You think I'm mad? Everyone always thinks I'm mad."

“No,” Archie said quickly, finally catching up with himself. “Of course I don’t. I’ve been looking for him too. We all have. We just never—but we should have known you would be the key, even if kissing him in his cat form didn’t work.”

Sometime before, Archie might have been disappointed he couldn’t do something to break the prince’s curse on his own, something that would more clearly pay off the debt he still felt he owed to the man. But finding Leo was the most important thing, and Archie had long ago learned to fit the right man to the right role. There was no question Tabitha was better equipped for the task after all she had seen. And the best help he could be was to share all he had learned of the faerie to speed her on her way.

After all, Ainsley had asked that they set aside their search until after their wedding, but she never said they couldn’t pass it to someone else.

“Come. Let me show you what I’ve found. And next time you see him, we’ll have a plan.” Archie led her back to the library, determined to chase this new hope wherever it led.

And if it meant that he never inherited the kingdom and stayed forever as a Marquis blissfully married to a princess, that would only make him more grateful to Leo, his soon-to-be brother by marriage and the former magic cat.

## CHAPTER 32

# SAVE THE CAT

Amongst the streets of Castletown and the rest of the Borderland Kingdoms, it was often said that faeries were cold and even cruel to the humans who came under their power. Perhaps for some fae and some humans, that was true, but that was not what Leo experienced. Within their realm he was often forgetful, numb, and disoriented with all the magic in the air, but he was always called a prince and set loose to wander about their highest court. The Fae Queen treated him as a somewhat exotic and beloved pet, given to her by the son of her youngest daughter who wished to curry more of her favor.

If Leo occasionally went days without food, it was because they simply forgot he needed to eat. If he was made to dance all night until his feet bled—well, that certainly wasn't ideal, but wasn't it cute how he tried to keep up with the rest of them? And if any member of the queen's court was ever intentionally cruel to him, that being—fae or animal spirit or whatever it might be—was swiftly dealt with by his dotting mistress.

So when he spent the day lost to himself, she was the first to notice.

The fair-haired beauty looked over her wine goblet at him, her elven features ageless and serene. No one would ever guess she had grown grandchildren, and Leo still had trouble believing it was true. “Tam’lin. Darling, are you not happy with the feast?”

Leo's hand was on a lock of his hair. One of the beads was missing. "I think I ... I might have remembered something last night."

The queen put down her goblet, almost purring with delight. "Did you? Oh, what fun." She clapped, calling for the attention of the rest of the table and beyond. "Everyone, Tam'lin is going to tell us another story of the human lands."

The lavish feast forgotten, the fae and faerie creatures gathered close at their queen's command in a delicate tinkle of banged feet and the soft whisper of wings.

Even a few of the animal servants came in from the hall.

Human stories were their favorite; they especially liked the one about the stubborn cat who refused to talk or wear boots like a proper faerie beast.

With all the wide and deceptively innocent eyes locked on him, Leo knew what was expected, but he still wasn't sure where to start. He had been so certain the memory was a dream, but the bead was missing. "Last night, I was out walking in the woods—just walking. But there was a woman. I thought I knew her."

"Your sister? Another member of your family, perhaps?" the queen asked, beckoning for him to continue. "In our realm, it is said that mortals can even connect with the spirits of the dead if their bond is strong enough."

Leo thought he remembered someone saying that before—that dreams could allow someone to form a connection between realms—but he shook his head. "I don't think she was dead, and she wasn't my sister. She was ... different. She called me by another name, and I wanted ... and I felt ..."

The queen's smile instantly dropped. She stood, swinging about to confront one of her seated guests. "Pan'dryn, what is this? You said he didn't have a true love, that he could be mine and dream of me alone."

The stag-horned and white-haired fae prince fumbled amongst the cushions they all sat on, almost crawling back like a crab. Leo hadn't known it before, but he had since learned

the fae man was hardly a man at all—a young upstart eager to make a place for himself within the queen’s court. “He *didn’t* have a true love. I checked, the first I met him. And then he was a *cat*—”

“And you thought a cat couldn’t find true love? Is that what you found in all your dealings with both men and beasts?” Her voice scorched through the room. There might have been some actual heat behind it. She had that kind of power. “You have underestimated your subjects, Pan’dryn. And you have underestimated me. That alone will lead to your ruin.”

The fae prince cowered in response, and the queen turned back to Leo.

She pressed her face into a smile one might give a child. A pet. A human. “Come here, my darling. Tell me of the girl you saw, and don’t be afraid.”

Afraid? Should he be afraid? He never felt anything anymore. “She wasn’t like you,” Leo was quick to reassure the Fae Queen, and it was the truth. He had no ability to guard his words or any sense he needed to. “She was ... smaller. Weaker. And sometimes she was afraid. But she would always smile for me, no matter what else was wrong. I heard her sing when there were only the cats to hear her. And when she would speak to me—”

“You see? There is nothing to worry about, my queen.” The fae man on the floor had finally found his voice. “He might have formed his own attachment to this girl, but how could it possibly be returned? I swear, he was a cat, and he had no connection to her before then.”

The Fae Queen kept her frown. “And why would he choose to form even a one-sided attachment to this girl if he agreed to your bargain as freely as you said he did?”

“It *was* a free bargain. He wished for the means to defeat an ogre who sent a plague to their lands. I gave it to him. I even allowed him to find and train his own replacement, fully compensating his kingdom for his loss. You know this is true. I cannot lie to you or anyone.”

Leo frowned. The fae prince might not be lying, but he wasn't telling the truth. "You broke our bargain, and your magic should be forfeit." Leo had suspected it before and had it confirmed here—now that he understood more of how the magic worked.

The fae fed off of human belief—their desires, wishes, stories, and dreams. They kept their bargains and avoided outright lies to strengthen their power, but they didn't have to tell the truth as much as they had to be *believed*. A lack of belief or a strong enough counter-belief could hurt them just as much as an iron blade.

And even drained of emotion, Leo had sharpened his view of his bargain with the fae prince into a deadly point.

"You become a white stag on the Wild Hunts when the rings are open. My uncle, the former Marquis, caught you and used a corrupted version of your power to start the plague. He even gave you my name because he hoped you would kill me—or at least remove me as the heir to the throne of Umbrae. But you wanted me as your pet instead—you gave me a part of your magic because you wanted me to hunt the Marquis and free you by his death. I wanted the plague to end, so I agreed, but only if you agreed that no more harm should come to my family or my kingdom. But my uncle is my family—even if I never told you how we were related. Even if we both wanted him dead. You killed my uncle, and our bargain should be forfeit."

Soft murmurs trickled through the fae at his pronouncement and the queen didn't even look at the fae prince this time. She just pointed at the door.

"Leave me. Retire to your mother's country until I can stand to see your face again." She whirled to face the rest of her court. "All of you must leave me at once."

The fae and their creatures all scattered. Dishes fell. Feathers and trinkets were left behind in their owners' haste to retreat, but Leo didn't move. He rarely did anything unless the queen directly told him to, and she commanded his every movement when they were together.

But sometimes her attention was called elsewhere.

That was when he walked and dreamed.

Once the hall was empty, Leo still sat on his cushion and tried to make sense of everything that had passed. “Are you also angry with me, my queen?”

“Of course not, my darling.” Her voice was softer, though she still carried an unfamiliar frown. Her hand went to her crystalline eyes. Was that a tear? Did the fae shed tears? He had never known them to, and he still couldn’t be sure now. It was gone in a blink, whatever it was. “I could never be angry with you. The bargain you made with Pan’dryn was corrupted by his own deceit, and I have always known that you would leave me eventually. Humans are such fragile and delicate creatures. I should be grateful for the time we had together.” She stepped forward and cupped his face as if memorizing its shape.

Leo tried to look at the ground, but that was wrong. She lifted his chin up to face her.

He wondered if she might bend down to kiss him. His memory had become such a scattered and fickle thing, but he was certain she had done it before. He couldn’t have refused her, and perhaps no sane person should want to. She was beautiful. Powerful. A goddess who put even other fae to shame. Being made to meet her gaze was like looking straight into the radiant sun.

But now, after seeing the human girl, he couldn’t help but wonder how it might have been to taste her lips instead.

Someone who might be his equal in every way.

The queen let out a sigh, as if she could somehow read his hesitation. “I cannot say if this counter-bond you made will be returned, but you will have your choice, my love. I cannot take it from you. I will not.” She dropped his face, her words becoming as firm as steel. “And when you see this girl again, this is what you must do ...”



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THAT NIGHT, Leo went out into the forest. With each step, the surreal beauty of the fae court gave way to thorn trees with discolored bark and a variety of mortal imperfections. A dark-haired young woman waited for him. She sat on a fallen log, holding a fluffy gray cat and humming a familiar tune. He shook his head in wonder. “Tabitha. You’re here.”

“I’ve been out here to see you several times,” she said, a soft furrow in her brow. She released the cat and stood, straightening her simple skirt. “Do you remember?”

Leo frowned. He knew he had seen her before, but was it one time or a dozen? It was impossible to say.

The few steps between them could have been a thousand, the air too thick to cross.

She sighed. “I’m not surprised. When I saw you last, I still thought it might have been a dream.” She fiddled with something in her hands. The missing bead. “But the new Marquis, Archie, said I might be able to help you find your way home, and I would like to try. If you would let me ...”

She reached out her right hand, her left still holding the bead, but Leo knew it wouldn’t be as simple as that. He recoiled. “Why did you come?”

“Because you are my friend.”

He shook his head. “That isn’t enough. I can only be released if your love is true, and you could not have fallen in love with a cat.”

She lowered her hand, laughing. The errant sound stood in discord with the somberness of the moment. “And why is that? I fall in love with cats quite frequently. They became my family after my human family became lost to me. You know about that.”

Did he know about that? Leo frowned, unsure. But the fluffy gray cat at her feet seemed to blink in confirmation. And

at once Leo knew something else—this cat was one of Biscuit’s kittens all grown up.

Tabitha kept nearly a dozen cats, and at one point, Leo had known all of their names.

“But I do understand that most of my cats are ... simple,” Tabitha continued. “They stay with me for simple reasons, and we share a simple sort of bond. It was the only sort of bond I thought I could manage for a time. But you were never so simple, and you stayed with me anyway.”

Of course he had stayed. She was an anchoring presence he had wanted to latch onto, even if all the details on how that feeling came into being were lost to him now.

Maybe she could explain those feelings to him?

His foot took another step toward her, a halting but involuntary force, and she smiled encouragingly. “So no, I did not know you as a prince or love you as a man when first we met, but I held some affection for you that grew in stages as I came to understand how magical and complex you are.”

Leo paused. “You learned who I was when Archie told you.”

“Yes, though you might recall that it did not take me long to accept his words, and I have seen you in this form several times since then.”

Leo took another step. “In our dreams.”

“And in the painted memories of your family.”

His family? Another flash of memory came with that thought. “So you know ... I was a prince, but I wasn’t always very good or noble. Even when I wanted to heal our kingdom, I did it out of pride.”

She shook her head. “Only pride? You loved your mother and others who were lost.”

Was that true?

Yes, it was. He took another step, Tabitha smiling over his small efforts like he was a young child learning to walk. “And

when you helped Archie, when you helped me, was that always out of pride?”

“Some of it was ... with Archie.” But the thought made Leo smile.

There was nothing wrong with keeping a portion of his pride. He might not be himself without it.

“And with me?”

Never with her.

“You are magical and complex,” she said, rippling with satisfaction. “You were never only one thing, and the man I see now, I desire. I understand we still have a lot to learn about each other, and it could be that my love isn’t strong enough, but it’s more than strong enough for me to want to try.”

He closed the distance between them with a final, eager step. “You *are* brave. You *are* strong. You always help things become more beautiful than they are, and in my dreams ... even with all the magic here ... I always wanted to return and stay with you.”

She reached out her hand, now only a few inches from his. “Will you let me take you home?”

His fingers fluttered in agreement, but he resisted for another moment. This was important. “You must hold on to me. The magic—it might not want to let me go.”

The Fae Queen had explained to him that the latent magic given to him by her errant grandson still made Leo a shifter and partly under the fae prince’s control—Pan’dryn had placed him within the queen’s court and continued to use this bond to spy on her over the past few years. The queen promised she could hold Pan’dryn off and prevent him from directly retaliating, but if Leo tried to leave, the latent magic would resurface, and he would be lost without another strong bond to counteract it and lead him home.

Tabitha nodded. “Hold on to me, and I will hold on to you.”

Leo took her offered hand. She gave him a gentle squeeze before walking back toward the forest path and Castletown. He followed her step for step, picking around the forest underbrush, but then he noticed the gray cat at her feet, and his stomach dropped.

The colors blurred.

“*You are a cat,*” came the familiar voice inside his mind. He couldn’t fight it.

The old panic resurfaced, tempting him to flee.

But Tabitha was still holding his hand—his paw. She scrambled to catch and support his back feet as he started to fall. She knew who he was and seemed determined to hold him, even if she was now carrying him in her arms.

“That’s the magic, isn’t it?” Tabitha said, like it was only natural. “It doesn’t matter. If you want to be a cat, you can be a cat. I will take you home, regardless,” she told him, and he believed it was true.

Being a cat would limit their relationship significantly, but Tabitha would still accept it if that was what he wanted.

They made it a few more steps, but even as Leo started to settle into her arms, he felt the magic work again. Tabitha said he could be a cat if he wanted to be, but he didn’t like being so small. The fae prince had always called him a “*little hunter*” or a “*little prince,*” but that was another twisted manipulation. Leo no longer believed that was true.

He grew, becoming a lion larger than a bear.

Tabitha staggered. She trembled and buckled under his weight. Her gray cat fled from them. Would Tabitha run away too? He was huge. It was easy enough to charge in as a rescuer—as the one in control—but would she be brave enough to stay if the roles were reversed and she was at his mercy? Leo was deathly afraid of being trapped forever in this monstrous form, but then Tabitha shifted her hold, moving her arms out from under his legs and on to his neck—his mane.

“It’s all right,” she said. “I don’t need you to be small. You can be any size you choose—cat or prince or king of beasts.

You will still be my Tom and my Leo. And if I can't carry you, then you will carry me." She climbed onto his back, like she had always belonged there.

She *did* belong there. Leo was happy to carry her. He wanted their bond to continue, and so did she. Tabitha even got the gray cat to return to walking at their side.

Leo continued a few more steps, looking at his front paws as they crushed through the forest loam. The claws and fangs were fine weapons and had served him well. Perhaps they would be even better now that he was larger. Tabitha had been hurt before too. She would understand if Leo wanted to keep a weapon at his side. But he wanted hands that could be more than weapons. If he couldn't let this defensive part of him go, his bond with Tabitha might still exist, but their relationship would be limited.

Leo didn't want to be a cat. He never wanted to be Tabitha's pet or master.

He wanted to hold her hand.

She giggled when his form shifted again, becoming some kind of ape. Leo wanted to laugh too. They could hold hands now, but the fur was ridiculous. He had never wanted it.

*I am not a cat.* The fae man had forced himself into Leo's mind, twisting it to suit his own designs, but Tabitha would accept any form Leo took and find a way to adapt herself to it. She could make anything seem beautiful; she steadied him, anchored him, and called him home.

The process continued. Leo became cats of every size. He became a bull, a rat, and for one bizarre moment, a waddling bird with black-and-white feathers. Sometimes, he was small, and Tabitha carried him. Sometimes, he was large, and he carried her. But Leo knew which bond he preferred, releasing one to hold more tightly to the other.

And they left the forest as two humans, a man and a woman, holding hands together.

## CHAPTER 33

# THE CAT CAME BACK

Archie's life had become a faerie story, and he was about to marry his princess with the sun shining down from a cloudless sky, the castle grounds open to welcome noble and common guests from all corners of the kingdom. They stood together on the same dais where they had once performed Anderdolf, and it seemed rather fitting. Ainsley had once told him that most of the official tasks they would be asked to do as nobles could be seen as another play—a performance of a perfect princess. And now her marriage to her “Ogre-slaying Champion.” Thinking of it in that light, it wasn't so bad, and Archie thought he performed his part adequately.

Hold that.

Stand there.

Recite this.

But when he looked across the stage at his perfect princess—the illusion that had once held him spellbound—he couldn't help but think of all the ways that image paled when compared to the fiery young woman behind her courtly mask.

That woman deserved more than to perform for a crowd on her wedding day.

So, he dropped the scripted vows he had painstakingly memorized and spoke the words that had become engraved upon his heart. “Ainsley, I love you. And while most see you only as the Princess of Umbrae, I want you to know that it was

never the height of your stature that won me over but the tenderness of your soul.”

Ainsley smiled and squeezed his hand, ready to follow his lead. “And I would be happy to be a goose girl or baker’s daughter, just so long as I get to hold the hand of my miller boy.”

They kissed, and a cheer rose from the crowd of Charity House Children that sounded suspiciously like nine-year-old Sophie. The matron assisting with the ceremony pursed her lips in protest, and the king sighed in a long-suffering fashion, but the rest of the proceedings continued without a hitch. They bowed and stood and walked together, as two separate creatures choosing to become one.

Then there was the celebration that followed.

Ribbons twisted to and fro in a mix of peasant and courtly dances. Despite his hopes rekindling with Tabitha, Archie had given up his dream of toasting his bride with the public appearance of her noble brother, but as he watched Ainsley dance with her father, he didn’t think the princess was faking her smile.

Perhaps for now, that would have to be enough.

His eyes scanned the crowd again. His brothers were here; Rupert shamelessly using Archie’s name to make more connections and pushing his expanding business on the more noble circles while Harris seemed perfectly content to share a dance with a young woman he had met in Carabus.

Archie turned from them to watch the forest gnomes sitting on the banquet table, eating radishes half their size.

Then a hooded figure came to stand behind him with cat-like grace. In such a large and diverse crowd, his appearance wasn’t quite as concerning as it could have been, but Archie still made eye contact with Sir Callum and checked to make certain his purely-ceremonial-but-still-solid-enough-to-be-used-as-a-club-if-necessary sword was in reach.

“Not bad,” the man said in a courtly sort of drawl that would never match his attempts at a more common



appearance. “A bit sappy for my taste, but not bad.”

Archie frowned at the man’s shrewd and narrow build. The chestnut hair tied back in a queue. He wasn’t a threat exactly, but there was something about his eyes ...

“Leo? You’re back?”

And then Archie couldn’t help it.

He grabbed the man in something of a hug and a tackle, refusing to let him go.

“Stop that,” Leo said with a hiss, flailing in a way that only made Archie more certain of his identity. He probably would have scratched if he still had claws. “You oaf! Can’t you tell I’m trying to avoid that kind of spectacle?”

*Too bad.* Archie kept a hold on his wayward brother-in-law as he scanned the crowd again for his bride. “I’m getting Ainsley. And the king. I also have several guards at my disposal that can make certain that you don’t just disappear again.”

Leo blanched under his hood, but he stopped struggling. “I’ll put myself on your mercy then, my prince.” And he actually bowed—his head at least as his arms were still pinned in Archie’s grasp. “I wanted to see my sister’s wedding, and I do intend to speak to my family in private if I can, but ... please, no one else.”

Archie frowned. Cat or prince, this was not the Leo Archie thought he knew. What had the faeries *done* to him? “You’re back, but you’re not really back, are you? Something has changed.”

Leo raised an eyebrow. Obviously several things had changed.

Archie let him go. “I suppose I can understand ... It has been seven years since you’ve been here as a prince. It would be an adjustment.”

“Yes and ...” Leo rubbed at his arms and looked more than a little pained. “Tabitha doesn’t do well with crowds.”

*Of course.* Archie had dreamed of publicly presenting Crown Prince Leopold to his family, but that was just another faerie story. It had nothing to do with the true desires of the once-cursed man who stood before him. “You should be with her. But I’m glad you came tonight. Tell me where you would like to meet your family, and I will do my best to keep it private.”

Though, if Leo was determined to keep his return out of the public eye, then there were several more things Archie wanted to say while he had the chance.

“And I ... I wanted to thank you. I’m not sure why you did it, but—”

“Well, not so I could steal your first-born child or any other faerie nonsense,” Leo said, his voice hollow and wry. “Though Leopold would be a good name for the next prince, if you need someone else to carry the title for me. But I was lost. Magic ... does that to you. I wanted to know who I was, and so I used you to help me put the pieces together. But you could never become entirely like me, and perhaps that helped me most of all.”

Archie glanced down at his boots. Was that really the only purpose behind all the magic? “Sometimes I still feel like I must be fooling everyone.”

“You were never that clever, but Ainsley loves you. I imagine there’s a reason for that.” He looked back at the crowd. “Everyone here is wearing some kind of mask, measuring themselves against each other. If you want my advice, I wouldn’t try too hard to match them. I had to be a cat to learn that.”

Ainsley had finished her dance with her father and was now looking for him. “We should make our plan quickly so I can get back to her,” Archie said.

“Yes, we should,” Leo agreed, though it was clear his mind was on another girl far away.

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THEY SAY cats have nine lives, and Leo was certain he had used at least one more. There was a time *before* when he was human, a time *after* when he was a cat, some lost years *between* when he was amongst the fae, and then there was *now*.

Now, well—now was about to be very pleasant indeed.

When Leo had met with his remaining family, Ainsley had cried. All her words spilled out in a rapid and incomprehensible stream—cursing his departure and celebrating his return with tears of equal sorrow and joy. Then she held him so fiercely Leo wondered if he would ever be allowed to catch his breath. She even pulled on his hair at one point—like she couldn't believe the change.

His father was more sober and still, like he wasn't sure what he was looking at. Leo had no idea if Ainsley or Archie had even told him about Leo's time as a cat, but it probably didn't matter. The king probably wouldn't have truly believed the tales without seeing any of it himself. But by the end, his shoulders seemed lighter. His smiles became more open and sincere, like years of pain were slowly melting away.

And as for Leo himself ... Well, he certainly had been glad to see his family again—and perhaps even the miller boy as well—but there was still a surreal quality to it, like he was watching someone else's life or walking inside another dream.

He had told Ainsley to keep his old bow and didn't doubt she would be sneaking out to visit him soon. He was sure his father would find a way to keep in contact with him as well, but he couldn't stay, and they couldn't hold him—not anymore.

Leo came out of the castle and walked straight to an outer-row dress shop, watching the young proprietor move around her porch full of cats until she seemed to feel the heat of his gaze.

They stared at each other for a haunted and somber moment.

“You came back.”

Leo nodded. “Of course I came back. I said I would.” He certainly owed her that, if nothing else, but he hoped that their bond had moved beyond simple obligation or self-interest. “I want you to know that I never would have expected ... I never would have asked you to come after me.” Leo had made a lot of traps and clever schemes in his day; he had always managed to land on his feet, but he never wanted Tabitha to think she had been a part of that. He never would have put her in danger. Even if everyone knew that love could conquer any faerie curse.

But if anything, Tabitha looked affronted at his admission. “I see. You’re a prince, so you were allowed to risk yourself for the kingdom you loved, but none of us were meant to do the same for you?”

Leo frowned. What was he to say to that? “I don’t feel much like a prince anymore.” He paused, gathering his courage before the rest of his news tumbled out in a steady stream. “I wanted to see my family, but now that they have Archie to be Ainsley’s husband and their prince, I don’t know if I want news of my return to go beyond that—at least not for right now. Are you all right with that?”

Tabitha’s eyes grew distant, something foreign and solemn in her words. “It makes no difference to me what title you carry. Have I not already proven I would hold on to you no matter what form you take?”

She had proven far more than that—something that caused his heart to stir and seemed a far more precious form of magic. But he wanted more than her hand this time. More than her words. They had both held each other so much inside the faerie realm; there didn’t seem to be any need to delay. They would relearn his human form together.

Leo took another step onto the porch, letting his actions show his own intentions.

They continued to match each other step for step.

He reached her face at the same time she reached his.

Their lips met as one, equal in every measure.

Leo had entered the forest and came out as a cat at sixteen. He had never fallen in love before Tabitha and had only been drunk once before, getting into the wine at an age his parents would not have approved of. But that strangled memory was what he thought of now.

From the time he had entered the Fae Queen's court until this moment, a part of him had been drunk, numb, asleep, but was now awakening. The pain was an almost welcome assurance that his heart was still beating, that his lungs still drew breath.

That he was still alive or perhaps alive again.

That the final curse had been lifted.

Leo still believed in the fae and the powerful magic they wielded, but he also believed in Tabitha and a love strong enough to counter any curse. And whatever life or lives he had left, he was determined to make the best of it, kissing Tabitha until they both needed breath.

"You ... Would you like to come in?" The girl fumbled adorably under her curtain of hair, reaching her hand for the doorknob behind her. "It isn't a castle, but my mistress signed the shop over to me when her husband died last winter, so you could stay here like you did before ..." Her hand froze and her cheeks turned a bright crimson. "I mean, I know you're not a cat anymore, but ... I want you to stay. Do you want to?"

Leo grinned. That was fast. He might have been disappointed Tabitha had robbed him of the chance to propose first, but it wasn't like he wasn't prepared. They might not be the most conventional couple around, but they both knew what they both wanted. "And the cats won't mind if you take in another stray?"

"Huh. I don't care if they do." Tabitha huffed, like she intended to give any feline dissenters a firm talking to, and Leo couldn't be more in love.

He scooped her up bridal-style and carried her into a shop he already knew, though from a vastly different angle. Reds,

oranges, and other colors his cat eyes had been unable to see popped up everywhere.

It was ridiculous.

Things with him and Tabitha often were.

But they would make things right eventually. He would give her the ring Ainsley already picked out for them from their mother's collection—a cat's eye with diamonds—and they would find a way to be married before the night was out. He might even return to the castle one day—if only to make certain the upstart miller's son was making good use of his throne. But for now, Leo was happy to be just a man at home with his woman, kissing her to his heart's delight while several misplaced and scandalized cats looked on.

The End

*Next in Once Upon A Prince:*



*Available November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2023*

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**A voiceless prince. A desperate princess. A sham romance that turns heart-breakingly real.**

When cocky Mer prince Kaerius impulsively saves the human princess from drowning, he doesn't expect to fall in love with her. Yet her human fragility is so unexpectedly sweet that he is soon head over tails. So he bargains his voice to the lord of the deep for a chance to court her on land. He's confident that he can win her affection—he's irresistible, after all.

But he is a fish out of water in the human world. He didn't expect it to be so difficult to make Marin appreciate his charms. Her father is ailing, her kingdom is threatened from multiple directions, and she must choose from among several foreign suitors to keep her people free. Thinking Kaerius no more than a mute stranger, she asks him to pose as her suitor to give her leverage with the foreign lords vying for her hand. But not all of them are so easily deterred, and they won't take no for an answer.

Kaerius will have to show the princess that his love is not just an act, but how can he win her, much less save her, without a word?

***The Silent Prince*, a gender-swapped retelling of The Little Mermaid, is part of Once Upon A Prince, a multi-author series of clean fairy tale retellings. Each standalone story features a swoony prince fighting for his happily ever after.**

[Read The Silent Prince here!](#)

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# **SNEAK PEEK: THE SILENT PRINCE**

## CHAPTER ONE

Light danced through the water in a thousand shades of blue and gold.

Kaerius burst from the water in an exultant rush, and his song might have split the sky with its beauty. His tail flashed in the brilliant dawn before he dove deep only to twist toward the surface for another joyful leap.

He sang for the joy of the morning, for the thrill of the icy water upon his skin and scales, for the ecstatic bliss of a new morning full of possibilities. He sang for the deep tones of whale song and the joy of fish flesh between his teeth, for the joy of leaping between sea and sky, and for the beauty of the droplets that caught the sunlight and cast it around in a thousand little rainbows.

He sang for the splendor of the Mer voices that echoed through the water around him, high and pure and enchanting, and for his exhilaration and pride in knowing that his voice was the loveliest and most irresistible of all.

The prince of the Mer was not humble, and he had no reason to be, for he was the fiercest, strongest, cleverest warrior his people had ever known, and he sang with power and beauty that surpassed any other. He sang with lust for all that the world offered and all that he would take from it, and for the pride of the life within him. For what reason would such a prince be humble?

Kaerius sang until the sun was well above the water, and the other Mer had retreated deeper beneath the surface to the

quiet, dark depths to hunt. He admired the coruscating flash of the scales upon his tail in the sunlight. He danced in the shallows, turning circles and twisting around and around to let the light play on his scales to dazzling effect.

“Kaerius!” His father’s deep voice rang through the water, and the young prince scowled.

His tail flip was sharp with insolence, but when he reached the Mer king some three miles away and a mile beneath the surface, he said only, “What is it, Father?”

“The sun is up. It’s time to stop singing and focus on the hunt.”

Kaerius snarled, “Why can’t I appreciate the beauty of the sunrise, Father? Why do you hate it so much?”

The Mer king took a deep, slow breath of water, every muscle of his chiseled body tight with anger. “I do not hate the dawn, insolent child,” he said quietly. “I am glad that my sacrifices in war, and your mother’s sacrifice of her life for yours, have afforded you the luxury of spending your time singing to the uncaring sun. However, I had hoped that when you reached the age of majority, you would understand that ruling requires more than a beguiling voice and a pretty face. It requires sacrifice, Kaerius, and you’ve been sheltered from so much that I wonder if I’ve ruined you entirely.”

The young Mer prince’s mouth dropped open. “This is how you insult your best warrior? How many times did I go to battle for you?” His voice cracked with offended fury. “I haven’t been a child for years. But you wouldn’t know, would you? You stay in the depths, hiding from the light and from me, just because I look like Mother.”

“Enough!” roared the king. “You speak of what you do not know.”

“Then tell me!” cried Kaerius. “How many times did I ask for you to give us better guidance? We won the war, and still you stayed down there, as if nothing in the light had any appeal for you.”

The Mer king's chest heaved with the effort of keeping his temper, and his silvery hair made a pale cloud around his grim face. "Did you ever think that others made greater sacrifices than you did, and our healing comes more slowly? The war did not end as quickly and easily for me, or others, as it did for you.

"Nevertheless, I did not call you here to reprimand you for your appreciation of beauty. I called you here to focus your attention on your responsibilities. The hunt. Your life is not your own, Kaerius. You are a prince. Act like it."

Kaerius trembled with rage. "I am acting like a prince! Is it not our life's work to sing and bring joy and beauty to the world? You've forgotten the very purpose of our existence!"

The king snapped, "It isn't all about you, Kaerius, and what you enjoy! It is and has always been about sacrificing oneself for one's people. That is why I stay in the depths. I guard our people against the lord of the deep! Do you think I do not miss the light upon my face, or the taste of shallow waters? I give myself for my people day by day, and you are too self-centered to even see it."

Kaerius's nostrils flared. "Then you should be glad I sing to the dawn, since you have apparently delegated that task to me, the inadequate prince. At least I sing well." The prince knew this was a horrible thing to say; his father's throat had been nearly ripped out by a warrior of the southern Mer during the war. The king had escaped with his life only because of his exceptional strength and ferocity, but his exquisitely beautiful voice had never recovered its purest tones. The king could still sing, and his voice rippled with beauty and magic, but it was a far cry from its former glory.

Guilt twisted within Kaerius's offended anger at the sight of his father's wounded fury. He wanted his father to say something horrible in return, something that would wound him in similar manner, so that he could focus on his anger rather than his guilt and regret.

Instead, his father said stiffly, "I am glad you have not suffered as I have, Kaerius, and I am glad you recovered so

easily from the pain that still troubles me. I wish you had learned a little empathy and compassion along with your skill as a warrior. Now go and hunt. The little ones are hungry.”

The king disappeared into the depths before Kaerius could say anything else.

At this depth, even sharp Mer eyes could see only a short distance, and he imagined that his father was not yet far away. But he could not think of what to say.

He darted off to begin the hunt, his heart full of wounded pride.

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By late afternoon, Kaerius had brought the little ones more than enough fish for their evening meal. Their mothers were capable of hunting, and their fathers... well, there were fewer Mer men of age after the war, but those who remained were easily capable of feeding their own families and the orphans and widows. The king had given Kaerius this task on principle, not out of any real need for another Mer in the hunt.

When Kaerius turned away from the nursery, he rolled his eyes and sighed in annoyance. He liked hunting, but being told to do anything rankled.

A sharp pain in his tail made him flinch in surprise, and he whirled to see a young Mer grinning at him.

“What?” Kaerius snarled.

“Oh, did I tweak your pride?”

Kaerius bared his sharp teeth and darted after Tehrgil. “You insufferable upstart!”

The Mer child, barely into adolescence, screamed with mirth as he fled. “Prince of pomposity! Thought it would do you a little good!” His laughter tinkled through the water like the song of a newborn whale.

The prince surged forward and caught the little prankster by the tail. He turned toward the surface, hauling the now-

frightened child behind him with a roar of anger.

“I AM a prince, you insulant brat! Never forget your place!” As his head broke the surface, he gave a furious flick of his tail, sending them both high into the air. At the apex of his leap, he flung the child away from him to tumble through the air and flop back into the water with an undignified slap of his tail.

Tehrgil was not hurt, of course. Mer skin was far too tough to be stung by the slap of water, even from such a height. But he feared Kaerius’s temper, and so he fled without looking back.

If he had looked back, he would have seen the prince dive back into the waves with a graceful arc of his tail and then slip his head above the surface again.

A small sailing ship had been close by.

Ships were rarely of interest to Mer. If there were a storm, the ship might be dashed into pieces among the rocks and the sailors would drown. But on this coast storms were rare. Moreover, three hundred years ago the humans had built a lighthouse on the nearby promontory. Since the lighthouse, there had been only two wrecks, both before Kaerius’s birth.

He had seen ships, of course, but only from a distance. Little fishing boats hugged the coast, dragging their nets behind them. Nets were dangerous; rumor said that once a mermaid had been caught in a net and killed by humans, an ocean away and several generations before. Kaerius couldn’t remember the details, and imagined it was a myth anyway. If he were caught in a net, he would cut himself free with his knife or his teeth! A warrior such as himself would never fear a human. Still, the Mer folk had always been cautious of contact with humans.

The sun setting behind Kaerius seemed to gild the entire ship, and he drew closer without realizing it.

A sound carried across the water.

A strange instrument made a sweet, pure sound unlike anything Kaerius had heard before. It was like sunlight in his

ears, warm and bright, sliding liquid through his veins. Another swish of his tail brought him closer, and he shook his head to fling his wet hair from his eyes.

Then another sound joined the first, a voice of dawn as the sun settled below the waves. The words were a little breathy, as if the singer were young and nervous in the most charming way, and then the singer found her confidence and her voice soared.

Waves slapped the side of the little ship, and Kaerius followed it as it drew close to the rocks, caught as surely as if he were entangled in a net.

The ship threaded the narrow passage into the harbor, and Kaerius still followed.

The instrument quieted, but the singer continued, her voice softening, until the last words carried over the water.

Kaerius sucked in a deep breath, startled to discover how close to the shore he was. What a lovely voice the singer had! She sounded near to his own age, twenty, and her voice would be a perfect counterpart to his.

That was a foolish thought. Mer did not sing with humans! They sang with the whales and the dolphins, with the crash of the waves, and with the thunder and rush of a storm.

Her voice was too soft and too human, too devoid of magic, to match his.

But he wanted to hear her again.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jacquie Stevens wrote her first novel as a stress relief activity during nursing school. Now, as a USA-Today Bestselling Author, she has taken a step back from nursing so she can spend all her time writing stories filled with elves, fairies, and all things awesome. She also is a freelance editor.

Jacquie lives in Arizona where she can be found walking the streets with a dark and handsome young man who loves everything about her. He's a shiba inu mix.

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