



# THE CHANGELING CHILD

H.S. NORUP  
PUSHKIN CHILDREN'S



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*For Dorte and Henrik*

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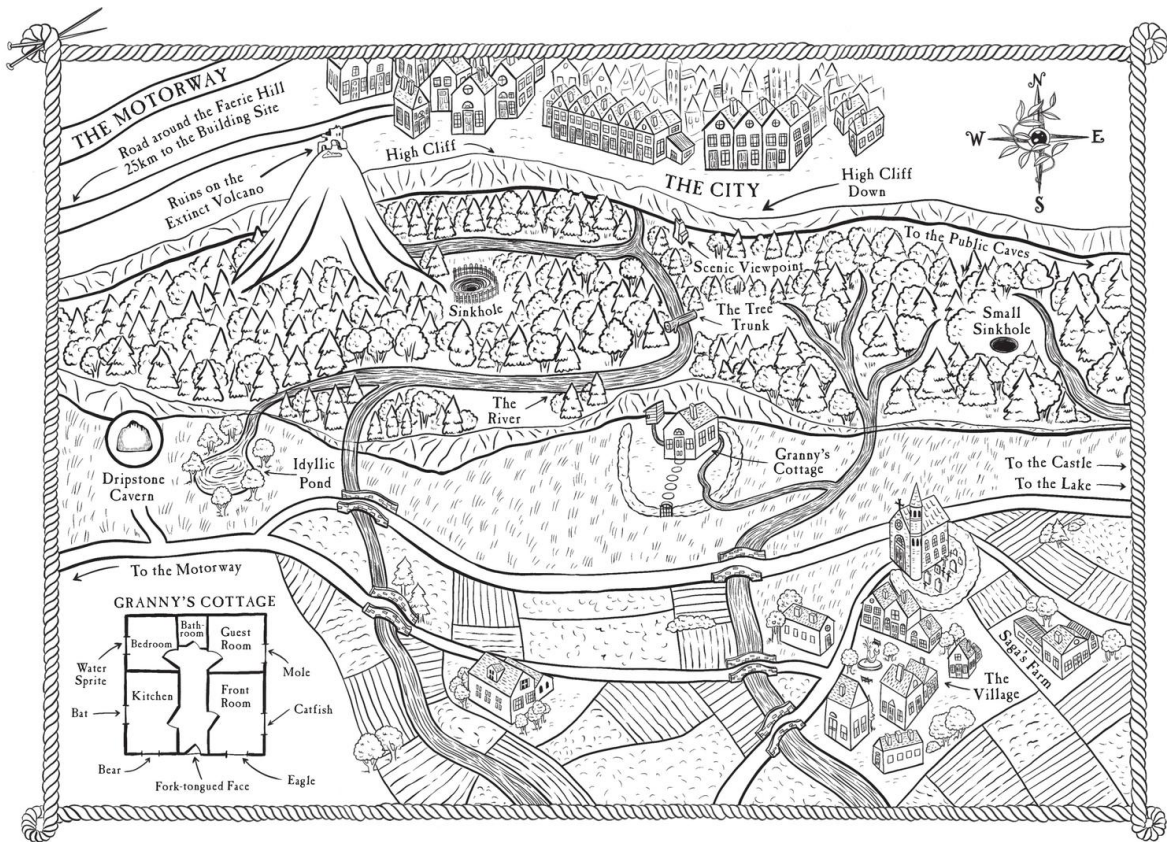
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# 1

## SAGA



### *Entirely Ordinary*

Saga squinted through her misty glasses at the faerie creature. She shivered and tightened the hood of her red waterproof jacket. A cold October rain bounced on the puddles and lashed at the back of the bus shelter where she was waiting. The road remained deserted.

‘Guess it’s just us. Again,’ she said to the creature—a tree sprite she called Mr Tumbleweed—who lay sprawled in her bicycle basket. He was the size of a nursery-school child, and his twiggy, stick-insect-like legs hung out over its side.

The only answer she got was a snore. A snore that sounded like a gurgle, because her bicycle was outside the shelter in the pouring rain, and the tree sprite’s mouth—a gash in his log head—was wide open.

Exactly one bicycle stood in the long row of bike racks by the boarded-up lakeside kiosk.

Last Saturday, only two others had joined her litter-pick walk in the woods. But right after the summer, right after she’d become a little bit famous, more than twenty kids from school had turned up.

‘Come on. Let’s go!’ she said, as much to herself as to her companion, and stepped out from the shelter. ‘Wake up!’

When the tree sprite didn’t stir, she reached out to shake him. However, before she even touched his gnarled shoulder, he emitted a high-pitched whine and shot up, as if she’d set him on fire. In one leap, he was atop the bus shelter roof.

‘Somebody should not touch this one body with some iron thing,’ Mr Tumbleweed complained in his creaking wooden-floorboard voice.

Saga turned her arm and glanced down at the metal button on her sleeve. ‘Sorry. I didn’t think.’

‘Then somebody should try thinking!’

‘Sorry. Will you help me, please?’ At least he could do that when they were alone.

With a grumble she couldn’t catch for the pounding rain, he leapt down and jumped across the empty car park. Saga trotted after him in her wellies, splashing straight through the deepest potholes, towards the dense greyness that she knew must be the lake. Before she’d picked up the first plastic bottle, raindrops were already sliding down past the knitted rainbow scarf and inside her jumper.

Mr Tumbleweed reappeared out of the sheeting rain, extending both hands, his twig fingers spread wide. Each of them pierced a piece of litter—bits of sweet wrappers, torn magazine pages, soggy tissues. Saga plucked them all off and stuffed them in her bin bag.

On hot summer days, the grass embankment would be crowded with people who came to swim in the cool water. Even off-season, when the little kiosk was closed, it was a popular place for picnics and bonfires. In the month since she’d last been here, quite a lot of litter had accumulated on the sandy strip by the water’s edge and under the gorse bushes. Saga couldn’t understand how some people had no problem bringing their own food and drink but didn’t take their rubbish with them when they left.

While they made their way along the lake, Saga let her thoughts wander. As usual, whenever she was bored, they wandered back to Faerie and to the adventure she and her best friend Alfred had been on in that other realm. They had encountered sprites and tiny butterfly faeries, vicious pixies, fearsome high faeries, helpful shapeshifters and terrifying beasts. Some of them had even appeared nearby in the real-world forest.

But, in the two months since Alfred had left, Saga hadn’t seen a single faerie creature. Except Mr Tumbleweed, of course. And she’d been collecting rubbish in the woods most Saturdays, half hoping for a sighting. There would be no sightings today, not here by the lake. She stomped on a plastic container and picked it up, before she carefully tackled the shards from a broken glass bottle.

Three hours later, Saga cycled home to the farm, while Mr Tumbleweed snored in her basket. She was soaked to the bone, despite her waterproof gear. Inside the boot room, she left her drenched clothes in a pile and headed directly to the upstairs shower. So she was only wearing knickers and her inside-out vest and a towel wrapped around her wet hair when she discovered Oliver was home.

He stood in her room, by her desk, turning the pages of her notebook. Her Faerie Investigation Society notebook, where she'd sketched and described all the faerie creatures she'd seen.

'Hey! That's private!' Saga stormed at him, snatching the notebook out of his hands so quickly one of the pages tore. 'And this is my room!'

'Nice to see you too.' Oliver sniggered in that annoyingly overbearing big-brother manner of his. He peered at the torn paper pinched between his fingers. 'Is that supposed to look like a dog with antlers?'

Involuntarily, Saga shuddered. 'A wolf,' she muttered, a memory of those antlered wolf beasts clear in her mind. She rubbed her bare arms where goose pimples sprang up. 'A faerie creature that me and Alfred—'

'Oh, grow up and stop that faerie nonsense. How old are you? Ten?' After Oliver had turned eighteen and now thought he was an adult, he'd become even more self-important.

'You know I'm twelve. And faeries are actually real.' She glanced up at the wardrobe, where Mr Tumbleweed was shaking his log head from side to side.

'Tell someone who cares. I just came to borrow your scissors.'

'Steal, more likely,' Saga muttered under her breath, as she pulled a desk drawer out and found her scissors. 'Why are you here? Did your fancy school throw you out?'

'Ha, ha. I have two weeks off. You have one, right? And still a whole week of school to go first.' He left her room, calling, 'You'd better be quiet in the mornings...'

Saga gritted her teeth and decided that early Monday morning she'd get Poppy and Daisy—their two younger sisters—to come upstairs and play their shrilly recorders right outside his bedroom door. With Oliver at home from boarding school, the coming weeks would be less boring, but not in a good way.

'I wish I could tell someone who cares,' she said, sinking down on her chair. But, unfortunately, whenever she mentioned faeries, most people

reacted like Oliver. Or worse. ‘I wish I could tell the whole world about faerie creatures.’ Leaning back, she tapped the bridge of her glasses. ‘I wish I could become the David Attenborough of the faerie world...’ She imagined herself walking through the twilit faerie landscape, speaking to a TV camera in stage whispers, filming a documentary.

‘Faerie bodies will not be happy to have somebody talking about them to human nobodies,’ Mr Tumbleweed said from the top of the wardrobe.

‘How would they even know?’ she said, dismissing the tree-sprite’s warning. He was always so negative.

She tried to return to her documentary fantasy, but, in her mind, antlered wolves appeared and chased her camera crew away. Saga shook her head to get rid of the image.

It was no use daydreaming anyway. She had to do something concrete. Something people would notice and appreciate—like stopping the construction of a motorway tunnel through the Faerie Hill.

That was what she and Alfred had done a couple of months ago. On their expedition to Faerie, they’d found an enormous dripstone cavern inside the hill. A cavern so spectacular that even the mayor realized preserving it would be more valuable than his beloved motorway tunnel.

The fact was that that one week of frantic action had put the rest of her life into perspective. After the initial media buzz, which Alfred was only too happy to let her handle on her own, interest in Saga and her nature group projects had petered out.

The rush of having had a real impact on the world had been incredible. And now... Nothing. The past month, since it had all died down, had been the most boring period of her entire life.

With her bare feet, Saga pushed off from the leg of her desk. She tucked her knees up, wrapping her arms around them as the chair swivelled, wishing she could swirl herself into that other realm.

The chair stopped, facing the window. Outside, rain slid down the glass in steady streams, blending the darkening grey sky and the bare brown fields.

‘Nothing ever happens here! I wish Alfred was coming for the autumn break. I wish something exciting would hap—’

‘Somebody should take care what they wish for,’ Mr Tumbleweed groaned.

‘Or what?’ Saga sighed. She had to do something. Anything.

Luckily, she still had one idea. One idea that could grab people's attention, whether they believed faeries were real or not. An idea that had sprung from her belief that there might be other humans in the faerie realm.

In addition to documenting everything about faeries in her notebook, Saga had also been to the library and searched the microfilm archives for information about the Faerie Hill and its surroundings. Specifically for information about disappearances and suspicious occurrences. Unfortunately, all the instances that were marginally interesting had taken place long before she was born. All except one.

Twelve years ago, a baby had vanished. In the newspapers, the case was referred to as 'the kidnapping of Baby L'. She'd found out precious little about the family, but it was clear that the child was never returned to its parents and had never been found.

To Saga, the obvious explanation was that the baby had been taken by faeries. The faeries would've exchanged the child for a changeling—that was what faeries did in stories. All she had to do was return to the faerie realm, find the child, who must be her age now, and bring them home. Simple. Well, simple if she had any means of returning to Faerie... But without Alfred, no chance.

At first, she'd actually thought Alfred might be a changeling, but he was something far more fascinating. They'd discovered he was a demi-fae: half human and half faerie. Half water-sprite, to be precise.

With her whole being, Saga wished it was her. But she was just an entirely ordinary human, with ordinary human parents, living a boring ordinary human life.

She sighed again and did the one thing that always cheered her up. After powering up her laptop, Saga clicked on her saved shortcut to the local TV station's website. It opened a video from the protest march against the motorway tunnel through the Faerie Hill. A memory she relished.

She was watching herself tearing free of a police officer's grip, when she noticed a photo of Mayor Underwood in the sidebar news section. He was smirking at her from above a headline that read: *Underwood Cavern Grand Opening*.

Forgetting the video, she tapped the photo, right on the mayor's long nose. An even larger photo of his smug face popped up. She quickly

scanned the text, muttering, 'Oh no, oh no, oh no,' as she read.

At the same time, a thrill surged through Saga's body. Because surely something exciting was about to happen.

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## 2

ALFRED



### *Empty Promises*

The three boys took a detour to walk Alfred home. When he stopped outside the building where he and Dad lived in their new flat, his teammates came to a standstill too. They all continued talking, analysing the day's water-polo match. They'd won.

Ignoring the vibrations of his ringing phone, Alfred commented on a particularly spectacular goal that Wesley, their team captain and centre forward, had scored.

'All down to your pass,' the older, taller boy said and slapped Alfred on the shoulder. 'And that spiral turn when you evaded the defender! You gotta teach us, man.'

'Anytime,' Alfred answered, although he wasn't sure he could. He did, after all, have special abilities in water.

They all called versions of, 'See you, Al,' after him as they walked on, and he unlocked the front door. As he started up the stairs, Alfred was smiling. He couldn't wait for all the extra training during the autumn break.

Water polo was so much more fun than swimming. His teammates weren't his competitors any more. And these new teammates appreciated that he was the most agile swimmer in the pool. He was getting better at throwing the ball too, though he still preferred to pass it so others could score the goals. It made him a popular team player.

Obviously, his teammates didn't know that there was a reason he moved with such ease in the water. Nor did they know that he could

breathe and see clearly under the surface. Water was his element, because his mother was a water sprite, a faerie creature called Nereida.

Until this summer, Alfred had believed his mother was human—that he was human—and that she'd died when he was a baby. But she hadn't died. In addition to discovering she was a water sprite, he'd learnt that she'd vanished without a trace before he was two weeks old. Vanished into the Faerie Hill. He chose to believe in the possibility that somehow, somewhere in Faerie, she was still alive or could be revived.

Halfway up the stairs, he stopped to alleviate the twitch in his shorter right leg. While he stretched his calf muscle, his smile widened as he remembered how easy it had been to join the team.

From his first day at the new school, he'd tried to follow Saga's example and not care about being different. When his form teacher introduced him, Alfred had stood up, without trying to hide. Calmly, at least on the outside, he'd told them all matter-of-factly about his limb length discrepancy and his right leg being 5.3 centimetres shorter than the left and having to wear special shoes. 'So, if you need to pick a team for football or something else that involves running, you should pick me last. But—' Alfred had held up the printed photo of his seventy-eight medals and trophies. '—I'm pretty good at swimming.' To widespread chuckles and a frown from the teacher, he'd also offered to teach them words that weren't taught in schools in Italian, French, German or Japanese. He hadn't mentioned that he'd been called many of those words by bullies in faraway countries.

Several kids had surrounded him after that first lesson, asking for a closer look at the photo or about the translation of specific swear words. By lunchtime the news had spread, and both Wesley and the captain of the swimming team had invited him for tryouts. The choice had been easy.

Inside the sports bag, his phone buzzed again. Alfred sped up the last few stairs. He heard the incoming videocall on his computer, as he opened the front door. Only one person was this impatient.

Half-running through the flat, he called, 'Hey Dad! We won.'

'Congrats, Alfie!' Dad called back, popping out of the kitchen. 'Dinner's ready in fifteen.'

'Just gotta talk to Saga.'

‘Where were you?’ Saga said, the moment he answered the call. ‘I tried for ages.’

‘Water polo match. Just came in the door.’ He shrugged out of his jacket before sitting down.

‘Ah... Is it still better than swimming?’

‘Definitely! It’s totally different to be part of the team that...’ He trailed off when he noticed Saga was drumming the fingers of one hand impatiently on her cheek.

‘We have a problem,’ she said, leaning forward. ‘The mayor has announced plans and activities for the grand opening of Underwood Cavern. It’s next Saturday. There’ll be pumpkin-carving competitions and all kinds of Halloween nonsense in the forest. It’s going to attract a lot of people.’

‘Oh.’ Alfred was glad he wouldn’t be going. He hated crowds.

‘Do you think... Do you think we’ve made everything worse? For the faeries, I mean. Obviously, it’s better for nature this way. Even if they’re using the old tunnel building site as a car park, it won’t damage the pond or harm its inhabitants. But if people are going to flock to the cavern and swarm the woods—and not just on opening day—I can’t imagine the faeries will be happy.’

‘We didn’t have a choice,’ he said, when she stopped to breathe. ‘And it’s still better than the motorway tunnel, for everyone, including the faeries.’

‘I’m just worried they will do something—the faeries, I mean—if there’s going to be an invasion of families in the forest. And I think you ought to be here, if that happens. You can talk to them. You’re the *alf rät*.’ As if to emphasize her point, she straightened and tightened the ginger bunches on top of her head while she said the last two words.

Alfred’s name, *alf rät*, meant elvish advisor, a formidable high faerie had explained. The faerie called herself Amanita, and she’d both helped and tricked them. She’d also told him what it meant to be a demi-fae. He tried not to think too much about it.

When he didn’t speak, Saga continued. ‘And perhaps we could even go to Faerie... There’s someone I’d like to look for. A baby who I think the faeries switched with a changeling twelve years—’

‘I can’t,’ he said, not wanting to hear what changeling theory she had thought up now. ‘Granny’s coming here, while Dad’s travelling.’

‘I’m sure your granny wouldn’t mind if you came to hers instead.’

‘I have extra water-polo training.’ Alfred picked up the little water-sprite figurine that stood on his desk and held her in his hand. She was carved of wood and she depicted his mother. And, he believed, the figurine somehow sheltered her spirit. It was his most treasured possession.

‘This is more important than water polo.’ Saga pushed her glasses up on her nose and leant in close to her webcam, staring right at him. ‘You’re afraid of coming back, aren’t you?’

Alfred looked down, not answering. He stroked the carved hair of the mouse-sized figurine and exhaled. His breathing slowed. A warmth spread inside him until he felt as if he were floating in a cocoon of soothing water.

‘You can’t stay away from here for ever,’ Saga said softly.

‘I know,’ he muttered.

Although he actually liked his new school and the water polo team, Amanita had offered him a different life. A life where he wasn’t an outsider. A place with others who were just like him—half human and half faerie—in a group of demi-fae, where she’d said he truly belonged.

Saga knew that, and she’d guessed how tempted he’d been by the offer. Saga knew everything. Even the bit about his potentially exceptionally long life, and the fact that his mother had enchanted Dad and Granny to erase her from their minds. Their thoughts usually skipped away from thinking about her. They remembered that she’d disappeared when he was a baby, but they seemed to have forgotten Nereida wasn’t human.

‘I don’t know why you’re afraid, but what if... what if I promise to keep you away from Faerie?’ Saga asked. She was still so close to her camera he could see a fingerprint on one of her lenses. ‘I’ll forget about looking for that abducted child.’

‘I’ve got to go help Dad with dinner,’ he said.

‘Please just think about it...’

Alfred shook his head and ended the call, before Saga could say anything else to persuade him, before she could make any more empty promises.

He wanted nothing more than to go to Granny’s in the autumn break. Every single day, he longed for the stream that ran through Faerie and out

into her garden.

Saga was right—he was afraid. Because if he went back, how could he not jump in the water? How could he not return to Faerie? Worst of all, what if he wanted to stay?

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# 3

## SAGA



### *A Convenient Accident*

By Wednesday, Saga was getting desperate. At school, all everyone talked about was the cavern opening and the pumpkin-carving and fancy-dress competitions. Mainly, Saga thought, because the first prizes were the latest gaming consoles. Although she'd called Alfred every day to persuade him to come, she still hadn't succeeded.

On her way home from school, she stopped by Alfred's granny's. When she got off her bike outside the gate to Applevale Cottage, Mr Tumbleweed jumped out of her basket and left in a huff. The cottage's protection against faerie creatures meant he couldn't enter the garden without having one of his fits. He was annoyed that Saga visited so often. At least once a week since the summer, she'd dropped by for a chat with Anna, Alfred's granny.

It was nice to have someone besides Alfred who knew about faeries, although Anna preferred not to talk about them. Saga knew Alfred had tried to tell his granny about their visit to Faerie and him being half water-sprite, but she never remembered.

When Anna heard the gate creak, she looked up from where she was standing by her garden table, smiled, and waved Saga closer.

'What're you doing?' Saga asked, upon seeing there was a bowl full of conkers and a chopping board littered with their spiky husks on the table.

'I'm experimenting with yarn dyes. These should give some nice rich browns.' Anna pointed with a knife at the husks and went back to

chopping them into quarters. 'How are you, dear?'

'I'm worried about Saturday.'

'So am I.'

'I wish Al—' Saga caught herself from using his real name and cast a glance towards the naked thorny twigs of the hedge. 'Your grandson ought to be here for the opening, don't you think? We found that cavern!'

Anna sighed. 'I agree, but he says he wants to stay home for his water-polo training.'

'What if you told him you had to stay here? Couldn't you... I don't know...' Saga remembered that her own grandfather, who was quite a bit older than Alfred's granny, hadn't come to Mum's birthday recently because his back was acting up. 'Perhaps claim to have a bad back or something? So you couldn't travel?'

'My back is perfectly fine,' Anna said, her brow furrowing, as she stirred with vigour. 'And I'm glad he's settling in. Aren't you?'

'Of course...' Saga gave up and trudged back along the garden path. She'd just closed the gate when she heard a rustle under the hedge.

'The sprite boy is not coming?' a screechy voice said.

'But *she* wants him here, Little Mother.'

Saga looked around for Mr Tumbleweed, but of course he'd already gone home. She peered in between the stems of the shrubs and cover of dead leaves, without spotting the rat-sized little people in their filthy clothes. But she knew it was them—the vicious pixies who had stolen her shadow and later been forced to sew it back on. Almost all of her shadow. In a faerie deal, she'd given them the shadow of her left little finger.

'We could use a second shadow curtain, Little Father. The low winter sun blinds me so,' Little Mother said, from wherever she was hiding. She raised her voice, saying, 'Little girl, we could make the old woman want to stay, so your friend would have to come here.'

'For a small price,' Little Father added.

Briefly, Saga was tempted. She didn't care if she lost another snippet of her shadow. 'And this wouldn't involve you cutting her shadow or yarn or anything?'

'No cutting, Little Mother.'

'I do like the *snip, snip, snip*, Little Father, but we can promise that there will be no cutting.'

'A little harm goes a long way,' Little Father muttered.

‘No! Forget it,’ Saga said. What was she thinking? It was stupid to even consider cooperating with the little people. They couldn’t be trusted. ‘We don’t have a deal.’

‘No deal, Little Mother.’

‘No new curtain.’

They kept muttering, while she mounted her bicycle and set off.

The next afternoon, after school, Saga had been helping out at the bird sanctuary her nature group was part of establishing. It wasn’t exactly thrilling work, but she loved seeing their plans take shape. As she cycled home, uphill from the lake, a biting wind blowing against her, she recalled the encounter with the pixies. Mr Tumbleweed hadn’t been with her then, and he wasn’t with her now because of his strong dislike of birds. Perhaps his absence explained her first sighting—or at least hearing—of faerie creatures in two months! The thought was exciting, though something about her chat with the pixies gave her the chills.

She couldn’t wait to get indoors to warm up, and she was almost home, when Saga noticed the blinking blue lights. An ambulance was parked in the lane by Applevale Cottage.

‘Oh no!’ she said aloud, and trod in the pedals with renewed energy and a sense of dread.

She was almost there when the ambulance drove away. At least it didn’t use the siren. Mum stood by the garden gate.

‘What happened, Mum?’ Saga called. ‘Was that Anna in the ambulance?’

‘She’ll be okay.’ Mum looked a bit shaken. ‘I found her in the garden. Somehow she’d fallen and hit her head. I feared it was much worse, but I think perhaps it’s a mild concussion. And a broken leg or ankle. She must’ve stumbled...’

Or someone tripped her up, Saga thought. She felt cold all over. Had her talk with the pixies given them a malicious idea?

‘Come on. Let’s go home. I promised Anna I’d call Rob and tell him about the accident.’ Mum began walking. ‘It was lucky she’d said I could stop by for some jars of her rosehip

jam before she went away...’

‘Yeah. Lucky...’ Saga muttered, pushing her bike. ‘What about Alfred?’ she asked. ‘His granny was supposed to look after him next

week.'

'Oh... I'll tell Rob that Alfred is welcome to stay with us, if he'd like that.'

'Thanks, Mum!' Saga didn't comment on whether Alfred would like to come, and she tried hard to ignore the nagging guilt that came from having had her wish fulfilled at the expense of someone else.

At home, she paced the kitchen while Mum talked to Rob, who was grateful for their help and offer of having Alfred stay. Then she went to her room and turned her new hourglass, planning to give Alfred and his dad half an hour to talk. She watched the slow-moving sand impatiently.

Alfred called before the last grains had fallen.

'It was them,' Saga said immediately. 'The nasty pixies. It's their fault. I'm almost certain it's their fault. But I think they got the idea from me and I'm sorry and I want to find them and—How's your granny, do you know?'

'Dad just talked to the hospital. Her ankle's broken; she needs an operation. And she has a concussion, but they think it's mild. What's that about the little people? Tell me slowly.'

After Saga told him what had happened, Alfred was quiet. She could see he was stroking the hair of the water-sprite figurine, which he often did when he was thinking or needed to calm down.

'Sooo... are you going to come here?'

He nodded. 'Dad's driving me tomorrow afternoon, so we can visit Granny.'

'I'm really sorry, but I'm glad you'll be here for the cavern opening.'

'Okay. Just promise me...' He lifted his gaze from the figurine. 'Swear that we're not going to Faerie.'

She'd been right in guessing he was scared. Saga took a deep breath and let go of her dream of ever finding the missing child. 'I swear we're not going into the faerie realm.'

It was only later that night, when she was about to doze off, that a thought struck Saga, bolting her awake. She hadn't made a deal with Little Mother and Little Father. They got nothing from her for tripping up Anna, so why had they done it?

Was it purely out of spite? Or had someone else paid their price?

## 4

ALFRED



### *A Suspicious Discovery*

Dad had been driving for more than three hours when Alfred began to recognize the landscape. The grey shapes of the extinct volcanoes appeared in the gloom. Through the rapid-moving windshield wipers, Alfred tried to spot the ruins at the top of the one that rose above the Faerie Hill.

He wanted to see it, almost as much as he'd hoped he never would again.

'I promised to bring Granny some things from the cottage, so we'll go there first,' Dad said, while he navigated the curve of the motorway exit. 'There's an extra key at the farm.'

'I have a key.' Alfred rummaged for his key bundle in the front pocket of his backpack. 'Right here.'

'Ah, good.' Dad looked at him sideways. 'I don't.'

'Granny said I should keep it.' Alfred remembered sitting on the front step with Granny, at the end of his last visit two months earlier, while Dad was packing the car. When he'd wanted to give her his key to the cottage, she'd put it back in his palm, closing his hand around it with hers, saying, 'The cottage is your home too. One day, when I'm gone, it'll belong to you.' Unable to speak, Alfred had hugged her tightly.

By the time they reached the cottage, the rain had become a drizzle. Dad's phone rang while he parked.

'Go ahead, Alfie. I'll just be a sec.'

Alfred zipped up his jacket as he walked towards the dark cottage. He avoided the stepping stones he knew wobbled. Above the thatched roof, atop the high cliff, trees creaked, leaves rustled and branches swayed against the leaden sky. Crows cawed, swooping down around him, welcoming him home.

Despite all these noises, one soft sound stood out—the trickling of the spring that ran along the hedge. It flowed out from Granny’s shed, from the underground river, from Faerie. Alfred exhaled. The spring’s music soothed at the same time as it tantalized him, and he longed to submerge himself in its water.

Before entering the cottage, he cast a cursory glance at the wood-carved figurine above the door. In the strange long face, the hollow eyes stared back at him. A forked tongue stuck out of the mouth. It seemed to be licking the air. The figurine resembled the faerie queen’s spies—Alfred had seen their forked tongues and eyes appear on trees in the forest and felt their piercing glares.

Inside, in the kitchen, a plate with crumbs and a half-full teacup stood on the table. Alfred went to the window sills and touched the wood-carved bear’s snout and one of the bat’s ears. The two cat-sized figures depicted two shapeshifters—faerie creatures who could change from their animal forms into something that almost resembled humans—the bear-creature, Bjørn, and the bat, Batty.

‘I’m back,’ Alfred whispered, feeling a little apprehensive. Much as he wished to talk to them, he feared what they would say. He’d made a deal with Saga, but what if the shapeshifters wanted him to return to Faerie?

There was, however, no reaction, not even the slightest flutter of Batty’s large ears, but he imagined her saying, ‘No need to shout.’

Before Dad came inside, Alfred sought out the other woodcarvings.

In the front room, he greeted Evie the eagle. He leant over the sculpture, meeting her piercing eyes. The other front room window was empty, but Alfred found Castor the catfish in Granny’s bedroom. The long feelers on the strange-looking fish reached the window sill. Since he’d stayed at the cottage, Alfred had learnt that catfish taste buds were exceptional.

‘There you are,’ Dad said, coming into the bedroom. ‘I have a list here.’ He looked at his phone. ‘I’ll get the clothes, if you find... let me

see... her knitting in the guest room. The book she's reading and her earphones should be by her armchair in the front room... and you can empty the bin.'

In the guest room, the loom took up more space now that Granny was weaving. As Alfred squeezed past it to get to the window, all the blue, green and turquoise threads made his eyes swim. He turned and stood for a moment, gazing at the tapestry above the bed. The woven depiction of the turquoise river filled him with such longing that he went to stroke a hand over the water. Exhaling, he felt the same deep sense of calm spread in his body as when he held the water-sprite figurine.

Before picking up the knitting basket, he touched one of the little wood-carved mole's outstretched fingers. Majorie the mole was the last of the shapeshifters. Their five wood carvings guarded the cottage and protected Alfred and Granny with their exceptional senses—Marjorie's sense of touch, Castor's sense of taste, Evie's sight, Bjørn's sense of smell and Batty's hearing.

Back in the kitchen, he rinsed the plate and the cup and filled a saucer with milk. Whatever the little people had done, Granny would want him to bring milk to them, to avoid further sabotage. And perhaps he might find out if they really were the culprits.

After depositing the rubbish bag on the front step, Alfred walked round to the side of the cottage. The light from the kitchen cast the v-shaped shadow of Batty's wings on the muddy grass and Alfred's own shadow on to the hedge. Burnt orange rose-hips dotted the leafless, thorny twigs.

'You don't deserve it, but here's your milk,' he muttered, as he pushed the saucer under the tangles.

The little people didn't answer. He couldn't hear anything scuttle around in the hedge either.

Above, wind whooshed through the trees on the edge of the cliff. Alfred shivered. He walked past the stacked firewood by the high cliff face and ran his fingers over the bolted shed door. His granny's garden shed was tiny, but it opened up into a large natural cave. Here she dyed her yarns, using water from the spring that bubbled out of a narrow underground tunnel in the darkest recess of the cave and ran through her working space. On this side of the bolted door, the spring flowed under the shed's planks and out into the garden. Alfred listened to its music, but

he avoided coming into contact with the water. Lillith, the terrifying water sprite who'd taken over his mother's streams, would know he was back if he touched the surface. And he did not want to alert her—no one had ever looked at him with such hatred.

He was following the cottage wall back towards the front door, when he noticed that one of the heavy wooden garden chairs lay on the grass, overturned, next to a smashed saucer. As Dad turned off the light in Granny's bedroom, the darkness in the garden spread. Only the light from the kitchen still shone.

The lawn here was flat and even, but Alfred approached the garden chair, gliding his feet over the wet grass as if he were walking on slippery ice. He stopped when his right shin met resistance. Leaning down, letting his hands slide down that shin, he tried to find something he couldn't see. And then he felt it. A thread, finer and less noticeable than any spiderweb, sturdier than any fishing line. A faerie gossamer thread.

Holding on to it, he knelt until he was almost down by its height. From here, the row of glittering raindrops it had caught were visible in the light from the kitchen. His eyes followed the thread first to one of the overturned chair's legs and then to the wall of the cottage. He tugged hard, but the thread didn't snap. His action just made the raindrops fall, turning the gossamer invisible.

In an awkward crouch, holding on to the thread, he made it to the cottage, where he found it attached to a silver needle stuck into the wall. A silver needle exactly like the one Little Mother had used to reattach Saga's shadow.

If they needed proof of who'd caused Granny's accident, he'd found it.

Half an hour later, he and Dad entered Granny's hospital room. As soon as he'd given her a hug, Alfred asked if she remembered how she'd fallen.

She was a little muddled. 'My foot was under a garden chair, but I don't remember how that happened.' She pointed at her bandaged foot, which was raised and hanging from a sling. 'They can't operate until the swelling goes down.'

'I think a... a hedgehog... tripped you up,' Alfred said, using the code name Granny herself had used for the little people until she found out he

could see faeries too.

‘Nonsense,’ Dad said. ‘You must’ve been sitting on the chair and somehow tipped it over and stumbled while getting up.’

Granny shook her head. ‘Robbie, why don’t you find a vase for those beautiful flowers you brought?’

The moment Dad left the room, Alfred told Granny about the gossamer thread he’d discovered. Out of loyalty to Saga, he didn’t say anything about her fear that she was at fault.

‘It’s odd,’ Granny said. ‘The little people haven’t bothered me in such a long time. Some days they don’t even drink the milk. But please remember to put milk out for them while I’m in here. Will you do that?’

‘Of course,’ Alfred said, as Dad entered the room, carrying a vase with the bouquet.

They sat for a while, chatting. The woman in the next bed snored loudly.

‘You hear why I needed earphones,’ Granny whispered.

Alfred nodded, thinking. If the pixies hadn’t bothered Granny recently, then why had they suddenly harmed her? Was Saga to blame? She wasn’t used to making faerie deals—had they tricked her, despite her claim that there wasn’t a deal? Or did the little people have their own reason for wanting Granny out of the way?

# 5

## SAGA



### *Unfamiliar Relations*

‘He’s here! Saga! He’s here,’ Poppy and Daisy yelled from the front room, where they had been keeping watch for headlights in the darkness.

Outside, the geese-alarm, as Dad called it, went off with loud honks. Rufus barked. After putting her notes about the kidnapped baby into a desk drawer, Saga sprang downstairs.

‘Alfred, Robbie, come in, come in,’ Mum was saying, as Saga reached the boot room. ‘Girls, give them a little space. Didn’t I tell you to get ready for bed?’

Saga waited until all the others had said their hellos before she gave Alfred a hug. He almost hugged her back.

‘How’s your granny?’ she asked.

Her mum was asking Alfred’s dad the same thing, and leading him into their kitchen, where Dad was making tea. The apple pie Saga had helped Mum make earlier stood, steaming, in the centre of their large dining table, next to a plateful of sandwiches.

‘She’s okay, but...’ Alfred lowered his voice, although no one would’ve heard him if he’d shouted. Poppy and Daisy were chasing each other, and Rufus was still barking. ‘You were right about the pixies.’

In a hurried whisper, Alfred started telling her about the gossamer thread attached to the cottage, but of course they were interrupted.

Oliver opened the front door and kicked off his wellies, letting a fresh whiff of muck from the stables into the house.

‘Hey, you must be Alfred,’ he said, as he pushed past them. ‘Lily talks about you non-stop,’ he called while he washed his hands in the downstairs bathroom.

‘Who’s—’ Alfred began in a low voice.

‘Don’t call me that! My name’s Saga.’

‘I bet she never even mentioned me,’ Oliver said. Luckily, he headed straight for the kitchen and didn’t see Alfred’s nonplussed expression.

‘That was one of my big brothers,’ she said. ‘The annoying one. I wish Florian was here instead. He’s two years older and much nicer than Oliver. But he won’t be home until Christmas.’

‘You have brothers? And your real name is Lily?’

‘Typical Mum. She loves flower names. Please forget that you know—I don’t want to risk that you ever call me that name when there are faeries around. And come on, let’s get some pie before Oliver eats the whole thing.’

The kitchen hummed with lively talk. Alfred slid into the chair next to his dad, so Saga had to sit next to Oliver. At least she was sitting directly opposite her friend. While Mum was asking him about his new life, and Oliver, who wanted to study engineering, interrogated Robbie, she observed father and son. Their gestures were so alike. And there was a similarity to their faces that she couldn’t put her finger on. But at first glance, it didn’t even look as if they were related. Alfred’s olive skin was darker than Robbie’s weathered tan. His wild dark locks came down over his ears, whereas Robbie’s ash-blond hair was as straight as her own. The biggest difference though was their eyes. Robbie had the exact same clear blue eyes as Alfred’s granny. Normal eyes.

Alfred caught her staring at him. She couldn’t believe she hadn’t realized he wasn’t entirely human the first time she looked into those eyes. One glance should’ve been enough, because his eyes were extraordinary. Big, round and green, they shone with light. Light that she now recognized as faerie light. Why couldn’t everyone see it?

‘Cat got your tongue?’ Oliver elbowed her in the side, a little too hard. She elbowed him back.

‘Children!’ Dad raised his voice slightly, before he continued telling Robbie about Florian and his agriculture studies.

‘What about you, Saga? Do you have an idea what you want to do?’ Robbie asked, which was nice, because adults never asked her anything

with Florian or Oliver nearby.

‘She’ll be going to prison for blowing up a building site,’ Oliver murmured almost inaudibly.

‘I’m going to be a forester,’ she said, because Alfred was the only one she could possibly tell about wanting to become the David Attenborough of the faerie world.

‘When I was your age, I wanted to be a forester too...’ Robbie smiled.

Before she could ask why he’d chosen the opposite direction and worked with dead concrete instead of living plants, an idea struck her. ‘Did you change your mind because of Nereida?’ she asked.

In response, Robbie’s smile vanished and his eyes became infinitely sad.

For a moment, everyone sat in a frozen silence, then Robbie said, ‘I’d better get going,’ and the others started moving. Everyone except her.

‘Way to go, Lily,’ Oliver whispered as he pushed his chair back.

Mum hugged Robbie before she ushered Poppy and Daisy to their beds. Oliver carried Alfred’s holdall upstairs to Florian’s room and showed Alfred where he would be sleeping. By the stove, Dad was making coffee in a Thermos for Robbie to take with him on the long drive. The two of them were chatting and laughing about something from their school days, as if nothing had happened.

After Robbie had left, Saga followed Alfred upstairs.

‘I saw his mind skip,’ she said, when she entered Florian’s bedroom. ‘I’m sorry, if that made him leave sooner, but I wanted to see how it happened.’

Alfred nodded. She didn’t need to explain that she meant the memory enchantment at work.

Mum bustled into the room, bringing towels. She said all the mummy things, making sure their guest had everything he needed, before she left them alone.

Alfred sat down on the bed. ‘You’re lucky, you know,’ he said. His hand rubbed the terrycloth towel.

‘Because of my mum?’

‘Not just her. I only have Dad and Granny. You have this whole family... Siblings, an uncle. You’re so many...’

‘Way too many!’ She sighed theatrically. ‘And not one, but five uncles. And three aunts and eight cousins and five grandparents. You can

have Oliver for free.'

Alfred snorted, without smiling.

'For all we know, you might have a huge water-sprite family,' she said, trying to raise his spirits.

His head jerked up. 'You really think so?'

'Your mother must've had parents, right? And we know she was someone's sister.' After the summer, Saga had visited the village graveyard and seen Nereida's grave for herself. Below her name, *Beloved wife, mother, sister* was etched into the headstone.

Alfred's throat worked, like he was swallowing a lump, before he spoke. 'Perhaps I could find them. If I ever were to go back to Faerie. Even if I never find out what happened to my mother twelve years ago. Perhaps I could find her family... my faerie grandparents...'

'Faeries live practically for ever. Someone's bound to at least know her mother.' Saga wondered if water sprites paired for life. She still had so much to learn about the faerie creatures. 'I'll come with you... If you've changed your mind about going?'

'No! I haven't. You promised.'

'Whenever you're ready.' It was disappointing, but no matter how much she wanted to explore Faerie and search for that abducted child, Saga would never force Alfred to go. She tried to lighten the mood, saying, 'You can never have enough grandmothers. I have three now Dad's dad remarried.'

'Another grandmother,' Alfred muttered.

'Anyway, my room's next door. And someone you're definitely not related to needs to be fed.' She led the way across the landing into her own room. Here, she put the napkin with a slice of pie she'd been hiding under her bulky jumper on the window sill.

'Cake!' Mr Tumbleweed jumped down from one of the wooden beams that ran the length of her room under the roof.

'Hello, Mr Tumbleweed,' Alfred said.

Ignoring the greeting, the tree sprite scooped pie into his mouth with both stick-finger hands.

'So what's the plan?' Alfred asked when Mr Tumbleweed had licked the napkin clean. 'What are we going to do about that cavern opening tomorrow?'

‘I don’t know. It depends what happens. My plan was to get you here.’

‘Okay... Perhaps no one will come. I mean, they didn’t exactly turn out in droves for the tunnel protest. And if it rains like today...’

Saga opened one of the curtains. ‘It won’t rain,’ she said.

Outside, in a sky littered with stars, a waning moon peeked out behind a small remaining cloud.

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## 6

ALFRED



### *Trouble at the Cavern Opening*

The next morning, Alfred was woken by two pirates and something licking his hand.

The pirates jumped around on his bed, yelling, ‘Watch out!’ and ‘The crocodile!’

The slobbery thing by his hand was ticking.

Not quite awake, Alfred pulled his hand away and scrambled to sit up in the middle of the bed. Poppy stood over him, wearing a captain’s hat and holding a large hook. Daisy held a foam cutlass to Rufus’s head. Rufus barked. An old-fashioned alarm-clock hung from his collar. A green towel had been stuffed into the collar and covered his back like a cape.

‘You can be a lost boy,’ Daisy said. She wore red joggers and a black-and-white striped T-shirt. Her ginger hair was hidden under a scarf with skulls.

‘Where’s your leader?’ Poppy held the hook, which was also made of foam, to his throat.

Saga appeared in the doorway.

‘Uh-oh!’ Daisy raised her cutlass and both girls yelled, ‘Tinkerbell!’

‘Get out! Or I’ll make you fly!’ Saga ran at the bed.

Screaming, the girls jumped down and ran in circles to avoid Saga. She didn’t chase them when they left the room, the ticking dog on their heels.

‘Sorry,’ Saga said.

‘Is this how you normally wake up?’

‘Nah. They’re just a bit overexcited about the cavern opening—especially the fancy-dress competition.’

‘I don’t know why I’d imagined they would dress up as princesses.’

‘I used to do that. But only so I could bring my “toad”’—Saga made air quotes—‘to the parties.’ She’d told him Mr Tumbleweed looked like a toad to normal humans.

‘What do I need to be a lost boy?’ he asked, though he didn’t feel he needed much.

‘We’re not dressing up,’ Saga said.

‘Why?’ If they went as a big group with the rest of her family, and everyone else was dressed up for the competition, Alfred wouldn’t mind dressing up.

‘I forgot to tell you. We—’ She pointed at him and herself. ‘—have VIP tickets. Delivered from the mayor’s office yesterday. In any case, if all the other kids are dressed up, we’ll stand out more if we’re wearing normal clothes.’

Alfred shrugged, although he felt that was the best reason for dressing up in the first place. He really didn’t understand Saga and her need to stand out from the crowd.

‘It’s unfortunately sunny,’ she said, opening the curtains, before she left him to get dressed.

Outside, white puffy clouds raced across the blue sky. Alfred could see the forest from Florian’s window. From this distance, its colourful splashes of rusty oranges and yellows made it seem less threatening than usual.

The room was nice, though it was clear no one lived here any more. The desk under the skylight was empty, the bookcase half full of children’s books and old schoolbooks. On the top shelf, rows of trophies for various sports collected dust. Medals and faded rosettes filled a battered shoebox on another shelf. None of the prizes were for swimming, though. Most were for running, football or showjumping. On the wall hung photos of football teams and horses. A large framed photo of a horse and boy took up most space. In another photo, an older version of the same boy swung in a climbing harness near the top of a cliff.

Alfred stepped nearer for a closer look. Like Oliver, Florian was tall and muscular and had their mum’s curly brown hair.

After a chaotic breakfast, Saga and Alfred set off on bicycles, with Mr Tumbleweed in the basket on Saga's handlebars. A rainbow-striped scarf looped around her neck and hung down over her red jacket. Saga's mum and the girls had already been picked up by her uncle.

When they reached the former tunnel building site, their worst fears were confirmed. Despite the fact they arrived almost half an hour before the grand opening, the car park was already filling up. Engines idled, spewing exhaust fumes, and drivers honked to force their way to the last empty spaces. Adults with witches, princesses, superheroes and kids in various animal costumes in tow trampled up the path towards the cavern. Children and some of their parents called out, sang or yelled to others in the crowd.

Alfred hadn't thought so many people lived in the area, and he began to understand why Saga worried the faeries might react to the invasion.

'We're not expected to speak, are we?' he asked, as he locked his bicycle.

'I doubt it. Mayor Underwood won't want to share the media attention.' Saga nodded towards a van from the local TV station, while she took the envelope with their VIP tickets out of her shoulder bag. 'But if we are, I can do the talking.'

They crossed to the path and passed right by a shiny black sedan. Inside, the mayor sat on the backseat, jotting down notes, probably finalizing his speech. His bushy moustache wiggled as he mumbled to himself.

Where the path began, stalls were lined up. A scent of roasted chestnuts and burnt caramel wafted from one. Another served sandwiches and hot soup. Under an open marquee stood long tables laden with pumpkins and tools to carve them with. Children formed queues in front of both that and the booth where they could have their photos taken for the fancy-dress competition.

'At least all this will keep people away from the forest,' Saga muttered, as they passed a sign proclaiming: *Free entry! (First week only.)*

At the cavern entrance, a framed steel door with a big lock had been mounted, so no one could enter outside opening hours. Alfred didn't think it was quite fair that anyone should earn money on a natural

wonder. But he was happy the access was restricted and that nothing could escape from Faerie this way.

Inside the cavern, a red ribbon crossed the width a few metres in. That small area alone was lit up by spotlights on the nearest formations. It was enough to make people stop and gape. Beyond the ribbon, the cavern lay in darkness, except where crevices in its ceiling let in strips of daylight.

When Mayor Underwood entered and pushed himself to the front, another man in a suit led Saga and Alfred to stand by the mayor's side. The ribboned-off area was completely packed.

'Welcome,' the mayor boomed, and the chatter died.

Except one voice. A woman called, '*Fred! Freddie, where are you?*'

The mayor cleared his throat. 'It's a huge honour to welcome you all to Underwood—'

'*Freddie, stop hiding!*' a man called. A rustle went through the crowd as adults turned and looked down to see if an extra child had sneaked in among their own.

'—Cavern.' The mayor raised his voice. 'I am proud that we succeeded in stopping the motorway tunnel—an infrastructure project I personally was against from the very beginning, although I obviously had to support the plans publicly.'

Alfred and Saga exchanged a glance. Alfred had a very clear memory of the mayor, yelling 'I want my tunnel!' like a spoilt toddler.

'After a tough battle against the regional planning commission, we convinced them that this magnificent natural wonder is so much more valuable than a mere traffic improvement.'

'*Freddie! Freddie!*' The voices sounded frantic.

The mayor elbowed the man in the suit, muttering, 'I knew we should've scheduled the grand opening at night, to avoid all those minors coming along.'

The suited man set off in the direction of the voices.

'I should also mention these two youngsters, er...' He consulted his notes. 'Saga and...er... Alfred, who stumbled upon the cavern and insisted it should be named Underwood Cavern, undeterred by my... er... reservations.'

Nearby, Saga's uncle rolled his eyes. Despite the cool October weather, he still wore shorts and leather sandals—now with woollen socks.

*‘Freddie! Has anyone seen a green dinosaur?’*

‘This is only the beginning of our county’s bright future. I...er... We have big plans to develop this area into a world-class tourist attraction. And now, without further ado...’

Another suited man handed the mayor a pair of scissors and a control button attached to a long wire.

‘I declare Underwood Cavern open!’ With one hand the mayor cut the ribbon, and it slid down the nearest stalagmites. With the other, he turned on the spotlights in the rest of the cavern.

A collective sigh went through the crowd before they started clapping. Alfred and Saga clapped too. Not at the mayor, but at the magnificent sight. The spotlights cast dramatic shadows on the ceiling and made everything even more impressive than Alfred remembered.

Flanked by his assistants, the mayor led the way up through the cavern. People surged forward after him, spreading out, as there were no set paths. Only the most brittle dripstones had been cordoned off with rope.

Saga tugged at Alfred’s sleeve. ‘Let’s wait here a moment.’

‘There you are, Freddie!’ a woman said right next to them. She was crouching by a small green-clad figure with an enormous dinosaur head. ‘You can’t just run off like that. Where were you?’

‘Look, Mummy. Butterfly.’

‘There aren’t any butterflies at this time of year. And not in here, silly.’ The mother took Freddie’s hand and followed the crowd.

Saga and Alfred waited until they were alone in the entrance area before they strolled up through the cavern. Like everyone else, they studied all the beautiful formations. They had not gone far before they heard one parent call, ‘*Tom, come here,*’ and another, ‘*Lara, where are you?*’

Alfred couldn’t help wonder if it was normal for children to run off from their parents in such a place—the cavern was labyrinthian, with many hidden corners and dark shadows. He’d always been terrified of getting separated from Dad.

The calls went on. Other parents joined in. Pulling his arm, Saga tugged him in the trail of the panicking parents. Where Freddie had been missing for the duration of the mayor’s speech, it took much longer before Tom and Lara were found. Asleep, they sat together, a small

Viking and an angel with a sword, in the nook of a tree-like stalagmite. They only reacted once someone touched them.

Alfred and Saga overheard the Viking telling his dad that he'd followed a brown butterfly.

‘Not a butterfly,’ Saga muttered.

‘D’you think it could’ve been a moth?’ Alfred asked.

She nodded. ‘A faerie moth.’

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## *A Signposted Monstrosity*

On the way to the cavern exit, Saga kept her eyes narrowed, ready to close them if she caught sight of fluttering wings. Those children had fallen asleep in the most unlikely of places, exactly like she had herself when a moth faerie had enchanted her this summer. Immediately afterwards, the spiteful pixies had stolen her shadow. And there was no way she'd ever fall for a faerie trick like that again.

Outside, unfortunately, most people didn't just walk back to their cars and the food stalls. The weather was simply too nice. Flocks of families headed up the path into the woods, carrying backpacks and picnic baskets.

Saga wished it had been raining as hard as yesterday. Anywhere but here, she would've been delighted to see people spending more time in nature—as long as they didn't leave behind their rubbish. But this was the Faerie Hill. And the noisy crowd confirmed her belief that this influx might annoy the faeries. Perhaps even infuriate them, which would undoubtedly mean trouble.

'What are they doing?' Alfred pointed to a clump of adults by a big sign. Pirates, wizards and ghosts ran in circles around them as she followed him to the group.

The sign was a map of the area. In a box in its corner, small letters warned of sinkholes. A yellow arrow pointed into the forest. According to the map, people would be able to see plans for the tourist attraction at the viewpoint, forty-five minutes' walk away.

The scenic viewpoint.

A chill ran down Saga's back. She used to love the viewpoint, but she'd avoided it since their visit to the faerie realm. It was where they'd first encountered one of the antlered wolf beasts.

'Come on,' she said, pulling herself together, and started up the path. It had been marked by white-and-red stripes painted onto boulders and trees to show the way.

Alfred hung back. 'I really don't...' he began.

'We have to see what's at the viewpoint.' She seriously hoped the mayor was overpromising on the world-class status of the attraction.

In among the trees, she stopped often to pick up litter—there was more than usual—and waited for Alfred to catch up.

Behind her, he sniffed. 'It smells all mouldy here. Almost like in... in that other place.'

Saga inhaled the earthy autumn air. 'That's just nature. Leaves decomposing,' she said, but there was something about the forest and its smell that seemed a bit off. As they walked on, she pointed out yellow and white and brown and bright-orange mushrooms. An awful lot of them—maybe more than usual—had rings or miniature ballerina skirts around their stems, showing their toxic nature. At the sight of a half-circle of white-speckled red toadstools, she murmured, 'Amanita.'

Alfred grabbed her arm. 'Where?'

His grip relaxed when she said, 'The poisonous mushrooms.'

'Don't call her,' he muttered, which made Saga wish she hadn't spoken the faerie's chosen name aloud.

When they'd put some distance to the crowds, Mr Tumbleweed jumped down from an old ash tree.

'Some faerie bodies are not going to like having all these busy bodies here,' he grumbled, before bouncing out of sight.

'This hiking trail... is that what the mayor meant when he said he was developing the area into a tourist attraction?' Alfred asked, huffing a little.

Saga stepped around a father, carrying Pooh, with Tigger jumping ahead, before she answered. 'He said "world class" so he must have something of another scale in mind.'

'Perhaps picnic tables by the viewpoint?' Alfred suggested. 'Or a playground?'

‘I can’t imagine he’ll do anything for children.’

They kept guessing what the mayor could be planning, shutting up whenever they passed one of the many families. Every time an adult called a child’s name more than once, Saga tensed.

‘Look! A bridge.’ Alfred pointed. ‘A real bridge.’

The fallen tree trunk that used to be the only way of crossing the brook had been removed. In its place was a simple footbridge. Made of wood, it fitted into the landscape. Saga had to admit it was nicely done. But... she frowned. When had she last been in this spot? It couldn’t be more than three Saturdays ago, and in that period the trail had been marked, and now this. What would they find at the viewpoint?

Alfred stopped in the middle of the bridge. Holding on to the railing, he stood looking down into the water with that dreamy expression she’d seen on his face whenever he was near one of the Faerie Hill streams. She let him have a few moments. It was only when a group passed in the other direction, and someone squealed how amazing the building was going to be, that she pulled him away.

Although some of their earlier guesses had been pretty far out—like a small train from the car park and all the way around the dripstone cavern—none of them came near the actual plan they discovered at the viewpoint.

A group of people chatted loudly about the project, as they moved to the edge of the cliff. With Alfred close behind, Saga hurried to a billboard-sized sign with architectural plans. While they studied the drawings and read through the text boxes, Saga heard Alfred’s breath catch.

‘D’you think the faeries can read?’ she asked quietly. ‘Mr Tumbleweed can’t.’

‘I’m sure Amanita and her kind can,’ Alfred said. ‘But they won’t have to be able to read, will they? Not with those sketches of the project phases.’

Saga shook her head. ‘This is a catastrophe! For nature and for the faeries.’

‘I suppose a paved path up here would be okay, and helpful for people with disabilities...’ Alfred said about the first phase, which also included picnic tables and toilet facilities at both the cavern and the viewpoint.

‘But look at that monstrosity!’ Saga pointed at the phase-two section. It depicted a huge construction of concrete and steel, right here at the viewpoint. The building would house a restaurant with a large terrace and a platform with a clear glass bottom that would extend out from the cliff.

In phase three, a cable-car station would be added.

‘That is kind of cool,’ Alfred said, tracing the sketched wires with his index finger.

Saga punched him in the shoulder. ‘Imagine how many people would come here if they could whizz up directly from the city. And imagine what the building itself will do to the faerie realm.’

‘I know.’

Saga was certain that he too was remembering their journey through the bleak void that the faeries called the desolation, caused by cities and buildings in the human world.

‘And the faeries are definitely not going to like phase four,’ Alfred said.

Saga turned slightly. Through the trees, she could see the ancient cone-shaped volcano and make out the crumbled ruins at the very top. Something up there glinted in the sun.

Where phase three was the cable car connection with the city and the monstrous restaurant building, phase four went even further. The cable car would continue all the way to the top of that cone-shaped hill. The old ruins would be replaced with a second steel and concrete station and yet another viewing platform. According to the billboard, that building would ensure that it became the highest accessible point far and wide.

But in the faerie realm, the cone-shaped hill was the faerie fortress, a castle with more than twenty storeys above ground, though Alfred and Saga had only seen the inside of the dungeons far below the surface. She imagined the entire structure dissolving into a cone of blank nothingness under the influence of the cable-car station.

Shaking her head in disbelief, Saga turned away from the sign. She pinched herself, hoping to wake up from the nightmare.

‘Wait!’ Alfred crouched. ‘Did you read the footnote?’

Saga knelt down next to him. At the very bottom of the enormous sign was a tiny asterisk. There were asterisks in the text boxes too, but they were so small she hadn’t noticed them in her rush to read everything.

She squinted to decipher the minute letters, muttering, 'All plans pending landowner's approval.'

'I thought the county owned the Faerie Hill,' Alfred said. 'I mean, otherwise they couldn't just build the tunnel, could they?'

'Perhaps they just don't own the land up here.'

'But who owns it then?'

Saga tapped the bridge of her glasses, thinking. 'That's a very good question. I hope it's someone who wants to protect nature.'

'If we find out, perhaps we can stop all this without involving the faeries.' Alfred rubbed his calf muscles, before standing up.

She'd forgotten how taxing it was for him to walk on the rocky and root-latticed paths. 'Let's hope so,' she said. 'And let's take a break. I'm hungry.' She walked to the edge of the cliff, sat down on a boulder and took their tuna salad sandwiches and water bottles out of her shoulder bag.

Alfred sank down next to her. While he chewed, he returned to kneading his calves.

Below them, the city stretched far out into the landscape. Like on a map, roads, junctions and roundabouts framed houses and large buildings. In the distance, factory chimneys veiled the concrete of industrial estates in grey smoke.

'No wonder this causes the desolation in Faerie,' Saga said. This was the area they had seen in the faerie realm, covered in black rubble and emptiness. The city sucked all the natural energy out of both worlds. It made her furious that humans didn't only ruin their own nature.

Alfred stuffed the paper from his sandwich in her bin bag. 'If they build anything on the cone hill... the scaffolding alone, if it's metal...'

Although she hadn't taken more than a single bite, Saga packed her sandwich away. She'd lost her appetite. As she stowed their water bottles, she remembered how Alfred and Bjørn had struggled to breathe in the desolation. An image of suffocating faeries, smothered by that cone-shaped void, filled her mind.

Without speaking, they began the trek back. After crossing the brook, they took a detour past the big sinkhole. The old wooden fence had been renewed. A second, two-metre-high fence encircled the first. Warning signs hung on every one of its sturdy fenceposts.

Mr Tumbleweed, who'd stayed out of sight since the first time they crossed the brook, jumped out of the sinkhole and leapt over the high fence. Bouncing off in the opposite direction from the cavern, he told them to follow and led them to the foot of the cone hill.

'Some faerie bodies are angry at some human bodies, this one body thinks.' With one gnarly twig finger, he pointed to the very top of the hill. Up there, colourful streamers fluttered in the wind.

And now Saga could see what had caught the sunlight up there earlier. The streamers were mounted on thin metal poles.

'I'm not sure what they are, but I think...' She drew a deep breath. 'I think it might be too late not to involve the faeries.'

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## *The Sleeping Children*

‘Story poles,’ Alfred said, staring up at the spindly antennae on top of the cone hill. ‘They’re called story poles and they’re probably marking the outline of that station planned at the top.’ Dad had shown him poles like these, used to visualize future buildings in other countries. ‘They’re lightweight, maybe aluminium, but they may contain iron.’

‘Iron,’ Saga repeated. ‘That’s not good.’

Faeries were allergic to iron, and Alfred was wondering how much damage the poles had already caused inside the faerie fortress, when shouted names rang out in the forest. Had more children gone missing?

‘Do you still think it’s a coincidence with those moths?’ he asked, glancing around at the nearest trees, looking for both moth faeries and other things. All the way on their hike to the viewpoint, he’d been wary of knots on the trees, fearing they’d turn into the eyes and forked tongues of the faerie queen’s spies.

‘No,’ Saga said. ‘But how can making a few kids take a nap help the faeries? We have to find out who’s doing it and why.’

Alfred nodded. As long as they could find out without going to Faerie. ‘I just don’t want—’

Mr Tumbleweed interrupted him. ‘The nasty someones...’ he gasped, shaking so much his twig fingers rattled, ‘...are nearby.’

Behind them, the dense branches of an evergreen pine rustled. While Saga held on to the tree sprite’s twiggy upper-arm to steady him, Alfred

twisted and peered up between the needles. Where a pinecone shook unnaturally, he spotted the two rat-sized pixies.

Little Mother swished her mucky skirts, sending a shower of dirt down over Alfred, so he had to close his eyes. When he opened them again, the little people had hopped to the ground and were scuttling away.

‘Hey! Why did you trip up my granny?’ he shouted after them.

‘We got you here, didn’t we?’ Little Mother screeched.

‘You should thank us, you should.’ Little Father ran straight into a thick layer of oak leaves. His dirty hat, which was almost the same colour as the decaying undergrowth, was visible among the leaves and acorn cups.

‘I’m going to catch those nasty...’ Saga sprinted after them. Mr Tumbleweed groaned something, and she called, ‘Just stay there!’

Ignoring the shower of acorns the pixies threw back at them, Alfred joined the chase. Their pursuit led them past the fenced-in sinkhole to a small clearing. In its centre, the little people halted by a familiar tree stump.

‘What have you done?’ Saga called, stopping at the edge of the clearing.

Around the tree stump, leaning against it, sat three small figures—a princess, a witch and Batman. Under her pointy black hat, the witch’s face was painted a bright green. The princess’s long glittering skirt was torn and muddy. Batman wore orange trainers. All three were fast asleep. Luckily, all three shadows appeared to be intact.

‘We did not do any snipping,’ Little Mother said.

‘Or snapping, Little Mother. Not us.’

‘We would never...’

‘Not ever.’

Little Mother pointed her knobbly finger at Saga. ‘Not after the little girl forced us to give our word.’

‘So what did you do?’ Alfred asked, gasping to catch his breath.

Immediately next to Alfred, a smooth voice said, ‘They did not do anything. I did.’

Saga grabbed hold of his wrist, as Amanita strode out into the clearing. The tall high faerie swished her long birch-bark coloured hair. Where her floor-length green skirt touched the ground, tiny red toadstools popped out of the undergrowth.

Little Father stuttered, 'You... You... Your...'

'Leave us!' Amanita said.

Alfred had never seen the little people disappear so fast. He himself felt like he was nailed to the ground.

Amanita strolled around to the other side of the three children, trailing a half-circle of red dots. 'I told you humans were greedy. One dripstone cavern was never going to be enough.' She leant over the kids. The blue butterfly faeries, her living hair pieces, scrambled to keep the long strands away from her eyes.

'So vulnerable,' she said. 'Impressionable too. One day in Faerie and they would forget they ever knew another world.'

'Don't touch them!' Saga took a few steps towards Amanita. It made Alfred unfreeze.

'Why are you doing this?' he asked, following Saga.

'I thought you had realized that by now.' Amanita straightened and looked at him with her bottomless black eyes. 'It's all for you, our *alf rät*.'

Goose pimples raced down his arms. 'What do you mean?'

'We need you. Your father is away and your beloved human grandmother does not need you either. We do. We want you to help us stop the humans from destroying this forest and our realm. Or...' She walked on, trailing red dots.

'Oh no,' Saga whispered. 'She's making a faerie ring around the kids. She's going to take them to Faerie!'

On the ground, less than a quarter was missing to complete the circle of toadstools.

'How clever you are, little girl.'

'I'll help. Of course, I'll help,' Alfred said. 'Just leave those kids alone.'

'Wonderful! I need you to come with me to our realm.'

'But that's blackmail!' Saga said outraged.

'Let's call it... an inducement.' Amanita took another step.

'Stop.' Alfred bit his lip. It was the last thing he wanted to do, but he couldn't let her take innocent children away. 'I'll come.'

'We both will,' Saga said.

'I am afraid that's not possible. Alfred belongs with us, but you are a mere human.'

Next to him, Saga stiffened. Her voice quavered slightly when she spoke again. ‘These problems were created by *humans*, and the solution must be found in the *human* realm. If Alfred stays here, we can find a *humane* way to stop the mayor’s plans.’

‘You, legendary little girl, are so intrepid, I am certain you can do what must be done in your little human world.’

‘The kids need to be awake and well, before I go anywhere.’ Alfred kneaded his temples. Things were going swimmingly. He’d been here less than a day and already he was being forced to return to Faerie.

‘Would you like me to wake them?’ she asked, bending forward and letting a hand hover over the witch. Without Amanita touching her, a visible shudder went through the little girl.

‘Will they be able to see you?’ Saga asked.

‘An excellent question.’ Amanita smiled, showing clenched pearl-white teeth. ‘They will see something...’

Before their eyes, her appearance changed as quickly as a time-lapse video. Her hair altered in length and style, while its colour shifted through a greyscale palette. The butterfly faeries fluttered above her, frantically looking for the right strands to grasp. Her wrinkles grew deeper and deeper, only to vanish completely in a face that went through every possible skin tone. She remained tall and slim, but her stature sunk from erect to hunched and straightened again. The most impactful differences, though, were to the faerie’s facial features. Their transformations happened so fast Alfred couldn’t quite register them individually, but some of her expressions made him feel warm and fuzzy inside, while others were so terrifying he wanted to scream.

He knew it was all faerie glamour, but it made him wonder which one of the thousand faces showed the real Amanita.

She reached down, about to caress the witch’s green cheeks.

‘Wait!’ Alfred yelled. ‘Don’t touch them.’ If they saw, the children would have nightmares for ever.

Amanita straightened and her features settled in a satisfied expression. She looked younger, though, and her hair was darker than before her transformations.

‘I think you might enjoy collaborating with the other demi-fae to find a solution.’ She spoke in a soft conversational tone.

‘He can’t go today,’ Saga said, crossing her arms. ‘It’s too late. And I can’t explain to my mum if he’s not home for dinner.’

‘In that case...’ Amanita took two steps towards closing the toadstool circle.

‘Stop! I’ll come. Tomorrow morning. But you’ll have to let me leave again in the afternoon. Or Saga’s parents will worry.’

‘Tomorrow *and* the next days,’ Amanita said.

Alfred stuck a hand in his zippered pocket and touched the water-sprite figurine, while he thought. Ever since Amanita had told him there were others like him, he’d longed to meet them. If she really brought him back from Faerie every afternoon, wouldn’t he be getting the best of both worlds? He might even discover more about his mother. And perhaps find her family...

He would have to make the terms crystal clear, though. The phrasing had to be precisely right, so the agreement would bind him too.

Turning to the high faerie, he said, ‘I’ll come with you every day until, and only until, we’ve found a way to stop these new plans or until Dad or Granny needs me—whether that’s Dad needing me to come home or Granny needing my help when she leaves the hospital—if you promise not to enchant other children and if these three are unharmed.’

Without pause, Amanita said, ‘I shall await you by the small sinkhole where we first met, tomorrow after sunrise. And return you there with time to spare before sunset.’

He hadn’t expected her to agree so readily. It made him feel he’d promised too much, or asked for too little. He glanced at Saga. She was biting her lip, looking worried.

‘The children will wake when you touch them, but I suggest waiting until I am gone.’ Amanita held out her hand. When he hesitated, she added, ‘And you had better keep your word or the next children to go missing will not be found.’

Alfred let go of the figurine and took his hand out of his pocket.

Amanita reached for it. As her slender fingers enveloped his in a chilly grasp, she said, ‘Deal?’

Alfred forced himself to meet her gaze. She looked triumphant. He cleared his throat and muttered, ‘Deal.’

# 9

## SAGA



### *The Owner in the Footnote*

Saga woke the children. While she led everyone back in the direction of the cavern, she and Alfred took turns calling out that they'd found the kids. The princess and the witch almost got into a fight about whether they'd been following butterflies or moths, until Batman cast his vote in favour of moths.

'And the moth was so big I could see its face,' the witch was saying and touching her own green cheeks, when a small group of frantic adults came jogging towards them.

Leaving the grateful parents and their moth-obsessed children behind, Alfred and Saga continued downhill. They didn't talk. Seeing faeries again had reminded Saga that the woods had eyes and ears. She kept forgetting Alfred was slower than her as she walked, absorbed by her own thoughts. No matter how she twisted the words of Alfred's agreement with the high faerie, she couldn't find an escape clause for him. It seemed he would have to go to Faerie after all. And although it wasn't his fault, she couldn't help being annoyed that Amanita had rejected her.

Outside the forest, adults and dressed-up children were still swarming around the cavern entrance and queueing in front of the stalls. The excited mood was at odds with how she was feeling. Weaving through the crowds, without waiting for Alfred, Saga hurried down to the car park. She'd unlocked both bicycles before Alfred caught up. Mr Tumbleweed was already reclining in the basket on her handlebars.

‘So, where’s the loophole?’ she asked, as they pushed the bicycles along the gravel road. ‘I mean, you are the famous *alf rät*. You must have a way of avoiding going with Amanita tomorrow.’

Alfred shook his head. ‘I don’t. There’s no way to get out of the deal until Granny comes home from the hospital and needs me. In any case, if I don’t go with Amanita, she’ll abduct some kids.’ He spoke too fast, as if he’d been rehearsing the answer on their walk.

‘I swore to keep you away from Faerie.’

‘No. You swore we weren’t going to Faerie. And we’re not. I am.’

‘But that’s...’ Saga spluttered. ‘You remembered the exact wording?’ She looked at him sideways. He’d been so determined to avoid Faerie, and now he was going to go without a fight. She wondered if he actually wanted to go. ‘Couldn’t you have negotiated a deal where I could come with you?’

‘It’s too dangerous for you. You’re human.’

‘I know,’ she snapped. ‘I just don’t think you should’ve given in so easily. Amanita was bluffing. She didn’t want to take those kids to Faerie. She only wants you. She has absolutely no interest in ordinary humans.’

‘Perhaps.’

‘Besides, I thought you were afraid of going back... I mean, afraid of wanting to stay... So I just don’t understand—’ Saga clamped her lips shut, not wanting to turn this into a fight.

‘I was... I am,’ Alfred said slowly. ‘That’s why I phrased the agreement so I can’t stay in the faerie realm.’

‘Oh.’ She tried to recall the exact wording. He’d have to leave Faerie when his dad or granny needed him. ‘That’s... really clever.’ But how was she going to become an expert on faeries if she wasn’t allowed in Faerie? ‘Please, will you pay close attention to everything and tell me all about it afterwards?’ she asked. For now, that would have to be enough.

‘Of course.’ Alfred turned to give her an uncertain smile.

‘Maybe you can look for that child,’ she called, as they were freewheeling along the lane next to each other. ‘The one the police thought was kidnapped.’

‘Sure,’ Alfred called back. ‘Can we stop at my granny’s?’

As they leant their bicycles against the garden gate, Mr Tumbleweed burrowed deeper down into Saga’s basket.

While Alfred poured milk into a saucer, Saga studied the woodcarvings of Batty and Bjørn up close. She wondered if she'd ever see any of the shapeshifting faerie creatures again and sighed. Well, if her job was to be in the human world, then she would show Amanita just how intrepid she was.

'We could call your granny and ask if she knows who owns the Faerie Hill,' she said.

'That's a great idea,' Alfred said, with a little too much enthusiasm. He was clearly relieved she was shifting her focus away from Faerie to the real world. Then he swirled the saucer with milk for the pixies. 'Another great idea would be arsenic or cyanide.'

Saga chuckled. 'Or Dad might have some rat poison.'

After they joked about what else could poison the milk, their moods lifted, and Alfred called his granny on the landline. To listen, Saga pressed her ear to the wrong side of the receiver.

'How was the grand opening?' Anna asked, after answering his initial questions about how she was doing, her voice loud and clear enough for Saga to hear.

'Crowded,' Alfred said. 'Have you heard about the mayor's plans?'

'Enough to know the fair folk won't like them.'

'There's a billboard with all the project stages up by the scenic viewpoint.'

'Oh, dear. So they know...'

'Yeah. The thing is, Granny, there was a footnote, saying that it all depended on the approval of the landowner. Do you know who that might be?'

'I suppose the land must still be in the hands of the estate... Haven't you seen the castle on one of your excursions with Saga?'

'What castle?' He looked questioning at Saga.

'Longstone Castle,' Saga said, loud enough for Anna to hear. 'It's a real fairytale castle, with turrets and everything.'

'So who lives there? A prince and a princess?'

Saga elbowed him in the side, and they both giggled.

'It's no laughing matter, actually,' Anna said. 'The countess lives alone, and rumour has it she spends most of her time in one of the towers.'

‘A reclusive old countess in a tower? That sounds like a creepy fairytale.’

‘I suppose, but she isn’t old. Leonora went to primary school with your father.’

‘And she owns the land? Perhaps we can explain to her that she shouldn’t give her permission. Saga’s very persuasive.’ He smiled, holding a hand out to protect himself from further elbows.

‘I know she is, dear, but no one talks to the countess. I don’t believe she’s left the castle in more than a decade. Not since... not since she lost the baby.’

‘When was that?’

Anna cleared her throat. ‘Let’s not dwell on the past, dear.’

Alfred frowned. He hesitated, then asked, ‘When are you coming home?’

‘They can’t tell until after the operation. Sometime towards the end of the week, I should hope.’

After their goodbyes, Alfred hung up.

‘Luckily, when it comes to babies, I know just who to ask. Let’s go.’ Saga pulled on her coat and swung her rainbow scarf around her neck.

Ten minutes later, after placing the saucer of non-toxic milk under the hedge, they were back at the farm, and she was leading Alfred to their orchard. The old cart stood between the three rows of trees, laden with apple-filled crates. Poppy and Daisy, still dressed as pirates, were pushing rotten apples towards a wheelbarrow with their cutlasses.

‘If we help, she’s more likely to talk,’ she whispered as her mum approached, carrying a wicker basket to the cart.

‘Can we help, Vera?’ Alfred asked.

‘Thank you.’ Mum smiled at him. ‘I want to get the last apples in while the weather is still nice. Saga, you know I don’t like climbing the ladder...’

‘We’re on it!’

Soon Alfred was holding the ladder, while she climbed up and picked blushing red apples from the highest boughs.

‘Mum,’ Saga said, when they were picking from adjacent trees. ‘Were you supposed to deliver the baby for the countess of Longstone Castle?’

‘What do you mean?’ Mum threw a wasp-eaten apple towards the wheelbarrow before she looked up. ‘I delivered her baby.’

‘We heard she lost the baby,’ Alfred said.

‘In a way, she did. She gave birth to a healthy boy. But he disappeared before he was a month old.’

‘Disappeared?’ Saga repeated, a flurry of butterflies fluttering in her stomach.

‘Kidnapped.’ Mum picked up the full basket at her feet. ‘The police kept a tight lid—’

‘He was the kidnapped baby!’ Saga’s voice rose in excitement. ‘Baby L. L for Longstone.’ She climbed down from the ladder. ‘I’ve read about that. What happened to him?’

Mum carried on towards the cart. ‘He was never found. I don’t know more than was in the papers...’

‘Granny said the countess lives alone, so where’s the father?’ Alfred asked.

‘I don’t think anyone except Leonora knew who the father was. There were speculations... But that was just gossip.’ One by one, Mum sorted the apples into crates. ‘Unfortunately, I didn’t see the countess or her baby after the first week. You both came into the world at that time, and then...’ She trailed off.

‘Then Nereida disappeared,’ Saga finished.

After a quick glance at Alfred, Mum continued. ‘My maternity cover thought Leonora suffered from a postpartum depression. She suddenly didn’t want to have anything to do with the baby... and then he was taken.’

‘Did she think he wasn’t her baby?’

‘I’ve already said too much.’ Mum took her empty basket and walked back to the tree.

‘I knew it!’ Saga whispered to Alfred. ‘I knew he was a changeling...’ She tapped her glasses. ‘Or, I mean, a human the faeries took in exchange for one of their own.’

‘Where’s the actual changeling then?’ Alfred hissed. ‘Hidden in one of the towers?’

Saga shrugged.

‘Isn’t it more likely the father took him?’

‘I guess.’ She sighed, the excitement leaving her in one whoosh.

‘Hey.’ Alfred touched her shoulder. ‘If you find out more about the kidnapping, it might still help us when we talk to the countess.’

‘So while you’re on adventures in Faerie, I’ll be trawling the internet and going to the library...’

‘Trust me, ‘Alfred said. ‘I would much rather be at the library.’

But the way he said it didn’t quite ring true.

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# 10

ALFRED



## *The Demi-fae Den*

The small sinkhole was a quick fifteen-minute walk from the farm. Saga showed Alfred the way, like she'd done on his very first visit to the forest.

'See if you can come up with a way to stop the mayor's project today,' she said with her usual optimism. 'Perhaps the only thing those demi-fae lack is your human *alf rät* perspective.'

'Uh-huh,' he murmured noncommittally from behind. He was wondering if he'd get an opportunity to look for his mother's family. And the thought of meeting the other half-faeries gave Alfred flutters in his belly. His very full belly. Saga had forced him to eat enough porridge for an army and warned him against accepting any food or drink in Faerie. 'Though I'm not sure it'll affect you at all,' she'd said. 'But better safe than sorry.'

By the sinkhole, camouflaged so she was almost invisible, Amanita was waiting. She had faded the green colour of her dress and decorated it with burnt-orange patches that merged with the autumn leaves. Saga and Alfred stopped in what he hoped was outside her hearing range.

'So, I'll see you at the cottage at the latest around six o'clock,' Saga said. 'Oh, I almost forgot.' She rummaged in her canvas shoulder bag and extracted a new hourglass with a pen attached. Alfred remembered seeing her old one lying smashed on the stone floor in the faerie dungeons this past summer.

‘I’ve got this.’ Alfred showed her the old mechanical wristwatch he’d found in a charity shop right after the summer holidays. He’d been wearing it every day since then, getting used to winding it up in the morning. He knew from experience that anything electronic wouldn’t work in Faerie, and, like Saga, he knew he’d have to keep track of time.

Saga widened her eyes, looking impressed. ‘Good! Just be careful, okay?’

Alfred clutched the little water-sprite figurine in his pocket. ‘You too.’

Saga snorted. ‘As if anything could happen here...’ She gave him a quick hug and turned back down the path, before he closed the remaining distance to Amanita.

‘I am glad you came... Nemo,’ Amanita said, using the name Saga had chosen for him. She placed a cool hand on his shoulder. Her bracelet, a snake in perpetual motion around her wrist, brushed against his neck. ‘Do not give your true name away to anyone you meet in our realm.’

‘Of course not,’ he said, a little surprised that she wanted to protect him in this way. ‘What should I call you?’

She stared at him with an odd glint in her eyes. ‘Amanita. For now.’ Then she walked around him, creating a faerie ring. After stepping into the ring of toadstools herself, she crossed her arms and took hold of his hands with hers.

‘Dance with me!’ She began twirling them like in a playground game.

At first, Alfred was worried he’d stumble, but soon it was as if his feet didn’t even touch the ground. Air whooshed around him. Amanita blurred. He didn’t notice when they left the real world.

As their twirling slowed, damp mildewy air invaded his nostrils.

‘Welcome home,’ Amanita said, and let go of his hands.

To his surprise, they were indoors, yet still surrounded by trees. Alfred steadied himself against one of them. It was as cold and hard as marble. Weak light shone through a window nearby.

‘Are these petrified?’ He’d seen fossilized trees in a museum with Dad. He felt the bark ridges that could be millions of years old. ‘Or sculpted?’ he muttered, without receiving an answer, on his way to the window opening.

Through it, far below, the forest’s tree crowns resembled rolling hills. Eerie music played somewhere above. He had to be inside the faerie fortress.

Behind the petrified trees, ornate carvings of climbing plants and more trees covered every inch of the walls. Except in one corner of the room. That corner was a dark emptiness, void of even air, it seemed. Alfred recognized the desolation.

‘I see you have noticed the damage,’ Amanita said.

He nodded. This must be where one of the story poles stood on the ancient extinct volcano. He’d have to tell Saga. Surreptitiously, he glanced down at his wristwatch. It was still ticking, the second hand jumping ahead. Somehow, an hour had already passed since he showed it to Saga.

‘Come and meet the other demi-fae.’ Amanita strode through a gap between tree branches.

Alfred stiffened. He hadn’t counted on meeting others so soon. After brushing a hand through his unruly hair, he followed.

The room they entered was unharmed by desolation. It was also enormous. Boughs from a gigantic petrified tree stretched out above his head. Hammocks hung between them. Some swayed, with a hand or a foot visible from below. A low hum of chatter floated down from above.

After a loud shush and a whispered ‘Amanita’, the room fell silent. A dozen or so heads popped out of the hammocks.

Quickly, Alfred lowered his gaze and fixed it on three pairs of legs and bare feet that dangled close to the ground.

‘As you have no doubt noticed, humans are once again causing damage to our realm,’ Amanita said. ‘Their new plans for what they call the Faerie Hill will result in widespread destruction and make our home inhabitable. So they must be stopped.’

Alfred sensed several pairs of eyes boring into him. Perhaps they thought he was the human they had to stop.

‘We have two possibilities—either we stop their plans or we stop the humans themselves—and we will prepare for both. For you, the focus will be on learning the skills necessary for the second option, because this time we will be fighting back.’

Alfred’s head swivelled to Amanita. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Was she really training the demi-fae to battle humans?

‘Farriel will be your guide.’ Amanita touched his shoulder, saying, ‘This is Nemo. He is here to help. Although he has grown up among

humans, he is one of you. Viola, Uniko, Outis, take him under your wings and into your cluster.' She turned and strode away.

'Wait!' Alfred called before she left the room. There was a collective intake of breath behind him.

'Yes?' She paused in the door opening.

'What about...' Alfred was aware of the complete absence of sound in the room. Everyone was waiting for him to speak. He swallowed. 'What about finding a peaceful solution? I thought that was why I'm here.'

'By all means, let me know if you find a satisfactory way to resolve the problem.'

Speechless, Alfred stared after the high faerie as she sauntered out of sight.

'Hi, Nemo!' A high-pitched voice called. A girl and two boys came closer. They were barefoot and wore something that looked like green tracksuits.

'You can call me Viola.' The girl had dark-brown skin and huge shining violet eyes. 'Because of my eyes.' She smiled so widely, Alfred could see her many pointed teeth. There were definitely more than thirty-two. Her arms opened in a welcoming gesture, displaying hands with sharp claws.

The next person to speak was short and a little chubby, but he had the same translucent skin and black eyes as Amanita. He also had one small white horn sticking out of his forehead, like a unicorn. Alfred tried not to stare. 'And me, Uniko,' he said in a musical voice.

'Outis,' the boy behind them muttered. When he pushed his tousled hair aside, the brown eyes that met Alfred's glared. At first glance, Alfred couldn't see any non-human features. Not until Outis turned around, and Alfred saw his wings. They were tawny and feathered and lay flat against his back, reaching down to his knees.

While they'd been talking, the rest of the demi-fae had climbed down from their hammocks in the tree and were filing past, a few of them calling 'Hi' in passing. Alfred caught glimpses of horns and floor-length hair and glittering skin. None of them looked human.

'It must've been amazing to travel with Amanita!' Viola said. Reverently, she took one of Alfred's hands, turned it over and touched his palm with the soft tips below her claws. 'Did she hold your hand?'

When he nodded, she took it in hers—her skin was warm—and led him to a hammock near a window.

‘This is yours,’ she said.

‘Er...’ Alfred wanted to explain that he wouldn’t be staying the night, but he didn’t get the chance.

‘Change your clothes—hurry—or we’ll be late for Farriel. I won’t look.’

Alfred reached for the shirt that hung from the hammock. The green fabric was velvet soft, like moss. When he put it on, it welded itself to his body and felt like a second skin. Only the leathery straps on the shoulders hung loose.

‘I think I’ll just keep these on.’ Alfred patted his light, quick-drying trousers and checked that the zippered pocket with the little water sprite was closed. ‘And my shoes.’

Uniko turned to survey him. ‘Then you don’t look like us, but if you’re sure...’

The room had emptied. Outis was also gone.

‘Don’t mind him,’ Uniko said, as if he could read Alfred’s mind. ‘Outis likes humans even less than we do, and you do look awfully human.’

‘Come!’ Viola took his hand again and pulled him out of the room.

The corridor they ran along was like an endless trellis tunnel, overgrown with grey, carved plants. Their roots snaked across the floor, making the ground uneven and perilous for Alfred. He almost stumbled when a long, carved face stuck out its forked tongue. The faerie queen’s spies were everywhere. Even inside the fortress.

Uniko galloped ahead. Both he and Viola looked like green gazelles. Alfred almost wished he’d changed his trousers so he didn’t look out of place. Here, among the demi-fae, he’d expected to fit in. But of course, unlike them, he also still needed his shoes.

As they ran, he wondered what Saga would say if she knew he wasn’t focused on finding a way to stop the mayor, but instead was about to learn faerie tricks to fight humans.

# 11

## SAGA



### *The Kidnapped Baby*

From her hiding place in a sycamore climbing tree, Saga saw Amanita and Alfred swirl and vanish. She'd expected Amanita to take him to Faerie through the sinkhole. Somehow it would have seemed safer if he'd followed a route they'd already explored. She climbed down and ran to the ring of toadstools.

How was she supposed to just go home and read through old news on her computer? What if Alfred needed her help?

Without thinking further, she took a big step over the white-speckled red mushrooms. Saga started twirling inside the ring. Faster and faster she spun until the trees around her blurred together and she became dizzy.

Nothing happened.

She stumbled towards the nearest tree and leant against it until the world stopped spinning. As her vision settled, Mr Tumbleweed jumped into view.

'Somebody is trying something that will never work.'

'Can you take me to Faerie?'

He shook his head so violently his wooden neck creaked. 'That is one thing this one body can never do. Too many nasty nobodies in that place.'

If Mr Tumbleweed still wanted to protect her against faeries, then she supposed it would go against his ingrained instructions to take her to a place full of the creatures. But how could she become the David

Attenborough of the faerie world, if she wasn't even allowed to observe them?

She'd accidentally trodden on two of the toadstools, and now she kicked one of the others away.

'So I'm just supposed to go home? Because Ms high-and-mighty-faerie doesn't want to let any *ordinary* humans into the realm.' She kicked at another toadstool, making sure the faerie ring was thoroughly broken. 'I'll show her that ordinary humans can be useful,' she muttered, as she stomped back along the path.

Before heading home, she walked to Anna's cottage. 'Wait here,' she said, although she couldn't see Mr Tumbleweed.

She glanced at the wood-carved figures on her way past the cottage to the shed, where she pushed the bolts aside. She didn't enter. Unbolting the shed was purely a fallback they had agreed on. If, for some reason, Amanita didn't want to bring Alfred back at the end of the day—and there was a high likelihood that the faerie had somehow tricked him—Alfred might be able to escape through the spring and end up here. The second fallback involved rope and the big sinkhole, and probably a lot of worry and grief with her parents.

When she came home to the farm, the front door was wide open. Saga had hoped everyone would be out of the house. Mum's car was missing and so was the tractor, and she knew the girls were at playdates. That left Oliver.

She sneaked between the buildings, so she wouldn't have to cross the farmyard. The geese were pecking at fallen conkers in its centre. After creeping along the wall to the front door, Rufus met her with a wagging tail. She ruffled his ears and he nuzzled against her without making a sound. In fact, both she and Mr Tumbleweed made it all the way upstairs and to her own door without being discovered. Then Oliver came out of his room.

'Where did you come from?' he asked. 'Why are you sneaking around?'

'I'm not. Mind your own business,' she muttered, trying to close her door.

Oliver blocked it with a foot. 'Where's Alfred?'

'At his granny's.' Saga pushed at the door with her shoulder. 'Get out of my room.'

Oliver pushed back. 'You're lying. I can tell you're lying. Did you have a row or something?'

Mr Tumbleweed, for once helpful, jumped up and grazed Oliver's wrist with his stick hand.

'Eww. That disgusting toad.' Oliver stepped back.

Saga shut the door and locked it. 'Thanks,' she whispered to the tree sprite.

'Whatever.' Oliver banged a fist against the door before she heard him walk away.

As she fired up her computer, an email pinged. It was from her uncle. Alfred had taken photos of the billboard with his phone, and she'd sent them to her uncle last night, calling for a meeting in the nature group they were both part of as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, although her uncle was shocked at the extent of everything beyond the first phase of the development, he didn't think protesting against the project was urgent. The group's resources were spread thin, and they had to maintain their current focus on the bird sanctuary by the lake, he wrote. The first phase, which included the picnic tables and toilet facilities, were to be expected with the opening of the cavern, and they had plenty of time to protest against the buildings at the viewpoint and on the cone hill. Obviously, he didn't know about the faeries.

Saga sighed. Of course, the sanctuary was important, and she was proud of the work they'd been doing. But she wasn't going to give up. She would find a way to get that countess on her side. Impatient for action, she wanted to go straight to the castle, but perhaps a little background information might come in handy.

A quick search brought up links to articles about the kidnapping. None of them, including the ones she'd seen before, mentioned who the baby's parents were. It was only when she added the countess's name—Leonora von Longstone—that she found an article with further details about the kidnapping.

The unnamed Longstone baby had been twenty-six days old when he was abducted. The boy had been sleeping in his cot in a tower bedroom the night he vanished. It was the housekeeper who, upon entering the room in the morning, had found the cot empty.

One article speculated about whether the unknown-to-the-public father could've taken his son, as Alfred had suggested. It made her wonder if the father might have been someone local. But no matter how she searched, she didn't find his name.

Saga clicked through to another speculative article. Its writer linked the disappearance of Alfred's mother to the missing baby. It wasn't a giant leap—the two events were mere days apart and had happened in the same area. But the piece was poorly researched, because it surmised that the midwife had mistakenly exchanged the babies. Saga knew that Alfred had been born in the cottage, with zero chance of muddling him up with anyone. And obviously she knew her mother was the midwife in question. She decided to keep that theory from both Alfred and her mum.

She slumped with her head in her hands. She had nothing. Nothing that might help persuade the countess against the mayor's project. And nothing to indicate that the boy had been taken by the faeries.

At the thought of faeries, she wondered where Alfred was and what he was doing. He was definitely not reading old newspapers. She looked out of her window. The weather was too nice to be sitting inside.

'Wake up. We're going out,' she said, grabbing a stack of nature group flyers.

She ran past Oliver's open door, ignoring his calls after her. A moment later, she was on her bicycle, with Mr Tumbleweed swinging his twig legs from her basket.

It was time to take a closer look at the castle and that countess.

# 12

ALFRED



## *Glamour Hide-and-Seek*

By the time Viola and Uniko stopped running, Alfred had decided that learning how the faeries intended to fight humans was not a waste of time. He'd pay attention and get to know the others. If they accepted him as one of them, it would be easier to work together and find a solution.

They stepped out onto an open terrace, sheltered on three sides by the steep walls of the faerie fortress. Along the walls, petrified trees, overgrown with poison-ivy-like creepers and other plants, formed a colonnade. Above, the two moons illuminated the empty terrace.

'Try not to look directly at her,' Viola whispered, as he followed her towards the balustrade on the fourth, open side of the terrace.

'Who?' Alfred whispered back.

'Farriel.' Viola let go of his hand and left his side.

Alfred couldn't see anyone, but through the pillars of the balustrade he glimpsed the treetops.

'Welcome, Nemo,' a dreamy, disembodied voice said nearby. A scatter of leaves spun, as the air moved with the swish of an invisible skirt.

'Hello... Farriel?' Alfred peered from side to side, unsure where to look.

'I've heard you are gifted in the art of concealment,' Farriel continued. 'Self-taught, I believe.' The dreaminess faded a bit when she raised her voice, and said, 'And you all know that mastering concealment glamour is crucial when you leave our realm.'

Muttered agreement sounded around him, though he couldn't see any of the others.

'Why would we ever leave?' someone said.

Farriel didn't answer. The dreaminess returned to her voice. 'How are your revelation skills? Can you detect glamour? See through a disguise? Unveil, unmask, uncover that which hides its true identity?'

'Er... no, I don't think I can,' Alfred said quietly, still trying to discover the source of Farriel's voice. She must be tall, because the sound came from above his head.

Someone behind him sniggered.

'Then I shall teach you.'

'To see past all glamour?'

'Someday, perhaps, when the saplings in the woods crest the current tree crowns, you may,' she answered. Without warning, her invisible hands turned Alfred around. 'For now, let me see how many of the others you can find.'

The terrace seemed as empty as before. At first, it was like wearing a blindfold. He could see the carved stone and the plants, but none of the demi-fae. He wanted to disappear instead of revealing the others, and he had to fight hard against the urge to merge with the background. This ability to become almost invisible must be what Farriel said was his gift. It must be what the others were doing now. He didn't know how to see through glamour, but to detect the others he knew he'd have to find things that were out of place.

Standing with his back against the balustrade, he scanned the overgrown terrace. There was a faint shadow on the ground next to him. Someone was crouching on the top rail. Someone with wings. He swirled round.

'Outis?' he asked, uncertain.

Like a magic trick, Outis became fully visible. He scowled.

Silently, Alfred walked to the colonnade and between the pillars, trying to take everything in. He found Uniko in a tangle of plants, after hearing a twig snap, and Viola by sensing something slightly warmer near a petrified trunk.

'Well done,' she said, her violet eyes shining.

Inhaling deeply, he noticed a familiar scent from Granny's shed. He couldn't quite place it, but he found a boy who looked completely human

apart from his floor-length brownish hair. At the sight of the long hair, Alfred remembered how his own strands had grown after swimming in the river.

‘Are you part water sprite?’ he asked.

‘Of course not,’ the boy said, turning away.

Next, he found an impossibly tall and thin girl by accidentally walking into her. Her skin shimmered in a kaleidoscope of bright colours. Alfred gaped.

‘You were there,’ he whispered. ‘I saw you when the guards took me to the dungeons.’

‘Sorry,’ she said, the colours of her shimmering skin fading into dull, muted tones.

When he couldn’t find anyone else, Farriel sent the others into the corridor and told him to conceal himself.

Alfred went to stand by a bare stretch of wall, making sure he was in the shade so the moonlight wouldn’t reveal him. He stilled his breath, stilled his heart and concentrated on becoming unseeable against the uneven grey stones.

He stood there for a long time while the others searched the courtyard. Then the girl with glittering skin stopped in front of him, saying, ‘Stop stretching your leg, I can hear your tendons creak.’

Alfred, who’d barely lifted his toes to ease a cramp beginning in his right calf muscle, was seriously impressed. So was Farriel. She praised the girl, who was called Kaleido, for finding him. And Alfred for his concealment skills, but also said he was behind the others in revelation.

‘You have lived in a world with little glamour, where you have wanted to hide, so that is to be expected.’ An invisible, cool hand rested on his shoulder. ‘To master revelation, you must learn the opposite. You must be present in the moment and become part of the world with all your senses. If you live fully with your whole being, you will see that which is hidden, the things others overlook.’

Afterwards, they all played this strange glamour hide-and-seek, and Alfred thought he’d never in his life had a better lesson. If this was what Amanita meant by teaching the demi-fae to fight back, then maybe he needn’t worry!

He realized he’d forgotten the time when a bell chimed and all the other demi-fae became visible at once. He looked at his wristwatch. It

was already after two in the afternoon.

‘Come,’ Viola said. ‘Our next lesson is in the royal gardens.’

Viola and Uniko climbed up on the balustrade, just as Outis leapt from the top rail. Wings flapping, he circled downwards.

‘I can’t fly,’ Alfred said, leaning out to look down. They were at least ten storeys up.

‘We can’t either,’ Viola said. ‘Come up here. You’ll see.’

Uniko raised his voice and sang a wordless scale. The beautiful tones resonated around them. Moments later, three enormous birds appeared above the tree crowns. As they flew right over his head, Alfred tried to see if one of them was Evie the eagle. They all had the same staring yellow eyes as her, but they seemed younger than the shapeshifter he knew.

Careful not to lose his balance, he turned his head to look after them, and got a shock when one was right behind him. Roughly and without warning, its claws grabbed the two leathery straps on his faerie shirt and lifted him up in the air.

Next to Viola and Uniko and their two eagles, he glided rapidly towards the ground, like on a zip line he’d once tried with Dad. A butterfly explosion filled his belly. His ears popped.

They’d almost reached the ground when he caught his breath enough to ask, ‘Do you know Evie? I need to talk to her.’

The eagle slowed. It screeched, and Alfred understood what it was saying, like he’d understood Bjørn in his bear shape. ‘She’s my great-grandmother. I’ll find her.’

‘Thank you,’ Alfred said, as the eagle set him down on the ground.

‘Don’t thank them,’ Outis said. ‘It’s their job to serve us.’

Alfred shrugged. He didn’t know how to answer without Outis disliking him more.

Scanning the surroundings, he frowned. He’d expected a display of colourful flowers and otherworldly beauty in the royal gardens. But the opulent blooms were faded and mostly greyscale. Black plum-like fruits dangled from the branches of the nearest leafless tree. Dewdrops hung like pearls on spider-spun gossamer lines between the plants. It wasn’t colourful, but he supposed it was beautiful in an eerie, ghostly sort of way.

‘Doesn’t the sun ever shine?’ he asked, and pinched his nose to even out the pressure in his ears. From behind a large black flower, two yellow butterfly faeries peeked at them.

‘Why would we want sunshine, when we have the moon?’ Viola said. She picked one of the black plums. As she bit into it, a deep purple liquid burst from its centre and dripped down her chin. ‘You want one?’

‘No thanks,’ Alfred said, distracted by a sound he recognized—the sweet music of a spring.

Craning his neck, he looked past a natural trellis of white roses. And there it was. In the colourless garden, the stream’s blue-green-turquoise threads appeared luminous.

Like in a trance, he stepped closer.

‘Oh, are you thirsty, Nemo?’ Viola asked, from somewhere far away. ‘Me too.’

Both she and Uniko overtook him. They knelt by the stream’s edge and scooped water up with their hands, slurping it in big gulps.

Alfred paused a few paces away. Suddenly, he was parched. All he wanted was to feel the cool liquid in his throat. And he knew the stream’s water would be safe to drink. But Lillith...

‘The water sprite doesn’t mind,’ Uniko said, guessing Alfred’s thoughts again.

Outis passed him with a derisive shake of his head and drank with gusto.

Could another water sprite be guarding this spring? Perhaps someone from his mother’s family? Or would Lillith accept him now he was one of the demi-fae?

Alfred thought he’d die if he didn’t have a taste of the delicious water. He crouched by the water’s edge, ready to frog-leap away if needed. Moving as fast as he could, he stuck one scooped hand into the stream and pulled it out again. But he wasn’t fast enough. Before his hand reached his mouth, a tendril of river-weed hair wrapped around his wrist.

Lillith’s hair. The touch of a single strand was enough to identify her. She pulled so hard at him, the water in his palm spilt on the ground.

Alfred leapt back, but more strands exploded from the stream.

# 13

## SAGA



### *The Housekeeper's Story*

Saga cycled against the wind from the lake towards the castle, her rainbow scarf fluttering behind her and Mr Tumbleweed rattling in the basket. She kept glancing up at the forest, which made her think of Alfred. Again, she wished that there was some way for her to go with him to Faerie.

She also wished she had a better plan right now. What was the likelihood that a recluse countess would talk to a twelve-year-old girl about her missing child and how she managed her estate?

When Longstone Castle came into view in the distance, the white towers and turrets stood out against the colourful autumn forest. The greenish copper roofs gleamed in the sunshine. It was beautiful.

Up close was a different story. The high wall around the castle was crumbling. It blocked her view of everything except the nearest tower. Its white chalk had peeled off like giant scales, leaving the grey stone below exposed. Shutters that had once been green closed off all visible windows.

Saga pushed her bicycle past an enormous wrought-iron gate. Wooden planks, mounted on the inside, made it impossible to glimpse anything through the bars. A rusting doorbell protruded from one of the ornamental gate posts. She pressed it.

To her surprise, the gate opened. Leaving her bicycle and Mr Tumbleweed, Saga took the stack of flyers and walked into a gravel-

covered forecourt. An old woman in a light-blue dress came out of a side door, wiping her hands on a white apron.

She stopped and frowned when she saw Saga, saying, 'Oh, I thought it was... Who are you? We're not buying anything.'

'I'm not selling anything,' Saga said, approaching. 'I would just like to tell you a little about the work of our nature preservation group.' Her group's planned collection to raise money for the bird sanctuary wasn't until the following Sunday, but no one could object to her starting early. 'Or I can talk to someone else, if you don't have time.'

The woman peered at Saga over her glasses. 'Aren't you the girl who organized that protest against the motorway tunnel? Little Vera's daughter?'

Saga had never heard anyone call her mum, who was quite tall, little Vera. 'Yes, that's me. I'm Saga.'

'That was a fine thing to do, Saga. I'm Ms Walters, the housekeeper. Why don't you come into the kitchen and tell me about it? I could use a cuppa.'

Saga followed Ms Walters into a huge kitchen. Despite its size, it was warm and cosy, with heat and the scent of baking bread coming from the biggest stove she'd ever seen. Polished pots and pans hung on hooks above. A wooden counter ran all around the room under the windows with their frilly curtains.

'Sit down, sit down.' The kettle was already boiling on the cast-iron stove, and Ms Walters bustled with the teapot.

Saga took off her scarf and coat and sat at a corner of the wide table in the centre of the room, while Ms Walters served tea in painted blue porcelain cups with saucers and set a plate of homemade biscuits between them.

'I saw you on the news.' Ms Walters waved her hand at an old telly in a corner. 'You were so brave. And then you found that cavern. I'm going to go see those dripstones next Saturday.' She slid one of the flyers across the table towards herself. 'So what are you campaigning for now?'

Her mouth full of biscuit, Saga opened the flyer and pointed at a description of the bird sanctuary. That her fame was actually helping gave her a boost of confidence, and she decided on a direct approach. 'And—' She leant forward, speaking quietly. 'It's not in the flyer yet, but

I'm also working against the council's plan to turn the whole forest into a massive, overrun tourist attraction.'

'Oh dear,' Ms Walters said. 'Is that what they're planning?'

'Horrible, right? Can I ask you something, Ms Walters?'

'Ask away.'

'Why doesn't the countess do something? It's her land, isn't it? Doesn't she care what happens to it?'

'You're a sweet child, but I can't talk about what my mistress does.' Abruptly, Ms Walters rose and began clearing the cups away, although Saga hadn't finished her tea.

Saga got up and carried the now-empty plate to the sink. 'Sorry. That came out wrong. I really want your opinion on the matter, not your... er... mistress's.'

With the teapot still in her hands, Ms Walters turned back to Saga. It looked like she wanted to talk but felt she shouldn't. Saga tried to remember how mum coaxed difficult topics along and got her to tell her about the bullies, back when she'd still cared what the other kids said about her.

'I know about the baby that was kidnapped, and I know it must've been immensely hard for the countess,' she said. 'I can't imagine how hard these past years must've been for you...'

It was as if Ms Walters deflated. She sank down on a chair with the teapot in her lap.

'You must be around the same age as the young master would've been.'

Saga nodded. Now was the time to be patient and hope Ms Walters would keep on talking. Mum said people had a tendency to fill a silence. She hoped it would be with something meaningful and not pointless chatter.

'It would've been lovely with a house full of life again... But it was not to be. Since the kidnapping, my mistress has not been the same... and already before he disappeared... something was different.'

There was a longer pause, and Saga prepared to ask what was different. But she couldn't ask about the countess being unwell after the birth without getting Mum in trouble. Luckily the housekeeper continued.

'You see, from one day to the next he stopped fussing. He just drank one bottle of milk after another and slept like a drunken man. I suppose

that can happen. Oh, I shouldn't be talking about all this.'

'I won't tell a human soul,' Saga said, hoping Ms Walters wouldn't stall at the slightly odd phrasing. She wanted to be able to tell Alfred.

'There was something about his eyes. They were golden brown when he was born, but... I don't know... my mistress claimed they became black, and I suppose they did turn a darker shade after a few days.'

Saga bit her lip. All of this, no matter what Alfred thought, sounded as if the baby had been switched. As if the faeries had stolen him, leaving a changeling in his place. The countess had noticed, and so, it seemed, had Ms Walters. When the changeling had vanished and the kidnapping investigation begun, the countess's real son had already been gone for weeks. No wonder she'd been distraught.

'Did he... Did the young master have a name?' she asked, after a while, when Ms Walters didn't continue. A name could be immensely helpful if the boy was now in Faerie.

Ms Walters shook her head, but it wasn't clear if it was in answer to Saga's question. She seemed to be far away in her memories.

'What about the father? Who was he?'

That question tore Ms Walters out into the real world. She got up and set the teapot down. 'Must be getting on now. I'm certain you have others to visit with your...' She waved a hand in the direction of Saga's flyers, before she ushered Saga towards the kitchen door.

'Could I talk to the countess? About the forest project, I mean.'

'Absolutely not. She's not to be disturbed.' Ms Walters gave her a small push outside.

'Thank you for the tea. And the delicious biscuits.'

Until Saga was back in the lane and while the gate creaked shut, Ms Walters stayed standing in front of the door, her arms crossed, watching, making sure she left.

Saga doubted the housekeeper would ever again let her into the castle. What she didn't doubt was that the Longstone baby had been switched for a changeling.

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*Moth Faeries*

Viola and Uniko threw themselves on the hair strands that connected Alfred and the water sprite. Alfred tore at the locks round his wrist, freeing himself. The stream bubbled. Out of the surface of what had appeared to be a shallow spring, the tangle of Lillith's tendrils rose.

'Run!' Uniko shouted, already trotting away from the growing island of hair.

Viola and Alfred sprinted after him.

While he ran, Alfred secretly licked his slightly damp palm. It was worse than smelling a freshly baked cake without being allowed a bite. Why couldn't Lillith let him have a sip, when she let the others drink? Once again, he'd been singled out. It reminded him of all the times he'd been bullied at school. Why was the water sprite so determined to ruin everything for him, when all he wanted was to be part of the group?

Behind them, an ear-piercing screech erupted. Lillith screamed something incomprehensible. He understood the words 'you' and 'away', and muttered, 'What else is new?' under his breath, wishing she would find someone else to terrorize.

'What have you done to upset the water sprite?' Viola panted, when they were safely beyond Lillith's reach.

'What's she saying?' he asked, slowing down. He couldn't explain why Lillith hated him so much.

Glancing back, Viola jogged on. 'No one understands water sprites.'

Perhaps not above water, Alfred thought, but in the summer when Lillith had dragged him to the bottom of the river, her voice had been different. Below the surface, he'd understood what she sang. He pulled at Viola's arm to stop her. This was important. 'Have you seen other water sprites here?'

'I usually only see the hair. How would I know if it's one or a whole family?'

Alfred wished it was a whole family. His mother's family.

'I've heard they sing underwater. Is that true?' Uniko asked.

Alfred nodded. Underwater his own voice even came out as a kind of song, and normally he couldn't carry a tune. But he didn't need to be underwater to understand that Lillith wanted to keep him away. Why though? Bjørn had told him his mother had been her rival, that Lillith had taken over Nereida's streams. Did that mean she saw him as a competitor, and suspected he'd want to reclaim the river?

Before Alfred could untangle his thoughts, someone called from above, 'They're down there!'

When Alfred looked up, he saw Outis perform a perfect loop-the-loop. As Outis landed in front of them, an eagle let go of Kaleido. Her glittering skin lit up the dull tones of the garden.

'Are you having a lesson with us?' Viola asked.

'Not exactly.' A blush shimmered on Kaleido's cheeks. 'Amanita asked me to help you find moths.'

'We're learning moth enchantments?' Viola's eyes grew impossibly big and round.

'Moth enchantments?' Alfred asked. Was that what had made the children at the cavern opening fall asleep? 'What precisely are moth enchantments?'

'Don't you know anything?' Outis muttered.

'It's a moth dance—a choreographed moth dance,' Kaleido specified, 'that makes the intended onlooker do something you want them to do. But first, of course, you're going to need moths.' She held out her palm. A golden, glimmering moth faerie landed on her shimmering index finger. With the tip of her other index finger, she caressed its silky wings. 'This is mine. You'll have to attract your own.'

'How?' Uniko asked.

Alfred wondered if they were supposed to walk around saying, ‘Here, kitty, kitty.’ Or rather, ‘Here mothy, mothy.’

‘Hold out your palms, like I’m doing, and perhaps walk around a bit. The moth faeries will—’

‘I want the biggest one,’ Outis said, pushing his hair out of his eyes.

‘It’s not up to you. They choose who they’ll serve. Usually. So perhaps let them see who you really are.’

Uniko began walking and hummed in his clear, beautiful voice. Viola bounced off after to him, chatting about how excited she was. Like them, Outis stretched out his arm with his palm turned up, but instead of walking, he unfolded his wings and glided over the ground in a sort of Superman pose.

Uncertain, Alfred followed them, his palm trembling slightly. How could he show who he was without swimming?

‘Look,’ Viola shrieked. ‘Isn’t she pretty?’

The moth in her palm had off-white, pink-fringed wings, with pale-purple and blood-red stripes cutting across.

‘Oh, you have one too,’ she said, as a moth hovered above Uniko’s hand. It beat its minute wings so fast an audible hum sounded from the brown and orange blur. Before it landed, its trunk-like nose uncoiled and touched Uniko’s horn.

‘Well done,’ Kaleido called.

Alfred glanced after Outis. He still hadn’t attracted a moth either. Or rather, it seemed he had, but he’d closed his hand into a fist and used it to wave a small green creature away.

The stream’s music babbled to Alfred, but he avoided going near it, as he left the others.

‘Here mothy, mothy,’ he murmured. ‘I know that doesn’t work,’ he continued in a whisper, ‘but I don’t know what to do.’ He was starting to worry about what would happen if no moths wanted to help him. He imagined the others, especially Outis, who seemed to be battling off both a black and a speckled yellow moth, saying that obviously no moth wanted to serve a human.

‘I know I look human, but I’m not, and underwater I’m different,’ he muttered, just as Outis whooped in triumph.

The moth in the other demi-fae’s palm was so big Alfred could see it from where he stood. Its tawny wings matched Outis’s feathers, their

span wider than his hand.

‘Please,’ Alfred whispered, shaking a nearby bush. ‘I promise to treat you well.’

A short distance away, the others gathered around Kaleido. ‘Perhaps one of them will find you tomorrow,’ she called to Alfred.

He was about to give up, when a striped creature circled around him. He stopped, standing stock still, not daring to breathe, willing it to land.

It chirped.

‘Hello,’ he said, although he hadn’t understood the chirp.

And then the moth faerie landed in his palm.

At first, it sat with its wings folded up tightly. Irregular brown shapes on a white background resembled those on a giraffe. Then it spread its forewings, revealing orange hind wings with blue-black splotches, like on a leopard.

‘Not a giraffe, after all, are you?’ Alfred murmured, as the creature spread its wings further and he saw its furry body was a brighter orange with black stripes. ‘A hidden tiger, perhaps?’ he wondered, marvelling at the little creature that seemed to be even better than himself at masking its true self.

It looked expectantly up at him with its big round eyes.

Ever so carefully, Alfred stroked the fluff behind its feelers.

It chirped again.

‘What did you get, Nemo?’ Viola called as he walked towards the others, the moth perched on his hand.

‘Oh, that’s weird,’ Kaleido exclaimed, when she saw the moth.

‘Butterflies can’t do enchantments.’ Outis sniggered.

‘It does look like a butterfly,’ Uniko said.

‘No, I think it might be a moth.’ Kaleido sounded uncertain.

Alfred studied the creature. He didn’t know how to tell the difference between a moth and a butterfly. But he’d always thought moths were various shades of brown. Orange seemed to be a very butterfly-y colour. And it reminded him of the Duke of Burgundy, a butterfly faerie with brown-laced orange wings he and Saga had encountered.

‘It’ll probably be okay,’ Kaleido said. ‘Otherwise, perhaps you’ll attract a moth tomorrow. Or Amanita will lend you one for the simple sleep enchantments you’ll be learning.’

Alfred stiffened and glanced down at the colourful little creature. He'd briefly forgotten why they needed to bond with a moth, forgotten the aim of their lessons. Amanita had said they'd be stopping the humans. Putting them under a sleep enchantment was certainly one way. What, he wondered, would be done to them once they were asleep?

Kaleido touched his arm with her shimmering hand. 'Don't worry,' she said, misunderstanding his silence.

But Alfred did worry. He worried about everything. And now, on top of everything and despite not wanting to put anyone to sleep, he worried that he would be the only one who couldn't learn the enchantments.

The moth or butterfly faerie in his palm chirped and looked up at him with those big round eyes. He wondered how much it understood.

'Don't you worry,' he whispered.

When Outis beat his wings and took off, the hidden tiger flew away.

Kaleido pointed to an opening in the dense hedge that surrounded the royal gardens, saying, 'The faerie who calls herself Amanita will meet you by the river bridge.'

Viola and Uniko waved to him when they were lifted up by two eagles. He almost wished he was going with them to that cosy demi-fae den, that he wasn't once again the odd one out.

Alfred walked to the hedge. It was so wide, the opening was a short tunnel. Once inside, he paused. All around him, ivy-like creepers with pulsating purple veins rustled as they grew and climbed. Shuddering, he recalled how these poisonous plants had escaped out of the sinkhole, out of Faerie and into the real world, where they had covered an entire building site in less than two days. Outside this tunnel lay the open area between the river and the faerie fortress. It seemed peaceful in the moonlight. A short distance away, the river bridge crossed the water. Here in the faerie realm, it was still an overgrown tree trunk. He couldn't see Amanita anywhere.

Last time he'd been here, beasts and antlered guards had chased him and Saga. It struck him that now he was all alone. All alone in the faerie realm. While he'd been with the other demi-fae, he'd almost forgotten where he was and enjoyed himself. Now, he desperately wished Saga was with him. At the same time, he felt a little uneasy. What would he tell her when she asked what solutions he'd found, together with the faeries? Would she think he'd wasted the whole day?

‘My dear young sprite,’ said an enunciating voice from outside the hedge. ‘Are you going to come out from the garden anytime soon or are you waiting for me to grow even older?’

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# 15

## SAGA



### *The Countess's Company*

Outside the castle gate, the wall continued next to the lane towards the woods. Saga decided to walk all around the walled grounds. If the housekeeper wouldn't admit her, she'd have to find another way to approach the countess.

'You're not gonna believe what I discovered,' she muttered to Mr Tumbleweed, while she pushed her bicycle alongside the wall. 'I'm one hundred percent certain the Longstone baby was stolen by faeries.'

The tree sprite grunted something about no somebodies wanting human nobodies.

'I know Amanita doesn't want me. You don't need to remind me,' Saga said absentmindedly. They had to find that boy. Or rather, Alfred had to find him, somewhere in Faerie. If only she knew what his mother had called him. Even if he hadn't been christened, that'd be his real name... His true name.

The lane became a track, and, where the wall turned ninety degrees and continued round the side of the castle, a narrow, overgrown trail. Creeping ivy covered the wall and perhaps held the crumbling masonry together. Stomping up the trail, Saga imagined what would happen if they found the stolen child.

How amazing would it be to bring the boy back to his mother? How incredibly grateful would the countess be when they reunited her with her son? Surely, then she would listen to Saga. The mayor's tourism project

would be blocked. The faeries would be happy. And Amanita would realize Saga really wasn't just an ordinary human girl.

Once the undergrowth became too dense, she leant her bicycle against an oak out of sight from the lane.

'Come on,' she said.

Mr Tumbleweed gave a chuckle—he was always happiest in the forest—and bounded ahead in among the trees.

The narrow trail led to a small side gate in the wall. It too was made of wrought iron and seemingly hadn't been opened in years. Ivy hung down from above in a dense woven curtain. Saga tried the handle, but the gate was locked. After tearing a hole in the creepers, she pressed her face in between the metal bars.

All she could see was an overgrown lawn and the corner of a sunny terrace. With its back towards her stood a striped deckchair. Its faded fabric was stretched taut—someone was sitting there, enjoying the sun. Hoping to find a vantage point where she could see the person, Saga continued on the overgrown trail next to the wall, uphill into the woods.

Where the hill flattened, the wall turned again and ran parallel to the lane. It was still too high for her to look over, but a tree had fallen partly in over the wall, creating a walkway. The tree's roots rose above the hollow in the ground where they'd once been anchored, and Saga used them as footholds to climb up on the trunk. Without much effort, she balanced her way to the top of the wide wall, and stood, surveying the grounds.

She could see the back of the castle and most of the garden, except where trees on the inside blocked her view. From this distance, the castle looked less dilapidated.

She focused her gaze on the terrace. The person was still sitting in the deckchair, but it was too far away for her to see them clearly. Could it be the countess? Saga wished she'd brought binoculars. She tried taking her glasses off, but of course that didn't help.

Perhaps if she jumped down, she could sneak closer... It was a short two-metre drop, but how would she get outside again?

She was considering jumping anyway, when Ms Walters, in her recognizable light-blue dress, came out of a back door with a laden tea tray. After depositing the tray on a low table, Ms Walters left again. The

person in the deckchair leant forward. Long hair in a rich reddish-brown swished around their head.

It had to be the countess!

Ms Walters returned with a blanket that she tucked around the countess's legs.

Saga bit her lip and tapped the bridge of her glasses. Should she go down there and tell the countess about the danger of the mayor's plan? Perhaps see if she could somehow get her to divulge her son's name?

This might be her best chance to talk to the countess. Saga sat down on the wall, preparing to leap. But Ms Walters came out onto the terrace for the third time. And this time she wasn't on her own. Right behind her came a familiar portly figure in a dark suit.

The mayor. He was waving a wad of papers.

It was Sunday afternoon. What was he doing here? Was he actually friends with the countess? Or had he come to discuss the tourist attractions?

Saga swung her legs to the other side of the wall and jumped back on its outside. She didn't want to be seen by the mayor, but she might be able to hear that booming voice from the garden gate.

With her shoulder bag banging against her hip, she pelted downhill. It couldn't have taken her more than five minutes to reach the overgrown gate, but when she got there, neither the countess nor the mayor were on the terrace. The blanket hung between the deckchair and the table, partly covering the teapot, as if it had been flung off in haste.

Had they gone inside to discuss the plans?

If they were in the forecourt, she might hear them. Saga ran to grab her bicycle and rode down the narrow, bumpy trail. Just when she reached the corner of the wall, a shiny black car—the mayor's car—accelerated out of the main gate and along the road.

The mayor was gone. The gate creaked shut.

What did it mean that he'd left so quickly? Had the countess immediately agreed to all his plans or thrown him out? Either way, things were happening too fast. They would have to find that snatched child right away.

It was no use ringing the bell—Ms Walters wouldn't let her in.

As Saga cycled to the cottage to wait for Alfred, she hoped that tea in the deckchair was a daily ritual and that she hadn't just missed her only

chance of talking to the countess.

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## *A Poisonous Proposal*

‘**E**vie!’ Alfred stepped out from the hedge around the royal gardens, having recognized the voice.

Evie the eagle, as he thought of her, stood, slightly stooped in her long brown dress, right outside the hedge tunnel. Her yellow eyes shone with affection.

Alfred couldn’t stop himself. He’d never been so happy to see anyone, and he threw his arms around her.

‘I am glad to see you too, young sprite.’ Evie patted down her impeccable white hair after he let go. ‘The other shapeshifters will be happy to know you are well. Though I cannot figure out how you came to be in this realm without any of us noticing. We have been keeping watch over the gateways.’

‘I came with Amanita,’ Alfred said, before correcting himself and using Kaleido’s phrasing. ‘The faerie who calls herself Amanita.’

‘Aha. I know who you mean... She is rather too glamorous... I can’t quite place her...’ Evie’s brow furrowed. ‘And now you are learning with the other half-faeries, my great-grandson, young Emmett, tells me. That might not be an entirely bad idea.’

‘But we’re learning to hide from humans and put them to sleep,’ Alfred said. ‘That can’t be good.’

‘Hmm... If the rumours about what the humans are planning are true, then we might all need to reconsider our allegiance to the queen.’

Alfred knew the shapeshifters weren't fans of the faerie queen, but if their realm was threatened, he understood why they would be forced to unite against humans. 'Where are Batty and Bjørn?'

'Alas, we shapeshifters are not welcomed in the fortress or the royal gardens, and there are too many humans in your forest. But we are here, outside the hedges. I shall let the others know you have returned. And I will be keeping an eye on you.' Evie brushed his cheek with her wrinkled hand. Her touch was feather-light.

'Wait. D'you know anyone from my mother's family?'

'No. We airborne have little to do with water creatures.' Evie brushed his cheek again, but now her fingers were feathers, tickling his chin. As she spread her arms wide, the plumage cover raced up to her shoulders and down her dress. Her hooked nose grew into a beak. Her eyes, though, those piercing yellow eyes, remained unchanged as she beat her wings and flew away.

Feeling a little calmer, Alfred walked out into the open. He still couldn't see Amanita. Perhaps she'd only appear when he was right by the river. His neck prickled at the sound of a wolf howl from the woods. But the guards that stood by the fortress entrance ignored him.

At a safe distance from the river, outside the reach of Lillith's water-sprite hair, he paused. He inhaled deeply, and his breathing adjusted itself to the rhythm of the trickling water.

It was half past five. If he knew Saga, she'd already be waiting impatiently at the cottage. Where was Amanita? He went over their agreement in his head. Had she tricked him and meant the river was the home she would take him to?

It was both his home and the way home, and, if Amanita wouldn't help him, he wasn't going to trek through the underground tunnels when he could swim right into Granny's shed. But would knowing Lillith's name be enough to negotiate passage along the stream?

Alfred slid down the riverbank. Another reason to choose this way, he admitted to himself, was that he might at least seize a few moments of pure joy in the water before Lillith caught him. Caught him and threw him out of Faerie. He hoped that was all she planned to do to him. Perhaps, before he was expelled, he might also hear a snippet of the song the fish sang about Nereida and Applevale—the love song about his parents that Bjørn had once mentioned.

He was by the water's edge, getting ready to dive, bracing himself for a water-sprite fight, when Amanita strolled across the tree trunk.

'I would not try that if I were you,' she said, carelessly dislodging moss and plant bits so they fell onto the water's surface and floated away.

Expecting a tendril explosion, Alfred scrambled back up the riverbank. Nothing happened. The river weed continued to sway lazily in the depths.

'How was your day?' Amanita asked in a sweet voice. Her skin shimmered, making her features difficult to make out. After Evie's comment, he realized Amanita's glamour shield prevented him from ever seeing her real persona.

'It was... it was good.' He suddenly wanted her recognition. 'I was pretty good at the glamour stuff. Especially hiding.'

'As I knew you would be.' She smiled. 'Is it not wonderful to make new friends?'

Smiling back, he nodded, then caught himself. He wasn't here to make new friends. He had Saga, and his purpose in coming here was something else.

'What are we going to do about those planned buildings in the real world?' he asked.

'Let us return to the fortress and exchange ideas with your new allies. Have a little mindstorm.'

'It's called a brainstorm,' Alfred muttered. He thought about the demi-fae den. The hammocks on the tree branches had looked so comfortable. Lying in one of them, swaying in the breeze from the forest, while brainstorming solutions with Viola and Uniko, would be fun... But no. He shook his head. What was she doing to him?

'Can we do that tomorrow?' he asked, trying to stay calm. Alfred stuck his hand in his pocket and clutched the water-sprite figurine. It helped. 'I'd like to leave now.'

'Leave for the *real* world, as you call it?'

'Yes, please.'

'Why? Do you not like it here?'

'You promised to take me back.' A sense of dread settled in his stomach. Was his deal not watertight? 'Saga is waiting for me.'

'Alright. I shall take you to your legendary friend, and I want you to give her a message. You have seen the damage inside our fortress. It is

the worst kind of desolation, and it must be caused by something made of pure iron that the humans have placed in the ground on top of our hill.'

Alfred nodded. When he'd seen the column of desolation inside the fortress, he'd known one of the story poles was to blame.

'Tell her to seize and destroy whatever is causing the damage. This is her chance to prove her worth to us.'

'But I don't think she can. Not alone—'

'Before threats become necessary.'

Did that mean something would happen to Saga if she didn't remove the story poles? He was afraid to ask. 'Please. I want to go home now.'

'Is it not annoying that you are dependent on me to travel between the realms? You should be able to come and go as you please. Access to these waterways is your birthright.'

At her mention of waterways, Alfred again became aware of the river's trickling music. He could almost taste the sweet water.

'A pity we cannot control the water sprite. After what she has taken from your mother...' Amanita cocked her head. Her smile was one of sadness. A tear rolled down her cheek, though it was too large and blue-tinged and definitely a glamour effect.

Alfred squeezed the figurine in his pocket. He knew Amanita was trying to lure him into asking questions about Lillith and his mother, so she could keep him here. Perhaps trick him into staying. She would continue to drop her little hints. At some point, when he was desperate to know an answer, there would be a price to pay.

The high faerie considered him with her black eyes, as if gauging his determination. 'You know, there is a way for you to incapacitate that water sprite... I might be persuaded to tell you...'

What did she mean? Could he somehow take Lillith's power? He squeezed his lips together, not rising to her bait.

With a sigh, she encircled him in a ring of toadstools, took his hands and danced him out of Faerie.



## *Batty's Counsel*

Saga paced the darkening garden, checking her watch. She'd pinched the extra key to Anna's cottage that her mum kept in a kitchen cupboard, and she'd already put milk out for the pixies, without catching sight of the spiteful creatures.

After following the leafless hedge to the garden gate, she stepped outside and glanced back along the lane. Alfred should've been here by now. They'd agreed to meet at Applevale cottage, but would it be better if she met him by the small sinkhole? She was both worried about him and impatient to hear if he and the other demi-fae had come up with a way to stop the mayor.

'What do you think? Should I wait here?' she asked Mr Tumbleweed, who, as usual, was dozing in her bicycle basket.

'What this one body thinks has no influence on where somebody appears,' he creaked. 'Or does not appear.'

'Right,' Saga muttered. 'Helpful.' She extracted the bag with Alfred's change of clothes from under the tree sprite and walked with determination back to the shed. That way, she'd be ready if he'd had to escape through the stream.

As she flipped the switch inside the shed door, the fluorescent lamps in the cave blinked awake. The empty dye baths gleamed, reflecting the bright light. On the long work table, closed glass jars full of dried leaves and flower petals had been stacked along the wall next to a pile of baskets. The rest of the table was bare and spotlessly clean.

Saga had only ever been in here while Anna was working. Then the table would be overflowing with open jars and plant-filled baskets, and a large fragrant pot with whatever she'd be using as dyes would be bubbling away on the gas stove. Now the air in the cave was still and a little stale. The trickle of the spring broke the hushed silence. To Saga's ears it sounded exactly like all other springs. The water was shallow and clear, without any turquoise threads or the river weed Alfred was always talking about.

'Nothing,' she murmured to herself.

She was on her way outside again when Alfred called from the garden.

'I'm here,' she answered. Lit up from behind, her shadow stretched out on the lawn. She waved, her four-fingered shadow hand dancing over the grass. 'You're okay?'

Alfred nodded, coming closer. 'You?'

'Of course.'

A gust of wind went through the trees above and a shower of rust-coloured leaves rained down on them.

'New shirt?' She ran her fingers over a sleeve that felt exactly like damp moss.

'Yeah. Did you bring a spare?'

Back inside the cave, Saga found the bag with extra clothes and turned away while he changed. After a short silence, she gave up waiting for Alfred to speak.

'Did you find a way to stop the mayor's project?'

Alfred shook his head.

'So what *did* you do?' she asked. 'Did you meet the other demi-fae? Were they... nice?'

'Some of them.'

While he folded the moss-green shirt, she dragged names and descriptions out of him. Getting Alfred to talk was harder than keeping her sisters quiet.

'And what have you been doing...' She waved her hands in an impatient gesture.

With a faraway look in his eyes, he stood by the long table, stroking a hand over the folded shirt, touching the leathery shoulder straps. He

wasn't talkative at the best of times, but he seemed especially reluctant to speak now.

Saga tried not to be envious. It was difficult. Not only had he been to Faerie, but he was also making new friends. Interesting friends who were demi-fae with faerie powers. Compared to them, how could he not find an ordinary human boring?

'I've... I've been learning things,' he finally said. 'Like glamour, which is why I was always so good at hiding.'

Saga nodded. She'd guessed that long ago.

'But that's not all... We're going to learn moth enchantments. Using moth faeries to put someone to sleep...'

'What? But that means—'

'It means Amanita is training us to ambush humans in the forest,' Alfred interrupted, his words tumbling out fast as if a blockage had been removed. 'She said the faeries will either stop the tourism project or stop the humans. And I don't think stopping humans just means putting them to sleep.'

'A slumber ambush,' she said, imagining the forest full of entranced sleepers. 'Is there a way to fight those moths?'

Alfred shrugged. 'I don't know yet. And it doesn't even seem as if she's interested in finding a peaceful solution. All she wants to do is brainstorm ideas. Except she called it mindstorm, which might be something completely different to do with those moths. Please tell me you've discovered something useful.'

'I have,' Saga said. 'Come on. I'll tell you on the way, or we'll miss dinner.'

They turned out the light and bolted the shed door. As they passed the kitchen window, Alfred tapped the glass in front of the carved wooden bat.

'I talked to Evie,' he said.

'You did? What did she say?' She wished she could meet the shapeshifters again. She'd barely finished the thought when her favourite batgirl spoke behind them.

'Evie told me.'

'Batty!' Saga and Alfred exclaimed at the same time, rotating on the spot. Neither of them made to hug the shapeshifter, who stood with her arms crossed, as usual entirely dressed in black.

‘Yes, yes, I’m glad to hear your voices too,’ Batty said in her clipped tones. ‘Listen, Alfred, you must work hard to learn all they teach you. Bjørn and Marjorie aren’t happy about you roaming Faerie, but the rest of us agree it’s essential you learn to fend for yourself in our world. You can’t depend on us to swoop in and save you every time you’re in trouble.’

*What about me?* Saga wanted to ask.

‘I’ll come to you in a moment, human girl,’ Batty said, making Saga wonder if her hearing was so fine she could hear unspoken thoughts.

‘Saga,’ Saga muttered.

Batty surveyed her own dark reflection in the window between them and ran a hand over her cropped black hair. ‘I heard you talk to that high faerie by the river.’

‘Amanita,’ Alfred said.

‘I don’t care what she calls herself. Be wary of her. There’s something false in her tone.’ The dark skin of Batty’s forehead furrowed. Her large ears fluttered, making the diamond stud earrings shift and sparkle. ‘And take her threat seriously.’

‘What threat?’ Saga asked. ‘You didn’t tell me Amanita threatened you.’

‘Not him. This concerns you.’ One of Batty’s long black-varnished nails pointed at Saga. ‘Those metal poles on the ancient volcano must be removed.’

Alfred nodded. ‘I saw a spot of desolation inside the fortress.’

Saga wanted to ask what it was like inside, but that could wait.

‘So that is what you must do, Sa-ga.’ Batty said her name slowly, showing her sharp teeth. ‘Tomorrow would be a good day. It’s going to rain, so few people will venture into the forest.’

‘O-kay...’ Rain would make the path up the steep cliff about ten times as difficult and dangerous. Why hadn’t Alfred told her already? Didn’t he think she could do it? But she was going to show them—Amanita and Batty and even Alfred—that she wasn’t just a useless ordinary human.

‘And what she said about the water sprite?’ Alfred asked. ‘Did you hear that too?’

Batty gave a quick nod.

‘Should I do it? If I get a chance, should I, you know, incapacitate her?’

‘Personally, I don’t have strife with the water sprite, but it would evidently be smart if you had your own gateway.’ Batty’s ears twitched. ‘Someone is calling your names at the farm. I must dash too.’ Without further ado, Batty stepped away from them. All Saga saw before she disappeared was an inky whirl of darkness.

On their way home, pushing her bicycle and walking fast so they wouldn’t be too late, Saga told Alfred about seeing the mayor talk to the countess and her own conversation with the housekeeper. She explained why she was certain the countess’s son had been snatched by faeries.

‘Where do they keep human children?’ she asked. ‘Inside the faerie fortress?’

‘Abominations,’ Mr Tumbleweed snorted in his sleep, which was what he sometimes called Alfred. Saga hoped he hadn’t heard, over the crunching gravel and the geese who broke out into a honking competition.

‘I guess.’

She leant the bicycle against the house and opened the front door, saying, ‘Wherever he is, you have to find him.’

‘I’ll try,’ Alfred answered, though he didn’t seem completely convinced.

After a dinner of lamb chops with mint sauce and roasted pumpkin, they went to her room. She asked for descriptions of the fortress and the royal gardens and all the faerie creatures he’d met, while she wrote down the details in her notebook. It was all so fascinating. She longed to see everything for herself. Besides, who’d ever heard of an explorer who documented second-hand knowledge?

‘What are you gonna do about Lillith?’ she asked, when she was finally satisfied with his explanations. ‘I mean, are you going to “incapacitate”’—she made air quotes—‘her?’

‘I don’t know. I really don’t want to hurt her.’ Alfred got up from the beanbag. ‘What d’you think I should do?’

‘If you get the chance, then yes. She’s already tried to drown you twice or throw you out or whatever. And it would be easier if you could just swim out of Faerie...’

‘Okay. You’re right.’ As he left her room, he looked back, saying, ‘And I wouldn’t mind having an emergency exit.’

# 18

ALFRED



## *Enchanted Sleep*

It didn't just rain the next day. It poured. In the morning gloom, Alfred set out with Saga and Mr Tumbleweed, going first to Granny's with a change of dry clothes for later. They'd told Saga's mum they were going to the cottage to prepare a surprise for when Granny came out of hospital. It wasn't a complete lie.

After unlocking the shed, Alfred changed into his faerie shirt. He crouched by the spring, letting his hands hover over the surface, wishing he could swim straight to Faerie.

Instead, after they split up outside the garden gate, he trudged along the lane and up the trail towards the small sinkhole. The path was slippery with mud. He didn't like the thought of Saga having to climb the steep cone hill in this weather. But when he'd suggested she wait, she'd become all prickly, asking if he didn't believe she could do it.

Of course he believed in her. Saga could do anything! He'd tried to tell her so, but she was in a weird mood and told him to let her handle the real-world problems.

'Focus on coming up with a solution and finding the countess's son,' she'd said, while she slung an oversized rucksack up on her shoulders. 'And stop dilly-dallying in faerie school.'

By the time Alfred reached the clearing where Amanita was waiting, his drenched trousers clung to his legs. His faerie shirt, though, was still dry and warm.

‘What are we going to do about those building plans?’ he asked, when he was close enough to see the blue butterfly faeries in Amanita’s hair. There were four of them, and they were shielding her face from the rain, their wings in a line across her brow like a fluttering visor.

‘Not here,’ she said, grasping his hands.

They stopped spinning right by the stream in the royal gardens. The swirling turquoise strands immediately drew his eyes.

As Amanita waded through the shallow water, Lillith’s hair strands retreated with the lightning speed of a shoal of fish. The water sprite clearly didn’t want any trouble with the high faerie.

‘Imagine if you could swim all by yourself from your human grandmother’s dwelling to this spot...’ Amanita said, echoing his own thoughts from earlier. ‘You could come here whenever you desired... leave whenever you wished to leave...’

Two of the blue butterfly faeries waved for him to follow.

Gingerly, he trod forward. The water lapped at his ankles, making him sigh. The stream’s music tingled up his legs. He didn’t care that his shoes got soaked.

‘Imagine being able to submerge yourself in the water whenever you felt the need...’

At her words, Alfred desperately wished to lie down. He longed for the sensation of water all around him. He wanted to float in this stream that had once belonged to his mother.

‘What would I have to do?’ he asked hoarsely, as he mustered his willpower and stepped up onto dry land.

Amanita glided closer to him. ‘It is a simple matter. Cut off the locks of the water sprite’s hair that inhabit those waterways.’ She stroked his hair from the top of his head towards his ears, sending shivers down his back. ‘Cut at the roots, right here and here,’ she said, grabbing a small bunch on either side, directly above his ears. From a fold in her green dress, she extracted a pair of silver scissors and held them out to him. ‘Your cuts will not cause lasting damage,’ she added.

He took the scissors. Getting close enough to Lillith to cut her hair was not in any way simple, but perhaps one day he might get a chance.

‘Nemo!’ Viola called. She and Uniko, hanging from eagles, were flying towards him, the other demi-fae in tow. Behind them, the enchanted windows of the towering faerie fortress glimmered. The eerie

eternal music chimed from the top floor. That was where the captured and enchanted humans in Faerie were supposedly dancing. Perhaps that was where he should start his search for Saga's kidnapped child. If—and it was a big if—Saga was right. She'd been wrong before, when it came to changelings.

Outis landed ahead of the flock. 'Hello, Amanita,' he said, smiling. It somehow made him look less, not more, human.

As the eagles released their grip of the demi-fae, Alfred leant towards Amanita, murmuring, 'I asked you what we're going to do.'

'Do about what?' she answered loudly, for everyone to hear.

Alfred took a deep breath, steadying himself—everyone's eyes were on him, including Amanita's cool gaze. 'How are we going to stop the planned construction on the Faerie Hill?'

'Nemo, you are the advisor to elves and faeries,' she said. 'What is your proposed solution?'

'My... my proposed solution?' he repeated. 'I don't...' Should he tell her about the countess's kidnapped child? But if he suggested finding a human baby who'd never been taken to faerie, he'd become a laughing stock. It would be better if he looked for the child himself first.

'We'll make every human who enters the forest fall asleep!' Outis said.

'Why don't we take them to the ballroom?' someone called.

The boy with floor-length hair said, 'Can't we make them forget the whole thing?'

'Could we enchant them to plant trees instead of iron stakes?' Kaleido, her skin glimmering green, asked. 'Or send the poisonous creepers, like last time?'

'All excellent suggestions,' Amanita said. 'Wouldn't you agree, Nemo?'

'That's not what I meant. We should find a way without harming people.'

'Why?' someone asked.

'Then find that way,' Amanita replied, ending the very short brainstorming session. 'Until you do, we have other priorities.'

With a sinking feeling, Alfred realized that he'd made a mistake. A momentous mistake.

When he'd formulated his agreement with the high faerie, he'd counted on her interest in a peaceful solution. But Amanita didn't care by what means they prevented the destruction of the Faerie Hill. And, if she wanted to keep him in Faerie as long as possible, she had no interest in finding a solution at all. She didn't even need to stop the plans—one of the conditions in his deal—but could wait until construction began and ambush the workers. And if something happened to Dad and Granny so they didn't need him... Alfred gulped. He would be bound to return here every day. For the rest of his life.

'You four will stay with me.' Amanita swept a hand to indicate Alfred's cluster. 'The rest of you will practise, guided by Kaleido.'

'Amanita's teaching us?' Viola whispered, awed.

'The simplest sleep incantation is an inward-bound spiral. Like this.' A large moth faerie, striped like a giant hornet, fluttered out of Amanita's hair. With the moth hovering in front of her, she drew a clockwise spiral in the air with her index finger. The inward movement was deliberate and graceful, like a ballet dancer's. The creature copied the ever-smaller circles until it was fluttering in place by her finger.

Pushing his new worries away, Alfred tried to focus on the instructions.

'And how do you wake the sleeper?' Uniko asked.

'The counter enchantment is an outward-bound spiral that starts from the centre. But a touch by anyone is enough to rouse the enchanted.'

Alfred nodded to himself. That was how they'd woken the sleeping children.

As if she guessed what he was thinking, Amanita said, 'Naturally, we would not always want just anyone to be able to wake our spellbound subjects, so you will add your own personal touch to the spiral choreography. That way only you and your moth will be able to reverse the enchantment.'

'And if we don't... if we don't wake them?' Alfred asked, a knot growing in his belly. 'Will they sleep for ever?'

'Not for ever, no. I believe the enchantment expires after one hundred human years.'

One hundred years... The knot in his belly tightened.

'Let me demonstrate. I need a volunteer.'

'Me!' Viola waved both hands in the air.

Amanita pointed at Viola and repeated the graceful movement. This time, though, after four turns, she added a small circle at the highest point, before she finished the spiral.

The moth faerie added the extra circle to its flight.

Without a sound, Viola sank to the ground, fast asleep. They all tried to shake her awake. Even when Amanita touched her, she didn't stir.

'If a moth knows the choreography, reminding them of the dance is sufficient. They have surprisingly good memories, for such inferior creatures. And although we cannot understand their feeble peeps, they understand our commands.' Amanita pointed at Viola and said, 'Wake her!'

The hornet-like faerie flew to the tip of Viola's nose. From there, it performed the choreography backwards, circling counterclockwise and adding the extra counterclockwise squiggle. As if it was drawing Viola back to life, tension returned to her body, her spine straightened and she opened her eyes.

She sprang to her feet, asking, 'Did I do alright, Amanita?'

Amanita gave a small nod. 'Your turn,' she said to the others. 'Hold out your palms.'

Immediately, as if they'd been waiting for this cue, the four creatures they'd attracted the day before descended in a flutter and set down on their four upturned palms.

'Hello again,' Alfred whispered.

'Take a moment to re-establish the bond...' Amanita walked between them. 'Do not get too attached, though—they are short-lived creatures and have many natural enemies.' As she passed him, she leant closer to Alfred's hand, narrowing her eyes, muttering, 'Hmm... I have not seen one of those in a long time...'

When she'd moved away, Alfred stroked the furry tiger-striped body of his moth, feeling a little relieved. Amanita would've told him if it wasn't a moth faerie. 'What shall I call you?' he murmured. 'How about Tiger?'

The moth faerie chirped.

A blur of orange zipped past in the direction of the fortress. 'She likes that,' a small voice peeped.

'Duke, is that you?'

‘Yes. And Tiger likes her name.’ The orange blur slowed and the Duke of Burgundy fluttered around Alfred, waving his arms. ‘Can’t stop! I’m on my way to see Holly Blue.’

‘Wait!’ Alfred remembered that Holly Blue, another butterfly faerie and Duke’s best friend, had been a musician in the ballroom, a player of the eternal music. ‘How do I get to the ballroom?’ he asked.

‘You fly,’ peeped Duke, fluttering out of sight.

‘Nemo. Outis,’ Amanita said. ‘I want you two to work together.’

‘Don’t mess up,’ Outis muttered, glaring at him. ‘I doubt humans with butterflies can do this.’ He spat the word ‘humans’ out, as if it was the worst insult he knew.

But Tiger was no butterfly, and Alfred didn’t mess up. Within minutes, Outis had both been enchanted and reanimated again.

When it was Outis’s turn, Alfred braced himself for the terrifying sensation of blacking out. Rigid with trepidation, he watched Outis direct his moth. When the russet creature flew towards him, Alfred tried to look away. But the enchantment couldn’t be fought. Transfixed, his eyes followed its dance, while all other muscles in his body appeared to melt.

His last panicked thought before he lost consciousness was whether Outis would wake him or let him sleep one hundred years. Could Amanita’s whole lesson be a ruse to keep him here in Faerie?

# 19

## SAGA



### *Toad Magic*

**S**trong gusts of wind howled in the treetops, as Saga hiked up though the forest. It was, like Batty had predicted, deserted.

Mr Tumbleweed bounded alongside her, impervious to the rain that dropped in large puddles under the trees and fell in sheets wherever there was an opening in their crowns.

Saga thanked her foresight that she'd left her notebook and canvas bag with their extra clothes in the cottage. Instead she carried a large rucksack. In addition to her secret anti-iron remedy, it contained a climbing harness and actual climbing rope they'd found in Florian's wardrobe, after Alfred mentioned seeing the photo of her brother hanging from a cliff.

Where the steep rock face of the cone hill rose up in front of her, she stood for a while among the rubble from an old stone avalanche, looking up. Only part of one metal story pole was visible from here. Its flag rippled and thrashed in the stormy gusts.

Halfway to the top, she could see the most difficult stretch of the trail, where a rockfall last year had taken a huge chunk out of the path. From this far below, it was hard to tell exactly how wide the gap was and how little of the path remained. Even harder with raindrops hitting her glasses. But she knew a steel wire was mounted along the cone-hill route, so hikers could secure themselves on the exposed trail. And she remembered showing Alfred the steel wire this summer. Strung across the bare cliff

above the fallen-away path, it had glinted in the sun. She hoped it was still there, intact and ready to support her weight as she crossed the gap.

‘I can do it,’ she muttered to herself. After all, whoever had placed the story poles must’ve climbed the path too. Unless they’d flown up there in a helicopter... Well, she didn’t have a helicopter.

‘I’m going to show them I can do it,’ she said a little louder, as she walked on. ‘Alfred and Amanita and Batty. I’ll show them!’

She stopped where a wooden barrier and a *Do not enter: Danger ahead* sign blocked the trail. Careful not to harm the fragile plants in her backpack, Saga brought the climbing harness out, but left the coiled rope, which she hoped she wouldn’t need, inside. Preparing to ascend, she stuck her legs through the loops and tightened the harness around her thighs and waist. To test them, she tugged at the two carabiners that dangled from the straps. She’d been to a birthday party in a jungle-climbing park two years ago, and she was almost sure she remembered how they worked.

‘Okay. We’d better get going.’ She hoisted the rucksack up on her shoulders.

Mr Tumbleweed, who’d been standing surprisingly still, watching what she was doing, said nothing.

Saga sighed. She was used to hiking in the woods with only him as company, but right now she wished Alfred was there too, wished they were doing things together, instead of apart.

At first, it was just a slog to walk up the steep muddy path. But the trail wound around the cone hill, and, on the other side, it was much worse. Here, the ancient volcano stood right on the edge of the Faerie Hill. It rose, exposed to the elements, straight up from the open landscape and the city far, far below.

The wind hurled rain into the side of the hill. Miniature waterfalls fell from overhangs and tiny streams rushed over the path in rivulets. Saga’s glasses fogged up. She held on to the cold steel wire attached to the rock face, but she didn’t bother securing herself with the carabiners—the path was still whole. Next to her, Mr Tumbleweed jumped ahead like a mountain goat.

Then a sudden gust pushed Saga so hard she staggered backwards. For safety, she hooked a carabiner on to the steel wire.

A visible shudder went through Mr Tumbleweed, making his stick body rattle.

‘Are you cold or is it too wet?’ she asked, wondering if she should offer to carry him in the rucksack or if that would offend him.

‘This one body is also a toad, which is somebody who likes the wet,’ he said, then gave a series of rasping coughs, which she realized might be laughter.

‘Was that a joke?’ Saga chuckled. ‘You’re funny!’

‘But this one body does not think that one thing is funny.’ He pointed at the steel wire.

‘Then it’s a good thing you don’t need it.’ She was at one of the ring bolts that held the wire in place, and she switched the carabiner, before she hiked on.

Soon, Saga’s bunches hung limp with rain and dripped down inside her waterproof jacket. Even her socks and hiking boots felt damp.

When they reached the stretch where the path had fallen away, Mr Tumbleweed leapt, crossing the entire gap in one jump.

‘Toad magic!’ he croaked from the other side.

Saga had to stop. The damage was worse than she’d feared.

Perhaps four metres of the path was gone—about the length of her bedroom. The only remains of the trail was a narrow ledge in the cliff, but it wasn’t much wider than one of her hiking boots. And it didn’t continue all the way to where the path began again. At least a metre was completely missing.

Worst of all, two of the ring bolts had been torn from the rock face. They dangled on the steel wire, which hung, unbroken, but too loose over the empty space to be of any use.

There was no way she could cross this gap. No way she could reach the top.



## *Grave Gratitude*

With a sharp intake of muggy air, Alfred came to himself, sitting on the ground. Outis stood over him with crossed arms. Nearby, Viola helped Uniko up. Not much time, and certainly not one hundred years, seemed to have passed.

Relaxed and feeling a little sluggish, like when he'd been to the sauna after swimming, Alfred got up.

'Again,' Amanita said. 'Three times each, then switch partners.'

The high faerie left them, and they practised until they'd all enchanted each other and only their cluster was left in the royal gardens.

'Can you believe we had a lesson with Amanita?' Viola said, her grin showing her mouthful of pointy teeth.

'Why, though?' Outis glowered at Alfred. 'She didn't teach us anything Kaleido doesn't know. And she's usually busy with important stuff for the queen.'

Alfred wondered if he was the reason. Was Amanita trying to lure him into becoming more dependent on her help?

To avoid further speculation, he said, 'Can I ask, are you not scared of the queen?' Most other faerie creatures he'd met were terrified of her.

'Why would we be scared of the queen?' Outis answered. 'She protects us and the realm from humans.'

'Without her, Faerie would've gone into the mist and lost its connection to the outside realm, and none of us would've existed,' Uniko said.

‘And the queen values us. She calls us demi-fae.’ Outis pushed his chest out. ‘Most other high faeries call us the half-humans. One day soon we will show them how much they need us.’

‘I’m a bit scared of Her High Faerie Highness,’ Viola said. ‘But we rarely see her, and only at a distance, surrounded by other high faeries. Amanita is one of them. Right in the trusted inner circle. Farriel once said Amanita is one of the few who has ever seen the queen without her glamour.’

‘Speaking of Farriel and glamour...’ Uniko began to sing the little tune to summon the eagles. Alfred listened closely, trying to memorize the sequence so he might learn to call the eagles himself.

‘Shhh!’ Outis clamped a hand over Uniko’s mouth. ‘Hide,’ he whispered.

Viola’s eyes grew fearful. She grasped Alfred’s hand and tugged him behind a bush with black flowers.

A strange but familiar hum resonated across the royal gardens—the deep thrum that sounded when the guards flicked their branched antlers in salute. The queen’s consort, the most imposing faerie Alfred had ever seen, marched into the gardens from the fortress entrance. As he passed close by their hiding place with three other high faeries trailing after him, Alfred could see the butterfly faeries that were busy polishing his gleaming armour.

‘Teaching half-humans...’ one of his companions muttered.

‘Can you not dissuade the queen from her ill-considered ideas, your excellency?’ another asked, her long hair trailing the ground.

‘I suppose they are expendable,’ the first companion said.

Distracted by the trickle of the stream, which was right on the other side of another black-flowered bush, Alfred didn’t hear what the queen’s consort answered. None of the other demi-fae stirred until the tall faeries were gone from view.

When all was quiet—except for the stream’s tantalizing music—Outis flapped his wings and took off.

Uniko stood up to call the eagles. But before a single tone had left his mouth, slimy tendrils wrapped themselves around Alfred’s right arm and leg. They pulled at his limbs, dragging him straight towards the bush by the stream.

‘Nemo!’ Viola grabbed hold of his other arm.

‘Don’t touch the night flowers!’ Uniko dropped to all fours and tugged at the tendrils around Alfred’s legs.

‘What’s happening?’ Viola yelled. She was being dragged along, her heels making tracks in the soil.

‘It’s the water sprite,’ Alfred gasped. He tore at the strands around his arm, fighting to free himself. Lillith must’ve been waiting for the high faeries to leave. ‘Let me go!’ he yelled. He didn’t use her name. Despite everything, he wouldn’t disclose someone’s true name to other faerie creatures.

Alfred’s face was headed straight for one of the huge black flowers. Seeing that there were no flowers near the ground, he threw himself down. Viola let go. Uniko, who’d been crawling, had already given up. Lillith’s hair pulled Alfred into the middle of the large bush, where he grabbed on to its woody stem.

His hands were cramping and starting to get sore, when, directly above his head, someone spoke in a screechy voice.

‘In trouble, isn’t he, Little Father?’

‘That he is, Little Mother, that he is.’

‘Which one of them should we help, Little Father?’ Little Mother jumped, her filthy skirts flapping. She landed just in front of Alfred’s nose.

‘Does this one want our help?’ Little Father dropped down next to her. This close, their musty stench almost made Alfred gag.

‘No,’ he said. He was certain the price for their help would be too high. But more and more tendrils were wrapping themselves around his legs. He kicked against their tightening force.

‘What can we do?’ Viola called from somewhere outside the bush.

‘Let’s help him, Little Father. Out of the goodness of our hearts.’

‘Our hearts,’ Little Father chuckled. ‘Goodness me,’ he sputtered in a fit of giggles.

Moments later, the pull on Alfred’s legs eased.

Behind him in the stream, Lillith shrieked.

Alfred looked down to see Little Mother cut the last strands of water sprite hair around his arm with her silver scissors. Two sets of tiny black eyes stared back at him.

‘Thanks,’ he gasped.

‘He thanked us!’ Holding hands, the pixies started dancing. Little Mother giggled and Little Father yelled, again and again, ‘He thanked us!’

Alfred crawled out of the bush of night flowers with a distinct feeling that anything, including having to fight Lillith in the water, would’ve been better than thanking the little people. He didn’t need Saga’s faerie knowledge to understand that he now owed them a favour.

Why hadn’t he remembered the silver scissors Amanita had given him? They were right here in his pocket, and they looked exactly like Little Mother’s. He could’ve cut himself free. Or, even better, he could’ve let Lillith drag him into the stream and then tried to cut off the strands above her ears, as Amanita had suggested. In self-defence, he wouldn’t feel so bad about cutting her hair.

‘Was that Little Mother and Little Father?’ Viola asked. ‘Did you see them?’

Alfred nodded.

‘Wow! Are they still there?’ She crouched and peered in between the leaves. ‘I can’t see anyone.’

Uniko sang the little tune and said, ‘The eagles are coming.’

Getting up, Viola brushed her joggers off, while she continued to gush about the little people. ‘I’ve heard so much about them. I’m not saying all the tales are true, but they are so brave in the outside world... and some of the queen’s most valued agents.’

Alfred had a somewhat different perspective on the pixies, but he didn’t tell her. And Viola must’ve misunderstood something, because why would some of the queen’s most valued agents spend a large part of their time in his granny’s garden?

# 21

## SAGA



### *Tree-Sprite Roots*

‘I can’t cross here,’ Saga called to Mr Tumbleweed. Sighing, she prepared to head back down the cone hill. Instead of proving herself to Amanita and Batty, she’d confirmed their beliefs. She really was just a human. Utterly useless to them. Ordinary.

To turn around with her big rucksack on the narrow path, she took hold of the steel wire with her right hand. But instead of being taut, the wire gave way. Saga wobbled. Teetering on the edge, she grabbed for the wire on the other side of the nearest ring bolt.

After two tries she caught hold of it and regained her balance.

Shaking a little, she gasped, ‘That was close.’

Saga looked down at the wire in her clenched fists and the ring bolt between them. Then her gaze travelled back towards the last bolt. The steel wire ended there, fastened to the ring. It gave her an idea.

A slack wire was no use, but perhaps it could be tightened. She took a deep breath and opened her fists. Without shifting her balance, Saga began to pull the steel wire through the ring until it was taut all the way across the gap. After looping the excess wire into a knot, she held it together with one of her carabiners.

Still without moving her feet, she gave the wire a hard tug, testing it. It stayed taut.

‘Okay. I’m going to try,’ she muttered.

Holding on to the wire with both hands, Saga shuffled sideways on to the ledge. She leant into the cliff, her nose almost scraping against the

rock, as she slowly slid one foot sideways, then the other along. She wished she hadn't needed the rucksack. Although it was almost empty, its weight dragged her backwards.

Where the ledge ended, she hesitated. Her breath came in ragged puffs. She studied the gap. It might only be one metre. But how on earth was she going to jump that far from her sideways position, without anywhere to push off or a run-up from?

She'd need to unhook the carabiner for the jump, although that meant if she didn't make it... She glanced down. From this height, she wouldn't merely break an arm and her collarbone, like the time she fell from their chestnut tree.

Mr Tumbleweed, who still stood on the other side, observing her progress, asked, 'Does somebody need this one body's help?'

'I'm not sure what you can do.' Perhaps he could tie the rope somewhere for her and she could walk across on that...

Before she could make that suggestion, though, the tree sprite stretched up his twig arms. Like a diver on a springboard, he fell forward into the gap.

'No!' Saga screamed.

But his twig hands landed right at her feet, latching on to the narrow ledge. Tiny shoots crept out of his fingertips. They slithered over the rock until they found crevices to cling on to. At the same time, his lichen-covered feet sprouted roots, planting themselves firmly on the path at the other side.

He had made a bridge for her. A twiggy, unstable bridge.

'Are you sure that's okay?'

'Can somebody hurry?' he grunted.

Saga crossed the gap in three quick steps, without hearing any cracks of breaking twigs.

Like a sapling that had been bent aside, the tree sprite's body snapped back into an upright position. His feet trailed stringy roots when they set off.

The rest of the way to the stormy top was a breeze. Relatively.

On arriving, Saga took in the flat top of the cone hill. The ancient ruins consisted of two crumbled walls that formed a corner. Around them lay a scattering of tumbled-down stone blocks, half-buried in the soil. One of the story poles stood between the walls. The others had been

mounted around the edge of the mountain. Seeing them outlining the planned building, she recalled the architectural sketch from the billboard. The projected station and viewing platform would sit atop the hill, like an ugly crown on a green princess's head.

She wouldn't let that happen.

With determination, Saga strode straight to the nearest metal pole. It was three times her own height, a red streamer straining to fly away from its top. At its bottom, two short metal legs stuck into the ground, supporting the main part, which was bending in the wind.

The support legs were made of aluminium and light as tent poles. She wrenched them out of the muddy earth quite easily and breathed a sigh of relief. Without hesitation she pulled at the main pole. Its pointed tip slipped out too. That part wasn't aluminium, but hard unyielding iron. Iron flattened into a sword-like blade.

Mr Tumbleweed sprang back as she lowered the long pole to the ground. Luckily, like a tent pole, it pulled apart into shorter sections.

'Now, for the nice part,' she said, and opened her rucksack. Carefully, she brought out a fistful of dandelion leaves with their long pale roots attached. At such short notice, she hadn't been able to think of what else to bring.

After getting down on her knees, Saga stuck one root into each of the three holes and patted the dirt down around them. She knew these beautiful plants could survive anything, and she was also counting on their healing properties.



## *Disguising Differences*

‘Oh, your shirt has torn.’ Viola pinched the edge of Alfred’s sleeve and showed him an opening from elbow to wrist, which Little Mother’s silver scissors must’ve cut. Her hand was ripped away, as they were both lifted up into the air. The eagle above Alfred screeched a greeting from his great-grandmother.

Alfred tried to hold the tear together, while he followed the flow of the stream with his eyes, wondering how far Lillith’s territory reached. If he trekked along the tributaries, would he find other water sprites? Friendly water sprites to whom he might even be related?

Beyond the hedge that surrounded the gardens, a large bear stood on its hind legs and waved at him. Knowing that Evie and Bjørn, and probably Batty, were keeping an eye on him made him feel better. Safer.

‘Uniko, we need to get Alfred’s shirt mended,’ Viola called.

Uniko sang something to the eagles. Changing direction, the birds turned away from the balustrade. They flew alongside the castle to a tall glassless window and set down their cargo on a wide window sill.

Following Uniko and Viola, Alfred climbed down into the room where he’d first arrived with Amanita. In a corner, the column of desolation still stretched its blank emptiness from floor to ceiling.

By humming another little tune, Uniko summoned five bright-green butterfly faeries. Laden with spun gossamer, they landed on Alfred’s arm and worked so fast he didn’t realize they were done repairing his shirt until they fluttered away.

‘Thank you!’ he called after them.

‘Thanking creatures again,’ Outis muttered from the nearest tall window, as he folded his wings down his back.

Alfred ignored the jibe and walked over to where Uniko and Viola stood, studying the nothingness.

‘So that’s what the desolation looks like up close,’ Viola said. She stepped right to the edge of the column.

‘Have you really not seen it before?’ Outis asked in a bored voice from behind.

Blackened rubble surrounded the column where it went through a hole in the stone floor. But they couldn’t see the floors below. Viola got down on her knees and stuck a hand into the blankness. It vanished from view.

Alfred held his breath. Amanita had told him this new desolation must’ve been caused by iron, and it was clearly worse than the bleak area he’d trekked through with Saga and Bjørn. Although they’d struggled to breathe in the strangely dense air, they had at least been able to see each other and the antlered guards.

‘I can feel the edge of the drop-off,’ Viola said, leaning in until her arm disappeared up to her elbow.

‘Don’t!’ Outis pulled her back. Like it was glued to her arm, the column bulged and stretched in their direction. It gave a soft *plop* when it finally released her hand.

Viola panted, staring at her fingers, turning her hand as if making sure none of her claws were missing.

Suddenly, the ceiling above gave a crunching sound. They all scrambled back, fearing the desolation was spreading. Instead, it shrank. The column of darkness became a grey haze. The strange holes in the floor and ceiling healed themselves, though patches in a burnt ashen black remained.

Alfred guessed what was happening. Saga must’ve been able to pull one of the metal poles out of the ground. And done something else, he thought, when the spots cleared in a swirl of black dust, and the haze dispersed.

‘My friend’s doing that,’ he said. ‘My human friend. She’s reversing the desolation.’

‘Wow. She must be really powerful,’ Viola said.

‘Or just really human,’ Outis said with a note of derision.

A white butterfly faerie with delicate round wings flew between them, ringing a tiny bell.

‘Oh no, we’re going to be late.’ Viola dragged Alfred after her, as they ran to the courtyard. All the way there, the bell tinkled right behind Alfred’s ears, chasing them.

‘Sorry! Sorry, Farriel!’ Viola called across the clusters of demi-fae that already stood on the huge terrace. ‘We’ve just seen one of the desolation columns disappear. Nemo’s friend is reversing it.’

‘Is that so?’ asked the disembodied voice.

‘Yes,’ Uniko said. ‘In the reception room, the desolation is gone and the floor has healed!’

‘Then it must be true. Can anyone tell me why that is?’

Kaleido answered, ‘Because the desolation does not respond to glamour.’

‘Correct. It is impossible to use glamour inside the desolation and impossible to disguise the desolation itself. Its true nature is the void. And nothing can hide nothing.’

Alfred felt a swirl of cool air—Farriel must be walking between them.

‘A very fitting start to today’s lesson. I hope you are well rested. You will be working on your human disguises.’

A mutual groan rose from the group before they began casting their glamour effects. Kaleido’s shimmering skin turned a pale, dull beige. Viola’s eyes became smaller and almond-shaped, but the blue colour she changed them to was cobalt and just as unlikely as her own. Uniko’s horn vanished, leaving a circular birthmark. But all these changes lasted mere moments before their demi-fae features became visible again. They folded over, gasping as if they’d been running a race.

Alfred stared at them. Not only would they be enchanting humans with their moths—the other demi-fae would appear to be humans themselves while doing so. The real humans wouldn’t stand a chance.

‘Unless you are of the old high-faerie blood, this kind of glamour is physically and mentally draining,’ Farriel said right by his ear, misunderstanding why he was staring. ‘You can already pass among humans, so you’re free to decide which parts of yourself you want to disguise.’

‘Er... What about my right leg?’ he asked. ‘Is it possible to make it appear to be exactly as long as the left?’

‘That is possible. You must use the same technique as when you’re hiding. Focus your thoughts on hiding the difference. Human shoes are less responsive than our materials, so you might want to take those off. But remember it is simply glamour, your legs will still be different lengths.’

Alfred slumped a bit and looked down at his shoes. For a short while, he’d hoped glamour would solve everything so he could get rid of them. He sat down to take them off.

After getting up again, Farriel’s invisible hand brushed under his chin, gently lifting his face up. ‘Different length legs are a great advantage for a water sprite, and you should be grateful for them.’

Barefoot, standing on his left leg and supporting himself on the banister, he tried hiding the difference. He imagined his thigh and shin bones growing downwards and tried to visualize his ankles side-by-side, his feet aligned on the ground. It worked... for a moment. He kept practising. With every attempt, Alfred made the glamour effect last a few seconds longer. It was hard, but he didn’t feel drained. Perhaps being fit from swimming helped.

The visible change was so convincing, he felt compelled to try walking. He stumbled, because, of course, his right leg hadn’t magically grown 5.3 centimetres. Grasping the balustrade, he managed to right himself without falling. Alfred glanced around, hoping no one had noticed.

But from the top rail, Outis smirked. He had seen. His wings were clearly visible, and instead of working to hide them, he’d changed his eyes from brown to orange. It was clear he didn’t want to resemble a human.

‘Curious,’ Farriel murmured. ‘Your affinity for glamour is exceptional.’

‘Is that another water-sprite talent?’

‘No. Water sprites are powerful and skilled at many things. Glamour is not one of them.’

Alfred nodded thoughtfully. That made sense. If Lillith could hide her appearance, she wouldn’t look like a monster above water. Or would she?

‘I wonder who your ancestors are...’ Farriel said, hesitating. ‘With this aptitude, there’s no doubt you have high-faerie blood.’ She stepped around him, and muttered again from behind him, ‘Curious.’

High-faerie blood. He thought about what that meant for his chance of finding his faerie family, while he leant against the banister and put his shoes back on. It wouldn't be enough to look for other water sprites in the rivers and streams. His mother's relatives could be anyone, anywhere in the faerie realm.

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## *The Iron Sword*

Saga got up from planting the three dandelions. Trying to ignore that her clothes were colder and clammier after kneeling in the mud, she stretched. Then she swung her arms and jumped up and down to get warm.

‘Do you think it worked?’ she asked Mr Tumbleweed.

He nodded.

‘Ha! Desolation defeated!’ Saga pumped her fist. ‘Take that, Amanita! Saved by an ordinary human,’ she called into the wind.

Shaking his log head, Mr Tumbleweed jumped to the next pole, and, after grabbing the rucksack, she followed.

Luckily, that pole was in the lee of the ruin walls. While she pulled it out, Saga wondered if a historical society might be interested in protecting the site, even if the ruins were just two half walls and a few ancient bricks. Perhaps then they could help stop the mayor’s plans.

She got both that pole and the next one dismantled, while she thought about the fortress in the faerie realm. Unlike these ruins, that wasn’t a few fragments of a building. Would she ever visit Faerie again and see inside the fortress for herself? She tried to picture the carved and petrified trees Alfred had described and the room full of faerie hammocks. It was difficult to imagine when all she’d seen were the dark dungeons.

Saga stuffed the drenched streamers and the story poles into her rucksack. If she left its top open with the poles sticking out, they fitted

inside. A single upright pole remained. It stood right by the eastern edge of the cone hill.

While she'd worked, the rain had let up and the wind subsided a little. Saga paused to take in the incredible views. In the distance, one of the castle turrets peeked up above the treetops, piercing a dark cloud.

Beyond the castle, the lake merged with the low-hanging mist. Below the cone hill, she could see the scenic viewpoint and the billboard with project plans. It was easy to envision a cable car from down there up to where she stood. It was even understandable why people would want easy access to a place with such far-reaching views.

A chilly gust made her shudder and snap back into action.

The two support legs on the last pole were out in moments, but the main pole was stuck. With stretched arms, Saga tried to wiggle it back and forth to enlarge the hole, but it wouldn't budge. She detached the jangling support legs and pushed and pulled.

Her arms were stretched because the pole was so near the edge that she didn't dare step closer. Although the cliff didn't drop off quite as sharply here as on the other sides, if she fell, she would tumble down a steep slope. A steep, muddy slope where boulders and sharp stony corners poked out of the rain-flattened grass.

She glanced down, wondering if that was where Alfred was now in Faerie. Saga knew from experience the geography of the other realm was warped. But the bottom of the grassy slope might actually mirror the courtyard balcony Alfred had talked about, the place where he'd been learning about glamour. She wished she could learn about glamour too.

The wind whipped loose strands of hair into her eyes. She blinked, tears rising, her vision blurring.

'Can you help?' she called to the tree sprite, wiping her eyes on her scarf.

'This one body is not touching those somethings,' Mr Tumbleweed said, but he hopped to her side anyway.

Her fingers were stiff and cold, and she rubbed her chilled hands together. 'Can you do that thing where you plant your feet again? And hold on to the rope?'

He nodded.

After she threaded it through the climbing harness, Saga gave him both ends of the rope. This time she watched up close as roots grew from

his feet and anchored him to the ground.

‘Okay.’ With no fear of falling, she stepped right up to the pole and pushed and pulled.

It creaked and began moving, the hole around it growing. When it came loose, she pulled with full force.

‘Almost there,’ she panted.

Suddenly, the ground released the pole. Slick with rain, it slipped in her stiff fingers and hit her forehead. Her hands flew up in a reflex. One of them struck the pole, which fell the other way.

‘Oops!’ Saga said, as the long pole toppled down the steep incline, breaking into sections. Some of them rolled and some of them slid downhill. The bottom part with the sharp sword-like end bounced off a rock. It somersaulted, turning twice in the air. Then it landed with a thud on its pointy iron tip, stabbing deep into the earth.

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## *Deadly Desolation*

Alfred jerked at a sudden thunder-like crack. Behind him someone screamed. The high-pitched wail was cut off mid-shriek.

Both sounds echoed around the three walls of the courtyard. He spun on the spot. And there, right in front of him, was a new blank column of desolation.

Silently, the other demi-fae came closer, gathering around the emptiness.

‘Is that...’ someone began.

Glancing around, Alfred counted. Who had screamed? There were twelve other demi-fae around him. Had they been fourteen in total?

‘Farriel, what happened?’ Viola asked.

But Farriel didn’t answer. Their invisible instructor had been standing right behind him. Right where now there was nothing.

‘Does anyone know where Farriel was when this happened?’ Kaleido asked. Her skin shimmered in dark, dull tones.

Alfred waited a few beats, hoping someone else would speak up, before he said, ‘I think she was right behind me. And I was right here. So...’ He pointed at the desolation.

‘Maybe she was knocked out,’ someone said.

‘She must be somewhere!’

‘Walk around it in a spiral. Tread carefully! And use revelation,’ Kaleido said. ‘I’ll... I’ll try to find Amanita.’

Alfred whispered to Uniko, who stood next to him, 'Wouldn't her invisibility glamour stop working if she'd been knocked out?'

'Maybe,' Uniko said.

They were all tiptoeing around the desolation when Kaleido returned with Amanita. Everyone froze where they stood, as if she'd cast a spell over them.

'She is not here,' Amanita said after a cursory glance. With her gliding steps, she crossed the courtyard and leant out over the balustrade. After looking down, she shook her head.

'You are free to leave,' she said, walking straight to the blank column. Without pausing, she stepped into the void. Her appearance began to change before she vanished.

Instinctively, the demi-fae gathered in their clusters. Someone in Kaleido's cluster talked loudly about a faerie creature who was once swallowed by the desolation and never retrieved. Others were muttering about humans, blaming them for everything from the lack of sunlight in Faerie to the queen's consort's dislike of demi-fae. They were thirsting for a chance to enchant as many humans as possible.

'Did your human friend do this too?' Outis asked.

'I don't know,' Alfred said, suddenly realizing the new patch of desolation could've been Saga's doing. Something must've happened on top of the cone hill. He knew she could be reckless. What stunt had she been attempting? Or... A chill slid down the back of his neck. Had she fallen down the steep cliff with one of the story poles?

'You do know Farriel is a close relative of the queen, right?' Outis said. '*She* is going to be so angry.'

'Uh-oh,' Viola said. 'I wouldn't want to be your friend, if the queen sends her pixie agents after her.'

Alfred's stomach clenched. He wasn't too worried about the pixies—Saga had dealt with Little Mother and Little Father before. But if Saga had fallen all the way down here from the top of the cone hill, she'd be seriously injured.

Viola and Outis continued to discuss whether the queen might order the antlered guards to capture her or perhaps even let the wolf beasts out of Faerie.

'I have to go,' Alfred croaked, a vivid image in his mind of salivating beasts standing over Saga's lifeless body.

He should've told her not to climb the hill in a storm. He should've been with her when she tried. Instead, he'd just thought about himself and hurried back to this place where he wished he belonged. He had to find out if Saga was okay, and he had to warn her. Right now. Right away, he had to leave Faerie.

But without Amanita... Alfred turned to look out over the royal gardens and the forest beyond. Off to the side, he could see the fallen tree trunk and the river. None of the shapeshifters were in sight.

'What's wrong, Nemo?' Viola asked. She and Uniko came to stand next to him. 'You look very human and anxious.'

'I'm worried about my friend.' Alfred ran a hand through his hair. It made him remember Amanita doing the same. Pensively, he tucked at the strands directly above his ear, like she'd done. It reminded him of another way he might leave Faerie.

Technically, he knew what he had to do. He patted the pocket with the silver scissors. Lillith would attack him the instant he touched the water. And then it was a matter of somehow winning a fight against her underwater. The odds of him somehow tying her up so he could cut off the two bunches of her hair that would give him access to Granny's stream were not good. But Alfred had to try. For Saga's sake, he had to try.

'Uniko,' he said. 'Can you call me an eagle?'

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# 25

## SAGA



### *The Beloved Sister*

On her way down the cone hill, Saga managed to pick up the pieces of the fallen story pole that lay near the path. Mr Tumbleweed held her anchored with the rope whenever necessary.

But there was no way for her to get near the bottom section—the one that stabbed the ground. She hoped it was so far to the side of the faerie fortress that the desolation it caused would be unnoticed.

When she reached the gap in the path, Saga lowered the rucksack full of the aluminium poles down the cliff-side to the ground below with the rope. Mr Tumbleweed made a bridge for her, and without anything on her back, she easily traversed the ledge.

Wet and chilled to the bone and more exhausted than she'd ever been, Saga trudged the most direct way home. She thought about hiding the rucksack at the cottage, but she just wanted to get home and under a hot shower. And there were plenty of hiding places in the barn.

She was passing the graveyard, when a car honked and slowed down.

Mum's car.

Even worse, when the passenger window rolled down, she saw that Oliver was driving.

'Get in, Lily,' he said, and turned his loud music down.

She was so tired, she ignored his use of her real name. After swinging her rucksack onto the backseat, she climbed inside. Mr Tumbleweed jumped away from the lane—he'd get home on his own.

‘Where’s Alfred?’ Oliver looked over his shoulder at the rucksack. ‘And what’ve you got in there?’

‘Just drive. Or I’ll get out again.’

After a side-glance at her, Oliver put the car into gear. ‘What’re you up to, little Lily?’

‘Stop calling me that.’

‘So what’s in the bag? Placards for one of your little rebel protests?’

Heat rose to her cheeks. ‘They’re not little! And I’m not a rebel, I’m an activist!’

‘I’m an ac-ti-vist...’ he mimicked her voice, as they rumbled along the track to the farm.

Saga clenched her fists. ‘Mum and Dad are activists too.’

‘So you don’t mind me telling them you’re up to something?’

‘Mind your own business,’ she muttered, and wished Oliver would hurry back to his school. The problem wasn’t so much the poles themselves. Her parents might understand why she’d taken them, but they would be livid when they found out where she’d got them. Especially if they discovered that she’d climbed the cone hill all alone, and in a storm no less. ‘It’s nothing to do with you.’

Oliver snorted and turned the music up until the bass vibrated around them.

The second he stopped the car, she jumped out and grabbed the rucksack. Carrying it over one shoulder, she lumbered through the pelting rain into the nearest barn. She hid the whole bag of story poles in among the heaps of broken farm equipment that Dad had been planning to fix for as long as she could remember.

When she came back out of the barn, Oliver was still sitting in the car, music booming from it, despite the closed doors. He was watching her. She could feel his eyes following her, all the way to the front door.

The house was quiet—Poppy and Daisy were at playdates. Saga succeeded in reaching the bathroom, taking a shower and getting dressed in layers of woollen clothes, without anyone else discovering her. Her room was cold because she’d left the window open to let Mr Tumbleweed in, so she sneaked down to the kitchen to get a hot drink.

Unfortunately, Mum was there. She glanced up from the apple press, saying, ‘Where’s Alfred?’

‘He needed to finish something for his granny. Is this still hot?’ Saga asked, lifting the tea cosy. When Mum nodded, she poured a cup.

‘Can’t you leave that toad outside for once? I don’t want any strange bacteria in my juice,’ Mum said.

In a grumbling huff, Mr Tumbleweed snatched up a handful of dog pellets from the bowl on the floor and jumped back out of the kitchen.

‘Sometimes I wish your faerie godmother had never given him to you...’

‘I know Nereida gave him to me, but why do you call her my faerie godmother?’

‘Oh, the faerie part was just a joke with Rob, after the first time I met her.’ Mum went on feeding apples into the chute. ‘Nereida was different, in a way I can’t quite explain. As if she didn’t quite belong in this world. And she had this faraway look in her eyes... But she was so, so lovely. Interested in everything, as if the world was this magical place she’d recently discovered. I remember the first time she saw this.’ Mum patted the apple press. ‘Change the canister, will you?’

Saga pinched the rubber tube, blocking the flow of juice, and moved it to the next five-litre glass canister. She wished she could tell Mum that Nereida was faerie-like because she was in fact a faerie.

‘She was so delighted to see hard apples become liquid that she helped me all day! And she loved the taste—which was particularly delicious that year. Somehow, every year, the sweet smell of the juice always reminds me of her and that day.’

‘But why do you call her my godmother? She must’ve disappeared long before I was christened.’

‘Oh. That was because she came up with your name.’

‘What? Lily?’

‘Obviously. Saga’s your own invention. I wish you’d let us call you Lily again. It’s such a lovely name, and it suits you.’ Mum sighed.

‘Why Lily? Did she know you liked flower names?’

‘She suggested something else at first... Let me think...’

After a long pause, when her mum didn’t continue, Saga wondered if she was under a mild version of the memory enchantment that affected Alfred’s dad and granny. She sniffed and said, ‘The apple scent is wonderful,’ hoping that would be enough.

It seemed to work, because Mum inhaled deeply and resumed talking. ‘It was the last time I ever saw her, about a week after you’d been born. Dad and I had been discussing names for months... Anyway, she came to visit and she’d laid Alfred next to you in the playpen. While I made tea, she was cooing to both of you. When she looked up, she looked happier than I’d ever seen her. She said she knew you’d be like a sister to Alfred. And then your toad hopped out of her bag and she declared it would be your lifelong friend.’

Briefly, Mum forgot to feed the chute. The flow from the press slowed.

‘I was very tired, or I probably wouldn’t have agreed to having it in the house. Nereida kept talking—and she usually didn’t say much—saying something about the importance of blood. And about blood being thicker than water and how the original quote didn’t mean that family bonds were stronger than friendships, but the opposite. I think she had a strained relationship with her mother. I looked the quote up later. The original phrasing is, “The blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb.” I liked that, and I’m glad you and Alfred have become such good friends.’

‘Me too,’ Saga said, wondering what all the talk of water and blood meant.

‘Anyway, Nereida suggested another name first. Something similar... Something a little strange... Not Lillian...’

‘Was it Lillith?’

‘Yes, that’s it, exactly. How did you know?’

‘I heard it somewhere,’ Saga said, her mind fizzing. Why would Nereida want her named after that terrifying water sprite?

‘Lillith was her sister’s name—and she missed her sister terribly—that’s why she wanted it to be yours.’

‘Her sister?’ Saga asked, uncomprehending. Then she recalled the engraving on Nereida’s headstone: *Beloved wife, mother, sister*. But Lillith and Nereida couldn’t be beloved sisters, could they?

Mum nodded. ‘I think Lillith lived somewhere far away, perhaps down under. I’m not sure. Nereida never said. I never met her sister, and she didn’t even come to the funeral, which was strange. I always wondered if Rob couldn’t locate her, but I didn’t want to pry.’

With the scent of apples all around them, Mum talked on, wondering whether Alfred had any contact with his aunt, but Saga wasn't listening any more.

If Nereida had missed and loved her sister, could Lillith have loved her back? Could that love explain how she always tried to drag Alfred down under the surface? Perhaps she wasn't trying to drown him, but—

Saga didn't finish that train of thought, because with painful clarity she remembered how she'd encouraged Alfred to incapacitate Lillith the night before.

What if Amanita had told him how to do so by now? She didn't trust Amanita at all. Perhaps whatever the high faerie suggested might actually do Lillith harm...

'Saga! The tube!'

The apple juice was running over, pouring down the sides of the canister.

Saga hurried to move it.

'Mum, I'm sorry. I have to go!' She ran out of the kitchen, calling, 'I have to talk to Alfred, right now!'

After grabbing the first jacket she found in the boot room, she slammed the door, jumped on her bicycle and raced to the cottage. On the way, she tried to work out what it all meant, but she was too worried.

The only thing that pleased her was that Nereida had wanted her to become like a sister to Alfred. It made her feel a little bit special.

'Batty, Bjørn, help me!' she yelled as she ran past the cottage kitchen. But there was no response from the woodcarvings.

She tore the shed door open and waited impatiently for the industrial lights to blink on before she waded through the cave into the dark tunnel.

Here, she screamed as loudly as she could, 'Nemo! Don't do it. Nemo!' But, even as she did so, Saga knew he wouldn't hear her in Faerie, and she feared she was too late.



## *The Haircut*

Alfred scoured the surroundings for shapeshifters, on his flight down to the royal gardens. Neither Bjørn nor Evie was visible from the air.

‘Batty!’ he called, as he and the eagle swooped below the tree crowns. Batty would hear him if she was anywhere in the vicinity. But no black creature darted towards him.

He desperately needed to come up with a plan, and there was no time to search for his creature friends. He had to leave faerie now. Saga was either injured or in danger of faerie retribution.

When the eagle set him down, Alfred realized he didn’t need shapeshifter help. Because, fluttering out of the nearest night-flower bush, came a small colourful creature.

‘Tiger!’ He held out his palm.

The moth faerie chirped, as she landed.

Here was the solution! With Tiger on his hand, he sped towards the hedge around the gardens. A moth enchantment wasn’t dangerous for a water sprite—Alfred had already been put to sleep himself a dozen times by his clustermates.

But he’d consented to being put under. It felt a little bit wrong to enchant someone without their knowledge, to make anyone so vulnerable. Even Lillith. Doubt sneaking into his mind, he slowed down.

In front of him, the creepers that covered the hedge crawled upwards in their familiar jerks. Their purple veins pulsated with their poison, reminding him of their deadliness. Of Amanita’s callousness towards

humans. Of his fear that the queen would retaliate against Saga. He didn't have a choice.

Besides, Bjørn had told him Lillith always envied his mother. And who but she had benefitted from his mother's disappearance? He put one hand inside the zippered pocket and clutched the water-sprite figurine.

Blaming Lillith took away his last reservations. In any case, it wasn't as if he'd be causing her serious harm. Her hair would grow back eventually.

He was glad when he didn't meet any of the shapeshifters on the way to the river, because he was determined to follow his plan. By the fallen tree trunk, he showed Tiger the choreography—using the same moves that had enchanted Outis earlier.

'I want you to make Lillith fall asleep after I get her to the surface,' he said. 'Can you do that, please?'

Tiger chirped, her feelers vibrating.

A short distance from the river bank Alfred picked up a small stone. He rolled it around in his hand until he was sure Lillith would be able to detect he'd touched it, and then he threw it in the water.

Rings barely formed around the stone before her tendrils shot towards him. But Alfred was beyond their reach. Like a nest of snakes, Lillith's coils of hair writhed as her head rose out of the water.

At the first glimpse of her green eyes, Alfred froze. They were so like his own. She opened her mouth—probably to shriek—but no sound emerged. Her eyes had caught sight of Tiger, who spiralled in her direction. A glint of bewilderment shone out of the green orbs before they closed. The hair strands that had been trying to reach Alfred fell limply to the ground.

Cautiously, he approached the bank. When he got there, Lillith's head was sliding underwater. To stop her drifting away, Alfred jumped into the river. It felt so, so good.

While he dragged Lillith into a shallow pool sheltered by rocks, below the bank, he kept his own head above the surface, to avoid the temptation of staying in the depths. With shaking hands, he fumbled with his pocket's zipper and got the scissors out. He didn't want to touch her face, but his hand brushed her cheek when he grasped a bunch of strands above the ear. It made him shudder.

What he was doing felt wrong, but he couldn't stop. He had to warn Saga.

With a snip, he cut the tendrils close to the scalp. It left a small bald patch above her tapered ear. Alfred exhaled a long ragged breath. Then he carefully turned her head to the other side. He avoided looking at Lillith's closed eyelids while he chopped off the strands by her other ear. After pushing the scissors deep into his pocket, he tugged her hair down over her ears. He almost couldn't see where she'd been sheared. Perhaps she wouldn't notice.

Letting go of the handfuls of hair, he watched them turn into turquoise rivulets in the water. The water that lapped at his knees. He wanted so badly to dive down into the stream.

'Tiger,' he called, about to wake Lillith again, before he changed his mind. He ought to check if cutting those particular bits of hair really had cleared the path to Granny's shed. 'Wait here, please.'

Alfred turned away from the water sprite and dived into the river. Under the surface, Lillith's hair strands—the ones still attached to her head—had sunk down on the riverbed. They waved lazily back and forth, making no effort to catch or hinder him.

He floated with the current and opened his mouth. The stream flowed through him. His fingertips tingled. Bubbles from his gills popped by his ears and lingered in his curls. The taste of the pure spring water was even better than he remembered. The slight pressure on every part of his body reassured him he was supported. The feeling was incredible!

As he swam past schools of fish, they welcomed him with song. Their music warmed his insides. This was his true home.

To think his mother had left the river to be with his father. It showed Alfred how much she'd loved Dad. He couldn't wait to hear the song the fish sang about his parents' great love.

As if he'd conjured this wish, a distant choir sang, '*This is the tale of Nereida and Applevale.*'

He followed the voices, as they continued, '*A love so great it makes us quiver.*'

The song led him to what he instantly knew was Granny's stream. He knew it by the intense turquoise colour. It was also completely void of water-sprite hair and river weed.

*'It crossed between realms like our river,'* the fish sang, as he swam into the underground tunnel.

He was tempted to go straight home to search for Saga, but he couldn't leave Lillith in that enchanted sleep. So, before he reached the last narrow stretch to Granny's shed, he turned around.

On the way upstream, he swam as in a race, thinking about Saga. The image of her lifeless body reappeared in his mind. Pushing it away, willing her to be unharmed, he wondered what it would mean to her if she'd never be able to go to the forest for fear of the queen's revenge. He thought so hard about Saga that he almost believed he heard her calling him.

Back in the main river, he blocked out the choir song—now wasn't the time to hear the tale—and considered how he would get to a safe distance before waking Lillith. Planning occupied his mind so much that he'd almost reached the fallen tree trunk before he noticed that something was wrong. Seriously wrong.

He could see every single stone of the riverbed. All the lazy water-sprite hair from before had gone. What had happened to it? Where was Lillith?

After breaking the surface, he saw her immediately. She was still between the stones in the shallow pool. But so was someone else.

'Thank us, he did.'

'Generously at that, Little Father.' Little mother was snipping away at Lillith's hair with her own silver scissors.

'No!' Alfred yelled. 'What've you done?' He thrashed through the water. When he neared them, they nimbly sprang to Lillith's other side and continued their work. But it was too late anyway. Lillith was almost completely shorn.

Shaking with anger, he held out his hand for Tiger and showed her the counter enchantment, without worrying about his own safety.

Lillith woke with a terrified and terrifying shriek. Swinging one arm, she sent Little Mother and Little Father flying over the river. They somersaulted to high-pitched giggles.

'I'm sorry,' Alfred said. 'I—'

Before he finished the sentence, Lillith pounced. She leapt from the shallow pool, gripped his arms, and forced him backwards into the water.

‘I’m sorry,’ Alfred sang again under the surface. ‘I didn’t know they would do that. I just took the hair to free the stream to my granny’s cottage.’ He prepared to fight back.

But Lillith’s grip slackened. Without her hair, she looked small and frail, her huge green eyes even bigger. She let go of his arms and her sharp-nailed fingers darted for his cheeks. Instead of attacking, her hands cupped his face gently. She brushed his forehead with her lips.

‘I failed my sister,’ she sang. ‘I failed to keep you away.’

Alfred could see her eyes well up, see the green tears flowing from them.

‘I am sorry.’ She let go of him and paddled backwards.

‘Wait!’ Alfred started swimming after her. What did she mean?

‘Farewell, dearest Alfred,’ she sang.

At her use of his name, Alfred felt an ache in his chest, like his heart had been pierced. A weakness spread in his whole body. His arms and legs became heavy. He didn’t have the strength to swim after her.

The current of her tears carried him away. His eyes itched as the stream enveloped him in a wordless lament. All the way to Granny’s shed, with every mouthful that flowed through him, Alfred could taste the water’s saltiness.



## *Threatened into a Deal*

Saga had forgotten to borrow her mums's key to the cottage, so she was pacing the shed when she heard splashing from deep inside the cave. She ran past the empty dye baths, chasing her own shadow on the uneven walls, to see Alfred emerge from the spring. He stayed, sitting on his knees in the shallow stream, with his head bent. Gasping breaths made his whole body shudder.

He didn't hear Saga until she was nearly by his side.

As soon as he looked up and saw her, he stood, staggered closer and threw his arms around her, hugging her tightly. Surprised, she hugged him back.

'You're unharmed,' he said hoarsely, letting go.

'Why wouldn't I be?' she asked, as they walked back to the main cave.

'I thought... perhaps you'd slipped or something...'

'Nah. Piece of cake. But did it work? Did those patches of desolation inside the fortress disappear?'

Alfred nodded. His eyes were red-rimmed. Water ran down his cheeks from both them and his wet hair. It had grown longer.

She found an old rag by the dried herbs and handed it to him. 'And you found a way past... the water sprite?' She almost said 'your aunt', but with the intense dislike between him and Lillith, she wanted to try to be less direct than usual and break the family relation to him gently.

While wiping his face, Alfred nodded, and then he began to shake all over. Before they talked more, he needed a hot shower.

‘Come. Where’s your key?’

Alfred sank down on the corner of the nearest trough and put his face in his hands.

‘Come,’ she said again, and tried to take one of his hands. It wasn’t the least bit cold. She touched the sleeve of the faerie shirt, which was already dry. After carrying the stool over, she sat down in front of him. ‘What happened?’ she asked, patting his knee lightly. His quick-drying trousers were as drenched as hers had been earlier.

Still with his head in his hands, Alfred gave a rasping breath, and said, ‘I think... I think I killed her.’

‘Who? Your aunt?’ she blurted out.

Alfred’s head snapped up. Without a sound, his mouth formed the word ‘aunt’.

‘Sorry! Sorry! I just found out Lillith is your mother’s sister. You know, the sister from the gravestone.’ Quietly, she told him what she’d learnt from her own mother. While she talked, Alfred stared at her with dull, lifeless eyes. It was a little unnerving that he didn’t say a word. ‘As soon as Mum’d told me, I came here. I knew it couldn’t possibly work, but I tried to call you through the tunnel.’

After a silent beat, he said, ‘I heard you.’

Saga waited, her hand still on his knee.

In slow motion, Alfred took two things out of his zippered pockets. The first was the water-sprite figurine, which he clutched so hard his knuckles stood out. The second, a pair of silver scissors, he dropped on the cave floor as if they’d bitten him. He swallowed hard. And then he told her what had happened, while he looked down at the figurine and stroked her hair with his thumb. Saga got the impression he was talking as much to the little woodcarving as to her.

‘You can’t have killed her simply by cutting off her hair,’ she said. ‘Weakened her maybe, but I’m sure she’s still alive.’

‘You really think so?’ He looked up at her, a glimmer of hope returning to his green eyes.

‘I really think so. And besides, you’re not the one who harmed her. Those nasty pixies!’

‘They live to spread chaos. I don’t think anyone can control them,’ Alfred said. ‘Except perhaps the faerie queen. Viola told me they’re her agents.’

‘And Amanita. Remember how fast they ran away when she told them to leave? Isn’t it odd that she gave you these...’ Saga prodded the scissors with one of her shoes. ‘They look exactly like the ones Little Mother uses. Don’t you think perhaps Amanita might’ve... I don’t know... put them up to it? Isn’t it strange that they were right there waiting for you to put Lillith to sleep?’

Saga wasn’t sure Alfred heard her; he was staring so hard at the water-sprite figurine. She didn’t want to directly accuse Amanita, but she was certain the high faerie had something to do with this.

Getting up, Alfred muttered, ‘Lillith only ever tried to get rid of me... Why? And why didn’t she tell me she’s my aunt?’

‘Maybe she didn’t try to get rid of you.’ Saga picked up the silver scissors. She’d been thinking about this while she’d waited. ‘Maybe she just tried to keep you away from Faerie... because it’s dangerous.’

Alfred shrugged. Her words hung in the air. Together, they left the shed and walked to the cottage. It had finally stopped raining.

While Alfred showered and got dressed into clean, non-faerie clothes, Saga stood in the kitchen by the wood-carved bat and bear. In a low voice, she talked to them, telling them she was worried about Alfred and asking them to look after him in the faerie realm. They didn’t react.

On the way home, she told Alfred how Mr Tumbleweed had helped her on the cone hill. To lighten the mood, she understated how bad the weather had been and made her expedition sound funnier and much less dangerous.

‘It was so stupid that the last pole slipped from my hands,’ she said. ‘But I think it landed outside the faerie fortress.’

That was the moment Alfred explained why he’d been worried about her. Why he was still worried about her. It really was Saga’s fault Farriel had been swallowed by the desolation, and he had no doubt the faeries would find that out. He told her how Viola and Outis thought the faerie queen would send either pixie agents, antlered guards, wolf beasts or perhaps all of them after Saga.

At his mention of the antlered wolves, a tremor of fear ran through her.

None of them ate or spoke much at dinner. Luckily, Poppy and Daisy competed about who'd had the best playdate, and Oliver wanted to discuss a machine idea with Dad, so no one noticed. As the middle of five children, Saga was sometimes overlooked. It often annoyed her, but this week it was an advantage.

'By the way, I talked to your granny earlier,' Mum said to Alfred. 'Her operation went well. She should be back home towards the end of the week. How about we visit her tomorrow? I'm taking the girls and two friends to the aquarium in the afternoon, but we could have an early supper and go afterwards.'

'I'd like that,' Alfred said. 'Thank you.'

After dinner, Saga wanted to discuss everything, but Alfred said he needed time to think. He went straight to Florian's room and closed the door. She sat by her desk for a couple of hours, writing down what had happened. A little after she'd brushed her teeth, Alfred knocked on her door.

'What's the matter? Can't sleep?' She got up to let him in, but he stayed standing in the door opening.

'Please stay home tomorrow,' he said. 'You can't go into the woods. Not until I find out what's happened to Farriel and if the queen is angry.'

Saga shook her head. She wasn't going to let the faeries chase her out of *her* forest. 'But what if I find a way to get to that last story pole?' She knew where there was another rope. If she tied them together, they might be long enough.

'It's too dangerous. Wait until I've talked to Amanita, and then we can do it together, if she thinks it's safe for you to go back. Please, Saga, please promise me you won't go to the woods alone.' Like Amanita when she made her faerie deals, Alfred held out his hand for her to shake. 'Promise me,' he repeated, fixing her with a green-eyed gaze that was anything but human.

'Really?' Saga stared back at him. 'You're really doing that?'

With one small action, he'd created a barrier between them. Extending his hand to bind her in a faerie deal, he'd shown Saga that he was a faerie, making it clear that she was not.

'And Mr Tumbleweed doesn't count,' he added.

'Alright. I won't go back alone.' Unsmiling, she shook his hand, feeling a slight and unpleasant jolt when their fingers touched. 'Mr Alf

*Rät.'*

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## *The Dying Stream*

Alfred cast sideways glances at Saga as they walked up the track from the farm the next morning. She was pushing her bike and planned on cycling onwards to the castle. They didn't speak. He knew she was annoyed that he'd forced her into a deal. But he was glad she'd agreed to stay out of the woods. He was worried enough about both her and Lillith already.

'Will you promise me something too?' Saga asked when they paused by Granny's garden gate. 'We don't have much time. Promise you'll search for the countess's son.'

'Okay, I will.' Trying to lighten the mood, he held out his hand. 'D'you want me to shake on it?'

That made her smile. She shook her head, but she still took his hand and gave it a squeeze. 'I honestly think Lillith is fine. It's just her hair, right?'

'I hope so.'

However, when he entered Granny's shed, that hope was extinguished. The stream's music sounded subdued and distant. The beautiful blue-green-turquoise colours of the water had faded into dull pastels.

It still felt good and refreshing, though, when he lay down in the spring and started swimming.

Further upstream, his fear for Lillith increased. Very few fish darted between the sparse patches of river weed. There was no water-sprite hair.

And gone was the taste of salt, of Lillith's tears.

There was no trace of his aunt. He still couldn't quite believe that Lillith and his mother were sisters. Beloved sisters. Yesterday, it had almost seemed like she loved him too. But why had she tried to hinder him or drag him into the river at every opportunity? Couldn't she simply have explained why he should stay away?

He scaled a small waterfall in three salmon-like leaps. At the top, he came out of the underground and into the weak light of the two moons. It was too late to stay away from Faerie now.

When he tried to call Lillith's name into the current, the only answer was a weak chorus from the fish, singing, '*Nereida's son called, called, called...*'

'Where's Lillith?' he sang to the fish.

They broke into a duet, with one group chanting, '*Where, where, where...*' and the other singing, '*Is she hiding? Is she tiding? Is she webbing? Is she ebbing?*'

'Just answer me!' he roared.

The river fell silent as a large shape slunk out from a small stream.

'Lillith?' Alfred asked, momentarily relieved. Then he realized the figure was too small to be a water sprite.

It was a fish. A huge catfish, like the woodcarving in Granny's cottage.

'Castor?' he asked.

'Well met,' Castor hummed. The sound was a deep vibration that reverberated in the water around them.

'Do you know where Lillith is?'

'No. But I taste her in the water still.'

'So she's alive?'

'Ebbing,' he hummed.

Ebbing. Did that mean she was dying?

Before he could ask, Castor said, 'Are you a candidate?'

'A candidate for what?'

'Her replacement.'

'What? No.' Alfred loved the river. But he couldn't live in the river and never leave.

'Then I must seek one elsewhere, or the stream itself will die,' Castor murmured, and swam back into the shadows.

‘Wait! Can’t she get well again?’

Castor didn’t reply, but Alfred heard a faint, ‘*Nereida and Applevale*,’ coming from further upriver. He swam, following the sound.

Where water from another small spring trickled into the river, the song rang clear.

The fish there sang,

*‘The star-crossed lovers swam out of luck, luck, luck.*

*This is the tale*

*Of Nereida and Applevale,*

*A love so great it makes us quiver,*

*It crossed between realms, like our river.’*

The melody resonated inside him, giving him goose pimples. The words warmed his heart. He knew by now that his parents’ love had been great, but hearing it here, where his mother had belonged, somehow made it more real.

To get a little respite, Alfred stayed in the spring. The fish there kept repeating the same five lines.

At the next junction, the fish chanted,

*‘With silver scissors she cut her hair short.*

*This is the tale*

*Of Nereida and Applevale,*

*A love so great it makes us quiver,*

*It crossed between realms, like our river.’*

Intrigued, wondering what star-crossed lovers swimming out of luck had to do with cutting hair, he chased the sounds to another stream, on the other side of the tree-trunk bridge, longing to hear the next verse.

‘*The human boy fell in the river, river, river,*’ the choir sang, and started the refrain.

If the ‘human boy’ was his dad, then that verse belonged much earlier in the song than the one about star-crossed lovers. Perhaps the one about cutting hair did too. Alfred realized that the verses were scattered in the streams, out of order. If he wanted to hear the whole song, he would have to swim through Nereida’s—and now Lillith’s—entire territory and

collect them. Only then would he be able to assemble the jigsaw and hear his parents' story.

He could listen while he searched for Lillith. But swimming to all the small springs high up on the hill and through all the streams to the lake might take days. And he didn't have days. Besides, he'd promised Saga to search for the countess's son, and a human boy definitely wouldn't be here underwater.

Alfred surfaced. Standing up in the stream, he surveyed the forest around him. Where would the faeries keep human children?

When he himself had believed he might be a changeling, he'd always imagined his faerie parents lived in a small hut in the woods. But he hadn't seen any huts in Faerie.

From under dark, dense branches, two pairs of yellow eyes stared back at him. A long pale snout opened. Sharp canines reflected the moonlight.

'Honey!' a familiar bass voice called behind him.

At the sound, the dark branches rustles. The yellow eyes disappeared.

Alfred turned and saw the huge bear-like creature trample towards him from the hedge around the royal gardens.

'Bjørn!' He climbed the river bank and was swept up in a crushing bear-hug. Taking a deep breath, Alfred inhaled the flowery scent of the embroidered roses on Bjørn's hairy coat. The good-natured bear was his favourite shapeshifter.

'You okay, honey?' Bjørn still held on to Alfred's shoulders and looked down on him with warmth in his brown eyes. 'I smell you with that high faerie all the time. The one that smells funny. What is it she's calling herself? Death-cap?'

'Amanita?'

'That's the one. What're you doing out here?'

'I'm looking for the children who've been stolen by faeries.'

'They're waiting for you in the gardens.'

'Not them,' Alfred said, realizing Bjørn thought he meant the other demi-fae. 'Human children.'

'Pure-blooded human children?' Bjørn scratched his snout. 'I've never smelt any of those.'

'So there isn't one of them in a hut somewhere in the forest?'

'What hut?'

‘Never mind. Saga’s certain there’s a human child here who we have to find. Can you help? See what you can sniff out?’

‘Anything for darling Saga,’ Bjørn said. ‘But if they are anywhere, they must be dancing with the other humans—too many human odours are wafting down from that ballroom to tell their age. Or in the dungeons. Come to think of it, I once smelt a human child in those dank cells...’

After another hug, Alfred swam on into the gardens. He knew Bjørn’s sense of smell was exceptional. Surely that meant the human child couldn’t be in the forest. The boy had to be somewhere inside the fortress.

He’d intended to swim as close to the fortress as possible, but suddenly something held him back. Perhaps his shirt had snagged on a tree branch, he thought. But groping for the shoulder straps to release whatever it was, he touched a slender hand. Before he could react, the hand lifted him out of the water.



## *An Unlikely Accomplice*

Saga stood by the garden gate, holding the handlebars of her bike and watching Alfred until he disappeared into the shed. She hadn't been able to stay angry with him, but she was annoyed she couldn't go to the forest because of a stupid handshake. She knew the woods, and Mr Tumbleweed was by her side. What could possibly happen?

'I was actually trying to help the faeries when I dropped that pole,' she said to the tree sprite who huddled in her basket. 'It's not like I sent Ariel or whatever her name is into the desolation on purpose. What do you think? Will the queen really come after me?'

Mr Tumbleweed's creaking voice quavered a little when he said, 'This one body does not know. But if her queenly body does come after somebody, that somebody will want to be nobody.'

'Very helpful,' Saga muttered.

'Somebody is also bound by a faerie deal.'

'And you're going to enforce that? Are you in some kind of faerie pact with Nemo now?'

In a huff, he covered himself with the fleece blanket she'd brought.

Although it didn't rain, the day was cool and windy. It would be cold and boring to sit on top of the castle garden wall, hoping and waiting all day for the countess to appear. What would Alfred do if she broke the promise?

'The countess is definitely not going to be in the garden until the sun comes out...' She shuddered and zipped her jacket all the way up. 'I'll

get everything ready for tomorrow first, okay?’

One of the tree sprite’s legs twitched before he tugged it under the blanket.

‘Just go on sulking,’ she said, as she rolled back to the farm. Leaving Mr Tumbleweed and her bike behind the barn, she went inside to search for more rope.

But when she sneaked past the old machinery to where she’d hidden the rucksack, she found Oliver. He’d taken all the aluminium poles out and laid them on the floor. And now he stood bent over them, holding out one of the coloured streamers that had been flying from their tops.

‘Hey, that’s my stuff.’

‘More like the county’s.’ Oliver turned and took his phone out of his back pocket. ‘I know exactly where you got these.’ He opened a video clip, pressed play and held it right in front of her nose. The clip was from the cavern opening and included a flyover shot of the viewpoint and the cone hill with the story poles and their streamers flapping in the wind. ‘Do you deny it?’

‘No.’ With that video, denial was pointless.

‘What are you and Alfred up to, Lily?’ he asked with narrowed eyes.

Saga folded her arms and pressed her lips together.

‘Beats me how you got them all down, even though I found this.’ He held up Florian’s climbing harness. ‘Is Alfred good at climbing, despite his—’

‘Alfred wasn’t there,’ she hissed, interrupting him, because she couldn’t bear for Oliver to say anything about Alfred’s limb length discrepancy. It wasn’t the smartest move, because it intrigued Oliver further.

‘Don’t tell me you climbed up to the ruins alone, because I won’t believe that in a hundred years. It’s clear from the video that the trail hasn’t been repaired after the rockfall. And the weather yesterday was horrible...’

‘You’d better believe it,’ she said, rising, as usual, to his challenge. It would’ve been wiser if she’d just let him think she’d had help.

‘How?’

‘If you must know, there’s a narrow ledge—’

‘Not all the way. I was up there with Florian this summer and we had to turn back. I think... I think, unless you want me to tell Mum and Dad,

you'll have to show me how you did it.'

'Argh! Why are you so annoying?' Saga wanted to punch him, although given that he was ten times stronger than her, that never ended well. Why did everyone else think they knew what she could and couldn't do? 'We only have one climbing harness.'

'Says who? I have one too.'

'Don't you have to study or do some enormously important grown-up stuff?' she asked, trying to convey with her voice just how ridiculous she found him and his almost-adult self-importance. But while she spoke she had an idea.

If Oliver insisted on coming with her, she wouldn't be going into the woods on her own. She wouldn't be breaking her deal with Alfred. Like it was meant to be, her brother already wore a jumper in a crimson, faerie-detering red.

'No,' he said. 'Not unless you agree that babysitting you on a hike is important grown-up stuff.'

'Okay. I agree,' she said, smiling inwardly at his baffled expression. 'But only if we go now. And only if you stop calling me Lily.'

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*Raised by Faeries*

Whoever lifted Alfred out of the water dropped him unceremoniously on the ground. He scrambled to his feet to the sound of applause.

In a circle around him stood Amanita and the clusters of demi-fae. And they were all clapping.

‘It is an odd custom, this loud slapping of one’s own hands,’ Amanita said, over the steady rhythm. ‘Humans use it to show they are impressed by someone or something, and you all need to know that when you are infiltrating their society,’ she added, once the applause died down. ‘And we are truly impressed by what you have accomplished, Nemo. By how cleverly you defeated the water sprite.’

‘But Li—... she isn’t dead, is she?’ he asked.

‘We should be so lucky,’ Amanita answered.

Uniko held a hand up for a high-five, but clasped Alfred’s hand when their palms touched. Several of the older demi-fae patted him on the top of his shoulders with the tips of their fingers, in a way no human would. He didn’t correct any of them. It was the gesture that counted. And he hoped other humans would notice these oddities too and be on their guard. Especially if the demi-fae brought trained moths with them out of the realm.

‘Is Farriel back?’ he asked.

Amanita’s lips tightened. At the top of her hair, the three butterfly faeries shook their tiny heads.

Outis leant close and whispered, ‘Is your human friend still alive?’

Alfred gulped back his fear for Saga, as the others crowded him. They wanted to hear how he'd vanquished the terrible water monster. He told them the truth, that he hadn't done more than a simple sleep enchantment and cut off a few strands. And that it was the pixies who had defeated her, by snipping off all her hair.

'So that's what you were talking to Little Mother and Little Father about in there.' Viola pointed at the bush Lillith had tried to drag him through. 'You were planning this all along...'

'That's cunning worthy of a high faerie,' Kaleido said. 'The water sprite can't even blame you.'

'She was the only creature that was completely outside the queen's control,' someone mentioned.

'When Little Father and Little Mother tell the queen what you've done, she might grant you an audience.'

A sigh went through the group.

Standing here, in the midst of a group of half-faeries like himself, with everyone praising him, Alfred should've felt proud and happy. Instead he felt sick. Sick of what he'd done. Lillith might not blame him, but he blamed himself.

It also made him uneasy that they celebrated another creature's demise. Like him, they might be half-human, but unlike him, they'd been raised by faeries. And they seemed to lack something essentially human.

Wary, he decided that he couldn't trust them—not even Viola and Uniko.

As if she could sense his discomfort, Amanita said, 'That is enough. Give Nemo a little space. The rest of you, follow Kaleido.'

Amanita put a hand on his shoulder. 'Forget the water sprite. She was merely your mother's less worthy half-sister, you know, and all too keen to take over Nereida's territory.'

'You knew they were sisters?'

'Half-sisters.'

Fleeting, Alfred wondered if he should ask the faerie what else she knew of his mother's family. But he trusted her even less than the demi-fae. 'Did you know what Little Mother and Little Father would do once I'd put her to sleep?' he said instead.

'I am not sure what you are implying.'

‘It’s only... Saga thought it was strange you gave me the exact same scissors as the ones the pixies have.’

‘Saga thought that, did she?’ The butterfly faeries in Amanita’s hair quivered. One covered its eyes, another its ears and the third its mouth. ‘First she caused Farriel to vanish in the desolation. Perhaps that could be considered an accident. But this undermining suspicion... That little girl is interfering too much in our affairs.’

‘She isn’t... She didn’t... She healed the desolation. She can do it again as soon as it’s safe for her to go back.’

‘Nowhere is safe for meddlers.’ Amanita swept away, leaving him by the stream.

‘Not here,’ a screeching voice said from inside the nearest bush of night flowers.

‘Not there. Meddlers will be sorry!’ A green-chequered scarf moved out from behind the greyscale leaves. Little Mother ran after Little Father towards the stream.

Trying to catch them, Alfred flung himself down on the ground, arms outstretched.

Effortlessly, the pixies sprang, giggling, outside his reach. They stopped to look back at where he lay on his stomach, like a stranded fish, and stuck their tongues out.

‘You’re the ones who should be sorry,’ Alfred cried. ‘Why did you cut off the water-sprite’s hair?’

‘Why is he asking?’ Little Father said, looking at Little Mother.

‘Yes, he’s asking “why”, Little Father.’

‘But why?’ Little Father looked baffled, as if they’d never been questioned about their motives before. They stood immediately in front of the stream, deep in their absurd discussion.

While they were distracted, Alfred shuffled his legs up under himself. He pressed his palms into the ground, creating tension. He didn’t really have a plan beyond wanting to shove them in the water.

‘Why “why”?’ Little Mother asked.

Alfred pushed off with his left leg. What he’d imagined as a giant frog-leap was much more a caterpillar-crawl. In a kind of slow-motion he saw how the pixies looked mildly surprised at his strange movement before they turned and strolled away. They leapt over the stream while he got to his feet. Even though he knew he wouldn’t catch them, he chased

them along the stream up through the garden, until they vanished between the ever-growing pulsating creepers of the hedge.

He was trying to find a gap in the pale dense greenery when he heard a snuffle.

‘That you, honey?’ Bjørn murmured. The hedge rustled and twigs broke, as his large furry hand forced its way through. Alfred smoothed an embroidered bee on the hairy coat sleeve and squeezed the shapeshifter’s hand. Bjørn squeezed back so hard Alfred got tears in his eyes.

‘I’m trying to catch the pixies. Can you see them?’

‘I caught their stench a moment ago, but it’s gone.’

‘Gone? I thought you could smell things from miles away.’

‘Only in the same realm,’ Bjørn answered with a huff. ‘How did Evie explain it... “The troublesome things can slip through every little tear in the fabric of the universe,”’ he said, enunciating every syllable in a fairly good imitation of the eagle shapeshifter. ‘Or something like that.’

‘Figures,’ Alfred muttered. No wonder the little people caused so many problems in both worlds.

‘Nemo,’ Viola called, walking towards him. ‘What’re you doing over there? Are you talking to the queen’s pixie agents?’

‘No! I’m coming,’ Alfred called back. Before he let go, Bjørn gave his hand another crushing squeeze.

Little Mother had said meddlers would be sorry. Did she know Amanita had been talking about Saga? Alfred really hoped Saga honoured their agreement and stayed far away from the forest.



## *Mr Tumbleweed's Revelation*

Saga and Oliver parked their bicycles by the half-full cavern car park and hiked up into the woods. The sun still wasn't out, and the chilly wind cut through any gaps in clothing. Very few of the cavern visitors were exploring the forest trails.

'Did you have to bring that toad?' Oliver stalked in front—he knew the way as well as her, and his legs were longer. 'He's slowing us down.'

Saga didn't answer. She was on the lookout for pixies and frightening faerie beasts, while simultaneously trying to block out Mr Tumbleweed's mutterings. For once, he agreed with Alfred about the danger, and he jumped along behind her, foreseeing a lifetime in the faerie dungeons.

When they reached the barrier by the steep cone-hill trail, Oliver looked from the danger sign to Saga and shook his head, while they both put on the climbing harnesses. The ascent was an entirely different experience without the rainstorm, and they quickly came to the gap in the trail.

'You can't have crossed here,' Oliver said. 'The ledge perhaps, but not that gap. I don't know what you did, and who took those story poles down for you, but you're having me on. Ha ha! We can go back now.'

'No!' Saga hadn't come this close to the last metal pole only to turn around without at least trying to retrieve it. She had to be able to move freely in the woods, and of course she wanted to repair the damage she'd caused. A little quieter she said, 'Just go home. There's something I need to do.'

‘As if. You do need an adult babysitter, if you’re so much as considering crossing here.’

‘I don’t need you. And I told you already that I crossed yesterday. Twice!’ She grabbed the knot with the carabiner that kept the steel wire taut. ‘Who do you think made this?’

‘Show me how you did it then.’

Saga bit her lip. ‘You know how I’ve always said Mr Tumbleweed isn’t really a toad?’

Oliver sighed. ‘Am I about to hear one of your faerie stories?’

‘I’m about to prove—’

‘Somebody is getting this one body in trouble.’ Mr Tumbleweed grumbled behind her.

‘That he’s a very special toad,’ Saga said, deciding not to mention faeries unless it became absolutely necessary. ‘A very strong toad.’

‘Please,’ she whispered to the tree sprite. ‘Do what you did yesterday. Or those faerie threats will keep us out of our forest.’

Mr Tumbleweed shook his head and mumbled something about dungeons.

‘Please,’ she whispered again. ‘Every slice of cake I get, I’ll save for you.’

Despite the temptation, the tree sprite kept shaking his head.

Saga didn’t mean to threaten him, but she was getting desperate. ‘If you don’t do it, I’ll never feed you cake ever again!’

He stilled, his black button eyes staring at her.

‘No chocolate brownies, no blueberry muffins, no lemon drizzle cake with icing...’

Mr Tumbleweed’s gaze remained furious, while he licked his gash-like mouth.

‘Why are you mumbling about cake?’ Oliver asked.

‘No red velvet birthday cake with extra frosting on top,’ Saga continued, hoping she wasn’t risking her friendship with the tree sprite for nothing. ‘No apple—’

After a deep guttural sound, like an angry dog’s growl, Mr Tumbleweed jumped over the heads of Saga and Oliver. He landed on the other side of the gap, grew roots from his feet and shoots from his fingers, making a bridge.

‘Whoa!’ Oliver said.

Saga wondered exactly what he saw. 'Yeah. Let me go first.' With her carabiner attached for safety, she prepared to step onto Mr Tumbleweed.

'No, wait. Don't. A toad can't carry your weight.'

Saga ignored him and crossed the twiggy bridge. Upon reaching the other side, she turned and smiled.

Oliver gaped at her.

'What's the trick?' he asked while sliding his feet along the ledge. 'Did Alfred's dad construct some kind of transparent bridge?'

Unlike Saga, Oliver had climbing experience, and he trusted the harness. At the end of the ledge, he crouched and leant back, the strap from the carabiner taut. He felt around in the empty air by Mr Tumbleweed's hands.

'There's nothing here,' he said and shuddered when he accidentally touched what to him must look like a strung-out amphibian.

'Tell that somebody to get a move on,' Mr Tumbleweed said. 'Or this one body—'

'Can you let him see you?' Saga asked.

'If some nasty faerie body discovers—'

'Please, there's no one here.'

'Who are you talking to?' Oliver pulled himself up to standing.

'It's a trick,' Saga said. 'A faerie trick.'

Oliver opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. He stared down at Mr Tumbleweed, who must've removed his glamour disguise.

'Hurry up!'

To Oliver's credit, he didn't ask questions but gingerly stepped out onto the twig bridge.

'Now, do you believe he's a faerie creature?' she said, when Oliver stood next to her. Without waiting for an answer, she marched on, followed by her shell-shocked brother.

From behind, Mr Tumbleweed grumbled loudly about 'bad somethings' happening.

*Eagle Flight*

By the stream in the royal gardens, there was a flurry of activity, like at a busy bus station. Clusters of demi-fae were set down by their eagles as others left.

Alfred positioned himself next to Uniko, who was singing, getting ready for his eagle lift. Viola, who stood on Uniko's other side, leant forward to speak to Alfred.

'I made Kaleido fall asleep. It was an accident, but still. None of the others found anything bigger than a butterfly faerie to enchant. Except you, of course.'

'Except you, of course,' Outis repeated in a mocking tone before he spread his feathers. He beat his wings, whipping dust up into Alfred's face.

Unlike the eagles, who took the most direct route, Outis swooped and somersaulted in the air, before he disappeared out of sight. Alfred loved swimming, but in that moment he wished he could fly.

With the stream's music muted, the ethereal tunes from the ballroom chimed over the gardens. He surveyed the fortress. Somewhere in the middle, he could see the banister of the courtyard terrace. Above the terrace, ten rows of glassless glamour-made windows reflected the light of the two moons. Silvery brightness radiated from the top floor. That was where he must go. And Duke had already told him how to get there. Perhaps it wasn't even difficult.

Viola whooped, at the same time as Alfred felt a familiar yank on his shoulder straps. The first powerful wingbeats made him rise from the ground in rhythmic jerks.

‘That you, Emmett?’ he asked.

The eagle screeched in assent.

‘Can you fly me to the ballroom?’

A short while later, soaring above the courtyard, the eagle rose close to the fortress walls.

Alfred tried to see inside the lower floors of the building, but the enchanted windows all just cast back the moonlight. As they neared the top, the volume of the eternal music increased.

An elaborately carved ceiling came into view first. Then Alfred could see part of the grand ballroom. Silver glowing chandeliers cast shadow stripes from stone columns onto its walls. Further inside, dark shapes were moving and swaying. Human-like dark shapes. Dancers. Were some of them children?

From below, Viola yelled, ‘Nemo, where’re you going?’

‘Can you get me to that window ledge, Emmett?’ he asked, pointing to the nearest opening, then shouted, ‘I’ll be right there!’

He shouldn’t have raised his voice.

A faerie appeared in the window opening, and it wasn’t just one of the antlered guards. This was a high faerie. His long pale hands held a strung arrow on a longbow.

‘Come to dance, half-human?’ he said, smirking, one brow arching up to his cropped grey hair.

Before Alfred could answer, the faerie let his arrow fly.

Emmett nosedived. The shift in direction swung Alfred horizontal. Rushing air made his eyes water. The fortress blurred with the surroundings. With a whoosh, the arrow shot past his ear. Emmett pulled out of the dive and Alfred slammed forward then rocked back again. After wiping his eyes on his sleeve, he glanced nervously at Emmett’s claws from where he dangled, hoping the eagle wouldn’t lose his grip.

Above, the faerie chortled with glee.

A butterfly faerie like Duke might be able to fly up to the ballroom unnoticed. Not an eagle creature. Somehow Alfred would have to find another way to the top of the fortress.



## *The Nasty Nobodies*

Saga strode up the trail until they were above the place where, far below, the last piece of story pole stabbed into the earth. If it wasn't for all the sharp-edged rocks that stuck out of the ground, and the cliff that dropped off on the other side of the pole, it would've been the perfect hillside to roll down.

While uncoiling the two ropes she'd already bound together, she imagined the balcony Alfred had told her about, trying to visualize a balustrade beyond the desolation she'd caused.

'What's it... he doing?' Oliver asked quietly, speaking for the first time since he'd seen Mr Tumbleweed.

Mr Tumbleweed croaked, 'I'll show him.'

'Wow,' Oliver said, as Mr Tumbleweed grew roots, fixing himself in place on the rocky path. 'And what're you doing?'

'Just wait there. I'm getting that last bit of metal pole.' She fastened one end of the rope around Mr Tumbleweed's middle and the other to her harness.

'Are you abseiling without a belay?'

'Er, yes,' Saga said, although she had no idea what he was talking about.

'Do you know nothing about climbing safety?'

'No, I don't, and we don't have time for one of your lectures right now.' Here he was again—the change to her overbearing brother had been short-lived.

‘I’m not... I just want to help. Belaying will keep you secured.’ Gingerly, as if he was scared to come into contact with the tree sprite, Oliver untied the rope. Within moments, he’d tied hitch knots to two carabiners and wound the rope twice around Mr Tumbleweed, who was scowling at the safety clips.

‘Don’t let those touch him,’ Saga said. ‘He’s allergic to metal.’

‘They won’t. You take them. Or I can do it.’

Saga shook her head.

‘Okay. To extend the rope you let it slide through the belay loop. Go backwards.’ He gave her a gentle push—probably the gentlest push he’d ever given her. ‘And pull the rope down behind you to create friction and brake.’

Saga tried. The knot held. ‘Thanks,’ she said as she made her way down between the rocks and boulders, gradually releasing the rope so it stayed taut.

‘Shout when you need me to pull.’ Oliver stood, holding on to the rope’s other end, as if he didn’t quite trust Mr Tumbleweed to bear her weight.

When she made it to the pole, Saga wiggled out its iron tip. She hadn’t thought to bring dandelions today, so she just brushed soil into the hole and patted it flat.

‘Pull,’ Saga shouted, and the rope tugged at her harness as Oliver dragged her upwards.

‘Li—Saga!’ Oliver called with alarm in his voice, when she was about halfway. ‘Hedgehogs are attacking your... your toad’s roots. Shoo! Shoo!’

‘Nasty nobodies,’ Mr Tumbleweed screeched.

‘Kick them!’ Saga yelled.

‘I can’t kick hedgehogs! That’s cruel.’

‘They’re. Not. Hedgehogs,’ Saga gasped, hurrying uphill, finding footholds on the boulders that lay scattered down the hillside. She pulled herself up on the rope.

Saga was out of breath when she came close enough to see the pixies. Little Mother was snapping at Mr Tumbleweed’s roots with her silver scissors, while Little Father pierced them with a long needle. One of the tree sprite’s feet was already untethered.

Oliver nudged Little Father with his hiking boot, and the pixie stabbed his ankle.

‘Ouch! It bit me!’ Oliver stepped back, but held on to the rope.

With an immense effort, Saga charged uphill. Like a warrior with a sword, she swung the iron-tipped pole at the little people.

Nimble-footed, they sprang out of the way. Mr Tumbleweed didn’t—rooted to the ground, he couldn’t—and she hit the smallest twigs on his still-anchored foot. Emitting a high-pitched scream, like the squeal of emergency brakes, the tree sprite sank down in a quivering kindling heap.

‘The human girl will be sorry now!’ Little Mother screeched, as the pixies disappeared into a burrow.

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## *A Faerie Child*

When Emmett the eagle set him down, Alfred wobbled, unsteady on his feet. He was trying to think of an explanation for what he'd been doing outside the ballroom, when he noticed the others weren't looking at him.

Like a gargoyle, Outis stood statue-still on the top rail of the balustrade. Viola and Uniko were staring in the same direction, at something behind Alfred. He swung round to see what had prevented them all from witnessing his narrow escape from the faerie's arrow above.

'The desolation,' Outis muttered. 'It's gone.'

A short distance away, where the column of blackness had been, lay what mostly resembled a pile of discarded clothes. Above it a dissipating haze swirled.

'Is that...' Viola took a single step forward. 'Can that be Farriel?'

'It's not like we've ever seen her.' Outis beat his wings once and glided over the still figure. 'It's a high faerie,' he said upon his return.

Uniko hummed a little tune, summoning a flutter of the white butterfly faeries. After his murmured explanation, they dispersed to find Amanita.

Hesitantly, Alfred approached with the others.

The faerie lay curled up in foetal position. Torn strips of her tattered green dress flapped in the breeze. Her skin was a pale grey, her lips blue and her hair snow white. Most surprising was the fact that she wasn't

taller than any of them and looked like a child. Was this Farriel's true form?

'Is she breathing?' Viola whispered.

Alfred crouched. He held a hand above the faerie's bluish lips. A faint, cool airflow from her nostrils made him shiver. 'I think so.'

He was still crouching by Farriel when Amanita appeared in the courtyard, followed by Kaleido, the boy with floor-length hair and several others. The high faerie rushed to Farriel's side, not gliding as usual, but running. Cradling the still figure's pale cheeks in her hands, she turned Farriel's head slightly, so it faced hers. After muttering something under her breath, she exhaled, blowing on the bluish lips. Slowly their colour changed to a pale pink.

Farriel's eyes blinked open. She looked up at Amanita and whispered a single word, before her eyelids closed again.

Next to him, Amanita seemed to freeze for a split second. Then she gently let go of Farriel and stood up.

'Find the healers,' she said. All the butterfly faeries in her hair took off at once and in different directions.

Alfred stretched out of his crouch and stood huddled together with his clustermates, the other demi-fae forming their own groups. After Amanita waved a hand over Farriel, the tattered dress mended itself. And, as if Farriel grew older before their eyes, her body and face became that of an ageless female high faerie. She shimmered for an instant, as Amanita's glamour settled.

'You will not talk about Farriel's appearance to anyone.' Amanita's dark gaze swept over them.

As one, they nodded.

When a group of high faeries turned up, Amanita strode ahead of them into the fortress. Without touching Farriel, the healers raised her up from the ground and carried her from the courtyard on a cushion of empty air between their outstretched hands.

'So no more glamour lessons,' Outis said.

'Aren't there other teachers?' Alfred asked. 'Like for the faerie children.'

'Faerie children?' Outis looked at him as if he was stupid. 'You mean pure-blooded high-faerie children?'

'Er... yeah.'

‘I’ve never seen any,’ Viola said. ‘Perhaps they’re somewhere—’

‘Do you honestly think they’d bother teaching us if there were any high-faerie offspring anywhere?’ Outis rolled his eyes.

‘I don’t know,’ Alfred replied. Come to think of it, the only youngsters he’d seen in Faerie were the demi-fae. Though he hadn’t seen many adult high faeries either, he’d assumed they and their children lived elsewhere inside the towering fortress.

‘They might,’ Viola said.

‘What about Farriel?’ Alfred asked. ‘She’s a child, isn’t she?’ Perhaps not a young child—after all, she was their teacher—but she definitely wasn’t a grown-up faerie. And how did the lack of high-faerie children fit with what he’d just overheard Farriel say to Amanita?

‘Didn’t you listen?’ Outis said. ‘We’re not to talk about what we saw.’

‘How about human children?’

‘Apart from you?’ Outis asked.

Alfred ignored the jibe.

‘I’ve never seen any. Have you?’ Viola asked the group.

Uniko and Outis shook their heads.

‘Was this your human friend’s doing too?’ Uniko asked.

‘I don’t know,’ Alfred said, a lump of lead sinking in his stomach. If Saga had healed this latest spot of desolation, then she’d broken her promise and gone into the woods.

Either way, he had a job to do and time was running out. He glanced down at his watch. Behind the foggy glass, the arms were stuck at a little after five o’clock. He was certain it wasn’t that late. Then he understood what must’ve happened. The old watch hadn’t been waterproof. It must have stopped when he dived into the river, preserving the exact minute he’d cut Lillith’s hair. He hadn’t noticed that yesterday, and it hadn’t even registered this morning when he wound up the mechanism, barely awake. So only now did he realize that he’d lost his way of keeping track of time.

But whatever the time, he needed to find that kidnapped human child.

Kaleido sidled up to him, and asked quietly, ‘You were so close to Farriel, you must’ve heard what she said...’

Alfred shook his head, although he had heard the single word Farriel had spoken, after Amanita revived her lifeless body. Farriel had looked up at Amanita and whispered, ‘Mother.’

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## *A Brother in Arms*

‘**W**hat kind of hedgehogs...’ Oliver began. ‘They’re not hedgehogs!’ Saga thrust the piece of story pole into his hand, saying, ‘Hit them if they come back.’ Then she untangled Mr Tumbleweed and inspected his foot, while murmuring, ‘I’m sorry,’ over and over again.

A black burn-mark crossed his twiggy toes. After she poured water from her bottle over them, he calmed down, though a brittle burnt patch on his foot crumbled into ash.

‘Were those hedgehogs really faeries?’ Oliver asked, his pitch higher than usual.

‘Yes.’ Saga wished she could enjoy the moment, because she’d never seen Oliver look so insecure. ‘I’ll tell you more, but first we need to get away from here, because they are the most spiteful pixies.’

The siblings didn’t speak on the way down to the gap in the trail. Once there, Saga asked Mr Tumbleweed if the little people were close.

‘No nasty nobodies nearby.’ He stretched out between the trail and the ledge. Where his burnt foot grew roots, fine black dust settled on the rock.

‘What’s he saying?’ Oliver fiddled with the straps of his harness. ‘If we fall down here...’

‘I know. Just hurry up.’ She held the metal pole ready to combat the pixies, while Oliver crossed the twig bridge, then fastened it on her backpack and traversed the ledge.

Further down, where the trail widened and they didn't need to hook in their carabiners any more, Oliver found his voice. 'Wow!' he said. 'I had no idea all your stories were actually true... I can't believe you're so cool about all this.'

For the first time in her whole life, it seemed she'd impressed her big brother.

'Those hedgehogs, they were not like your toad, right? How many different kinds of faeries are there? And how many have you seen? And where?' he asked, continuing with other fact-based questions.

It was the kind of data Saga had been collecting in her notebook, which made her wonder if she and Oliver were more similar than she'd thought.

Although she knew she ought to wait until they were home, she told him everything he wanted to know. Seeing Oliver's eyes light up with wonder kindled a warm glow inside her. It gave Saga a taste of how she'd feel if she became a well-known faerie-realm expert.

'They are the most extraordinary creatures,' she said in her best David Attenborough impersonation.

Soon they were walking among the trees on the plateau below the cone hill.

'Somebody should shut up,' Mr Tumbleweed groaned. 'If ordinary human nobodies know about faerie somebodies, nobody, including this one body, can predict what the faerie somebodies will do.'

'I doubt it can get any worse,' Saga replied. To Oliver, she said, 'We'd better be quiet until we're out of the woods.'

'For real, or is that a metaphor?' He grinned, which showed that she still hadn't told him nearly enough about how fearsome and vicious some faeries could be.

'Both,' she answered, with a small smile. It was nice that Oliver knew and could talk with her about faeries. After this experience, they were brother and sister in arms. Perhaps they might even become friends.



## *The Heart of the Fortress*

Talking about Farriel—how lucky it was that she’d escaped the desolation and when she might be fit to teach them again—the demi-fae headed into the fortress. Alfred kept quiet and hung back. He stilled his breath, focusing on becoming unnoticeable, and hoped they’d forget he was there. He needed to find a staircase up to the ballroom or down to the dungeons.

Inside, in the long corridor, he stopped and waited as the sound of his clustermates’ voices receded. He’d only ever seen the space in a blur, rushing to get to one of Farriel’s lessons. Now he took time to inspect its walls and ceiling.

It was like being inside a trellis tunnel of plants. Grey, stone plants. Gnarly roots snaked across the uneven floor. Branches climbed the walls and tangled together above his head. Spun gossamer webs interlaced their twigs. The whole structure creaked, as nearby leaves shifted ever so slightly. Were the petrified plants still growing?

The corridor curved in the round fortress, so the only visible openings were the exit to the balcony behind him, and, further along, the doorways to the two rooms he knew. Still holding his breath, Alfred inched forward, passing the reception room and the demi-fae den with its enormous tree. Murmured voices reached him from the swaying hammocks, but no one noticed him.

As he followed the corridor, he searched the plant-covered walls for anything that was out of place. When knots on trees transformed into the

queen's fork-tongued spies, he got down on all fours and crawled under their long reptilian tongues. He passed many rooms towards the outside of the fortress. They were empty, except for petrified trees and carved-stone decorations. Without finding a staircase, he reached the end of the corridor, where it emerged at the other side of the courtyard balcony. He'd circled the entire fortress and not seen a single door that led into its heart.

So, on his way back, he focused his attention on the doorless inside wall. On the trunk of a particularly ancient looking tree, he spotted a strange protruding knot. At first he thought it might be one of the queen's spies.

When no eyes opened and no forked tongue appeared, he pressed the knot. It yielded at the slightest touch and sank into the trunk's grooved bark. As if he had chopped at the knot with an axe, the trunk split all the way to the floor. The crack spread upwards. The old tree groaned. The fissure grew wider and wider at the bottom, until it formed a triangular opening twice Alfred's height. An opening into a dimly lit hallway.

Taking care not to touch the trunk, Alfred stepped through the opening. In the velvety shadows, he could make out a set of elaborately decorated double doors that barred off the end of the hallway. One of the doors stood ajar, letting a sliver of cold silvery light into the dim space. As he neared the doors, he heard a murmur of voices.

Refocusing his glamour shield, Alfred stilled his breath, before he leant against the open door and peeked through the gap. A staircase spiralled down into a grand, silvery-bright lit room. More high faeries than he'd ever seen stood scattered around tables piled with a feast of steaming terrines and fountains of amber liquid.

Then, as one, they all stopped talking and bowed low.

A procession of high faeries glided through the room. The figure in their midst was shrouded by shimmering glamour. Could that be the queen? From this distance, he couldn't see if Amanita was one of the surrounding willowy faeries.

Alfred was leaning against the door, meaning to open it further, when he was grabbed from behind.

A low yelp escaped his mouth.

Whoever held on to his shoulder shushed him. 'Hide!' the other person—it sounded like Uniko—whispered, pulling him backwards

towards the triangular opening.

But before they'd retreated more than a few steps, the double doors were flung open. Two antlered guards stood silhouetted in the lit-up doorway.

With great effort, Alfred stilled his breath and leant into the carved plants, trying to merge every part of himself with the grey climbing vines.

'Who's there?' one of the guards called. His antlers were stumps, broken off after their first branching.

'We'll catch you.' The other guard trod out into the gloomy hallway, his hooves clapping on the stone floor. He swept a long wooden staff along the wall, searching for invisible trespassers.

Uniko's hand on Alfred's arm tightened its grip, as the guard approached.

Then, across from them in the hallway, Viola cast off her glamour shield and stepped out in front of the guard. Her eyes gleamed.

'You again,' the guard said.

'Please, can I just watch for a little bit?' Viola smiled with her many pointy teeth.

'You know the rules. Get back to the other half-humans.' The guards returned to the bright hall and shut the double doors with a dull, echoing thud, plunging the hallway into darkness.

'It's so unfair, I want to see the queen,' Viola said. 'Why didn't you tell us you were trying to get down to the throne room, Nemo? If we'd planned this, we could've gotten past those oafs.'

Alfred shrugged. He'd definitely not been trying to find the throne room.

'It's best to keep away from here.' Uniko led Alfred back to the corridor.

Viola took his other arm. 'We didn't know you were going to stay overnight.'

'I'm not.' Was it so late? With his watch dead, Alfred had no idea. 'I... er... I thought I could get down to the dungeons and leave that way,' he mumbled, not wanting to tell them what he'd been up to.

'You can't, but I can sing down an eagle,' Uniko said.

All the way back to the balcony, Viola tried to get Alfred to stay. He was tempted to do so. It would give him a chance to explore and search

for the human child. And, perhaps, after they'd just rescued him and with their knowledge of the fortress, he might even trust Viola and Uniko enough to ask for their help.

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## *The Heroic Knight*

Saga and Oliver hiked down through the forest in companionable silence. Oliver kept glancing at Mr Tumbleweed, smiling and shaking his head, as if he still couldn't quite believe faeries were real. There had been no trace of the vicious pixies since the incident on the cone hill, and Saga was beginning to relax.

While she stopped to retie one of her shoelaces, Oliver strode ahead. By her side, Mr Tumbleweed gasped and every twig in his body started quivering.

'Where are they?' Saga said, taking the tree sprite into her arms and scanning the nearest trees for the little people. Mr Tumbleweed was shaking so much she couldn't understand his rattling.

'Wait,' she called after Oliver, but it was already too late.

He was standing in front of Amanita.

Saga let go of Mr Tumbleweed, saying, 'Sorry. Stay here,' and hurried to her brother's side.

'Ah, the invisible girl!' Amanita smiled. Her hair, plaited with flowers and butterfly faeries, and a scattering of freckle-like dots on her nose made her look young like a faerie maiden. 'And who is this enchanting human?'

'I'm—'

'My brother.' Saga elbowed Oliver. 'Don't tell her your name!'

Amanita tittered that tinkling-bell sound. But her bottomless eyes glared at Saga.

‘Look,’ Saga said. ‘I’m sorry I dropped a pole and a faerie disappeared in the desolation, but I’ve pulled it out of the ground again. Can you please tell the queen?’ She tugged at Oliver’s arm, wanting to leave before he could give away her name or his own.

‘That is not our problem any more,’ Amanita said.

‘What then?’

Amanita ignored her question. Head tilted to the side, she studied Oliver. ‘Such a fine specimen. Strong and young. You are not as tediously cautious as your little sister, are you?’

‘No, no,’ Oliver stammered, his cheeks flushed.

‘You could be a knight. My knight in shining armour. Would you like that?’ Amanita glided backwards.

Oliver followed. ‘Yes!’

‘Do you like to dance, my knight?’

‘I love to dance.’

‘Stop it!’ Saga had never seen Oliver set foot on a dance floor. ‘She’s trying to lure you to Faerie. Look!’ She pointed at the red toadstools that had sprung up where Amanita had stepped.

‘I’m her knight, and I’ll follow her to the end of the world,’ Oliver said, which was just plain embarrassing.

‘Well, I’m the one with the sword.’ Saga drew the iron-tipped aluminium pole from the straps on her backpack and pointed the sharp iron blade between Oliver and the faerie.

Instead of shrieking and jumping back, Amanita took hold of the pole, immediately above the iron blade, and plucked it out of Saga’s hands. ‘Thank you. The perfect weapon...’ In Amanita’s hands it transformed into a magnificent, bejewelled sword. ‘For my knight.’ She turned the hilt for Oliver to take.

He suddenly wore gleaming chain mail and a feather-adorned helmet. Standing tall, he brandished the sword. Then he turned to point the blade at Saga, saying, ‘Don’t you dare attack this faerie princess. I shall protect her with my life.’

Behind Saga, Mr Tumbleweed called, ‘It’s all glamour,’ in a shaky voice.

Without hesitation, Saga copied Amanita. She grabbed what looked like the sharp blade and felt the round metal. With a twist, she wrenched

the sword from Oliver. In her hands, it shimmered and became an aluminium pole again.

Surprised, Oliver looked down at his jumper and jeans. 'Wait, where did my—'

'Stay away from my brother!' This time Saga aimed the iron point at Amanita's chest as she advanced.

Amanita took a step back. 'What a killer of joy you are, little girl.' With a swirl of her hand, she released a moth faerie from her hair.

Saga squeezed her eyes shut, then remembered that Alfred had told her there was no way to avoid looking at a moth faerie once it had been released. So the enchantment couldn't be meant for her. She opened her eyes to see Oliver sink down on a mound of decaying leaves.

'What have you done to him?' Although she tried to shake him awake, he didn't stir. 'He didn't do anything wrong.'

'He did not make any mistakes. You did, little girl. By telling him about us, you made him part of our world. A world there is no doubt he would love to see.'

'But I've told him before. I've told everyone! No one ever believes me.'

'He did, though, when you forced the tree sprite to show himself.'

Saga wanted to protest, but what Amanita said was true. After he'd been able to see Mr Tumbleweed wasn't a toad but a faerie creature, Oliver had believed her.

'So now we are facing a dilemma. If I do not take him with me, he will for ever be deeply unhappy. Most likely, he will spend the rest of his life searching for the realm, at the expense of all other pursuits.'

For an instant, Saga felt her own longing to return to Faerie, like a suction deep in her core.

'And if he goes with you, will he be happy?' she asked, her mind working overtime, wondering what she would tell her parents if Oliver vanished without a trace.

'Oh yes, if he likes dancing...'

'There must be another way.'

'I suppose I could make him forget ever seeing a faerie.'

'Please, Amanita!'

'I was terribly dismayed that Alfred thought I had used him to exterminate the water sprite. An appalling accusation, and he got the idea

from you. That he would believe you over me, saddens me deeply.’ In her hair, the butterfly faeries pretended to wipe their eyes.

Saga swallowed, waiting for what was coming.

‘I wish you would stop sowing seeds of suspicion in Alfred’s mind.’

‘What does that even mean? I can’t tell him if I think you are manipulating him? I can’t tell him about this, about you enchanting my brother?’

‘Saga,’ Amanita said, for once not calling her ‘little girl’. ‘Your chosen name is very fitting. You are a storyteller of sorts. And, as you know, stories can be told in many ways and from many perspectives. You must learn to spin them, to direct the lights where you desire the audience to look. Then your version of the truth will be what others see.’

‘You want me to lie to Alfred?’

‘Is it a lie if you tell him I helped prevent your brother from going to the faerie realm?’ When Saga didn’t answer, the faerie continued. ‘Know that I have Alfred’s best interests at heart. And not everyone in the realm values the half-humans.’

‘Get to the point. What do you want me to promise?’ Saga really, really hated faerie deal-making.

‘I do not wish to extract a promise from you. Call it a favour, as repayment for your removal of those.’ Amanita pointed at the aluminium pole. ‘But I suggest you think carefully about what stories you tell... If you convince others we exist, you and you alone must bear the burden of having brought danger upon them.’

‘So I’m forbidden from telling people about faeries.’

‘There is no prohibition, merely consequences.’

What was the point of becoming the natural-world expert on Faerie, if she couldn’t convince people that faeries existed? It ruined her whole plan.

Amanita directed her moth so it first woke Oliver and then led his eyes in a complicated, enchanting dance, full of twists and turns and tempo changes.

‘Naturally, I had to plant a new memory, or he would have noticed the gap.’ Amanita said, in a tone as if she was talking about the weather, while they watched the moth dance. ‘His knightly sense was strong, so the memory had to be heroic.’ The instant the moth fluttered back to Amanita’s hair, she swirled and vanished.

The rest of the way down to their bikes, Oliver talked about how he had saved Saga's life. How, when she'd slipped on the ledge, he'd leapt over the gap and caught hold of her harness. How he'd pulled her up with one of his strong arms. He was a hero—that was the memory Amanita had planted. It annoyed him that he couldn't tell their parents what he'd done without getting them both in trouble.

'You owe me big time,' Oliver said, when they got on their bicycles. 'I'll help Dad with stuff outside, but every indoor chore, every dishwasher Mum asks me to do this week, is going straight to you. And keep your toad away from me,' he added, making it clear he remembered absolutely nothing he'd seen or heard about faeries.

'Okay,' Saga said through clenched teeth. 'Just leave. I'm meeting Alfred at his granny's cottage.'

'Don't get into trouble. I won't be there to save you,' Oliver called back over his shoulder.

Fuming, she followed him at a distance. 'I'm the one who saved you, Sir Lancelot,' she muttered under her breath.

From her bicycle basket, Mr Tumbleweed croaked, 'This one body—'

'Yeah, yeah, I know. You told me so.'

What made Saga most angry was that she'd let herself be tricked. Like any ordinary human without knowledge of faeries, she'd let a faerie trick her. Amanita's payback on the debt she owed Saga for removing the story poles had been to free Oliver of an enchantment she'd cast herself. Saga had been cheated out of a reward.

With Oliver's new memory, the faerie had also played a trick on her, which was not unexpected. And now Oliver was so unbearably annoying, Saga almost wished she'd let Amanita take him away to Faerie.

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*A Birth Name*

Alfred had just changed his wet trousers, when the shed door was flung open. Saga barged into the cave, sending Granny's enormous pot that she used to boil her yarns flying. It hit the floor. The lid spun like a coin. Until it settled, loud clangs echoed around the cave.

She stopped abruptly. 'You're here,' she said, surprised. 'Did you find the countess's son?'

Before Alfred could do more than shake his head, Saga said, 'You'll not believe what happened.' Then, for about five minutes, she ranted about Amanita and Oliver and the little people and Mr Tumbleweed.

He'd never seen Saga this furious. It took a while before he understood that Oliver hadn't become a knight at the castle and fallen in love with Little Mother while Amanita danced with Little Father, and that the real hero of the story was Mr Tumbleweed. He was so happy Saga was safe that he couldn't even be annoyed she'd found a loophole in their deal.

'Can you believe Amanita wanted me to lie to you about the whole thing?' Saga raised her voice again. 'But I was never gonna do that. I would never tell you a rose-tinted version of the truth.'

Was that what he was doing, Alfred wondered. Years of playing down the bullying, not wanting to worry Dad unnecessarily, had taught him to focus on the highlights.

'Maybe just don't mention I told you. And don't trust her!'

‘I don’t. I honestly don’t trust any of them,’ Alfred admitted. ‘Even the demi-fae are different from me. From us. It’s as if they don’t have the slightest idea how others might be feeling.’

‘They lack empathy, you mean?’

‘Yeah, I guess that might be it.’

‘If they always spend time with others who are like themselves, and high faeries who have absolutely no compassion, and they don’t read books, how would they learn?’

Alfred shrugged. He might be part of a demi-fae cluster, but the only person who understood him was Saga. And she was the only one he fully trusted. Although Viola and Uniko had just saved him from getting into trouble with the antlered guards...

On their way back to the farm, he told her everything about his search for the countess’s son. Without any rose-tinting. All his little details about the fortress captivated Saga so much she’d calmed down by the time they reached the farm.

Her dad had made a delicious pumpkin soup and prepared the best ham-and-cheese sandwiches Alfred had ever tasted. Before setting off to see Granny at the hospital, he helped Saga clear the table. Vera had asked Oliver to do it, and Saga’s brother stood with his arms folded and a triumphant grin while Saga slammed the plates into the dishwasher.

‘Did you hear how I saved the day?’ Oliver asked.

Alfred nodded.

From a corner, Mr Tumbleweed said, ‘Somebody knightly looked ridiculous in that helmet.’

It made Saga giggle and she set the last tea cups down much more gently.

‘I did. I saved you!’ Oliver, who of course couldn’t hear the tree sprite, kicked the door frame as he left the kitchen.

‘Ready when you are, Alfred,’ Vera called from the boot room.

‘Is it okay, if I come with you?’ Saga followed him without waiting for an answer. ‘I think perhaps I have an idea.’

Alfred sat in the passenger seat, happy that Saga was there and would probably do most of the talking. But Saga was uncharacteristically quiet. He could’ve really used her help, because Vera was asking whether he was enjoying himself and what he and Saga had been up to during the day. Flustered, he blurted out that he’d been swimming, which didn’t

make sense given that it was October. Without any help from Saga, he pretended to have misunderstood the question and continued to talk about his water polo team.

When Alfred sneaked a peek back at Saga, she was staring out into the darkness, tapping the bridge of her glasses with her index finger, deep in thought. She didn't say a word until they reached the outskirts of the city. Then she suddenly interrupted them, asking, 'Mum, do you know what the countess called her son?'

'Do you know how many births I've attended in the past twelve years?' Vera replied.

'A million?'

'Not quite. But I certainly don't remember all those baby names. Not to mention that not all the parents have a name ready.'

'Did she?'

'Who? The countess? I don't remember.'

'But could you find out? I mean, would it be in the records from the birth, if she had a name ready?'

Alfred only half-listened. Talking about swimming had brought the verses of the song back in his mind. He wished he'd had time to listen to more of them.

'Saga.' Vera sighed. 'What's this new obsession? You know I can't give out confidential patient information. In any case, he was less than a month old when he disappeared. Whoever took him will have given him a new name.'

'So it couldn't harm anyone if you told me his real name.'

'Saga!'

It dawned on Alfred what Saga was doing. With the child's real name, if Alfred found out where in Faerie the human children were, he could simply call that name, and the boy might respond.

'Er... Vera,' he said quietly, 'I think... it would help me to know the name, because he vanished so soon after my mother, and perhaps the same villains took them, and it would really help to think that my mother wasn't alone.' He choked. What had started as a mere story to sway Saga's mum sounded much too real to himself.

'Oh, Alfred.' Vera let go of the steering wheel with one hand and patted his wrist. 'I hadn't thought of it like that. I can't guarantee anything. But I'll have a look at the records while you visit your

grandmother. If there's a name, and if I don't feel it can harm anyone to tell you, I will.'

'Thank you,' Alfred said past the lump in his throat. Of course his mum wasn't somewhere in Faerie with that lost boy, but the old nightmare of seeing her nurture another child was much too vivid in his mind.

'Well played,' Saga whispered, as she and Alfred walked after her mum to the hospital entrance.

Granny put her knitting down when they came into her room. After Alfred had leant down to hug her, she thanked them for the flowers Saga's mum had brought. They all chatted for a while about the cavern opening and the farm and tried to avoid lying about what they'd been up to. With Vera in the room, they couldn't talk freely.

'How long do they plan to keep you?' Vera asked.

'I think they're setting me free on Friday.'

Alfred exchanged an anxious glance with Saga. It was Tuesday evening now. Granny would be home in less than three days. She'd be needing his help then, and his agreement with Amanita would cease to bind him. It meant they had less than three days to come up with a solution. Less than three days left where he was free to come and go in the faerie realm.

'Let me know, Anna. I can pick you up if Rob's not back yet. I just need to check on a patient.' Vera left the room, he hoped in search of a certain birth record. They needed something. Anything.

'How are you two getting on? Any trouble with the urchins?'

'I hate them!' Saga and Alfred said at the same time.

'You sound like my mother.' Granny sighed. 'I decided long ago that hate didn't help me cope with the little people, but there are days...' She pointed at her chunky cast. 'The trick is to stay away from their territory.'

'Easier said than done,' Alfred muttered.

'Speaking of mothers,' Saga said, in a clumsy topic change. 'We're trying to find out as much as we can about the countess and her baby, before I talk to her. You don't know who the father was, do you?'

'Oh, that was a scandal, though they kept a tight lid on everything.' Granny spoke in a stage whisper, even though the woman in the next bed was watching the news with large headphones on. 'It was too much for the old count. That and the disappearance. Leonora's mother had been ill

and passed away years earlier, the poor dear, and her father was in his eighties—the eternal bachelor, we used to call him—died within a year of everything happening.’

‘But who was the baby’s father, Granny?’

‘Oh, I have no clue. He wasn’t from around here. As far as I know, she never told anyone. Not even her own father.’ Granny yawned. ‘Goodness. I’m sorry. These painkillers are making me so sleepy.’

When Vera returned to the room, she said it was time for them to leave. She fluffed Granny’s pillows. All the way down the long hallways and lifts, Alfred could see that Saga was bursting to ask what her mum had discovered.

In the car, before she turned on the ignition, Vera said, ‘I’m going to tell you the name that was in the records, but you’re not to tell anyone.’

‘Except the boy, if we find him,’ Saga said.

‘Alright, except him.’

‘Was the father’s name there too?’ Saga pushed herself forward between the front seats.

‘If it was, you know I’d never give you that information. But it wasn’t.’

‘What was the baby called?’ Alfred asked.

Vera steered the car out of the car park before she answered, ‘His name was Lucas.’



## *Swimming Plans*

That night, in her dreams, Saga ran around in a labyrinthian forest, searching for a baby called Lucas. Every time a wail answered, her progress was blocked by a knight in a feathered helmet, who asked her to dance.

She was exhausted the next morning when Alfred woke her. Yawning, she packed everything she'd need, before she walked with him up the track from the farm. The sun glistened on dewy spiderwebs as it rose above the mist that shimmered on the fields. Underneath Mr Tumbleweed, Saga's bicycle basket contained a thick blanket, binoculars, a thermos with tea, a leftover sandwich and two slices of cake. She planned on monitoring the castle from the top of the garden wall until the countess hopefully came outside.

Standing by the gate to Anna's cottage, she watched Alfred walk up the garden path.

'Find Lucas today,' she called after him, remembering her dream. If only there was a way for her to go with him. She had a feeling she'd be able to find the boy faster.

'I'll try!' Alfred turned and waved before he entered the shed.

Saga was preparing to get on her bicycle and set off for the castle when she noticed the thing that lay in her basket, half-hidden by a gnarly foot. She let her bike fall against the hedge, ignoring Mr Tumbleweed's grumbles that she'd woken him, and raced after Alfred.

'Wait!' she yelled, as she flung the shed door open.

‘What?’ he called from the darkness.

Careful to avoid turning over the big pot again, she ran, zigzagging between the empty dye baths. ‘You forgot this,’ she gasped, holding out her new hourglass.

‘It’s okay.’ Alfred stood up. His trousers were already soaked from the knees down. The water in the spring had risen and was rushing out of the small tunnel. ‘My watch is working again. Your dad put it in a bag of rice overnight to dry out. And now it’s inside two zip-lock bags in my pocket.’

‘Good.’ Saga’s eyes were drawn to the dark round hole. ‘What’s it like in there?’ she asked. ‘Is it far to swim before you’re outside in Faerie?’

‘It doesn’t feel far. Maybe... I don’t know... ten minutes. Why?’

‘I just wish I could come with you and help search for Lucas.’ Saga sighed. ‘But there’s no way I can hold my breath for ten minutes. And not even my brothers have diving gear lying around.’

‘What about a snorkel?’

‘Plenty of goggles and snorkels in the house, but that can’t be enough, can it?’

‘How long can you hold your breath?’

‘I’ve been practising since this summer,’ she said. ‘My record’s two minutes and fourteen seconds.’ It was twelve seconds more than Oliver. Alfred didn’t exactly roll his eyes, but he was clearly not impressed.

‘I could try to count the seconds on the stretches where there’s no air in the tunnels...’ Alfred said with little enthusiasm.

‘Yes! As soon as I’ve talked to the countess, I’ll search for a snorkel, and then I can come with you tomorrow. Good luck today!’ Almost as fast as she’d entered the shed, Saga ran outside and back to her bicycle.

‘Guess what?’ she said to the dozing tree sprite, as she cycled towards the castle. ‘Tomorrow, I’m going to swim to Faerie!’

To drown out the deluge of warnings from Mr Tumbleweed, she began to sing ‘*I’m swimming in the rain*’ at the top of her lungs. If she hadn’t had to hold on to the handlebars, she’d have stuck fingers in her ears. Getting him to agree to the plan that was forming in her head was going to take persuasion and probably a mountain of cake.



## *The Ballroom Dancers*

Before the shed door slammed shut behind Saga, Alfred regretted telling her about the air pockets. What had he been thinking? There would be no stopping her if she found a snorkel. The only way to avoid bringing his friend to a place where she'd be in constant danger would be to find the human child today.

It was the first time he swam through the tunnels at the surface. Glow worms lit up the space between the water and the rocky roof. Twice, the tunnels widened into craggy caves, where layers of coloured rock disappeared from view in the darkness far above. In other places, he couldn't get his eyes above the surface without bumping his head on the ceiling. Most of the way, though, at least a narrow snorkel breathing space remained. But in one long pipe-like airless passage, where the stream was compressed and the current strong, he counted to one hundred. And if he was pulling Saga along, she'd slow them down. Would a little over two minutes then be enough?

Because he'd been so focused on counting, Alfred was inside Faerie before he noticed the lack of river music. No fish were singing. Where yesterday he'd heard verses from the song about Nereida and Applevale, now the stream was silent as a grave. Without Lillith's hair, were the waterways dying? Or was it even worse—was Lillith dead?

When no one was waiting for him in the royal gardens, Alfred swam further upstream and out on the other side of the hedge. This was where he'd last seen Bjørn, and he broke the surface hoping to meet the

shapeshifter and ask for directions to the dungeons. The thought of returning to the underground prison terrified him, but perhaps Bjørn might come with him.

There was, however, no sight of Bjørn beyond the hedge. Out here, the stream turned. Its sprays glistened where the water rushed out of a tunnel that emerged from underneath the fortress. Swimming against the cascading water, Alfred searched for a gap, a trap door, a fissure in the circular water-polished rock walls—anywhere that might be a way into the dungeons. He found none.

He resurfaced on the far side of the fortress at the edge of a dark, dank forest. To his relief, he heard a fish choir sing, '*It crossed between realms like our river.*' He hoped the singing meant Lillith was still alive. Hovering in the stream, he waited for their verse.

'*But Nereida knew what happens to humans here,*' a solo fish sang.

Invisible weeds wiggled inside his shirt, giving him a chill. He knew what happened to humans too. And if he didn't want to risk Saga ending up in the ballroom, he had work to do.

On his way back to the royal gardens, a giant hand at the end of an embroidered sleeve blocked his progress.

'There you are!' Bjørn hauled him out of the water. 'I thought I caught a whiff of you, honey.'

'I was looking for you,' Alfred panted. He snorted to free his nose of water, while he got up. 'How do I get to the dungeons? You said you smelt a human child there.'

'Er...' Bjørn fiddled with a loose-hanging thread from an embroidered bee. 'Er... I've remembered... That human was darling Saga, just before me and Batty found you in that prison cell. It's the only time I've ever detected that particular mouthwatering... sorry... scent.'

'Nowhere else?'

Bjørn shook his head.

'Okay. I need to get to the fortress. Do you know how to sing—' Before Alfred could finish his sentence, Bjørn had stuck two claws in between his sharp canines. A shrill, high-pitched whistle rang out from his grizzly beard.

A moment later, Emmett circled down and lifted Alfred off the ground.

'Thanks, Bjørn,' he called from the air.

He found Viola and Uniko in their hammocks. He didn't exactly trust them, but they'd helped him yesterday, and they clearly knew their way around the fortress. In a whisper, he asked if they knew a way to the ballroom.

'I sometimes climb up to hear the music better,' Uniko said in his sing-song voice. 'I'll show you.'

'We're not supposed to go up there,' Viola said, but she sprang down from her hammock.

Outis stood in the window opening with his back to the room, the wind ruffling his feathers in smooth waves. 'You're going to get in trouble,' he muttered without moving from his spot.

Uniko led them along the corridor to a carved tree that stuck further out from the wall than most others. He climbed up its branches to the trellis-tunnel ceiling. Hanging on with his legs and one arm, he plucked at the stone leaves until a hole grew in the grey foliage.

'I didn't know—' Viola began, but Uniko shushed her before he crawled through the hole.

Viola and Alfred followed with some effort.

In near darkness, Alfred got to his feet inside a round tower. Like the silo at Saga's family's farm, it was tall and narrow, the curved walls windowless. In its centre, without any connection to the outside walls, a steep staircase spiralled upwards around a birch trunk, like a beanstalk. At the very top, the birch grew through a manhole-sized opening in the dark ceiling. Faint light radiated from this hole, and muted music drifted down into the confined space.

Each stair was carved into a triplet of connected leaves with a pattern of veins on their undersides. The further up they climbed, the smaller the leaf stairs became. With every step they took, the veins pulsated with a purple glow. There was no handrail, so Alfred gripped the vine itself tightly and tried not to look down. The muscles in his right calf soon ached and began to twitch. He pushed away thoughts of how he'd ever get back down.

Where the slim birch pierced the ceiling, the staircase emerged above a hexagonal platform. The music sounded clearer here. By now, the leaf steps were smaller than Alfred's shoes, and his ankles strained with the effort of balancing on his toes. Clinging to the trunk, he scaled the last

tiny rungs until his whole body was through the hole. Then he jumped across the gap and landed on the solid floor.

Six closed doors led away from the six walls of the platform. Above it, the birch's branches stretched up into the open. Its oval leaves rustled and glinted in the moonlight. When Viola caught up, Uniko walked to one of the wide wooden doors and inched it open. The music, which had been in the background the whole time, burst out.

Hiding themselves with glamour, they entered a long narrow ballroom lit up by cold, silver torchlight. Alfred's eyes adjusted to the brightness, and he gasped. The horrifying sight that met him made him want to run back down those awful leaf stairs.

As he'd expected, the ballroom was full of dancers. Human dancers, though they barely resembled people and their jerky movements hardly qualified as dance. The rags they wore were so tattered the frayed edges of their clothes had unravelled up to their elbows and knees, becoming fringes that swung with every jolty step.

Nearby a youngish man in shredded jeans swirled an elderly woman in a threadbare ballgown and one long opera glove with missing fingers. An even older fisherman in waders without soles danced in slow circles on his own, holding on to what looked like the remains of the woman's other glove.

Alfred forced himself to look at their skeletal faces. Their skin was sallow and taut over their hollowed cheeks. What made everything worse was that the dancers were smiling. Or rather, their mouths were twisted into forced grins, showing decayed teeth, below sunken eyes that were glazed over.

'Stay there,' Alfred whispered.

With fear in his eyes, Uniko pointed to the far end of the room, where two high faeries stood between window openings, overseeing the dancers. Alfred recognized the one with cropped grey hair. The longbow was slung over his shoulder, and he twirled an arrow between his pale fingers.

Scanning the throng for children, Alfred slunk past a bald monk in a brown garb. He was dancing with a woman in a pinstriped suit, her bare feet sticking out of her holed black tights. As the couple passed a table in the centre of the room laden with rotten fruit and decaying food, the woman grabbed a slice of cake covered in a thick layer of mould and

stuffed it into her mouth. Bile rose in Alfred's throat, and he almost retched.

A stern-looking madam, clad in a high-necked, faded black dress, held the hand of a smaller person. Alfred thought it was a child, until they swung round and he saw the moustached face of a short, uniformed soldier. At the sight of a bearded caveman in animal skins, Alfred wondered just how long some of these people had been dancing.

'Lucas,' he whispered as loudly as he dared, desperate to get out of the creepy ballroom.

None of the humans reacted. And he didn't really expect them to. They were all adults and lost to everything but the music.

Alfred had sneaked so close to the two high faeries he could see the quintet of tiny musicians that played between them.

'You there!' the faerie with the longbow called.

Alfred's heart hammered in his chest. He tried to control his breathing, tried to stay invisible, but he could feel his glamour shield slipping.



## *The Contrary Countess*

Saga sat on the castle garden wall, wrapped in the blanket and a too-big green oilskin jacket, which might've been Florian's. All her own outerwear was red and way too visible. Out of habit, she wore her vest inside out, but she'd stopped believing clothes provided any protection against faeries.

'At least the weather's nice,' she called to Mr Tumbleweed, who spent the waiting time climbing nearby trees.

From her position, she could see the entire terrace and the door that led out into the garden from the castle. While she scanned the windows with Dad's binoculars, Saga went over all the nature-conservation arguments against the mayor's project. An influx of people would impact both plants and wildlife in the forest.

'Flora, fauna and faeries,' she mumbled to herself, although she'd have to stick to the first two after Amanita's warning.

In the afternoon, Saga and Mr Tumbleweed were eating cake, and the terrace with the deckchair was in full sun, when the countess came outside. She wore a long fur coat. Ms Walters accompanied her with a tea tray. After wrapping a blanket around the countess's legs, the housekeeper returned indoors.

It was now or never.

'I'll call if I need a toad distraction. But don't under any circumstances show your true self.' Scooting forward until she sat on the

edge, Saga prepared to jump. The wall was higher than she'd first thought.

'This one body can help.' Behind her, Mr Tumbleweed sprouted roots around the crumbled masonry and held out his twig arms. His hands tightened around hers, and she let her legs dangle while he lowered her into the garden.

Without trying to hide, Saga walked directly down to the terrace. Behind her she heard rustles as Mr Tumbleweed followed, jumping from tree to tree.

'Excuse me,' Saga said, when she was still an unthreatening distance away from the woman, who sat with her eyes closed.

Blinking against the sunlight, the countess sat up. 'Who are you?' She shielded her eyes with one hand and reached for the bell that stood on the tea tray.

'I'm...' Saga stepped to the side, so the countess could see her without looking up into the sun. 'My name is Saga. Saga Wilder,' she said.

'You're a child.' The countess set the bell down again. 'Why are you here?'

'You might've seen me on the news when I protested against the motorway tunnel... I want to talk to you about the mayor's new tourism project.'

The countess sighed. 'I didn't want to speak to him about it. Why should I talk to you?'

'So you haven't promised him anything?'

'Nothing except to look at the plans before he returns for my approval later this week.'

'Good.' Saga cleared her throat. 'That project, with its huge concrete buildings and cable cars, is going to harm nature and the local wildlife and... and—' She couldn't mention faeries. 'All the creatures that live in the forest. It's your forest. I'm sure you care about its biodiversity.'

'You're wrong.' The countess leant back in her deckchair. 'I don't care.'

'But... But...' Saga was stumped. Her whole speech about nature conservation was useless if this was true. 'But why?'

'Please leave.'

‘What about the fauna?’ Saga raised her voice, saying, ‘Like toads.’ She had no clear plan and didn’t know if Mr Tumbleweed would be willing to reveal himself. Amanita had spoken of consequences, but perhaps in this case it would actually be better for the countess, who was clearly unhappy, to be swept away to Faerie. Perhaps in the other realm she could be reunited with her son.

As if baffled by this strange example, the countess frowned. ‘Toads? In the forest? On top of the hill?’ Her eyes grew big when Mr Tumbleweed leapt to Saga’s side.

‘Get. That. Creature. Away.’ Her voice came in sharp puffs, rising to a higher pitch with every word.

It was a strange reaction to a mere toad. Saga gave Mr Tumbleweed a soft push, and whispered, ‘Go.’

Grumbling something about knowing when he wasn’t welcome, he bounced up through the garden.

The countess’s eyes followed him out of sight. Then they trained on Saga. ‘You can see that tree thing too?’ she whispered.

‘Yes. He’s my friend.’

‘Friend,’ the countess repeated. ‘You can’t be friends with them.’

Saga didn’t know if she should speak or keep quiet. If the countess already knew about faeries, there couldn’t be consequences, could there?

‘They took my baby.’

‘I believe you.’ Saga took a few steps closer to the countess. ‘Would it help if you told me about it?’

‘There’s not much to tell. They took my beautiful boy and left a changeling—a creature as crooked and old as that tree thing you call a friend. Though only I could see what he was. I’d also been the only one who could see my son’s difference.’

Saga came a little nearer and sank down on her heels.

‘Everyone else thought the changeling was the baby. I couldn’t bear to feed it or be near it. When the imposter disappeared, I had already been grieving for weeks.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘It was my own fault.’ The countess shook her head. ‘I wish I’d never met him.’

‘Who?’

‘The faerie who fathered my little boy.’

‘Faerie?’ Saga asked, then repeated, ‘Faerie!’ If the father was a faerie, that meant the boy was a demi-fae. He might be one of Alfred’s new friends. ‘I know someone who might be able to find him,’ she said. ‘Your son, I mean.’

‘What’s the point? They will have changed him into one of them. He’ll never be my little boy.’

‘My other friend is half faerie, and he’s really nice,’ Saga said, but Alfred was different. He hadn’t been raised by faeries. ‘In any case, now I know you can see faerie creatures, I can tell you another reason you shouldn’t approve the mayor’s plans. This project will have terrible consequences for them. It might ruin the entire faerie realm!’

The countess nodded slowly. ‘Terrible,’ she muttered. ‘Ruin the faerie realm...’ Then a strange, fierce expression spread across her delicate features. ‘I’m afraid you have just given me the best possible reason to approve all the construction plans.’

‘But—’

‘No buts. I want you to leave now. Both of you.’ Throwing the blanket aside, the countess got up. ‘I’ll do anything to destroy their realm, because those faeries ruined my life.’

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## *Friends in Need*

Certain he'd been spotted by the high faeries, Alfred started swaying. He tried to catch the rhythm of the dancing humans, hoping to be mistaken for one of them.

But when he glanced up to check if they'd bought his act, the faeries were turned away from him and the other dancers. One of them extended a long pale arm and grasped something in the window opening.

Outis became visible.

'Another human who wants to dance,' the faerie said. His long colourless hair hung in a plait down his back to the waistband of his tan leather breeches. He was so tall his head was level with Outis's, and Outis stood on the window sill.

'I. Am. Not. Human!' Outis gasped and tried to wrestle free, but the faerie held on to him effortlessly with a single hand.

'As good as. If we clip those wings, all you're good for is dancing,' the faerie with the longbow said. He stuck the arrow into a quiver that hung from his waist and made a cutting motion with his fingers.

Alfred could see fear in Outis's eyes. In that instant, he looked one hundred percent human. After shielding himself with glamour, Alfred sought a distraction. Could he somehow redirect the dancers towards the high faeries? Or stop them dancing altogether? Could he stop the music?

He focused on the quintet. They sat on carved or petrified twigs that grew out of the wall decoration. A flute-playing bird-like creature perched near the ceiling. Two butterfly faeries with tiny gossamer harps

faced each other at Alfred's eye-height. Below them, a rhinoceros-beetle creature was stomping the rhythm and a grasshopper faerie played violin.

While the high faeries were occupied with taunting Outis, Alfred sneaked past them and reached the musicians. Holding one hand just behind the grasshopper and the other so close to a butterfly faerie that he could feel the tiny vibrations of its wings, he stopped hiding behind his veil of glamour.

'Let him go,' he called out, his voice almost not shaking. 'Or I'll stop the music.'

As if he wasn't the least bit pleased that Alfred was trying to help him, Outis glared.

The two high faeries turned and stared.

'You wouldn't dare,' the longbow faerie said.

Alfred pinched his fingers, ready to pluck the tiny harp and grasp the grasshopper faerie's leg. The other faerie let go of Outis, who hurled himself out of the window.

'Is there another ballroom? Tell me where the human children are dancing!' Alfred demanded. He tried to stand tall, while wondering how he was going to get out of this situation without harming any of the musicians.

The two faeries looked at each other with bewildered expressions. 'Human children?' The longbow-carrying faerie asked. 'There are no other human children here.'

'Then where... where are the babies that are switched with changelings?'

'Human babies don't survive here.'

'Neither will you, when we get you to the queen's consort,' the long-haired faerie said.

Both high faeries stepped closer. Alfred reached for the harp. What he hadn't expected was that the musicians wanted to keep playing. The butterfly faerie, still plucking at the strings, fluttered upwards with its harp. The grasshopper poked Alfred's finger with its bow leg, drawing blood, and jumped away, all while continuing to play. The rest of the musicians were outside his reach. Alfred let his hands fall.

Confident he had no way of escaping, the two high faeries didn't hurry. The one with the longbow commanded the butterfly faeries that sat on his arrow-ends instead of feathers to find the queen's consort.

The sight of the fluttering creatures gave Alfred an idea. After drawing a deep breath, he yelled, 'Tiger!'

The high faeries looked at him as if he'd gone mad. 'Is that a shapeshifter?' one of them muttered to the other.

No moth appeared.

Then, at the other end of the ballroom, Uniko began to sing a strange wordless song. The song's volume rose until it was as loud as the eternal music. The dancers at the far end of the room, confused by the competing rhythms, came out of step and stumbled around.

'What's happening?' the longbow faerie asked.

That was the moment Viola came spinning through the room, like a small tornado with teeth. Her outstretched claws scratched some of the dancers as she passed. Shrieks broke out.

Behind Alfred, someone said, 'Nemo,' in a low, intense whisper. Outis stood in the nearest window frame, his wings wide open, holding a hand out to him.

With no more than a breath's hesitation, Alfred gripped the hand with both of his and climbed up. Then Outis took hold of his shoulder straps, and they jumped. Though Outis beat his wings, it barely slowed them down. Unlike the eagle creatures, his wings weren't meant for extra weight, and they hurtled in free fall towards the courtyard below.

Alfred tried to spot something, anything, softer than stone to land on, as he prepared for impact. Panting, and with a sudden jolt, Outis changed their downwards direction and propelled them out beyond the courtyard. Alfred's left foot bashed against the top rail of the balustrade, before their rapid descent continued towards the royal gardens.

'The stream!' Alfred yelled, glancing up at the fast-beating wings, which were hitting leaves on nearby trees. 'Aim for the stream!' They were close to its surface, when he called, 'Let go!'

The shallow stream, like he knew it would, caught him. Alfred sank to the bottom and inhaled its flow. After two calming gulps, he pushed off and resurfaced.

Outis sat on the bank, wheezing, sweat glistening on his forehead.

'Thank—'

'Don't thank me,' the other boy said. 'You saved me. I saved you. We're even.' Standing up, his legs shaking, he kicked off. With erratic wingbeats, he flew back up to the fortress.

Alfred watched Outis touch down on the balustrade. Uniko and Viola, carried by two eagles, zoomed towards him. They had saved him too. Without their interference, he couldn't have escaped the ballroom. He wouldn't even have found the ballroom. Perhaps he should've confided in them much sooner.

'I can't thank you enough,' he said, when they landed.

'I just sang.' Uniko wiped a smudge off his horn.

'That's what human friends would do for each other, right?' Viola smiled with her abundance of sharp teeth. 'Without exchanging promises first, I mean. Right?'

'Er... yeah,' Alfred said, although no humans would've been able to do what they'd done. 'I'm glad you're my friends.'

Viola's eyes grew, if possible, brighter.

'I hope you won't get in trouble for this,' he said.

'We'll hide out in our den,' Uniko said.

'Come with us,' Viola added. 'And stay.'

'Perhaps another day... I have to help my human friend with something. Like, you know, friends do.'

Viola shouted, 'Goodbye, friend,' as they flew away.

Alfred smiled after them, a warm glow spreading in his chest. But the glow extinguished as fast as it had been lit. There were no human children here. No son of the countess anywhere.

Longing to clear his head, he dived into the water. After the first swim stroke, his body began to relax. On his way downstream, he got distracted by a new verse in the tale of Nereida and Applevale. It came from a side stream inside the gardens. The fish choir was so loud, so alive, it filled him with hope for Lillith. Hearing the chorus about his parents made him feel better too.

Underwater, he checked the time on his watch in its double layer of plastic. It wasn't late and he wanted to postpone telling Saga the bad news, so he followed the stream, discovering new verses where its ever-smaller tributaries bubbled out of the ground. Without finding Lillith.

While swimming home, he repeated the verses in his head. As soon as he emerged from the spring in the shed, he tore a page from the back of Granny's bulging notebook, full of yarn snippets and the mixtures and seeping times she'd used to obtain their colour. Alfred wrote down all the verses he'd heard and the refrain. The story still didn't make sense. He

didn't know where the jigsaw pieces fitted. Somehow seeing the jumbled, meaningless text made him more depressed.

He left the shed, thinking about how to break the bad news to Saga. They had no plan and their time was running out. At least without a human child to find, there was no need for her to come with him to Faerie. Humans didn't belong in that realm—he already knew that the ones he'd seen in the ballroom would feature in future nightmares.

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## *The Worst Good News*

Disheartened, Saga cycled back from the castle. If the countess approved the mayor's plans, the nature group would have to work hard to block the tourism project. Unfortunately, some of their members thought it was a good thing if people could easily get from the city to the viewpoint and the forest without needing their cars. But would the faeries have the patience to wait if the plans progressed? Or would Amanita unleash the army of demi-fae and moths?

She caught sight of Alfred as he came out into the lane by Anna's garden gate, and sped up.

'You're back early,' she said, getting off her bicycle. 'I finally talked to the countess, but...' She trailed off. 'What's wrong?'

'It's hopeless,' he said, downcast. 'We're not going to find that kidnapped baby. There are no human children in Faerie. And the humans I saw in the ballroom...' he drew a long shuddering breath.

'Er... about the child,' Saga began. 'The countess's son isn't human. He's a demi-fae. Not that it helps a lot, because she doesn't think he's her son any more. And she's hoping that the faerie realm will be ruined.' She paused, remembering how adamant the countess had been. 'In fact, I think I might've made everything worse, by telling her the project will harm Faerie.' Saga hated giving up, but even she had to admit that their situation was rather hopeless.

'Demi-fae?' Alfred asked, as if he'd heard nothing else she said. 'But they're all... They won't fit in. They all look non-human. More than me,

I mean.'

'I honestly don't think their appearance is what will matter to the countess. Not if she fell in love with the father, who must've looked anything but human.'

Saga tried to imagine a younger, happier version of the countess holding hands with a faerie creature. It was hard. Especially the happiness part. It made her wish more than ever that she could reunite the countess with her son. And not for her own fame or for gratitude or anything like that, she only wanted to see the countess smile. She wasn't giving up.

'We should find him anyway. Perhaps she'll feel differently when she actually meets him.' As she spoke, and a plan took shape, Saga's resolve strengthened. 'I've seen the countess, so perhaps I can recognize her features and guess who her son might be. And we know his real name is Lucas. You just have to take me to that demi-fae room with all the hammocks.'

'There's no way I'm taking you to Faerie. That ballroom...' He swallowed audibly. This time Saga waited for Alfred to speak, and, as they walked between the bare fields, he told her what had happened. He described the dancers in excruciating detail. She saw them in her mind, with their tattered clothes and worn shoes that clearly showed how many decades—if not centuries—they had been dancing. It was horrifying.

But Saga wasn't going to let that scare her. It wasn't merely about finding Lucas or stopping the tourism project. Since this morning, when she'd discovered there might be a way for her to swim to Faerie, her longing to return had intensified. Perhaps Amanita was right. Perhaps she would spend her whole life searching for ways into their realm.

'Did you check how long I'd have to hold my breath on the swim?' she asked after a long silence.

'Didn't you hear anything I said?' Alfred took hold of her oilskin jacket, stopping them both on the track, and spoke a lot louder than usual. 'I'm not taking you to Faerie. It's dangerous. The high faeries hate humans.'

'But did you check? And can I hold my breath long enough?'

'Nnn... Yes.' Shaking his head, Alfred let go of her jacket and walked on.

Saga followed behind him at a distance. She briefly wondered if it was true faeries couldn't lie, because it looked like he would've loved to say no.

When they reached the farmhouse, Mum came round the corner from the orchard, carrying a crate full of apples.

'What's up with you two?' she called.

'Nothing,' they both answered.

'Well, whatever it is, I have good news.' She set the crate down on the front steps. 'Your granny's coming home tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow?' Alfred asked in a hollow voice.

'I have a consultation at the hospital in the afternoon anyway and then I'll bring her home.'

'Tomorrow?' he repeated.

'Don't look so shocked.' Mum placed a hand on his shoulder. 'I know you two have been hanging out in the cottage much of this week. Do I need to check if it's tidy?'

'Er... no.' Alfred hid behind his hair—it had definitely grown since he started swimming in the stream—but Saga could imagine his expression. Instead of two days, they barely had one.

Tomorrow would be his last day in Faerie. And she was determined to go with him. She would find a snorkel. And if he wouldn't take her, she'd swim through that tunnel on her own.



## *A Song of Love and Blood*

After dinner, Alfred excused himself and went up to Florian's bedroom. He wasn't used to being surrounded by people and noise, and he needed time to think.

One single day left in Faerie. And what exactly had he achieved in the four days he'd been there? They weren't any closer to stopping the tourism project—on the contrary, after Saga's chat with the countess who might now actively seek to harm Faerie—and he was nowhere nearer to finding his mother's family. Except Lillith. And because of him, she might be dying.

It had been wonderful to swim in the streams and hear snippets of the song about his parents, but... Sitting on the bed, Alfred took the page from Granny's notebook out of his pocket. The list of jumbled verses still made no sense. He crumbled it up in a ball and let it fall to the floor.

After a single knock, Saga barged into the room. She threw a snorkel, goggles and an orange waterproof pouch down on the floor, stalked to Florian's wardrobe and rummaged inside it.

'Yes! I thought I remembered this,' she said, unrolling something navy blue that she held up against her body. It was a short-sleeved wetsuit. 'I'm ready!'

Incredulous, Alfred stared at her. Hadn't she understood anything?

'I know you think it's dangerous, but Mr Tumbleweed can look after me once we're in Faerie. I'll get him to meet me there.'

‘No,’ he said, trying to stay calm. Mr Tumbleweed wasn’t even a match for the pixies. ‘If it’s one of the other demi-fae, I’ll just get close to them, one at a time, and say, “Lucas,” until there’s a reaction.’

‘And what if saying the name doesn’t work?’ Waving the wetsuit around, Saga gesticulated. ‘He was a baby when the faeries switched him with the changeling, so perhaps his true name has no effect. And if he actually responds, what are you going to do then?’

‘Ask him to come with me. Then we can meet you at my granny’s, and you can take him to the countess.’

‘And if he doesn’t want to come, how are you going to persuade him?’ Saga stepped closer, until she was standing over him.

Alfred got to his feet. ‘I don’t know. You’re human, so it’s going to be harder for you. Besides, you’re not exactly diplomatic.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ Saga raised her voice. ‘D’you assume he’ll listen to you because you’re the famous *alf rät*?’

‘No, I don’t. And it doesn’t matter, because I’m not taking you. Look what’s happened already! Lillith might be dead, and those dancing humans—’

With his face in his hands, Alfred sank back down on the bed. It creaked as Saga sat down next to him.

After a long while, she said quietly, ‘I’m not like you.’

He pushed the paper ball back and forth with his indoor shoes. ‘I know.’

‘I’m not talking about the faerie-blood thing. It’s... I’ve never been anywhere. I don’t even have a passport.’ Saga rocked sideways, so their shoulders touched.

He didn’t move away. ‘What’s that got to do with anything?’

‘We don’t really travel, because of the farm. And I never minded. The only place I ever wanted to go was to Faerie. And I got to visit once, and it was terrifying and amazing, but now I’m hearing you talk about it every day...’

‘It’s still terrifying.’

‘You and Mr Tumbleweed will look after me.’

‘What if we can’t protect you?’

Saga shrugged against his shoulder. ‘If you won’t take me, then I’ll swim there myself.’

Alfred turned to look at her. Her lips were pressed firmly together. He knew that expression and had no doubt she would try. If not tomorrow, she might go on her own when he'd gone back home with Dad, and that would be even more dangerous.

'Alright,' he agreed, against his better judgement. 'I'll bring you to the royal gardens. The beasts and the guards keep away from there. You'll have to hide. And swear to only, only come out if I can't find out who Lucas is on my own.'

Saga's lips curved up as she slipped her hand into his, squeezing it and saying, 'Deal.'

Unsmiling, his eyes met hers before he let go. 'And if there are problems... I'll get Amanita to help. I'm sure the information that Farriel is her daughter is worth something.'

'Listen to you, Mr *Alf Rät*. You truly are turning into a devious faerie!'

Alfred snorted, as if he thought it was funny. It wasn't. It was scary. Was he changing? Would he become more and more like the other demi-fae, and less and less human, with every minute he spent in the faerie realm?

'What's this?' Saga picked up the paper ball and unfolded it, before she scanned the text. 'It's the song about your parents, isn't it?'

'Part of it. Twelve random verses. They don't make sense.'

'You know what I think we should do?' She got up and searched for something in Florian's desk drawer. 'I think we should puzzle the song together. Oliver has my scissors. D'you still have the ones from Amanita?'

He pointed at his trousers that hung on the radiator to dry. He wasn't touching the silver scissors if he could avoid it.

'What's the melody like?' Saga asked, while she cut across the page, so each verse was on its own slip of paper.

Alfred wasn't keen on singing, but he tried his best to remember. In a low quavering voice he chanted the chorus:

*'This is the tale  
of Nereida and Applevale,  
a love so great it makes us quiver.  
It crossed between realms, like our river.'*

Saga began humming with him.

‘I think this one’s first,’ Alfred said, pointing, and sang, *‘The human boy fell in the river, river, river.’*

Saga was good at making connections. Almost faster than he could read his own scrawls, she shuffled the pieces around, until all the cut-out verses lay in a new order. Then she read everything aloud, without including the chorus.

*‘The human boy fell in the river, river, river.  
The Applevale boy always came back to his love.  
With silver scissors she cut her hair short.  
But Nereida knew what happens to humans here.  
To become human she made a deal, deal, deal.  
Tricked by the queen, queen, queen.  
Her mother was promised any faerie-born child.  
Nereida believed her humanity was real, real, real.  
Like a human she bore her son  
The star-crossed lovers swam out of luck, luck, luck.  
The son carried her water-sprite blood.  
Lillith swore to safeguard the smolt.’*

Even though Saga didn’t sing the tale, it still affected him. He couldn’t imagine how much his mother must’ve loved his father for her to leave the streams. How much she must’ve loved him to make a deal to become human.

‘What’s a smolt?’ Saga asked. ‘Is that a real word?’

‘A young salmon,’ Alfred said, after a quick internet search on his phone. ‘I guess that would be me.’

‘Makes sense. Lillith really has been trying to protect you.’

Alfred nodded. That the greatest love story in the faerie realm ended with him being born was so sad a lump grew in his throat. His faerie blood had brought bad luck. Everything was his fault.

‘There’s obviously quite a lot missing.’ Saga tapped the bridge of her glasses. ‘But here’s what I think. Your parents met when your dad was a kid and fell in the river. At some point they fell in love. Then I’m not sure quite where this bit with Nereida cutting her hair fits in, but it’s clear she didn’t want your dad in Faerie. It sounds as if she made a deal with the

queen but was tricked into believing she'd be an actual human. And then she discovered that she wasn't really human after all—it must've been extremely strong glamour—and that you had faerie blood. Does that sound right?'

Alfred nodded again.

'The interesting bit is this...' Saga picked up the paper slip that read *Her mother was promised a faerie-born child.*

'Why?' Alfred asked. Now that she had worked out the order, he found it all interesting.

'“Her” must refer to Nereida's mother. And according to the song, any faerie-born child would belong to her,' Saga continued eagerly, caught up in solving the puzzle. 'Gosh, Nereida must've been absolutely certain she'd become human to make that kind of deal. Can you imagine her shock when you were born, and she discovered you weren't...' Trailing off, Saga bit her lip.

'But that means... because I have water-sprite blood... faerie blood... that's the reason Lillith and my mother wanted to keep me away from Faerie. Because...' His breath hitched.

Saga finished his sentence. 'Because you were promised to Nereida's mother—your faerie grandmother.'

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## *Through the Faerie River*

‘I have a bad feeling about this,’ Alfred said, when they were standing in his granny’s cave the next morning. ‘Please, Saga. Let me try to find Lucas alone. If I can’t, I swear I’ll come and get you.’

‘We have a deal.’ She crossed her arms, partly to keep warm. It was freezing cold, and she was only wearing the wetsuit and trainers. ‘Come on, before I catch a cold.’

Alfred’s face was a little out of focus—her glasses were tucked away in the waterproof pouch. The pouch, which she’d attached to her wrist, also contained a small towel, leggings, a T-shirt, her new hourglass and the silver scissors Alfred had insisted on giving her.

‘Okay,’ he finally said, and swung the rope they’d brought up on his shoulder. One end was tied around her other wrist. ‘Remember, I’ll tug once when you need to hold your breath and twice when you can breathe.’

Biting her teeth together so they didn’t clatter, Saga nodded.

Alfred sat down in the spring, as if the water wasn’t cold. The stream that rushed out of the tunnel rose. He’d be pushing her through this narrowest part, so she positioned herself in front of him. The icy water numbed her legs and hands. Saga lay down on her full belly—she’d eaten as much porridge as Alfred for breakfast. Then she stretched her arms out in front, palms pressed together, and took a deep breath through the snorkel.

Holding on to her trainers, Alfred propelled her forward. Like a torpedo, she travelled at high speed against the current. Water poured into her goggles, so she had to close her eyes. When she felt two tugs at her wrist, she got her head above the surface and emptied the goggles. Blurry, soft light gleamed from a colony of glow worms.

Alfred dived and appeared in front of her, before he yanked once at the rope and pulled her along. Saga inhaled with the aid of the snorkel, whenever she had a chance on their journey through the underground waterways.

‘D’you wanna go back?’ he asked, in a cave so beautiful she wished they could stay to explore. ‘We’re coming to the longest stretch.’

She shook her head and took a deep breath, before he dragged her into a tunnel with torrential water. Saga kicked with her feet to help them along. Her lungs felt like they were about to explode, when he finally hauled her up above the surface. She sputtered and gasped.

‘Give me a minute,’ she panted. If hiking up the cone hill in a storm had been reckless, then she didn’t know how to categorize what she was doing now. For fear of the answer, she didn’t ask how far they still had to swim.

After another couple of snatched breaths through the snorkel, their next real stop was at the bottom of a crevice in a cave that she thought looked familiar. Steep walls rose up on both sides of the fast-flowing stream. It cascaded down to them from a waterfall. Alfred held on to her, or she wouldn’t have been able to stay standing in the waist-deep rush.

‘We’re in Faerie now, right?’ Saga asked, searching the smooth walls for footholds. She’d do anything to get out of the freezing stream.

‘Yeah.’

‘How are we getting up there?’ Saga pointed at the waterfall. It was very loud.

‘You’ll have to climb. I’ll help you.’ He moved the rope from her wrist to her waist, and let it unfurl as he swam against the current.

Moments later, she understood why the verse of the song had called him a smolt, because he simply leapt up the waterfall like a salmon. He hauled her up with the rope, as she climbed next to the torrent.

‘Come. Last stretch. It’s not far,’ he said, when she reached the top. It was funny how Alfred was the one who knew the way and encouraged her along here, like she’d so often done with him in the forest.

The next time he tugged twice, and she raised her head above the surface, they were back in that strange twilight world. The first thing she heard was a wolf-beast howl.

She shuddered, and this time it had nothing to do with the cold.

‘Get under!’ Alfred hissed. ‘Hold on to my shoulders!’

Speeding along, with only her snorkel sticking out of the water, he swam them into the royal gardens.

Saga was barely out of the stream when she fumbled in the pouch for her glasses. Though Alfred had prepared her for the lack of colour and the strange black flowers, it was nothing like seeing the gardens for herself. Staring at everything, she began muttering observations that she wanted to remember. She hadn’t wanted to risk getting her notebook wet, but she wished she’d brought paper.

Far above, birds were circling. Alfred peered up at them, saying, ‘You should hide.’

‘Night flowers are even bigger... like giant peonies...’ Saga leant towards one of them to catch its scent.

‘Don’t touch them!’

‘Why? What happens if I do?’

‘I don’t know, but everyone keeps telling me not to.’

‘Superstitious nobodies!’ In a whirlwind of dark petals, Mr Tumbleweed jumped out of the bush. He was munching on one of the black blossoms.

Both Alfred’s and Mr Tumbleweed’s voices were muffled, so Saga shook water out of her ears. Instantly, her body began to sway to the distant ballroom music. Her wet trainers squelched as they took the first dance steps towards the cone-shaped fortress.

‘Oh no!’ She tried to fight the urge to dance. ‘I’ve forgotten my earmuffs.’

Alfred grasped her arm, holding her back, but he couldn’t stop her feet from tapping out a rhythm. While her body moved to the tune, she scanned the surroundings, desperately searching for something to block the sound.

‘Somebody didn’t think.’ With his twig fingers, Mr Tumbleweed scraped lichen off his leg and rolled it into two small fluff balls. Alfred helped stuff them into Saga’s ears. Her body stopped moving.

‘Can you hear anything?’ Alfred asked, the sound of his voice muffled by the lichen.

‘I can hear you, but not the music.’ Behind the bush, she quickly changed into her striped leggings and T-shirt and looped the strap from the pouch around her waist. She was attaching the hourglass to the strap, when there was a flurry of feathers and inky darkness around them. Evie and Batty transformed from their eagle and bat shapes.

‘What were you thinking?’ Batty stomped her high-heeled boot, as she stopped twirling. ‘How could you bring a human here?’

Evie smoothed down the sleeves of her brown dress. ‘That is rather reckless, young sprite.’

‘If I hadn’t brought her, she’d have followed anyway,’ Alfred said. ‘Can you help keep an eye on her?’

Batty gritted her pointy teeth and gave a curt nod.

‘Hello-oh! I’m here too,’ Saga said.

‘Yes, dear. We’ve noticed,’ Evie said, then continued speaking to Alfred. ‘If we find her one of those shirts with beast-skin straps, I can take her home if there’s trouble.’ She chuckled. ‘You did not think I used the underground tunnels to pass between the realms, did you?’

‘Beast skin?’ With a look of repulsion, Alfred fingered one of the shoulder straps on his moss-green faerie shirt. ‘She can have mine.’

‘You might need it. Let me carry you up to find another one.’ Evie raised her arms slowly, gracefully, like a retired ballet dancer. Feathers raced down her dress and up her sleeves. When she lowered her arms, they were wings.

‘Stay right there,’ Alfred said, as Evie’s claws gripped his beast-skin straps.

He’d told her about being lifted by the eagles, but Saga couldn’t help staring. She hoped she would need Evie’s help to leave Faerie, because flying like that would be amazing and about a thousand times better than swimming though the underground.

When they were out of sight, she noticed Batty glaring at her.

‘I know you’re the one who’s reckless,’ the bat girl hissed. ‘And if you endanger him—’

Before Saga could defend herself, Mr Tumbleweed jumped between them. ‘Some creature body needs to watch how they speak to this one body’s somebody,’ he said.

‘Oh, grow some roots,’ Batty spat out, before she swirled and vanished in a puff of darkness.

‘Thanks,’ Saga said, patting the tree sprite’s twig shoulder.

When Alfred landed again, he thrust a green bundle into her arms. ‘Hurry! Put this on and hide,’ he said. ‘The others are on their way down here for a lesson. Right now!’

‘Perfect! I can’t wait to meet—er... see—them!’

If looks could kill, Alfred’s green eyes would’ve blitzed her to smithereens.

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## *Looking for Lucas*

While Saga put the faerie shirt on over her top, Alfred checked the nearest night-flower bushes for pixies. Finding no trace of them, he made sure Saga and Mr Tumbleweed were hidden under a bush. He'd fought against bringing her here, and he knew she was in danger, but it also felt good to have his friend nearby. For once, he wasn't on his own in Faerie.

'Nemo!' Viola called, as one after the other demi-fae dropped down around him. 'I saw you in the courtyard. Didn't you hear me?'

'Oh... er... Hi. Sorry, I was kind of in a hurry to get back to... er... to the stream.' Alfred craned his neck to inspect the other demi-fae. Of course he couldn't completely discount Uniko or Outis, but he was searching for the boy with floor-length hair. After a haircut, that boy wouldn't look out of place in the real world. He'd heard Kaleido call him Cezar. Mortified, Alfred remembered asking Cezar if he was part water sprite the first time they met, a suggestion Cezar seemed to find offensive. They hadn't spoken since. And now Alfred was even more reluctant to talk to the other boy than he'd usually be with strangers.

Cezar stood with his back and his floor-length brownish hair to Alfred, together with Kaleido and a burly boy with dark skin and four translucent wings that didn't look like they could carry his weight.

'We're going to learn memory enchantment, did you know?' Viola bounced on her feet and craned her neck. 'Is Amanita here? Is she going to teach us?'

‘Sorry, let me just... I need to ask...’ As Alfred approached the other cluster, Kaleido giggled at something Cezar said, her skin shimmering in orange hues. Alfred wouldn’t mind talking to her. He felt he knew her a little. Perhaps she could help.

‘Kaleido,’ he said quietly. ‘Can I speak to you? Alone.’

She nodded and stepped away from the others.

‘I need to ask Cezar something, but I don’t know him,’ he said when they had some privacy. ‘Do you think you could get him to speak to me?’

‘Sure. What are you going to ask him?’

‘I can’t tell you.’

‘So what’s in it for me?’

Alfred had expected this reaction. Nothing came for free in this realm. ‘I’ll tell you a secret.’

She crossed her arms, clearly not expecting to hear anything she didn’t know already.

‘I did hear what Farriel whispered to Amanita.’

‘Go on.’

‘She whispered, “Mother”.’

‘Oh!’ Kaleido’s eyes widened. Electrified red tones danced over her skin. ‘Okay, so don’t tell anyone else—this is too valuable to share widely. Cezar has a hard time getting his moth faerie to dance his choreography, so give him some tips. Wait here.’

She went back to the group, and, after a whispered conversation, Cezar walked over.

‘Kaleido says you want my help with something, and in return you’ll give me a moth tip.’ Cezar swept his floor-length hair back. His hooded eyes were blue—a normal human blue.

Alfred explained about thanking other creatures and how he’d given his moth a name.

‘I suppose it doesn’t harm to try,’ Cezar said, looking slightly bored.

‘Lucas.’ Alfred watched Cezar closely. ‘A good name would be Lucas.’ The hooded eyes stayed half-closed. There was no reaction. It wasn’t him. And now Alfred had suggested that he gave the name to a moth. He should’ve thought this through. What if Cezar did use the name for his moth and began calling ‘Lucas’ all over the place?

‘Lucas?’ Cezar frowned. ‘Nah... That sounds too human. Anyway, what did you want my help with?’

An impressive winged faerie Alfred hadn't seen before glided over them, calling, 'Gather in your clusters and summon your moths.'

'Er... revelation,' Alfred said, improvising. 'I heard you're really good.'

'Well that rumour's false, so you've wasted your information.'

'Never mind.' Holding out his palm for Tiger, Alfred hurried back towards his own cluster. That had been an absolute disaster.

The flying faerie landed in the centre of the small groups of demi-fae. He was tall like the other high faeries Alfred had seen, but his skin was a warm brown and his wings an even darker brown, in a velvety texture. They reached his ankles and made Outis's wings look scruffy.

'Messing with memories is capricious, so I will work with one cluster at a time,' he said. 'And we need space.' While he folded up his wings, he guided the other clusters farther away. 'Spend the waiting time bonding with your moths. Do some light exercises. Trust between you is crucial for this choreography,' he called over his wing.

'Who's that?' Viola asked.

'The flying master,' Outis said, as if it was something everyone knew.

'Psst,' Saga hissed when Alfred passed the night-flower bush where she was hiding.

'It wasn't him,' Alfred muttered.

'Well, no,' she said, 'Because I'm almost certain it's him.' She pointed at Alfred's own cluster, just as Viola looked in their direction.

'Are you talking to Little Mother and Little Father again?' Viola said and came nearer.

'No, I—' Alfred tried to shield Saga from view, but Viola was too close.

'A human? You brought a human for us to practise moth enchantments on?'

'No!' Alfred closed his eyes briefly. He'd known it was a mistake to bring Saga. Now he'd have to trust his cluster with this secret. 'This is my human friend. The one who healed the desolation.' He glanced around. The other clusters were out of sight. 'Please be quiet. I don't want anyone else to see her.'

Saga crawled out from the bush. While getting up, she tightened the two bunches on top of her head and pushed her glasses up. 'You must be Viola. I'm Saga,' she said, holding out a hand.

Viola looked at it with a puzzled expression. 'I can't believe humans actually do this too.' She stretched out her own hand with its sharp nails and gripped Saga's. 'How do you do?'

'Er... good. You probably wouldn't use that greeting unless you were much older.'

'It's a pleasure to meet you, then?' Viola continued to shake Saga's hand, pulling it up and down.

Uniko and Outis had followed Viola and were watching the exchange.

'Or just "Hello",' Saga said. 'And you should've let go of my hand by now.'

Viola dropped Saga's hand in midair. But she'd been holding on so tightly one of her nails had scratched Saga's skin, drawing small beads of blood in a neat line. 'Oh, I'm sorry.'

Before Saga could shake any more hands, Mr Tumbleweed jumped out in front of her.

'Or perhaps say "Hi", without handshakes.' She wiped the blood away on her rainbow-striped leggings.

'Hi,' Uniko said. 'That is helpful to know.'

'Yeah, you could be our humankind teacher,' Viola said.

'Outis and Uniko, right? Nemo has told me so much about you.' Saga gave a small wave.

Alfred tried to gauge if she was looking more at Uniko or Outis. Perhaps he should simply say the name out loud.

'Is that a tree sprite?' Viola asked. 'I've never seen one before. Is he yours?'

Mr Tumbleweed groaned at the same time as Saga said, 'He is a tree sprite, but he's not mine. We just belong together.'

Uniko was saying something, but Alfred wasn't listening. He'd just heard a squeak from above. Batty's small black shape darted across the sky, as she told Alfred to go to the stream where Castor was singing out for him.

Saga was still talking to Uniko. Viola and Outis were discussing whether it was a false rumour that tree sprites were terrified of other faeries. In his creaking voice, Mr Tumbleweed made it very clear that they all had much less faerie blood than him.

Alfred sidestepped to the stream, knelt and stuck his head underwater.

‘Come,’ Castor hummed. ‘Lillith needs you.’ There was a strange urgency to the otherwise calm voice. And Castor had used her name. He wouldn’t do that unless it was important.

Alfred ran back to Saga, whispering into her ear that he had to find the water sprite. ‘Is it Uniko or Outis?’ he asked. ‘Which one of them is the countess’s son?’

‘Just go,’ Saga said. ‘I’ll talk to him.’

‘Look after *her*, please, not me,’ he called up to Batty. ‘You too,’ he murmured to Tiger.

The moth faerie chirped and fluttered over to settle on one of Saga’s bunches.

‘Don’t enchant her,’ he said to the others, and ran back to the water. ‘I trust you!’

Then he dived into the stream to find Lillith. It was his last day in Faerie, and it might be his last chance ever to see his aunt.

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## *A Humankind Expert*

When Alfred disappeared into the shallow-looking stream, Saga returned her attention to the three demi-fae.

There was absolutely no doubt in her mind. Apart from his ‘difference’, as the countess had called his faerie attributes, the boy resembled his mother. Now she just had to get him on his own and somehow find a way to bring him with her out of the faerie realm to a family reunion.

Before she could formulate a plan, Mr Tumbleweed began to shake.

‘They’ll both be sorry,’ a voice screeched from inside the nearest bush.

‘Little Mother? Is that you?’ Viola fell to her knees and peered under the leaves. ‘Where did she go?’

When Mr Tumbleweed calmed down again, Saga knew the pixies were gone. She ran a hand over the beast-skin strap on her shoulder and peeked up to the eagle that circled far above. Whatever the little people intended, she had protection and a way out.

‘Come on,’ Outis said. ‘Nemo and this human have already wasted enough of our time.’

‘No, wait, I want to hear more about the human world and how humans actually behave,’ Viola said. ‘Will you teach us, Saga? Nemo never tells us anything.’

‘Sure...’ A new aspiration for her life began to take shape in Saga’s mind. Perhaps she could become the expert on all things human in

Faerie, instead of the other way around. Except, of course, she didn't want the faerie creatures to be able to blend in too well, given their habits of enchanting or abducting humans. Realizing that she might just have found the easiest solution to her problem, she said, 'If you come with me to the human world, I could show you lots of useful things.'

'We're not allowed to leave,' Uniko said.

'And why would we want to?' Outis asked.

'Oh.' Saga looked from one to the other. No easy solution after all.

'And we really should exercise our moths,' Uniko said. 'But without Nemo, we can't pair up.'

'If you wake me up right away, you could take turns putting me to sleep,' Saga said, as she wiped away the drop of blood that was rolling down her wrist. Alfred had let the others enchant him. Why shouldn't she? And it would give her a chance to talk to each of them on their own. 'But no memory stuff!' She'd seen what that had done to Oliver.

'A real human!' Viola eyes shone. They looked even more unnatural than Alfred's. 'Can I try first?'

'Sure,' Saga said. 'I'll be okay,' she added to Mr Tumbleweed, ignoring his stream of warnings.

When Viola swirled her index finger in front of an off-white moth faerie with purple and red stripes on its wings, Saga fought not to close her eyes. But as soon as the creature spiralled towards her, it was too late anyway. She couldn't even blink.

She came to, sitting on the ground. Viola had stepped back and was standing with Outis and Uniko, worried expressions on all their faces. A hand was gripping her shoulder. It took a moment for Saga to realize that it couldn't be Mr Tumbleweed's gnarly twigs—the hold was soft but firm, and he was lying on the ground next to her, shaking so much his joints rattled.

She swallowed and glanced down at the pale, slender hand. A small snake, biting its own tail, slithered around the wrist in perpetual circles.

'Look what the tide brought...' Amanita said, as Saga scrambled to her feet. 'Where is Nemo?'

'I think he's taking a swim,' Viola said.

Outis pointed at Saga. 'He told her where he was going.'

'Leaving a frail, defenceless human with you three. He must have been desperate to cool down.'

Saga heard the suspicion in Amanita's voice. She had to distract her from discovering what Alfred was doing.

'I'm not frail or defenceless.' She wiped her hand on her leggings again, trying to hide the blood, which would make her appear weak and human. To steady herself, she picked up Mr Tumbleweed. In her arms, he calmed down a little. Then he slid down so he was standing between her and the high faerie, trembling, his stick hands held up with their quivering twigs spread wide.

'I shall take you back where you belong.' Amanita swished her skirt, peppering the ground with red toadstools. 'You already know too many of our secrets... though nothing a simple memory enchantment cannot remove.'

'I won't disclose any secrets. There's no need for moths or anything like that. Cross my heart.' Saga placed her right hand on her chest. 'Remember, I helped bring your—' She stopped herself from saying daughter. If she revealed her knowledge of that relationship, her memory would surely be wiped. 'The faerie in the desolation back.'

Amanita narrowed her eyes, as if she suspected what Saga had been about to say.

'I could be useful again,' Saga spoke hurriedly. 'If you really want the demi-fae to blend in with humans, they need to do better. They don't even know how to say hello like children their own age. And look what happened when one of them shook my hand!'

Amanita stared at the drop of blood that ran down Saga's wrist from the scratch. 'Let me heal that.'

Saga hesitated.

'Unless you want to attract the beasts.'

After Saga gently pushed the quivering Mr Tumbleweed aside, Amanita glided closer. Her long index finger stroked the cut, swiping the blood away. Saga shuddered. Where the scratch had been, a thin white line, like an old scar, crossed her hand.

As she stepped backwards, Amanita touched her lips with the blood-streaked finger. The tip of a pointy tongue flicked out with the speed of a lizard catching an insect.

'It's not only glamour?' Saga ran a finger over the spot. Had the high faerie just tasted her blood?

‘Of course not,’ Outis said. All three demi-fae crowded around her to study the scar.

‘How intriguing,’ Amanita muttered. ‘Old blood bound to an offshoot of the ancient tree father.’ Or something like that. With lichen in her ears, Saga couldn’t be sure. The high faerie scrutinized her, and said, ‘You may stay.’

‘Am I allowed to leave?’ she asked. ‘And perhaps come back another time?’

‘If you can find someone to show you the way.’

Someone. The word gave Saga an idea. Crossing her fingers for luck, she asked, ‘Can I choose anyone I want to guide me?’

‘Not keen on swimming?’

Amanita’s butterfly hair clips tittered.

‘No.’ Saga shook her head wildly, hoping to distract from her real objective. ‘Can I?’

From somewhere far beyond the faerie fortress, a deep resonant horn, that Saga had no trouble hearing, sounded.

‘Yes,’ Amanita said, noticeably distracted, though not by Saga, as the horn was answered by howling beasts.

‘What’s happening?’ Saga asked.

With a swirl of her dress and a blast of cool air, Amanita vanished, leaving a ring of toadstools.

Saga hoped Alfred was nowhere near those antlered wolf beasts. But she had got her wish. She could select anyone to guide her out of the faerie realm, and the particular anyone she had in mind was standing right in front of her. The countess’s son.

If Saga chose him as her guide, Amanita had just given him permission to leave Faerie.

*Lillith's Source*

‘Where is she?’ Alfred sang, as he followed Castor against the current underneath the faerie fortress, in search of Lillith.

‘At her source,’ the catfish hummed, and led Alfred into ever-narrower streams. Some cascaded over boulders in the open landscape. Others sliced rocks at the bottom of gullies.

The only sound below the surface came from distant fish choirs, singing the familiar refrain. Alfred didn’t pause to listen to any new verses.

Suddenly, the volume increased. A school of fish surrounded them, bellowing the chorus. At the same time, long strands of water-sprite hair waved in the current. The stream was coming alive.

What Alfred saw and heard momentarily overpowered his other senses. He truly believed Lillith had recovered, that her hair was regrowing. Then he tasted the water and brushed against an unfamiliar tendril.

‘You found a replacement?’ Alfred asked in his underwater singing voice.

‘A distant cousin,’ Castor hummed. ‘He will let you use the waterways.’

My cousin, Alfred wanted to ask, but Castor sped up, swimming into a deserted side stream.

After a while, Alfred stuck his head up above the surface, like he’d done a few times on their journey, trying to get his bearings. This stream

trickled so deep inside the woods he could see nothing but trees. On one of them, a face stared back at him, its forked tongue flicking out. A beast howled.

The scary sound was loud and too near, and it was followed by the blast from a strange-sounding horn. Hurriedly, Alfred ducked back under the surface and paddled harder to catch up.

They were swimming upstream and uphill in a small waterfall when he heard howls again. His head wasn't even above water. Was he being led into a trap set by the queen's consort? But, no, he trusted Castor.

As they neared the spring's source, the water turned cooler. Scattered wispy strands snaked along the riverbed. Alfred tasted the turquoise colour he associated with Granny's yarn and tapestries.

'Lillith,' he sang, knowing finally that she was alive.

A faint voice whispered his name, as he and Castor swam into a small pond.

Castor splashed with his tail and retreated into the shadows, humming, 'I'll await you here.'

To make sure the beasts hadn't followed him, Alfred resurfaced. Boulders formed a protective ring around the pool, which was smaller than Granny's kitchen. A rocky hillock rose behind it. The spring trickled out of the massive stone, filling the pool with pure and refreshing water. This was the source, the main source of the waterways that had been his mother's.

Under the surface, he found Lillith where the source dribbled into the pool. With her eyes closed, she floated vertically in the pure water. Most of her hair strands barely reached her feet. Without the abundant tendrils she looked fragile and vulnerable. It would take months before she could inhabit the streams again.

'I'm sorry,' he sang and swam to her side.

She opened her eyes. Their usual vibrant-green colour was clouded and dulled.

Shaking her head, she whisper-sang, 'I do not blame you.'

'Why didn't you tell me you're my mother's sister?'

'I promised Nereida...'

A small shoal of striped fish swam around them. '*Nereida, Nereida, Nereida,*' they chorused quietly.

‘She sacrificed herself for you.’ With what seemed to require all her strength, Lillith raised one hand and placed it on his cheek. ‘I vowed to keep you away.’

‘*Away, away, away,*’ the fish murmured.

Alfred placed his hand on top of hers, pressing it to his cheek. How had he not realized they were related from the very beginning? A small voice in his head reminded him that he’d feared she was his mother.

‘I wanted you... to stay...’ Lillith’s voice faded.

‘*Stay, stay, stay.*’

If he’d known who she was, he would’ve wanted to stay too.

‘Can this help?’ He fished the water-sprite figurine out of his pocket. ‘Perhaps give you strength?’

‘*Strength, strength, strength,*’ the fish repeated, but Alfred didn’t notice them any more.

A little life returned to Lillith’s eyes, but she didn’t move her hand from his cheek. ‘Too late. But she is there... Part of her is... You must free her...’

‘How?’

‘Learn from her... Never trust her...’

‘Who?’

‘Her mother...’

‘Nereida’s mother? Who—’

A black shape, much too fast to be a fish, shot right past Alfred. Lillith’s whole body jerked, as an arrow pierced her shoulder. Its silver tip burst through the skin on her back. Dark-green liquid oozed out of both wounds.

‘No!’ he cried, as a second arrow rammed into her upper arm.

Her hair came alive. It formed a shield. A too-small shield.

‘My sister... is... both,’ she panted. ‘This and the other.’ Like herself, the meaning of everything Lillith said was fluid.

‘What d’you mean?’ he sang.

Instead of answering, her hand on his cheek tensed. With a high-pitched wail, she pushed him down below her and enclosed him in her hair. He tried to free himself, but she kept him both shielded and captured. Every arrow made her jolt and tugged at strands around Alfred. The water turned a misty green with her blood.

Suddenly, Lillith's tendrils loosened their grip. Through the dispersing hair, Alfred saw a dozen arrows sticking out of her torso. The greenish fluid bled from every wound and seeped out of her mouth.

'Use this... treasure...' Each word was a struggle for her. 'From our father.' One knotty tangle directly above him unravelled itself. He grasped the small smooth object it released. It had belonged to his grandfather.

Lillith's body jerked as another arrow hit her chest. And then she floated upwards towards the surface. For one short moment, her hair fanned out around her—a dark sun in the moonlit pond. Then the strands wilted, breaking down. Before Alfred could react, Lillith's whole body dissolved into greenish glittering flecks.

Around him, the fish hummed a solemn requiem.

One by one, the arrows turned their silvery tips down. Kept afloat by the lightness of wood and feathers, they drifted out of the pool, upright, like snuffed-out candles.



## *Finding the Light*

After Amanita vanished, Mr Tumbleweed relaxed a little. The three demi-fae stared at Saga, while she turned the hourglass. She hoped it wasn't too long since the sand had run through.

'Why aren't you afraid of Amanita?' Outis asked. The high faerie's vanishing act had brushed his hair to the side, so Saga could see his features better.

'I'm terrified of her,' she replied. 'This is all a kind of human glamour, called hide-your-real-feelings. We can do that, you know. I can see you're doing it too.'

Outis narrowed his eyes. The spark of anger in them was the last proof she needed.

'You know, Outis,' she said and stared right back at him. 'Your mother looked at me in the exact same way yesterday. You have her eyes. And chin, I think.'

'His mother?' Viola asked. 'Isn't your mother a faerie, Outis? Like ours?'

Saga kept her eyes fixed on Outis's until he blinked.

'You're lying,' he said. 'No one knows who my mother is.' There was something about the way his lips tightened into a line that reminded Saga of the countess too.

'I know her name. I even know yours. Your true name.'

'You're lying,' he repeated, with less force. 'I don't even know my true name.'

‘Nemo knows it too.’

‘Why hasn’t he used it against me then?’

‘Why would he? He wants to be your friend.’

‘Come, Viola,’ Uniko said.

‘But I want to hear...’

‘I think we should give them a little space.’ Under muttered protests, Uniko dragged Viola away.

Outis crossed his arms. ‘So what is it?’

‘Wait.’ Saga peered into the closest bush. ‘Are the pixies nearby, Mr Tumbleweed? Can anyone overhear us?’

‘No nasty nobodies here, but the bat body.’

Saga didn’t know what kind of reaction to expect, so having Batty listen in might be helpful.

‘It’s Lucas,’ she said quietly.

Outis’s whole body tensed, his fingers stretching and spreading, his hair standing up and wings vibrating, as if she’d given him an electric shock. He inhaled sharply and then everything relaxed again.

‘Lucas,’ he whispered. ‘That’s my name? Lucas.’

‘It’s a nice name,’ Saga said. ‘It means something like “bringer of light”. Perhaps you can bring some light in here. It must be awful to live in this half-darkness all the time and never see the sun...’ When he didn’t react, she continued, filling the silence. ‘Your mother’s name is Leonora. You were stolen from her when you were a baby, and she’s been sad ever since... Not only sad, angry too... Angry at all the faeries, because she knows they took you...’ Saga trailed off.

Outis, as she was determined to continue to call him, didn’t speak. His eyes blinked a lot. ‘What do you want from me?’ he croaked.

‘Want?’ Saga asked, before she realized he thought she planned on using the knowledge to blackmail him. ‘You misunderstand. You can trust me, I swear. I’m a friend, and I am actually good at keeping secrets.’

From his sceptical expression, Saga knew a simple oath wouldn’t convince him. But what she was about to do went against all her instincts. She glanced at Mr Tumbleweed. He was far enough away that he couldn’t stop her if she spoke quickly.

‘My true name is—’

A creaking-floorboard moan sounded, as Mr Tumbleweed jumped straight at her.

‘Lily,’ Saga said, a split second before his twig hands covered her mouth.

‘Somebody is too foolhardy for this one body’s good!’

‘Sorry,’ Saga mumbled, freeing herself from the tree sprite. ‘If you don’t want to trust me, now you know. We’re even.’

‘Lily,’ Outis repeated.

Mr Tumbleweed’s round black eyes narrowed into scowling slits.

‘It’s a flower. Beautiful but quite stinky. And I think the name means “white and pure”.’ She snorted and pointed down at her grubby leggings. ‘Not very fitting!’

Without even smiling at her joke, Outis asked, ‘What’s she like, my human mother?’

‘I don’t really know her. No one does. Ever since the faeries snatched you, she’s been a recluse. But she’s definitely clever. And she can see faeries and she knows your father was a faerie creature. She’s also beautiful and looks a lot like you.’

‘How can she look like me when I have these?’ With a flourish, Outis swept his wings out in a stunning display of russet feathers.

‘Wow!’

Outis beat his wings once and rose up above the large bushes, then drifted down again. ‘Did she ask you to find me?’

‘I told her Nemo and I would try,’ Saga said, avoiding a direct lie. ‘The thing is, Outis... You know that some bad humans are planning to do something to the Faerie Hill that will cause widespread desolation here, right? Well, your mother can stop them.’

‘A human has that kind of power?’

‘Er... She kind of does. But right now she hates faeries, and she thinks she wants the realm destroyed. I believe, if she met you, she’d change her mind. You could change her mind.’

Under glaring eyes, his mouth became a thin line again. ‘I knew you wanted something in return. But if you try to force me, I’ll tell everyone your name.’ With his wings spread, he looked formidable.

Between them, Mr Tumbleweed growled like a particularly hostile watchdog.

Gingerly, as when Dad tried to calm a spooked horse, Saga reached out to touch Outis’s shoulder. ‘I’m not going to force you,’ she said

softly. 'But I'd like your help in persuading your mum, that's true. If you're willing.'

'She'd hate me. I'm more faerie than human.' Outis's wings folded in behind his back as he slumped.

'No, she wouldn't.' Saga kept her hand on his shoulder.

'I haven't learnt to hide my wings with glamour yet.'

Saga realized that behind his arrogant exterior, Outis was just as insecure as Alfred. She wished she was more like her mum, who could make anyone feel better with a few words. 'I'm sure your mother would love you if she met you. You might not be entirely human, but you are you, and she wouldn't want you to hide any part of yourself. And from what I can see you have the best of both worlds. You can actually fly, and that's amazing! As soon as Nemo is back, we could swim out to meet her.'

'No!' He jerked back. 'I don't want to meet her before I can hide my wings.'

Saga took a deep breath. They didn't have much time. She placed her hand on his shoulder again, wondering how to persuade him.

'Perhaps...' Outis cleared his throat. 'Perhaps I could see her from a distance... I can't swim, though.'

'Maybe Evie can show you her flight route out of the realm. Can you hide your human body with glamour to look like an eagle?'

'Why would I want to look like a creature?'

As if called by Saga saying her name, Evie circled down and landed by their side.

Outis stared at her with wide eyes, when her wings vanished and she appeared in her almost-human form.

'We were just talking about you,' Saga said.

'No time to natter, dear. We must be off.' With a claw-like hand, Evie reached up to straighten one of Saga's shoulder straps. 'There is trouble afoot.'

'Can Outis come with us?'

'I'm not allowed to leave.'

'You are,' Saga said. 'I want you to be my guide out of here. Didn't you hear? Amanita gave me permission to choose anyone.'

'But I don't know the way.'

'Evie can be your guide. Right, Evie?'

Evie's yellow eyes peered at Outis. 'If he does not cause as many problems as others of his kind.' Her dress was already feathered and her nose grew into a beak.

Saga barely had time to tighten the pouch around her waist before she was lifted off the ground.

'See you by the castle,' she called to Mr Tumbleweed, who was creaking very loud complaints about nobodies and abominations making his one job impossible.

With the jolting movements of Evie's wings, they rose up above the dark trees. Outis flew next to her. He almost resembled a bird, though it wasn't a kind that existed in the real world.

Saga had been so focused on getting Outis to come with her that it only now registered what Evie had said when she'd appeared so conveniently. 'What trouble is afoot?' she called up to the eagle.

Evie screeched an answer Saga couldn't understand.

From high above, she tried to spot Alfred. Howling beasts drew her attention to the far side of the fortress. On the cliffs around a small pond, a herd of antlered guards spread out, their armour gleaming in the moonlight. Were they hunting Alfred?

Swim, she wanted to yell. But she was too far away.

Before Saga could see what was happening, Evie carried her up into a cloud. And then she couldn't see anything at all. The billowing mass grew denser, as they passed through the fabric between the realms.

They flew inside that impenetrable fog for a long time. Saga didn't know how long—she'd forgotten to use her hourglass, and in the strange cloudscape she wouldn't have been able to see it anyway. She closed her eyes, listened to Outis's wingbeats behind them and hoped Alfred had stayed underwater and escaped.

When they finally exited the cloud, Evie descended towards colourful autumn trees, the afternoon sun glinting on the copper roofs of the castle turrets. While Saga guided them to the wall at the end of the garden, she kept glancing at Outis. At Lucas. His feathers gleamed with light in the sunshine.

She had found something even better than a changeling, and somehow she would persuade him to meet his mother.



## *The Faerie Grandmother*

Alfred didn't cry. The water didn't turn salty. He sank to the very bottom of the pool and opened his hand to look at Lillith's treasure.

A conch lay in his palm. Brown and bluish dots spotted its porcelain-smooth ivory surface. Air bubbled out of an opening that looked like it had been cut out with zigzag scissors. It was pretty, but not many would call it a treasure. Still, to someone in a mountain spring, this shell from a warm ocean must've been exotic.

'I'll treasure it,' he whispered to no one, and gently slid the egg-sized shell into the pocket that used to hold the silver scissors.

The current tugged at Alfred's hair as he swam to where water from the pool flowed into the stream.

'May the seven seas restore her sprite spirit,' Castor hummed sombrely. 'Come.'

'Wait. I have to see who... who killed Lillith.' He kicked off from the rocky bottom and floated upwards.

Shedding scales like glittering confetti, a dark shadow formed in the water and rose up in front of him. It came out of the catfish. Or it was the catfish. It was Castor, changing shape into something human-like. The warrior he became was not as large as Bjørn, but his shoulders were almost as wide. Braided grey hair and a long beard hung down in thin plaits over his bare chest.

'Stay close to me,' he sang, in a gravelly voice.

Still underwater, they faced each other, Castor's strong hands gripping his shoulders. Alfred looked into the shapeshifter's bulging grey eyes and nodded. As they broke the surface, Alfred saw two wolf beasts and a herd of antlered archers behind Castor. Their bows swung, so their arrows pointed directly at them.

An arrow whizzed towards them. Castor grunted, as it lodged itself in the back of his upper arm.

'Cease!' a voice commanded. A voice Alfred recognized.

And there, between the antlered beasts, stood Amanita.

With a swish of her long hair, she let an eclipse of moth faeries loose. They swarmed towards the antlered guards, who, one by one, fixated on their flying enchanters and slumped to the ground in spellbound sleep. The two beasts yelped and escaped with their tails between their legs.

One moth flew towards Alfred, but he knew it wasn't meant for him. Luckily, Castor hadn't seen it yet.

'Duck!' Alfred pushed down on his wide shoulders.

Castor pulled them both under.

'She won't harm me,' Alfred sang, while Castor tore the arrow out of his arm.

He thrust it into Alfred's hand, which closed around it. Microscopic particles rose from the riverbed and swirled around them. They grew into glittering fish scales and attached themselves to the faerie creature's fast-shrinking shape until Castor was a catfish again. A few scales were missing on his back, but otherwise he appeared to be unscathed.

'Be wary,' Castor hummed. 'The water tastes funny where she treads.'

With the arrow in his clenched fist, Alfred resurfaced.

'Why didn't you stop them?' he shouted, while he climbed the nearest flat boulder. 'They've killed Lillith!' He waved the arrow at the unconscious antlered guards, then at Amanita, as he advanced. 'You've killed Lillith!' Stomping, his shoes squelching, he reached her. 'Why?' he screamed right into her face.

In silence, she let him rage at her.

'We were rescuing you,' she said, when he paused to draw breath.

'Rescuing?' he bellowed, breaking the arrow and throwing the pieces on the rock.

'You once told me Lillith tried to drown you.'

‘That was ages ago. Before I knew who she was. That she was my mother’s sister.’ He shook with rage. And he wanted to stay angry, to let his fury fuel him. Without it, he would crumble.

‘My dear Alfred, when the queen’s trusted agents tell me a warrior of the seven seas is taking you to the water sprite... and after you had cut off her hair... How could I not believe she had ill intent? And then I find you captured in her slimy strands.’ Her concern was almost convincing.

The queen’s agents—those nasty pixies—must have followed him. He’d led the guards here to Lillith’s hiding place. It was all his fault. For a moment, he couldn’t breathe. ‘Now the only tie to my mother is gone,’ he said, then sank down, shoulders shaking with anger and repressed sobs.

He felt the cool breeze from Amanita’s dress as she crouched beside him.

‘Lillith was not the only family tie,’ she said softly, resting a hand on his shoulder.

If she was going to tell him where he could find his faerie relatives now, he would scream.

‘Nereida... Nereida was... is my daughter.’

Alfred shook off her hand and stared up at her, trying to gauge what went on behind those bottomless black eyes. ‘Is this a trick? You’re not a water sprite.’

‘I assure you, it’s not a trick.’ She smiled and opened her arms.

He leant away. ‘So who’s her father?’

‘An ancient river sprite who died long ago. He also fathered Lillith and a myriad of other water creatures, none of whom are my children,’ Amanita answered. Her voice was like warm milk with honey; comforting, soothing his raw emotions. What she said made little sense, until he thought about Nereida’s exceptional abilities. She’d been so skilled at glamour she could live among unsuspecting humans. And Farriel had surmised Alfred had high-faerie blood. Farriel, who had called Amanita ‘mother’. Did that mean she too was his aunt?

Alfred’s breathing slowed, the tension in his shoulders relaxed a little. ‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ he asked.

‘I wanted to get to know you first.’

‘That’s a rubbish reason.’ It made him feel as if he had been auditioning to be her grandson. What if he hadn’t shown any aptitude for

glamour or moth enchantments? Would she still have disclosed their relationship? 'If you're really Nereida's mother... why haven't you found her yet? You found Farriel—' Alfred stopped himself. He wasn't ready to reveal that he knew what Farriel whispered. *Learn from her, never trust her*, Lillith had said about Nereida's mother. And that was exactly what he planned to do.

'Believe me, I have tried,' Amanita said. 'But I taught her too much. Or not enough. One of her enchantments must have gone wrong. But I know she is still here. I sense her spirit. I hear echoes of her song in the streams and feel her presence in the woods. Most of all, I see her whenever I look at you.' Those black eyes still gave nothing away. Her cheeks were wet, though, despite the two butterfly faeries that were busy wiping off her tears.

'Is she in here?' He manoeuvred the water-sprite figurine out of his pocket. 'Is this like one of the spirit prisons, so the queen can free her?'

He held on, while Amanita caressed the water sprite's cheek.

'I wish it were that simple. But this is not what you call a spirit prison, although I do sense a spark of her essence...' She shook her head—the butterfly faeries fluttered back to her hair. Then she straightened and said in her usual composed voice, 'I believe *you* have the power to find her, Alfred. I *need* you to help me bring her back.'

Alfred stowed the woodcarving away, while he wondered why she stressed her need for his help.

'I am your *granny*, and I *need* you to stay,' she said.

When she emphasized 'granny', the penny dropped. She was alluding to the agreement he had made with her on the day of the cavern opening. What exactly was the wording? He would continue to come to faerie until Dad or Granny needed him... and now she was claiming to be his granny and need him.

Had he messed up? Was he now bound by their deal? Bound to stay in Faerie?

Of course, he wanted to learn from her and recover his mother if that was at all possible. But if Amanita had already searched for her, then that would take time. Time he didn't have, because Granny would genuinely need his help later today when she came home.

'Granny—my human granny—needs me,' he muttered, while his mind worked. And there in his own words was the answer.

‘You might be my grandmother,’ he said, getting to his feet. ‘We might even say you are my granny... But you can never be Granny, because that is the name I have given to my human grandmother. And the deal I made was for Dad or Granny needing me, using the names I call them.’

‘Touché, *alf rät*.’

High on his win, he couldn’t help saying, ‘Would you prefer to be called Gran? Or perhaps Nan or Nana?’

‘You shall call me Amanita until I tell you something else.’ She reached for him, but he took a step back. ‘And you will stay. Your mother vowed that a faerie-born child would be brought up by me in this realm.’

‘Where’s the proof of that?’ he asked, his voice shaking slightly, for fear some weird enchantment would be invoked. He knew from the song about Nereida and Applevale that some kind of promise had been made. ‘In any case, I’m old enough to decide for myself, so I am going to leave now, Amanita. *Granny* needs me.’ When nothing happened, he jumped off the boulder into the pool.

Strands of the new water-sprite’s hair swirled around him. He resurfaced, waving a handful of the river weed tresses. ‘And by the way, you don’t need to search for a new water sprite. One of my cousins or grand cousins has already taken up the role.’

Amanita stared down at him from the flat boulder, saying, ‘You are more like me than you think.’

‘See you later, grandmother,’ he said with a lightness he didn’t feel. The loss of Lillith made his heart so heavy he should’ve sunk to the riverbed. The last thing he saw before he submerged himself was Amanita’s face as it broke into a wide smile.

All the way to the royal gardens, following Castor, Alfred thought about that smile and how he might be like her. Did she refer to his cunning, which did feel good when it meant he could outsmart her? Or had she meant his ruthlessness in incapacitating Lillith, an action that had ultimately led to his aunt’s death? What other traits might he have inherited from her? The thoughts were unpleasant, but they helped keep his sadness at bay.

When Uniko told him an eagle creature had flown away with Saga and Outis, Alfred swam on. He welcomed the new speculations. Outis

was Lucas. Outis, who'd been right in front of Alfred all along. He was the countess's son! And Alfred could guess where they had gone.

Deep in the underground river, with the assurance of someone navigating their own neighbourhood, he followed a stream that he instinctively knew would take him to the castle.

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## *Vanishing Wings*

Saga landed with both feet on top of the wall in the woods behind the castle. She lurched forward as Evie let go of the shoulder straps on her faerie shirt, then caught her balance.

‘Evie, wait!’ she called, but the eagle shapeshifter beat her powerful wings and screeched.

‘She doesn’t have time,’ Outis translated. He was leaning over, breathing heavily. All feathers except those on his wings were gone, but the bird glamour disguise had exhausted him.

‘Has something happened to Nemo?’

‘I don’t know. She didn’t say.’ He turned towards the castle and his breath caught.

Below them, on the sunny terrace, the countess was sitting in her deckchair. He’d spotted her immediately.

Saga glanced sideways at him. The breeze tousled his hair and riffled his feathers. Both were the exact same reddish-brown colour as his mother’s hair.

‘That’s her. My mother,’ he said, staring fixedly at the countess. ‘She looks sad.’

Saga couldn’t make out the woman’s expression, but perhaps Outis’s eyes were as eagle-like as his feathers.

‘She is. But you can cheer her up.’ Thinking this might be her best chance and that an ambush could work, she continued. ‘Let’s go meet her right now.’

‘No!’ Outis crossed his arms and his wings fanned out behind him in that imposing posture again. He didn’t look away from the countess.

Before she could do more than nod, Mr Tumbleweed jumped from the nearest oak tree onto the wall. With one of his doglike growls, he leapt over Outis and landed between them, his back to Saga, his twig fingers curled into claws, ready to protect her.

Outis didn’t even notice.

‘There’s no need for that,’ Saga said, gripping the tree sprite’s gnarled shoulders and pulling him towards her. ‘Did you see Nemo? D’you know what happened?’

‘Some nobody is in a quagmire.’

‘Somebody? Or nobody? And what d’you mean by quagmire? That he’s in trouble?’ Saga clutched him so his twig arms grated. If she couldn’t get Outis to see his mother, then she’d left Alfred to fend for himself for no reason.

Mr Tumbleweed shook her hands off and pointed out into the woods. ‘This one body means that quagmire.’

Saga heard a splash. Between the branches of the oak trees, she saw a small pond. Or, she supposed, a mire. Alfred rose out of the shallow water and sloshed to the bank.

‘I’ll be right back,’ she said to Outis, and called, ‘Nemo!’ Relief surging through her, she ran along the wall to the fallen tree that she’d used as a gangplank on her other visits. ‘Come! You can climb up over here.’

Without answering, Alfred trudged towards her, leaves rustling under his heavy footfalls. When he came closer, she noticed his hair had grown longer. The wet strands hung limply, dripping and covering his face. His defeated demeanour turned her relief to concern.

Alfred didn’t even look up before he began clambering up the tree trunk. As she reached down to help him stand and cross to the wall, he clasped her hand so tightly it squashed her fingers. Below the dark hair, his bottom lip quivered. Something was definitely wrong.

‘What happened?’ she asked quietly, after a peek back at Outis, who was still staring down at his mother.

‘Lillith is gone,’ he murmured.

Saga put her arms around him. She wanted to know all the details, but they might not have long before the countess went inside, and she still

had to convince Outis to meet his mother.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she said, feeling the everyday words were feeble and not nearly big enough to express what she wanted to say. She could imagine how distressed he must be. After finally finding someone from his faerie family, he’d lost them before he’d had a chance to get to know them.

He hugged her back, his wet hair pressed against her cheek.

She squeezed hard, trying to put all the words she didn’t say into the embrace.

‘And Amanita is my grandmother,’ he whispered into her ear, before he freed himself from the hug.

Saga gasped. ‘Amanita?’

‘I’ll tell you everything later.’ With what seemed to require immense effort he tried to smile, though it was more of a grimace. ‘Hey Outis,’ he called. ‘So it’s you.’

Outis tore his eyes away from the countess and looked their way before he nodded.

In single file, Alfred followed Saga over to where Outis stood on the wall.

‘And you’re going down to meet your mother now?’ Alfred asked.

‘No.’ Outis pressed his mouth into a thin line. ‘I... I don’t want her to see me like this.’

‘She won’t care about your wings.’

‘You don’t know that. You look so human, they can’t see you’re not one of them.’ Outis pressed his lips together and clenched his fists so hard his knuckles turned white in concentration. His wings vanished, and he looked like a normal boy who happened to be clad in one of those strange faerie tracksuits. ‘The first time we meet, I want her to see me like this,’ he said through gritted teeth, before his glamour shield fell and his wings became visible again.

‘That was amazing.’ Saga patted his shoulder directly in front of the wing. Alfred had told her how difficult it was for the demi-fae to hide their faerie features.

‘No, it wasn’t,’ Outis said. ‘I’m not nearly as good as Nemo at this. I never wanted to be able to pass as a human. But now...’ He shrugged, sending a ripple through the feathers. ‘I’m going to learn, and then I’ll come back.’

Saga took Outis's hand and gave it a squeeze. He squeezed back. He'd hated humans, but she'd somehow broken through a barrier much stronger than his glamour shield. Perhaps dealing with lost half-faeries was her special ability. Somehow she had to find the right words to persuade Outis to meet the countess now, because they really didn't have time for him to learn to hide his wings.

'Outis...' Perhaps if she called him Lucas? Before Saga could decide what to say, Alfred spoke.

'If it was me... If I were your mother, I mean,' he said. 'I'd want to meet you immediately. No matter if I could see your wings or not. I wouldn't want to postpone it one minute. Some things shouldn't be postponed. Because... because bad things happen. People disappear. Or die.' He wiped his eyes on his moss-green sleeve. 'It's pretty windy,' he said, when he caught Saga looking at him.

Outis didn't answer. His gaze was again focused on the figure in the deckchair.

'Nemo's right. Your mum has been miserable for twelve years. She won't care about your wings.' Saga crossed her fingers behind her back. Alfred hadn't seen how strongly the countess was opposed to faeries. And stubbornness was another trait mother and son shared. What if they convinced Outis and the countess rejected him?

After a while, Outis straightened. 'Okay,' he said. He looked down at Saga's hand in his, but he didn't let go. 'If you'll come with me. Both of you. I've never had a mother, so I don't have anything to lose. And if you say she can stop the destruction of the Faerie Hill...'

'Great,' Saga said, glad Outis didn't have too high expectations of the family reunion. 'Mr Tumbleweed, can you help?'

While he grumbled about having allergic reactions to touching demi-fae and other 'abominations', his tree-sprite roots fastened on the wall, and he lowered Saga and Alfred down into the garden. Outis, spreading his wings, glided to the ground.

Together the three of them walked downhill to the terrace, Mr Tumbleweed leaping from tree to tree behind them. Saga kept a lookout for Little Mother and Little Father—it would be typical if the pixies turned up to ruin everything—but she didn't see them. As the trio got nearer, Outis dragged his feet. Saga, marching on, stepped closer to Alfred, so they hid Outis from view.

The countess appeared to be asleep, a blanket wrapped around her slender shape in its fur coat.

They stopped a few metres away, and Saga cleared her throat, calling, 'Leonora,' in the sing-song tones Mum used to wake her up.

'Leonora,' Outis whispered, as his mother stretched and blinked awake.

When she saw them, she tore off her blanket and sprang up. 'You!' she said.

'Yes, it's me,' Saga answered calmly. 'This is Nemo—the half-faerie friend I told you about. We've come to ask you to veto the tourism project.' She stepped aside, revealing Outis. 'And we've brought your son.'

Between her and Alfred, Outis stood, eyes shining, his wings hidden by glamour.

Saga willed the countess forward, wanting her to take him into her arms.

But that didn't happen.

Clutching her blanket, the countess froze on the spot, all colour draining from her face. Her gaze darted from Saga to Outis to Alfred and back. Her mouth opened and closed, but no words came out.

Outis began to tremble. For a short while his glamour shield flickered, the wings appearing and disappearing in flashes, then they became fully visible.

The countess gasped and took a step back.

'Wait! It's your son,' Saga said. 'Please—'

She was interrupted by a loud creak. The terrace door opened and Ms Walters appeared. Talking to someone still inside the castle, she held the door to prevent it from slamming shut.

A booming voice answered.

Just before its owner stepped outside, Saga recognized the voice of Mayor Underwood.



## *Definitely Extraordinary*

Alfred noticed the arrival of the mayor in the periphery of his vision, but his focus was on Outis. A moment ago, he'd been torn between envy that Outis would be reunited with his mother and happiness for the other boy. Now he was devastated at the so-called mother's reaction. Perhaps the countess was in shock, but that was no excuse for her stony expression. And to Alfred, this outcome seemed infinitely worse than not having a mother at all.

'Hide your wings,' Saga hissed. She took a step forward, so Outis was at least partly hidden from the mayor's view.

'What are you children doing here?' The mayor bellowed as he came nearer, a stack of papers under one arm.

The woman in the apron, who must be the housekeeper, glanced curiously at them before she went back inside.

'Hello, Mr Underwood,' Saga said, in her best public-speaking voice, as if they had just as much right to be there as he had. Alfred was certain she'd omitted calling him mayor on purpose.

Ignoring her, the mayor barged towards the countess. 'Countess Von Longstone,' he said with a small nod, extending a hand. When she didn't take it, he used it to smooth his moustache, pretending that was what he'd meant to do all along. He huffed at Saga, as if she was to blame. 'I hope you have had a chance to look over the proposal for my... er... *our* magnificent building plans.'

The countess nodded slowly.

‘Excellent. I have all the documents here for you to sign. Should we head inside?’ With a flourish, the mayor made an ‘after you’ gesture.

The countess didn’t move.

The mayor didn’t lower his hand, but a nervous tic made his left eyelid twitch.

‘Please,’ Saga said. ‘Please don’t, Leonora.’ Alfred couldn’t remember ever hearing her so pleading and subdued. ‘Please wait until you’ve had time to properly talk.’

‘What’s all this?’ The mayor frowned and rubbed his left cheek.

‘These children claim to have solved a twelve-year-old mystery,’ the countess said in a weak voice, waving her hand with the blanket towards them. ‘They claim to have found my son.’

‘Impossible. Nonsense. Balderdash,’ the mayor sputtered. His head whipped round to cast a dismissive glance at Outis, who was doing an incredible job of hiding his wings. ‘That cannot be the kidnapped baby.’

‘And now they’re asking me not to sign your documents.’

The mayor’s face turned an unhealthy shade of puce. ‘That’s... It’s not right... He must be an imposter.’

‘He’s not!’ Saga said.

‘I’m afraid you’ve been hoodwinked by these two... two tree-huggers.’

‘And yet, if it is my son...’ the countess said.

Alfred became aware of the strain this discussion was having on Outis. He’d been hiding his wings for the duration of the encounter with the mayor, but now his concentration was slipping. Despite the chilly October day, sweat beaded on his forehead. He clenched his hands into tight fists, but not before Alfred had seen how they trembled. Saga must have noticed too, because she folded her own hand around one of his in encouragement. Alfred took the other.

What would happen if Outis couldn’t hold the glamour disguise? If the mayor saw his wings? None of them had stayed to learn the memory enchantment. Besides, they hadn’t brought their moth faeries.

‘You can do it,’ Saga murmured.

‘If it is my son...’ The countess, ignoring the mayor, took a few tentative steps towards them, clutching the blanket to her chest. Then, walking faster, she closed the distance and stopped right in front of Outis.

She wasn't tall, but he tilted his head a little to look into her eyes. Their eyes were the exact same warm brown.

In silent agreement, Saga and Alfred let go of Outis's hands. Even the mayor was quiet.

'Lucas,' the countess whispered.

That was too much for Outis. As he nodded, his breath hitched, and his glamour shield dissolved. His feather plume stood out from his upper back.

Alfred searched for a distraction. Perhaps if he overturned the teapot?

But the countess reacted more resolutely. In one sweeping motion, she threw the blanket over Outis's shoulders. Holding it in place with a protective arm, she turned to the mayor, saying, 'It is my long-lost son.'

At once, the mayor changed his tactic. 'If it in fact is your son... Why would that prevent you from approving my... er... our project? Wouldn't you want him to have access to this world-class sightseeing attraction? We could even name...' The mayor swallowed. Alfred could see how much the next words pained him. 'We could even name the restaurant or something after him or you. Whichever.'

'I think it's time for you to leave, Mr Underhill.'

'Underwood!'

'I shall not be signing your papers.' The countess took a small brass bell out of her pocket. At its peals, the terrace door was flung open. Alfred suspected the housekeeper had been loitering just inside.

'See the mayor out, please, Ms Walters,' the countess said. 'And then if you could bring more tea for us all... and some of your delicious biscuits. We're celebrating the return of my son.'

Walking right past the mayor, Ms Walters came to stand next to the countess.

'Welcome home, young master,' she said, and caressed Outis's cheek, tears streaming down her wrinkled face.

'I'll see myself out.' The mayor stomped away, muttering about proof and DNA tests and the countess's gullibility.

'We'll help with the tea,' Saga said.

Following the housekeeper, she led Alfred to the castle. He peeked back to see the countess taking hold of Outis's shoulders. With a lump in his throat, he hurried inside. If it was him, he'd want those first moments with his mother all to himself.

‘I guess you found your changeling,’ he said quietly, when they entered an enormous kitchen where Ms Walters was already bustling at the stove. ‘Who, like me, also turned out not to be an actual changeling...’ Despite everything that had happened, Alfred smiled past the lump.

‘He’s half faerie and sort of a changeling child, so I count that as a win,’ Saga answered. ‘And you found your faerie grandmother. You must be sooo happy.’

‘Ha, ha!’ Alfred still couldn’t quite believe that the most devious faerie he’d ever met was related to his mother. Or that this meant he himself was part high faerie. He shuddered, hoping it didn’t mean he’d take after his new grandmother.

‘Mr Tumbleweed always says to be careful of wished somethings.’

‘He’s not wrong.’

Saga’s tone became serious. ‘I’m sorry about Lillith.’

Alfred just nodded. He didn’t look forward to telling Saga about his own role in what had happened. But he would tell her. He’d tell her everything.

‘At least Farriel sounds nice, and I guess she must be your aunt too.’

‘Saga, dear, help me get these onto that plate,’ Ms Walters said, juggling a rack with freshly baked biscuits.

Alfred felt the heat from a knot deep in his chest. So many feelings in there were tangled together: grief over Lillith, anger at Amanita, happiness for Outis, hope that he’d get to know Farriel and the teeny, tiniest hope that Amanita was right, that there might be a possibility of bringing his mother back. He stuck his hands in his pockets and held on to the conch and the water-sprite figurine, until he was asked to carry the teapot.

As they walked after the housekeeper, back through the castle, Saga’s ginger hair bunches bounced in front of Alfred. She still wore the moss-green faerie shirt over her striped leggings.

Suddenly he was so happy she was there. That she was his friend. Because Saga was incredible. And somehow, incredibly, with her sheer willpower to guide them, they’d blocked the mayor again and spread happiness in this sad place.

‘I’m glad my mother chose you to be my sister,’ he whispered, half-hoping she wouldn’t hear, when they came outside.

Saga stopped abruptly and turned back, the biscuits sliding on the plate she was carrying. One dropped to the ground and Mr Tumbleweed bounced out of nowhere and in between them, muttering, 'Cake,' as he snatched it away.

She pushed her glasses up on her nose and smiled so much he could see all her slightly crooked teeth. 'Even if I don't have any faerie blood? Even if I'm just an ordinary human being?'

Beyond her, Outis and his mother sat close together. Their eyes were locked and their hands clasped, as if they were both afraid of letting go. Alfred didn't know what they were talking about or whether Outis would stay with his mother, but right now they both shone with joy. And that was all down to Saga.

'Saga,' Alfred said, unable to stop himself from smiling back. 'Faerie blood or not... You are most definitely extraordinary.'

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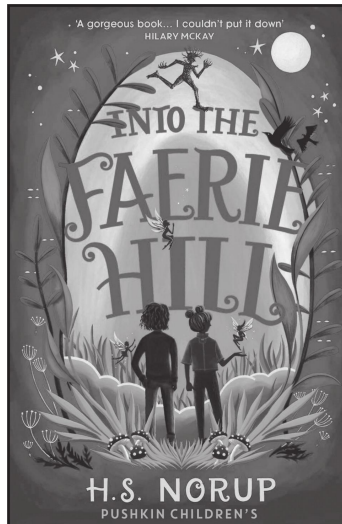
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## About the Author

H.S. NORUP is the award-winning author of *The Hungry Ghost* and *The Missing Barbegazi*—a *Sunday Times* Book of the Year in 2018. She grew up in Denmark, where she devoured fairy tales and escaped into books. After living in six different countries, she now resides in Switzerland and writes stories inspired by her travels, set in the borderlands between the real and imaginary worlds. When she's not writing or reading, she spends her time outdoors either skiing, hiking, swimming or taking photos.

The first book featuring Alfred and Saga, *Into the Faerie Hill*, is also available from Pushkin Children's.

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