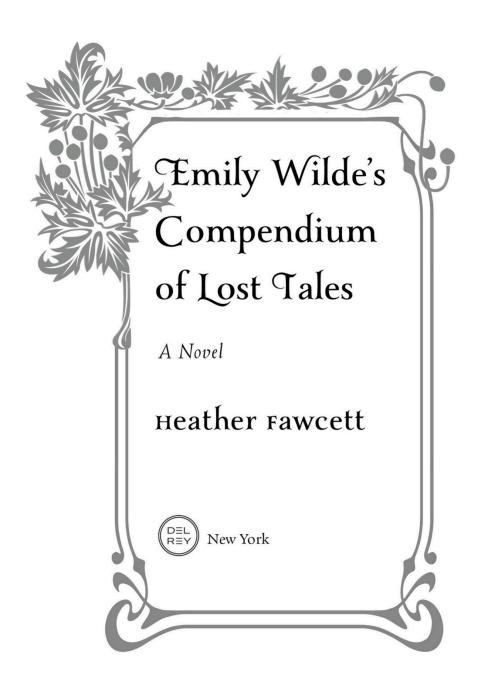


By Heather Fawcett

Emily Wilde's Encyclopaedia of Faeries
Emily Wilde's Map of the Otherlands
Emily Wilde's Compendium of Lost Tales



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### 29th December 1910—cont'd



If there is one subject upon which Wendell and I will never agree, it is the wisdom of attempting to drag a cat into Faerie. Even if said animal is a *faerie cat*; even if we are merely returning her to the world whence she came, still it is the most frustrating process. Wendell and I had lost Orga twice already while navigating the rocky Greek coastline, as she went charging off after mice or gulls, and now, as we stood at long last at the threshold of Wendell's door, she had vanished again.

"Bloody thing needs to be leashed," I said, out of spite more than anything. I strongly suspected that if I approached Orga with anything resembling a harness, it would end with me wearing the cat on my head, likely with unfavourable results where my facial features were concerned.

Shadow was at my side, as usual, his snout buried in the fragrant coastal grasses, snuffling busily. He would never abandon me as Orga is so often abandoning Wendell. Dogs are proper companions, not the physical manifestation of caprice.

Wendell made no reply. He had gone still upon first sight of the door, so much so that he might have been some gilded illustration in a storybook,

except that his cloak billowed at the hem, stirred by the salt breeze, which also tugged at the golden hair falling into his eyes.

I touched his arm, and he came back to himself, turning to smile at me.

"Em," he said, "she is a *cat*. You might as well expect Shadow to disregard your will as assume Orga to be governed by it. Remember her nature."

"Her malicious, untrustworthy nature," I said. Naturally the cat reappeared a heartbeat later, as if to spite us both, golden eyes glittering against her black fur, which rippled strangely, like smoke trapped within cat-shaped glass. Shadow, seated by my feet, gave her a weary sort of look and made his usual overture of friendship, nudging Orga gently with his nose. She arched her back and hissed.

"You should give up, dear," I told him, but the poor dog only looked at me blankly. Shadow's world was one in which all and sundry either fawned over him or kept a respectful distance from his intimidating bulk. Each time Orga hissed at him, Shadow seemed to assume it a misunderstanding, which grew increasingly improbable as these incidents accumulated, but still less improbable, in his view, than being disliked.

Wendell had gone back to staring at the door—savouring the moment, I suppose. I wondered if he would give a speech or something—after all, he'd spent more than a decade searching for the thing, and now here it was, folded snugly against the hillside like the bow on a Christmas gift.

I tapped my foot against a rock, feeling rather smug. Well, it had taken me only a handful of months to track the door down, hadn't it? I'd learned Wendell was looking for a door to his realm in November of last year when we were in Ljosland, and I'd begun researching the question in earnest in March, not long after we returned to Cambridge. And now—after a few twists and turns in Austria—here we were.

I considered and discarded several quips to this effect before deciding it would not be very magnanimous of me, and merely noted, "It's a pair with the one in St. Liesl."

Indeed, the door before us was nearly identical in shape and style—it blended into the Greek countryside perfectly, its wooden boards painted

with a scene of pale, pebbly stone and sun-dried vegetation. A little patch of rock roses to the left continued into the painting, and these two-dimensional blooms tossed their heads in the breeze in time with their tangible brethren. Even more impossible, to my mortal eyes, was the doorknob, a square of glass enclosing a splash of turquoise sea. This nexus is truly the most peculiar variety of faerie door I have encountered in my career. [\*1]

Though I'd expected to find it here, one can never be certain of faerie doors, and there was relief mixed into my self-satisfaction.

I turned to scan the landscape, shading my eyes against the sun. It was my preference *not* to suddenly vanish from sight in view of observers, simply because it was easier that way—Wendell and I did not need any well-intentioned search parties following us into Faerie. Beyond a little salt-stained grove of cypress trees, the land stretched out in a series of pale commas that embraced a sea so blue it made my eyes water. A pair of two-legged specks moved across a bend of sand in the distance—that was all. The countryside was empty but for us and the wind.

"How will they follow us?" I said, trying to hide my trepidation.

"Oh—easily enough," Wendell said absently. And he reached out with uncharacteristic hesitation and turned the knob.

We stepped through together, Wendell's hand closing around mine. I did not need his help, as I'd ventured through a few such impossible doors in my day without faerie aid, but I knew this was not his reason. His hand trembled lightly. I laced our fingers together and tightened my grip.

The little cottage beyond the door was empty, thank God—the winter faerie who owned it was now roaming the countryside, revelling in the delights of his season, as Wendell said such Folk were wont to do. The floor had been swept and the dishes in the washbasin put away, and overall everything had a very tucked-in, tidy look about it, as one might leave a home before a prolonged absence. I kept my gaze away from the mantel and the faerie's gruesome "art."

Orga and Shadow had followed behind us, Shadow giving the door a curious sniff before entering, but otherwise showing no sign he viewed this as any different from stepping through the door of my office at Cambridge.

Wendell allowed it to close behind us, and we gazed at the row of six doorknobs on the inner side.

I wanted to ask him about those doorknobs—specifically, I wanted to investigate them further, as two were a complete mystery to me and I wished to know where they led—but I knew it was not the time. His fingers drifted past the knob that would open the door to the Peloponnese again—which was now at the top—and past the one for the Austrian Alps. This one had a large key in it that looked to be made from bone. Locked.

Wendell clicked the lock open—I pictured the little door shimmering into existence once more against the Alpine mountainside—then removed the key and set it on the table. He lingered briefly on the doorknob decorated with a floral pattern before returning to the one covered in moss, which was now in the middle, for some reason. It had been lowest in the row when Ariadne and I had passed through the winter faerie's house in October. Wendell pushed the door open.

Light.

It was full morning, and my vision flooded with colour. Primarily green, but there was also the yellow of moss and lichened stone, the violet of bluebells clustered at the edge of the forest, the gold of sunbeams, and the rich azure of the sky. The door opened onto a hill in a small clearing, beyond which a wall of trees nodded their boughs in the wind, as if in greeting. The air was wet from a recent rain and heavy with the smell of green and growing things—all as I remembered.

Wendell pressed my hand to stop me from moving forward. His eyes followed Orga as she sniffed the air and then paced into the open. Her ears were pricked, alert, but the tension quickly left her body, and she sat back to nibble at a stalk of grass.

"I thought my stepmother might have this door watched," Wendell murmured. "If she lived."

"Or she might have sealed it," I agreed. "But then there is no reason to think she knew how Ariadne and I escaped, unless one of the common fae took note of our flight and told her." Wendell nodded, but still he stood hesitating on the threshold. He looked pale and strangely young against the shadow of the winter faerie's home; he put me in mind of a nervous child hesitating behind a stage curtain, unwilling to emerge when his cue came.

I stepped into the sunlight, a welcome change from the dank chill of the winter faerie's house. A little shudder went through me, though whether it signified terror or excitement, I could not tell. A part of me wonders if my fear of Wendell's kingdom, instilled by the many dark and unpleasant stories I have read of it throughout my career—not to mention my experiences here previously, which have faded into half-memories with the aura of nightmares—will ever fully leave me.

I gave his hand a playful tug. He looked at me, still pale, but something in my face seemed to steady him, and he allowed me to pull him through the door.

He took a few steps and then suddenly sank into a crouch, burying his face in his hand. Orga established herself at his feet, facing the forest warily. Shadow gave her what I can only describe as an approving look.

I strode up to the brow of the hill, both to give him a moment and to look for trouble. The hill was not high enough to afford a view over the entire forest, though I could make out the familiar glitter of a distant lake, over which rain fell in silver sheets. I leaned against one of the weathered standing stones that crowned the hill—as I did, there came a sort of startled skittering sound, and I caught a flash of a small foot disappearing under the stone, as if someone had been warming their toes in the sunlight.

Well, the common fae knew we were here. But that was unavoidable.

I made my way back down the hill. I expected to find Wendell enraptured by the bluebells and the forest—perhaps even the ghastly thing lurking at the shadowed edge of the clearing, one of the trees that gave Where the Trees Have Eyes its name. But no—he had brushed his tears away, and now had his chin propped on his hand, gazing at me with one of those enigmatic expressions I've not yet learned to parse, if I ever will. One of his faerie looks, as I think of them.

"What?" I said.

He rose, shaking the dew from his cloak. "You have that look."

He had mirrored my own train of thought, which made me scowl at him irrationally. "Which?"

"The one you wear whenever you outsmart me in some area," he said.

"Well," I began with a shrug, then stopped. My magnanimity was wearing thin, I'm afraid. "Haven't I?"

He laughed, a clear, bright sound, and then, before I knew what was happening, he had lifted me off my feet and spun me through the air, the greenery and shadow of the forest a whirl all around me.

"My beloved Emily," he murmured in my ear.

"Yes, yes, all right," I said, though I did not pull away. My smugness was back, together with a warm sort of satisfaction. It was pleasing to see him this happy.

The door swung open behind us, and suddenly the clearing was filled with noise. The guardians emerged first in a flurry of wingbeats, Razkarden in the lead. As they passed into the emerald light, they shed their glamours, transforming from pale owls to the most nightmarish creatures imaginable—still owls, at least in the main, but ragged and sinewy, eyes milky with cataracts. In place of feet, six massive spiderish limbs erupted from their torsos.

Razkarden alighted on Wendell's shoulder—or shoulders, for his legs would not fit on one—arranging his hideous limbs with surprising delicacy, and I was suddenly backing away from Wendell fast. Wendell, untroubled as usual, stroked Razkarden's beak and spoke quietly to the faerie monster. He took flight again, settling in the trees with the others.

Next came the trolls, by far the least unnerving of our motley army of common fae, their tools clanking in the packs on their backs. They burst into pleased muttering upon first sight of Wendell's kingdom, one marching up to a stump to rap on it, as if testing its suitability for building materials. Others seemed to be exclaiming over a pile of stones.

The tree fauns did not linger long in the clearing, which was a relief, but slunk immediately into the forest shadows, their feral hounds close at their heels. Now, the world holds enough Folk hideous to the eye, but in this respect I can think of none who surpass these fauns, with their scabbed and twisted horns and bulbous features.

Last came the *fuchszwerge*, streaming through the door in an auburn river, fox tails thrashing with excitement. Several dozen appeared to have volunteered to accompany us; the exact number is difficult to ascertain given how rarely the beasts stay still.

"Finally," Snowbell crowed as he surged to the front of the pack. "Now the quest will begin! And it will be far more exciting than the last one, for there is only *one* mortal oaf this time." He settled himself at my feet in a proprietary sort of way and began to wash his face, pausing to snarl at any others who ventured near. Telling the fox-faeries apart remains difficult, but Snowbell is easy to identify, for he is always bragging about his role in my last adventure.

Wendell looked back at the trees, his reverence replaced with merriment. "Shall we retake our kingdom, Em?" he said.

A shiver went through me at that. He had switched to Faie, which I had, of course, heard him speak before, but there was something discomfiting about the way he did it, abandoning the mortal tongue like an unsuitable cloak at the change of seasons. My hand strayed unconsciously to Shadow's head, and the dog butted at my palm, which steadied me.

"I suppose we might as well get on with it," I replied in the same language.

We found the path Ariadne and I had taken back in October at the bottom of the hill. I'd half expected it to be gone—why shouldn't faerie paths be as wayward as their doors?—but there it was, though it seemed to veer more to the north than I remembered.

I looked to the right, uncertain. "This way?"

Wendell followed my gaze. "I think not. The old ways will take too long. It's quite a distance to the castle, and I'd rather not tarry."

And he marched off into the dense tangle of undergrowth, making a sort of shooing gesture with his hand. Then—

A path unfurled at his feet, keeping pace several steps ahead of him, trees and grasses and stones simply drifting aside, as easy as waves retreating from a shore.

"Wendell," I said faintly.

He had already been turning to check on me, striding back up the path he'd made. I watched to see if it would dissolve again behind him, but it didn't, or at least not as quickly as it had appeared; the edges seemed to evaporate a little, greenery creeping back over the hard-packed earth.

He clasped my hands between his, his gaze radiating warmth and not a small amount of mischief. "We haven't much time for sightseeing, it's true—but let me show you what I can. Would you like that?"

He was teasing me, of course—he knew the answer as well as I did. The dangers looming before us, the trepidation I felt at my decision to venture here, to stay at his side—it was all abruptly subsumed by something much more familiar, which sent my heart skittering with excitement.

Scientific curiosity.

"Lead on, then," I said, taking the arm he offered me.

The path expanded to comfortably accommodate us. Shadow kept pace beside me, while Orga slunk in and out of the forest, appearing sometimes before us and sometimes behind, occasionally with some small, wriggling creature clutched in her maw. The others followed like a long and hideous train. I did not see the guardians, but from Wendell's unconcern, I assumed they were lurking in the canopy, watching us as they had during my first visit, though their intentions this time were less murderous—I hoped. Snowbell kept back, which he generally does when Wendell is near me. I believe he has the same terror of him that Poe does, though Snowbell expresses it in a rather more disturbing manner. I have heard him speculating more than once with his fellows about the quantity of blood Wendell would shed in retaking his kingdom, whether there would be leavings for the *fuchszwerge* to enjoy, and if so, what these might taste like.

Wendell talked as we went, pausing every few moments to point something out—he has a great deal of botanical knowledge when it comes to his realm, which I can only assume he was born with; I cannot imagine him acquiring it any other way. When I took out a notebook, he beamed at me—I had intended to spend our first day in Faerie observing rather than

compiling facts, but he was so pleased whenever I lifted my pencil that I found myself recording a great deal. My concentration was somewhat hampered by the looming peril, but in no way did I need to feign enthusiasm, and I asked many questions, though his answers were not always helpful and tended towards the nonsensical. I will here record a select few insights.

## On the geography of Where the Trees Have Eyes

This is composed primarily of a mixture of woodland and heath, with a scattering of boggy regions and a mountain range that bounds the realm to the east. These mountains are known as the Blue Hooks. There are three lakes: Muckle, the largest; Silverlily, beside which sits the castle; and Lower Lake in the south, a dark place within the lands claimed by the hagheaded deer, where we would not be venturing.

Asking Wendell to help me sketch a map of the realm proved largely fruitless, which did not surprise me. It is a widely acknowledged truth that Faerie has all the spatial integrity of a dream; a mountain may be in one place on a Tuesday and decide to spend Wednesday in a more favourable locale. At different points during our conversation, Wendell informed me: that the lakes and the mountain range were fixed points; that the Blue Hooks had once encircled the realm entirely, and were known to stretch themselves on occasion; and that Lower Lake had a contrary streak and sometimes switched places with Silverlily.

### On the faerie snails

After my unpleasant run-in with these uncanny denizens during my previous visit—I can still feel their shells breaking beneath my hands and

knees, and hear their tiny screams of agony—I desired to know more about them. Wendell, though, would only shudder and advise me against making enemies of them. Apparently, they possess a crude intelligence and value their dignity above all things; as such, they spend most of their lives occupied with revenge quests. While their vengeance may be slow in coming, they always have it in the end.

## On the bloody trees

I do not wish to write about these. But what sort of scholar of the Folk would I be if I hid from every horror?

No. I cannot do it.

But I must. Lord, what a mess of blotches and crossings-out this entry has become. Let us get this over with as quickly as possible.

The trees that give Wendell's realm its name are known as attentive oaks, a typical example of faerie euphemism. They are scattered here and there throughout the woodlands, though more often than not they lurk in the darker folds of the forest, the better to catch one by surprise and provide ample material for nightmares, I assume. Had each tree only a single pair of eyes, perhaps they would be bearable, but there are hundreds, if not thousands. For each leaf has an eye staring out of it, which may be creased in rage or widened in surprise, heavy-lidded or bloodshot, as if there is a unique personality trapped within every one, and all move to stare at you as you pass, rustling wetly.

Wendell, naturally, takes a philosophical view of these monstrosities. "Have you not seen worse in Faerie, Em?" he said. "Only leave them be, and you shall have nothing to fret about. Give them no reason to take offence."

"How does one avoid offending a tree?"

He began ticking things off on his fingers. "Don't insult them. Don't remove their leaves. Don't go tearing them open to see if there is a faerie

king more agreeable to your tastes hiding inside."

I did not deign to reply to this. "That's all?"

He thought it over. "Mind your step in the autumn months."

God.

As we went on, I could not help noticing that the path Wendell made for us was a much cheerier one than Ariadne and I had followed; we traversed sunny glades and bluebell meadows, and sections of bilberry-studded moor open to the sky, often boasting impressive standing stones. Silver baubles sparkled in the treetops, about the size of globes and light as air, which sometimes drifted from one tree to another with the wind. Wendell informed me that these were, in fact, a kind of faerie stone, which contained enchantments meant to provide comfort to travellers. He warned me against breaking them, though, for some had been tampered with by bogles, and could no longer be trusted.

"Are you purposely keeping me from the darker parts of your realm?" I enquired, as the path brought us to an expansive view of Muckle Lake. "I have been here before, you know. I'm aware it is not all sun-splashed meadows and harmless archaeology, so you needn't act like a nervous suitor on his best behaviour."

He gave a surprised laugh, and I knew I had guessed close to the mark. "Can you blame me for wishing to impress you a little? Besides, the darker groves are home to some unpleasant bogles and beasts. I suspect they would bow to me, but I would rather not risk any unpleasantness. We will have plenty of that to go round once we reach the castle."

All the while, he used his magic carelessly in a way I have not seen from him before, like an aristocrat tossing coins from his carriage, pressing his hand to trees to quicken them or make them flower; summoning hosts of bluebells in meadows he complained were lacking in colour; and at one point ordering a craggy hill to move to one side so that we would not have to clamber up it. I watched him, my mind running through several theories.

We paused after an hour or so to take refreshments—his suggestion, of course—beside a stream that flowed through a sunny clearing. Wendell knocked upon a standing stone, and out rushed a pair of tiny brownies clutching a silver tray piled with lightly steaming scones. They placed them upon a rock at the edge of the stream, bowed to Wendell, then with nary a word spoken darted back behind the standing stone.

For a moment, I stood blinking at the place they had vanished. Then I shook myself.

You shall encounter stranger things than that in this place, I reminded myself sternly.

I settled beside Wendell, who had summoned one of the silver faerie stones and broken it against a rock, whereupon the shards transformed into a glittering tea set. He scooped stream water into each cup, gave it a swirl, and it was tea, piping hot and smelling of honey and wildflowers.

More magic, I thought, making another mental note.

"How far to the castle?" I enquired, sipping the tea—naturally, it was delicious, sweet and sharp together. "Will we pass through the barrows?"

"I'd rather not." He was swishing his hand absently through the rushing water, looking as pleased as a cat in a sunbeam. His beauty seemed to me to have assumed an even more ethereal quality since we'd stepped through the door—was it my imagination? His hair was like dark gold lit by firelight. "Most of the barrows encompass villages," he continued, "each with their own lord or lady."

I nodded. We'd agreed that the best course would be to avoid alerting whoever held the castle to our presence, or any nobles who might use the information to their advantage.

"I hope we'll arrive before nightfall," he said, tearing off a piece of scone. "We must get past Muckle Lake, and I've no doubt we shall encounter dangers along the way. Beyond that—"

I waited, but he only made an expansive gesture that someone who didn't know him as well as I did might have found enchantingly mysterious. He finished, "We shall see."

I gazed at him for a moment, digesting this.

"You don't know where we are," I said in flat disbelief.

"Roughly, roughly." He looked puzzled by my consternation. "Well, what need would I have had to venture this far into the hinterlands? Of course, that isn't to say I never left the castle grounds when I was growing up. Many of the nobility are exceedingly fond of the Hanging Pools, where the river Brightmist spills down a ravine and forms a series of crystalline ponds, perfect for bathing in. And then there is the forest of Wildwood and its bog, hunting grounds forbidden to all but the monarchy and our chosen companions, where one finds uncommonly large boars and the rarest species of deer, which possess antlers of pure silver..."

He continued his rhapsodies concerning the bathing pools and hunting grounds. When at last he paused for breath, I said, attempting to keep my voice level, "Wendell. We are here to conquer your kingdom. This will be difficult if you do not know the way to the bloody *throne*. Now, answer me one way or the other—are we lost?"

"Oh, Em," he said fondly. "You worry too much—remember that we are in my kingdom, not some Godforsaken ice court or mountain wasteland. No, we are not lost, not in the sense you mean. I know where the castle is—what does it matter where we are?"

On that infuriatingly nonsensical note, he was off to rap on the standing stone again, this time after a little jam for the scones.

Lest any assume that Wendell and I marched into one of the most dangerous Faerie realms on record without any strategizing whatsoever, I assure you it was not so.

"We should review the possibilities," I had said one late October night as we sat by the fire in Wendell's apartments. It was a week or two after our return from Austria.

He had looked up from the book he'd been reading—some silly romance or other; he doesn't read much, and when he does, his taste is questionable. "Hmm?"

"For whom we might be facing when we return to your realm," I said. "If your stepmother is dead, who might have stepped in to claim the throne? Who would have the standing, the influence, to earn the loyalty of the nobility? Perhaps your stepmother's half-brother, Lord Taran?"

"Taran?" Wendell tilted his chin back, thinking it over. "He never struck me as particularly power-hungry. I suppose it's possible, though. As I said before, Em, I had little to do with him, and he with me. My uncle is ancient, and would have viewed me as a silly child, beneath his notice."

I felt a prickle of frustration. "Well, who else is there? Had your father any siblings?"

"Oh—a brother or two." He thought. "Two. He had them executed long before I was born."

"Good Lord," I muttered. I'd known Wendell's court was a nest of vipers, but I was beginning to suspect the stories were, if anything, rosier than the reality.

"Who else?" I pressed. "Cousins? A well-liked advisor? Friends?"

"My father's only true friend was my mother." Wendell's gaze drifted towards the fire. "He always said so. They were everywhere in accord, their opinions and preferences so similar. Only she was of *oiche sidhe* blood, but one would have thought he too was descended from the little housekeepers. I suppose that is partly why he married her, despite the taboo. Everything had to be meticulously clean, under my father's roof. And he and my mother would sew and weave together, combining their magics to produce such kingly attire as has never been seen before...not only clothes, but hunting nets that could snare the most formidable quarry, and pennants so intricately woven and bright it was said that my father's enemies could not help staring at them even in the heat of battle." He gazed into the flames. "After my mother died, I don't know that he was close to anyone. My eldest sister, perhaps. But she is gone too."

He shook himself and reached for his teacup. Though his subsequent exile pained him, I have rarely had the impression that Wendell is much touched by his family's murder, something I have generally put down to his faerie nature. It is less troubling that way, which is not to say that it *isn't* 

troubling. At a fundamental level, the Folk are not like mortals, a fact which, at times, I still struggle to connect with Wendell. I waited to see if he would go on, but he did not.

"You said your stepmother had children," I pressed. "That she wanted to see her own flesh and blood on the throne."

"Yes—once she'd finished with it," he said drily. "She and my father had one daughter, who was a child when her mother decided to murder her father and half-siblings." He rubbed his forehead. "Deilah. She would still be very young—it's hard to imagine the nobility taking her seriously. I don't know. I've no doubt there *are* plenty of Folk with designs on my throne. But I know so little about politics."

I shook my head. "Surely your father gave you some form of a political education. Surely you learned *something*, watching him."

"Em—" Wendell closed his book, his expression taking on a pained quality. "I was barely nineteen when I was exiled. At that age, Folk are viewed as near infants, at least as far as our wisdom goes. We are expected to attend revels and balls, and more revels and balls, and cause a variety of minor troubles for our parents, and that is the extent of it." He sighed. "I was perhaps more fond of parties than the average youth. My father could not have had a lower opinion of my political capabilities. Besides, I had five brothers and sisters between me and the throne, and even given my kingdom's penchant for assassinations, few thought I'd get anywhere near it."

I paused as the weight of what he was saying sank in. "Then—you haven't the slightest idea how to rule a kingdom."

"Does anyone?" He took my hand, discomfort shifting suddenly into earnestness. "We will learn together."

"Oh God," I said faintly.

He studied me. "Is it that bad? You already know more about faerie kingdoms than any mortal."

"Stories," I said faintly, drawing my hand back. "I know stories."

He gave me an odd look. "And have you ever needed anything else? Have you not shaken a kingdom to its foundations, found a door to a distant otherland, overthrown a queen? Hand you the right storybook, and you are capable of anything."

Well, I doubt I need describe how little comfort I took from his absolute faith in me. I've always known Wendell squandered much of his youth, but I assumed he had learned *something* about his court, about what it meant to wield power. Now I understood the truth: he knew nothing about kingship, and yet, on the eve of claiming his throne, viewed this fact as largely immaterial, if it had even occurred to him before. Small wonder some dryadologists believe all faeries are mad.

"I am a *scholar*," I said. "I observe. I record. I don't—no one will ever see me as a queen."

"No?" He opened his book again. "More fool them. I suppose I could simply follow my father's playbook and send Razkarden to pluck out my enemies' eyes and entrails."

I could not tell if he was joking or not, which put paid to my desire to pursue the discussion. And that, more or less, is where we left things.

## Though I did not stop thinking about it.

I thought about it as we walked, the weight of my bag shifting against my back. I had packed four books—two of which I smuggled out of the special collections section of Cambridge's dryadology library, [\*2] which grates at my conscience, but I cannot see what else I could have done; one cannot mind library due dates in a world where time is liable to rearrange itself—all of which deal with the politics of faerie courts, what little is known of them. While it has long been assumed that the lords and ladies of Faerie rule primarily through might, the nobility being more skilled at enchantment than the rest of the courtly fae, recent scholarship has done much to challenge the notion that faerie monarchs are inept at strategizing or other conventional leadership skills. [\*3] And, indeed, the rise of

Wendell's stepmother, a halfblood, to the throne offers more evidence to bolster this perspective.

I have not said much to Wendell about this, because the project is at present only a half-formed idea, but I have begun taking notes on the principles of faerie leadership that I have gleaned from my readings. It goes without saying that no dryadologist before me has actually *witnessed* the ruling of a faerie court from the throne itself, and thus no one has ever been better placed than I to write a book on faerie politics.

Even thinking those words sends a frisson of anticipation through me. If Wendell's stepmother has us slain before I have a chance to contribute to the scholarly debate, I will be very disappointed.

A great deal of whispering followed Wendell and me as we made our way through the forest. I had the sense of being regarded by many pairs of eyes, but no Folk, either courtly or common, dared to greet us.

"If only we could glean some news," I said. The frustrating truth is that we know next to nothing about what we will be facing. I have spoken with Poe, who has proven himself an uncommonly good source of gossip due to the volume of visitors he receives from disparate faerie realms, but he knew only that Wendell's kingdom fell into chaos after I poisoned its queen. Wandering Folk, according to Poe, tend to avoid realms in such states of turmoil.

Wendell looked around. "Why not ask her?" "Who?"

Wendell just kept on staring at a branch. "You needn't cower. I am not going to harm you."

I waited, but no response came from the forest, nor any sign of movement. Wendell made an exasperated sound and plucked the faerie off the branch—the faerie that I had not seen, who wore a cloak of woven moss. With the hood drawn up, crouched as she had been, she was merely a bend in the bough, an inconsequential vagary in the forest's pattern.

The brownie gave a panicked squawk before going still again. She could not have been more than a foot high, with a cherubic face half covered in moss and the all-black eyes that are commonplace in creatures of her type.

"Your Highness!" the brownie cried in her small voice. "I did not see you! Forgive me!" As soon as Wendell set her down, she threw herself onto her face at his feet, jabbering something I could not make out—more apologies, I believe, only she also mentioned moss a great deal, making or mending it, I think, perhaps to give to Wendell as a present? The logic was difficult to glean.

"Please stand," Wendell said. "I am not anybody's Highness at present, so you needn't—oh, this is tedious."

The annoyance in his voice seemed to penetrate the faerie's desperation more than his words. The creature stood, shivering.

"We are not going to harm you," I repeated, but she only looked at me miserably. I felt a surge of pity.

Wendell swept his cloak to one side and crouched before the faerie. "Now," he said, "answer me quickly, and you shall return to your moss-den all the sooner. What has happened to my realm?"

The faerie began to jabber again, coupling this with a great deal of hand-wringing and elaborate gesticulations. Again I could make out very little of what she was saying, despite my fluency in Faie; the brownie mumbled and spoke in a dialect that seemed to have a great deal of Irish mixed in. After listening for a moment, Wendell held up a hand.

"Nothing particularly useful," he said to me, standing. "The little ones have been greatly troubled of late by Folk charging about on their steeds, trampling their burrows. Battles have been waged, and a great deal of magic expended, sending brownies like this one into a panic. Some have fled into the mountains, abandoning their homes altogether." He looked genuinely upset. "But they do not know what is happening, nor the players involved, only that their lives have been made very unpleasant. What a mess!"

He rubbed his hand through his hair. "It began with my stepmother—her decision to enlarge her kingdom by conquering the neighbouring realms; not an event appreciated, it seems, by all the inhabitants, who send regular raiding parties to harass our Folk. Things have grown only more unstable since your visit."

I addressed the brownie. "Does the queen live?"

More gesticulating and dense dialect. This time, even Wendell looked confused.

"Yes?" he said. "But there's something else—she says my stepmother has fled. Though the little one uses an odd word for it. One that describes how a fallen leaf decays into soil, becoming part of the forest floor."

We looked at each other, and I saw that we were in agreement; something in this boded ill. "Anything else?" I said.

"There is a battleground near—the little one offered to show us. We may learn something there."

"All right," I said, and we set off, the faerie a green ripple of movement on the path ahead.

**SKIP NOTES** 

- \*1 Unfortunately, my paper on the subject—currently under consideration by the *British Journal of Dryadology*—is still held up in peer review. It seems many scholars are not yet willing to accept the existence of faerie doors that connect multiple places, and it is possible that I shall have to gather additional evidence to override the skeptics, or perhaps convince other scholars to venture to Austria themselves to test my findings.
- \*2 The Irish Monarchs: Tales of Fayerie Kings and Queens from the Pre-Christian to the Modern Era, by John Murphy, 1772; and The Mirror King: A Speculative Biography of Scotland's Oldest Faerie Lord, by Douglas Treleaven, 1810.
- \*3 See, for example, Anna Queiroz's recent article on the two faerie kingdoms of Madeira, one of which has long been depicted in local folklore as a grey and unpleasant land ruled by a rapacious king, while the other is ruled by a king and queen who, among other things, hold regular tribunals to resolve disputes and regularly abduct mortal musicians to write propaganda ballads about their reign; their kingdom is much larger, and home to some of the most fantastical revels known to scholarship, generally a marker of a prosperous faerie realm.