

The White Stag:
A Collection of Queer Fairy Tales

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Stories can change lives. They give voices to the oppressed and educate the ignorant. The fairy tale is one of the most widespread types of stories, with the ability to entirely alter the way that children and young adults view the world, yet the majority of existing fairy tales and storybooks involve only cisgender, heterosexual protagonists, without much diversity in sexuality, gender, and ethnicity. The five stories herein attempt to aid the process of diversifying fairy tale literature in order to provide marginalized groups with media representation.

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Process Analysis Statement

My first experiences with queer identities were as insults in a high school locker room. I had grown up sheltered, carefully kept ignorant of the world outside of my small Catholic farming town, and I had no idea what any of the words meant—I knew only that they were bad. I was wrong, of course, but how was I to know differently? Everything I saw or read in media featured only cissexual people in heterosexual relationships. That lack of diversity taught me from a young age that being queer was wrong, before I even knew what being queer meant.

I still remember the book I read that taught me otherwise. I picked it up from the public library, thinking it sounded interesting, with no idea that the protagonist was a lesbian who fell in love with another girl. When the two girls got together at the end of the book, I was stunned—I finished the book and then reread the ending three times, sure that I had misunderstood. When I finally put it down, all I could think was—that was allowed? Women could fall in love with women?

At the time I read that book, I was fifteen years old and a sophomore in high school. I went through the first fifteen years of my life completely ignorant of queer identities—and within the year after learning that queer identities even existed, I realized that I myself was queer. I wonder often—had I had access to media that featured queer characters earlier in life, would I have discovered my own identity sooner? Would I have learned earlier that the feelings I had were not wrong or dirty or unusual?

Representation can change lives. So many queer individuals have to spend years upon years unlearning all of the internalized homophobia and transphobia that they were taught by society and media—even unintentionally, because if the only relationships portrayed are between cissexual, heterosexual individuals, no matter whether they condemn queer relationships or not,

those experiencing the story will come to the conclusion that queer people do not exist, or that they do not deserve happy endings, or some other equally negative idea. But if queer kids could see themselves represented earlier on, it could help them significantly in their journey to self acceptance.

I chose to become a telecommunications major and creative writing minor in the hopes that I would someday be able to make a difference when it comes to the lack of diversity in media. I want to be able to provide queer youth with the representation that I did not have when I was a child. I know firsthand how much it means to be able to see yourself in stories, and how much easier acceptance becomes when you know that you are not alone—that there are others in the world like you.

These thoughts led me to develop this project. Most children experience fairy tales in some way or another—whether through movies or as bedtime stories or otherwise—and if those stories were more diverse, it could cause widespread change in the way that children learn to view queer people and their relationships. Minimizing ignorance from the beginning is an important step in queer acceptance.

I wanted to create stories as similar to the traditional fairy tales that I loved as a kid, because while some may see that structure as childish or cliché, I think that it is important for queer kids—and especially queer children of color—to be able to experience the simple joy of happy endings. I did a lot of research, reading popular fairy tales such as *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Rapunzel*, *Rumpelstiltskin*, and many more, as well as fairy tales that are common in other cultures, such as the Indian *Jackal or Tiger?*, the Chinese *Herd Boy and the Weaving Maiden*, and the African *The One-Handed Girl*. I tried to draw inspiration from as many sources as possible to appeal to as diverse of an audience as possible. I read dozens of

stories multiple times over the course of this project to familiarize myself with the variations of the fairy tale structure, and learned a lot about the values of other cultures and the power of fairy tales in the process.

Actually writing the stories often felt like pulling teeth. I found myself stuck often, and started writing stories only to find that I had lost interest in them and had to start over with a new idea. Coming up with ideas was easy enough, but coming up with ideas that worked well when they were fleshed out was a lot more difficult. I second-guessed myself constantly, and went back to square one to outline and re-outline the project over and over.

The illustrations were entirely different—I knew exactly what I wanted them to look like from almost the very beginning. The time-consuming process to complete them was the problem. One illustration, from the first sketch to the finished product in full digital color, took close to eight total hours of work. Adding that on top of the stories, the first full drafts of which took an average of five hours each, along with my full course-load, made for an insanely busy semester.

My personal life complicated matters multiple times as well. In October I learned that my younger sister is showing the first signs of kidney failure, and just in November my best friend of six years attempted suicide. My mother has also been in and out of the hospital multiple times in the past few months due to complications of an as-yet undiagnosed neurological disorder that has symptoms similar to epilepsy. Staying positive and continuing to work in the face of what felt like a constant assault of negativity was incredibly difficult, and there were many moments in which I was afraid that I would not be able to finish the project on time. I felt constantly stressed and anxious, and it became harder and harder to find motivation to work, not only on my thesis but in my classes as well.

I pushed through thanks to the support of my advisor and my close friends (as well as copious amounts of caffeine). At the end of it all, I have five polished fairy tales featuring diverse characters and multiple types of queer representation, as well as three illustrations, and I am proud to put my name to it as my completed thesis project.

The Gardener and the Blacksmith

Deep in the heart of a lush forest, in a small but well-loved cottage nestled amongst the trees, a baby was born whose laughter made flowers bloom. Her parents, having long wished for a child, delighted in her happiness, and raised her with much love and care.

The babe, named Rhosyn, grew into a cheerful young woman, with an infectious grin that she offered generously to others. The forest and gardens she spent most of her time in flourished with her bright moods, and soon it spread even farther to the fields around the village near her home.

It came to pass that the land was struck by a terrible drought, and villages all over faced starvation as their crops died. Yet the village and its fields and forests continued to thrive, until finally it drew the attention of the young King Liam.

He traveled to the village, and asked why the drought wasn't affecting them. Their answer astonished him—to think that a single woman could save an entire village with her laughter! But such a person intrigued him, and so he went on down the road into the forest to seek out the cottage where she lived with her parents.

Rhosyn's parents nearly fainted upon finding the king upon their doorstep, but the woman simply gave him a smile, and asked if he'd like to come in for some tea.

The king graciously accepted the offer, and over the course of his visit was stunned to watch as plants in pots around the house visibly grew taller in Rhosyn's bubbly presence.

He realized, then, that she could save his kingdom with her power, and set about convincing her to come away with him to travel the land. Rhosyn was reluctant to leave her parents, but they urged her to go, to spread her joy to the others that needed it.

And so it was that Rhosyn left with Liam, and set out to save the kingdom from drought. The land turned green wherever she walked, until it burst with color and life once again. The king did all in his power to help her and nurture her happiness, and in the process they became good friends; Rhosyn had always wanted a brother, and Liam a sister, and as they learned more about each other they playfully bickered and teased as though they'd grown up as siblings.

Rhosyn laughed and smiled more than ever on her travels in the company of her new brother, and by the time winter came the people no longer feared starvation.

Liam invited Rhosyn to come live with him in the castle, where she could easily travel should her powers be needed, and though she desperately missed her parents and their cottage with its little garden, the young man was her first and closest friend, and she had both enjoyed his company and the work they had done together.

After a short visit home, she moved to the castle in the city.

Some time later, there was terrible news of a forest fire to the south where she grew up. She rushed home, but her arrival came too late, and she found nothing but ash and charred debris

where her family's cottage used to be. Her parents were gone, and not even their beloved garden had a single trace of life left in it.

Consumed by grief, she found herself unable to smile or laugh, and the plants she used to lovingly tend to started to wilt in her presence. Liam tried desperately to cheer her up, pained to see his sister so heartbroken, and summoned all sorts of entertainers to the castle in the hopes that they might finally help her laugh again, but they all failed.

She wandered the castle grounds, steering clear of the gardens lest her pain and grief harm the plants, and often found herself sitting on a stone bench in a small alcove off of the courtyard, where she could listen to the sounds of people passing in the market without bothering them with her grief.

A ring rolled into her alcove one day, stopping by her foot, and the court blacksmith, Noa, followed after it, wiping her hands on her heavy apron as she walked and stopping upon seeing Rhosyn.

'Why do you sit here by yourself?' asked Noa.

'I'm not very good company,' Rhosyn replied, and leaned down to pick up the ring, offering it to Noa.

She took it, looking surprised, and tilted her head. 'What makes you think such a thing?'

'I cannot laugh,' said Rhosyn, 'nor smile, for my grief has drained all my happiness away.'

Noa considered this, and stepped forward, pressing her fist to her chest and bowing ever so slightly. 'I will help you find your happiness again,' she vowed. 'Come with me to my shop, and I will tell you stories while I work that will surely bring a smile to your face.'

Rhosyn was doubtful, but she had grown lonely in her little alcove day after day, so she followed the blacksmith to her shop and listened to the stories that she told as she worked.

The stories were nothing like she'd come to expect from the many entertainers that Liam had brought to the castle—they were all simple and true tales from the blacksmith's life or stories that she'd been told by people around her. Rhosyn found herself listening closely to each one, interested to learn more about the woman that seemed unbothered by her grief, and came back every day to sit in the shop and listen even more.

Weeks passed, and she didn't laugh. But Noa was patient and kind, and never grew frustrated, and as they grew closer, Rhosyn began to want to smile again.

It started slowly, with a small tilt of her lips, but Noa's company gave her an easy sort of peace and contentment that she'd never had with anyone before, and before long her smiles became grins.

They began to venture out of the shop together, first on simple errands and then simply because they wanted to. Noa met Liam, who was so relieved to find a smile on his sister's face again that

he caught them both up in a hug. Rhosyn went back to her gardens and showed Noa how she tended to the plants.

Slowly, Rhosyn's grief became something manageable. And even on the bad days, Noa's steadfast presence was a balm to the pain in Rhosyn's heart.

The first time they kissed, she laughed so brightly, giddy with happiness, that the weeds growing between the cobblestones in the street outside shot upward nearly a foot in height, tangling the feet of passersby.

So she found her happiness once again. And every day, she returned to Noa's side, often with a handful of flowers, to share life with her, perfectly happy to continue smiling into kisses.

Oceansong

Sailors tell stories of the monsters that dwell in the deep, and the spell they weave with their voices to bewitch those that dare to lay eyes on them. Fleets of ships have been lost to the creatures, they say—sunk, and their crews drowned.

Wiser people know that the monsters once were not monsters at all, and might not be still. They remember the old stories, when sea witches, humans born with magic connected to the water, served as a bridge between land and sea.

As the sea witches disappeared, humans began to forget the old stories, and now few alive remember them, and even they often believe the stories to be fanciful myths.

But the merfolk remember, and wait for the day the sea witches will return and restore the bridge between worlds.

. . .

The seventh child of the Sea Queen was known for getting into trouble. Prince Kei often disappeared to explore unknown waters, driven by his curiosity, and though his family worried, they allowed him his freedom upon seeing the joy his adventures and discoveries brought him.

Eventually, his interest in the secrets of the ocean began to wane, and he started to wonder about the world above the water. He'd come across many shipwrecks and lost human treasures in his wanderings, and found them to be strange and wonderful. His mother cautioned him against exploring above the surface, but he couldn't resist his curiosity.

He became especially attached to a particular coastal kingdom and often observed the capitol city. He loved the vibrant colors the people wore and decorated their homes with, as well as the lantern lights that twinkled in the night and the energetic dances that often took place in the streets. He would sit below, as close as he could safely get, and listen longingly to the music and laughter—he wished, more and more, that he could join them.

But his home was the ocean, and he loved Her dearly. So he merely watched, and wished.

. . .

The merfolk were blessed with what some humans might say was more than their fair share of magic. Their voices connected them to the sea, and they could understand Her, though She rarely spoke using words.

The ocean loved Her people, and used Her connection to them to help them whenever She could. One such way She did this was by helping them find their soulmates—an ability unique to merfolk.

Not all of them had soulmates. Some had more than one. Relationships between soulmates weren't always romantic in nature. But the chance to find each other was one that the merfolk cherished.

Whenever they touched their soulmate, the ocean would start singing.

. . .

One day, while the merprince was following a ship from his favorite human kingdom and observing from afar, a storm rolled in faster than they could escape it.

The humans tried desperately to keep control of the ship despite the roiling waves and lashing winds, but the storm forced them onto a cluster of rocks that tore holes in the hull, and they began to sink.

They piled into lifeboats, but one of them who lingered behind to make sure everyone made it off of the ship was pitched overboard when the pressure of the water cracked the ship into pieces.

Before he could even spare a thought about it, the merprince was diving under the waves, reaching for the drowning man.

As soon as his hand touched the man's shoulder, the ocean began to sing.

Kei was so surprised that he stopped dead in the water, eyes wide, but the man's skin was pale and blood trailed from a small wound on his temple, so he quickly gathered him in his arms and swam faster than he ever had before, speeding to the surface at an angle to clear the worst of the storm. Rain lashed his face, but he stayed resolutely above water.

The man breathed, but did not wake. Kei knew that he wouldn't be able to help the man, out in the middle of the water, and that he needed humans to care for him properly.

He tightened his grip on the man as much as he dared, glancing toward the horizon where he knew the shore lay miles and miles away. Then he took a deep breath, and began to swim.

. . .

Kei struggled to pull the man's unconscious form onto the sand, high enough that the tides wouldn't bother him, and then lingered, uncertain. If he just left, there was no guarantee that the man would be found and helped in time, but if he stayed too long, he risked being discovered and attacked.

He looked down at the man. His chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm, and the wound on his temple had stopped bleeding, but he showed no signs of waking.

Carefully, Kei reached out and smoothed the man's hair away from his forehead, making sure not to get his clawed fingers caught in the tangles. The oceansong in the back of his mind grew louder at the contact.

As much as he wished for it, Kei knew that he couldn't stay at the man's side. So despite his heartbreak, he tore himself away, hiding just offshore in the shadow of a curved cliff.

Ducking low until the water covered his nose and mouth, leaving only his eyes above water, he began to sing—a simple lure, to pull people closer so that the man would be discovered. Soon a

group of people became visible on the edge of the beach, and he let his song trail away at the sound of alarmed shouts when the humans saw the man and hurried to his side.

He lingered longer than he should have, watching to be sure that they would help him, and only when they started looking around did he duck under the water and leave the shore behind.

The merprince couldn't forget about his human soulmate, and became determined to find a way to join him on land. His sisters, unwilling to see him hurt, offered words of caution, but they knew too that the bond between soulmates was cherished, and that he wouldn't be persuaded to stay away from the man.

Kei's search eventually brought him to the witch Aldusa. The legends said that she was once a sea witch, centuries ago, but turned against her own kind and was cursed to live as a monster in the darkest reaches of the sea, unable to return to land and forever mourning her lost humanity. She was twisted and cruel, and her deals rarely worked in anyone's favor but her own, but Kei was desperate, and so he found himself sneaking away to visit the witch.

The waters of Aldusa's trench didn't sing, shrouding the place in an eerie, oppressive silence.

Aldusa herself sat in the sands outside of her home, scraping her nails with a shard of bone.

"I know why you have come to me," she said. "Your soulmate is a man, and you wish to become human so you may join him."

Aldusa's voice was a grating rasp without a hint of the lyricism that was characteristic of merfolk. Her words hissed and echoed in the quiet.

"Can you do it?" Kei asked, and the witch grinned, revealing sharp teeth stained with blackened blood.

"Are you willing to pay the price? I don't give anything for free, little princeling, and the cost for such a thing will be high. Can you give up the ocean? Can you leave her behind? What will you give up to chase your human love?"

"Anything," said Kei. "Everything."

"I will make you a potion that will turn you human. The prince must kiss you with desire in his heart before the moon is new for the transformation to become permanent. Your legs will ache with every step, and you will never again return to the sea. You will have a human life, much shorter than what you would have as you are. Should you fail, your body will dissolve into sea foam, and you will die. Will you accept the risk of death should the prince not desire you?"

"I will."

"In exchange, you will give me your voice. You will be unable to speak until the prince kisses you, and then every word will feel like knives in your throat, and never again will you sing and be heard by the ocean."

Kei's hand wandered to his throat. The price was high as the witch had said it would be, but he would bear the pain of it for his soulmate.

“How?” said Kei, and the witch smiled her wicked smile.

The witch took Kei's voice with magic, sealing the bargain between them with twin amulets of gleaming onyx, and cut his hand to drip his blood into the potion before adding drops of her own black blood. Mist rose with every added ingredient. When it fell away the potion was pure and clear and shone faintly in the dim light of the trench.

Kei took the potion and returned to the palace, avoiding his sisters, where he placed a necklace that marked him as a prince of the sea around his neck next to the amulet. It was the only thing of home that he could bring with him, and he held onto it tightly as he swam for the surface, following the familiar path to the kingdom of his soulmate. He arrived at the steps of the palace just as the sky began to turn gray with the sunrise, and pulled himself onto them before drinking the potion.

His body burned and twisted until he felt as though he would break apart. His vision faded as the pain worsened, and he collapsed onto the stone steps.

When he woke, his soulmate was kneeling next to him, looking upon him with concern. A simple crown was nestled in his dark hair, and Kei realized that he had seen him before the shipwreck, and that he was the prince of the kingdom, and was called Adrian.

Adrian asked him many questions, about where he came from and who he was, and if they'd met before, but Kei's throat ached as a reminder that he no longer had his voice, and he laid his hand upon his neck and looked sadly up at his prince until the man took off his cloak to wrap around Kei's bare shoulders and then reached down to take his hand and help him to his feet.

He walked with the same grace that he'd had as a merman despite the dull pain in his legs, and many eyes followed him and marveled at the lightness with which he moved.

Adrian was enchanted by him despite the difficulty of communication that his lack of voice created between them, and they take many walks together so that Adrian can show him the city. They grew close quickly, and Kei felt comfortable with Adrian in a way that he'd never felt before. It became clear that Adrian felt the same way, and the night came with over a week before the new moon when they watched the sunset on the waves from the beach, and Adrian turned to take his hand, longing plain on his face.

“I feel like I've always known you,” said Adrian, and kissed him.

Heat spread through Kei's throat and in his legs as the kiss sealed the transformation, and his heart soared with happiness—but then the prince broke away suddenly and pushed himself backward, stumbling in the sand, eyes wide and anguished.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I shouldn’t have kissed you. I can’t be with you, no matter how much I wish it could be so—I’m betrothed to another, and my duty as a prince forces me to go through with it. I can’t fail my people.”

Kei felt his heart break at the news. He reached out for the prince, but Adrian shook his head and moved further away. His obvious reluctance only made Kei’s pain grow.

He knew from the tickle in his throat that if he tried, he would be able to speak, and finally tell Adrian his name, but his despair stole his voice from him a second time, and he found himself unable to say a single word as Adrian told him that he was still welcome in the castle. When he walked away, leaving Kei on the beach, Kei sat in the sand and stared out at the sea, letting the waves wash over his feet. He could hear the oceansong again, but he could not sing back.

He held his necklace tightly in his hand, and cried for the home that he’d given up for a love that could never be.

. . .

Kei wandered the halls of the castle like a ghost, and spent most nights on the beach, staring longingly towards the horizon where the sea blended into the sky. He still went on walks with Adrian and kept him company. Though his heart ached at the careful distance that the prince kept between them, he couldn’t bring himself to stay away from his soulmate.

Weeks passed like this. When nearly a month had gone by, Adrian quietly informed him that his betrothed would arrive the next day, and that they were to be wed in two weeks’ time.

Kei thought that the pain in his heart might kill him, but his selfish pleas caught in his throat and he swallowed them down, steeling himself against the sorrow. His soulmate could not love him the way he wished, but Kei would not force him to choose between his kingdom and his heart.

The next day he allowed the servants to dress him for the ball that was to be thrown in honor of the princess’s arrival. Adrian wanted him to meet her, and assured him that she wouldn’t hate him or be angry for the kiss they’d shared. They were friends, he said, since childhood, and though the betrothal hadn’t been their idea, they had an understanding, and cared deeply for each other.

Kei watched the dancers from the edge of the room, wishing that he could join them but feeling far too heavy to leap lightly on his feet as they did. Adrian introduced the princess to his people on a balcony that overlooked the courtyard as Princess Hala. She was beautiful, with white hair that gleamed in the lights and dark skin. As she stood next to Adrian, with his dark curls and light skin, they seemed to fit together like the night sky fits with the stars.

He forced himself to climb the steps to greet the two of them, and found himself glad that he’d agreed to come when Adrian’s face lit up with a smile upon seeing him. To his surprise, Hala also smiled warmly, and rose from her seat to take his hand.

As soon as their palms touched, a distant song echoed in Kei’s ears, and his head snapped up to look towards the sea, and then at Hala.

Her eyes were wide. When he tried to pull away, her grip tightened on his hand, and a prickly feeling shot from the tips of his fingers up the length of his arm—when he looked up again, her blue eyes were glowing softly.

Delight poured over him like water, and he grinned, reaching toward her even as she reached for him until they collided into a hug.

They pulled away, and he mouthed, “Sea witch,” at her, giddy with happiness when she nodded back at him and laughed.

“You’re a long way from home,” said Hala. Adrian looked between the two of them, confusion obvious on his face, but didn’t interrupt. “Is this where it begins?”

Excitement bubbled up in Kei’s chest until he thought he might burst with it. The sorrow was still there, underneath it—he had two soulmates, and he couldn’t love either of them—but the sea witches hadn’t been destroyed after all. The bridge between their worlds could be rebuilt, with her help.

He grinned in answer to her question, and pressed his hand against his chest where his necklace laid warm against his skin.

Hope was not lost.

. . .

The wedding approached quickly, looming over Kei like a shadow, but he spent every bit of time that he could with Hala and Adrian. He felt warm and contented in their company, and though it was tinged bittersweet, he chose simply to enjoy the time that he had with them.

They asked him to be at their wedding, which was to take place on the stone steps that led into the sea where Adrian had first found Kei. He agreed to make them happy, but as the day drew near his heart grew heavy once more.

Kei found himself on the beach the night before the wedding, wading into the waves and rocking with their movement, sorrow growing when the current didn’t recognize him as it used to. He shivered in the cold, sea spray stinging his face, and clutched at his necklace.

He opened his mouth and sang, throat aching, the first sound he’d made since sealing the transformation. His voice was rough and splintered and didn’t belong to the ocean, and he knew that She wouldn’t hear him, but he didn’t stop, something in his bones pushing him to stand firmly against the push and pull of the tide and try.

Hala called to him, and he turned to find her standing on the beach, wrapped in a cloak and holding a spare in her hands.

“Come back to me,” said Hala.

Kei shivered, looking back to the sea one more time before making his way out of the water and stumbling through the sand to Hala’s side. She wrapped the cloak around him and guided him towards the castle with a gentle arm around his waist.

“I heard your song,” she said.

“She can’t hear me anymore,” he replied. The words were a quiet rasp in his throat, but he knew that she heard him.

He looked back again, where the water glittered under the stars.

“My name is Kei,” he told her, and fell silent once more.

The sky turned dark in the middle of the wedding next day, and Kei knew what was happening before lightning crackled and revealed Aldusa emerging from the water as it boiled around her. Her eyes fell first on him and then moved to Hala, half-hidden behind him.

“Out of the way, princeling,” she snarled at him.

He clutched at the necklace around his neck until his hand started to bleed, and stepped forward until he stood firm on the bottom stair, waves washing against his ankles.

“She is not the one who cursed you,” said Kei.

“Her blood is the same. You cannot stop this, little merprince; you have no power over me.”

Adrian was suddenly on the step next to Kei, and his sword flashed out, cutting a thin stripe across Aldusa’s chest. She shrieked in pain, and Kei flinched as the sound rang sharply in his ears. He reached out to press Adrian back a step, watching Aldusa press a hand to her wound.

Black blood dripped from an amulet around her neck—the twin to his own—and he realized what he had to do.

He grabbed his amulet and ripped the cord that bound it, holding it in his palm. Aldusa lunged forward, and he reached out and caught her amulet in his hand, tearing it away and crushing it in his grip. Their blood mingled with the shards of both amulets, and Aldusa reeled back as if struck.

The wind swirled around them, storm building, and Kei burned, bones cracking as the transformation began to wash over him.

He smiled at her, triumphant and resigned, and seized her arms in his hands. She tried to tug away, and he let the movement pull them both into the water.

Adrian and Hala screamed his name as he fell. The tips of Adrian’s fingers brushed against his back as he tried to catch him, and the touch dulled the pain of the change as the water closed over his head.

The ocean sang as he became Hers again, the currents wrapping around him and filling him with strength. She remembered him, and She asked him to join with Her, angry at Aldusa’s attempt to control Her. He offered himself to Her, and Her magic flooded into him, sending power tingling through his limbs like an electric shock.

Aldusa's clawed hands tore into his skin as she tried to rip herself away from him, but he didn't let go, unflinching through the pain.

"You don't belong to the ocean," said Kei, and Aldusa snarled at him.

"I command the waves," she said. "The ocean belongs to *me*."

"No," he replied, sad. "It never did."

He tightened his grip, summoning his strength from the waters that he'd belonged to since the day he was born, and began to sing.

Aldusa's struggles became desperate as his song built, and she freed one of her hands, slashing at him, but he remained unbothered by the pain and the blood that clouded the water. Her grip weakened as she began to change.

The darkness fell away from her until she was human once again, uncursed, and she stopped struggling entirely.

She lifted her human hand to her face, marveling at it, and stared at him with wide eyes even as water filled her lungs.

Her eyes flickered—first with wonder, then relief, then remorse. She held onto him still, but her grip was no longer painful.

He finished his song, and Aldusa closed her eyes as she dissolved into sea foam.

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The ocean separated from him, humming a lullaby as Kei drifted, tired and aching. Pain dragged at him, but he didn't mind it, at peace knowing that his soulmates would be safe, and that he was part of the sea again. He could taste life on his tongue, unique to Her waters, and that was enough.

The song around him changed, and then changed again as arms wrapped around him and tugged, carrying him back to the surface.

He opened his eyes, and Hala and Adrian pulled him carefully onto the steps. As their hands held him, their oceansong grew louder and more beautiful than he'd ever heard it.

Hala's eyes glowed faintly through tears as she pressed a hand to his chest where Aldusa had slashed at him. She sang, and the pain faded, replaced with a pleasant, unfamiliar heat.

His exhaustion took over before he could thank her, and he fell into a deep sleep.

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When he woke, Kei was warm and dry and—human again. It felt different than before. There was no pain in his throat or legs, and when he sang a note low in his throat, his voice came out as his, and the ocean sang back, though She sounded distant.

He opened his eyes, and Adrian and Hala were on either side of him, holding his hands in theirs. They sprang onto their feet upon seeing him awake, and leaned over him. Adrian lifted his hand and pressed a kiss to his knuckles. Hala brushed her lips across his temple.

“It’s alright,” said Hala, gentle and smiling. “We can all belong to each other.”

Adrian and Hala joined their other hands across his bed, and Kei felt happiness rise in his throat.

“Thank you,” said Prince Kei, and pulled them both into his arms.



THE MONSTER AND THE MERCHANT'S DAUGHTER

In a small but wealthy town near the coast, there lived a young woman named Nesrin. She was the only child of a merchant, and though her father had once doted on her, he grew cold and detached following the death of her mother. Once she became of age, he began to entertain suitors, hoping to arrange a beneficial marriage.

Nesrin didn't wish to marry, as she had no interest in men, but her father wouldn't be swayed, and quickly became impatient with her refusal of suitors. He gave her less and less of a choice, and she began to feel trapped, but she had nowhere to go, and no one who would try and defend her from him.

On the edge of town, there was an old forest, and in the forest, there lived a monster. The stories said that if you brought a cup of fresh lamb's blood as an offering and the monster found you agreeable, you might ask for a favor—so long as you were willing to pay for it.

Many who went to ask never returned. Those that did often found their desires fulfilled in ways that horrified them. Everyone cautioned against going anywhere near the fickle monster's clearing, for fear of losing more than you might be prepared to give.

But Nesrin had few options, and so one night she found herself stealing out of the house under the cover of darkness.

She picked her way carefully along the winding forest path, following it deeper into the dark woods. In one hand, she carried a dim lantern to light the way; in the other, a heavy bronze chalice. The farther she went, the bigger and more foreboding the trees became, yet she never faltered or shrank in fear, her shoulders squared and her spine straight.

After some time, she came to a clearing filled with thick mist that swirled around her feet. In the center was a cloud of shadow, with great snarling teeth that grinned and big white eyes that seemed to cut through the darkness with their own light.

‘What did you bring me?’ said a voice, though the mouth didn’t move.

“Lamb’s blood,” said Nesrin, setting her lantern gently to the grassy earth and cupping the goblet in both hands, “fresh from the butcher’s.”

She reached out her hands in an offering, lowering her head respectfully, and felt cold, clawed fingers reach out and take the cup from her.

The monster sighed, contented, and the chalice fell to the ground at the girl’s feet, empty. When she picked it up, the metal was like ice against her skin.

‘What do you seek?’

“There are two suitors fighting for my hand,” said Nesrin. She rolled the goblet between her palms. “I don’t wish to marry either of them—one is old, with interest only in heirs, and the other is known for his awful temper—but my father has said that if I don’t choose between them, he will choose for me.”

‘Ask me,’ the monster said, sounding amused.

“I don’t really want them dead,” she replied. “But I don’t want to marry them, either. Could you do something so that I don’t have to?”

The shadows shifted closer, and she felt a breeze across her face—cold, carrying the scent of blood and, surprisingly, roses—and knew it was the monster’s breath.

‘What will you give me for it?’

She hesitated, and then reached at her neck with one hand, and pulled her necklace over her head, letting the egg-sized ruby sway like a pendulum from its glittering golden chain.

“Is this enough?” she asked, and the monster plucked it gently from her grasp.

‘It will do. Tell me the names of the ones you speak of.’

She did so.

The monster seemed to scrutinize her for a moment, and then the eyes and gleaming teeth disappeared into the shadows.

‘Go.’

She went. The next morning, she woke to news that both of her suitors had gone missing in the night without a trace, and took care to hide her relief from her father, weathering his cool disappointment by ducking her head and seeing to her chores.

Weeks passed, and another suitor came to court her. This one seemed kind and charming at first, but the first time they were left alone together in the courtyard, he tried to kiss her, and caught her by her wrist when she tried to move away. He grew frustrated as she continued to evade him, and only released her when a servant entered to bring them tea.

That night, she entered the woods again, and found the monster in the same clearing.

“There is another suitor,” she said, offering the blood one-handed.

‘And what is wrong with this one?’

Her mouth twisted into an angry frown. “He doesn’t take no for an answer.”

The monster was quiet. After a long moment, Nesrin heard the click of claws against metal as the goblet was taken from her hand.

‘What will you give me?’

She reached up and removed her earrings—gleaming pearls, polished and unflawed. The monster took them too, and the chalice fell to her feet as it had the first time.

‘Tell me his name.’

She did, and picked her lantern back up along with the goblet, prepared for the monster to tell her to leave.

‘Why did you return?’ asked the voice, instead, and she tilted her head, surprised and confused by the question. *‘Knowing that most who seek me out don’t live to tell about it once, let alone a second time—why did you return?’*

“Because,” she said, slowly, “I feel safer in your company than I did with my suitor. Because my hands do not shake here. Because...you did not harm me when you had the chance.”

The monster watched her.

‘Go.’

And she went.

The next morning, the suitor was found frozen in his bed. She felt her father’s eyes following her, and was careful to avert her gaze and duck her head as though mournful.

In another week, she found herself looking towards the forest. Curiosity had unfurled in her chest and settled there, like a cat in a patch of sun. When night fell, she let it tug her feet back towards the monster’s clearing.

‘Another suitor already?’ the monster asked, amused.

She sat down in the grass, smoothing her skirt over her folded legs. She put the chalice on the ground in front of her, expectant.

“Would you tell me a story?” she asked.

Softly, the monster said, ‘*What will you give me for it?*’

“What will you take?”

There was a thoughtful silence. She once again felt the cool breeze of the monster’s breath on her cheek—roses and snow.

‘*A lock of your hair.*’

Nesrin nodded, and pulled a small folding knife from a pocket of her dress. The blade was sharp, and cut easily through the lock of hair that she twisted around her finger.

She set it carefully on the ground next to the cup, and clawed hands reached out and took both into the cloud of shadows.

The story that the monster began to tell her was a long one, full of sorrow and joy and love in equal measure, and she was captivated by it from the very beginning. A story about a woman—a healer—leaving her village to become a warrior, and finding adventure and magic and love in her travels...it was nothing that Nesrin had ever heard before.

So enchanted was she by the story that she didn’t realize how much time was passing until the sky began to gray, and she shot to her feet with a yelp, interrupting the story and nearly kicking her lantern over in the grass.

“I have to go!” she said. “My father can’t know that I’ve gone.”

‘*Best hurry back, then,*’ said the monster, and she could’ve sworn that the words were tinged with disappointment.

She gathered her lantern and the chalice, finding it on the grass at her feet, turning to leave, and then hesitated.

“I’ll come back,” she promised. “To hear how the story ends.”

Then she left, rushing home to climb back into bed before it could be found empty.

Despite having returned in time, her father seemed to have grown even more suspicious, and she was given so many tasks during the days that it was all she could do to make it to her bed before falling asleep each night. She longed to return to the woods and hear the rest of the monster’s story, but she wasn’t given a chance, and had to resolve to wait until the suspicion died down.

One day, she was at the market buying flowers, and a lord’s son, passing through, saw her smile into a bouquet of roses and was instantly enchanted. He went to her father in the same day and asked for her hand in marriage, and her father, wary after the fates of her other suitors and flattered to receive a request from a lord’s son, said yes.

Arrangements were made, and she was told once she'd returned home from her errands that she was to wed the lord's son in only three days' time.

The son, sheepish, asked permission to take her to a festival so that they could get to know each other, since they'd skipped the proper courting period, and she wasn't given the chance to protest.

Despite her expectations, her suitor was kind, and respectful, and never once tried to kiss her. The festival was beautiful, and he bought her chocolates and a single red rose, carefully stripped of its thorns, that he tucked behind her ear after asking for her permission to do so.

If the circumstances had been different, she might have liked him—but they weren't, and she didn't love him. She *couldn't* love him.

That night, she dressed and went to her door to leave, determined to go to the forest and ask another favor—but no matter how hard or which way she twisted the knob, it would not open.

Realizing that her father had locked her in, and that she wouldn't be able to go to her monster for help, she sank to the floor of her room and wept.

The two days passed quickly, and she was kept under careful supervision during every moment so that she couldn't slip away. At night, she was locked into her room.

The third day came, and she was woken early to begin preparations for her wedding. All day, she was kept confined to the house, in the kitchens cooking or in the courtyard arranging flowers.

The wedding was to take place at sunset, and an hour before, she was taken back to her room to be dressed.

Her gown was the finest thing that she'd ever worn, silken and soft, and glittering jewelry was piled on her arms and neck and ankles until she felt heavy with it.

She looked in the mirror when they'd finished and thought about marrying the man with the kind smile and gentle hands who asked permission to touch her—and felt sick.

Tears fell from her eyes, and the servants cooed over her and patted her consolingly and told her that she was beautiful. When their words couldn't stop her tears, they exchanged knowing looks and left the room to give her a moment alone.

She looked away from the mirror and saw the rose from the night of the festival on her table. She remembered the roses that she'd been smiling into at the market, when the lord's son had seen her—she'd been thinking about her monster, waiting in the woods to finish the story.

She picked up the flower—and then, overcome by a sudden flash of anger, crushed it in her hand.

Pain shook her from her anger. When she opened her palm, it was bleeding, cut by a thorn that must have been missed by the florist, hidden by a leaf.

Instead of bandaging it, she closed her hand on the flower once more, and looked up in one last search for an escape.

Her eyes fell on the window, and the thick ivy clinging to the stone wall.

By the time she heard shouts, she was mere feet from the ground, and she let herself drop, gasping at the jolt of pain. Men—her father's guards—rounded the corner of the building, and she *ran*.

The light of day was dimming fast, and she didn't have her lantern, but she didn't trip on the path, having learned it well. Pounding footsteps followed closely, and she never once slowed her desperate sprint, until finally she crashed into the familiar clearing and collapsed in a shaking heap just in front of the shifting cloud of shadow.

"Please," she gasped, tears falling fast down her face. She couldn't manage a full sentence through her heaving breath, so she reached out, offering the only thing she had in her hands—the bloodied rose—and said again, "*Please.*"

Clawed fingers plucked the rose from her bleeding palm. The sounds of shouts and footsteps grew closer.

'*What will you give me?*' said the monster.

"Anything," she promised. "Everything."

Cold arms wrapped around her shoulders and cradled her close, and when she looked up, the monster was a woman, with glowing white eyes and too-sharp teeth and smooth black hair like dripping shadows.

Around her wrist, she wore Nesrin's lock of hair, braided into a bracelet.

"And if it is your heart that I want?" she asked, and her voice was the same, crisp and rough like ice and thorns.

"I would give that," said Nesrin, "even if I received nothing in return."

She smiled, warm. She pressed a soft kiss to Nesrin's brow and wound her sharp fingers around the back of her head to gently press her tear-stained face into her neck.

"Don't look," she whispered.

The air went sharp and icy, inky dark spreading through the trees. The shouts turned alarmed, then fearful, and then fell silent altogether.

When all had gone quiet, the sun had fallen fully below the horizon. The monster pulled away, sliding her grip down Nesrin's arms to her hands and pulling her to her feet, letting go and stepping back once she was steady.

She didn't look around to see if there were visible signs of what had been done to keep her safe, instead looking only at her protector's face.

The forest was cold and dark, and the woman she had just promised her heart to had a wolf's grin and smelled like blood and roses and winter. But her hands didn't shake.

"How does the story end?" she asked.

"It doesn't," she replied.

Nesrin took a breath—easy here.

When she reached out this time, she had no blood or jewels to offer.

The monster took her hand anyway.



The Boy Who Loved the Moon

In a tiny village nestled in the foothills of a forested mountain range, there lived a boy who named himself Sadi.

He named himself for luck, hoping that it would change his fortune. He had no parents, and slept in a shed with the small herd of sheep and goats that he tended for one of the village's wealthier families in exchange for food and shelter. The village knew him as he was—a boy born into the body of a girl—and thought him strange and cursed for it.

The other boys and girls his age avoided him, afraid that his misfortune would curse them as well, and he was often lonely. He told himself that he didn't mind being alone, but as he watched over his flock in the hills with a view of the bustling village, he couldn't help but daydream of a different life.

"Someday," he told the wind, "I will not be alone anymore."

The wind whistled as though it had heard him. He talked to the wind often—and to the trees, and the mountains standing like sentinels above the village, and to the rustling grasses. They couldn't talk back, but he imagined that they were listening all the same.

As time passed, the land seemed to grow fond of Sadi and his chattering. The hills where he took his flock to graze were always vibrant and green, and no predators bothered them. Mountain streams where he drank and bathed stayed cool and clear through every season. Even bad weather seemed to mellow when he ventured out into it.

The village became even more wary of him. People began to mutter about magic and witches. They feared what Sadi's newfound luck might bring upon them. So long as he kept to himself, though, all people did was whisper.

Then the day came that misfortune began to strike the village. People began to sicken from the water they drew from the well. Crops withered, food stores rotted, and more livestock were lost to predators than ever before.

Only Sadi and his flock remained untouched by the curse that had seemingly fallen on the village. Despite the many ways they had mistreated him, he offered his knowledge of safe water and brought back foraged food to share. Many refused him, believing it to be a trick of some sort, and those that accepted did it reluctantly and out of desperation.

Despite his aid, the villagers only grew more suspicious. They began to hate him for his health and cheerful disposition, and became more and more certain that he must be behind the sudden series of disasters that plagued them, because he was the only one unaffected.

Sadi started to worry about what they might do as their suspicion became more hostile. He discreetly prepared provisions for himself, hoping that a nearby village might show him kindness, and waited for the chance to leave the village for good.

Before the chance ever came, however, Sadi was woken in the middle of the night in his little shed by angry shouts. When he opened his eyes, he saw flickering shadows cast by torches, and fear jolted through him as he realized that the villagers were outside.

Their shouts accused him of being a plague upon the village. They said that his misfortune had spread and infected the very land itself.

His heart thudded in his chest as he stood to face them. He tried to defend himself, but they shouted over his words. They called him changeling and witch and cursed, and his pleading was lost to their anger.

"Leave!" they yelled. "You've never belonged here!"

An angry man in the front of the crowd reached for Sadi, and the fear overwhelmed him until suddenly he was bolting for his familiar hills, seeking safety.

The crowd chased after him, even when he passed the edge of the village, and he ran and ran until he plunged into the thick trees, and he kept running even then, blindly crashing through the undergrowth until the sounds of pursuit faded behind him and all he could hear was his own heaving breaths.

He collapsed in a clearing, a blanket of stars over his head, and just like that, he was more alone than ever before.

Sadi curled up in the dew-damp grass and wept for what he had lost. The village had treated him poorly, but it had been his home for all of his life, and now he was lost, with no idea where to go and no one to point the way.

“Maybe I am cursed,” he said to the sky. “Maybe I will be alone forever.”

He buried his head in his arms, and wished, not for the first time, that he had been born into a different life.

His wishing was interrupted by a hand on his shoulder, and he shouted, scrambling away, fearful that his hiding spot had been found by the angry villagers. When he looked, instead he found a boy his age who seemed to fill the clearing with a soft glow. His eyes were bright blue, and his dark hair fell in silky waves around his face. Sadi was sure that he’d never seen him before, but even so, something about him seemed familiar.

“Who are you?” Sadi asked, digging his hands into the soft earth out of hope that it might still protect him.

“I am Maru,” the boy answered. His voice was clear and bright, and reminded Sadi of the cool mountain breeze that sang through the tall grasses at night. Sadi recognized his name, and knew him to be the spirit of the moon. “And you are Sadi. The wind told me.” He stepped forward until he was barely a breath away. “I know you. You’re like me.”

Sadi felt warm from Maru’s closeness, and he stared wide-eyed at Maru, who giggled at his expression and reached out to—pluck a leaf from his hair.

He giggled again and blew the leaf off of his fingers, watching it twist in the air before turning and leaving the clearing. He started to sing as he walked, and Sadi was struck by the way the world seemed to fall still to listen.

“Wait!” he called, and followed after him.

Maru didn’t slow down, seeming to glide easily through the forest as though he knew all of its secrets, while Sadi tripped over roots and got tangled in vines trying to keep up. He feared that he might lose him entirely, and pushed faster and faster until he was nearly running again.

Maru’s song started to fade just as Sadi burst through the trees and into a field of soft grasses that swayed in the breeze, surrounded by flowers that unfurled in the presence of Maru’s gentle light. As Sadi watched, fireflies glittered in the grass.

“Oh,” he breathed, for the place was surely magic.

Maru smiled and reached out his hand, and Sadi stepped forward uncertainly to take it. Maru’s hand was soft and warm in his, and Sadi knew at the touch, like something he’d forgotten and just remembered, that he trusted Maru in a way he’d never trusted anyone before.

“Watch the stars with me,” Maru said, and there was something in his voice that sounded like the same ache of longing and loneliness Sadi had spent his whole life feeling.

They laid in the grass, linked by their hands, and looked up at the sky. Without being prompted, Sadi felt compelled to tell Maru the stories that he’d made up for the constellations, things that he’d only ever told to the wind and mountains who couldn’t answer.

Maru listened. He laughed and smiled and teared up and squeezed Sadi's hand in all the right places, and Sadi felt like he knew him too.

At the end of the story, Maru sat up, sighing, eyes distant as he looked towards the east where the sun was due to rise soon. Sadi sat up with him, close enough for their knees to knock together.

"I can't stay," Maru said. "I'm not supposed to be here at all. I came because I heard your stories—because you were lonely, and so was I, and I looked at you and I knew you. But this isn't my home. I have to go back."

Sadi tightened his grip on Maru's hand.

"Can I come with you?" he asked.

Maru looked surprised, like he hadn't expected Sadi to want to stay with him. "Humans can't go to my home. You would have to give up being human. You'd become something different, like me."

"But I wouldn't be lonely, if you were there," Sadi said.

"No," Maru agreed. "The night would be your mother, and the sun your sister, and the stars your friends. My home is not a lonely place."

"But you were lonely?"

"I think I was lonely because I missed you."

Sadi leaned closer to press their brows together, closing his eyes as their breath mingled. It was the only way he knew to show Maru that he understood.

"It's okay," he said. "I think I'm already something different."

Maru smiled softly and grabbed Sadi's other hand, lacing their fingers together. "Are you sure?"

Sadi thought of the village, and his flock, and the watchful mountains. He thought of the sky, and the way Maru made him feel quiet in his skin like the rain did.

"Yes," he said.

Maru leaned forward and pressed a gentle kiss to Sadi's mouth. They fell together like stardust, leaving loneliness behind.

The sun rose on an empty field.



THE WHITE STAG

Once upon a time, a king and a queen sought out the magic of the goddess of life in order to have a child. They had tried for many years, and been unsuccessful—only magic could finally give them the child they so desired.

The goddess heard their prayers, and blessed them, and within the year a baby was born who was magic-touched. The king and queen named their beloved child Micah, and raised him with love and kindness.

When he was still a young child, Micah was almost kidnapped by bandits, saved only by the quick thinking of a servant boy named Dante, who guided Micah to safety through the hidden tunnels of the palace. As a reward, the king and queen allowed Dante to begin training as a warrior, a privilege typically allowed only to those of noble birth.

Micah and Dante became nearly inseparable from that night on, and were rarely seen apart from each other despite the different lives they led. They grew at each other's sides, forming an unbreakable bond that withstood the test of time.

When they came of age, suitors began to visit the palace, seeking Micah's affections, but he was uninterested in marriage, and told his parents that the only person who he wished to remain with forever was Dante.

His mother, despite her love for him, disapproved of his friendship with Dante. She wished for him to consider the company of the many others that she felt were more suitable, but she knew that he wouldn't do so as long as Dante remained at his side.

She summoned Dante, meeting him alone.

"I love my child more than anything in this world," she told him. "You have stayed by his side ever since you were young—yet I cannot be sure that you deserve to remain there, as he desires. If you wish to continue being his friend, you must accomplish three tasks to prove your love and loyalty."

Dante, terrified at the idea of being separated from Micah, agreed, and so the queen sent him to complete the first task.

"A fierce monster is terrorizing villages on the western edge of the kingdom," she said. "Defeat it, and return to me with proof of your triumph."

Micah, upon discovering what his mother had done, tried to follow after Dante, but guards were placed at his door to keep him from leaving. Afraid to lose his friend, he prayed to the goddess who had given him life, asking her to aid Dante with his tasks and protect him from harm.

The goddess loved Micah, as he'd been born of her magic, and wished to see him happy, so she decided to give her blessing to Dante, and watch over him as Micah had asked of her.

Dante traveled to one of the western villages, seeking the monster, and learned that no mortal weapon had any affect against it. He set out for the place where the monster was rumored to live anyway—a section of the great forest that had been turned to ash by wildfire.

Just as he reached the burned place, the goddess of life appeared to him in her mortal form. In her hand she held a sword.

"This blade was forged in the depths of my own river, whose waters control the flow of life. It will pierce the hide of any creature, mortal or otherwise, so long as it is wielded by someone who has my favor. Take it, and complete your task."

So Dante took the sword, strengthened by the knowledge that Micah's goddess-mother watched over him, and stepped onto the plains of ash.

The monster slept in a field of jagged stone. It was twice the height of a mortal man, with the body of a wolf, the horns of a goat, and the scaled skin of a snake. Feathers ran along its spine, and it had a mouthful of teeth like broken glass.

Dante crept close, sword in hand. Just as he prepared to strike, the wind shifted, blowing his scent towards the monster, and it awoke with a screech that echoed through the trees.

The creature was cunning and quick, and the two of them fought for hours, until the sun began to set over the mountains in the distance and they both heaved for breath, tired and wounded, and still neither had gained the upper hand.

Then—Dante's feet were swept out from underneath him by the monster's tail, and he fell to the ground on his back, sending up a cloud of ash. The monster shrieked in triumph and raised its head to deal the final blow, and Dante desperately thrust his sword towards it.

The blade pierced through the creature's mouth and into its brain, and it collapsed, wholly dead.

Dante cut off its head and placed it in a cloth sack to carry it back to the palace. He presented it to the queen as proof, and though she was shocked that he had completed the task, she showed no outward sign of it.

"For the second task," she said, "you must defeat the bandits who have been attacking travelers on the south road. Capture their leader so that they may be tried for their crimes."

The bandits of which she spoke were a group of nearly thirty, and had evaded all efforts from other warriors to be defeated or captured. For one warrior to face them without aid meant almost certain death.

But Dante nodded, and bowed to the queen as he took his leave. For Micah, he would do anything—including the impossible.

The bandits were cunning, and adept at evasion, but they weren't particularly skilled at fighting. They relied on their numbers and their ability to escape to pull off their thievery, and Dante had trained with the best warriors that the land had to offer. He knew that if he could corner them, and find a way to limit the number of them that could attack him at once, he stood a chance of defeating them.

There was a stretch of the south road which passed through a narrow canyon, with cliffs stretching high on either side, which was favored by the bandits as a place to ambush travelers. As the path began to wind its way out of the canyon, it narrowed to the point that only one small cart could pass through at a time.

Under the cover of darkness, in the middle of the night, Dante prepared. He narrowed the canyon further using bags of sand and loose rocks, creating a choke point, and dug at the cliff sides to make them more unstable, pouring explosive powder into pockets in the rock.

Then he returned to his camp and dressed in his finest clothes and armor, ensuring that the bandits would be unable to resist attacking him.

In the late hours of the afternoon, he returned to the canyon, and with the sun gleaming off of his polished armor, he was set upon almost immediately. Bandits poured from the cliffs—a quick count showed that the group was there in full, likely hoping that their numbers would intimidate him into surrendering rather than attacking.

Dante knocked away the first of the group, and ran for the choke point, pulling his bow from his back. He paused with barely yards to spare behind him and struck his flint to spark the tar-covered tip of his arrow, whirling and firing at the cliffs. The powder lit, and the cliff sides collapsed inwards, blocking the bandits from escaping. The bandits cried out in dismay, and Dante smiled grimly.

He cast his bow aside, too pressed for time to return it properly to his back, and bolted for the place that he'd chosen to make his stand.

The first wave attacked quickly, hoping to overwhelm him with brute force, but they hindered each other's movements in the narrow space, and Dante cut them down easily. The next group was slightly more cautious, and tried to push him backwards to clear the path, but he dug his feet harder into the rock and pushed back, standing his ground.

Dante fought into the early hours of the night until he stood over his defeated enemies, his sword stained and his arms beginning to shake. Bandits had tried to climb the barrier, to knock his feet out from underneath him, to take him by surprise over and over—and he'd defeated them all, except for the last three who stood back, watching him warily.

“Surrender,” he said, “and I will take you to the palace to stand trial.”

The bandits surrendered. Dante watched them carefully for any sign of subterfuge, but none of them dared to attack him after witnessing the overwhelming defeat that he'd dealt to the rest of their group.

The queen's lips pressed together in a thin line upon his return. He hadn't been meant to succeed once, let alone twice, and yet here he was, triumphant. If she wasn't careful, he'd complete all three tasks, and she'd be forced to allow him to remain at her son's side, despite his unworthiness.

“Travel to the land of the dead,” she ordered. “Fill a bottle with water from the golden pools where the gods renew their magic, and bring it to me.”

Dante nodded wearily and left the throne room. Inwardly, he despaired—no mortal had traveled to the land of the dead and returned.

He looked towards the tower of the palace where Micah's rooms were. He couldn't see his friend in the window from this distance, but he could see the flowers that he grew on his balcony, bright against the stone.

Renewed determination filled him once again. He would do this—for Micah.

There were several ways to enter the land of the dead, the most common of which, obviously, was dying. Barring that, there was a river that was said to pass into the River of Life every night at the precise moment that twilight descended upon the land.

That method relied heavily upon timing and the favor of the gods, and it could take many attempts before Dante was successful. It'd been weeks of travel and fighting, and it was the longest he'd gone apart from Micah since they were children. He was tired, and impatient--the river wouldn't do.

Before he could agonize further at his small camp in the forest, days from anywhere but close to the lands of the gods, he was startled from his thoughts by rustling in the undergrowth and the soft thud of hooves on the packed earth.

He straightened, reaching for his sword lest the creature wish him harm--and his eyes fell upon the White Stag, standing tall and proud, white coat gleaming in the moonlight.

You are touched by life-magic, a whispery voice said, like many voices speaking together. *I will carry you to the land that you seek.*

Dante knew the legends of the stag, and was awed that the creature thought him worthy. He pressed a hand to his chest, overcome with emotion, the small spark of hope turning into a bright flame.

He rested well for the first time since beginning his tasks with the White Stag watching over him, and when the morning came the princely creature knelt forward to allow him onto its back. The world passed in a blur of brilliant color, and suddenly they were before the airy golden temple that marked the beginning and end of all things, in the center of which was a courtyard that contained the pools he sought.

The three brothers who ruled the land of the dead met Dante at the top of the temple's great steps. They had no names, and were identical in appearance except for their hair. One was silver-haired, another had hair black as night, and the third had hair that was like dripping sunlight.

They saw his sword, gifted from the goddess-mother herself, and the White Stag waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs, and the love and determination that drove him on and kept his back unbowed under the weight of all he'd faced, and were charmed instantly.

Still, they could not let a mortal pass without contest.

The silver-haired brother tilted his head and stepped forward.

"We see you," he said. "It has been many years since we have seen such a warrior. Should you desire, you could have anything--riches, glory, even immortality. We would make you a new god, to thrive and be worshipped and live on in legends for the rest of time."

Dante listened. He knew the brothers didn't lie, and he could have all they said. Once, he might have leapt at the chance, when he was young and desperate to prove himself.

But godhood no longer tempted him. He looked inside himself and wished only for what had been his goal since the beginning--to spend the rest of his life at Micah's side.

"Thank you," he said. "But all I desire is to stay always with my friend, who I love more than life. I would give everything I have just for that."

The brothers smiled. "Go on," they said, together. "Complete your task. You have proven yourself worthy."

So Dante passed by the brothers and came to the courtyard, and filled a bottle with the golden water there, and returned to the steps.

He bowed deeply.

"Thank you," he said again. "You have given me a great gift. I will not forget it."

The brothers placed their hands lightly upon his shoulders and his brow.

"Live well," they chorused, and Dante felt their blessing rush over him like rain.

He went to the bottom of the steps and climbed once more onto the White Stag's back, clutching the bottle in one hand. Tears filled his eyes--finally he could return home, to Micah's side.

But in the mortal land, the queen had lost faith that Dante would fail, and so, desperate to keep him away, she went to a black witch for aid. The witch gave her an arrow which would find its target in even the farthest reaches of the land. As soon as it pierced their skin, they would fall as though dead, lost to sleep from which they would not awaken. She fired the arrow at the sky and returned to her throne, content that she had finally won.

And so it was that just as Dante passed back into the land of the living, the queen's cursed arrow struck him, and he fell into a deathlike sleep. The White Stag carried him back to the palace, and was met by Micah, who had been overcome with a terrible feeling and had climbed from his window to escape his guarded room, rushing to follow the painful tug in his chest. He cried out at the sight of Dante's sleeping form, anguished, feeling as though his heart was being ripped away.

He cradled his friend gently in his lap, taking in all of the scars and bruises and dust from his quests—quests that he wouldn't have been on had it not been for Micah's possessive mother.

Micah leaned over him and wept.

Be still, the White Stag's whispery voice said. *All is not lost.*

"I have lost Dante," Micah cried. "He is everything to me, and so I have lost all."

"Oh, my child," said the goddess-mother, appearing in front of him. She ran a hand over the crown of the White Stag's head, and then knelt in the grass next to them. "Do you love him?"

"Love," Micah said, "is not strong enough for what I feel for Dante, but it is the only word I have. I love him more than life, more than breathing."

"Then he is not lost at all," the goddess replied, and, smiling gently, she placed a hand on Micah's brow, and then on Dante's, and as the last of Micah's tears fell, Dante's eyes opened, and he gazed upon the face of his friend.

The goddess-mother walked with the White Stag into the forest, leaving them to themselves, and Dante reached up and pressed a hand to Micah's cheek, and then they both cried for joy, holding each other as tightly as they were able and swearing that they would never part again.

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