

WHO SLAYS THE
GYANT, WOUNDS
THE BEAST

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Christmas Eve, 1598

THE BORDER BETWEEN what is and what might be changes with the seasons, and with the hour. Homesteads and fields and lanes that have the hard, dusty air of the mundane on a hot summer afternoon can echo to the sly tread of something wild and irrational under the full moon. Whispers uttered by no human mouth are caught on the breeze on All Hallows Eve or Walpurgisnacht. At the great hall of Charlecote Park, lonely in the frozen landscape, the rules of the daylight world have long since dissipated with the setting sun. There are whispers here too.

"Now?"

"Soon."

And prints made by no human foot in the deep snow that lies heavy against the sturdy walls. Lights blaze in the many windows and the sounds of viol, hautboy, and harpsichord drift out across the still countryside as the merry-makers prepare for the coming holy day.

"THIS IS A pit of debauchery. We should be home in London, Will, not in dismal Warwickshire among these fornicators and cupshotten ne'er-do-wells. I would be at church when the first bell tolls, and keep the devil at my back." Nathaniel Colt huddled beneath the woolen blanket as he peered out of the carriage window at the approaching hall. His breath clouded and he had long since lost the feeling in his toes.

The man opposite did not appear to feel the chill. He lounged across the seat, cleaning his nails with a knife. His boots were polished to a shine, his clothes the latest fashionable cut from the tailors who supplied the court. An urbane air belied his true nature, which occasionally surfaced in the depths of his dark eyes.

"Fornicators and cupshotten ne'er-do-wells, Nathaniel? England's aristocracy may not take to such a description," he replied. "However true it may be."

"I am a God-fearing man. Unlike yourself," Nathaniel added sniffily. "But I would expect no less from someone who has intimate knowledge of every tavern and doxy on Cheapside."

"Life is short, Nat, and we are bounded by misery on all sides. We must seek out what jewels we can."

Nathaniel snorted.

The carriage jolted as it passed between the grand gates and made its way toward the entrance where servants waited to help them from the carriage.

"And when do you plan to tell me why the Queen has dispatched us to this devil-haunted spot?" Nathaniel added. "What could possibly demand the attention of the magnificent Will Swyfte, England's greatest spy?"

"That note of sarcasm is unbecoming, Nathaniel," Will said lightly. "I may have to find another assistant in future."

"My heavenly rewards come early."

The servants led them into the hall where they were greeted by the host, the newly knighted Sir Thomas Lucy, dressed in a black doublet.

"Will Swyfte, England's greatest spy," he said. Nathaniel rolled his eyes.

"This is an honor, indeed." He paused. "Is the Queen—"

"Elizabeth has had to cancel her visit for the festivities," Will said. "And Walsingham sends his apologies. I am here on their behalf."

Lucy was crestfallen. He tugged at his beard for a moment and then said, "You will make merry with us, then, Mr. Swyfte? My house and staff are at your disposal. And I for one would take great pleasure in hearing of your famous exploits in your own words."

Lucy directed Will and Nathaniel toward the room where the festivities were taking place, before hurrying to the side of his wife. "I fail to see the

value of a spy with a name and a face that is known by everyone in the realm," Nathaniel sighed.

"England needs its heroes, Nat. People must see that all is being done to keep them safe in their beds. It stops them asking difficult questions of their betters. More, it distracts them from the real nightmares threatening to steal their breaths. Philip of Spain was a small ogre in comparison."

"And what are these nightmares? Should not an assistant be trusted enough to know more than the common man?"

"Do not be so quick to shuck off the common life." A note of regret rose briefly in Will's voice. "Enough chat. I have work for you."

The ballroom was thronging with the cream of the aristocracy, dancing and drinking and carousing with the complete abandon of the carefree ruling class. On show were the finest gowns and cloaks and doublets, bright colors glowing in the Christmas candlelight. Each guest wore a mask, so that a man might have difficulty knowing if the woman with him were his wife; an added attraction. In the shadows, kisses were stolen, and dancers would occasionally vacate the floor to disappear to the rooms above.

"Somewhere in that morass of carnality is Sir Edmund Spenser."

"The Queen's favorite poet?"

"The same. Find him, Nat, and bring him to me. But with the politeness befitting his status, of course."

"What would you have me do?" Nathaniel said incredulously. "Snatch off every mask until I find the face we seek?"

"You are a resourceful man," Will said with a grin. "That is why I have elevated you to your high status."

"And where will you be while I risk the stocks or being thrown out into the winter cold?" "I go in search of true love."

AT THE FAR end of the entrance hall, a hidden door revealed a tight, winding staircase that led to the guest bedrooms. Ice had formed on the inside of the windows and Will's breath plumed in the chill. He had memorized the layout of the house from the plans Walsingham had given him, but it was impossible to know which room had been set aside for Spenser.

The first door he tried revealed a couple in sweaty coitus. Though both naked, the man still wore a devil mask and the woman hid behind a cat's face. Lost to their rhythm, they did not see Will.

The next four rooms were empty, though fires crackled in the grate. The fifth was locked. From a hidden pouch, Will removed a roll of velvet containing a skeleton key. The lock turned with an irritatingly loud clank, but as he slipped inside the figure seated at the mirrored dressing table appeared not to have heard. It was a woman, though her reflected face was lost to the shadows of a hooded cloak. Ringlets of brown hair tumbled out on to her breast. She was still, like a moonlit pool, and at first Will thought she was asleep.

But then her voice rolled out, low and honeyed and as warm as the candlelight: "Leave now, uninvited guest, or face the inevitable repercussions." The soft tones betrayed no fear.

"You are the consort of Sir Edmund Spenser?" She did not reply.

"It is not my habit to intrude into a lady's chamber..." Will paused. "At least, not without some degree of invitation."

"You did not leave your sword upon arrival," the woman noted. "You are expecting a threat? Here, in this house of celebration?"

Will found himself lulled by her soothing voice. "Weave no spells with me," he said. "I am aware of your tricks."

"Then there is no need for subterfuge." The woman turned to him and removed her hood. Though Will had encountered some of the most beautiful women in Europe, his breath caught in his throat. Her flawless skin appeared to exude a thin golden glow and her hazel eyes flashed with an otherworldly light.

"Glamour?" he said.

"'Twould be an insult if I considered your opinion to carry any weight." She stood, and as the cloak shifted around her form the atmosphere became sexually

charged.

"I can see why Spenser fell beneath your spell."

A shadow crossed her face. "No spell." "Who Slays the Gyant, Wounds the Beast 19
"What, then? True love?" Will expected a tart response to his mockery, but she turned from him and went to the window.

"I could not expect one such as you to understand," she said quietly as she gazed out across the frozen fields.

"You know we cannot allow it to continue."

"Is it so dangerous?"

"A man and a resident of Faerie? If the icy war between our two lands was not close to growing hot, you perhaps could make an argument for such a liaison. But—"

"War? You speak as if that means anything." She turned to him, her eyes blazing. For the first time, Will glimpsed the true power that he knew existed just beneath the otherworldly beauty. He drew his sword.

She strode toward him, the air crackling around her. "The events of tonight must reach their natural conclusion."

"Your profession of love does not ring true. You know well how much the information you both carry is of value to your kind. You cannot be allowed to cross over to the other side."

"My kind?" Her face grew cold and terrible. "My kind are fools and lovers." She snapped open her left hand to release a wild fluttering of wings. Within a second, Will fell to the floor, unconscious.

"YOUR MASTER CUTS a very dashing figure," Alice Lucy noted as she sent the eldest of her thirteen children back to bed. "Is it true he has personally dispatched one hundred Spaniards?"

Nathaniel masked his weariness at her question and the familiar, tiresome sparkle in the eye of the mistress of the house. "There are many stories surrounding my master, some of them even true."

"My husband has done his own duty to deal with the Catholic problem locally. Though, of course, not with the verve of Master Swyfte," she added hastily.

"He is a God-fearing man?"

"I believe Master Swyfte does not know the meaning of fear," Nathaniel said with a tight smile.

"And no woman has yet led him up the aisle. How sad that he abides such a lonely existence."

Nathaniel's attention was drawn to some kind of disturbance on the far side of the whirling dancers. "Master Swyfte does not want for companionship. But Queen and Country demand much of him, and a wife would find her days and nights lacking."

A ripple moved across the ballroom as dancers came to a sudden halt. An animated group had grown near one of the windows looking over the formal gardens leading down to the river.

Alice peered at the growing crowd with irritation. "They are in their cups. Do not concern yourself."

"I fear, mistress, there is more to this than wine." Nathaniel deferentially edged through the dancers until he could hear the conversation of the knot of men and women move from jocularly to concern.

"Get him to a bedroom!" a rotund man in a pig mask squealed. "He holds up the festivities and the midnight hour draws near!"

"Hold. His chest does not move. Perhaps he has choked on a nut. Remove his mask."

Nathaniel could see a man prone on the floor, his white ruffle soaked in the red wine he had been drinking so that it appeared he had been shot. Fumbling fingers plucked his mask free and then all those around him recoiled as one.

"The Devil's work!" the pig-man exclaimed. He crossed himself as he staggered back onto the dance floor.

At first, Nathaniel was sure this was some joke to mark the festivities, for the man on the floor was not a man at all. Straw sprouted from ears and mouth like one of the figures farmers left in the cornfields after the harvest.

Silver coins were embedded where the eyes should have been. Yet the skin still bloomed warm and the features were more real than any prankster could have constructed.

"Quick!" Nathaniel said. "Where was he before he fell?"

One of the guests pointed toward the window. "He looked out across the landscape as he drank his wine."

Those nearest the window backed away quickly, amid murmurs of "Witchcraft!" As the ripples of what had happened moved swiftly across the dance floor, Lucy rushed over aghast.

"A joke!" he cried. "A Christmas prank!" Hastily, he ordered his servants to remove the straw man. Circulating rapidly, he managed to calm the most anxious guests, but an atmosphere of unease still hung heavily over the hall.

"Is this why your Master is here?" Lucy asked as he pulled Nathaniel to one side. "If so, I would ask for his help before these matters worsen, for I fear they may."

"My Master's motives remain a mystery known only to himself. Though dress me in a cap and call me a fool if there were no connection, for bizarre occurrences follow my Master like a dog follows a wedding parade."

"Then I beseech you, bring him here, now, before we are all turned to straw." Nathaniel bowed and disappeared into the crowd, though he was now niggled with the thought that Will had been gone for an undue amount of time.

WILL WOKE ON the cold, hard boards of the bedroom, his head filled with one memory constantly replaying: Jenny calling to him across the golden cornfield that lay beside her Warwickshire home. The image stung him so hard it had brought tears to his eyes while he slept. The remembrance had been planted there to teach him a lesson.

"Magicks," he muttered contemptuously. "Many a time I have found you in such a position, but never without the consumption of wine."

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Nathaniel slipped in and helped Will to his feet. "You were attacked?"

"Not in the way you think." Will steadied himself. Jenny slipped from his mind, but she was not replaced by peace. "I fear I have a score to settle."

"I fear you have to listen to me prattle before you do another thing."

Nathaniel quickly explained what had occurred in the ballroom. "What transpired here?" he added. "Is this the same threat?"

"In a way. Come—great danger draws near." In the cold corridor, Will scraped the ice off the window to peer into the snow-bright night. The light from the great windows fell in large rectangles on rolling drifts. "Footprints," he mused.

"Someone is out there?" Nathaniel squeezed beside Will. "Those are the prints of animals," he said dismissively.

Beyond the pools of light, where the trees clustered, darkness lay heavily. Points of light appeared briefly here and there, as though fireflies moved among the branches. Will continued to watch until there was a sudden burst of fire: a torch igniting. Another, and then another, moving back and forth.

Will did not wait to hear Nathaniel's questions. He found Lucy passing brightly among the guests, splashing sack liberally into goblets while attempting to raise spirits with jokes and bawdy comments.

"Master Swyfte. Is the unfortunate incident now contained?"

Will drew him to one side. "The matter is just beginning. This hall is under siege."

Lucy cursed loudly. "'Tis the Catholics. The uprising we all feared has begun."

"You should find some warmth in your heart for the brotherhood of man," Will replied coldly. "There are worse things under heaven than Catholics."

"Moors?"

"We must make the hall secure by the midnight hour."

The grand clock squatting in the corner near the mantelpiece showed twenty minutes remaining. "There is time enow. I will order the servants to lock and bar the doors," Lucy said.

"That will not suffice. I will advise your kitchen servants to prepare a concoction of salt and other herbs. It must be sprinkled along every entrance into this place: doors, windows, hearths. To miss one opening could be the end of all of us."

Lucy blanched. "Then you are saying this threat is witchcraft?"

"Best not discuss these things here and now for fear of frightening your guests, Sir Thomas. Trust in me and the authority of our Queen and we shall keep your home safe from all enemies." Lucy nodded. "One other thing: keep all guests away from the windows and anywhere they can be spied from without."

Deeply troubled, Lucy hurried off to find the cook. Will turned to Nathaniel. "Did you find Spenser?"

"I searched high and low, and met many who had spoken to him, or believed they had, but he always stayed one step ahead."

"Then back to it, Nat. The urgency is greater still. Spenser and his love must not be allowed to leave this place before the sun breaks."

"You fear for his life at the hands of whatever waits without?"

"I fear for all our lives, Nat, and the lives of every man, woman and child in England."

IT TOOK FIVE minutes for the kitchen staff to prepare Will's salt-based concoction and a further thirteen minutes to draw a line of it before every entrance into the hall, and that was with every servant working fast with small leather pouches of the mixture. The final grains fell into place as the bell on the great clock began to chime midnight, and only then did Will ease slightly. Fuelled by more bottles brought up from Sir Thomas Lucy's cellar, the guests continued to enjoy themselves, oblivious to what was taking place around them, but Lucy himself wandered the party rooms ashen-faced.

And as the final chime echoed, every candle and lamp in the hall winked out. Whoops and excited shrieks filled the room. "'Tis time for the great unmasking!" someone called. No one had noticed that even the roaring fire in the hearth had dimmed to a faint crackle. Through the gloom, Will quickly snatched a candle from the table and lit it with his flint.

Another cheer rose up. With fumbling fingers, Lucy hastily lit another five sticks in a candelabrum on the other side of the room. The panic was clear in his face.

From an oblique angle, Will watched through the window, but there was no sign of anyone approaching. All around him, the drunken guests tore off their masks with great cheers. The women blushed and curtsied. The men brayed and kissed their hands.

Except one. Will saw him at the same time the guests closest to him began to laugh and point. A large, fat-bellied man, he staggered around, feeling across the gray-furred surface of the wolf's mask he wore. Yet in his other hand, he clutched the same wolf mask that he had just removed.

"A mask beneath a mask! How novel," a freckle-faced woman cried.

Desperate to stop a panic that might drive the guests out into the night, Will ran to drag the guest to a more private place. He was too late. "This is no mask. It is my face!" the man howled. Those nearest peered closely and saw that it was true.

There was a gurgle and a swell that became a crashing wave as the guests swept toward the exit amid deafening cries for God to save them. Will was closer to the hall and made it to the grand oak door first. He drew his sword and brought the rush to a halt.

"You know me," he said firmly.

Silence.

"Do you know me?" he stressed in a tone that bordered on the threatening.

A few near the front quietly said that they did.

"Then you know that I will allow no further harm to come to loyal men and women of this realm. As long as you stay within my purview, and do not venture outside, for that is where the true danger awaits."

Several were still consumed with dread of the supernatural. They tore at their clothes and tore at their hair and for a moment Will thought they were

going to rush him in the grip of their frenzy. But saner heads held them calm until the panic subsided and then the questions began in force. At the back of the hall, Nathaniel was trying to catch his attention. Shaking off the desperately clutching hands, Will left Lucy to maintain whatever calm he could and ran in pursuit of the figure Nathaniel had indicated.

At the foot of the rear staircase, Will caught up with a man with wavy brown hair above a high forehead that gave him the look of an intellectual, but it was marred by the desperation etched into his features.

Will took his arm. The man did not resist. "Sir Edmund?"

There was a long moment of silence before he relented. "Yes."

"You know who I am?"

"I have heard of your exploits, like every other person in this land."

"Then you know I am only charged with the gravest tasks."

Spenser nodded. Will saw no surprise that he was there, just a dismal resignation.

"Your wife, Elizabeth, has displayed remarkable fortitude during your repeated absences from the family home," Will continued, before adding knowingly, "while you were composing your poetry. She fears your latest absence may be longer than the others, Sir Edmund. Is she correct?"

Spenser bowed his head; his hands were shaking so much he appeared to be sick.

"What is your intention?"

"To take you back to London. Our Queen wishes for you to spend some weeks... perhaps months... at the court."

"I cannot return." He grabbed Will's shoulders forcefully. "Please, you must understand. This is an affair of the heart. I seek freedom to let it breathe. I cannot return to the stifling fug of the court."

"You have one affair of the heart, Sir Edmund, the woman you wed four years past. There is no room for any other."

"What are you saying?"

"You will not be allowed to see your current associate, under orders of the Queen—" "Walsingham, more like!"

"She will be returned to her former residence to continue the work she has carried out these last thirty years."

"No!" Spenser began to cry. "Not back to that cell. To the four walls and the gloom and the questions, the endless boredom. To one such as she, that Who Slays the Gyant, Wounds the Beast 29

is a living torture. Why do you not kill her and be me with it? Why do you not kill us both?"

The intensity of emotion in Spenser's face brought Will up sharp. "These are difficult times," he said, softening slightly, "and they require difficult measures. The war between England and Faerie has blown hot and cold, and now it is cold, though no less dangerous. What you attempt here tonight will light a fire that could burn England to the ground. You know these things. Yet you persist."

"You call me traitor, but I am just a man in love. Can you not feel what I feel? Do you have no heart?"

"In the midst of this great struggle, there is no place for ones such as you or I to consider such things—"

"Such things? They are the reason we do what we do!" Spenser wrung his hands; he appeared on the verge of falling to his knees.

"You are a poet, Sir Edmund, and I am merely a spy. All I know is lies, whispered secrets, and the caress of a blade across the throat. Now, why here, this night? Why not return to Ireland?"

"There is a crossing point not far from the hall," Spenser said with bleak resignation. "At this time of year, it would allow me to travel with her without suffering the terrible fate of those who have ventured to the Far Lands in times past."

"Will! Come quick!" Nathaniel appeared at the door to the ballroom, his face pale.

"Stay by my side, Sir Edmund," Will cautioned. "Though a peer of the realm, 'twould not be fitting to ignore the Queen's decree." Spenser bowed his head at the implicit threat and followed silently.

In the ballroom, Will and Nathaniel turned one of the massive oak tables onto its side for cover. Outside, the torches were moving. They had emerged from the tree line and were slowly advancing on the house. As the snow flared in the torchlight, figures gradually came into view. Nathaniel caught his breath. "Can this be true?" Then: "Is it the Devil and his followers, up from hell to claim our souls?"

"Not the Devil in name, Nat." The approaching group was led by tall, strong males with golden-tinged skin and beautiful but cruel faces. They wore black and silver helmets and breastplates that looked more like tropical shells than armor. But beyond them, still half-seen, were worse things that came with hooves and scales and bat-wings and horns, writhing in shadow, eyes glowing balefully. The approaching line reached across the entire back of the hall, and from the way it curved at the fringes, Will guessed the building was surrounded.

"What, then?" When Will did not reply, Nathaniel turned to him. "You knew of these things?"

"For a long time."

"The Unseelie Court." Spenser stood to one side, his face ghostly in the gloom. "To them, humanity is like the cattle in the field. They have haunted our nightmares since Adam rose up in the Garden."

"Hunted, is the word, I think," Will said. "For .in age, they saw us as playthings, Nat. Objects to torment, like the bears that dance in the inns on :heapside. They would steal our children from the crib and leave misshapen things in their place. Or they would turn us into the stones that stand proud in the fields, or lure us to their land with the promise of gold, or magickal instruments." He glanced at Spenser. "Or love."

"No lure," Spenser said. "'Tis from the heart, Master Swyfte, I told you that."

"Your heart, perchance. But your paramour who has been at Her Majesty's convenience for many a year—"

"Imprisoned!"

"I would think she nurtures a little bitterness in her heart, would you not? A desire for revenge, say? To spew forth every detail of our magickal defenses that finally helped hold those foul creatures at bay?"

"No!"

Will grabbed Spenser roughly and thrust him behind the table so he could see clearly through the window. Nathaniel gasped at such rough treatment of a member of the aristocracy.

"Look deep into their faces, Sir Edmund, and tell me they would not make demands upon one of their own, even if she is as true and noble as you say. To prey upon us again, they would do anything to gain the information she holds." Tears rimmed Spenser's eyes. "I could not bear to lose her, Master Swyfte. To you or them."

"Perhaps arrangements could be made for occasional access to her room—"

Spenser laughed bitterly. "Clearly you have never loved. "'Occasional access'? That would be more torment than reward."

"Where is she, Sir Edmund?"

"I know not. 'Struth." He smiled. "She could be standing an inch behind your shoulder and you would not know. Or she could already be away across the fields, free at last. The things she can do! It takes the breath away."

"Will?" Nathaniel's knuckles were white on the tabletop. Outside, the Unseelie Court had come to a halt just a few feet from the windows. Their torches cast a sickening ruddy glow into the hall. "The salt and herbs you spread at the entrances—it will prevent them gaining access?"

"They cannot cross it and survive."

"Then we are safe. We have but to wait till dawn."

Spenser snorted contemptuously.

"Whatever, we shall hold them at bay, Nat." "They are so far beyond us, they are gods," Spenser said. "Old gods from the days of the Fall.

Would you hold back an angel or a devil, Master Swyfte?"

"I would stand against Hell itself if needs must."

LUCY'S GUESTS HUDDLED on the floor near the walls furthest from the windows in the ballroom and the great hall. Some drank heavily to mask their their fear, but most trembled and prayed. Will prowled the building in search of Spenser's Faerie Queen, but there was no sign of her in the ringing, empty bedrooms, or the vast, steaming kitchen.

"Perhaps Sir Edmund is right and she is long gone," Nathaniel ventured.

"If she were gone, our longtime tormentors would not continue to wait beyond the walls. No, Nat, she is still here, and we must find her before lawn. For when the Unseelie Court melts away, .he will be gone from here, and all hope will be gone too."

"If she is as powerful as Sir Edmund says, what chance have we of finding her?"

A cry followed by a loud hubbub rose up from the rooms below. Will raced down to find several aristocrats wrestling one of their own to the flagstones of the entrance hall. He had the glassy-eyed look of a sleepwalker.

Lucy grabbed Will's arm. "He is possessed," he gasped. "My wife noticed him, in a dream, walking to the door where he proceeded to wipe away your concoction." Will turned toward the door, but Lucy continued, "We have replenished your magical barrier."

"Good. No barrier must be removed till dawn breaks. Do you hear?" Will heard the unintended lash in his voice, but Lucy did not appear to mind. He nodded anxiously.

Will inspected the glassy-eyed man who appeared to be coming to his senses. Others still pinned his arms and legs to the floor. Will motioned to them to free him. "The danger here has passed. But be vigilant in case others become pixie-led."

"The Unseelie Court controlled him?" Nathaniel asked when they had moved away to one side.

"They have the power to control weak minds for a short period," Will said.

"And unfortunately," Nat added tartly, "we are surrounded by the aristocracy." Another cry rose up as a woman lurched toward the barrier at the fireplace in the ballroom. She was brought down in seconds.

"I fear it will be a long night, Nat."

BY THREE O'CLOCK, the party guests were whimpering and crying. Every few minutes one of their number would attempt to wander off, only to be brought down in a flurry of bodies. They were growing progressively more violent as the anxiety increased. One woman cried constantly with a broken arm. Blood streamed from the noses of others.

Will grabbed Spenser and hauled him next to the fire. "My patience wears thin, Sir Edmund. You must flush out your love."

"Or what, Master Swyfte? You will murder a favored subject of the Queen?"

"No threats. But death is not the worst thing."

"Will! Come quick!" Horrified, Nat appeared at the door followed by billowing smoke and a sickening smell of cooking meat. A tall, elderly man ran back and forth, squealing, as flames consumed him; he still clutched the lamp he had poured over himself, his hand now welded to the metal. Several men attempted to haul a tapestry to stifle the blaze, but the man in his death throes was fast and random. Obstacles added to the chaos as women swooned across the floor and other guests stumbled in their crazed attempts to flee.

"They will kill us all!" one woman wailed repeatedly.

The blazing man was eventually forced to the ground and smothered by the tapestry, but it was too late for him. The smoke and the stink of burning filled the hall.

"Is this it, then?" Nathaniel said. "They will pick us off one by one?"

"They have nothing to gain by that." Will paced back and forth, attempting to count heads. "It was a diversion."

Lucy ran up, ashen-faced. "My wife," he said. "In the confusion, she departed."

"I saw her," a white-haired woman said. "She went towards the kitchens." Will thought Lucy would faint. "They have taken her," he gasped.

Before Lucy could plead for his wife's return, Will was racing through the hall, with Nathaniel close behind. The deserted kitchen was filled with steam and the smell of Christmas spices, and from the scullery beyond came the sound of scraping. Hunched before the door that led to the kitchen yard, Lucy's wife had just finished removing the last of the salt mixture. Will vaulted the row of empty coppers, but it was too late. The door began to grind open and beyond an insane shrieking rose up that sounded like birds over the autumn fields. Will dragged the dazed Lady Lucy back and thrust her into Nathaniel's arms. "Take her back, and put another line of the mixture beyond the kitchen door!" "What about you?"

"They will be on us before we reach safety. I will hold them back as best I can."

Nathaniel looked aghast, but as the door swung open with a resounding crash, he took Lady Lucy's hand and ran. Will drew his sword and waited. Through the door, the dark was impenetrable and a deep, threatening silence had replaced the shrieking.

"Come, then, you foul and cowardly creatures," he said. "An Englishman with cold steel awaits."

The lights in the scullery and the kitchen beyond went out as one. The smell of wet fur and rotting fish filled the room. Holding his sword up, Will backed slowly across the room. A queasy dread began to rise in his stomach; he had felt it before, a by-product of the very nature of the otherworldly beings. They were so alien that simply being in their presence could reduce someone to tears or laughter or gibbering fear, the emotions pulled unbidden from the depths of the mind. What lay hidden before him was one of the Unseelie Court's outriders, sickeningly vicious but not as cunning or cruel as its golden-skinned masters.

Though he could see nothing in the gloom, Will was attuned to the slightest movement. The scrape a talons on the flags, the shiver of scales over the wooden table, an animal growl deep in the throat. When something lashed out toward his face, he was already responding to the shift of air currents. His sword flashed upwards, biting into meat. A high-pitched howl made his head ring. What felt like a falling tree crashed against his chest, flinging him back across the room. It opened up his shirt and the leather protector beneath, but only grazed his skin.

Rolling and springing back to his feet to avoid napping, slavering jaws, he muttered, "Thank You, Master Dee, for the hidden armor. Your inventiveness will be my salvation."

For five long minutes, he danced in the pitch dark, striking whenever he sensed his attacker near, clattering over pans and shattering crockery. He missed more blows than he hit, and it was clear his attacker was biding its time.

Finally something that felt like a vine wrapped tightly around his ankle and yanked him onto his back. The creature was on him in a second. Pinning him down with the weight of a horse, it lowered those snapping jaws to within six inches of Will's face. Its breath made his stomach churn and the scrambling effect of its nature left his thoughts fractured.

"Ah, Master Dee. One more time, I pray," he whispered. From the hidden pocket behind his belt, he managed to extricate a small pouch of tightly folded velvet. Screwing his eyes shut tight, he flicked the pouch into the face of the beast. With a searing flash, the velvet unfolded and the parchment container within burst to release tin phosphorus.

Another deafening howl rang off the walls as the creature flung itself backward. "'Tis to my endless joy that some of your kind cannot abide the light," Will said as he scrambled across the scullery with the after-burn of the phosphorus still stinging his eyelids.

He pounded on the heavy oaken door to the hall. "Nat! Now would be a good time to admit your master! I have ambitions beyond being a tasty morsel."

Will heard the ferocious movement at his back as Nat threw the door wide. He bounded through and bolted it behind him as a tremendous force crashed against it. Nathaniel threw himself on to his back, but the hinges held.

"Come, I have had more than enough of these games," Will said.

Nat noted the many cuts visible through Will's ragged clothes. "You are hurt."

"Others will hurt more, trust me."

Will returned to the cowering, whimpering aristocrats where Lucy held his wife tightly to him. "For your own safety, you must retire to the bedrooms where I will lock you in," Will said.

"Never!" a man with bovine features exclaimed. "I will hear no such thing! Locked in? That will make us easy prey for those devils."

Will's hand fell to the hilt of his sword. The bovine man watched it uneasily. "You put each another at risk by roaming free. You must trust me to I keep you safe." The bovine man made to protest once more, but several hands pulled him back toward the stairs. Look in his eyes," another hissed into his ear. Best not to argue. Take this up with the Queen if we survive this night."

As Nathaniel herded the group up the stairs, WI II called out politely, "Not you, Sir Edmund. We have unfinished business."

Hesitantly, Spenser returned to Will's side. The noises outside the house had grown louder, not just the menagerie cries but clanks and rattles as the Unseelie Court tested windows and doors or scurried up the walls to clatter across the roof.

"We have done well to survive till now," Spenser said as he eyed the torches moving past the windows. "They will not relent."

"Did you expect it to end like this when you fled London, Sir Edmund?"

"It has not ended. Not yet, at least."

"Oh, it has, Sir Edmund. For you, and your love. Sit." Will kicked a chair next to the dying fire and pressed Spenser into it; all pretense of deference for his station was now gone. Will pulled up a chair next to him.

"This is a damnable job I do, but to bemoan it is pointless. I accepted the responsibilities long ago, and there is no going back now," Will said as he looked deep into Spenser's face. "My service to Queen and Country precludes a life of my own. I live only to keep safe England and the Queen's subjects. Do you understand?"

Spenser nodded slowly.

Will laughed quietly. "I think not, Sir Edmund. There has been no sacrifice in your life. No loves lost. No good friends killed for reasons that always appeared trivial. I miss my Jenny with all my heart, and I miss Kit, murdered all those years ago in a small room. I regret so many things. Yet here I am."

"I fail to see where you are going with this, Master Swyfte."

"I speak by way of apology, Sir Edmund, for you should know that what I do is in no way personal, or colored by malice or bitterness. Though I have suffered hard, I have given my own happiness freely for the sake of great things." Will removed a small dagger from the back of his belt, and then he gripped Spenser's right wrist forcefully. "I am about to remove your little finger, Sir Edmund. And then I will move on to the next, and the next, and so on, until you have no digits left to write your grand works. And then I will take your ears, and your nose, and then your eyes. I will leave your tongue till last in the hope that at some point you will stop me to tell me of the whereabouts of your love, and then to order her to return with me to London. You will, then, of course, be free to go."

"I am the Queen's favored poet," Spenser gasped in horror.

"And I am the Queen's right arm, for better or worse. We are small people, all of us, and our individual lives are meaningless against the continued safety of all the good men and women of this land. They deserve to sleep soundly in their hods, and to raise their families, and earn their crust, free from fear and pain of death. I would gladly sacrifice myself for that cause. And so should you."

Will placed the blade against Spenser's finger. Spenser attempted to wrench his hand free, but Will's grip was too strong. An aroma of honeysuckle filled the room. In one corner stood the Faerie Queen, her face terrifying.

Will quickly moved the blade to Spenser's throat. "He will be dead before you can act."

Tears rimmed Spenser's eyes. "Let him kill me. You must be free!"

The agony in the Queen's beautiful face was almost too much for Will to bear. He softened his tone. "Give me your word you will cause me no physical harm and he will live."

"I so do," she replied icily.

"No!" Spenser cried. "He will take you back to that cell! You will never see the sky again—" The Queen raised her hand and Spenser slumped unconscious. Will hid his shock. "I see in your face you will not relent," she said. "I believe you will even follow us to the Far Lands." "I do what I must to prevent all you know falling into the hands of the enemy."

She looked out at the flickering torchlight and the constant insectile movement. "I care nothing for the demands of my people. For this war, which has dragged on for so long. I want to be free." Her gaze fell fondly on Spenser. "The only meaning I have ever found has been in his presence."

"You are their Queen, and they want you back."

She nodded. "But even a Queen must do her duty or pay the price. They would extract the knowledge from me one way or another, however much I resisted. 'Who slays the gyant, wounds the beast,' that is what my love wrote, and it is true. Slay me, now, and you wound my people forever."

"You are more valuable to us alive. You have helped keep your people at bay for many a year. My Queen needs you."

She came over and gently caressed Spenser's neck. "If we are separated again, my love has only a few short days to live." The Queen's face remained impassive, but in her eyes Will saw raw emotion; human emotion, and this in itself was shocking. "He will die, at Westminster, on January the thirteenth. Three days later he will be interred at the Abbey, a burial fit for a true hero of the nation. And so easily is guilt assuaged," she added acidly.

"You know this?"

"I see it. There is no doubt." She smiled sadly. "Love is a terrible weapon. It can end a life as well as begin one."

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Will hesitated.

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"I was harsh," she continued. "I set the memory of your Jenny hard in your mind so it would haunt you every time your thoughts stilled. I wanted to show you what love truly meant."

"I know what it means," he snapped.

"How long since she died?" When he did not reply she continued, "I can remove it. Give you peace."

Will closed his eyes, and there was Jenny, smiling beneath the blue summer sky. His lips tingled from their final kiss. Her perfume filled his nose as if she were still there, close enough to take into his arms.

He opened his eyes. "Pain is the price we pay for what we do. I thank you for your gift, good lady. My Jenny will stay with me, and I will never know peace. That is how it should be. And in that I find some absolution."

Slipping the dagger back into his belt, he offered his chair to the Queen.

"Dawn is not far away. Sit awhile, and make the most of this time."

With resignation, she took the chair, and Will knew from her face he had just consigned Spenser to death in a few short days.

THE HIDEOUS SOUNDS beyond the walls grew to a crescendo as dawn approached and then faded away like mist before the sun. The snow rolled out thick and heavy, now virginal as if no foot had ever touched it. As the Christmas bells tolled, Lucy and his guests descended, wringing their hands and crying their thanks to the Lord. Will hesitated.

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"Another victory for England's greatest spy," Nathaniel said with a tart smile that failed to mask his relief. "The tale of this night will only add to your fame."

"No one will speak of this again, on pain of death. The Queen will convey her wishes to her subjects herein. Let the people be content with stories of swordplay and rescues and assassinations foiled. They deserve no less."

Spenser still slept in his chair by the fire. The Queen, now hooded to hide her features, rose and came over.

Nathaniel cowered a step behind Will. "She is coming with us? Of her own free will?"

"Her love is fading and will soon be gone. There is nothing for her in this world or the next. Why should she not come?"

The Queen's eyes met Will's and an understanding lay between them. She walked silently past and across the snow to where the carriage awaited. Nathaniel followed, but Will stood on the threshold for a moment, listening to the words of his own love, seeing her smile, always dead, always alive. Only there when his thoughts were still, the Queen had said. There would be little of that.

The war would continue as cold as that harsh winter, and there would be little rest for any of England's spies.

"Hurry up, Nat!" he called. "There are great works still to be done! No rest for the likes of you or I! To London, and the rest of it be damned!"