



WELCOME TO FAIRYLAND

GISELE STOOD GLARING at the portal into Fairyland. Fairies (fae, fey, faeries—no two sources could agree on spelling) were creatures out of legend, appearing so rarely that people in kingdoms other than Isshia frequently discounted them as entirely fictional. Even in Isshia, they did not pop up on an everyday basis. Humans didn't visit Fairyland except in accidental and story-worthy circumstances. Therefore, it logically followed that it must be extremely difficult to travel between the two realms.

But no—reciting the portal spell she'd found in an old and only slightly forbidden book, while standing next to a hawthorn tree on Summervane, had worked on the first try. The small tree's branches provided the lintel for the wavering portal, its trunk one edge of the frame, showing a blurred vision of another forest. A forest, moreover, that didn't look so very different to the one she was currently standing in, except that the shadows beneath its boughs were a touch darker.

The ease with which she'd accomplished the magic was so

offensive that she simply refused to believe it. Powered by that supreme disbelief, she stepped into the portal and straight into another world. There was a tearing sound—the protective iron horseshoe in her coat pocket had been left on the other side.

“Damn,” she cursed, thoroughly unsettled and with a delayed spike of fear as it dawned on her that she’d just hurled herself recklessly into another world without any of her supplies. The silence of ancient woodland pressed down on her, abruptly *unfamiliar*.

But the portal remained, an archway of brighter daylight. Hastily she stepped back through it. Of course, now the trap would spring—

She stumbled as she returned to the hawthorn tree, expecting resistance and finding none. The horseshoe lay on the ground, red-hot and having scorched the surrounding grass. She hadn’t truly expected to be able to take it into Fairyland, but it had seemed worth an attempt, iron being consistently mentioned for its protective qualities against fae.

She glared indignantly at the still-wavering portal. How *dare* it be this easy?

You wanted it to be impossible so that it wouldn’t matter that it took you so long to work up the courage to try.

Champion snorted, which for the placid gelding was a loud proclamation that he didn’t like this at all and would Gisele please stop appearing alarmingly from trees and also setting fires?

“Sorry, old fellow,” she said, patting his neck. “This is where we part ways, rather sooner than I expected. I’m not risking your neck, and you’ve iron shoes on besides.”

Champion was confused by her removing his tack and setting him loose but was not unwilling to overlook this oddity to enjoy browsing the dry summer grass. She had every confidence in him making his own way back to the stables once she was gone.

Champion was a horse strongly motivated by his feedbag, and the palace brand was clear on his flank.

Taking a deep breath, she shifted her pack into place and checked the bronze dagger that was so vital for her Plan. It remained securely in its holder and, unlike the iron horseshoe, had travelled easily through the portal. Everything set, she stepped through the shimmering air beside the hawthorn's trunk and re-emerged into Fairyland. It remained an unfairly straightforward process, and, yes, she *had* wanted it to be impossible, or at least nearly so. It would have made it easier to forgive herself.

"Any evil fairy sorcerers here?" she snapped at the surrounding foliage, just in case that was going to be similarly straightforward. Nothing responded, which was probably for the best. Ancient forest giants stretched thickly in every direction, the dry rustle of leaves swallowing the echoes of her voice. The shadows had an odd indigo tint in the corner of her eye that disappeared when she stared at them directly. Somewhere out of sight, a strange bird called, and she jerked.

Giving herself a mental shake, she got out the wrist-charm, made of her own hair, comfrey, and dandelion leaves twined together and attached to a leather cord. The wild mage she'd persuaded to make it based on a recipe in a different only slightly forbidden book hadn't been certain it would work, but sure enough, the charm pulled in a clear direction. A chill went through her. It was pulling towards *him*.

Her own personal Malediction, as she'd silently dubbed him long ago. He was the source of her curse, the terrible fae sorcerer who'd tricked her mother into a firstborn bargain. The Malediction was the bogeyman of her childhood, the terrible fate she'd spent her life preparing to face, the monster who would one day tear her away from her family and home. The monster who had, most monstrosly of all, *never turned up*.

Before she could lose courage, she checked all her remaining precautions were in place and began walking. Every nerve stretched tight, waiting for the terrors of Fairyland to descend. In all the tales she'd heard—and given her history, she'd made sure to hear as many as possible—the fae realm was best described by one primary adjective: dangerous.

If only there had been a more rigorously academic text available on the subject of defences against fairies. She'd been forced to cobble together a dozen different options from folklore, none of which had been robustly tested, as far as she could find. Her pockets were full of herbs purported to ward off fairies, along with a packet of salt.

Iron was the only point of consensus, though the renowned Galyian scholar Morizote had theorised that iron-aversion was only a metaphor for the conflict between man's industry and the natural world. Gisele didn't have much patience for Morizote's opinions generally, since he'd gone on to espouse the view that fairies as a whole were merely allegorical. *Must be nice to believe that*, she thought wryly. Galyia, half a continent away, clearly did not suffer from fae-cursed princesses. When she got back, she'd write an entire essay about *allegory* and send it to the man.

Something was wrong.

She stopped composing her mental lecture mid-stride, academic outrage replaced by animal fear. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end. Slowly, she turned around, heart thumping. The gloom had deepened beneath the forest boughs, but otherwise there was nothing obviously amiss. Except—

No birds, she realised sharply. The background chorus had fallen silent, and the only sound was her own breathing, loud and heaving. She put a hand on the handle of the bronze knife.

The air was still and hot. She wanted to remove her coat, but instead she cautiously inched backwards, concentrating on

being as small and unnoticeable as possible. *I'm not here; I'm not here.* In some of the stories, fairies could hear your thoughts.

The sense of danger slowly eased. Shakily, she checked the navigational charm again and chose a path that would take her in a wide circle around that disturbing patch of forest. She didn't start breathing again until she was safely past.

That was only the first of what turned out to be multiple . . . encounters? Could you call it an encounter if you didn't actually encounter anything? Maybe her precautions were working. Or maybe, now that the coolness of the early morning had faded, Faerie's monsters were simply too hot to menace anyone.

She stopped to remove her coat and re-pin her hair so it didn't sit so heavily on the back of her neck. As the sun drew directly overhead, the heat became relentless, even beneath the forest's thick canopy. It made it hard to stay alert.

She wasn't *complaining* about the lack of danger, exactly, but part of her felt a continuation of the same indignation the portal had sparked.

Don't worry; there's still plenty of time for it to turn out to be horribly dangerous. You haven't faced the main event yet, after all.

She shied away from the thought, shifting her pack into a more comfortable position, pausing to take another drink from her second canister. The first was now empty. It felt as if she'd drunk her own bodyweight and sweated out more besides.

A proper lady does not mention bodily functions, and a princess should strive to be the most perfect of ladies.

The words of her old etiquette book swam up from memory, an incongruous thing to think of now. The books had made no mention of the fact that none of it *mattered*. Not perfection, and not its opposite, either. She should know, having thrown herself into pursuing both extremes with equal obsession.

No, you couldn't rely on books, or other people, or on being rescued if you just proved yourself dutiful and worthy enough. The only thing you could rely on was yourself. If only it hadn't taken her so many years to work that out.

The shame threatened to rise up once more, and she determinedly pushed it down. *At least I'm taking action now.* Wallowing in self-recrimination wasn't going to turn back the clock, and she refused to keep looking backwards.

Forward, then. She checked her wrist again. The charm didn't seem to be losing any of its power. If anything, it seemed to be growing stronger. Although, perhaps that was only to be expected, given what ultimately powered the charm was her connection to the fairy she was tracking, and she was getting closer to him than she'd ever been before.

Him.

She shivered. Was it just her imagination, her sense of physically being pulled in the direction of the charm? The curse had never felt directional before, but now it certainly did, as if someone were tugging a rope connected to her heart. She bared her teeth. Certainly not her heart.

Let us say a rope connected to our general chest-area, then. That sounds so much better.

She grinned despite herself, but her smile faded as she felt for the handle of her knife again. Could she do this? She had to do this. She *would* do this. She had a Plan, and the Plan, after all, had gotten her this far more or less successfully.

With that bit of self-bolstering applied, she kept walking, following a deer-path along a stream. She assumed it was a deer-path. Did Fairyland have deer? The background chorus of cicadas grew louder until it formed a wall of sound rather than individual chirps.

Fairyland's dangerous, glamorous inhabitants continued to

remain absent, even when the light faded. She made a small, careful camp, ringed with salt and her protective herbs. In the night, fearsome cries woke her, and she spent several hours with her back to her fire, knife in hand, certain she could see glowing eyes in the darkness, but nothing ventured into her circle. In the morning, she found an enormous set of pawprints just beyond it and shivered.

It took her two days to reach the meadow, where the forest opened out into a vast green dotted with wildflowers. Gently waving orange poppies mingled with the delicate white lace of wild carrot, purple mallow, and spikes of pink-and-white foxglove and lupine.

Gisele paused on the treeline, in part due to reluctance to step out into the blazing sun but mostly because this enticing meadow had to be a trap. No doubt any number of horrors would emerge the moment she set foot on it.

Beyond the sea of undulating colour lay a house, although the word ‘house’ fell woefully short. She squeezed her eyes shut and re-opened them, but the structure remained just as bizarre. It was a house built by someone who’d never seen a building before, nor been much concerned with gravity, spilling over multiple levels with the rising land and sprouting windows, balconies, and a rounded tower connected to the main house via a pretty arched bridge. All of it had been designed—or possibly grown—with wilful disregard for engineering principles. It was doubtful whether there was a single right-angle in the place.

An enthusiasm of plants rioted around it, utterly out of control in a way that made her fingers itch to start righting it, with trees, flowers, ornamental shrubs, and vegetables all mixed together and fighting for space. Ivy smothered half the front garden, pumpkin leaves charged fiercely over the balconies, and enormous thistles waged a vigorous war with seventy

other varieties of weed over who held property rights to the flower beds.

This couldn't possibly be where the Malediction lived. Terrible fae sorcerers were supposed to live in ominous black fortresses, not in a cheerful cross between an architect's fever dream and a witch's cottage. But the charm was vibrating against her wrist, and the metaphysical rope connected to her *general chest area* felt thicker than ever. *He* was definitely in the house, even if this wasn't at all the house she'd expected him to have.

A horrified gasp had her spinning towards the sound, but the gasper was already executing a rapid exit. A thin figure dove straight into the stream with a splash, leaving only the impression of dark hair and strange, glowing eyes behind. Gisele frowned as the figure disappeared downstream. Some kind of water sprite?

I suppose that's proof my curse works on fairies too? Perhaps that had been what had kept her safe, walking through these woods. Perhaps she would turn up on Malediction's doorstep and terrify him into submission with her mere presence. The thought held considerable appeal.

She crept around the edge of the forest, waiting for some hint of the house's true—and undoubtedly dreadful—nature to become apparent as she drew closer, but it remained outrageously, joyously whimsical. A medium-sized tree was growing immediately behind one of its chimneys, and she laughed because how in the *world* did that work?

Her hands flew to her mouth. How could she be laughing at her worst enemy's house? Was it an enchantment, fogging her mind?

She closed her eyes. *Remember what he's cost you. Remember what you're here for.*

Painful, sharp-edged shards of memory rose. A lifetime's worth of bitter moments, each as unwanted and vivid as the

next. And most of all, waiting and waiting and *waiting*. A growing hollowness in her chest, an itch under her skin, gasping awake in the dead of night feeling weighted down with *absence*.

Her fingers curled around her dagger. No. She was done. If her Malediction wasn't coming for her, then she was damned well coming for *him*.

She'd finally reached the edge of the forest closest to the house. A graceful willow provided cover as she bridged the gap between forest and overgrown garden. A deep pool gleamed invitingly up at her. Waterlilies grew around one edge, their pale pink flowers open for the day, and a school of tiny, brightly coloured fish darted beneath them as her shadow fell over the water. She could see all the way to the sandy bottom.

Dipping a hand in, she found the water deliciously cool, and it took a supreme effort not to pull off her pack and jump right in, clothes and all. Turning up to the Malediction's front door sopping wet didn't seem like it would convey quite the right mood.

She grimaced at her rippled reflection. No proper princess here. Her face was red, and a good part of her braid had worked its way loose. The summer-weight walking habit was well-fitted and practical, but no one would call it beautiful. The water was kind, but she knew there were fine lines in the corners of her fae-touched eyes. At least her blonde hair hid any grey hairs; her vanity chose to believe that meant there weren't any.

Who cares what I look like? I certainly don't care what HE thinks of me. It was why she hadn't bothered to pack any fine clothing. Why should she waste such niceties on the terrible sorcerer who'd ruined her life?

Except, *another* part of her had grown up at court and knew well how appearances affected how people treated you. Not that anyone had ever treated her normally, with the curse prickling uncomfortably at them, but she had nonetheless noticed the

nature of the treatment changing as she aged ever more firmly into the ‘spinster’ category. What if Malediction saw her and sneered? Maybe she ought to have worn her most impressive court dress instead, though goodness knows she wouldn’t have wanted to carry it all this way.

She wished she were the sort of person who didn’t suffer such contradictory self-doubts. Princesses in stories never seemed to, and she envied them their certainty. *At least get them out of your head before you confront the Malediction!* No matter what she felt inside, she was determined that he shouldn’t see her as anything but purely self-confident.

Losing the struggle with her vanity, she knelt and fished about in her pack for her comb. It was so very besides the point, but tidying her hair made her feel better nonetheless.

“I am Princess Gisele, firstborn child of Queen Bianka of Isshia. You will tell me your name and release me from our bond,” she murmured to herself as she scooped up water, wetting her cheeks to cool them. Did she sound commanding? Should she add something about the gold? She tried for a firmer tone. “You shall consider the bargain fulfilled, or else I won’t give you the antidote.”

Antidote to what?

She whirled, heart thumping. A ginger cat trotted through the undergrowth with its tail held alert. Its coat was particularly rich in colour, glowing in the sunlight. It bunted its head against her legs, demanding to be petted.

“Hello,” she said to the animal. Had she imagined someone speaking? “Where did you come from?”

The house, a furry-feeling voice said in her head. Her hand stilled, and the cat shoved its head against her palm. *Pet me more*, it demanded.

“You can talk?!”

Why have you stopped? Keep petting!

She began to scratch the cat's head again. "Are you— Are you *his* cat?"

Whose?

"The fae who lives in this house."

The cat sat back on its haunches and glared at her. *Cats do not belong to people*, he told her primly. *You may refer to me as Zingiber.*

Her heart suddenly beat too hard in her throat. "I'm Gisele. Do you know the name of the fae who lives in the house?" Could it be that simple? Her mother had failed to answer the sorcerer's riddle and learn his name, but—

He does not go by his name.

—of course it wouldn't be that simple.

"What do people call him, then?"

The fae who lives at Skymallow House.

She swallowed. "What does he look like?"

Zingiber shrugged. *Hideous.*

"Right," she said faintly. *Hideous.* She'd asked her mother once what the Malediction looked like. Queen Bianka's reaction had spoken louder than her words; she wasn't a woman easily daunted, but she had gone still, her skin paling and lips pressing tightly together. "He was a beast," she had said at last. "Do not ask me to revisit such a terrible memory again."

Gisele hadn't asked again, but that hadn't stopped fearsome visages from visiting her nightmares. Various illustrated grimoires lavishly detailing the terrors of Faerie hadn't helped. And now she was about to face the reality.

Are you visiting him? He doesn't get a lot of visitors. Maybe because he's so hideous.

She gulped. "Er, yes. I suppose I am."

Zingiber got up and padded towards an overgrown path

disguised by a thick layer of jubilant orange nasturtiums. *Come on, then; the front door is this way.*

So much for her vague notions of a sneak attack. But this was more sensible, wasn't it? She was no spy, no warrior, and it was foolish to pretend otherwise. She would approach the terrible sorcerer reasonably, lull him into a false sense of security, stab him, get his name, give him the antidote, and go home happy. The whole script might in theory only take a few minutes, if she played her cards right.

Her legs wouldn't move, though, frozen in her kneeling position despite her very rational Plan, a lifetime's dread, and weeks of planning about to come to a head. Could she really do this? Who was she trying to fool? When had she ever *done* anything? She'd never stabbed anyone except practice dummies before and that with mediocre skill. She wasn't a young, headstrong, story-book princess. She was a self-conscious spinster who'd already let decades of her life slip away with barely a protest, waiting for her life to start.

The bitterness of that thought sparked her into motion. She checked her hidden dagger once more. No more waiting. She *had* to do this to have any chance at a future. The searing heat of gold melting, the courtiers' shrieks echoing in her ears . . . Although she shied from the memory, she let the emotion of it carry her forward, following the ginger cat through the overgrown path. Setting her heels and taking a deep breath, she knocked on the front door.