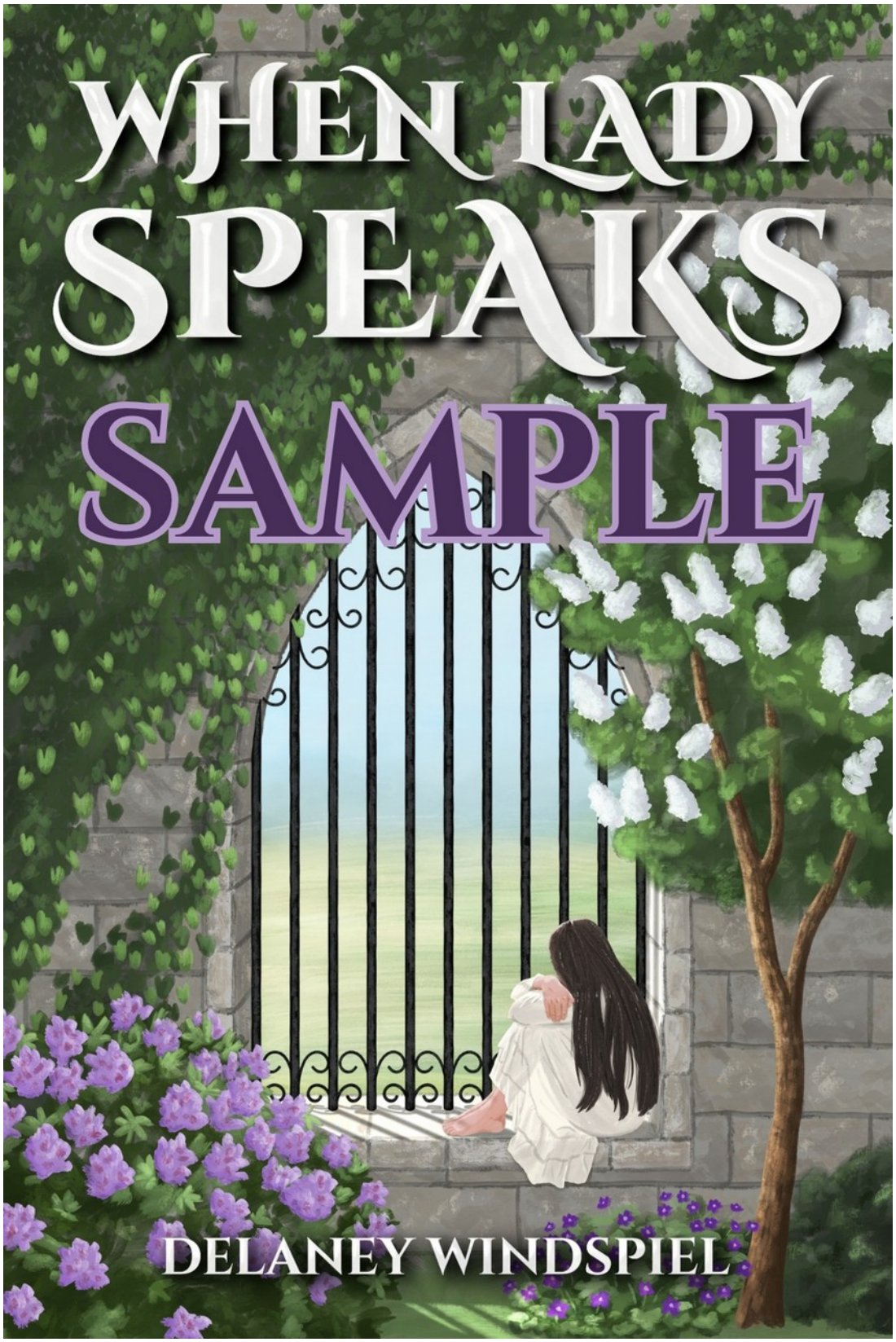

WHEN LADY SPEAKS
SAMPLE
DELANEY WINDSPIEL

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When Lady Speaks

First edition

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CONTENT WARNING

Content Warning: This novel includes kidnapping, violence, blood and gore, child abuse, and sexual harassment, as well as discussion of sexual assault and other heavy topics.

None of these are found in the sample entry (Chapter 1 and 2).

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CHAPTER 1

"Because they're *humans*! Reckless, insatiable pests!"

Lady opened her mouth, but all her arguments and protests were too tangled to choke out.

"And you have no magic!" her sister lectured further. "You're fragile and defenseless, even more than Ria. Now stay here and find reason while I help chase them out of our woods *again*."

A gust of wind whipped the trees as the raven-haired sibling stormed off. Lady stared after her in wounded anger, hoping the humans had made it back to the village by now.

Behind her, she could feel a timid presence drawing nearer.

"What was that about?" Ria asked.

"Nothing," Lady muttered, pushing her long brown hair out of her face. "Gale's just overreacting as always."

She turned to look at Ria, the daintiest of her sisters, a fair beauty with wavy sunlit tresses. Ria gazed back at her in question.

Lady crossed her arms. "There were two women picking berries at the treeline, not even *in* the forest." She huffed. "Our sisters tried to drive them away, but one got stuck on the thorns and couldn't run. I was worried Wren's wolves might actually *bite* them so I…"

Ria's emerald eyes widened. "You what?"

"I ran out in front of them," Lady answered boldly. "To give them time to escape."

"And they *saw* you?"

"Yes, but it's not like I was in danger! Honestly, they were more startled than anything." Lady recalled the women's gaping mouths, made even wider when Gale descended from the skies to snatch her away like a vixen snatching an errant kit. Lady sniffed. "It couldn't have hurt to at least *talk* to them." She shrugged with an indifference she did not feel. Ria remained quiet.

All around them, a mollifying peace blessed the cozy glade. Ria's wisteria tree stood tall beside a brook, with a great twisted trunk and branch-like vines that clung to its neighboring mulberry and oak. Dangling, pinkish-white blooms decked the canopy above, swaying as though to remind Lady of the endless beauty this refuge had to offer. She scuffed the ground with the ball of her foot.

Reaching up to tug Lady's hand free from her loosely crossed arms, Ria pulled her towards the sprawling base of her wisteria tree. There, she summoned a lush bed of grass and bade Lady rest beside her. Lady sat reluctantly, leaning back against the trunk to watch a bee circle the blossoms in want of their tantalizing, hidden nectar. Ria traced squiggles of moss onto the roots.

"What do you find so interesting about humans?" Ria asked at length.

Lady squinted into the sunlight darting through the flower-laden vines. She often questioned herself the same. "They look like us, talk like us… Yet everything they do is a mystery," she said. "Why do they cover their bodies with wool? Create fire to burn their food? Shape metal into swords when they have teeth like anyone else?"

With every piece of knowledge Lady gathered about humans came even more, bigger questions. She couldn't get enough! But the same curiosity never plagued her sisters.

She sighed. *I have strange taste.*

Ria went on to run her fingers through Lady's hair, gently detangling each snarl. "Brooke says you've been sneaking closer to the village," she murmured.

Lady blinked. Only recently had she let anyone in on that secret. She'd been doing it for years, so long that it felt ridiculous to hide any longer. There was no shedding the relentless tug she felt drawing her to that place… The place she was once born to Mother Nature, knowing nothing but the sky and the trees and her name. Her sisters had found her there and whisked her away, just before the humans came to build their village.

Lady felt Ria's eyes probing her.

"Brooke says you took her there yesterday," her companion pressed, frowning. "To hide in a tree and watch people sing and pretend to kill each other."

"It's called a play," Lady laughed. It had taken *her* a while to understand such performances as well, but they'd taught her nearly everything she knew about humans and their ways, from fighting over thrones to falling in love.

Ria pouted. "She says you brought *Wren* to see one too."

“Don’t remind me,” Lady groaned, squeezing her eyes shut at the memory of their chaotic sister swarming the actors with ravens for fun. A riveting drama, ruined!

“I’d like to see one…”

Ria’s comment yanked Lady’s mind out of the past. She stared at her sister in disbelief. Ria – the only one of them who never ventured out, never left her tree. The golden-haired beauty who trembled at the thought of a human barging into their peaceful glade… *She* wanted to see a play?

Ria fiddled abashedly with Lady’s hair.

“*Someday*,” she corrected herself. “I want to do everything you four do together. See the meadows in bloom, stand under the waterfall, even watch the humans.” She smiled at Lady’s continued shock. “I want to be brave.”

“I– I could take you,” Lady stammered. “Right now, to see the village! There probably isn’t a play, but… it could be a start!”

Ria’s eyes doubled in size. “Right now?” she echoed, and looked at her wisteria tree – its vines twined around steady branches, its roots drinking from the glistening stream. To think this was all she had ever known… And yet, swallowing, the timid maiden nodded.

An excited buzz within her, Lady stood and helped her up.

“Gale won’t like this,” Ria laughed nervously.

Lady grinned. “No, she won’t.”

They moved slowly along the bank, Lady feeling the tension in Ria’s fingers as they ventured further away. Every few steps, Ria glanced back at her tree until, unable to see the last of her blooms waving behind her, she crawled to a stop, shaking like a leaf.

“Let’s sit awhile,” Lady suggested. “We can take as long as you like.”

Humming, Ria distracted herself by summoning a patch of daisies where they knelt. Ever jealous, Lady watched her sister run her hands through them as though petting the ground to get to know it better. How talented her sisters were, each blessed with their own unique power… Lady sighed and plucked a flower to twist between her fingertips. Her twiddling soon reduced its stem to a thin pulpy ribbon, and its petals closed in to hide its cheerful yellow center. Lady let it fall, feeling rather sorry for so mindlessly soiling its beauty.

Bells tolled in the distance, lifting her spirits with their bright, echoing peals. Ria stiffened beside her but stared towards the sound with undeniable curiosity. Lady's heart thrummed with happiness.

"Ready to keep going?" she asked. "You'll like this next stretch."

Sure enough, the moment the trees petered out to reveal a meadow bursting with white lilies and larkspurs, Lady heard the breath leave Ria's lungs. Her sister stood exquisitely still, eyes glittering with tears as she took in the view.

"There's so many," she whispered as though she hardly dared believe it. "Oh Lady, I could *fly*."

Grinning wide, Lady squeezed her hand. "Then let's!" she exclaimed, and pulled her forward. With a startled laugh, Ria ran beside her.

Just then, a great dark shape reared among the trees. Gasping, Lady and Ria slammed to a halt as a startled horse shot out ahead of them.

In the saddle was a man, calling "Whoa!" to no avail, his steed bolting through the meadow. With a sudden stumble, the horse crashed to its knees and the man was thrown over its head. Clambering to its hooves, the animal left its groggy rider flat on his back.

"A man?" Ria trembled in awe.

A man! Lady's mind resounded. But she could only manage a nod, anxious desire tugging at her soul. All those times she watched her sisters chase away such interesting creatures unquestioned… Now was her chance to speak to one!

She looked at Ria clinging tight to her arm. "I should see if he's alright."

Ria hesitated. "Be careful," she begged, and shrank into the bushes.

Heart beating faster, Lady walked out into the open. It felt all the more nerve-racking, venturing to speak to a human male. At least *women* looked like her and her sisters. Men were different in ways she struggled to put into words. She'd never even gotten this close to one before.

Groaning with eyes closed, the man put a hand to his head, his fallen flat cap now hanging on a fern nearby. As a being of eternal youth, Lady had no guess for his age, but he looked somewhat young, with a scruffy face and sandy tousled hair. She wondered at the ticklish feeling in her stomach as she stooped over him, parting her hair to drink in his features.

Lady willed herself to speak.

"Are you hurt?"

With a start, the stranger sat bolt upright to stare at her.

"Oh no," he uttered, gazing at her body before tearing his eyes away and fiddling with the ring on his finger. "A nymph…"

Lady's heart leapt with delight at the recognition.

The man hastily reached for his cap. "Pardon my intrusion," he said, and winced as he put it on, keeping hold of the brim to block his view of her. "I'll fetch my horse and leave."

"*~Wait!~*" Lady exclaimed, giving into a strange instinct to speak with authority this time. The man lifted his gaze to meet hers, all tension suddenly gone without a trace. Lady felt a small thrill at this reaction. She knelt to join him.

"*~Remove your hat,~"* she told him, and he did.

He's actually obeying me?

In another surge of boldness, Lady reached for the man's hair. He bowed his head and she fussed with his curls to reveal a gash. "You *are* hurt!"

"A little," he admitted.

Lady confirmed it was only a shallow wound, but arranged his springy locks away from it just in case. She found she quite enjoyed playing with his hair, though blood smudged her fingers and she could feel Ria's anxiety emanating from where she watched. The man remained patiently bent forward, his face not far from Lady's lap.

"Can I ask…" he spoke after a few moments. "Why approach a total stranger like this? Don't you know men are dangerous?"

Lady frowned. Now he sounded like Gale.

"I don't see how," she replied, casting a reassuring smile to Ria. "I've watched humans ever since they appeared here, and *they're* less violent than most animals I've known."

In fact, interacting with one now, Lady simply couldn't believe Gale's stories of men clashing in mass death and destruction out in the fields. She'd seen the villagers yell and push each other, sure, but nothing as bad as elk in their rutting season or foxes fighting for territory.

A distant rumble of thunder drew her attention and she rushed to wipe her fingers on the grass.

"All better," she declared. "You should probably get going now."

Before my sisters find you.

"Thank you, miss," he replied, getting to his feet. "I really am sorry for the intru…" His voice trailed off as she stood in front of him, his eyes again falling on her slender form. Swallowing hard, he tried to hide back under his hat.

"*~Keep it off!~*" Lady exclaimed.

Just as before, her words took immediate effect and he smiled, tucking his hat under his arm. "Of course. How silly of me."

Lady stared at him, hardly daring to believe it. All her life she'd admired her sisters' magic and resigned herself to having none. But this… Could it be?

She had to test it to be sure.

"*~Would you…~*" Lady strove to think of some random instruction. Her mind flew back to her favorite scene of a knight encountering a maiden. She extended her hand coyly. "*~Kiss me?~*"

With a broader smile, the man took her hand – his fingers larger and rougher than her sisters', but still warm and gentle – and brushed it with his lips. Lady's body caught aflame with a feeling she'd never known. Ria gasped from within the bushes.

Kissed by a human! Lady couldn't help but laugh at the torrent of emotions inside her. How could she be so many things at once? Giddy and flustered, lightheaded and fervent. She was enraptured, she was *empowered*!

The stranger bowed.

"A pleasure to meet you, miss," he said, and headed for his horse.

In a happy daze, Lady watched him go, mind tumbling with questions. Halfway across the meadow, he stiffened and glanced back at her before breaking into a run. Lady heard Ria's soft approach as he finally reached his horse and galloped out of sight.

"What was *that?*" her sister questioned, inspecting Lady's hand. "Did he bite you?"

"No," Lady breathed, still staring after the human. An anxious, fuzzy excitement whirled in her stomach as she put words to her new reality…

"I found my gift."

CHAPTER 2

"Are you sure?" Ria stared at Lady. "How can you tell?"

"It just felt so natural," Lady said. "Oh Ria, it's amazing! Come on, I'll show you at the village!"

But a dark cloud descended over them.

"What are you doing here?!" a raven-haired nymph demanded from above, floating down to alight amongst the writhing grass and flowers.

"Gale!" Lady rushed forward to take her hands. "You'll never believe it! My gift– I have power over humans!"

Gale's face clouded over with confusion. "What power?"

"Ria saw it!" Lady beamed. "Ria, tell her!"

Ria stared back at her.

"There they are!" another voice called from the woods, and Lady turned to see two more nymphs, Wren and Brooke, arrive on elk. Wren practically stood atop hers, grinning through its antlers at them. "Crickets, Ria! Since when do you leave your tree?!"

"Sisters!" Lady ran to greet them. "Guess what I just discovered! I can command humans like you command animals, Wren!"

"What!" Wren's eyes ignited with intrigue. Brooke, too, leaned in to hear more. Lady ushered them over to the others, describing what happened.

"You talked with a *man*?" Gale bristled with electricity. "And with Ria right behind you?!"

"Yes, I did," Lady replied loftily. "I was right not to fear him."

The two held each other's eyes for a moment, Lady refusing to give in to her usual meek disposition. How much sooner would she have found her gift if it weren't for Gale? To think what a better view she could have gotten of the plays, what fun she could have had! Lady was determined to make up for lost time.

"Ria," Gale growled, redirecting her narrowed gaze. "What did *you* see?"

Ria swallowed as all eyes turned on her. Lady looked at her pleadingly.

The timid nymph straightened. “It’s true,” she testified. “Lady talked to the man and he ran away.”

That’s all? Lady bit her lip in effort not to blurt out everything else. *I told him what to do! He kissed me!*

But now Gale looked contemplative. She turned to Lady. “You made him leave?”

Lady’s heart sank at the sudden interest in her voice.

“More than just that,” she answered, but only then realized how the details might anger Gale more. Lady summoned her confidence and walked through the meadow. “I’ll show you at the village!”

“The village?” Gale echoed in exasperation. “You only just discovered this power!”

“Oh, let her try,” Wren piped up, commanding the elk forward. “I’m dying to see this!”

Lady beamed as Ria and Brooke pitched in their agreement, Ria scampering over to take hold of Lady’s arm. Gale sniffed and followed after them on a low, bitter wind.

“Fine,” she conceded. “If need be, I’ll deal with things myself.”

Lady’s stomach twisted at the implication of her words. But she squared her shoulders, choosing not to be intimidated.

“You’ll see.” She grinned. “I’ll have them eating out of my hand!”

~ ~ ~

“They *built* those?” Ria gasped, still clinging to Lady’s arm as they peered out at the village.

Lady felt a funny sense of pride as she overlooked the dozens of houses grouped together among the crops. “They’re called cottages,” she said.

“And they’re made of trees,” Gale added darkly.

Lady glared at her as she felt Ria squeeze her arm tighter.

“What are we waiting for?” Wren demanded, jumping off her elk to race out from the woods. “Let’s mess with some humans!”

“Wait!” Heart skipping a beat, Lady ran after her, unsurprised when Ria let go to take Brooke’s arm instead.

Together, the five nymphs ventured through the field, Lady’s anticipation mounting with every step. Despite herself, doubt had begun to wheedle its way into her mind. What if she was wrong, after all? What if she’d mistaken one strange interaction as proof of a power she didn’t possess? Or what if she *did* have power, but nowhere near enough to handle an entire village of humans? Anxiety closed her throat.

Gale would never let me hear the end of it.

They stepped out onto a gritty path, still unseen by the humans chopping wood, airing out rugs, bickering with neighbors… Children squealed in excitement as they chased a rat with sticks, eyes fixed on their scampering victim. The rodent made a beeline for Wren and climbed up her leg.

Dozens of others darted from buildings and bushes to join it. The kids slammed to a stop in front of the nymph, terror on their faces.

Hands full of hissing rats, Wren bared her teeth in a wicked grin.

The children screamed and scattered. Villagers gathered at the commotion, all staring in disbelief at the five invading nymphs. Wren cackled.

Speak, Lady willed herself as she felt Gale’s testy wind begin to pick up. She stepped forward.

“*~Don’t be alarmed!~*”

Her effect was immediate, the shock and fear dissipating from her subjects’ faces. Lady felt the same thrill she had before as the humans drew nearer with bright-eyed curiosity.

“Mother Nature…” Wren breathed, and tried to scare the nearest villager with her rats, but the man only laughed in appreciation. Lady grinned wide. Eight humans under her control! She spun to see Gale’s reaction, too overjoyed to act smug.

Her sister looked keenly interested.

“Show us what else you can do,” Gale said.

“*~Guide us around your village!~*” Lady ordered the humans, and they welcomed her forward. She gawked at their shops and their carts and their big stone church, clapping in delight as the bell tower rang. Ria peered at potted plants while Wren freed a weary wagon mule, and Brooke leapt down into a well before reemerging on a geyser.

Gale, however, followed after them with an ever impatient air. “We’re not here to sightsee,” she reminded them.

Lady ignored her. Two dozen people she’d amassed in the village square by now, wonderfully varied from a muddied toddler to a hardy woman to a fine gentleman painting on an easel. Like Wren playing with her furry and feathered friends, Lady decided it was time to familiarize herself with *them*.

“*~What is this?~*” she inquired, flipping up and down something a man informed her to be a ‘collar.’ “*~How about this?~*” She soon lost herself in toying with buttons and pockets, lacing and fur trim, glasses and beards. The villagers laughed along cheerfully as she investigated each layer of their clothes and every item on their person, but Lady couldn’t be satiated. She wanted to know *more*!

“Enough fooling around,” Gale griped and grabbed the jacket Lady began to try on. Lady shook her off, angry as a popping sound came from the seams. Lady shook her off, angry as a popping sound came from the seams.

“Let go, you’re ruining it!” she snapped, and the villagers stepped in to push Gale away. Gale shot above them at once, hovering in the air and scanning the crowd with narrowed eyes.

“Interesting,” she murmured. “They adopt your emotions.”

Interest piqued yet again, Lady looked around to observe the humans’ anger, but already they seemed to be getting over it, blinking back at her with renewed curiosity. A dozen experiments entered Lady’s mind.

“*~Be angry,~*” she told them, and laughed at the exaggerated scowls they gave. “*~Now be happy!~*” The villagers beamed in a more convincing manner.

‘Sing a song,’ Lady silently commanded next, then swallowed her disappointment as not one made a sound. *I guess they need to hear me. But what if I speak nonsense?*

“*~The sky is red,~*” she informed them, and the villagers gazed up in wonder. She grinned. “*~Do you agree?~*”

“It looks blue,” many answered back. “Where is it red?” “I want to see!”

“Alright, alright!” Gale interrupted Lady’s games. “So they do as you say. Tell them to stay out of the forest. Or better yet – tell them to migrate far away.”

Lady felt a jab in her heart. She turned to her sister in disbelief. “How can you say that?”

“Because they’re humans,” Gale retorted.

“They’re my gift!” Lady cried, and the villagers chorused their agreement. “*You’re* the only one who hates them. Look at our sisters!” She gazed across the square where the other nymphs were raiding a market stall. Each one of them was engrossed in sniffing soaps and tasting spices, gathered around a peddler who blithely presented more of his wares.

“You two have to try these!” Wren called out, elbow-deep in a barrel of sweets. “Human food is amazing!”

“Spit that out!” Gale stormed towards her.

Lady stared after her belligerent sister, lost as to what could sway her.

“Pardon me, my lady,” a voice surprised her with her name. She turned to see the painter from earlier now standing quite close. With his dark purple waistcoat and sweeping blond hair, he stood out from the others like a rooster among hens. Lady was almost startled by his forwardness and unmistakably *lavender* eyes.

The young gentleman gave a bow. “I am Sir Mireson Clements, High Commissioner from Paerilee,” he introduced himself with a great many words. Straightening again, he gave a dazzling smile. “May I ask *your* name?”

She blinked in confusion. “*~You said it,~*” she answered. “*~Lady.~*”

“Oh, indeed!” The man beamed. “A pleasure to meet you, my Lady. Dare I say you’re the most ravishing sight I’ve ever seen! Would you consider accompanying me to the Baron’s masquerade this evening?”

“*~Masquerade?~*” Lady echoed, mystified. “*~What is that?~*”

“A party full of dining and dancing.” The gentleman took an invitation from his inner pocket and unfolded it before her. “There’ll be hundreds in costume, but you’ll fit in perfectly as you are. The theme is fantasy, you see – a night fit for the gods!”

Dancing and costumes? Like a play? Lady grabbed the paper and gasped at the drawings of knights and fair maidens, faeries and deities. She crumpled it to her chest, looking up at the gentleman. “These characters will be there?”

His eyes twinkled. “And many more.”

“Sisters!” Lady exclaimed, rushing to her kin. “We have to go to this!” She held up the paper as if it made any sense to them.

“No,” Gale refused outright, but the others peered closer.

“What is it?” they asked.

“There’ll be food,” Lady said, and Wren’s eyes lit up. “And dancing!” She bubbled over with excitement. “Oh, I just know you’ll love music!”

But Gale grabbed her by the wrist. “We’re going *back* to Ria’s tree.”

“Not yet!” Lady protested, struggling, and the villagers came running to her aid. Gale pushed them back with a gust of wind.

“Please!” the gentleman’s voice rang out, and Gale’s grip loosened. Lady was surprised as her sister allowed the man to approach, his face bright and smiling. “It’d be such a shame to miss it,” he said. “There’s no telling when such a marvelous event will happen here again!”

His words turned Lady’s interest into urgency and she yanked herself free of Gale.

“*I’m going,*” she told her, and wondered at the sudden indifference in her sister’s eyes. Gale exhaled with an air of resignation. Hope bloomed inside Lady.

“Me too!” Wren grinned, and Brooke nodded in agreement. Even Ria, hiding behind them, gave Lady a tentative smile.

“Splendid!” the gentleman said. “The manor house is some distance away. We should set off at once!”

Lady could hardly believe it as she and her sisters soon sat upon elk, following the man’s carriage and his accompanying guards. She was intrigued by the two uniformed men armed with swords, but found that they were just as cheery as the villagers, smiling attentively at her every word. She even had to tell them to ride ahead to give her sisters some space, especially as Ria clung tightly to her waist.

Sharing a steed with her precious sister, Lady was privy to Ria’s jumpy movements and trembling breath – the only thing to keep Lady’s spirit from soaring through the sky. To think this was Ria’s first day away from her tree! And now they were headed even further, to a place with even more people… Lady rode for a while in guilt.

“Are you nervous?” she finally asked.

“Of course I am!” Ria exclaimed. “I could bury myself and turn into a potato!”

Lady laughed, then laid a grateful hand on her knee. “Thanks for trusting me. This is the biggest adventure any of us have ever been on. I’m so glad you’re here for it.”

Lady felt her sister smile into her shoulder blade.

They crossed a bridge over a swift-running stream and continued into the gently rolling hills beyond. Gale remained unusually quiet, seemingly more like mild Brooke in her demeanor, but with less interest in her eyes. Lady was rather glad of it. Far better to listen to the countless crickets and frogs than a mounting pile of criticisms and fore-warnings.

She began to wonder, however, how far the humans' territory stretched as the carriage led them deeper still. She was just about to ask when the gentleman, having opted to sit up on the bench with the driver, turned to gesture ahead.

"We're here!" he called. "Just over this hill!"

Lady and her sisters gawked as they rose over the crest. Below them sprawled cropped hedges, flower beds, and closely trimmed lawns forming a geometric pattern most unfamiliar to the nymphs. And just beyond that was a house more massive than Lady thought possible. Like the village church, it had a grey stone exterior, plus too many windows to count. A steep roof studded with chimneys rose against the dimming sky. Birds swept overhead in the last moments of daylight.

Ria loosened her grip to sputter in bewilderment at the garden's neat and orderly plants. Pressing further into the garden, they ogled a fountain mimicking Brooke's power, with streams of water arcing in a wondrous display. Lady never ceased to be amazed by humans. It seemed they and their tools could shape anything into submission!

It was fairly dark by the time the sisters reached the entrance, where a paved road circled around to kiss the terrace steps.

"We're rather late, I'm afraid," the gentleman said as they all dismounted. He opened the carriage door to duck inside. "I'll just be a few moments getting in costume. Please do head in without me!"

Lady swallowed, turning to face the manor house with its large imposing doors. She was acutely aware of her sisters lagging behind as she crept her way up the stairs. Not even she could guess what to expect beyond these solid stone walls built to keep nature out. Lady extended a trembling hand to try the door.

It opened before she could touch it.

Oh! Lady froze in her tracks as a guard came out. He, too, stiffened at the sight of her, his sharp navy uniform blocking her view of the inside. Lady felt her breath abandon her

as she took in his features. He was handsome in a confronting kind of way, with grey eyes flared and fixed on her. He had short black hair and an attractively defined jaw which he clenched, judging by the flicker of his cheek.

So hostile, Lady thought, feeling almost giddy under his stare. How unapologetically he investigated her soul! She knew one word from her lips could soothe the tension emanating from his being, but curiosity stayed her tongue. This closeness, this energy, this near *perilous* feeling… it was all too delicious to cut short.

She smiled at him and noted the resulting downward twitch of his brow. What thoughts, she wondered, prowled behind that brisk arresting gaze?

~ ~ ~

What the hell*?*

Josiah thought he'd gone mad. The young woman before him was *nude* – not a stitch of clothing to cover her smooth graceful form. Her hair, mink brown and glossy, flowed down to her waist. She looked like a marble statue had come to life and flooded with color, blushing softly as she looked up at him with dangerously innocent eyes.

When he'd first opened the door, she'd gone still as though just as startled as him, but soon recovered with a smile too pure and playful to trust.

Who is this woman?

Josiah never expected to feel so threatened by a mere maiden, but time seemed to slow just as it did in a fight. Heart punching his ribs, eyes marking every pulse in her body, he reminded himself to breathe. She had yet to do anything more than exist in front of him.

With no idea of what else to do, he forced himself to step aside for her, dumbfounded as another *four* women entered in tow, just as naked as the first. Each cast him a look – some wary, others challenging. Hand instinctively tightening on his sword, Josiah watched as they took in the mansion's grand entrance like tourists in the city.

He couldn't place them as Coastanian, Harkian, nor even Paeriline. There was a sort of ambiguous, celestial perfection to their features. Josiah's mind grasped for an explanation.

Are they performers?

The theme of the masquerade *was* mythical folklore… He had gathered that much, what with everyone's costumes and the decorative pixies scattered around the place. But could this really be the party's entertainment? Pretend nymphs, hired to dazzle guests?

The brunette gave him one more smile before urging the others down the hall. Josiah stared after them, half-wanting to observe their imminent disruption of the ball. But his employer, he noticed, had *finally* arrived. With a final glance behind him, he went out to the carriage, heartened by a few bramble swifts still arcing through the sky.

"Ah, Guard," His Excellency greeted him as he exited the carriage dressed like Hermes. Josiah maintained a carefully impassive countenance while saluting the fool. With a metal winged helmet, draped chlamys, and double-serpent staff, his employer looked more like a stage performer than a man of profound power. His eyes were especially lively as he peered at Josiah through his silver feathered mask. "Anything to report?"

Moments ago, Josiah's answer would have been no – the grounds appeared safe, no whispered plans of attack, no shady figures about. But now…

"Five nude women just entered the building," he stated plainly.

His Excellency's grin only broadened. "Did she speak to you? The brunette?"

Josiah frowned. So his employer was familiar with them? The maiden in question flashed through his mind in excruciating detail. "No sir."

But His Excellency hardly seemed to hear him, staring ahead at the manor house with a look of great anticipation.

"She's *perfect*," he breathed. "Keep an eye on her this evening. I have plans for her yet."

END OF SAMPLE

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