

CHRISTIAN KLAYER

SHADOWS
OVER
LONDON

THE FAERIE HAVE COME TO TAKE LONDON AND ONLY
ONE GIRL STANDS IN THEIR WAY.

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LONDON

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To Katie . . .

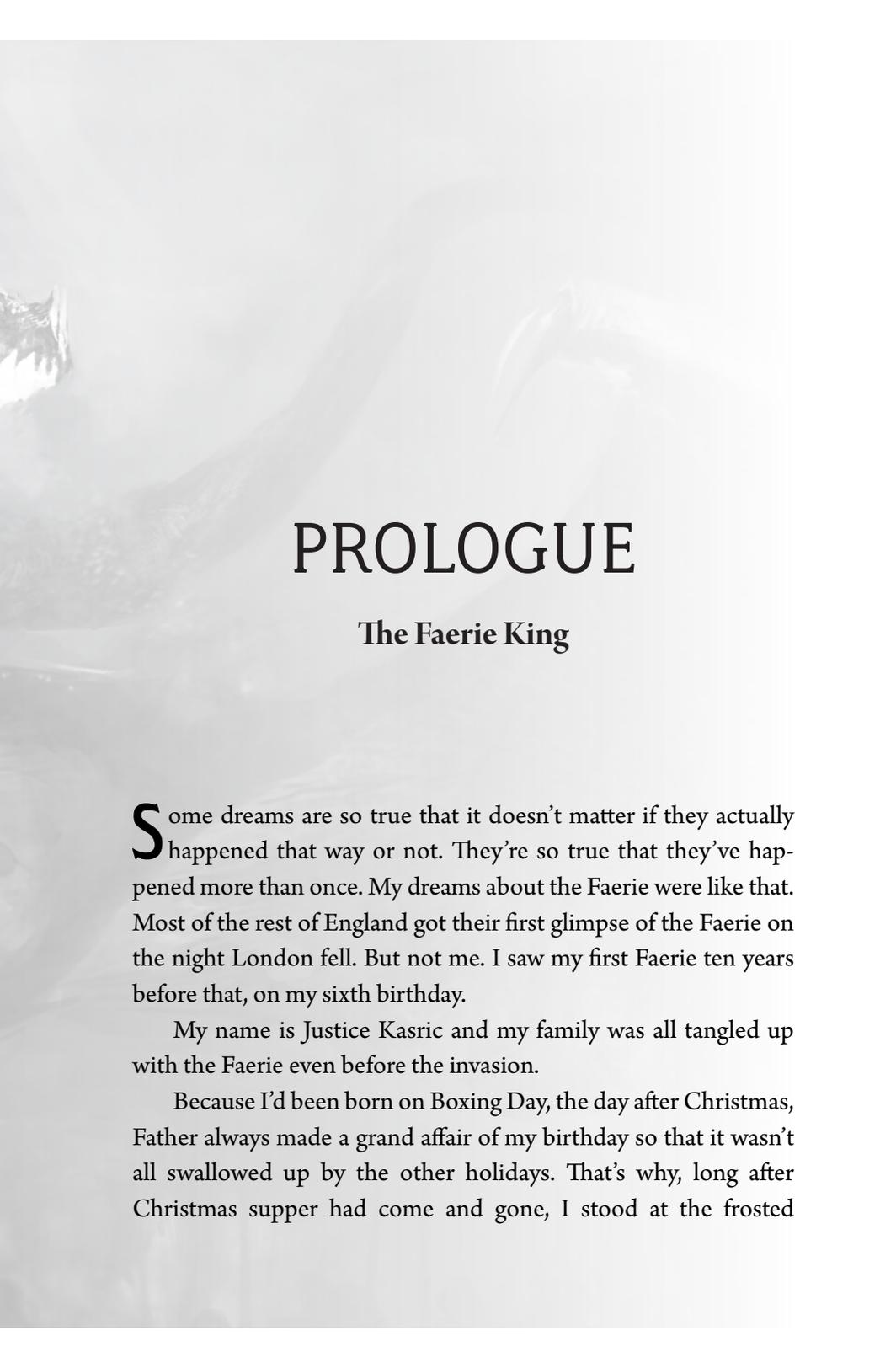




Myths are public dreams, dreams are private myths.

– Joseph Campbell





PROLOGUE

The Faerie King

Some dreams are so true that it doesn't matter if they actually happened that way or not. They're so true that they've happened more than once. My dreams about the Faerie were like that. Most of the rest of England got their first glimpse of the Faerie on the night London fell. But not me. I saw my first Faerie ten years before that, on my sixth birthday.

My name is Justice Kasric and my family was all tangled up with the Faerie even before the invasion.

Because I'd been born on Boxing Day, the day after Christmas, Father always made a grand affair of my birthday so that it wasn't all swallowed up by the other holidays. That's why, long after Christmas supper had come and gone, I stood at the frosted

window of my room looking out into the darkness trying to guess what kind of surprise Father had in store for my sixth birthday. I was sure that something wonderful was coming. Maybe a pony . . . or even *ponies*.

I crept quietly out of my room. I didn't want to wake Faith, my older sister. I didn't see or hear anyone on the top floors, but then I heard movement from down in the front hall. Father. He clicked his pocket watch closed, tucked it back into his dark waistcoat and pulled the heavy black naval coat off the hook by the door. I was sure he'd turn around and see me crouched on the stairs, but he only stood a moment in the shrouded half-moonlight before opening the front door. A cool mist rolled noiselessly past his ankles as he went out.

I was in luck! Where else would Father be going except to feed the ponies? I pulled on my rubber boots and threw my heavy blue woolen coat over my nightgown, determined to follow.

When I opened the door and looked out into the front garden, the mist hung everywhere in soft carpets of moonlit fleece. Father was nowhere in sight, but I could hear him crunching ahead of me.

I paused, sensing even then that some steps took you further than others. The enormity of my actions lay heavily on me. The comforting, warm interior of the house called for me to come back inside. It was not too late to go back. I could return to the rest of my family, content with a life filled with tea settings, mantelpiece clocks, antimacassars and other normal, sensible notions. The proper thing would have been to go back inside, to bed. I remember shaking my head, sending my braids dancing.

I followed Father outside into the still and misty night.

We went across the front garden, past shrubs and frozen pools, and descended the hill into the snow-laden pines. His crunching

footsteps carried back to me in the still air. I followed by stepping in the holes he'd left in the snow to make less noise, jumping to match his long stride. The stables lay behind the house, but clearly, we weren't heading there. We lived in the country then, amidst a great deal of farmland with clumps of forest around.

The silence grew heavier, deeper, as we descended into the trees, and a curious lassitude swept over me as I followed Father through the tangled woods. The air was sharp and filled with the clean smell of ice and pine. On the other side of a dip in the land, we *should* have emerged into a large and open field. Only we didn't. The field wasn't there. Instead, we kept going down through more and more snow-laden trees.

The treetops formed a nearly solid canopy sixty or seventy feet above us, but with a vast and open space underneath. The thick shafts of moonlight slanted down through silvered air into emerald shadows, each tree a stately pillar in that wide-open space.

I worried about Father catching me following him, but he never even turned around. Always, he went down. Down, down into the forest, into what felt like another world entirely. Even I knew we couldn't still be in the English countryside. You could just feel it. I also knew that following him wasn't about ponies anymore and I might have given up and gone home, only I had no idea how to find my way back.

After a short time, we came to an open green hollow where I crouched at the edge of a ring of trees and blinked my eyes at the sudden brightness. The canopy opened up to the nighttime sky and moonlight filled the empty hollow like cream poured into a cup. This place had a planned feel, the circle of trees shaped just so, the long black trunk lying neatly in the exact center of a field of green grass like a long table, and all of it inexplicably free of snow.

Two pale boulders sat on either side like chairs. The silence felt deeper here, older, expectant. The place was waiting.

Father lit a cigarette and stood smoking. The thin wisp of smoke curled up and into the night sky.

Then, the Faerie King arrived.

First, there was emptiness, and then, without any sign of motion, a hulking, towering figure stood on the other side of the log, standing as if he'd always been there waiting. I'd read enough of the right kinds of books to recognize him as a Faerie King right off and I shivered.

The Faerie King looked like a shambling beast on its back legs, with huge tined antlers that rose from his massive skull. He wore a wooden crown nearly buried by a black mane thick as lamb's fleece that flowed into a forked beard. His long face was a gaunt wooden mask, with blackened slits for eyes and a harsh, narrow opening for a mouth.

Except it wasn't a mask, because it moved. The mouth twitched and the jaw muscles clenched as he regarded the man in front of him. Finally, he inclined his head in a graceless welcome. He wore a cloak like a swath of forest laid across his back, made entirely of thick wild grass, weeds, and brambles, with a rich black undercoat of loam where a silk lining would show. Underneath the cloak, he wore armor that might once have been bright copper, now with rampant verdigris. He leaned on the pommel of a wide-bladed, granite sword.

The Faerie King and Father regarded each other for a long time before they each sat down. A chessboard with pieces of carved wood and bone sat suddenly between them. Again, there was no sense of movement, only a sudden understanding that the board must have always been there, waiting.

They began to play.

The Faerie King hesitated, reached to advance his white king's pawn, then stopped. His leathery right hand was massive, nearly the size of the board, far too large for this task. He shifted awkwardly and used his more normal-sized left hand. Father advanced a pawn immediately in response. The Faerie King sat and viewed the board with greater deliberation. He finally reached out with his left hand to make his move, and then stopped. He shifted in his seat, uncertain, then finally advanced his knight.

I could feel others watching with me. Invisible ghosts hidden in the trees. The weight of their interest hung palpably in the air. Whatever the outcome of this game, it was important in a way you couldn't help but feel. However long it took, this timeless shuffling of pieces, the watchers would wait and I waited with them. With only a nightgown on under my coat, crouching in the snow, I should have been freezing. But I didn't feel the cold. I only felt the waiting, and the waiting consumed me.

Father and the Faerie King had each moved their forces into the center of the board, aligning and realigning in constant readiness for the inevitable clash. Now Father sliced into the black pawns with surgical precision, starting an escalating series of exchanges. Around us, it began to snow.

As the game went on, Father and the Faerie King lined their captures neatly on the side of the board. Father looked to be considerably better off. The Faerie King grew more and more angry, and he squeezed and kneaded the log with his massive right hand so that the wood cracked and popped. Occasional bursts of wood fragments flew to either side.

Father's only reaction to this violent display was a long, slow smile. He took another Turkish cigarette calmly from a cigarette

case and lit it. I was suddenly very chilled. That kind of calm wasn't natural.

The smoke from Father's cigarette drifted placidly upwards. His moves were immediate, decisive, while the Faerie King's became more and more hesitant as the game went on. The smile on Father's face grew. I watched, and the forest watched with me.

Then the Faerie King snarled, jumped up, and brought his massive fist down on the board like a mallet. Bits of the board, chess pieces, and wood splinters flew out into the snow. Twice more he mauled the log, gouging out huge hunks of wood in his fury. Then he spun with a swiftness shocking in so large a person and yanked his huge sword out of the snow. He brought it down in a deadly arc that splintered the log like a lightning strike. Debris and splinters had flown around Father like a ship's deck hit by a full broadside of cannonballs, but Father didn't even flinch. Two broken halves of smoldering log lay in the clearing.

"Perhaps next time," Father said, standing up, the first words either of them had spoken. He brushed a few splinters from his coat.

The Faerie King stared, quivering, his wooden face twisted suddenly with grief. Then his legs gave out and he collapsed in the snow, all his impotent rage spent. He sat, slumped with his mismatched hands on his knees, the perfect picture of abject defeat. He didn't so much as stir when Father turned his back and left.

I couldn't tear my gaze away from the rough and powerful shape slouched heavily and immobile in the snow. White clumps were already starting to gather on his arms, shoulders, head and antlers, as if he might never move again.

Father climbed directly to my hiding place and stood, looking down at me with amusement in his glacial-blue eyes. I'd forgotten all about hiding.

He warned me to keep silent with a gloved finger to his lips, then put a hand on my shoulder and steered me away from the hollow. Father fished his watch out of the waistcoat pocket and checked the time as we climbed back up the slope. We walked for a bit, surrounded only by the sound of crunching snow and the spiced scent of Father's smoke.

"Well," he said finally. "I've always encouraged you to be curious, little Justice, but *this* is a surprise. Did you follow me all the way from home?" He didn't sound cross at all, only curious. So it was a family trait.

"Yes." I looked back the way we'd come. It was hard to imagine that *I* was the biggest surprise of this night.

"You must be cold," he said, "yes?"

I *was* cold, suddenly. Father draped his coat around me, then picked me up and carried me like a princess. The soft wool of his coat was warm and comforting, as were the familiar scents that clung to it. The Turkish tobacco with cloves and ginger. Ordinary, familiar smells that sluiced away the strangeness of the night.

"Father, what was that horrible thing?" I asked

"Oh, not so horrible, Justice. Not really. Though I suppose the church might not agree. But then, you'll learn to think for yourself and not take *their* word, eh?"

"Yes, Father," I said. I knew exactly what the church would have to say about a creature like that, but maybe that wasn't so important.

"Well," he said after a time, "now I have a problem. This needs to be a secret, you see? But I know how little girls talk. Perhaps a bribe? What would it take to keep this our secret?"

He didn't need the bribe and we both knew it. I would have done anything for him.

But he'd asked, so I said, "A pony?"

He laughed. "Well, I don't have a pony on me, but . . . here, hang on tight." He shifted my weight a little so that he could fish around in his coat pocket.

He handed me a chess piece from the game, one of his knights. At least it *looked* like one of the wooden pieces from the game back in the hollow, but how could it be? The Faerie King had bashed them all to bits and I hadn't seen Father pick anything up when he left. Still, there it was.

"Would this horsie do?" he said.

I looked closer. The piece wasn't just a horse's head, but an entire stallion carved in loving detail. It reared up, riderless, wild and beautiful. More than beautiful. The dark wood gleamed, reminding me of the glossy flank of a living horse.

"It's wonderful," I said, taking it in both hands. It was warm to the touch. "I couldn't feed a regular horse, anyway."

"You are very wise for such a small child," Father said.

"Does it have a name, Father?"

"Why, of course it does. All important things have names. Remember your promise here not to tell a soul about what you saw, and I'm sure we'll discover her name together."

A sudden sleepiness overcame me. It felt impossibly late, near morning. He must have carried me all the way home because my next memory was Father climbing the steps inside our house and then lowering me into bed. He moved carefully so as to not wake Faith, my older sister.

Moments or hours later—I could never be sure—I sat up.

Father was gone. I was in my nightdress only, with no sign of my coat. In the bed across the room, Faith was in the deepest kind of sleep, immobile, as if it would take a prince to wake her.

But the sweet smell of Father's Turkish cigarette still lingered in the air.

I looked for the chess piece, but to my disappointment there was nothing in the bed, nothing on the dresser. There was no sign of the chess piece anywhere.

So, for many years I discounted the memory of that night in the forest, believing it only a lovely and somewhat frightening dream. I didn't find out how wrong that idea was until much later.



CHAPTER 1

Father Comes Home

It wasn't until I was fifteen, that I thought seriously of the Faerie King again.

We were in London now. Had been for six months now, so that Mother could be closer to her doctors. This meant trading the sun-dappled glades, small brooks, and ageless mystery of the woods in the countryside for the raucous, vibrant, smoky, fog-drenched, teeming bustle of London.

The dim street lanterns shone dully in the darkened, rain-slick streets, illuminating little. Vague shapes of people, horses, carriages, and other things moved like shadows out there. I pressed my face against the leaded glass, trying to see more but not having much luck.

There was activity in the street beneath me, our groom helping Faith into another carriage that would whisk her to some fashionable part of town for yet another ball. Same as last night. And the night before.

With Henry sent off to Harrow's Boarding School, and Faith gone so often, it would be another night of having the house to myself. Faith's laugh drifted up from the street and I saw her stop and say something to the groom, her hand briefly on his arm. He nodded eagerly, completely besotted with her. Everyone was.

Before London, Faith and I had been inseparable. But her presentation to court and moving to London had changed all that. Now, I hardly ever saw her. She was a debutante and part of London *Society*.

Now the house would be empty, with no one to talk to. Mother would be here, of course, but that wasn't much help. Neither was the loathsome Mrs. Westerly, Mother's maid. None of the servants inside were that interesting and I wasn't often allowed outside.

Father, of course, was away at sea.

I heard Mother's slow footsteps pass in the hall outside my room and thought briefly of dashing out and trying to talk to her. Engage her in something, *anything*. But the idea faded as quickly as it had come, smothered by the remembrance of a hundred other failed attempts. Since Faith's introduction to Court, Mother had focused all of her declining faculties on Faith's progress in *Society*.

I was only a year behind Faith, and should soon be introduced to the Court and to *Society* myself. (You could always hear the capital 'S' and italics when Mother said *Society*.) The problem was: I didn't have a knack for *Society* and we all knew it. Superficially, I didn't look so very different from Faith. Both of us were slender, and we both had the same pale-gold hair.

But while Faith simply *reeked* of coquettish elegance, I was too curious about everything, Mother said, and it made my face all thin and ferrety. Also, I asked too many questions. Boys don't like questions. Men even less so.

With my ear to the door, I waited for several minutes after I heard the footsteps pass, then stole out into the darkened hall.

I had two places of refuge. The first was Father's study. The lock was an ornate brass monstrosity shaped like a widespread elm that was harder to pick than any other lock in the house, but I'd had lots of practice. Once inside, I locked the door again and tugged one of the carpets to cover the bottom of the door so I could light a candle. Then I pulled out Father's collection of maps and nautical charts. The room always smelled of leather books and Father's cigarettes. I knew I'd be safe in here.

Father had been an officer in the Crimean War before leaving the service and becoming a merchant captain for the East India Trading Company. Being a sea captain meant he spent more time sailing to India and back than he did in London, but whenever I was here in his study, he didn't seem so far away. I walked to the great map on the wall and traced Father's course with my fingers. Coming back from India would be faster now with steam power and the Suez Canal, but that didn't seem to change the fact that Father was almost never home. He simply commanded more voyages than he had before.

I left the wall and pulled out some of the books of maps that offered more detail. Flipping through the pages, I found England first and noticed a few with pencil marks outlining a number of the railroads, which was curious. But England and her coastline weren't as interesting to me as more foreign places. I'd already memorized most of the English coast. Now, the maps showing

India, China, the Americas. *These* were the magical places to me. Oh, to sail to *those* places!

I imagined standing on the deck of a ship someday, with the rocking horizon stretched out before me. With a hold full of cotton, silk, indigo dye, tea, or opium to sell, I could make all the money I might need to stay free. Forget Society and their chaste and interminable little dinners. I would eat salted pork, ship's biscuit, fruit from the islands, or fish pulled up from the surrounding seas. I would love and marry who I wished, perhaps no one at all if that was what *I* wanted. I could go anywhere, meet anybody, *be* anybody, instead of living amidst the inescapable, awkward and stifling life in London Society with nothing to live for but my husband's dreary successes or even drearier failures and nothing whatsoever of my own.

A bit of stray streetlamp glow leaked in from the street. I took Father's navy coat and an old battered hat from the coat rack and slid open the study window. Another marvelous feature of Father's study. No one came in here when Father wasn't home, so there was little risk of discovery.

I went out to my second refuge: the roof. With Father's coat and hat protecting me from the cold, wet and soot, I could sit and watch the will-o-wisps of the gas streetlights down below. Carriage lanterns moved in the fog and the call of cabbies' cries and the clatter of horse's hooves echoed all around. The entire city seemed alive and spread out beneath me. I sat above it all, wrapped in the anonymity of London's yellowed and ageless fog.

After a while, I climbed back into Father's study and pulled the leather-clad Mariner's Diary off the shelf. I looked a little at the merchant ships like Father captained now, but turned quickly to the navy vessels, which Father had worked on and commanded

years ago. There were a great many pictures in this edition and I entertained myself for a short time identifying how each was rigged, where the wind must be coming from, and what the sea must have been like based on the position and disposition of the sail. I lost myself in the drawings of sail and rigging and the minutiae of life at sea and finally fell asleep in Father's big leather chair.

At first, I dreamed of running close-hauled on a fair wind. Next, I dreamed of the Faerie King sitting in a strange forest, immobile and covered in snow.



I woke slowly and sat a moment drowsily staring at shadows on the ceiling. Morning! It was bloody morning already. I jumped to my feet and the Mariner's Diary crashed to the floor. Scooping it up, I smoothed the pages and went to put it back on the shelf, but stopped, staring.

There, in a corner of the room, sat a chess set that hadn't been there before. At least, I hadn't seen it. The room had been dark. Seeing it sent a shiver through me, bringing back both last night's dream and following Father in the woods, so long ago.

It wasn't just any chess set, either. It was *the* chess set. The same set of carved wood and bone I'd seen in my dream in the forest. Only, suddenly, I was sure it hadn't been a dream at all.

Someone was in the middle of a game, with a bunch of captured pieces lined up off to the side. I reached out with a shaking hand and picked up one of these, the knight. The warm and polished surface tugged at something deep, deep inside of me until my legs felt weak. The details of the horse were perfect, just as I remembered from that night in the woods. Father had given it to

me then, hadn't he? And then I'd lost it. I clutched it tightly. Now that I'd found it again, I didn't want to ever give it up. I tucked the chess piece into a pocket of my dressing gown.

Dazed as I was, my gaze swept the room to see what else I'd missed in the darkness last night. A smoking stand sat in easy reach, filled with recent ash. That's why the room always smelled so strongly of Father's cigarettes. There were a number of new items on the bookshelves. Some of the older books on the top shelf were gone, replaced by collection after collection of children's storybooks: Faerie tales and ghost stories. The shelf at the very bottom held curios.

Father had been home recently—within the last month—and hadn't told anyone. It had been months since I'd seen the room during daylight and gotten a good look around, hadn't it? None of this was here then.

So someone had come into this room recently, smoked, muddled with the books and added things to Father's collection. It had to be Father. I imagined him sitting at his desk, smoking, pondering one of his maps while the rest of us slept. I was hurt beyond belief that he'd been home and hadn't told me.

I knelt down to look at the new things on the bottom shelf. The closest object was a jar sealed with wax, which I picked up. Inside, suspended in amber fluid, a tiny, lifeless girl washed slowly back and forth. Both horrified and irresistibly drawn to get a better look, I held it up to the light.

She was smaller than my hand, with delicate wings like a dragonfly. Her face was beautiful, but feral, even in death. The long red hair on her head fell down past her shoulders, but she also had tufts that ran down her spine and along the backs of her arms and legs. Fine hairs that floated like seaweed in the preserving fluid.

Her hands were grotesque, barbed and curved talons that dangled down to her knees like oversized butcher's hooks. But the worst was her mouth, which gaped open to show rings of teeth like a river lamprey. A freakish combination of beautiful and repulsive that made me shiver. A small card next to the jar labeled it simply: "Faerie—Pix".

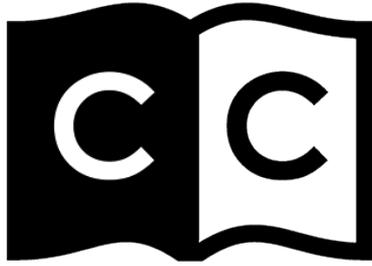
There were other objects there: a collar, elephant figurines, a bowl of broken stained glass in green and red, and a sextant. These things also reminded me of the time in the woods, convincing me even more that my memory of the Faerie King hadn't been just a dream.

I jumped as something heavy thumped downstairs. I wasn't expecting any of the family up and it didn't sound like the servants. I needed to get out of here before someone caught me.

Closing the door of the study behind me, I went back out into the darkly-paneled hallway, half expecting the Faerie King to be there waiting for me. Next to an umbrella stand, perhaps. A high window at the far end of the hall let in more wan light. It couldn't be too many minutes past dawn. The family portraits in the hall glared at me accusingly: Father, Mother, Joshua, Benedict, Faith, myself, and lastly, Henry, the youngest. I glared back.

Another loud noise from downstairs, a door slamming, I thought. Loud voices down there, too. Lots of voices.

I glanced at the stairs that led down to the front hall. It wouldn't do to get caught out here by Mother or Mrs. Westerly, but curiosity drew me to the stairway like a mouse to the trap. I looked down into the front hallway to see dozens of men in white breeches and rough jackets, clearly sailors, passing back and forth in raucous industry. The door to the street was propped open, letting in noise from the street and a cold draft I could feel all the way up here.



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Some dreams are so true that it doesn't matter if they actually happened that way or not.

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