valerian

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by cloudycats

Summary

“What did you plan to do with Ethan?”

Stella and Ashen Eyes have a talk.

“What did you plan to do with Ethan?”

“Hm?”

Ashen Eyes drops by frequently but irregularly; so far as Stella can tell, they come to check on her between their own errands, though they pretend to have sand in their ears whenever she asks them as much. Sometimes they stay for a day or two, and others they leave so quickly that Stella catches only the traces of their magic long after they've gone.

Maybe keeping a stray cat is like this, if the cat in question is one who laughs too often, speaks mostly in cryptic half-threats, and wants neither your food nor your attention but only the occasional reminder of your continued existence.

She's pretty sure they feel similarly about her, though.

It's a slow evening, lazy and warm – the kind of evening, Ashen Eyes has told her, when sketchier faeries come out to fill the shadows. If they thought hearing that would scare her into staying inside, they don't know her at all. Once Ethan finishes helping with the dishes in the kitchen, Stella's going to rope him into a game of tag.

The two of them used to favor hide-and-seek on these visits to their grandmother's house, with all of the places in the countryside to go missing in, but they haven't felt like playing it since Christmas. That's Ashen Eyes' fault.

“If Chise hadn't helped me find him,” she says, scowling. “You know.”

When Ashen Eyes shifts under her, it doesn't affect her balance at all. She sits cross-legged on their cloaked head, chin on her knuckles and elbow on her knee, a state of affairs that not only do they seem unannoyed by but that they haven't even registered as worth commenting on. If she had to guess, she'd say they were making an active effort to help her avoid falling from her perch.

She really doesn't get them.

Rubbing their cheek, they say, “What *was* I planning to do?” She doesn't have to see their face – the shadowed one or the real one – to know that they've crinkled their eyes in a grin. “Yule was a good while ago. So much has happened since then.”

“*Nothing* has happened,” Stella mutters, and Ashen Eyes laughs at her.

Alright, so maybe Elias tried to sacrifice Stella in a ritual to save Chise from... something? Cancer? She hasn't caught the details. But Chise gave Elias a stern talking-to about his methods, Elias gave Stella the worst apology she's ever heard (a high bar to clear coming from someone with a younger brother), and they've both given their assurance that it won't happen again. And they cured Chise's maybe-cancer, too, allegedly without a human sacrifice involved, so a win-win all around.

Then Stella agreed to a contract with Ashen Eyes, which in retrospect she obviously shouldn't have done, alone and angry and shrouded in an unnatural mist where anything could have happened without rescuers finding her in time.

She can guess what Chise would say about it if Stella told her, so Stella has steadfastly avoided mentioning it ever. Ethan knows that Ashen Eyes visits and that Stella can see them, which is as much as she's said to anyone.

Luckily, what the two of them arranged barely qualifies as a contract at all. Ashen Eyes could have done much worse to her. They had her as soon as they told her that, with a pact, she could stop them from doing to others what they did to her and her brother.

That she could stop them from hurting innocents, to be clear, and from messing with people for no good reason but their own entertainment, not that she could stop them from pulling *exactly* the same stunt they did with her and Ethan. She's read up a little on potential missteps when interacting with the fey.

“In the future, I will consider giving you a chance to talk me out of it,” they said then, “maybe.”

Stella yanked at their scarf to drag their head down – even then she could tell they were only humoring her – and snarled into that chitinous, three-eyed face pockmarked with splotches of dripping shadow, “I want more than that.”

“Oh? And what do I gain from this, Stella Barklem? What can you offer me in return should I let you trap me?”

“You're able to keep yourself in check for one human lifetime. That's nothing to you,” she told the creature who still calls Scotland by the name the Roman Empire bestowed on the land.

They smiled, as they always do at the grand event of a mortal living up to its potential. “But what is it worth to *you*?”

She won't know for sure if she made a mistake that day unless Ashen Eyes decides to capitalize on it. Until that moment arrives, they can sit around playing house under the waning sun outside her grandmother's home, and she can badger them into actually explaining their motives. Sometimes. Rarely. If the stars align, and if they feel like cooperating.

She scrunches her mouth. “*Two* things have happened,” she amends. “Are you going to tell me or not?”

Ashen Eyes hums. “Maybe I would have eaten your brother if you hadn't found him,” they reply in what passes for a joke with them.

“Don't you dare.”

“A different answer, then: your friend lost a brother once, in a separate manner than you nearly did.”

That sounds more like them.

She says, annoyed as much as anything else, “You're horrible.”

“For repairing a broken bond?”

She frowns down at them, not that they can catch it at this angle.

“You wouldn't have recognized him. You would have gone to the pharmacist's house up the road to collect your grandmother's prescription, and your friend would have met you at the door while her brother hid watching from the upstairs window. Ah, but – maybe he wouldn't have. Maybe his health would have been a little less fragile living in that house than here in this one, with you. He could have come across you on the road one day, walking. You would recognize each other from passing glimpses that meant little to either of you, and you wouldn't give a second thought to why you couldn't ever seem to remember the other's name.

“When you returned to London with only your parents, Stella, you would wonder at how you used to spend your time and why the hours you had yet to live seemed suddenly much emptier.”

Ashen Eyes would have done it. They would have done it and laughed. Chise told Stella afterwards that they deliberately rigged the contest to help themselves lose it (because of course they did), but that doesn't mean the stakes they set weren't real.

“I do prefer that you won, though,” they add, utterly shameless. “The struggle was lovely to watch.”

“That's the type of thing you're going to stop doing.”

She can *hear* their smile as they reply, “You shouldn't have agreed to a contract dependent on your lifespan. Lessons to keep in mind.”

She picks at the coarse fabric of their hood. She'd take a bet that they won't kill her, or at least that they won't do it without making a huge show of the attempt and offering her plenty of chances to get away. “Elias is the one who cut your head off, isn't he? He owes me, too. If he did it once, he can do it again.”

“You can't count on the thorned one to honor agreements quite as much as you can rely on us to.” They tilt their head to the side. They're definitely using magic to stick Stella in place. “Though your friend might help you get around that. My, but she's come far.”

“It's still creepy that you keep tabs on her.”

“*All* of us keep tabs on her. It isn't just me. Decades have passed since a new mage arose from the masses. That alone would make her worth watching.”

Stella's tossed around the idea before that fairies call themselves neighbors because of how much they like to crane their heads over the fence and gossip about all of the things they see on the other side, but she doesn't intend to voice it. As condescending as Ashen Eyes acts, they very rarely show genuine contempt; for that thought, though, she imagines they might make an exception.

“What would you have done with Elias?” she asks.

“I'd have kept arranging encounters until the sleih beggey took him back. She would refuse to do anything else with her life until she retrieved him.” That's... a weighty assertion. Stella hasn't quite pinned down how to define their relationship – Chise calls Elias her teacher, but they act closer to family. Her guess as to which *part* of a family updates with each interaction. “And I couldn't contain him for long, anyway.”

“So you went to a lot of trouble to do that to us.”

“I'd say it was worth it.”

Stella grumbles, and then she unfolds her legs and hops down to the grass.

“Leaving?”

“I'll be back, so you stay here.” She softens the demand with, “It won't take long.”

When she comes back a minute later from her detour to the kitchen, they've migrated onto a tree branch too high for her to reach without climbing. She holds up the grease-stained paper bag anyway. “Hey, this is for you!”

For a moment they don't move. Then they ripple like a heat haze and disappear, reforming on the ground to pluck the offering from her.

“Shortbread and lemon curd,” she says while they unroll the top to peer inside.

“Made by you? And you kept me in your thoughts as you assembled it. Goodness.”

Yelling at them about their choices hasn't acquired meaningful results yet, so Stella's trying a different tactic. “If you can find something else you enjoy, you might stop being....” She flails a little to indicate their entirety.

They laugh for far too long. “You're adorable,” they tell her, patting her head. She'll dump paint on them the next time they come around.

“I don't know if you have allergies, so I picked something pretty harmless.” Unless they have a gluten or lactose intolerance, this should work for them. She's heard them call some bizarre things food before, but better to be safe.

“Very thoughtful.” They sound downright gleeful.

She crosses her arms. “I'm not doing it again if you're going to respond like this.”

“Oh, don't let me stop you from acting as your heart wills.” Good. She wasn't going to. “I have never seen a child keep the kind of promise you tried to make to me, and you've done nothing as of yet to demonstrate that you might be an exception. But until you prove me right, this is a very fun diversion.”

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