

THE  
LATCH  
KEY



OLIVIA  
ATWATER



# THE LATCH KEY



OLIVIA ATWATER



STARWATCH  
PRESS

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## CHAPTER 1



The Lord Sorcier, Elias Wilder, had never intended to be a father. In fact, he had never intended to marry at all—but now, somehow, he had found himself with both a Mrs Theodora Wilder and an entire orphanage of children who seemed to consider him their father.

Elias was not fond of children. On the whole, he found other *adults* to be barely tolerable. Given the choice, he greatly preferred to spend his time in isolation with his books and his magic and... well, his wife was excellent company, actually, and he was fond of *her*, at least.

But the fact remained that Elias had helped to save several children from a faerie. And so, despite his preferences, he was indeed a father now. And he was not at all the sort to shirk such an important responsibility.

Elias was unsurprised to discover, early one Sunday evening, that he was not very good at the job.

The sky was just beginning to darken as Elias approached the set of apartments which had been granted to him by the Crown. The living space was a townhouse of several stories, stacked atop a perfume shop which always smelled cloyingly of flowers. The apartments had probably had a very important sounding name at one time, like *Highcrest* or *Willow House*—but Elias could not stand ostentatious things, and so he and his wife had decided simply to call it *the House*.

As Elias came within sight of the House—just close enough to catch a whiff of that noxious mixture of roses, lilies, and lavender—he caught a glimpse of one lonely, flickering candle through a window on the third floor. Said candle had taken up residence within his study, among his magical books and his spellcasting implements. Elias’s first instinct, of course, was that his wife Dora had stepped into his study in order to satisfy some momentary curiosity among his books. Dora often asked him dreamy questions about magical theory, but she was just as apt to research such questions all on her own. Though the study could be a dangerous place, this never bothered Elias at all, since his wife had already killed one faerie all on her own and could therefore take perfectly good care of herself, thank you very much.

Elias loosened his cravat as he climbed the stairs. “I wonder what’s caught her attention this time,” he mused.

But as he opened the door to the dining room on the second floor, he saw Dora sitting at the table, surrounded by several children. Everyone was still wearing their Sunday best, with a smattering of little bonnets and coarse long coats.

“You *do* need to eat your peas, Roger,” Dora was saying to a young brown-haired boy in the chair just next to her. “Don’t mistake me, I’m pleased that you *can* be picky now—but Mr Lowe says that if you don’t eat all of the healthy bits, he may need to come and visit again.”

Roger grimaced as though Dora had presented him with an impossible ultimatum. “You know what I think?” he said. “I think some faerie made peas just to torture us. Can’t I just say some Hail Marys an’ eat more pie instead?”

Dora paused to consider this seriously, and Elias found himself briefly amused. It was true that his wife had only half a soul—and this made her act very fanciful and distracted at times—but it was this very quality which often endeared her to the children, since she was always ready to consider things from their perspective.

“But why would a faerie make peas terrible on purpose, unless they were trying to *prevent* you from eating peas?” Dora asked. “Surely, you don’t intend to let a faerie trick you, Roger.”

Roger narrowed his eyes, clearly put off by this response—though surely not defeated. Before he could reply, however, Elias cleared his throat audibly.

“Dora,” he said. “Did you leave a candle burning in the study?”

Dora glanced towards Elias. As she did, Roger swiftly snatched the peas from his plate, tucking them into his handkerchief to hide them.

“I have not been in the study at all today,” Dora said. “I took the children to church, and then to Kensington Gardens—and now, we are having supper.”

Elias knitted his brow warily. “If you have not been in the study, Dora,” he said slowly, “then who is in there right *now*?”

The children at the table all looked at each other with such guilty expressions that Elias knew there was a minor conspiracy afoot. Dora turned to look over the gathering, quietly counting heads, even as Elias stormed for the stairs once more.

“Oh,” Dora sighed. “Abigail.”

Elias took the stairs up to the study two at a time. His heart thudded quickly in his chest, sick with danger in a way that it had not been for years now. The books and tools in his study could easily harm an unwary adult; a child of Abigail’s age would surely fare even worse if she touched the wrong thing.

His mind conjured up horrible images one after another. Perhaps Abigail had accidentally summoned some dark creature, or erased her own memories, or started a fire—

None of these terrible imaginings were in evidence when Elias finally threw open the door to his study. All that he saw, in fact, was a little twelve-year-old girl sitting in his large leather chair, staring down at a thick tome in her lap. She still wore her Sunday dress—a worn but respectable white gown which one of the women from the Charitable Ladies’ Board had donated to the orphanage. Her bonnet had been tossed onto the floor nearby; her lank, straw-like blonde hair had come free of its careful bun.

Abigail glanced up swiftly as Elias slammed the door open. Her expression stayed calm and still—but her blue eyes filled with knowing guilt, and

she pushed back a few strands of her hair nervously, tucking them behind her ear.

A surge of cautious relief flooded through Elias, even as he strode for the chair. He snatched the tome from Abigail's lap as though it were a looming viper, setting it far out of reach on the corner of the desk. Abigail flinched, and he turned his attention sharply back upon her.

"Are you hurt?" Elias demanded, searching her over for signs of injury. "Have you used any magic, even by accident?"

Abigail shrank down into the chair. It was easily twice her size, such that she looked even smaller than she really was. "I—no sir," Abigail mumbled. "I was just readin'."

Elias let out a shaky breath. The fear had yet to fully pass, and his heart-beat was very loud in his ears. "You are not allowed in here," he said. "You *know* that you are not allowed in here, and you are certainly not allowed to read these books!" He paused briefly as a thought occurred to him. "You can read?" he asked. "Mrs Dun said that none of the children from Hollowvale knew how to read."

Abigail swallowed. "Mrs Dun started teachin' us a few weeks back," the little girl said.

Elias pressed his fingers to his forehead. "You've only just started learning how to read," he said slowly, "and yet, you are here in my study, attempting to decipher some of the most dangerous texts in all of England. Have I understood correctly?"

Abigail did not respond this time. Instead, she looked down silently at her hands in her lap in the way that children did when they had no proper response.

Elias shook his head. "Up," he said shortly. "Out. And do not let me catch you in here again. You are fortunate to be alive, young lady."

Abigail pressed her lips together. She shoved herself up from the chair, keeping her eyes cast down to the floor.

As soon as she had left, Elias collapsed into the leather chair. His hands still shook with an overwhelming surplus of emotion; a vice squeezed here and there at his heart, insisting that there might yet be danger at any moment.



He breathed slowly for a long time, trying to still the dizziness that threatened to overtake him. After several minutes, the ongoing dread lessened just enough that he was able to stand again—though he knew from long experience that it would not fully depart for hours yet.

Elias had never needed to lock his study before; he knew and trusted all of the servants that worked at the House, and his wife was every bit as dangerous as the books were. Until today, it hadn't occurred to him that the children from Mrs Dun's orphanage would ever be underfoot. But Dora loved all of the children dearly, he realised, and it only made sense that she would insist on bringing them back to the House at times.

For the first time in a long while, Elias dug into the desk drawers to search out a large ornate key. On his way out of the study, he locked the door behind him and tucked the key into his coat pocket.

## CHAPTER 2



**B**ut perhaps it is important to start this faerie tale from the very beginning.

Once upon a time, there was a little boy named Elias whose father was a faerie. At least, Elias was fairly certain that Lord Swiftburn was his father—the tall, slender creature that always looked down at him would not respond unless Elias called him *Father*, which seemed to suggest as much.

Lord Swiftburn was a comely elf with long, white-blond hair and piercing golden eyes. He was, all things considered, a terrifying father. *All good fathers ought to be terrifying to their children, after all*, Lord Swiftburn often told Elias. The faerie always said this with a charming, carefree sort of laugh which made his golden eyes twinkle. Elias feared that laughter above all else, though the other faeries who sometimes visited seemed to find it uniquely compelling. Lord Swiftburn's laugh always seemed to presage a new and sudden change in Elias' circumstances, over which he already had so little control.

Like its lord, the land known as Swiftburn was both beautiful and deceptively frightening. It was a land of broad, sweeping forests and golden grasses, all bone dry from lack of rain. The sky was always dark and foreboding with summer storm clouds, but no water ever fell; instead, great

winds whipped across the land, stirring up the dry foliage in crackling hisses, while thunder rumbled ominously overhead.

In all of Swiftburn, there was only one structure: a large, soot-blackened stone manor which Elias's father called the *Whithering House*. The Whithering House was situated on a very tall hill, where no trees or grasses ever grew; its great sash windows were always so dirty that Elias spent much of his time scrubbing the soot from them in order to see outside at all. He rarely dared to set foot outside of the Whithering House—for Swiftburn was prone to dangerous outbursts, the consequences of which he often saw from the vantage point of his bedroom window.

Every so often, a stray bolt of lightning struck somewhere in Swiftburn, like a spark in a tinderbox. Each time this happened, the world that Elias knew was transformed into a beautiful, raging inferno. Sheets of golden fire raked the land, dancing joyfully across the landscape as they burned the world to ash. The flames always climbed to engulf the Whithering House—but somehow, the building never burned. Instead, Elias marvelled at the sight of the fire licking along his windows, like a friendly pet come to say hello. The devastation to the land was terrible—but the rustling trees and the dry grasses always regrew in a hurry, so that everything was back to normal by the time Elias next awoke.

Living in Swiftburn was dangerous indeed for a mortal child. But Elias did his best to stay within the Whithering House and obey his father's changeable wishes. And for many years, this was enough.

Eventually, however, Lord Swiftburn was inspired to leave his realm. "I intend to take a holiday in England!" the faerie declared to Elias, as they settled in for supper in the great hall. "Perhaps this time, I will trick an Englishman into insulting me, so that I may punish him!"

Elias normally tried to stay quiet in order to avoid his father's attention—but at this, he could not help his curiosity. "What is England, Father?" he asked. "I have never heard of it before."

Lord Swiftburn smiled at his son. "It is a foreign land where mortals live," he said. "I have hidden many paths to England within Swiftburn, since I so enjoy visiting there. I will take one of those paths within the day and catch myself a mortal."

Elias knew that *he* was mortal, though he did not fully understand the word. He frowned at this. “Am I from England?” he asked.

Lord Swiftburn waved his hand distractedly. “Oh, I do not quite remember,” he said. “It does not matter, does it? You are here now, and you are my son. Let us not speak of it.” He pressed one long finger to his chin now, deep in thought. “I cannot bring you with me, of course—you will surely spoil my holiday. But I cannot leave you here in the Whithering House either, can I? Who knows what mischief you might cause while I am not here to watch you?”

Elias closed his fingers into his palms beneath the table, suddenly worried. But he kept his tone calm from long years of practice. “But what if Swiftburn catches fire while you are gone?” he asked. “I will need to hide in the Whithering House, won’t I?”

Lord Swiftburn shook his head at Elias, as though his son was being very silly indeed. “I will only be gone for a little bit,” he said. “I am sure that everything will be fine.”

Elias was not at all certain that everything would be fine. “I will be very well behaved, Father,” he said quickly. “If you’ll only let me stay in the house, I’ll remain in my room and make no noise at all—”

Lord Swiftburn turned a dark expression upon his son, and Elias shut his mouth abruptly. “A good son does not argue with his father!” the faerie said softly. “Have I not taught you better than this, Elias?”

The candles that glowed golden upon the table flickered with warning, burning higher and brighter and hotter. Elias sucked in his breath with fear. He knew, of course, that being trapped outside could be deadly... but displeasing his father could be dangerous as well. And of course, above all else, he *did* desire to be a good son.

“You... have taught me better,” Elias said softly. He looked down at his plate. “I am sorry, Father. I will not argue any more.”

Lord Swiftburn let out a sharp, impatient sound. He rose from his place at the table. “It is too late,” he said. “You have spoiled supper entirely. I might as well depart for my holiday now.” He gestured at Elias. “Up. Out. I will let you back into the Whithering House when I have returned.”

Elias stared helplessly at his father. But he knew that arguing would only

make things worse—and so, he shoved to his feet and headed for the front door of the manor.

Outside, the black, rumbling sky spread out before him. Elias hesitated on the threshold of the Whithering House, terrified to set foot beyond it—but Lord Swiftburn dragged him out by the arm and closed the soot-stained door behind them both. The faerie pulled a key from his coat and turned to lock the door.

“I am taking the latch key with me,” Lord Swiftburn declared. “I will unlock the door when I return.”

And then, without further ado, the faerie started down the hill on his way towards England. Eventually, his white-blond hair disappeared between the trees—and Elias was left alone on the doorstep of the Whithering House.

Elias sat there for many minutes, staring helplessly out into the distance. Every so often, a flash of lightning cut across the sky; each time, his body tensed and his eyes scanned the forest ahead for signs of fire.

*I am surely going to die, Elias thought. Father will be heartbroken when he returns—but I will still be dead.*

Fear choked his throat and clouded his mind. But Elias was a clever boy, and he was used to surviving in faerie. He took several deep breaths, forcing away the dizziness—and as he turned to consider the Whithering House behind him, an idea finally occurred.



TWICE, Elias watched the world go up in flames from his bedroom window before Lord Swiftburn returned from his holiday in England. He had intended to sneak back out of the Whithering House before his father returned—but the faerie arrived while Elias was sleeping, and he only knew that Lord Swiftburn had come back when he was pulled abruptly from his bed.

“What is this?” Lord Swiftburn demanded. “How are you here? I am certain that I locked the front door!”

Elias stumbled up to his feet, blinking away his blariness. His father

was frustrated and dishevelled looking; his white-blond hair was all askew, with straw sticking out of it at odd angles.

“You were very late returning,” Elias said carefully. “I had to hide from a fire while you were gone. But what has happened to you, Father?”

Lord Swiftburn’s golden eyes sparked with fury. “I disguised myself as a toothless, disgusting old mortal man!” he said. “I knocked at a farmer’s door and asked him to let me inside. And do you know what he did?”

Elias frowned uncertainly. “Well... did he not insult you, Father?”

“No! Not in the least!” Lord Swiftburn threw up his hands, now pacing the bedroom. “He invited me inside, the cunning wretch! He set a place for me at his supper table! He even gave me his own bed for the evening!” Lord Swiftburn’s face twisted into a furious scowl. “You know that I cannot accept gifts—I must instead return them threefold. I have been weeding crops and mucking stables for days!”

Elias felt his heart sink all the way down to his toes. He had hoped that his father might see how well behaved he had been and that he might forget all about his anger as a consequence. But Lord Swiftburn had been miserable for his entire holiday, and it was clear that he was now in a terrible mood.

“And now I see that my own son is an equally clever little mortal,” Lord Swiftburn snapped. “I notice that the soot on your window is smeared. You climbed through it, didn’t you? Well! That will not happen again. I will lock all of the windows before I leave the next time.” He closed his long fingers around Elias’s arm and started for the door of the bedroom. “In the meantime—disobedient children do not get bedrooms. You will have a place in the attic now. Let us see how you enjoy *that!*”

Once again, Elias did not dare to argue. Instead, he stumbled up the stairs after his father towards the attic of the Whithering House. The faerie tossed him into the dark, shivering old room—and slammed the door closed upon him.

## CHAPTER 3



Some days later, Elias returned home late in the afternoon and discovered Dora sitting at the dining table with a stern-looking middle-aged woman. The two women were having tea when Elias arrived; as he entered, Dora smiled dimly at him.

“Ah, here you are,” she said. “Miss Langley, this is my husband, Lord Elias Wilder. He will prefer it if you call him anything but that, I am sure. Elias, this is Miss Langley. She is a governess. Mrs Lowe recommended her very highly.”

Elias considered the two women before him. “I see,” he said—though he didn’t actually understand what was going on at all. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Langley. But if I may be blunt for a moment—why are you here?”

Miss Langley winced, and Elias remembered belatedly that while *Dora* preferred such direct questions, all the rest of high society generally found them rude. And while Elias did not *mind* being rude to most people, he did try to maintain a civil tongue around his wife’s guests.

“The Charitable Ladies’ Board hoped to engage a governess for the children,” Dora reminded Elias. “They have settled on Miss Langley. But she requires room and board, and the orphanage is so full that Mrs Dun cannot find her room to stay there. I am discussing options with everyone involved.”

Elias frowned. “We have several spare rooms in the House,” he said. “I suppose the lady might stay here with us, if she was so inclined.”

Miss Langley blinked. “Oh, that is... very generous of you, my Lord Sorcier,” she said.

The title grated on Elias’s nerves—but he bit back a tart reply this time. “If we are employing you,” he said, “then we must obviously give you lodgings. If there are no lodgings at the orphanage, then you must obviously stay here. I do not see what other options there are.”

Dora blinked serenely at Elias. “But there are other options,” she said. “We could move some of the children here instead. As you’ve observed, we do have space in the House. And *that* would leave room for more children at the orphanage.”

Elias considered his wife carefully. “We... could do that,” he said slowly. The idea of having children underfoot at *home* was not a pleasant one by any means—but despite his lack of skill with children, Elias was very protective of them in *principle*, and the idea of creating more room in the orphanage did please him. “Would we not require a second governess here, in that case?”

Dora beamed at him. “That is true,” she said. “I suppose that *we* might hire Miss Langley in that case. We can always find another candidate for the orphanage.”

Elias nodded, though his stomach was still uneasy. “I should warn you both that I am not likely to be of much help. I do not know how to parent a mortal child.”

Miss Langley’s eyebrows shot up over her teacup. “A mortal child?” she asked. “Do you know how to parent *immortal* children, my Lord Sorcier?”

Elias sighed. “No, neither sort,” he said. “But I am particularly ill-suited to mortal children. My father was a faerie, and I cannot say that I learned much of use from him on the matter. He nearly killed me several times, in fact.”

Dora smiled at Elias with a dull sympathy on her features. “Ah,” she said. “I am not very good with children either, I think—but any parent must be better than a workhouse master.” She took a thoughtful sip of her tea. “You were forced to kill your father, weren’t you? I wouldn’t wish for any of the



children to kill *you*, of course. Perhaps it is best if I handle things, in that case. This is my idea, after all.”

Miss Langley now looked politely stricken by the unusual turn which the conversation had taken. But she was currently outnumbered by the two strange people who had decided to employ her, and so she stayed wisely silent rather than demanding explanations.

Elias smiled at her abruptly. “You will do nicely, Miss Langley,” he said. “I hope you overcome your trepidation and accept the job.”

Miss Langley studied her teacup carefully. “The pay is very generous, my Lord Sorcier,” she observed. “I find unemployment to be more trepidatious by far.”

Elias nodded. “The House is the safest place in all of London, if you are a welcome guest,” he said. “So long as you stay out of the study, you should have little to fear.”

“Oh,” said Dora suddenly. She straightened in her seat. “Oh dear. I took Abigail for ices with us today. But she has disappeared again, hasn’t she?”

Elias narrowed his eyes. Dora was prone to distraction, given her half a soul; a clever little girl would have no trouble eluding her. “She cannot possibly be in the study,” Elias said. “I told her not to enter—and I have kept the door locked, ever since I first found her there.”

Dora gave him an apologetic look. “Perhaps you ought to check there, all the same,” she said. “Abigail is terribly resourceful.”

Elias shook his head and started for the stairs.

## CHAPTER 4



“I have hatched a better plan!” Lord Swiftburn announced to Elias the next morning over breakfast. “I will disguise myself as a hare and go dig up the farmer’s crops! When he calls me names and tries to chase me away, I will show my true form and punish him for his insolence!”

Elias had spent the entire evening shivering in the attic; he had not slept very well at all, and so he had to repeat the words in his head in order to make sense of them. Dread settled into his heart as he realised that Lord Swiftburn would soon leave him alone once again. “Do you think the farmer knew who you were before, when you were an old man?” Elias asked. “Perhaps he’ll recognise you again and give you gifts?”

Lord Swiftburn laughed that pleasant laugh of his. “No, no,” he said. “Farmers have no magic. I am certain that he did not recognise me. Mortals are simply kind for no reason at all sometimes. One cannot always predict their nonsense. But if I threaten the farmer’s crops, then he will surely try to thrash me!”

Elias knitted his brow. “Kind for no reason at all?” he repeated slowly. “Do you mean that mortals sometimes give gifts without expecting anything in return?” The idea was so foreign to Elias, after all his years in faerie, that it briefly staved off the panic that had started thudding in his chest.

“Oh yes,” Lord Swiftburn said. “Mortals do not have to follow rules at all! They are so terribly unpredictable. It is part of why I so enjoy going on holiday in England!”

Elias watched Lord Swiftburn carefully. “And... does England often catch on fire, as Swiftburn does?” he asked.

“Not often at all,” Lord Swiftburn said. “Though I did start a little fire in London when I visited once.” He smiled dreamily at the memory. “No, England is quite boring, I would say—at least by faerie standards.”

England, Elias thought, sounded very wonderful indeed. But he did not dare to say this to his father.

“Well!” Lord Swiftburn said. “I must be off to nibble at some turnips.” He cast a warning look at Elias. “You will stay outside, of course. I have locked all of the windows already.”

Elias bit back a despairing groan. But he pushed up to his feet and followed his father outside once again, watching hopelessly as the faerie locked the front door and tucked the latch key back into his coat pocket.

“I will be back very shortly this time,” Lord Swiftburn said with a laugh. “That farmer is about to feel quite foolish, I expect.”

Elias watched him disappear into the forest once again, as the storm clouds roiled overhead.



LORD SWIFTBURN RETURNED to faerie only many days later—wet, bedraggled, and accompanied by a second faerie, who walked at his side. The other faerie was a slightly shorter man with pale hair and even more pallid skin, dressed all in formal black attire. Elias recognised him as Lord Longshadow, who had come sometimes to visit for tea.

“Perhaps you should let the matter lie,” Lord Longshadow said, as the two of them walked up the hill towards the Whithering House. “In a hundred years, the farmer will be dead, regardless.”

“Let the matter lie?” Lord Swiftburn repeated incredulously. “And be bested by a mortal? Ha! No, not in the least. Only give me an afternoon and

I will come up with an even more devious plan! Mark my words, that farmer will rue the day that he showed kindness to a hare!”

Elias watched them approach from his place on the front step. “Good afternoon, Father,” he said. “Good afternoon, Lord Longshadow. I hope that you have had an enjoyable time in England.”

Lord Swiftburn scoffed angrily. “I have spent the last few days chasing off foxes from the farmer’s hen coop,” he said. “I fell into a river while I was at it. At least I met Lord Longshadow on my way back into faerie. He will have tea with us and help me come up with a better approach.”

Elias nodded amiably. His father pulled the latch key from his coat pocket and unlocked the front door, allowing them all inside.

“I do not know if I will be of much use to you,” Lord Longshadow said, as they all moved in to sit down at the table. “I talk much with mortals, it is true. But I mostly speak with them after they are already dead, when it is time for me to lead them to the Other Side. Perhaps you should ask your son for advice. He is mortal, is he not?”

Lord Swiftburn glanced towards Elias with a frown. “My mortal son is too clever by half,” he said. “He might well lie if I asked him. You know that mortals can *lie*, Lord Longshadow.”

Elias glanced between the two of them warily. “Lie?” he asked. “What is a lie?”

“Perhaps you will find out when you are older,” Lord Longshadow said, with a hint of amusement. “Speaking of which—I am sure that I saw Swiftburn catch fire yesterday. But we found you on the doorstep outside, young mortal. How is it that you survived?”

Lord Swiftburn turned to look at Elias. His golden eyes caught upon the soot that still stained Elias’ clothing, and a fresh fury kindled in his gaze. “You awful, deceiving creature!” he said. “You climbed in through the chimney, didn’t you? But how did you get back out again without unlocking the front door?”

Lord Longshadow now shot Elias a faintly apologetic look as he realised the situation. “One can hardly blame the boy,” the other faerie said. “Swiftburn is not known for sparing mortal lives.”

But Lord Swiftburn was not listening. He thudded his fist onto the table

furiously. "Tell me!" he demanded. "Tell me now, boy, or else I will make you regret it!"

Elias swallowed thickly, staring at his father. "I... I climbed out the window this time," he said. "They unlock from the inside."

Lord Swiftburn shook his head in disgust. "This is what I deal with in my own home!" he said to Lord Longshadow. "I took this creature in. I have fed him from my table. I have given him a roof over his head—"

*Except for when you take back that roof,* Elias thought silently.

"—and yet, he cannot do as he is told!" Lord Swiftburn finished. "Not even the simplest things!"

Lord Longshadow did not seem much fazed by this. But Lord Longshadow was rarely fazed by much at all. He had always been calm and aloof, and eerily patient.

"Well," said Lord Longshadow. "He will die too, someday. All mortals do eventually. And then none of this will matter, will it?" He smiled at Elias, as though the words ought to have been comforting rather than terrifying.

Elias shrank down into his chair. "Do you not care if Swiftburn kills me while you are gone?" he asked his father softly.

Lord Swiftburn made a noise of disgust. "Why do you think that Swiftburn will kill you?" he asked. "You are being ridiculous, Elias." He waved dismissively at his son. "Go and make some tea. I am bound to lose my patience with you if you stay."

Elias did not particularly want to stay where he was. He shot to his feet with one last nod at Lord Longshadow, and then hurried from the room.

Elias stayed well out of their way for the rest of Lord Longshadow's visit. But when the other faerie finally offered his goodbyes, Elias followed him out onto the doorstep of the Whithering House.

"Can't you help me?" Elias pleaded with Lord Longshadow. "Father is going to leave me outside again tomorrow when he goes back to England. Swiftburn will surely kill me while he's gone."

Lord Longshadow turned his black eyes upon Elias. There was an odd ripple of colour within those eyes up close—a vibrant sheen of pink and yellow and violet that flickered across the darkness. There was a sympathy there as well, but it was distant and alien.

“This is not my domain,” Lord Longshadow told Elias gently. “I am a guest here, and my power is limited. But I am the shepherd of the dead, and your father has no use for dead children. If Swiftburn should kill you, then I will come back to retrieve your soul. I will lead you to the Other Side, where you need not worry about storms or fires ever again.”

Elias stared at Lord Longshadow. For just a moment, he considered the words, wondering if he should give up and die. It would be simpler, he thought, than fighting what seemed to be so inevitable.

But Elias didn't know what was on the Other Side—and he did not want to find out so very soon. “You really can't do *anything* for me?” Elias asked. “Nothing at all?”

Lord Longshadow contemplated this question, turning it over patiently in his mind. When he spoke again, his voice was slow and measured. “I can do nothing for you, little mortal,” he said. “But there is one higher power here than your father to which you might appeal. In England, lords own their land—but here, it is the other way around. If you can gain Swiftburn's favour, then no door here will ever be locked to you.”

Elias sucked in a breath. “Swiftburn is alive, then?” he asked. “I can... talk to it? How do I convince it not to kill me?”

Lord Longshadow shook his head sadly. “I do not know,” he said. “I know how to appeal to Longshadow, for it is my realm, and it is fond of *me*. But Swiftburn is every bit as strange to me as it is to you.” He glanced out at the black, rumbling sky and sighed. “I must be going. Mortals die so quickly, and I have already tarried too long here. I am sure that there are already more souls for me to guide away.”

Lord Longshadow stepped out into the dry, crackling grasses and the whispering trees. Soon enough, the darkest shadows of Swiftburn had engulfed him—and he was gone.

## CHAPTER 5



The door to Elias's study was still locked—but a suspicion had grown within him as he climbed the stairs, and he was now strangely certain of what he would find inside the room.

Elias unlocked the door and headed in. As he did, he heard the scrabble of small feet on the wooden floors. He turned his gaze to the window, where a little girl with blonde hair had started climbing her way out onto the roof.

“Abigail,” Elias said sharply. “Get down from there. I have already seen you, and there is no point.”

The little girl paused with one leg already out the window. She glanced back towards Elias, and he saw her silently calculating whether she ought to risk further trouble by running, or whether she should simply endure her forthcoming punishment.

The sight of that cold, careful fear on her face loosened the tight anger that had gripped at Elias's chest. He sighed heavily. “Please come down,” he said. “We should speak, perhaps. I'll call for tea.”

Abigail watched him uncertainly for another second—but eventually, she lowered herself back down from the window and closed it behind her. Slowly, she padded back towards the desk, where an old book still sat open.

As Elias watched, she closed the book and took it towards the shelves, nestling it back into its spot there.

Elias rang the bell for the maid. He requested a fresh pot of tea and two cups; when they had arrived, he settled them on the desk and turned his attention towards Abigail and the shelf where she'd been lingering.

"What have you been reading?" Elias asked her quietly.

Abigail swallowed uncertainly. Her eyes were still cast down to the floor. "I don't know," she said. "I can't read the title. It's all been nonsense, even with Mrs Dun's lessons."

Elias headed over to the shelf, reaching out for the book which she'd replaced there. The leather cover was unremarkable—but the title on the first page read: *Mystères de fées*. An illustrated satyr danced across the page, piping on its flute.

Elias smiled ruefully. "This book is in French," he advised Abigail. "No lesson from Mrs Dun will ever teach you how to read it. I can barely read it myself."

Abigail slumped her shoulders, and Elias glanced down at her. "You were looking for books on faeries?" he asked.

Abigail nodded dully—and the last embers of Elias's angry confusion doused themselves. He pressed a gentle hand to her shoulder and led her back to the desk, where he set the warm cup of tea into her hands. He waited for a time, as she took a few sips to steady herself.

"It is very dangerous in here," Elias told her finally. "But you know that. I have told you... and you believe me, I am sure." He searched her downcast face. "Are you... afraid of something worse?"

Abigail looked up at him abruptly. There were tears in her blue eyes, though she tried to hold them back. "I couldn't do anything when Lord Hollowvale came for us," she said. "There's all sorts of faeries out there, an' I still can't fight any of 'em."

Elias closed his eyes. The dread in Abigail's voice struck at something old and fearful inside of him—and for just a moment, he was young and alone again, sitting on the doorstep of the Whithering House.

Shame soon followed fear; Elias opened his eyes again, staring down at her. "You are right to be afraid," he said softly. "There are terrible things in



this world, and they have found you before. I will always protect you from them when I can. But I am not always with you, am I?”

Abigail’s lip wobbled dangerously, and Elias knew that his words had hit the mark. He took Abigail’s tea from her again—and though the instinct did not come naturally to him, he wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly.

Abigail sniffled into his chest. It was clear that she didn’t *want* Elias to see her cry, which bothered him somewhat more. But she held onto him and hid her face for a time, shivering against him.

*I have been blind, just like my father,* Elias thought wearily. *I was so convinced that I knew best. But I was seeing the world through my own eyes, and not through hers.*

“I should have asked you these things sooner,” Elias murmured. “But I am asking them now, at least.” He lifted Abigail’s chin so that he could look into her reddened eyes. “This study is still very dangerous, Abigail. But I can show you what dangers to avoid here, if you are willing to listen. And...” He hesitated. “I am not a very good teacher. But I will try to teach you magic nonetheless, if you wish it.”

Abigail widened her eyes at the offer. It was clear that she hadn’t expected anything of the sort—but the hope that blossomed in her expression was so poignant that Elias suspected he had finally found the proper words to say.

“I’ll behave,” she swore. “I’ll only touch what you tell me to, I promise. An’ I’ll be the best student you ever had, no matter how hard it is.”

Elias smiled wryly. “You will be the *only* student I ever had,” he corrected her. “And that is why you will have to temper your own expectations. But I suppose we will figure something out together.” He picked her up and settled her into the large leather chair at the desk. “Have some tea, and we will talk of faeries.”

Abigail took her teacup again, now looking hard and determined. “We’ll talk about faeries,” she said, “an’ how to kill ‘em?”

Elias inclined his head. “And how to kill them,” he agreed.



ABIGAIL ENDED up staying at the House late into the night, as Elias familiarised her with the study. Their conversation was all very awkward, for the most part—but it came with a strange sort of relief, as well. For every time Elias told Abigail something new about faeries and magic, he saw the fear in her features lessen just a little bit more.

Eventually, however, the little girl tired—and the next time Elias turned around, he found her fast asleep in the leather chair.

There was nothing for it, of course; Elias asked the housekeeper to make up a bed for Abigail in the House. He carried Abigail there himself, as she slept against his shoulder—and for a moment, he was reminded of the first time that he had carried her away from the workhouses, when she had been sick and thin and worn.

The memory sent a pang through him; and though Elias was not very *good* at being a father, he knew then that he was one, all the same.

“I will be terrible at this,” he advised the sleeping girl, as he tucked the covers around her. “But I will try my best.”

“Terrible at what?” Dora’s voice sounded behind him, in the doorway of the small guest room. Elias turned and saw her there, watching him and Abigail with a soft expression on her features.

“I told you,” Elias said softly. “I am not meant to be a father, Dora.”

Dora smiled distantly at him. The glimmering star on the wedding ring that he had given her played upon her face in the darkness—and Elias thought once again that he must have married the kindest and most wonderful woman in the world.

“You are right to be afraid,” Dora told him. “It is a great responsibility, and the consequences of failure are quite awful. But you have always been so clever, Elias. Once you set your mind to this, I know that you will learn it well. And I am so pleased that you have decided to try.” She padded across the bedroom floor to close her arms around him—and Elias let out a breath of unutterable relief against her.

“I don’t want to become my father, Dora,” Elias whispered. “It is my very greatest fear.”

Dora reached up to cup his cheek. Her hand was warm and comforting

—and somehow, even his deepest, darkest fears lost their power against her touch.

“I cannot see that you are anything like him,” Dora said. “But you are not alone, Elias. If that is what you fear, then I will help you to avoid it.”

Elias smiled down at her. “You are always so sensible, darling,” he murmured. “It does make me feel better.”

He held her for a long while, in the darkness of the House. But eventually, when he had regained his strength, Elias climbed the stairs to his study. Once there, he pulled the old, bulky key from his coat pocket and returned it to its place in the desk drawer.

This time, when he returned downstairs, he left the door unlocked.

## CHAPTER 6



Lord Swiftburn left again the very next morning, just as Elias had supposed that he would.

“I have solved the issue, certainly,” the faerie said, as he locked the front door of the Whithering House. “I will turn myself into one of the farmer’s children! I will be utterly lazy and indolent, and he will surely raise his hand to me!”

“I think that is a very good plan,” Elias said quietly. He spared a single sympathetic thought for the English farmer, who had really done nothing wrong at all—but Elias’s own survival was too pressing for him to dwell upon the poor man for too long. “Perhaps I could come with you to England this time, Father?” Elias asked. “If you don’t wish for me to help you, I can stand out of the way and hide.”

Lord Swiftburn shook his head. “Children are disobedient by nature,” he said. “I do not trust you in the least, Elias. You will stay here until I return. And so you understand—I have blocked up the chimney entirely. You will not be sneaking into the Whithering House *this* time!”

Elias slumped his shoulders. “Yes, Father,” he mumbled.

As Elias sat on the front step, watching his father’s retreating back, he wondered whether he should hope for the farmer to be cruel this time. If the farmer *was* cruel, then Lord Swiftburn would quickly punish him—and

then, perhaps the faerie would return before another fire could start within his realm.

But Elias did not want the farmer to be cruel, he realised. The idea that there were creatures out there who showed mercy for no reason had comforted him greatly. England had become to him a sort of mythical land full of possible kindnesses, and he desperately wanted it to remain that way.

Besides which, Elias thought, he did not dare to risk his life by assuming that the situation between his father and the farmer would fall out one way or another. Elias had to find a way to survive Swiftburn—for no one else was likely to help him do so.

Elias rose to his feet, casting a wary glance towards the storm in the distance. He took only a moment to brush the soot from his trousers—and then, he turned to consider the Whithering House.

Elias tried each of the windows first of all—but alas, Lord Swiftburn had locked every one of them, just as before. He climbed his way next to the roof to look down the chimney again—but even from the top, he could tell that the flue had been closed.

Thunder rumbled warningly in the distance. From his place on the roof, Elias saw a crackle of light. For a moment, he dared to hope that nothing had caught fire... but even as he watched, an ominous ember glow began in the distance at the far edge of the forest.

Panic flooded through his veins as he watched the fire grow closer. In the wake of that encroaching death, his mind went blank and all of his cleverness fled.

*I am going to die this time, Elias thought. There is nothing that I can do.*

As he looked out over the horizon, however, Lord Longshadow's words came back to him: *"If you can gain Swiftburn's favour, then no door here will ever be locked to you,"* he had said.

Elias climbed back down the side of the Whithering House to stand before the front door. Though he had watched Lord Swiftburn lock the door himself, he tugged at the handle regardless, hoping beyond hope that Swiftburn might take mercy upon him.

"Please let me in," Elias begged aloud. "I haven't ever done anything to

hurt you. Haven't I behaved well? Haven't I stayed quiet and out of the way?"

Nothing and no one responded to his pleas. The door remained solidly locked, no matter how he pulled at it.

The fire had swept across the forest. It licked now at the bottom of the hill, where it began to slow its pace. There was less upon the hill for the fire to burn... but it would make its way eventually to the Whithering House, all the same.

The fear that choked at Elias's throat was so intense now that he found it difficult to speak. Even at the top of the hill, he felt the terrible heat against his skin.

But slowly—ever so slowly—that fear began to change. In the face of his own certain death, Elias discovered that there was a terrible fury somewhere beneath the panic.

"I've done *nothing* to deserve this!" he yelled at the door. "I never asked to come here! I never asked to be housed or fed or fathered! If I could, I'd rather go and starve in England instead of being trapped here!"

He slammed his fists upon the door—not because he thought he might be able to open it, but because he needed to prove just how angry and hateful he was feeling in some small way.

"I hate you!" Elias shouted at Swiftburn. The words tore their way from his throat, wild and fierce. "I hate you, and I hate Lord Swiftburn! I would burn you both to bits if I could, except that I wouldn't let you ever grow back again—"

The fire had climbed now to the top of the hill. It danced its way towards him in golden-red arcs, every bit as beautiful as it was deadly. Sparks blew across the wind, up into his eyes. Heat burned upon his face.

But the hatred in Elias's heart had grown and grown the more that he shouted. That hatred was hotter than the fire, more terrible than the storm. It surged within him, clawing its way from his body—and suddenly, the fire that licked at his limbs ceased to burn. Instead, it fed the anger inside of him until he *was* the fire, until he could feel nothing but the desire to destroy the things which had so badly injured him.

Elias turned his attention upon the soot-stained Whithering House,

which even now resisted the firestorm that surrounded it. *I despise this place entirely*, he thought. *Why should it stand there safely while I burn?*

The world around him thrummed in mindless agreement. Power flooded up through his feet, spilling over with his fury. Elias directed it all towards the terrible house in front of him.

And the Whithering House began to burn.

The impenetrable stones caught fire. The soot-stained windows cracked and popped. The chimney tottered and fell.

And finally—even as Elias watched with dark satisfaction—the front door turned to blackened embers.

The fire swept across the hill, cleansing it of everything that stood atop it. Eventually, however, it passed to the forests beyond and left Elias behind—alive and shaking, with a sudden sickness in his stomach.

Where once the Whithering House had once stood, only charred foundations now remained.

## CHAPTER 7



Though the forests and the grasses in Swiftburn eventually regrew, the Withering House remained an empty ruin.

Elias knew in his heart that his father would never forgive him—that it would be better if he was very far away when Lord Swiftburn finally returned. But he was tired and defeated, and he had nowhere else to go. As such, when Lord Swiftburn finally returned a full day later, he discovered Elias sitting on the charred front step of the Withering House.

“What is this?” Lord Swiftburn demanded, as he strode his way up the hill. His golden eyes were furious as they took in the scope of the destruction before him. “You awful creature! I knew I could not leave you here alone, not even for a moment!”

Elias wanted to be angry at his father, as he had been in the heat of the fire—but as he looked into the faerie’s darkened face, all he could feel was emptiness.

“I’m sorry, Father,” he said softly. “I didn’t mean to do it.”

“Hah!” Lord Swiftburn spat. “If I were an English farmer, then perhaps I would embrace you and ask what was the matter. Perhaps I would be so *infuriatingly* kind to you that you were obliged to chase a storm away from my crops!” His eyes narrowed dangerously. “But I am no English farmer,



boy. I am a proper faerie father, and you will *fear* me properly. I will not have you talking to my realm behind my back!”

Lord Swiftburn’s gaze glowed with a familiar fire as he looked down at Elias. Slowly, that fire began to engulf him until he was a blazing inferno atop the hill, blocking out all sight of anything else.

There remained, however, a spark of something terrible in Elias’s chest—an ember that had not quite gone out. And as Elias realised that his father truly meant to kill him this time, he felt that ember fan to a fresh new flame.

“It may be true that you are my father, and you can tell me what to do,” Elias said calmly. “But you cannot give orders to Swiftburn. It is your master, Father, and it will do as it pleases.”

Heat surged through Elias’s body, as though to confirm the words. The inferno in his soul became hot and hungry, even as the flames that danced around Lord Swiftburn began to flicker and die. Fire licked along Elias’s hands, growing hotter and higher by the second.

*Everything in Swiftburn must burn eventually*, Elias thought. *Even you must burn*. It was not entirely his own thought—it belonged instead to the fire in his veins and the ashes at his feet. But it was hateful and certain, and it gave him the strength to reach for his father with the power that he had been given.

Lord Swiftburn had only a moment to realise how badly he had erred. His burning reddish-gold eyes flashed with shock and fear. In the next instant, Elias’s fire engulfed him.

There was a sharp, awful scream which seemed to go on and on. Lord Swiftburn’s voice rang oddly in Elias’s ears, as though from very far away.

When the voice finally died away, so too did the flames.

All that remained before Elias was a fine white pile of ash... and a fire-blackened latch key.

As the heat in Elias’s soul retreated back to its tiny ember and he understood just what he had done, he fell to his knees and wept.



LORD LONGSHADOW FOUND Elias still on his knees before the ruins of the Whithering House.

“Alas,” said Lord Longshadow. “Swiftburn has chosen a new lord.”

Elias looked up at the dark faerie blankly. “I don’t understand,” he rasped.

“You have impressed the realm too much,” said the dark faerie. “Whatever quality your father had which attracted Swiftburn, you must have that quality in even greater measure.”

Elias closed his eyes. “I am so angry, and so hateful,” he whispered. “Is that really what Swiftburn desires from its lord?”

Lord Longshadow considered this seriously. “It may well be that,” he said. “Your father must have raised you well, to make you even more of what he was.”

Elias pressed his face into his hands. “I don’t want to be lord of Swiftburn,” he cried. “I don’t want to be like my father.”

Lord Longshadow was silent for a very long while. When he spoke again, his voice was soft. “The realm has offered you its lordship,” he said, “but you are free to decline the honour.” He paused. “It will be difficult for you either way, mortal. You do not belong here in faerie, and you never have done. But you know nothing of your real home, and it may prove to be even more foreign than the cinders beneath your feet.”

Elias dropped his hands, still shivering in misery and self-loathing. His eyes caught upon the latch key, and he swallowed down a fresh surge of confused emotion.

“My real home,” he whispered. “Do I belong in England?”

Lord Longshadow tilted his head in a birdlike manner. “Truthfully,” he said, “I do not know. Perhaps Lord Swiftburn abducted you from England. Or perhaps you were his child by a mortal woman. Either way, you are mostly mortal, but for the spark of Swiftburn that now burns within you.”

Elias looked up at the faerie. “I don’t want to be like my father,” he repeated hoarsely. “I want to go to the land where people are kind for no reason at all.”

Lord Longshadow nodded slowly. “I can take you to England, if that is your desire,” he said.

“It is,” Elias whispered. “I want nothing more to do with this place.” He hesitated. “I want to become something very different from my father. As different as I can possibly be.”

“Because you are mortal,” said Lord Longshadow, “you may become whatever you wish.” The faerie offered out one pale hand to Elias, who reached up to take it.

Elias rose to his feet beside the faerie, still gripping his arm. And Lord Longshadow led him down the hill from the ruins of the Whithering House, where the latch key lay untouched in the ashes.



## AFTERWORD

My personal definition of a villain is someone who has power over others and who chooses to use that power to people's detriment. This, I think, is why adults can so easily become villains to their children—even when they earnestly desire to be the opposite.

Elias is right to fear being a father, in that respect. But, unlike his own father, Elias understands what it is like to be helpless, and he knows how much power he wields over his children. In the end, Elias Wilder avoids becoming a villain because he is willing to see the world from Abigail's point of view, rather than insisting that he always knows best. I try, as much as I can, to keep that in mind for myself.

As always, I would like to thank my wonderful husband and my dedicated alpha readers, Laura Elizabeth and Julie Golick, for their help with this story. I also owe thanks to my editor and historical nitpicker, Tamlin Thomas, and to Sophie Ricard, for lending me her grammatically perfect French once more.

Though Elias and Dora's story is mostly complete, I hope that you will enjoy seeing them once again in *Longshadow* (Book 3 of the Regency Faerie Tales) when Abigail and Lord Longshadow later cross paths.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Olivia Atwater** writes whimsical historical fantasy with a hint of satire. She lives in Montreal, Quebec with her fantastic, prose-inspiring husband and her two cats. When she told her second-grade history teacher that she wanted to work with history someday, she is fairly certain this isn't what either party had in mind. She has been, at various times, a historical re-enactor, a professional witch at a metaphysical supply store, a web developer, and a vending machine repairperson.



Want more Regency faerie tales? I send out writing updates and neat historical facts in the Atwater Scandal Sheets. Subscribers also get early access to chapters from each book, before anyone else!

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