

THE WITCHWOOD KNOT

SECOND EPILOGUE

VICTORIAN FAERIE TALES

BOOK ONE



OLIVIA ATWATER



STARWATCH
PRESS

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SECOND EPILOGUE



Never before had Winnie owned so many gowns that she needed to deliberate between them.

As it turned out, however, her inheritance from the dowager had not been a *single* gown—rather, the woman had left Winnie every single item of clothing from her considerable wardrobe. Though much of it was old and out-of-date, it was all in such pristine condition that it could have fetched a small fortune.

Winnie combed through the gowns and slippers and wrappers draped across her bed, feeling oddly numb. The dowager's funeral had been only a few days prior. Somehow, everything that had happened since her arrival at Witchwood Manor felt like one long, terrible dream.

In a way, of course, that was exactly what it *had* been. But one of these days, Winnie thought, she was going to need to wake up.

The light from her stained glass window caught upon silver thread and tiny sewn-on pearls, among the silk and muslin and velvet. Her hand lingered at the collar of a dark

red tea gown, embroidered with lush white lilies. A tiny spark of childish greed which she had once thought smothered flickered back to life, pushing back the dull feeling in her chest, as she pulled the gown from the bed and dressed herself for the morning.

The fit was a bit tight in certain places, and far too loose in others. But tea gowns were forgiving, and overall, it made for a pleasing, somewhat decadent silhouette.

Winnie gestured towards the skull on the fireplace mantle with one long, dangling sleeve. “What do you think, Ollie?” she asked. “Shall we keep this one?”

Yellow light winked within one of the skull’s eye sockets. Winnie’s lips curved upward. Oliver probably approved of the gown’s long train, which dragged along the floor behind her. It was perfect, she thought, for a ghostly cat to chase down the hallway.

“As you like,” Winnie said. “I shall dub you the final authority on the matter.”

The gown’s train *was* a bit unwieldy on the stairs, as she headed down for breakfast. But it did make for a terribly dramatic descent.

Her stomach clenched briefly as she headed into the dining room. Part of her still expected to see Lord Longfell sitting at the head of the table—but of course, he was not there. Instead, Robert had settled himself in his father’s place, looking out over his kippers with his best attempt at a haughty air.

“Good morning, Miss Hall,” the boy greeted Winnie. He gestured magnanimously towards another chair. “Won’t you join me for breakfast?”

Winnie grabbed a small plate of food, before settling into

her chair with an arched eyebrow. “Are we being formal now, Your Lordship?” she asked. “I hadn’t realised.”

Robert wrinkled his nose. “I feel like ‘Your Lordship’ *ought* to sound more respectful,” he complained. “You’re not saying it correctly.”

“Perhaps I’ll get better at it,” Winnie said blithely. “Besides—you’re not a lord *yet*. People are still searching for your father. I expect they’ll continue doing so for some time before they give up the matter.”

Robert’s gaze fell back to his plate in silence. Winnie had not minced words with him over the last few days; they talked quite frankly of the situation, so long as they were alone. To his credit, Robert had handled everything with more resilience than Winnie might have expected.

“Your cousins spent the entire funeral circling like vultures,” she added, in order to change the subject. “We’ll have to run a few of them off, I expect.”

Robert speared at one of his kippers with a displeased grumble. “I suppose it’s a good thing everyone knows this place is haunted,” he muttered.

Winnie smiled faintly. “More haunted than ever, in certain respects,” she agreed. “But at least you can keep servants, now.”

Robert dared to look up at her. “When are your sisters coming?” he asked abruptly. It was a question which he had asked several times now, every day since the funeral. His experience with Lady Mourningwood had left him shaken, and the idea of having two more magicians at the manor had greatly appealed to him.

“I have yet to receive any letters from them,” Winnie said. She tried to keep her voice calm—but her own anxiety was slowly starting to get the better of her. The cards had warned

her that going to retrieve Clarimonde from London herself would result in disaster... but surely, Mrs Lowe had managed to get word to her by now?

Bellamira, at least, was probably still abed—if Hugh had any control of her at all. On that point, Winnie admitted to herself, she was more than a little bit doubtful.

“Soon, though?” Robert prompted her uneasily.

“Soon,” Winnie told him. She hoped the answer was true.



MID-DAY FOUND Winnie in the conservatory, fretting over cards again.

The previous morning, she had cleaned the room from top to bottom in a sudden fit of nerves. The stained glass roses were still dirty, and dust lingered in the air—but it was somewhat less claustrophobic than it had been before, with all of its musty Holland covers hanging about.

Faerie cards sprawled across the table before her, shimmering faintly in the sunlight. After the funeral, Winnie had asked Mr Quincy to borrow his cards; since then, he had conveniently forgotten to ask for them back, over and over again. Given the frequency with which he had remained distracted lately by affairs in the Mourningwood, Winnie found the deck to be something of a comfort... even when it told her such unnerving things about the future.

Again this morning, she had drawn a card with a deep red rose in full bloom, adorned with wicked-looking thorns—the Beast of Desires, which signified a terrible, overwhelming temptation. The Beast lay just next to a card which depicted a bloody, blinded woman, tangled within a briar—the Mendi-

cant of Desires, which Winnie had come to associate with Clarimonde.

“I know that card,” Mr Quincy murmured, just behind her. “It was on the table yesterday, wasn’t it?”

A small bit of the tension that had grown between Winnie’s shoulders relaxed at his appearance. She turned her head to glance up at him, where he leaned over the back of her chair. Though he still wore his crimson jacket, there was a deeper gravitas now to the shadows which pooled around him. His red eyes were darker than usual against the clear sunlight of the afternoon.

“They are both court cards,” Winnie told him quietly, “which means that they most likely represent specific people. The Mendicant of Desires is Clarimonde. I don’t know who the other card represents... but the Beasts are rarely a positive sign in a reading.”

Mr Quincy’s lips twisted with worry. Somehow, he had managed to send off his sister without raising her suspicions about where his ultimate loyalties might lie. But Clarimonde and Bellamira were both possible weak spots in his deception; if either of Winnie’s sisters was identified as a mortal magician and captured by Secundus, their connection to Winnie would eventually lead, in turn, to *him*.

Abruptly, Winnie remembered to feel anxious for Mr Quincy, as well as for Clarimonde. The fact that he could not die was meaningless—in fact, if his dark siblings ever *did* discover his betrayal, it only meant that his torment would be endless. The idea left a cold, uncomfortable knot in her stomach.

“We will find our way through this,” Mr Quincy told her softly. “We are clever enough between us, I should think.” He reached down to brush the hair back from Winnie’s eyes as

she looked up at him. Belatedly, he froze in place, as though just realising that he had touched her.

Winnie pressed her palm atop his hand, before he could remove it. His skin was still faintly cool against her warmth. His missing index finger was noticeable; though his hand no longer bled, she knew that he would spend the rest of his immortal life aware of the finger's absence.

"I am sorry for what you have lost," she murmured to him. Winnie traced her thumb along the back of his hand, as though she could soothe the injury away.

Mr Quincy smiled oddly. "I am not sorry," he said. "It was the first real choice that I have made in years. Whatever else happens... it reminds me that I belong to myself."

Winnie slowly let her hand drop again... but as Mr Quincy started to draw back, she raised an eyebrow at him. "I did implore you to touch me more," she told him, with a faint smile. "I may be a liar, Mr Quincy... but I did not lie about *that*."

It was strange indeed to see a hint of colour touch his pale skin. Mr Quincy's fingers trailed hesitantly along Winnie's cheek. Wine red eyes studied her with silent, breathless intensity, still wary of her reactions—but Winnie lifted her chin to arch her neck against his hand encouragingly. He swallowed ever so minutely, and a small, wicked thrill lanced through her. For all of his power, Winnie thought, there were ways in which Mr Quincy was very weak to her. The fact that she had no intention of using that weakness against him made the realisation somehow even more delicious.

He leaned down towards her, until his breath was on her lips. "I have been thinking on your lullaby," Mr Quincy murmured. "I have added another movement. I could teach it to you, while we discuss this further."

Winnie's smile curved into indolent satisfaction. She leaned up the last inch between them, brushing her lips against his as she spoke. "I would enjoy that greatly," she whispered back.

There was still a heady, forbidden pleasure between them as Winnie rose and drew him with her to the piano bench. No one, of course, was going to forbid her—Winnie was the master of her own choices, these days—but the idea that most of English society *and* faerie society would terribly disapprove of her interest in Mr Quincy tickled at her natural contrariness.

Winnie did not wait, this time, to settle herself within the circle of his arms. The scent of blood, which should have unnerved every natural instinct within her, had now become oddly comforting. Mr Quincy laid his cheek next to hers as he set his fingers upon the piano keys.

"I feel a brief departure would go well, just after the opening," he mused. "Something like this." He demonstrated a slight variation on the melody, which Winnie slowly copied. Once she had practised the measure a few times, he said: "There is someone who might go retrieve your sister, even if Secundus has her under close watch. I would need your help convincing him. For some strange reason, faeries do not trust me."

Winnie frowned slowly. "Thus far," she said, "my record of convincing faeries to do *anything* is poor. But I am willing to try." She added an absent trill to the new melody, and felt him smile against her. "I am curious just whom you have in mind. He must be special indeed, if you believe that he can steal a magician while Secundus watches on."

"One could certainly call him 'special,'" Mr Quincy muttered. "That is... a word that one might use. Apart from

‘arrogant’, and ‘clever’, and ‘insufferable.’” He moved Winnie’s right hand gently down the length of the pianoforte. She quickly caught his implication, and repeated the new melody in a higher key.

“I would be more concerned if those words did not describe nearly all of the faeries that I have ever met,” Winnie said dryly. “He is capable, though?”

Mr Quincy made a vague noise of agreement. “I had been thinking that he would be a good ally, regardless,” he said. “Hollowvale has had many rulers, you see—not all of them perished before vacating the position. This one stepped down, though I admit I don’t know why. He calls himself Lord Foxglove... though these days, he is truly lord of nothing.”

Winnie paused her fingers over the piano keys. “I believe we are in luck, Mr Quincy,” she said softly. “I know Lord Foxglove, at least in passing. He can indeed be insufferable company... but he will speak with me, at least, if you can tell me where to find him.”

“You will not need to look very far at all,” Mr Quincy told her, with a hint of acid. “Lord Foxglove wanders often through faerie, imposing himself as a guest on those whom he can swindle into it. He was a guest in the Mourningwood when Secundus engineered the Witchwood Knot.”

Winnie straightened slightly against him. “You mean that he’s been here this *entire* time?” she asked.

“Oh yes,” said Mr Quincy. “He is a *most* demanding guest.”

Winnie narrowed her eyes down at the piano keys, where their hands still lingered. “And was he, perchance, present in the conservatory when I was dragged into that charming game of Hot Cockles?”

“Do you know,” Mr Quincy said lightly, “I believe that he was.”

Winnie smiled sharply. “Perhaps Your Lordship would re-introduce us?” she asked. “It’s been so long since we had tea.”

Mr Quincy laughed darkly. His warm breath tickled against the back of Winnie’s neck. “I do believe that it would be my pleasure,” he said.



THE MOURNINGWOOD WAS in rare form by the time Mr Quincy led Winnie into the clearing where that throne of oak still loomed. Ghostly blue lanterns strung about the twisted trees illuminated every corner in writhing shadows. The empty black sky had gained a surprising sprinkling of stars, however, which reminded Winnie of the river she had crossed on her way to the weeping willow tree. A long ebony table had been set with delights both strange and mundane; wispy dreams about the size of a single nibble stacked high upon a silver platter, just next to a plate of suspiciously familiar-looking scones. A tea service sat at the centre of the table, from which Winnie caught the faintest scent of jasmine.

Only one pale figure sat at this broad table, lazily licking dreams from his graceful fingers. His long white hair draped over one shoulder like a tail; his waistcoat, woven from idle thoughts, gleamed silver in the starlight. Winnie might not have recognised him, except for his narrow, vulpine features and his arctic blue eyes... but then, Lord Foxglove was a puca, and prone to shifting his appearance on a whim.

Winnie walked up to the grand table with Mr Quincy, arm in arm, still trailing her dramatic tea gown behind her. Lord Foxglove glanced up as they approached, only half-interested in their presence... but some animalistic instinct must have

warned him of his danger, as he suddenly straightened and offered them both a second look.

“Lord Foxglove, isn’t it?” Winnie declared, with far too much brightness and enthusiasm. “Why... I didn’t even recognise you earlier, in the conservatory. Then again, I *was* somewhat distracted at the time.”

To his credit, Lord Foxglove did not hesitate with wariness—rather, he rose smoothly to his feet and offered her a pleasant smile in return. “My goodness!” he replied, in an equally astonished tone. “If it isn’t young Miss Winifred! You’ve grown so much since last we spoke.”

Winnie released Mr Quincy’s arm in order to pace closer to the faerie, eyeing him with a hint of coldness over her smile. “I suppose that you were *terribly* busy eating strychnine and drinking ambrosia when the other faeries started that lovely game with me. And when Lady Mourningwood tried to curse me.”

Lord Foxglove laughed cheerfully, as though she’d made a joke. “You had the matter well in hand, of course,” he said. His voice was soft and clear, entirely divorced from the slyness that Winnie knew he hid beneath it. “I would expect nothing less from Lady Hollowvale’s favourite student.” He offered her a jaunty bow, as though to commend her efforts.

“Oh yes,” Winnie assured him. She reached for the silver knife on her chatelaine, running her fingers idly along the hilt. “Lady Hollowvale taught me so *many* things, Lord Foxglove. She often advised me to remember my friends... and also my enemies.”

The pleasant smile fell away from Lord Foxglove’s face all at once. He straightened slowly, with a cold, alien expression. “You believe that you could harm me?” he said in a soft voice. “With a gift bestowed by Hollowvale, no less.”

“Hollowvale no longer recognises you as lord,” Winnie said. “But more importantly... I fear that I am not the only person you’ve insulted.” She glanced over the table where Lord Foxglove had been seated. “What a feast this is. But you had no right to eat it, did you?”

Lord Foxglove scoffed, even as he licked another finger. “I am a guest here,” he replied. “Is that not so?”

“Oh, you *were* a guest here,” Mr Quincy told him calmly. “But you were Lady Mourningwood’s guest, and not mine. I did not give you leave to sit at my table and eat my dreams, Lord Foxglove.”

This revelation startled a brief moment of genuine fear into the faerie’s glacial eyes. He glanced warily between Winnie and Mr Quincy, before he managed to swallow down the emotion and return to that incessant pleasantry. “That is... technically true,” he said. “I must offer my humblest apologies, Dread Tyrant of the Mourningwood.”

Mr Quincy’s jaw twitched slightly at the moniker. Though Winnie knew that he had been playing the role his brother expected, it could not possibly please him to be seen as the creature that had stepped through the mirror in the Witchwood Knot.

“I do not accept your apology,” Mr Quincy informed him flatly. “But I *will* accept a favour.”

Lord Foxglove went so still that for a moment, it was difficult to tell if he was breathing. Winnie knew what he was thinking—no reasonable faerie would relish the idea of owing a favour to one of the *fomóraig*.

Mr Quincy allowed him to stew in his discomfort for several seconds, before he turned his reddish eyes to Winnie. “And I, in turn, will gift that favour to Winifred. I am sure that she will use it wisely.”

Lord Foxglove's brow knitted at that unexpected turn of events. His delicate nose twitched as he began to speculate on the strange implications of this statement.

"Now, I invite you both to take tea with me," Mr Quincy said. "I suspect that we have much to discuss."

Winnie met the faerie's eyes evenly. "Consider somewhat longer this time, Your Lordship," she advised Lord Foxglove, "whether you would like to be my friend."



LONG AFTER THEIR conversation had ended, Winnie lingered in the Mourningwood, laying back upon the leaves with Mr Quincy. Stars still twinkled calmly through the skeletal branches of the trees, lending a certain beauty to the otherwise stark landscape.

"You added those?" she asked him distantly.

"I did," Mr Quincy murmured. "They're just another illusion... though I suppose that much of faerie could be called illusion." Finally, he had taken Winnie's reminder to heart and wound his arm around her shoulders, so that she could lay her cheek against his chest.

"I like them, all the same," Winnie mumbled against him. "They're... peaceful."

"I required a shred of peace," said Mr Quincy. "I'm glad to share it with you." His hand drifted hesitantly to her hair, and Winnie sighed with pleasure, burrowing her face against his neck. His fingers stroked there slowly, and her eyes fluttered closed.

Winnie had enjoyed the heat of his touch before—but this was a new and entirely different sensation. This touch was calming and serene, with a hint of soft affection. She couldn't

remember ever having felt something like it before. The closest thing she could remember was a memory of Bellamira sitting behind her, brushing out her hair.

None of this, she thought, was love. It was the very beginning of love, however. She found herself surprised that she could even recognise it.

They were allied, of course, and Winnie had gained a deep respect and empathy for Mr Quincy which she believed he'd offered in return. Certainly, she had decided that she enjoyed his touch. But this elusive, gentle stirring within her heart was something altogether different... and she intended to savour every moment of its growth.

"That is lovely," Winnie mumbled sleepily. "All of this is... lovely."

Though her eyes were closed, she knew somehow that she had drawn a smile from him.

At some point—she wasn't quite sure when—Winnie lost all awareness of anything other than his cool fingers in her hair and his chest rising and falling beneath her. When she came back to herself, she found herself in bed, as the sun rose and Margaret swept the ashes from the fireplace. This time, she woke with a smile on her lips and autumn leaves still tangled in her hair.

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.



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<https://oliviaatwater.com>

info@oliviaatwater.com



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