

## In the Maiden's Name

"CALEB!"

All heads turned towards the kitchen. Although no customers were in the restaurant, there were plenty of waiters around to hear Manager David yelling. Looks were exchanged as the staff wondered amongst themselves what had been done this time. Some wore looks of guilty pleasure, others of annoyance. No one moved save for a light-haired man who practically bounced into the kitchen.

"You rang?" Caleb chimed to his employer. The gruff man was, along with a very annoyed chef, standing next to an industrial dishwasher.

"Would you mind explaining this?" David hissed with a forced calm that did nothing to help the vein in his forehead. He gestured brusquely to the open dishwasher. Caleb looked inside. The normally pristine white plates and cups were now awash with reds, greens, blues, yellows, and purples in an eclectic technicolour display.

Caleb rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Hippie explosion?" he offered.

"Must we go through this every time?" David sighed forcefully. "You're the only one here dumb enough to pull something this, so out with it."

A grin. "Aw, don't be like that! It's just a bit of dye mixed into the detergent! Nothing a little elbow grease won't fix!"

The chef began ranting something in French. David cut him off. "I know, I know! Look, Caleb, the only reason you're still here is because you can diffuse angry customers and bring in good tips. But I'm not going to let you treat my restaurant like a playground! So you are staying after hours and will clean—*by hand*—every one of these plates."

Caleb mulled it over. "Well, I could do that... but what's in it for me?"

The vein pulsed. "What's in it for you? How about not being fired!?"

"Yea... see... this job's gotten kind of dull." Caleb explained as he scratched the back of his head. "I mean, I essentially just spray-painted the dishes and it still isn't satisfying. So I think I'm gonna treat this as a sign to take my leave. Enjoy!"

He slipped out of the kitchen before either David or the chef could react.

"Oh, one last thing before I forget." Caleb said as he stuck his head back into the kitchen. "Davey, when you make that face? You look like a pineapple. Juuuust a little bit. Ta!"

Caleb's former co-workers—whether because they overheard the conversation or were piecing it together from the bilingual shouts now coming from the kitchen—stared as he left. With a final look back and a tip of an imaginary hat, Caleb walked departed.

Out on the street, he burst into laughter. That had rocked! His best work yet! Caleb's grin widened as he stripped off his nametag and threw it into a nearby dumpster before setting off down the street. The look on David's face had been priceless. True, the pineapple jab might have been pushing, but it was worth it to see the vein turn purple. Besides, his prank hadn't caused any *lasting* damage. A few good scrubs would clean those plates right up, and it wasn't as if he dyed them during a lunch rush.

Caleb sighed contentedly as he considered what to do with the rest of his day. It was too early to go grab dinner, and all of his friends were still working. A few moments' contemplation came up with the obvious answer: go to a bar. Getting drunk always made things interesting or, better yet, getting somebody *else* drunk! That was much more entertaining! There were a number of bars to choose from, so Caleb let his feet decide and wandered through the city until finding himself next to an unassuming tavern named *The Nibbler*.

"Hullo, peoples!" he exclaimed upon entering. Scattered voices mumbled 'hello' back. Sweeping the booths for a likely prospect, Caleb made his way to the bar and took a—**\*whump\***

He fell straight to the ground. Annoyed but intrigued that someone had pulled his seat out from under him, Caleb looked around for the culprit. What he found was that not only was his own seat gone, so was every other chair, stool, and booth, along with the bar and basically the entire building. Instead of a moderately-filled tavern, Caleb was now in an extremely lavish sitting room. Crystal-studded lamps bathed the room in a rich light that highlighted the ornate carvings of a nearby coffee table and windowsills, along with an embroidered couch that he suspected was gold-inlaid. The only conclusion for the scenery change was that this was the morning after of an extremely alcohol-fuelled adventure. One that had blitzed his memory of everything from after he entered the bar. As he got to his feet, Caleb wryly noted that he had either enjoyed a very lucky night on the town, or committed several felonies.

Caleb stroked the hairs on his chin in thought as he tried to recall what had happened after he entered the bar. Then he remembered that his chin didn't *have* any hair. He checked again. Sure enough, there was something fuzzy on his chin, and he could feel it spreading. Intrigued by this development, Caleb felt the fuzz grow out into soft hair as it covered more of his face. His nose grew cold as what he now suspected was fur came nearer, and Caleb felt his face push out into a canine muzzle. Fascinated, he felt along his new teeth, paying little attention as his ears peaked and moved upwards.

"Interesting..." he mused out loud. His voice was mostly the same, but had what could best be described as a 'ruff' quality. The reason for this nonchalance was simple: an alcohol-induced dream had just become a far better explanation for Caleb's situation than a drunken aftermath. Instead of panicking uselessly at his own imagination, Caleb found it far better to go along with its machinations. Besides, he rarely got a chance to lucid dream, so such a vivid experience was too good to pass up.

The fur continued to move down his neck and onto his chest. Caleb pulled his shirt off and threw it aside so he could get a proper look. Slightly cream-coloured along his front, the fur turned to a dusted brown as it spread out across his arms. Leathery pads blossomed on his palm and fingertips even as the digits shrank in slightly and his pinkies vanished entirely.

Caleb's tongue lolled out absently as he felt the texture of his new paw-hands, clenching and unclenching each in turn. He was so distracted that he forgot about the fur moving downwards and coating his legs. It wasn't until Caleb felt a pressure in his shoes that he realized what was happening. The stretched seams made them difficult to remove, but it was soon accomplished. His feet had

lengthened and looked much more like the limbs of an animal than his hands did, but at least they weren't cramped up anymore. Caleb balanced on the balls of his feet as he enjoyed the clicking of his claws on the marble floor. Almost as an afterthought, he pulled down the back of his pants to make room for the inevitable tail that flowed outwards.

"Well this is new." He mused as he felt along his changed body. There were no mirrors but the table was polished enough to let Caleb get a good look at himself. It was fascinating to see the human-canine reflection follow his movements. As for species, Caleb's first thought was some breed of wolf; but the bushy tail and overall sleekness of his frame, combined with vague memories of the Discovery Channel, identified himself as a coyote. Definitely interesting.

"How did you get in here?" a nearby voice exclaimed. Caleb spun to see a frail-looking woman standing in the doorway wearing a confused expression.

"I should ask you the same thing!" Caleb countered with a voice of authority. "My name is Caleb and this is my residence, I demand you identify yourself!" It was a silly joke, but had set itself up too perfectly.

The woman was successfully flabbergasted. "Wha? Your? No this is—" She shook her head. "You may address me as Maiden and this is *my* home. Now please answer the question."

Caleb tried to give an answer. He really did; but somehow 'I got smashed and woke up here' didn't seem satisfactory, and 'I'm dreaming and you're a figment of my mind' was just plain rude. Various stories about chasing lost pets or undercover detective work were quickly considered and discarded. It didn't help matters that there was something... *off* about this woman he couldn't put his finger on.

"Wait," Maiden interjected between Caleb's mental gears. "You don't know, do you?"

"Umm... no?"

A sigh. "Well that is at least a partial explanation. We shall sit and I shall explain."

Maiden glided into the room and slid onto the couch. With a motion, she invited Caleb to join her. He complied, getting a proper look at Maiden as he sat down. In this better light, he realized that his initial assessment of her was incorrect. Maiden's hair and skin was pale-coloured and she had a wispy quality to her movements, but they were more suggestive of grace than frailty. A scent of fresh breeze and light perfume wafted around her and tickled Caleb's newly canine nose. If a sharp wind were to come along, Maiden gave the impression that she would not so much be blown away as glide along the air.

"You are," Maiden began, "within my estate, which is located in what is commonly referred to as The Dreaming. You are, to be blunt, in the realm of the fae. If wish to know how this happened, all I can say is that it simply does. Ever so rarely, a human like yourself just sort of 'falls through' and ends up here."

Caleb raised a brow. "You think I'm human? I have a fur coat that says otherwise."

Maiden fixed him with an amused look. "The Dreaming is a world of symbols. When humans arrive, they become something symbolic of themselves. Fae can't shapeshift in the Dreaming, and none of us look like animals. This means that when an upright coyote mysteriously appears in my house, there is only one explanation."

Caleb nodded politely at the woman's logic. It made *enough* sense, which was probably the best he could expect for now.

"While here," continued Maiden, "you may enjoy a stable environment. Any area not under the control of a fae is prone to be...erratic. This is hazardous to your health."

As tempted as he was to force events past this exposition, Caleb decided against antagonizing his host. This dream was leading somewhere and it wouldn't be worth derailing things until he knew what the endgame was.

"So I have to stay here, then?" He asked.

Maiden inclined her head. "In a manner of speaking. I am an extremely important member of the Autumn Court and your presence here is a noticeable disruption, but I can permit you to stay if you agree to some degree of, ah, employment."

"You should be aware that I have a very interesting track record with my employers."

"I know. Fortunately I think my offer is more akin to your interests. There is a large social gathering I must host this evening. All I ask is that you attend and help entertain my guests."

"Entertain how?"

A bemused shrug. "With anything, I suppose. Humans are in style again, so simply appearing is bound to keep people fascinated."

Caleb's tail wagged eagerly. "Be a party guest in exchange for room and board? You have yourself a deal, good madam!"

Maiden gave a genteel smile as she got up. "Enjoy yourself until then. I am exceedingly busy but will retrieve you at the proper time."

Left alone in the room, Caleb quickly became bored. He wandered out of the sitting room, intent on exploring the rest of the house. This was more difficult than it first appeared, as Maiden's home seemed to lack any hallways. Whenever Caleb approached a door, there was simply an awareness of movement before finding himself in the next area. It was frustrating in terms of navigation, but not entirely unexpected in a dream.

The areas he was able to discover included a study, what looked like a dressing room, a small library, a pantry of sorts, and a bedroom. Whether these were all the rooms in the house or only those he had access to, Caleb couldn't tell. What he did notice was that every room was an extravagant display of finery. Jewelled drapes fluttered above rich carpets, bookshelves were made of vine-entwined wood, and portraits of surreal scenery and fantastic creatures hung from every wall. Caleb found the effect impressive, but somewhat unsettling to have every room basically yelling at him about how fancy they were. It did not help that every room was filled with the same scent of perfume and polish. As his nose burned from an unfortunately deep whiff, Caleb felt a great deal of pity for his grandmother's terrier.

Caleb was in the study perusing the bookshelves and trying to make sense of the strange writing when Maiden reappeared.

“Oooh, time already?” He asked with perked ears. “I can’t wait to see what a fae party is like! Anything special I should know?”

“Don’t speak unless spoken to, do not eat anything that is not offered, and keep in mind my standing at all times.”

“But of course.”

The world blurred as Caleb was overwhelmed with a sense of guided motion. His orientation returned when he found himself inside a room roughly the size of a small gymnasium. Tables and heavily-cushioned chairs lined the walls alongside stretches of food that Caleb couldn’t recognize. One to his immediate left was occupied by pudding cups holding what looked like crystallized egg salad, but gave off a rich aroma of pastry dough. Odd as this dream-food was, it still took a fair effort for Caleb to restrain from panting at the scent.

The guests looked human enough, but each had a feature or two that gave them a distinctly unearthly feel. One spindly-looking man had wings of ice folded on his back; another had hair that flowed like a kaleidoscope as he spoke animatedly with a woman with skin like tree bark. The party looked like it was already well underway, and Maiden quickly flowed into the crowd, greeting the guests and shaking hands. Caleb had mere seconds to himself before he was approached by a rotund gentleman with a moustache like a large door-knocker.

“Ho-ho!” The man bellowed jovially. “So, the buzzing is true, eh? A human attends the soiree?”

Caleb twitched an ear in gesture. “Not so human currently, but yea.”

A boisterous laugh. “Posh, that’s just the Dreaming doing as it always does. Fur, scales, or feathers, a human is a human. Fascinating little creatures you are, going through life in such a fixed world.”

“Things are boring when they stay the same. If something interesting doesn’t happen, then I make it happen.” Caleb replied with a smile. Explaining his philosophy to what was essentially his own mind seemed redundant, but conversation was conversation.

The man’s eyes widened. “A human of variety? How novel! I must offer my compliments to Maiden.”

“If you want to offer me praise, I’d be more than happy to take it directly.” Caleb chimed.

“Ho-ho! Perhaps I shall!” The man gave another booming laugh.

The rest of their conversation was something Caleb found strange but that the man—whose name turned out to be Nimiron—could not stop being astonished by. Evidently the idea of living in a world that had stable, physical laws was something most fae could not comprehend. The fact that humans had to even *build* things was incredibly foreign to the Dreaming’s inhabitants. Caleb found himself enjoying this constant expounding by Nimiron and the chiming in by other guests on how extraordinary they

found his life. Being the centre of attention was always fun, and the strange way these fae saw the world was most definitely interesting.

“...metal tubes that fly, that’s not true, is it?”

“... can’t make a meal without pulling it up from the ground? Extraordinary!”

“...what do you mean magicians can’t do magic?”

The ability to astound the crowd with basic facts and nuggets of trivia was a new experience for Caleb, and one he enjoyed thoroughly. Of course, the constant praise and occasional ear-scratch he received didn’t hurt things either. The night passed into a whirlwind of talk and laughter until eventually the last of the guests had departed, leaving Caleb alone with Maiden.

“You seem to have hit it off rather well.” Maiden mused later that evening.

“I hope so!” Caleb beamed. His tail had not stopped wagging for half the night and he couldn’t help but do a little spin on his footpaw.

Maiden clasped her hands together in joy. “Everything went better than I could have possibly hoped! Did you know that the Lake Duchess said she would tell her court all about you? I mean, that gossipy sprite would gush about hangnails if someone would listen, but still! And the Oak Earl wouldn’t know style if it pissed on his trees, but even he could tell you were something special!”

“I haven’t a clue who any of those people are. The only person who told me their name was Nimiron.”

“Ah, him.” Maiden laughed. “A man cursed with no sense of fashion—you should have seen what his moustache looked like *last* year. But he is one of the Autumn Duke’s most trusted advisors so his large grace must be respected.”

She slid onto the couch and beckoned for Caleb to join her. “When the guests weren’t talking with you, they were complimenting me about you. There’s something special in that, Caleb. In a single evening you’ve become the talk of the court. I’ve never seen something so astounding.” Caleb’s ears twitched at her words. Maiden’s voice was warm and soothing like a summer breeze. “It won’t be long before people want you to come as their own guests.”

“More parties?” Caleb’s asked as he took a seat. “I could get used to that kind of employment.”

“You may get your wish.” Maiden chimed as she scratched him behind the ears. Caleb’s tongue lolled out in a contented smile.

Word spread quickly amongst the fae that there was a human living with Maiden. By noon the next day, Caleb had received no less than fifty-three invitations to various parties, dinners, and at least two funerals.

“I’m certainly popular.” He grinned as he flipped through the pile. His claws clacked happily along the tile floor as he read each invitation.

“Yes, but that won’t last if you accept the wrong one.” Maiden mused as she looked through the letters. “Like this one, from the Orange Earl. No sense of decency and the definition of hedonism. No one goes near anything he does. You want only the best of the best. Accept the invitations of the most important members of the court, and ignore the social-climbers who just want you to make them look stylish.”

“Be a bit difficult since I don’t know who any of these people are.”

Maiden smiled as she rubbed Caleb’s head. His ears flushed red as her soothing perfume drew near. “That’s what I’m here for.”

In the end, Maiden had whittled down the fifty-three invites to only four. Of these she selected the offer of someone named the Rose Scholar, who was having an unveiling party for a new flower acquisition. The premise seemed incredibly dull, but the chance to entertain again made Caleb agree. Plus being able to liven-up a flower presentation was too good an opportunity to pass on. When the evening came, Caleb was whisked away again in a blur of motion and found himself alongside Maiden in a bizarre cross between a greenhouse and living room.

“Welcome! Welcome!” Exclaimed a surprisingly well-built man whose clothes looked like they were made of giant petals. “So glad you could make it, dear Maiden! And you have graced us with the human as well! Such good things I hear of him!”

“You dew us such honour.” Caleb chimed. “The second I saw your invitation I knew I couldn’t leaf it alone.”

The puns were obvious and stereotypical, but the Scholar and his guests burst out laughing nonetheless. Maiden’s pleased look was all the encouragement Caleb needed, so he continued.

“You are revealing a new flower, yes? A vine acquisition, I’m sure.”

More laughter set the tone for the evening. Caleb was once again the centre of attention as the plant-like appearance of each guest just fuelled his jokes. The Rose Scholar’s new flower was actually pretty interesting. The butterfly-shaped plant’s petals would open and close in response to nearby sounds, and Caleb had a great deal of fun making it undulate in time with a series of limericks. When he returned to Maiden’s estate that evening, his employer was positively ecstatic.

“...he couldn’t stop laughing even when you made that ‘stamen’ joke. I’ve never been more impressed!” She complimented with a voice like soft rain. “And he agreed to let me speak with the Earl of Thorns—do you know how long that normally takes? You must have magic in you somewhere, Caleb.”

His ears flushed at her words. “I do my work well. This arrangement is quite fun.”

Maiden indicated a new pile of invitations. “So why not let it continue?”

A new routine emerged from that point. By day, Caleb was offered free rein in Maiden’s estate. Most of this time was spent wandering the lavish halls or curling up on the couch to listen to Maiden gossip about the other fae. The smooth tiles and comforting perfume of the house was a constant, relaxing atmosphere. By night, it was off to the parties. Caleb would joke or tell stories to the guests of whatever event he was attending. Under any normal circumstance, even such self-gratifying routine would

become boring, but Caleb's interest was always held by the strange shapes of the fae guests or the bizarre locales the parties were held. To keep things interesting, Maiden suggested that he show some skills he learned on Earth, so Caleb also added juggling and a few magic tricks to his repertoire. The fae were fascinated that a human could be capable of such dexterity, or that Caleb's slight-of-hand could deceive their eyes. Caleb's popularity rose, and so did his dear Maiden's.

There was no clear point upon which Caleb realized that he was not, in fact, dreaming, and that he actually was a human-animal entertaining real fairies. There was just a gradual acceptance that the way things were was the way they would be. Or perhaps it was the realization that Maiden's pleased smile, sweet words, and the gentle way she scratched his ears were too wonderful to exist only within Caleb's mind. The greatest reward Caleb received from his work was Maiden's approval and trust. As increasing numbers of nobles requested his presence, Caleb knew it meant another favour or treasure they would owe Maiden.

This was not to say that Caleb had no responsibilities of his own in this arrangement. He had to maintain a proper appearance after all. As time passed, Caleb found himself having to brush his fur each day, for it had begun to grow scruffy. He had to take care while eating and drinking not to spill from his bowls, but this was only proper table manners. Or floor manners, at any rate, as Caleb found chairs too awkward to sit on with his canine body. Maiden didn't mind though. She was very accepting of his "symbolic eccentricities". The sight of his tongue lolling out as he smiled seemed to amuse her, which of course only made Caleb smile more. There was also no admonishment, for instance, in that time after the Whirling Lady's ball when an itch on his neck had caused Caleb to scratch with his foot. If anything, such behaviour only endeared him more to his host. He had earned Maiden's trust and affection, which she eventually commemorated by making him an official part of her household. This mainly meant getting a nametag in the shape of Maiden's personal crest, but Caleb still wagged his tail happily as she fastened it around his neck.

The new nametag jangled from Caleb's collar as he bounded through the expansive party-room. Maiden was finally hosting another party at her home—and the Autumn's Duke was going to be coming! Caleb had, of course, never met the Duke, but he knew from listening to Maiden that he was the head of her court. If Caleb impressed the Duke and got an invitation from him, then Maiden would be catapulted straight to the upper echelons of society! Normally, Caleb would be curled up in Maiden's lap as she told him all about the Duke and what to do to impress him, but she was currently out collecting the gems owed to her from when Caleb appeared at the Miner's housewarming. Left alone in the estate, Caleb couldn't think of anything to do except prepare for that night's entertainment. Juggling was always popular, so he got out his balls and began to practice. Caleb barked happily as he watched the balls sail up and down. Over the past few days, his hands had shrunk to be almost indistinguishable from paws, but Caleb's practice had ensured—much to Maiden's delight—that he could still perform unhindered. A smile broke across his muzzle as he imagined how impressed the Duke would be at his performance, and at how happy it would make Mai—

**\*bonk\***

Caleb's lapse in concentration had cost him a ball. It bounced off his head and rolled towards a door, flickering as it was transported to the next room. With another bark, Caleb bounded after the runaway on all fours. He followed the ball into the sitting room and spotted it nestled under the couch. Grumbling, Caleb squeezed underneath to get within reach. A strange silence fell over his senses as he pawed his way towards the ball. The musk and dust from beneath the couch had blocked the soothing

refinement of Maiden's perfume and her polished, opulent home. Hastened by this anxiety, Caleb seized the ball the moment he was close enough. As he turned away, however, something made him pause. A bundled, dark navy cloth behind the ball drew his eye. He grabbed that, too.

Once out from under the couch, Caleb unfolded the cloth. It took a moment to process what the object was, but he soon realized it was his shirt from when he first arrived in the Dreaming. Caleb had thrown it aside to watch himself change—it must have slid under the couch. He drew the shirt close and took in its smell. Most of the scent was from the dust that coated the shirt and, now, the tip of his muzzle, but there was something else there too. A sort of stingy smell, oily and sharp. It was a scent that Caleb would have turned his nose at were it not for the overwhelming nostalgia it evoked. He recalled his last day of work at the restaurant, his silly thought that Maiden's home part of a dream, and his first meeting with his gracious employer. Caleb's tail wagged happily as he remembered when Maiden offered him a chance to work for her.

*"You should be aware that I have a very interesting track record with my employers."*

*"I know. Fortunately I think my offer is more akin to your interests."*

Eh? Caleb rubbed his brow. Something was off about that. But he was remembering it correctly, he was sure of that. So what was wrong here?

*"I know"*

Knew what? That Caleb had left a trail of pranked and tricked employers? That wasn't so special—anyone who knew him would know that. But Maiden didn't know him—not then. She said that Caleb entering the Dreaming was a fluke. He never told her about his time on Earth. Caleb struggled to process the information; not because the answer was hard but because it was fogged just out of reach. He buried his muzzle in the shirt to let his old scent clear his head.

When the first realization came, the others locked into place. He hadn't thought it important at the time because he thought he was dreaming, but since this was all real, Maiden couldn't have known about his job history unless she'd spied on him beforehand. The chances of a human randomly walking into the Dreaming and ending up in the house of the very fae who was watching him was too remote to be accidental, which meant that Maiden had brought Caleb here intentionally. Her offer of employment wasn't altruistic—it was calculated. Humans were in style, and Maiden wanted to be popular. What better way to boost social standing than to have a human under your thumb with the guise of generosity?

The perfume in the air suddenly became nauseating. Caleb looked to the wall-length, jewelled mirror Maiden had been given in exchange for one of his appearances. The Dreaming was a symbolic world; that he still believed to be true. When he arrived, Caleb was a coyote. He was cunning, clever, independent, and fun. But now he could see how his fur had grown scruffy and lightened, how his muzzle and tail had shortened, how his ears were beginning to flop down. A dog stared from the reflection; a domestic pet that lived for his owner's affection—for a pat on the head and a few honeyed words. Caleb bared his teeth at the animal in the mirror. Being used as a jester was something he could take. But Maiden hadn't wanted an entertainer, she wanted a decoration. Caleb had been carted around like a flower or statue—a conversation piece or fancy trinket. The collar around Caleb's neck didn't make

him part of the household, it made him property. This routine had gone on long enough, Caleb decided. It was time to make something interesting happen.

That night, the assembled guests received a mild surprise when they saw Caleb. He had combed his fur and polished his collar per Maiden's instructions, but he now sported a strange, navy-coloured vest that looked like it had been torn from a larger material.

"I thought something fancier than bare fur would be better for tonight." Caleb explained proudly to the assembled fae. "We have a special guest, after all."

He tilted his head towards the Autumn's Earl, who stood near the back of the room. The wizened, oak-like man nodded politely back. In the corner of his eye, Caleb could see Maiden beaming with anticipation.

"I made this vest myself, you see." He continued. "Humans are good at that. We're good at making things. Games are something we have a distinct knack for. For example, I have made a game specifically for this occasion. Would anyone care to play?"

A curious murmur ran through the guests. Many eyebrows were raised at such a novel prospect.

"We won't have to tackle each other, will we?" A voice asked worriedly. Evidently this fae knew about football.

"Not at all!" Caleb reassured. "It's just a guessing game. One I think you'll all enjoy very much! It's even about my dear Maiden, who I'm sure you've all had dealings with."

From his periphery, Caleb saw a flicker in Maiden's eyes. It was a moment of concern quickly replaced by confidence and a sugary smile.

Caleb drew a piece of paper from his pocket and unfolded it. "Maiden is a fair fae and has assured me of her great knowledge about this court. I took the liberty of recording her most brilliant insights and will gladly share them with you all. The point of this game is for you to guess who these insights are about."

Maiden froze.

"The first insight," Caleb began after clearing his throat, "is about someone who is 'so daft he could be pissed on and mistake it for rain'."

Silence.

"Anyone? I was sure this was an easy question. Oh well, I'll give a hint then. His name sounds like 'Goat Girl'. Yes! You in the middle?"

The guests turned and stared at someone who Caleb recognized as Nimiron.

"Ah... would the Oak Earl be right?" He offered.

“Indeed it would! Next insight regards ‘a wretch of a woman whose head was too stuck up her own rear to catch me stealing her armoire’.”

“Oh! Oh! The Glass Countess!” Exclaimed a little man with moth-like antennae. “She told me a servant had taken it!”

Maiden spasmed. Without her lures and tricks, she was powerless to stop Caleb as he swayed back and forth on the spot, tail wagging happily. She could only watch as he sent her world crashing down. “Well done, good sir! Any ganders as to who the ‘pruney old hag’ of our next insight might be?”

“Ah... the... Water Wife?”

“Two for two!”

The crowd clambered for more, and Caleb happily delivered. His ears perked up as he spoke of jibes delivered about the Rose Scholar and fertilizer. His fur returned to dusted-brown while he revealed who was really responsible for the Alchemist’s bronze leg. His muzzle grew out, and his fingers lengthened as Caleb disclosed every scandalous word Maiden had ever uttered while her dotting pet lay curled on her lap.

“...no, sorry, I’m afraid it was the Orange Earl who she framed for the incident with the cow. I had no idea there were two.” Caleb barked happily as he neared the end of his list. “But why don’t we have Maiden herself come up for the final rounds?”

All heads turned to Maiden. Her wispy hair was sprawled across her face, and there was a noticeable scent of sour perfume in the air. She was trapped in her own home and faced with the amused and angered looks of the fae court.

“L-lies...” She hissed. Her face had contorted like a wrathful harpy. “A-a-all of it, I-lies! I am the Maiden! I am the fairest! I am the m-most gracious! He is nothing! Human! Dog! I am the Maiden! I am—I am—”

“Exposed.”

The Autumn’s Duke had spoken. Though his voice was calm and reassuring, his judgement was palpable.

“Caleb’s words are true, Maiden. He would have lost your influence otherwise. While certain antics are to be expected within any court, I find you to have gone beyond what I consider acceptable. Seek your fortune elsewhere. You are unwelcome in my court.”

With a final, shattered look across the room, Maiden vanished.

Looks and whispers were exchanged through the crowd, but everyone fell silent again as the Duke continued. “You have my thanks, Caleb, for this evening’s entertainment, though I am afraid it has cost you both your employment and shelter. If you wish, I can offer you stay at my own estate and the proper treatment your talents deserve.”

Eyes shifted to Caleb as he unclipped his collar. “Thanks, but no thanks. I think I’m done working for fae for the time being.”

“Understandable, but unfortunate. May I ask what it is you plan to do now?”

Caleb smiled. A coyote’s smile. A trickster’s smile.

“Something interesting, of course.”

*Jonas Belford, 2011*