"In the shadows, they lurked. Moon-white skin and hair like the mist on the moors. Beneath the hills and atop the mountains, in the lochs and below the seas, the whispers of a world unknown echoed. To be one was to be an other. Tall and lanky, short and hairy, four-legged and one-armed, skin of seals and women, the others existed. Oh, to be one of them. A gift and a curse. A beauty and a beast.

But not to be one of them—to be mortal and weak, lost and blind—would be the true curse. A failed destiny shaped in the guise power. But to know true power—to know magic and tricks and demons and angels—is to know freedom.

Oh, to be one of them. One of the others." - An excerpt from *The Few and Fair*, E.C. Beinn.

***

Fog was drifting along the tops of the brick tenements, dark and shadowed from years of weather and smoke. The sky was gray with it, drifting to-and-fro on an invisible wind. A girl was standing at Haymarket Station, chestnut curls frizzed from the watery air, blue eyes watching the sky mist swirl. A canvas tote was hanging from her shoulder, and an unlit cigarette was dangling between her fingers. A stranger, breath heady with whiskey, had handed it to her minutes before. "'Ere, lassie," he'd said. "You look like you could use one."

She didn't smoke, and she wasn't planning on starting, but the sympathy in the man's eyes and surety of his movements had left her dumbfounded. She supposed it had been the look on her face, or maybe the whiskey in Scotland gave you supernatural powers. An ability to look into someone and know what they felt. If the man had done that, he would have seen nerves sparking with anxiety. Dread. The overwhelming feeling of failure.

The bus rolled into the station, double-decker and painted red. Letting the older crowd board first, the girl flicked the unlit cigarette into the trash and pulled herself onto the bus. It was a

sixteen-minute ride to the University of Edinburgh, and soon enough she was hopping off and walking the rest of the way to George Square, long strides carrying her around the green and into one of the shadowy stone buildings.

She made her way through the halls, up the stairs and into the faculty wing. A large oak door stood closed, golden plaque in its center indicating who was inside. She read it over thrice, just to be sure, and knocked with cold, pink knuckles.

"Come in!"

She turned the brass knob and entered. Professor Dunn sat at his desk, half-moon spectacles sliding down his round nose, white whiskers cut unevenly around his lips. He looked up at her, a smile she knew was fake crinkling the skin around his eyes.

"Ms. Leslie! In, lass, in. Have a seat."

"Alyce," she said politely, and sat on the other side of his desk. "Call me Alyce, Professor."

"Aye." He nodded. "So, Ms. Leslie. Yesterday was your workshop. Rough day?"

Alyce shifted uncomfortably, the urge to crack her knuckles, do something—anything—with her hands, surging through her. Rough was not a sour enough word to describe the slaughter she'd faced the day before. Her nails were digging into the meat of her palms, but she barely noticed it as the liquid flames of embarrassment and self-hatred scorched her blood.

"I want to preface this discussion by sayin' yer not a bad writer, Ms. Leslie."

"Oh," she said, swallowing thickly. "So, you liked it, then?"

"I didn't say that. But I'm an old man. What do I know? Nothin' of magic and elves and faeries."

"It's folklore, Professor," Alyce said. She wanted to run. Hide. Fade away into the shadowy corners of the room until she was nothing more than the shadows herself. "It's… the unreal."

"Aye, don't get defensive now. You Americans like to get defensive. I know what it is. What I'm sayin' is I don't teach it. I don't write it. No one in this uni teaches it or writes it. Literature, Ms. Leslie. That's what we're here to study. To create."

Bitterness and annoyance rose like bile in the back of her throat. "Is that all, Professor?"

"No." He leaned forward, bracing his thick arms on the desk. "I have a friend of a friend of a friend. Trust you've heard of Beinn?"

Having never heard the name spoken aloud, Alyce shook her head. "Ben? Ben who?"

"Beinn. E.C. Beinn? The writer?"

"Oh," she said, nodding. "Yeah, I've heard of him." Fawned over his writing night and day, more like it.

"Well, like I said, a friend of a friend of a friend." His hand made a rolling motion, so fast his wrist cracked. "Anyways, he's just moved to Edinburgh. Got a place in New Town. Back in London, he did workshops. I've sent him yer story."

Alyce's heart shot down into the chasm of her stomach. "What?"

"Yer welcome."

"Wait! Why... I mean, you can't—"

"It's done, Ms. Leslie," Professor Dunn interrupted. "No promises, but if he gets in touch, you best get in touch back." He paused; his dark brown eyes were suddenly clouded with sympathy. "I'll tell you what someone told me once. Good advice, it is. If you want to write—whatever genre or medium—you best study under someone you admire. Learn from the best. That is, if you get the chance."

Alyce watched him as he stood from his chair, walked to the door, and gestured for her to leave through it. No words formed on her stunned tongue.

"This is yer chance, Ms. Leslie," he said as she stood and grabbed her tote. "Take it!"

***

"Don't fuck this up, Alyce," she whispered to herself. She stood before a wide, forest-green door, black iron gating on either side of her. There was a doormat at her feet, a swirling black "B" indicating that she had come to the right place. Even so, she opened her phone and checked the address in her inbox before she reached up slowly with a trembling hand. She grasped the cool golden door knocker, its face like an owl, and tapped it down. Once. Twice.

She took a few steps back, reaching up in an effort to smooth her wind-blown curls and straighten the collar of her coat. Her gaze flicked quickly to the windows, taking in dark curtains drawn aside to reveal the shadows of an interior. *No. Don't look inside. Look at the door. No. Your phone. Look casual, like this is nothing you haven't done before. Look… cool.*

She barely had time to fidget before the sounds of locks clicking forced her eyes back to the door. It opened quickly, and she drew a long breath as a man came into view. Squat and round, dressed in khakis and a brown cashmere sweater, a tuft of mousy brown hair sticking up atop a mostly bald head. Her chest deflated.

This was not E.C. Beinn.

"You must be Ms. Leslie!" the man said in an oddly squeaky voice. "Come in, come in. Mr. Beinn is just in his study. The name's Bile. At yer service."

Bile? Alyce had never heard that name before, but she chalked it up to her being American and uncultured. She forced herself to smile at the odd little man and follow him inside.

"Absolutely Baltic out there, innit?"

"Yeah," she said, sniffing through a red nose and removing her mittens. "Freezing."

"Yer American!" Bile smiled, and his large front teeth stuck out past his lips, making him look a lot like a rat. "How… new! Which state?"

"North Carolina."

"Ooo. Hilly. Mr. Beinn will like that."

"Oh?"

Bile nodded. "Beinn means 'hill' in Gaelic. Come on! This way. I'll get you settled in 'till the master's ready."

Alyce followed him through the foyer, her eyes sweeping over the minute and grand details of the townhouse. It was dark inside, the only light coming from the gray-lit skies beyond the frosty windows. The walls were painted a dark green, and a staircase, wood bannister the color of brown cloves, wound upward three stories. Crystal chandeliers hung precariously throughout, and one cast a dull and yellow light over the intricately upholstered armchairs of the sitting room Bile led her into.

"Take a seat. Can I get you anything? Cuppa? Biscuits?"

Not wanting to be rude and starting to feel a rumble of hunger in her stomach, Alyce nodded. Bile scurried out, his loafers moving silently over the rug and clacking over the wood floors in the distance. Alyce listened to the floorboards creak, her brow furrowed as she took in the room around her. A fireplace was crackling softly, and on either side of it were built-in shelves, both lined fully with books, dusty-old and new. Alyce wanted to give into the curiosity that bubbled, wanted to see what types of books Beinn had in his collection, but instead, she shrugged off her navy wool coat and hung it on the arm of a chair. She sat on the edge of it, but she wouldn't lean back. Would not crinkle the upholstery, mossy green and lined with stitching like brown autumn leaves, or soil it with her clear inferiority. She had never known E.C. Beinn to be so… well, rich.

She was staring at a portrait of a moon-skinned man with hair like raven feathers when Bile came back, a silver tray held steady in his hands. He placed it on the short card table and began to pour a cup of tea. It flowed, golden-brown and smelling of autumn spice, from the spout of a bone china teapot. Alyce watched it pour, as if transfixed by the finery, until Bile placed it back on the tray and handed her the saucer and teacup. She took it, glancing quickly at his long and sharp, yellowed nails.

"Oh!" Bile squeaked, and Alyce nearly jumped. "I forgot the milk and sugar. Sorry, lass. Be back in a jiffy."

Before Alyce could assure him that she needed neither milk nor sugar, he had gone. She sat still, lips parted, inhaling the scent of the tea. She wasn't much of a tea person, always having had preferred coffee, but she could not deny that the smell of it was pleasant. Spiced and earthy. Still, she placed the cup and saucer back onto the card table and focused her attention on the biscuits.

As the quiet closed in on her, no sound other than the crackling fire, her eyes slid back to the portrait of the man on the wall across from her. He looked familiar, although she could not pinpoint the reason why. The darkness of his eyes was bewitching, an endless pool of black. A void in which she might fall into and be forever lost.

"The painting is interesting, is it not?"

She swiveled her head around, curls bouncing over her shoulder. The voice that had spoken was deep, smooth like velvet, and held an accent she did not recognize. He stood on the threshold behind her, leaning against the arched wall that led into what seemed to be a formal dining room. In dark leather chukkas, black trousers and a white button down layered with a sweater vest and a glimpse of a tie, E.C. Beinn looked like he'd popped straight out of some dark

academia aesthetics guide. He looked much like the few pictures Alyce had seen of him: black hair that was streaked with gray. Dark eyes that were almost black. She wasn't sure what she had expected but seeing him in person made him appear… starker. And it was intimidating as hell.

"I… I was just thinking that the man looked familiar," she said, shooting to her feet. She didn't know why, but she had the sudden urge to curtsey. Not in the presence of royalty, however—no matter how revered he was—she walked forward and extended her hand. "I'm Alyce."

"I know," he said, and shook her hand. His skin was cold against hers. "Nice to meet you. So sorry for the wait. I was writing, and being in a particularly good spot, did not want to lose my rhythm. I'm sure you understand."

Once, she might have. Once, she had been able to lose herself in it all. But recently, the spark had dwindled. It was the reason she had been terrified for her workshop. Terrified that Beinn had been sent her work—work she had wanted to be proud of but could not manage to be—and convinced he would not be impressed. But here she stood, in his home, in front of him, at his personal request. So, she smiled and nodded. "Yes," she lied. "I know how that feels."

He smiled warmly, creases appearing around his eyes.

"Your house is beautiful," she said, desperate to fill any second of quiet. "When did you move in?"

"Oh, less than a month ago. Didn't do it all myself, of course. I had help."

Just as he said it, a scuffle behind her caused Alyce to turn to see Bile reentering the room, a small tray in his hands, a silver sugar and creamer set on it. The odd man paused, his head bowing as he saw Beinn standing on the other side of the room.

"'Scuse me, ma—" He paused. "Sir. Was just fetchin' some cream and sugar for the lass."

"That's quite all right, Bile," Beinn said. Alyce turned to see him looking at her, something like fascination swirling in those dark eyes. "I do hope Bile has been good to you?"

"Of course," Alyce said earnestly, then to Bile, "Thank you."

"'Course, lass. Ms. Leslie is from North Carolina, sir. Hills!"

"Hills, indeed," Beinn responded. He gestured for Alyce to take her seat, and while it was no command, she did so as if her life depended on it. He sat in the armchair opposite of her, and once Bile had left the room, he asked, "How long have you been in Edinburgh, Alyce?"

The way he said her name made her nervous, but she mustered her courage and said, "Five months."

"Different from the States, I imagine."

She nodded.

There was a pause, enough time for Alyce to realize she was sweating. She wondered how discreetly she'd be able to wipe her palms on her jeans, but never managed to do so as Beinn said, "Your professor seems to like you."

That caught her off guard. "What makes you think so?"

"His email implied as much. You seem surprised."

"I am."

He grinned, white teeth flashing. "Dunn was never a lover of the unreal."

"You know him personally? I thought… I mean, he said you were a friend of a friend of a friend. Or something like that."

"That's a lot of friends."

Alyce laughed. She'd never expected Beinn, with his dark imagery and gruesome tales, to possess humor.

"I'm sure you have questions," he said. "So, I'll be frank. I know from your messages that you have read my work and have an appreciation for it. The piece Dunn sent me of yours intrigued me. It needs work. Serious work. But I saw something in it that makes me want to help."

She'd be lying to herself if she said she had not felt a twinge of pain. Even if she had wanted to believe otherwise, Alyce knew her writing needed work. She felt unworthy, sitting in front of Beinn. Had felt unworthy even standing on his front doorstep. But this was a chance. And like Dunn had told her to do, she needed to take it.

"What I'm offering you is an apprenticeship," Beinn continued. "You'd be coming here, to my house, to write with me. Every day, with the exception of Sundays. You'd be working on your own work, of course, and I would not be telling you what to write. I'd be encouraging you. You'd be encouraging me. We'd share ideas…" His thoughts seemed to trail off, and he smiled. "How does that sound?"

Like a dream. Like a completely unbelievable dream. She wanted to tell him just that, and she spent so much time debating with herself whether that would be weird or not, spent so much time not answering him, that he held up his hands.

"I can let you sleep on it—"

"No!" Alyce said abruptly. "No, I, uh… Yes. Yes, I would love to work with you. Of course, I would. Thank you."

There was not much else she could say, but Beinn seemed satisfied. "All right. Good. We start tomorrow, then."

They didn't spend much more time talking. He had to write, and she had to go home and have an attack of excitement and simultaneous panic. Had to go call her mom, let her calm Alyce

down in the way she was always able to do. Rational and confident. With that, they stood from their mossy green armchairs.

"It was lovely to meet you, Alyce," he said. "I look forward to working with you."

She bid him goodbye, pulled on her coat, and let him walk her out. Bile smiled from where he peered around a corner, wagging his yellow clawed fingers in a wave goodbye. And then she was gone, leaving Beinn and Bile and her tea behind, cold and untouched on the card table.

***

If you are interested in reading the full version of this story, please email me at:

erinmhunter@hotmail.com

This story is the property of Erin Hunter