

# Contents/Navigation

## **Black Knight Shining *by E. Leighton***

### **Blurb:**

**Fairy tales do not come to life and kidnap children.**

But in the village of Merremet, that seems to be exactly what has happened. With yet another village's children vanishing overnight, ruling House Reverdin finally sends one of their knights to investigate the disappearances.

Young, hotheaded, and eager to prove herself – the knight Angelique Reverdin is intent on bringing this kidnapper to justice. With her only leads being the ink-black eyes of the survivors, folktales, and local superstition – she must make do with fragmented clues and conscripted coin guards to assist her.

Ephraim Waldegrave has no love for the crown, nor its knights. When Angelique arrives at Merremet, all he sees is a spoiled, impulsive brat. But as the captain of the local coin guard, he is conscripted like the rest and obligated to do anything she asks.

But what neither seems to realize is that the kidnapper has set his obsessive sights upon Angelique. And with each clue she finds, the mythological Black Knight quickly becomes a little too real for her to refute.

### **Tropes & Trigger Warnings:**

#### **Tropes**

- Enemies to Lovers
- Age Gap
- Toxic Relationship
- Bitchy FMC
- Cat & Mouse
- Forced Proximity
- Curses, Superstitions, Fae Pacts
- Hate Sex
- Touch Her & Die
- MF & MMF 🌶️
- Third Person Omniscient POV

#### **Trigger Warnings**

- Graphic Sexual Content (open door, ~4x 🌶️)
- Non-con & Dub-con
- Torture
- Blackmail
- Drugging
- BDSM
- Whipping/Bruising, etc.
- Drowning
- Death/Harm to children (largely off-page)

## Chapter 1

It was dark. It was dark and it was quiet. And the children were gone.

Thirty-six children, gone. All of them, gone! Not a whisper or a word left in their wake. Only the wailing of mothers and fathers who would see the sun start to rise on empty beds. Who would come out of an inexplicable stupor as the black ink blinding their eyes was washed out by tears.

Merremet was the fourth hamlet on the coast to suffer this fate. As the fog rose up from the bay and the sun pierced it in rays, chaos began to reign.

Byrne was a large man, more muscle than most. He puffed with effort as he came running out of the woods. Armor clanked and his cloak fluttered in his hurry. He squinted in the fog and hurried towards his superior.

“Captain,” he said as he bounded up the cobblestone steps of the sidewalk. “I found the baker.”

Ephraim was standing resolute – a beacon of calm in the rising sea of panic – as the village slowly woke around him. He was ordering more of his armored coin guards to search for stray children; to check in basements and beneath bridges. His guards hurried to obey, though all knew it was unlikely they find any children left behind, or at least any alive. Despite the rising din, he heard Byrne’s voice well enough above the grief.

“Dead?” Ephraim asked.

“Aye. Blinded and,” Byrne gestured at his chest, “burst, like the rest.”

Ephraim paused briefly to direct a weeping couple up the hill, towards the village’s inn. He then looked over towards the ugly scene across the town square. A few of the townsfolk had escaped the deep sleep that made the kidnapping possible. They had paid for this with their lives, ravaged by thorns that erupted out of their bodies, and their eyes blinded. Without life to wash it away, their eyes were still dyed black. Coin guards were wrapping and tying the bodies, hiding black eyes behind white linen.

Such was the fate of those who saw the black knight, or so the fairy tale went. But that was just a story to scare the little ones into behaving. The coin guards all knew the story, anyone who passed through Lyfelde province knew it. They knew to beware the brambles, to fear the knight that called them home.

But Ephraim’s trade was service to the living and real, in the form of strong backs and sharp steel. Stories were just stories. This kidnapper was real, and so was the sludge that dripped from eyes.

The people of Merremet needed help, and that was what Ephraim and his posse were there to offer. Without knights of any kind, without assistance from any high houses or lesser royals, the coin guards would simply have to do. While the wealthy were busy waging war, arranging marriages, drinking and dancing holes in their shoes night after night – the poorer folk picked themselves up, pooled their resources, and carried on.

The captain and his coin guards had arrived at Merremet without any shining armor, without any rank or colors. But they had arrived in good time when they were called for, with armor that wasn't pretty, but was serviceable; and with a contract and seal allowing their operations.

Ephraim felt for the contract, tucked into the pocket of his overcoat as he mulled over the miserable situation. That precious little bit of paper gave him permission to assume total control of Merremet. His armor was cold as his hand brushed against it, and the air felt heavy, as if rain was coming. "Go to the quartermaster, get a shroud." He said. "We'll put the baker with the others."

"Captain!" A woman called from the hill behind both men. The impatient screech of a church owl told the pair what to expect. "A letter has arrived!"

Ephraim and Byrne trudged up the hill towards the overcrowded inn. The quartermaster, Nadine, was working out of the rear of an armored wagon. Crates and barrels of supplies were already cracked open and being distributed by coin guards – spare blankets, food, and firewood. Beside her was a perch, and atop it a church owl, pacing back and forth with a scroll tied about its leg. Nadine unwound it and passed it to Ephraim. He read it quickly, and his lip twitched in disgust.

"What is it?" She asked.

"A knight." He said.

Both Byrne and Nadine looked at each other in surprise.

"House Reverdin," Ephraim said, "is sending one of their knights to investigate."

"House Reverdin?" Nadine blurted out in disbelief. "They're sending a *royal* all the way out here?"

"To Merremet of all places?" Byrne added, similarly befuddled. "We're in the middle of bloody nowhere! It's miles in any direction."

"Baldri, down south, their children vanished, too." Nadine snorted indignantly. "They didn't send a knight for *them*." She chewed her lip, growing anxious. "Why take an interest now? What's so special as to get the royal's attention?"

Ephraim shrugged and breathed a deep sigh.

"I am not sure. Perhaps Lady Thévenet requested their intervention. It's possible the kidnapper struck a little too close to Castle Greves for her liking."

Nadine scoffed and turned over her shoulder, looking up towards the hills further inland, shrouded in fog and surrounded by thick forest. From way down in the valley, it was difficult to see the lights glittering atop the distant hilltop where the palace in question resided, but they were there. "Oh, she's *plenty* safe, way up there."

"We're the ones down here." Ephraim said, changing the subject. "And we have work to do. Byrne, get a shroud for the baker. We will have graves to dig and mouths to feed. Nadine, where is the doctor?"

Nadine flicked her head at the inn behind her. "First floor, the east wing has been converted to an infirmary, as you ordered."

"Good."

"And the bodies?" Byrne ventured to ask. "Where do we put them?"

Ephraim glanced back down the hill to where the dead were being loaded into a spare wagon.

"The graveyard behind the church should have a holding house. Put them there, out of sight. Folk can learn of their dead later."

"Out of sight..." Nadine murmured.

"Nadine?"

"Do you think these folk will see again?" She whispered. "Some of them... their eyes aren't clearing. It doesn't usually take this long."

"Time will tell."

With that, Ephraim turned and made his way inside the inn. As he walked, he felt again for the contract in his coat pocket. *So, they finally sent a knight...* he thought. *It's about damn time.*

## Chapter 2

Another knight in gilt armor crumbled to the ground, joining the limp bodies strewn across the marble floor of the sanctum. Angelique straightened up and saluted with the Proving Sword – a needle-sharp rapier of unnatural opal – to her downed opponent.

“Have I convinced you, my lady?”

“Darling, please,” The elderly noblewoman coughed and pushed herself up in her chair. “I am only worried about you! It’s so much safer if you just stay here. Ignore that letter, let the Lady sort her province.”

“This is the fourth village in Lyfelde province to lose its children. Lady Thevenet has *sorted* nothing. That is why she asks for help.”

“These things take time.” She coughed again, sinking deeper into the shimmering fur that was draped all about her throne, all about her.

“Then I shall help it take less time.”

“My dear, Castle Greves is so very far. And little Merremet is further still. It’s not safe there.”

“I’m not a child, Lady Clemence.”

“You are my child.”

*No, I’m not.* “I am your knight, by your own ruling.”

“Yes, yes, of course you are, my darling – but you are both.” Lady Clemence held out her wrinkled, trembling hands, beckoning her daughter closer. “You are precious to me.”

Angelique didn’t go to her.

“Send more of your palace guards in.”

“My dear...”

“More.” Angelique stepped over the moaning, half-conscious form of an armored guard as he lay on the floor. “How many more do I need to best before you have faith in me?”

“Please, put the sword down,” Lady Clemence looked at the battered knights strewn about the room, all brought to their knees or lower in duels. The Proving Sword prevented any permanent damage, no matter how it pierced or sliced. It was made to prove mettle and prowess, not to kill. “this... is plenty proof enough.”

“Yet it is not enough for you.”

“It’s... not that. Won’t you listen to me, my darling? I do not want you to get hurt.”

“Lady Clemence, I am stronger than you think.”

“Your *strength*, my child, is not in doubt.”

“Then what is?” Angelique walked over to her squire where he knelt, holding her real sword. She took it and approached Lady Clemence, holding her sword out to the old woman by the blade.

“*You* knighted me. If you have done so only in name, take my sword and title back.”

Her mother sighed and the fur stole enveloping her seemed to do the same.

"I cannot convince you to stay with me, my child?"

"No, you cannot."

Lady Clemence nodded, her lip quivering.

"Then I... send you to Merremet with my blessing. Lady Thevenet's knights will be at your disposal. All that she can offer you, in this wretched time, make use of it."

Angelique drew her own sword back and bowed her head stiffly. "Thank you, my lady."

Lady Clemence watched as Angelique then held out the Proving Sword. The shimmering fur that cocooned the old woman writhed around her feet and stirred from her lap, revealing its form: not a robe, not a gown, but a creature. A beast with a long head, sharp teeth, and a tangled mass of nearly invisible antlers that grew out from the single, spiraled horn in the center of its head.

The magic beast lifted its head and, with a silent nod towards the weapon, took the Proving Sword back into itself. The creature then settled its head back in the queen's lap, and she resumed stroking the fur as it once again became part of her attire.

With the Proving Sword gone, the knights began to recover from their enchanted wounds, slowly rising to their feet and righting themselves – with only bruised pride as injuries sustained. Angelique stormed through and stepped over them as she left the sanctum, her squire hurrying to follow her.

Lady Clemence watched her only surviving child depart without another word.



A bump in the road brought Angelique out of her recollection, back to the present. The carriage was comfortable, but a bit cold. The pair of champagne horses drawing it hurried along the narrow forest road to Merremet. She looked down at her hands to find herself still holding the last letter she had received. *I regret to inform my lady... that I have no knights to yield...*

Angelique felt herself get angry all over again at Lady Thévenet's reply. She glared out the window and watched the forest fly by in a blur.

*What a miserable little place this hamlet must be, way south at the far end of the valley. And a miserable little lordling who oversees it.* The beauty of the woods – the deep green leaves and the subtle glow of the fireflies – was lost on her as she grumbled aloud.

"There are *really* no knights to spare?" She said, "None? Not even squires?"

Her advisor, Grégoire, adjusted his monocle and looked up from where he sat across from her.

"I'm afraid not, Lady Reverdin. Though, I'm sure Lady Clemence has every confidence in you."

"I am *one* knight." She interrupted. "I should have at least a score to assist with a matter such as this."

Grégoire scratched an itch beneath his moustache. “Ah, there are some two score or more coin guards in the village, I am told. Simply show them your sigil and you’ll have no trouble recruiting them.”

She huffed at the thought. “Mercenaries. Pitiful.”

He waved his hand. “Not to worry, my lady. I have experience with such mercenaries. I will draft a contract and ensure that they remain within it.”

“How? Coin guards have no honor, no code.”

“Ah, but they do, my lady.” Grégoire said. “Their code is just coin. Threaten their money, and they will fall in line.”

She frowned and looked out the window again. This serial kidnapper was a delicate matter. She needed sharp swords that trustworthy and honorable, not penniless brigands who sold their rusty steel to the highest bidder

“And,” Grégoire added, “if I may be so bold as to say it, you *do* have one plenty capable squire at your disposal.”

Angelique rolled her eyes and glanced out the opposite window. Outside, keeping pace with the carriage on his horse, was Gabriel – her own squire. *He’s more a glorified servant than a real squire*, she thought. *He’s a moderate step up from my butler*. Gabriel certainly *looked* the part of a would-be knight: a handsome young man, just a few years younger than her, with perfectly polished armor and short, sunshine yellow hair. But he was inexperienced in the ways of the real world.

His integrity wasn’t in doubt, though, and that did count for something.

“He hasn’t had enough training for my liking.” She murmured.

“Three years is not sufficient?”

“Three years with a Proving Sword is nothing.” She frowned. “He needs real-world practice if he’s going to prove himself to be worth his salt, to me or anyone else.”

Grégoire smiled. “Then what a marvelous opportunity this is for him, yes? Perhaps a lady at Castle Greves, in Lady Thévenet’s court, would be delighted to name him her knight – he who participated in such a noble task.”

Angelique groaned. “I suppose. Maybe I can throw him up against these coin guards to sharpen him up. How many did you say there were, again?”

“Approximately two score, though I do not have an exact number.”

“Why? Can’t they count?”

Grégoire snickered. “Their captain, I am told, was unsure how many of his number he would be able to spare on such short notice. They were set to arrive today, though I don’t know if they have, or in what numbers.”

“Wonderful. And this captain, is correspondence with him difficult? Terrible writing? I *do* hope I’ll be able to read it.”



“Oh, it’s neat enough. But if all goes as intended, correspondence won’t be necessary. The captain intends to be present in Merremet.”

“What?” Angelique leaned forward in her seat. “Oh, no. Grégoire, that’s going to be a nightmare. The coin guards will defy any order of mine and defer to their own leader if he’s there.”

Grégoire shook his head. “He seemed a reasonable sort from his letters, my lady. But, again, all you need do is show your house sigil and the lot of them will obey – even the captain.”

She clicked her tongue “I do hope you’re right.” *Gabriel is a headstrong boy, it’ll be hard enough to manage him... the last thing I need is some coin guard who thinks he knows better getting in my way, too.*

She set her jaw and watched as the thick forest on either side of the road began to thin. The carriage got its first real taste of sunlight in hours as it dashed out of the trees. And Angelique meanwhile caught her first glimpse of the rolling hills, the lush vineyards, crystal-clear waters... and the rather ominous briar thicket on the horizon.

“Goodness,” she said aloud without thought, “what in the world is all *that* mess?”

“Hm?” Gregoire leaned over and squinted out the window. “Ah, they call it the Brambles, I believe. Ghastly looking things, aren’t they?”

“Very.”

The swirling thorns were an eyesore on a rather charming valley, in her opinion. She watched the vineyards sweep by, her eyes roving from row to row until they stopped on a dark shape.

A man, by the silhouette, shaded beneath a gnarled oak tree. Even from such a distance, she felt *absolutely* certain he was looking at her – as if he had been awaiting her arrival. It made apprehension settle deep in her belly. But she blinked, and the shape was gone. Just her eyes mistaking that overgrown oak tree, surely.

She looked down the road, then, peering into the thick fog that churned up from the bay – and at the modest village tucked within the blue-grey blanket of it at the bottom of the valley. Somewhere down there were coin guards, and their captain.

Angelique could put a man in his place if it came to that, she was certain of it.

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Thank you for reading! ❤️✂️

*If you would like to continue reading, please reach out.*

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