



THE LOST SISTERS

A Folk of the Air Novella

THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING SERIES BY
HOLLY BLACK

The Lost Sisters

Holly Black



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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Begin Reading](#)

[A Sneak Peek of *The Wicked King*](#)

Do you remember the fairy story “Mr. Fox”?

Once upon a time, there was a girl who was beautiful and clever, adored by her elder brothers and by her suitors, who included a mysterious man named Mr. Fox. No one knew much of him, except that he was impeccably mannered and gallant, and lived in a very grand castle. The girl liked him above the rest, and soon it was agreed that they should be married.

The girl was not only beautiful and clever, but she was also curious, and so, before the wedding, when Mr. Fox said he would be away on business, she went to see the castle in which she would be living. It was every bit as grand as people said, with high, strong walls crawling with ivy and a deep, dank moat. As she got closer, she saw that over the gate words had been inscribed in the stone: BE BOLD, BE BOLD.

On she went, through the gate and to the door, where she found words again: BE BOLD, BE BOLD, BUT NOT TOO BOLD.

Still on she went, into the empty house. She walked through fine galleries and parlors until she came to an enormous staircase. There she found a door, over which more words were inscribed: BE BOLD, BE BOLD, BUT NOT TOO BOLD, LEST THAT YOUR HEART’S BLOOD SHOULD RUN COLD.

When she opened the door, she found that it was filled with the corpses of brides. Some were freshly killed, their gowns stained with blood. Others were nearly skeletal. All had clearly been murdered on the day of their wedding.

Horrified, the girl closed the door and ran down the stairs. She would have rushed out except, just at that moment, Mr. Fox came in the door carrying the body of his latest victim. The girl hid herself behind a large urn and made no sound as Mr. Fox carried his new bride up the stairs. At the landing, he tried to prize a ring off the dead girl’s finger, and when that failed, he took out a knife and sawed off her hand at the wrist. No sooner had he cut it off, though, slippery with blood as it was, it fell—right into the lap of the hidden girl. Resolving to look for it later, he carried the body into his charnel room, and the girl made her escape.

The next day, Mr. Fox came to visit the girl, for it was time for them to sign their marriage contract. There, sitting with her brothers and her family around her, she recounted what had happened to her as though it had been a troubling dream. At every turn of her tale, Mr. Fox denied it, but when she pulled out the hand of the murdered bride with a ring still shining on one finger, no one believed his denials. Then the girl's brothers leaped up and cut Mr. Fox into a thousand pieces.

I think about that story a lot. I think about it all the time.

It's the kind of thing you like. The wicked are slain, with swords no less. Vengeance is had. Boldness is rewarded. But what about all those girls, all those obedient girls who trusted and loved and wed and died? Weren't they bold, too?

I bet you don't think so. I bet you think they were just stupid.

That's your problem in a nutshell. You're judgmental. Everyone makes mistakes. They trust the wrong people. They fall in love. Not you, though. And that's why it's so hard to ask you for forgiveness.

But I am. Asking. I mean, I am going to ask. I am going to try to explain how it happened and how sorry I am.

Let's start with a love story.

Or maybe it's another horror story. It seems like the difference is mostly in where the ending comes.

Once, there was a woman who was beautiful and clever and, because of her beauty and cleverness, believed that she would always be happy. Perhaps she should have known better, but she didn't.

When she met her future husband, he carried the scent of blood and oiled steel and windswept rocks. He courted her with charming old-fashioned ways. He was the promise of the unfamiliar, the epic. And if he made her parents uncomfortable and her friends afraid, that only made her love bigger and feel more important. If she had reservations, she buried them. Everything else had always turned out well for her. She could not imagine it being otherwise.

And so she went to dwell with him in his castle across the waves and

discovered all the horrors he'd kept secret.

I wonder if you think Mom was stupid, like the dead girls in the first story. But Mom's story is a lesson. All stories are lessons.

Fairy tales have a moral: Stay on the path. Don't trust wolves. Don't steal things, not even things you think no normal person would care about. Share your food but don't trust people who want to share their food with you; don't eat their shiny red apples, nor their candy houses, nor any of it. Be nice, always nice, and polite to everyone: kings and beggars, witches and wounded bears. Don't break a promise.

Be bold, be bold, but not too bold.

It's important that we learn the lessons our mother didn't.

Once, there were three sisters who lived in a subdivision of a suburb. Three girls, Vivienne, Jude, and Taryn. The eldest was one of the Folk herself, with split-pupiled eyes and ears that came to slender points. The two youngest were twins with cheeks as plump as peaches, ready to be eaten up. Their father was a bladesmith who sold his swords over the internet. Their mother helped him run his business. She didn't like to dwell on unpleasant things, like mistakes or regrets or burning down her past and running away from husbands in Faerieland.

And when Mom's past caught up with her, she didn't even have to live with the consequences. She and Dad, dead in moments. And us girls, taken across the sea to be raised by a monster. The three lost sisters. Doesn't that sound just like another tale?

Let's skip ahead, past all the blood and the crying and the fear of a terrifying new place with terrifying magical people.

Let's skip to the beginning of what I did that was wrong.

It started with Locke slipping a note into my rucksack. He must have done it on the grounds of the palace, where tutors instruct the children of the Gentry—and us—in history and riddle games and divination and all the other things needed to be productive members of society.

If I came to your window, would you come out?

Locke, constant companion to the youngest prince of Elfhome. Hair like fox fur and a laugh that could charm the apples to drop from the trees. Why would he bother slipping that—or *any* note—to a mortal girl?

I guess I caught his eye.

There was a day when you were practicing for the tournament and I was reading a book of stories. Locke peered over my shoulder, looking at an illustration of a serpent curled around a princess with a long knife.

“How does it feel?” he asked. “To be stuck in a fairy tale?”

“How does it feel to *be* one?” I countered, then felt foolish. Talking to one of Prince Cardan’s awful friends was always risky, but when Locke grinned, it felt like boldness instead.

“I like stories,” he said. “And perhaps I like you as well.”

Then three days later, the message from him.

Fairy tales are full of girls who wait, who endure, who suffer. Good girls. Obedient girls. Girls who crush nettles until their hands bleed. Girls who haul water for witches. Girls who wander through deserts or sleep in ashes or make homes for transformed brothers in the woods. Girls without hands, without eyes, without the power of speech, without any power at all.

But then a prince rides up and sees the girl and finds her beautiful. Beautiful, not despite her suffering, but *because* of it.

And when I saw that note in my bag, I thought that maybe I was no longer stuck in a fairy tale, maybe I could be the hero of one.

All through dinner at Madoc’s long table, where Oriana fussed over little Oak while Vivi made faces at him and you stabbed at your venison, I was hopelessly distracted. My thoughts strayed again and again to Locke. Later, in the parlor, I tried to finish the embroidery I was adding to my velvet cape, but I stabbed my own finger with the needle, over and over, until even Oriana asked me if there was something wrong.

Do you remember that night? You sat before the fire, limned by flames, polishing a dagger, your brown curls tumbling over your face. I wanted to tell you about the note, but I was afraid that if I did, you would warn me it was some kind of trick. That Locke was just trying to humiliate me. You knew he was a boon companion of the youngest and worst of the princes of Elfhome, after all. You knew what Locke and his friends found amusing: cruelty.

But Locke didn't do the worst stuff. He wasn't like Prince Cardan, who listened to weeping like it was fine music, who stole selkie skins and *tried them on*, who smashed and burned enough things that it was said he was no longer welcome in his father's palace.

At least I didn't want to believe that Locke was like him.

I didn't want the note to be some kind of trick.

You know I hate it when people don't like me. I hate it that the Folk look down on us for being mortal. I comfort myself with the knowledge that they need us, even if they don't like to admit it. They need mortal lovers to bear their immortal children and mortal ambition to inspire them. Without us, not enough babies would be born, not enough ballads would be composed, no less sung.

And I comforted myself that I understand their baroque customs, their love of courtesy. Which was why I couldn't let Locke's note go unanswered. Etiquette *demand*ed some kind of response.

Of course, it didn't demand that I agree to meet him.

Instead of telling you about my dilemma, I went to Vivi. She was outside, staring up at the stars.

"Prophecying?" I guessed. Neither you nor I have been good at seeing the future in the skies. Neither of us can see in the dark well enough to note the movement of the stars accurately.

Maybe if we'd been better at it, we could have seen what was coming.

Vivi shook her head. "Thinking. About our mother. I was remembering something she'd told me."

I wasn't sure what to say to that. You know how Vivi is, cheerful when things go her way, and brooding when they don't. She'd been touchy the whole week before, sneaking off to the mortal world whenever possible. She's like that around the anniversary of us coming here and the anniversary of that one time we tried to leave for good. But I didn't need her moodiness. I needed her advice.

Vivi's voice took on an odd, distant quality. "I was in the bath, drowning boats and sending plastic sharks after them under the bubbles. I must have been very little. And Mom said to me, 'You must be *particularly* kind to people. Other kids can act like monsters, but not you.'"

"That doesn't seem fair," I said, although I couldn't help feeling a little resentful that Vivi had so many memories of Mom and Dad, while I couldn't

recall their faces with much detail.

“I thought so, too.” Vivi shrugged. “So I went back to drowning ships.”

“Oh,” I said, puzzled.

“But maybe I should have listened.” She turned toward me and fixed me with her eerie, cat-eyed stare. “I’m not sure I ever learned how to be particularly kind. What do you think?”

I didn’t like to admit it, but sometimes Vivi frightened me. Sometimes, for all her love of human things, she seemed entirely alien. Especially when I feel like just another of the human things she loves, possibly out of the same nostalgia for her childhood that makes her yearn for mortal movies and songs and comics.

I don’t know if you’ve ever felt that way. Maybe I should have talked to you about it. Maybe I should have talked to you about a lot of things.

“Well,” I said, seeing my opening. “It would be *particularly* kind to help me right now. A boy sent me a note and I have to send him one back, but I’m not sure what to say.”

I took it from my pocket, feeling a frisson of hope and fear when my fingers touched the paper, half-expecting it to be a product of my imagination. I could feel my cheeks grow hot as I handed it over.

You have to understand, I never thought it would come to anything bad for anyone but me.

Vivi read the message, perfectly able to see in the dark. “Locke?” She seemed to be trying to place his name. I wasn’t sure if she was teasing. “So, you’d like to meet this boy under the moonlight? Steal a few kisses?”

She made it sound so easy. “What if this is a joke? A game?”

She turned to me, head tilted, her expression pure confusion. As though I had no reason to be afraid of a broken heart. She had no idea how dangerous a broken heart could be. You do, though. You know.

“Then I suppose you’ll have a laugh before you kick him in the shins for causing trouble,” Vivi said with a shrug. “Or bring one of Jude’s blades and chase him around with it. You got the same instruction in swordplay she did; you must remember *some* of it.”

“I was never very good. I kept apologizing when I hit anyone,” I reminded her.

Madoc wanted to teach at least one of us his trade—the art of war. I am sure he hoped for Vivi. But it was you who wanted to learn. You who had the

real affinity. You who kept at it when he knocked you down.

You used to say that I was good. That I learned the moves easily. But I didn't *want* to know them. I hated the idea I might *have* to know them.

Before Elfame, I thought of us as just the same. Twins. We wore the same clothes. We laughed the same way and at the same things. We even had our own weird language, which was supposed to represent how our stuffed animals talked. Do you remember that?

There were differences, of course. I was always shy. And you never turned down a dare, even when it got a tooth chipped chasing one of the neighbor kids around the concrete edge of a pool.

But those differences didn't seem important until Madoc came. Until you attacked him while I sobbed. You tried to hit him. Uselessly. Foolishly. You ran at him like you didn't care if it cost you your life.

After that, it was like everything was a dare you couldn't back down from.

And you started not telling me things. Like how your finger came to be missing or what happened the night that no one could find you. I am not the only one who hid things. You hid plenty.

Now you're probably saying that I am making excuses. That I'm not really sorry. But I am just being honest. And I am trying to tell you the story the way it happened.

"So forget him, then," Vivi said.

I didn't listen. "Maybe it's not a game. I still need a way to send him a note back."

"Get Jude to distract him, and while he's looking at her, drop the paper into his bag," she suggested. "Or you go talk to him and she can do the slipping. He'll expect that less."

"Jude doesn't care about boys," I told her, maybe sounding harsher than I'd intended. I was terrified at the thought of being caught by Nicasia, or worse, by Prince Cardan. Giving Locke the note on the palace grounds was completely out of the question. "All she cares about are swords and strategy."

Vivi sighed, probably already regretting admitting a desire to be kinder. "I could call a seabird to take your message to Locke's estate. Is that what you want?"

"Yes," I said, gripping her hand hard.

In my room, I selected a page of beautiful, creamy paper. Carefully, I penned a message: *If you dare to come to my window, you will find me*

waiting.

Then I pressed a cluster of apple blossoms (for admiration) into the paper and folded it up into a tight little square, which I fixed with wax and Madoc's seal.

I wanted to remind him, you see, that it wasn't without risk to treat me poorly. You see, I wasn't stupid. At least not yet.

Once upon a time, there was a girl named Taryn. She suffered many indignities at the hands of the magical people called the Folk, yet she never was anything but kind, no matter how they despised her. Then one day, a fox-haired faerie boy looked upon her and saw her virtue and her loveliness, so he took her to be his bride. And on his arm, dressed in a gown as bright as the stars, the other Folk saw her for the first time. They knew that they'd misjudged her and...

All through the next afternoon at lessons, I watched for some sign he had received the note. He didn't look my way. Not even once.

I started to doubt that Vivi had sent my message. Perhaps she'd made a mistake and enchanted the seabird to someone else's estate. Or perhaps he'd merely crumpled the note and tossed it away.

On our shared blanket, you bit calmly into a damson plum, oblivious to my wild thoughts. I looked at the dullness of your hair, at the human softness of your body that no training with a sword could entirely erase. In the mortal world we might have been pretty, but here I could not pretend we were anything but plain.

I wished that I could kick you. I wished I could slap you. Looking at you was like looking into a mirror and hating what I saw. And your obliviousness, in that moment, made it worse. I know it was a terrible thing to think, but at least I am admitting it. See, I am confessing everything.

All afternoon, I stewed in despair and misery. But that night, a pebble struck my window and I saw the shape of a boy standing below, smiling up at me as though he already knew all my secrets.

That first time Locke came to my window, I climbed down from the balcony and walked with him through the woods. In the distance, I heard the songs of

revelers, but the forest around us was hushed.

“I’m glad you agreed to a stroll.” He wore a russet coat and kept pushing back his hair as though he were the one who was nervous. “I wish to ask you about love.”

“You want advice?” I steeled myself for him to tell me something I didn’t want to hear. Still, it was flattering to think he wanted me for anything.

“Nicasia believes herself to be in love with me,” he said.

“I thought—” I began, then reconsidered what I’d been about to say.

“That she was Prince Cardan’s beloved?” Locke gave me a sly fox’s grin. “She was. And I seduced her away from him. Does it surprise you that she would choose me over a prince?”

I shook my head, startled into honesty. “Not even a little.”

He laughed, the sound rising through the trees like a whirlwind of leaves. “Do you not even think me a disloyal friend?”

I was glad for the dark, so that my blush might be even a little obscured. “Surely he gave you reason.” I did not point out what a hateful creature Prince Cardan was, but I doubted I had to if neither Nicasia nor Locke cared for him enough to consider his feelings.

“I like you,” Locke said. “Unwisely. I am fair sure I like you far too well.”

I frowned, wondering if he meant because I was mortal. But surely if he could steal a prince’s *lover* without reprisal, he need fear nothing from no one. “You can like me all you want, can’t you?”

“Nicasia might not agree,” Locke said with a smile that made me think he meant something more than I’d supposed by his declaration. Something more than tepid friendship.

I felt a little light-headed.

“So if I mean to keep visiting you,” he went on, “will you promise to tell no one? Absolutely no one, no matter what, until I allow it’s safe?”

I thought of Vivi, who helped me send the note. I thought of you, who’d be suspicious of his motives. “No one,” I said finally. “I promise.”

“Good.” Locke took my hand and kissed my wrist, then walked me back to the house.

I know what you’re thinking, that if I figured you’d be suspicious of his motives, then maybe I should have been suspicious, too. That if fairy stories

warn us about keeping promises, I shouldn't have given my word so easily. But there, under the stars, with everything feeling like a dream, I didn't even hesitate.

The second time Locke came to my window, I snuck down the back stairs, carrying with me a bottle of night-dark wine, sharp cheese, and one of your knives. He and I had a picnic under the blanket of night, and then under the blush of morning, drinking from the stem of the bottle and from each other's mouths.

The third time Locke came to my window, I threw down a rope and he climbed up to my balcony. He came into my bedroom and then into my bed, with the whole house quiet around us. We had to smother every sound.

"Once upon a time, there was a girl named Taryn," he whispered, and it was perfect. He was perfect.

Nights upon nights of happiness followed. We told each other stories, stories of the people we knew and other stories that we made up, just for each other.

And yes, I told him about you.

I told him too much.

I was giddy with love, stupid with it. At the next revel, I was too eager to catch sight of Locke, to stay safely removed from the fray. I plunged into the center of the wild circle dances, dragging you with me. Even though I knew he shouldn't talk to me, I suppose I hoped for *something*. Happiness had made me too bold.

What I never expected was for him to turn to us—and for his eyes not to meet mine, but yours, Jude.

As though he couldn't tell us apart.

Prince Cardan saw him looking, too.

All that night I tossed and turned on my blankets, waiting for Locke. But he never came.

The next day at the palace grounds, I didn't know what to think or do. I felt sick, the kind of sick that makes your whole body heavy, as though your blood is turning to gravel.

Then Prince Cardan kicked dirt on our food. It coated a piece of buttered bread in your hand. You looked up at him and you didn't manage to smother your anger before he saw it.

Mostly, we are agreed that the youngest prince is trouble we ought to avoid. Royal, terrible, and vicious. And mostly we were beneath his notice. But not that day.

"Something the matter?" Nicasia asked, draping her arm over Cardan's shoulder. "Dirt. It's what you came from, mortal. It's what you'll return to soon enough. Take a big bite."

I wondered at Cardan, allowing her so close to him after her betrayal. And I wondered at them both, frowning down at you, Jude, when it was me they ought to be angry with. I kept expecting them to turn, kept expecting them to know *something* of what I'd been doing with Locke. I half-expected them to know *all* of it and to lay it out in hideous, humiliating detail.

But you stood in front of Nicasia and Cardan as though you were my shield. "Make me," you snarled. I simultaneously wanted to make you shut up before things got worse and throw my arms around you in gratitude.

"I *could*, you know," Prince Cardan said, something awful kindling behind his eyes. The way he looked at you made my stomach churn.

Nicasia pulled the pin from your hair. "You'll never be our equal," she told you, as though we needed reminding.

"Let's leave them to their misery," Locke urged Cardan, but it didn't help.

You'd gone automatically into a fighting stance. I wasn't sure if they knew it, but I did and I was terrified of what might happen next. I was pretty sure hitting Cardan was treasonous, even if he hit you first.

"Jude's sorry," I told them, which probably annoyed you, but that's one thing I don't regret. "We're both really sorry."

Cardan looked at me with those unsettlingly black eyes. "She can show us how sorry she is. Tell her she doesn't belong in the Summer Tournament."

"Afraid I'll win?" you asked, that old urge not to back down from a dare kicking in hard.

"It's not for mortals," he returned, voice cold, and when he looked at me, it seemed he was talking about more than the tournament. *It's not for mortals.*

It's not for you. Locke is not for you. "Withdraw, or wish that you had."

"I'll talk to her about it," I put in quickly. "It's nothing, just a game."

Nicasia gave me the sort of smile usually reserved for a pet obediently doing a trick. For a moment I wondered if they really had only been being idly awful, if they knew nothing. But Cardan's stare was heavy-lidded, lascivious. And when Nicasia spoke again, her words seemed to have more than one meaning. "It's all just a game."

That night, I resolved that if Locke came to my window, I would send him away. He should have defended me. He should have done *something*.

But as dawn threatened the horizon with no sign of him, I lost my resolve. If he came, I swore I would be content with that alone. I would be selfishly glad he was with me, even if it was only in secret. If he came, if only he'd come.

He didn't.

Faeries despise humans as liars, but there are different kinds of lying. Since you and I first came to Faerie, Jude, we've lied to each other plenty. We pretended to be fine, pretended the *possibility* of being fine into existence. And when pretending seemed like it might be too hard, we just didn't ask each other the questions that would require it. We smiled and forced laughter and rolled our eyes at the Folk, as though we weren't afraid, when we were both scared all the time.

And if there were hairline cracks in all that pretending, we pretended those away, too.

So I didn't understand. I knew you wanted to be a knight, but I didn't understand how afraid you were of Madoc forbidding it. I thought that you'd just fight for him. I thought that it was me who needed to find a place in Faerie and that your sword had already bought you one. I thought the Summer Tournament was merely an opportunity to show off. There would be others. He hadn't taught you the sword for nothing.

I should have understood.

We'd been raised like the children of the Gentry, but we weren't. We were mortals and we had no fixed future in Faerie. You were wondering about your place here, just like I was.

“I am done with being good,” you told me after Madoc had basically crushed your dreams.

I thought you were just venting.

But then you salted the food of Prince Cardan and all his friends, including Locke. You played the kind of prank that was only supposed to be funny when it was done by them, not to them. You were bold and daring and breathtakingly stupid.

Be bold, be bold, but not too bold, lest that your heart’s blood should run cold.

Across the grounds, the prince looked at you, eyes alight with hatred. I have never seen a look like that on anyone’s face before, a look of such pure malice that I took an involuntary step back.

You had the nerve to grin at him.

And I was just *so mad*. I loved Locke and he hadn’t come for nights and nights, and there you were, making everything worse. And for what? Because they said something mean? Because they ruined our lunch?

I was afraid and I wanted to shout at you and shake you, but you would have just been puzzled. And I couldn’t make myself explain, not since I didn’t know if Locke would ever come to my window again. What if all of our whispered words and kisses and embraces meant nothing to him? I wasn’t ready to admit to my foolishness, but I was angry all the same.

Angry at you, angry at him.

On our way home, all my anger turned to terror. Prince Cardan and Valerian caught you, blindfolding you, pinning your arms—and Locke got hold of me. Nicasia was somewhere behind them, laughing.

“Don’t be afraid,” Locke whispered into my ear. I couldn’t see his expression, but his voice was soft. “This will be over quickly.”

“You have to stop them,” I whispered back. “You have to help—”

“Trust me,” he said, then pushed me into the river. I hit the water with a splash. The shock of cold hit me and I stumbled, making for a nearby boulder, my heart beating wildly. I had no idea what might happen next. Nicasia’s mother was the Queen of the Undersea and Cardan’s father was the High King. They could do whatever they wanted with us.

I thought of the look I’d seen on Cardan’s face and shuddered.

Trust me, Locke had said. But I didn’t. How could I?

You got a harder shove and went under the water, emerging spluttering,

panicked. I tried to move toward you. Water soaked my skirts, dragging me down. I was terrified that I was going to slip, that the current was too strong. Locke's words only made it worse. *This will be over quickly*, he'd said. But not everything is better for being fast.

You stood up. It was hard to concentrate on anything but the freezing river and keeping my balance. I heard Valerian say something about nixies. Hungry nixies. Cardan watched us greedily.

I was scared. Really, really, really scared.

"Is this fun?" you demanded, as though none of this fazed you. "Are you enjoying yourselves?"

Nicasia splashed you with water.

"Enormously," Cardan said, just as your foot slipped and you went under.

You surfaced before I got close to you, taking shuddering breath after shuddering breath. But you still didn't back down, didn't beg, didn't promise to do what he wanted. I wonder what it was that made you dig in your heels. Maybe it was the sheer unfairness of the way the deck was always stacked against us.

I tried to wade upstream, where it was shallower. On the bank, Locke watched me with an expression of polite interest, as though he were looking at a play unfolding on a stage. It was horrible. My skirts were so heavy and I was moving so slowly. My steps were uncertain.

"Twin sister," Cardan said, turning to me. "I have a most generous offer for you. Climb up the bank and kiss me on both my cheeks. Once that's done, so long as you don't defend your sister by word or deed, I won't hold you accountable for her defiance. Now, isn't that a good bargain?"

"Go," you said firmly. "I'll be fine."

I looked at Prince Cardan. A little smile pulled up the corner of his mouth. I had been in Faerie long enough to read between the lines of promises. He wouldn't hold what *you'd* done against me. But he'd made no promises about what *I'd* done.

What were the chances he knew all? I wanted out of the river, away from the nixies and the current. I wanted to know that I wasn't going to drown or be eaten. And though I suppose there was a certain nobility in staying in the water with you, it wasn't as though it would help anything.

Maybe Cardan was just paying you back for the salting of his food.

I glanced over at Locke. He raised his brows slightly, in a way I found

hard to interpret. *Trust me*, he'd said. But if he had a plan, I'd seen no sign of one.

Valerian came to the edge of the bank to hand me out of the water as though I were some great lady. When I pressed my cold mouth to the prince's cheek, Locke waited a moment, then drew me a little ways away.

Nicasia turned toward me and the ferocity in her face filled me with dread. "Say 'I forsake my sister Jude,'" she demanded. "I won't help her. I don't even like her."

"I don't have to say that," I said in confusion. "That wasn't part of the bargain."

The others laughed. Not Nicasia, who was clearly too incensed to even pretend amusement.

Something was wrong. This wasn't because of any prank. Nicasia's anger was too intense, Cardan's hatred too vital. And Locke seemed half in and half out of the action, as though he was a willing but unenthusiastic participant.

"Please," I whispered to Locke. "Do something."

"Ah, but I have," he told me, not looking in my direction as he spoke. "I'm protecting you."

And then all at once I recalled the way he'd smiled at *you* at the revel, in front of Cardan, and how he hadn't been to see me since. Recalled that you and I are identical twins. He was *protecting* me, sure. Protecting me by *tricking* them.

He'd made them think you were his lover.

And the way you'd stood up to them—well, you practically confirmed it.

"No," I whispered. "She's my *sister*. You can't do that to my sister."

"You ought not worry. Look," he said, his gaze lingering admiringly on you, wet and cold and defiant. "She's strong enough to bear it."

I am ashamed to say that his words were enough to make my sympathy sour. And though we walked home together and I wept with an excess of horror and guilt, wet and cold and overwhelmed, I would not tell you why. I didn't tell you anything. I didn't speak.

Of course, it wasn't like you said anything to me, either.

That night, shivering before the fire, I plucked the petals from flower heads in a divination I didn't learn at any palace school.

He loves me.

He loves me not.

Locke still didn't come.

I woke to Vivi jumping on my mattress, shouting about going to the mortal world. She was in high spirits and would hear no arguments against it. You just seemed exhausted, sagging against your ragwort steed as we flew over the sea. I petted the rough green skin of mine, pressed my cheek against its leafy mane, drank in its grassy smell. I loved Faerie, loved magic. But right then, it was a relief to be leaving it for a while.

I needed to think.

Look, I admit that I was jealous of the way he'd openly admired your defiance.

I tried to tell myself a story. In "The Princess and the Pea," a girl came to the door of a palace in distress, her gown soaked and muddy, her skin chilled. She was a princess, she said, but her carriage had been turned over and her servants had been separated from her in a rainstorm. She only needed a bed for the night and some food. The queen wasn't sure if she believed the story. The girl was very beautiful—beautiful enough that the queen's son was staring at her in a decidedly moonstruck fashion—but was she really a princess? There was only one way to find out. The queen instructed that a pea be placed beneath dozens of mattresses. Only a princess's skin was sensitive enough for such a small thing to bruise her.

Maybe Locke liked that I was sensitive. He'd protected me, maybe he wanted someone who needed protecting. But I wasn't sure.

Plus I thought you were mad at me.

I really did. After all, I'd climbed out of the river, leaving you behind. I'd kissed that monster Cardan on both his cheeks.

And, even if you didn't know it, I was the reason all this had started. "You're probably mad," I began.

"I'm sorry," you blurted out at practically the same time, looking, if anything, more miserable than before. Then, realizing what I'd said, you just looked confused. "At you?"

"I swore to Cardan that I wouldn't help you, even though I came with you that day to help." That was the least of what I had to apologize for, but I

couldn't tell you the whole truth. I'd promised Locke I wouldn't tell anyone.

You seemed frustrated. "Really, Taryn, you're the one who should be angry that I got you tossed into the water in the first place. Getting yourself out of there was the smart thing to do. I would never be mad about that."

Of course I *had* been angry, but when you said that, I felt guiltier than ever.

Vivi had ideas about funnier and worse pranks you could play on the prince and his friends.

"No!" I interrupted, horrified.

What Locke had done—even if it was awful to you, it was a grand gesture. It meant he cared for me. And now Nicasia and Prince Cardan had had their fun and humiliated you. Now, maybe if you didn't provoke them further, they would stop.

Locke hadn't visited me in days. Surely whatever they thought had been between Locke and you, they must believe it was over. That they'd ended it. That they'd frightened you off.

But before you promised to back down, Vivienne dropped the bombshell that she had a mortal girlfriend and was leaving Faerie forever.

"Here's my plan to cheer you up," Vivi said, leading us through a shopping mall. "We all move to the human world. Move in with Heather. Jude doesn't have to worry about knighthood and Taryn doesn't have to throw herself away on some silly faerie boy."

I tensed at that, remembering that she'd helped me send the note to Locke, but she didn't say any more. She was too busy trying to convince us that we didn't want to stay in Faerie because she didn't, and leaving us behind made her feel bad.

What she didn't understand was that there was nothing in the human world for us, not even our own names.

I looked our story up once, in a library. Pulled articles onto the computer screen. Our parents' murder had caused a bit of a sensation because of the swords. In a world of guns, swords seemed old-fashioned and a little bit funny. Weird couple dies weirdly. There was wild speculation about an affair gone wrong, and a few of Dad's medieval reenactment friends gave quotes that tried to play down the salacious angle. But since the papers mostly chose photos of them in costume, that only made things worse.

The articles presumed that the children would turn up. Some of our

clothing was missing, toys were gone. Maybe we'd be found after a few days, having slept in the forest, blanketed in leaves brought by considerate sparrows. But, of course, we weren't.

We were never found at all.

Heather turned out to be a pink-haired artist who exchanged such a fathoms-deep glance with Vivi that I couldn't even begin to interpret it. Despite that look, I couldn't help wondering *how* Vivi could possibly love a mortal girl. She didn't know anything. She had no magic. She didn't even seem like she'd done much suffering.

I should have found it inspiring—after all, if Heather and Vivi were in love, then love was possible between mortals and faeries—but it made me feel uneasy instead. Like maybe they'd used up all the luck there was.

Or maybe it was because I was thinking about how Mom had started out a lot like Heather. She fell in love with someone who didn't tell her the truest truth, who let her believe that he was human, who brought her into a world she didn't understand, a world that chewed her up and spat her out. A world I was hoping wouldn't do the same to me.

Be bold, be bold, but not too bold.

Be good, but not too good. Be pretty, but not too pretty. Be honest, but not too honest. Maybe no one got lucky. Maybe it was too hard.

By the time we were heading back toward our ragwort horses, I think Vivi realized that if she was leaving Faerie, she was doing it on her own.

I tried to imagine Elfhome without her. Everything would be a little more frightening. There would be no legitimate heir to intercede with us with Madoc. No one to go to for little magic. And worst, no way to reconsider. Without her to make us a flying pony from weeds or a boat that would travel by puffs of our breath, there was no way off the isles.

Before, it was important that we found a place we belonged in Faerie, but with Vivi leaving, it was imperative.

"You're going to have to tell her eventually," you said, still talking to Vivi about Heather. About Faerie. About lies of omission.

I tried not to feel called out by the words, even though they could have just as easily applied to me.

"Love is a noble cause," Vivi reminded her. "How can anything done in the service of a noble cause be wrong?"

By late afternoon, we were back on the palace grounds, attending a lecture so dull that I dozed off in the middle of it. You and I sat in the branches of a tree to have our lunch. I took care not to glance too much in Locke's direction—even though I was eager to—and Prince Cardan and his companions seemed to have tired of us. You seemed to be actually trying to avoid trouble for once. I let myself relax. I let myself believe that the worst was behind me. I let myself pretend.

Once upon a time, there was a girl named Taryn and she had a faerie lover who came to her at night. He was generous and adoring, but visited only in the dark. He asked for two things: one, for her to keep their meetings secret, and two, never to look upon his face fully. And so, night after night she took delight in him but, after some time had passed, wondered what his secret could be....

My daydream reverie was interrupted by Prince Cardan.

"I know what you did," he drawled, voice low, not at all sounding like he was asking a question. "Wicked girl. Yet you let your sister take the brunt of my ire. That wasn't very nice, was it?"

He was dressed in a velvet doublet, with buttons of carved jet. Loose black curls framed his sharp cheekbones and a mouth set in a cruel line. He's handsome, but that makes his horribleness worse, somehow. As though he's taken something nice and made it awful. Being the single focus of his attention made me feel like a bug that a child was going to burn with a magnifying glass.

I stammered, caught completely off guard. "I—I didn't know. I swear I didn't."

A slow smile spread across his mouth. "Oh, I see why Locke likes you."

For a moment I thought that might be almost a compliment.

"You're *awful*." He said it as though he was delighted. "And the worst part is that you believe otherwise."

Tears sprang to my eyes. I hated that I cried so easily. And he was wrong. I hadn't known. Not until that afternoon by the river.

I shook my head, wiping away tears. "Does that mean you're going to leave her alone now?"

Cardan leaned in close, close enough that I could feel his breath on my cheek. “It’s much too late for that.”

Then you came out of nowhere and grabbed his shoulder. Before I could even speak, you’d spun him around and slammed his back against a tree. Your hand went to his throat. Cardan’s eyes went wide with shock. All around us, the children of the Gentry stared, agog.

Cardan was a Prince of Elfhame. And you were putting your hands on him—there, in front of everyone. Hands he was likely to order cut off.

Shock pinned me in place. I barely recognized you with your teeth bared like that. This new you, who wouldn’t surrender in the river, a Jude I am not sure I know. A Jude I was not sure would like me. Right then you looked as though you wanted to bite out the prince’s throat and he looked thrilled to have an excuse to do whatever awful thing he was planning.

I was terrified for you and scared for myself, too. Everything was just getting worse and worse and I didn’t know how to stop any of it. It felt like being trapped in one of those circle dances. Mortal feet won’t stop moving, no matter how tired you get. We’ll dance until our feet bleed. Until we collapse. We can’t do anything else until the music ends.

But that night, at last, Locke came to my window.

A stone struck the glass pane and I was out of bed in an instant, fumbling for a robe. I came out onto the balcony and looked down at him, my heart racing. His hair was bright in the moonlight, his face as handsome as heartbreak.

I took a breath and steeled myself. It was so tempting to push away all my doubts and fears and to rush into his arms.

But I couldn’t let myself forget how hurt I had been, night after night, not knowing whether he’d ever come again, not knowing what I’d meant to him, if I’d meant anything at all.

And something else bothered me. Something about the freshness of Nicasia’s anger and her possessiveness made me wonder if Locke and she were together still. If, when he wasn’t visiting me at night, he was visiting her.

Locke and I stared at each other as the cool night air blew my robe, ruffled his hair.

“Come down, my beauty, my darling, my dove,” he urged, but not loudly. He must have been a little worried, with the general sleeping so near. If Locke woke Madoc up, who knew how he’d have reacted? For a moment, I pictured Locke’s heart shot through with an arrow and then shook my head to get rid of the image. It wasn’t like me to think things like that.

It especially wasn’t like me to have a brief jolt of satisfaction from it.

Guilt over my thoughts, more than anything else, made me lasso a thin rope from my balcony and slither down it. My bare feet landed on the grass.

Locke took both my hands and looked me over with a smile that managed to be complimentary and slightly, amusingly lewd. I giggled, despite myself.

“It was hard to stay away from you,” he said.

“You shouldn’t have.” It was part of his charm, somehow, to get me to say the things I meant.

“We—the Folk—don’t love like you do,” Locke said. “Perhaps you shouldn’t trust me with your heart. I might break it.”

I didn’t like that. “Cardan knows it was me you were meeting. He told me as much.”

“Ah,” he said. Just that.

I took a few steps from him and crossed my arms over my chest. “Leave Jude out of this.”

He gave me a fox’s grin. “Cardan certainly does seem to enjoy hurting her, doesn’t he?”

It was true, and awful. Even if I could persuade you to stop reacting—impossible enough—the prince had to be angry about being slammed into a tree. “She can’t win.”

“Can’t she?” he asked.

I hated the way he questioned me, as though you were so much more *interesting* than I was. I was the good sister, the one who kept faith and stuck to the rules. You were the angry one, the one who didn’t know how far was far enough, the one who courted disaster. It wasn’t fair. “*You* won’t even go against him. How could *she* have any chance?”

Locke laughed at that. “There it is. That temper you try to hide. You know what fascinates me about you? You’re a hungry person sitting in front of a banquet, refusing to eat.”

I thought of the banquets of Faerie, of everapple, the fruit that makes mortals give in to abandon. I thought of the banquets I’d only heard of, where

the Folk enchant humans and serve up garbage glamoured to look like delicacies, where they crown one of them the Queen of Mirth, a title that comes with robes of filth and horrible mockery.

How could he doubt why I would hesitate to eat at such a banquet?

“Aren’t you ever careless?” he asked.

“Always, with you.”

“I want to show you something,” Locke said, taking my hand. “Come with me.”

“I’m not wearing—” I began, but he led me toward the woods.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “No one will mind.”

I stopped moving, horrified. “Who is going to be there? I don’t think this is a good idea.” I didn’t even have shoes.

“Will you trust me?” Locke asked. There was so much in that question. When I thought back to the time before that first note, my life seemed to have been dry paper waiting for him to kindle it.

No, not him. *Love.*

“Yes,” I said, taking his hand. “For tonight.”

There was a revel near the Lake of Masks. A few Folk cavorted under the stars and stretched out on carpets. I didn’t recognize any of them; they didn’t attend the palace school, and if I’d seen them before, it had only been in passing. They seemed to know Locke, though, and called out to him. One played a fiddle and when he saw us, he began playing a song I’d heard before in the mortal world.

Locke twirled me in his arms and for those moments, everything was perfect. We danced three dances like that, my body becoming looser, my steps less formal. Then we rested on the grass, sharing a glass of spiced wine from a borrowed wooden cup.

Then Locke pointed to a boy with hair the impossibly bright green of new leaves. “He keeps looking at you.”

“Because I’m in a nightgown,” I said.

“Go speak with him,” Locke said cryptically.

I gave him an incredulous look, but he only raised his brows and smiled. “It will be easy once it’s begun.”

“What will?” I asked.

“Go,” he urged, looking impish.

And so I forced myself to stand and to make my way over the grass.

The boy looked surprised as I drew closer, then stood up, dusting off his homespun tunic. Reed pipes hung from a leather cord around his neck.

“The general’s daughter,” he said, and bowed. “Sometimes, when the leaves are thin, we can see the lights of your stronghold from here.”

“And sometimes I can hear music from my balcony. Were you the player?”

He blushed. He must have been green-blooded, because his cheeks and neck were abruptly suffused with that color. “If it pleased you, then I’d like to claim it was me.”

“And to what name ought I direct my praise?” Locke was right about one thing. It was easy. The boy was nice. But I didn’t understand what I was supposed to be doing.

“Edir,” he said. “But you can call me whatever you want if you will consent to dance with me.”

So we danced, his shy hand on my hip. Locke watched. The fiddler pranced around as he played. Revelers in rags, leaves in their hair, whirled and jumped.

I laughed.

This was just the sort of thing that Oriana would hate. She wouldn’t like me venturing out alone, my pockets empty of salt. She wouldn’t like me dancing, especially with Folk who were not courtiers. But despite that, despite the strangeness of the situation, I was having fun.

“I hope you didn’t get bored without me,” Locke interrupted, surprising me. I hadn’t noticed when he got up.

A moment later, he was pulling me into his arms for a kiss. Then he turned to Edir. “He looks amusing enough. Was he?”

Hurt flashed across the boy’s face. His mouth crumpled.

“Very amusing,” I said. Only after the words left my mouth did I realize how dismissive they sounded, like Nicasia or Prince Cardan himself. But for a moment it felt good to be awful, like looking down on the world from some great height.

“I will take my leave,” Edir said, drawing himself up. “Perhaps some night you will cast open your window and hear my song and recall tonight.” He went back to his friends and I felt terrible for hurting him.

“He will want you all the more for not getting you,” Locke whispered in my ear, pressing his lips against my throat.

“I don’t care,” I said. “I’m going home.”

“I will escort you,” he said. “If you like.”

“Yes.” I gathered my robe around me and began to walk, not waiting for him to lead the way. I felt—I don’t know how I felt. I could barely describe it.

“Why did you want me to do that?” I asked finally. The woods were so quiet. And all I could think was that Locke had shown himself to me. That’s who he was, the person who engineered Edir’s pain. Friend to Cardan and Nicasia and Valerian. Peas in a pod. I had been a fool to love him.

“To show you what you would not otherwise believe,” Locke said. “Envy. Fear. Anger. Jealousy. They’re all spices.” He laughed at my expression. “What is bread without salt? Desire can grow just as plain.”

“I don’t understand—”

He put a finger against my mouth. “Not every lover can appreciate such spices. But I think you can.”

He meant it to be flattering, but I wasn’t so sure that it was. I ducked my head, twisted away from him.

He didn’t look upset. “I can show you a version of yourself, Taryn. One you’ve never imagined. It’s terrible to be a girl trapped in a story. But you can be more than that. You can be the teller. You can shape the story. You can make all of Faerie love you.”

I hated that it was so easy for Locke to guess the deepest, most shameful desire of my heart.

And before you judge me, I know you want it, too. I see how you look to Madoc for approval. I see how your gaze rests on them—the envy, the wish to be seen as special. Don’t tell me you wouldn’t do a lot to win the love of Faerie.

“What would I have to do?”

“Put aside your mortal ways and your mortal qualms.”

Despite my misgivings, when he came and kissed me, I clung to him. And when he urged me down to the forest floor, I was glad to forget everything else. I stretched out, breathing in the sweet scent of leaf mold all around us.

As I finally fell asleep in the late morning, with the sun so bright, I had to close the drapes and press my pillow over my eyes as a new story looped in

my head.

Once there was a girl named Taryn and she was beloved of a boy named Locke. They were the companions of the youngest prince of Elfame and his friends, the talented Valerian and the beautiful Nicasia of the Undersea. When they arrived at revels, courtiers turned their heads to see the magnificent cut of their gowns, to see the cunning cut of their jackets. And everyone who saw them adored them—especially Taryn, who was the best and most beloved of them all.

Your tournament was soon after.

I warned you. No good could come from defying a prince. But the thing was, you'd been indoctrinated with a stupid idea of honor from Madoc, which basically translated into an unwillingness to back down and a belief that *winning* was more important than *surviving*. And you played this game the same way.

I came late to the stands. I didn't want to be there. Even though I'd told you that participating would bring nothing but sorrow, I had no expectation of you listening. And I hated to watch.

But Vivi was going to go, and if I didn't, you would have taken it the wrong way. We were already arguing enough. So I sat in a gown of blue, listening to the crowd howl, seeing the cream-colored banners whip through the air. And I got ready for the spectacle.

You didn't disappoint. You hit Cardan so hard that I thought you cracked his ribs, but it was your practice sword that broke. You knocked his friend Valerian into the dirt. It was like some madness took hold of you. I thought you were unrestrained before, but it was nothing to this.

Vivi cheered wildly. Princess Rhyia, one of Cardan's sisters and a friend of Vivi's, looked on with the delight of a hunter watching the dance of predator and prey. I clutched my hands together in dread.

After the tournament, I rushed from the stands, sick with worry.

But Prince Cardan had already found you. He'd grabbed you by your hair and was snarling into your face.

You'd been too good out there. Anyone could see that. Just like anyone

could see why he hadn't wanted you to compete in the first place. You were mortal. You weren't supposed to best the children of the High Court, no less make it look easy.

"There's nothing you can do," Locke said, coming up behind me.

"He is going to hurt her," I said, glancing back at Princess Rhyia, hoping she might intercede. But we were far from the stands and she was in deep conversation with my sister anyway, barely glancing in our direction.

"He's a prince of Faerie," Locke reminded me. "And Jude—well, let's watch and see what she is."

"Beg," Prince Cardan ordered you. "Make it pretty. Flowery. Worthy of me."

For a moment, you looked like you might.

Locke's eyes were alive with interest.

"Why are you looking at Jude like that?" I asked.

"I can't help it," he said, never taking his gaze from you. "I'm drawn to trouble."

I recalled what he'd said about jealousy being a spice, about giving up mortal ways and qualms.

Locke left me there. He left me and walked over to you. My sister. My impulsive twin who seemed to be willing to make every stupid choice in the world.

The one with the tale that was still unfolding.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. This is supposed to be an apology. I made a lot of bad choices. I know that.

You were tired of being picked on, tired of bowing your head to them. You were probably tired of being tired. I get that. But it made it extra hard to keep on bowing my head when I was the only one.

And Locke. Locke saw me differently than anyone had seen me before. He'd given me a taste of what it was to love, to want, to desire. And it made me hungry for more. I didn't want to give it up.

That doesn't justify what I did, though.

"Come riding with us," Vivi said, indicating Princess Rhyia. Even though she was royalty, her chief joy was riding out in the forest, hunting with her

companions. I believe Vivi and Rhyia were drawn together by a mutual lack of interest in propriety.

“Yes, come,” said Princess Rhyia. “Are you any good with a bow?”

“Middling,” I returned, unable to turn down the invitation of a princess, even though I knew I couldn’t sulk the way I would have liked. And oh, I wanted to sulk and feel sorry for myself and cry. I hated the way he looked at you. I wanted to eat all the clotted cream and jam in Madoc’s kitchen.

The Folk don’t love like you do.

I thought of my mother, wandering through the rooms of Madoc’s stronghold, slowly coming to realize that she couldn’t bear being there. How she made a plan to escape him.

I thought about how good it must have felt when you hit Prince Cardan with your practice blade.

“So tell me about this Heather,” Rhyia said to my sister as we rode. “Is she really worth living in their world of filth and iron?”

Vivi laughed. “You know I like it there.”

Rhyia’s lip curled slightly. “Well enough. But the girl?”

“The first thing I noticed about her was that she had a smear of blue ink on her nose,” Vivi said. “The second thing I noticed were her eyes, the color of darkest amber. When she spoke, I was afraid she was talking to someone else.”

Rhyia snorted. “What did she say?”

Vivi smiled with the memory. “I want to draw you.”

“Ah,” said Rhyia. “An artist.”

“You should bring her here,” I said, although I was only making trouble. “Artists are beloved of Faerie.”

“Ah, what a fine suggestion!” said Rhyia with a big laugh. “How happy I am you’ve come riding with us.”

Vivi looked less pleased. “I think I will keep Heather to myself for now.”

“Love is greedy,” Rhyia said, drawing her bow. She’d spotted a bird high in the trees and chosen it to be her quarry.

Her words bothered me, although I suppose my love for Locke was greedy, too. But love was also transforming. I knew that from fairy tales. It could turn you back from a cat or a frog or a beast. Probably it could turn you into those things, too.

You can make all of Faerie love you, Locke had said.

Vivi fell back to ride with me as the princess set off on the hunt. Our horses drew side by side.

“Why are you angry with Jude?” Vivi asked.

I suppose there was no hiding the way I had looked when we watched the tournament. And—I mean, you know how I felt. “She’s the one who’s angry,” I said. “She’s angry all the time. And she makes everyone angry at both of us.”

“Sometimes it’s easier to be mad at the people close to us,” Vivi said, “than to be mad at the people who deserve it.”

Princess Rhyia shot three small birds and cooked them over the fire. We ate them with soft cheese and a bottle of wine. I was so hungry I licked my fingers afterward, chewed on the bones. Vivi noticed and gave me half her bird. When I demurred, she rolled her eyes at me.

It still wasn’t enough.

That night Locke came to my window and called for me, but I pretended to be asleep. I was too hurt, too raw. I didn’t want to hear whatever he would say to me if I asked about you.

He called and called, but I wouldn’t go down. Finally he gave up.

And yet, it was impossible for me to rest. After an hour of tossing and turning, I threw on a cloak and sat on my balcony. I listened to the night owls calling to one another.

Then music started up near the Lake of Masks. I heard a singer begin a tune I hadn’t heard before, a song of heartbreak. Of a girl who walked the earth by starlight. Whose aspect was mortal but with beauty divine. Her cruelty had pierced his heart.

I was listening to Edir singing about me.

Locke had been as good as his word. He had shown me how to make Faerie love me. He had shown me how to be the shaper of a story. He had done more than that, even. He had shown me how to achieve something like immortality.

I sat there in the dark for a long time, listening. And then I turned around and walked to Locke’s estate.

You’ve been there, I know, so you’ve seen it, like a fairy-tale castle with a tower of the sort Rapunzel might have been imprisoned in. During the day

it's pretty, but in the dark, it was intimidating.

Be bold, be bold.

With a shudder, I drew myself up, wrapped my cloak more tightly around myself, and knocked on the heavy front door with all my strength.

I saw a light blaze in one of the high rooms and I knocked again.

The door opened and a thin, tall creature—a servant of the house, I presumed—opened the door.

“I would see Locke,” I told him with as much haughtiness as I could bring to bear.

Be bold, be bold, but not too bold.

He gave me a steady look and I stared back, trying not to notice how pale and sunken-eyed he looked, like one of the dead. But then he swept a bow and indicated without speaking that I ought to come inside.

I was brought to a little parlor that was shabbier and dustier than I'd expected. Another servant, this one small and round, brought a decanter of some purple liquid and a small glass.

When Locke finally came into the room, I was coughing because it turned out the purple stuff was very strong. His hair was mussed from sleep and he wore a thin shirt and soft-looking pants beneath a dressing gown. His feet were bare on the stone floor.

“You came *here*,” he said, as though it had never occurred to him I could do that. I suppose that's one good thing about being obedient and faithful and good. People think you will never surprise them.

“Yes,” I said. “I think I understand now. What you meant when you said I had to give up my mortal qualms. And I am willing to do that. But I want you to marry me.”

“Ah.” He sat down on the couch, looking stunned with lack of sleep. “And so you came here in the middle of the night?”

“I hope that you love me.” I tried to sound the way Oriana did when she forbade us to do things—stern, but not unkind. “And I will try to live as the Folk do. But you ought to marry me even if neither of those things were true, because otherwise I might ruin your fun.”

“My fun?” he echoed. Then he sounded worried. Then he sounded awake.

“Whatever game you are playing with Nicasia and Cardan,” I said. “And with me. Tell Madoc we're to be wed and tell Jude about your real intentions or I will start shaping stories of my own.”

I thought of the brothers in the story of Mr. Fox, cutting the villain to pieces. It came to me, standing on my balcony, that with their inclination to violence, my family would need a lot less provocation to turn on Locke. As Edir's song drifted through the air, I realized that Locke might teach me lessons, but he wasn't going to like what I did once I learned them.

"You promised—" he began, but I cut him off.

"Not a marriage of a year and a day, either," I said. "I want you to love me until you die."

He blinked. "Don't you mean until *you* die? Because you're sure to."

I shook my head. "You're going to live forever. If you love me, I will become a part of your story. I will live on in that."

He looked at me in a way he'd never done before, as though evaluating me all over again. Then he nodded. "We will marry," he said, holding up his hand. "On three conditions. The first is that you will tell no one about us until the coronation of Prince Dain."

That seemed like a small thing, the waiting.

"And during that time, you must not renounce me, no matter what I say or do."

I know the nature of faerie bargains. I should have heard this as the warning that it was. Instead, I was only glad that two of his conditions seemed simple enough to fulfill. "What else?"

Be bold, be bold, but not too bold, lest that your heart's blood should run cold.

"Only this," Locke said. "Remember, we don't love the way that you do."

I know that I should have been a better sister, that I should have given you some warning, but some part of you must understand.

All I had to do was keep my mouth shut and put up with anything he did, until Prince Dain's coronation. Then he had to tell you the truth. Then he would be with me forever.

And love me until he died.

So you see, I am sorry. I really am. I didn't think he could win your heart. If it makes you feel any better, it was agony to watch you with him, to see you laughing as the three of us sat on the blanket at the palace school, your hand in his. I was anguished seeing your blushes and shining eyes. Jealousy

wasn't a spice to me then. It was the whole meal and I was gagging it down.

But I am not our mother and I am not going to make her mistakes. I won't turn back. I know what I want. I want Locke. I'm not afraid of his secrets.

And you're going to forgive me. You have to. You're my sister, my twin. You've got to understand. If I just explain it right, I know you're going to understand.

And I am going to keep standing here and practicing it in the mirror until you stop looking at me that way when I finish.

Continue reading for a sneak peek of Holly Black's The Wicked King.





The new High King of Faerie lounges on his throne, his crown resting at an insouciant angle, his long, villainously scarlet cloak pinned at his shoulders and sweeping the floor. An earring shines from the peak of one pointed ear. Heavy rings glitter along his knuckles. His most ostentatious decoration, however, is his soft, sullen mouth.

It makes him look every bit the jerk that he is.

I stand to one side of him, in the honored position of seneschal. I am supposed to be High King Cardan's most trusted advisor, and so I play that part, rather than my real role—the hand behind the throne, with the power to compel him to obey should he try to cross me.

Scanning the crowd, I look for a spy from the Court of Shadows. They intercepted a communication from the Tower of Forgetting, where Cardan's brother is jailed, and are bringing it to me instead of to its intended recipient.

And that's only the latest crisis.

It's been five months since I forced Cardan onto the throne of Elfame as my puppet king, five months since I betrayed my family, since my sister carried my little brother to the mortal realm and away from the crown that he might have worn, since I crossed swords with Madoc.

Five months since I've slept for more than a few hours at a stretch.

It seemed like a good trade—a very *faerie* trade, even: put someone who despised me on the throne so that Oak would be out of danger. It was thrilling to trick Cardan into promising to serve me for a year and a day, exhilarating when my plan came together. Then, a year and a day seemed like forever. But now I must figure out how to keep him in my power—and out of trouble—

for longer than that. Long enough to give Oak a chance to have what I didn't: a childhood.

Now a year and a day seems like no time at all.

And despite having put Cardan on the throne through my own machinations, despite scheming to keep him there, I cannot help being unnerved by how comfortable he looks.

Faerie rulers are tied to the land. They are the lifeblood and the beating heart of their realm in some mystical way that I don't fully understand. But surely Cardan isn't that, not with his commitment to being a layabout who does none of the real work of governance.

Mostly, his obligations appear to be allowing his ring-covered hands to be kissed and accepting the blandishments of the Folk. I'm sure he enjoys that part of it—the kisses, the bowing and scraping. He's certainly enjoying the wine. He calls again and again for his cabochon-encrusted goblet to be refilled with a pale green liquor. The very smell of it makes my head spin.

During a lull, he glances up at me, raising one black brow. "Enjoying yourself?"

"Not as much as you are," I tell him.

No matter how much he disliked me when we were in school, that was a guttering candle to the steady flame of his hatred now. His mouth curls into a smile. His eyes shine with wicked intent. "Look at them all, your subjects. A shame not a one knows who their true ruler is."

My face heats a little at his words. His gift is to take a compliment and turn it into an insult, a jab that hurts more for the temptation to take it at face value.

I spent so many revels avoiding notice. Now everyone sees me, bathed in candlelight, in one of the three nearly identical black doublets I wear each evening, my sword Nightfell at my hip. They twirl in their circle dances and play their songs, they drink their golden wine and compose their riddles and their curses while I look down on them from the royal dais. They are beautiful and terrible, and they might despise my mortality, might mock it, but I am up here and they are not.

Of course, perhaps that isn't so different from hiding. Perhaps it is just hiding in plain sight. But I cannot deny that the power I hold gives me a kick, a jolt of pleasure whenever I think on it. I just wish Cardan couldn't tell.

If I look carefully, I can spot my twin sister, Taryn, dancing with Locke,

her betrothed. Locke, who I once thought might love me. Locke, whom I once thought I could love. It's Taryn I miss, though. Nights like tonight, I imagine hopping down from the dais and going to her, trying to explain my choices.

Her marriage is only three weeks away, and still we haven't spoken.

I keep telling myself I need her to come to me first. She played me for a fool with Locke. I still feel stupid when I look at them. If she won't apologize, then at least she should be the one to pretend there's nothing to apologize for. I might accept that, even. But I will not be the one to go to Taryn, to beg.

My eyes follow her as she dances.

I don't bother to look for Madoc. His love is part of the price I paid for this position.

A short, wizened faerie with a cloud of silver hair and a coat of scarlet kneels below the dais, waiting to be recognized. His cuffs are jeweled, and the moth pin that holds his cloak in place has wings that move on their own. Despite his posture of subservience, his gaze is greedy.

Beside him stand two pale hill Folk with long limbs and hair that blows behind them, though there is no breeze.

Drunk or sober, now that Cardan is the High King, he must listen to those subjects who would have him rule on a problem, no matter how small, or grant a boon. I cannot imagine why anyone would put their fate in his hands, but Faerie is full of caprice.

Luckily, I'm there to whisper my counsel in his ear, as any seneschal might. The difference is that he must listen to me. And if he whispers back a few horrific insults, well, at least he's forced to whisper.

Of course, then the question becomes whether I deserve to have all this power. *I won't be horrible for the sake of my own amusement*, I tell myself. *That's got to be worth something.*

"Ah," Cardan says, leaning forward on the throne, causing his crown to tip lower on his brow. He takes a deep swallow of the wine and smiles down at the trio. "This must be a grave concern, to bring it before the High King."

"You may already have heard tales of me," says the small faerie. "I made the crown that sits upon your head. I am called Grimsen the Smith, long in exile with the Alderking. His bones are now at rest, and there is a new Alderking in Fairfold, as there is a new High King here."

“Severin,” I say.

The smith looks at me, obviously surprised that I have spoken. Then his gaze returns to the High King. “I beg you to allow me to return to the High Court.”

Cardan blinks a few times, as though trying to focus on the petitioner in front of him. “So you were yourself exiled? Or you chose to leave?”

I recall Cardan’s telling me a little about Severin, but he hadn’t mentioned Grimsen. I’ve heard of him, of course. He’s the blacksmith who made the Blood Crown for Mab and wove enchantments into it. It’s said he can make anything from metal, even living things—metal birds that fly, metal snakes that slither and strike. He made the twin swords, Heartseeker and Heartsworn, one that never misses and the other that can cut through anything. Unfortunately, he made them for the Alderking.

“I was sworn to him, as his servant,” says Grimsen. “When he went into exile, I was forced to follow—and in so doing, fell into disfavor myself. Although I made only trinkets for him in Fairfold, I was still considered to be his creature by your father.

“Now, with both of them dead, I crave permission to carve out a place for myself here at your Court. Punish me no further, and my loyalty to you will be as great as your wisdom.”

I look at the little smith more closely, suddenly sure he’s playing with words. But to what end? The request seems genuine, and if Grimsen’s humility is not, well, his fame makes that no surprise.

“Very well,” Cardan says, looking pleased to be asked for something easy to give. “Your exile is over. Give me your oath, and the High Court will welcome you.”

Grimsen bows low, his expression theatrically troubled. “Noble king, you ask for the smallest and most reasonable thing from your servant, but I, who have suffered for such vows, am loath to make them again. Allow me this—grant that I may show you my loyalty in my deeds, rather than binding myself with my words.”

I put my hand on Cardan’s arm, but he shrugs off my cautioning squeeze. I could say something, and he would be forced—by prior command—to at least not contradict me, but I don’t know what to say. Having the smith here, forging for Elfame, is no small thing. It is worth, perhaps, the lack of an oath.

And yet, something in Grimsen's gaze looks a little too self-satisfied, a little too sure of himself. I suspect a trick.

Cardan speaks before I can puzzle anything more out. "I accept your condition. Indeed, I will give you a boon. An old building with a forge sits on the edge of the palace grounds. You shall have it for your own and as much metal as you require. I look forward to seeing what you will make for us."

Grimsen bows low. "Your kindness shall not be forgotten."

I dislike this, but perhaps I'm being overcautious. Perhaps it's only that I don't like the smith himself. There's little time to consider it before another petitioner steps forward.

A hag—old and powerful enough that the air around her seems to crackle with the force of her magic. Her fingers are twiggy, her hair the color of smoke, and her nose like the blade of a scythe. Around her throat, she wears a necklace of rocks, each bead carved with whorls that seem to catch and puzzle the eye. When she moves, the heavy robes around her ripple, and I spy clawed feet, like those of a bird of prey.

"Kingling," the hag says. "Mother Marrow brings you gifts."

"Your fealty is all I require." Cardan's voice is light. "For now."

"Oh, I'm sworn to the crown, sure enough," she says, reaching into one of her pockets and drawing out a cloth that looks blacker than the night sky, so black that it seems to drink the light around it. The fabric slithers over her hand. "But I have come all this way to present you with a rare prize."

The Folk do not like debt, which is why they will not repay a favor with mere thanks. Give them an oatcake, and they will fill one of the rooms of your house with grain, overpaying to push debt back onto you. And yet, tribute is given to High Kings all the time—gold, service, swords with names. But we don't usually call those things *gifts*. Nor *prizes*.

I do not know what to make of her little speech.

Her voice is a purr. "My daughter and I wove this of spider silk and nightmares. A garment cut from it can turn a sharp blade, yet be as soft as a shadow against your skin."

Cardan frowns, but his gaze is drawn again and again to the marvelous cloth. "I admit I don't think I've seen its equal."

"Then you accept what I would bestow upon you?" she asks, a sly gleam in her eye. "I am older than your father and your mother. Older than the stones of this palace. As old as the bones of the earth. Though you are the

High King, Mother Marrow will have your word.”

Cardan’s eyes narrow. She’s annoyed him, I can see that.

There’s a trick here, and this time I know what it is. Before he can, I start speaking. “You said *gifts*, but you have only shown us your marvelous cloth. I am sure the crown would be pleased to have it, were it freely given.”

Her gaze comes to rest on me, her eyes hard and cold as night itself. “And who are you to speak for the High King?”

“I am his seneschal, Mother Marrow.”

“And will you let this mortal girl answer for you?” she asks Cardan.

He gives me a look of such condescension that it makes my cheeks heat. The look lingers. His mouth twists, curving. “I suppose I shall,” he says finally. “It amuses her to keep me out of trouble.”

I bite my tongue as he turns a placid expression on Mother Marrow. “She’s clever enough,” the hag says, spitting out the words like a curse. “Very well, the cloth is yours, Your Majesty. I give it freely. I give you only that and nothing more.”

Cardan leans forward as though they are sharing a jest. “Oh, tell me the rest. I like tricks and snares. Even ones I was nearly caught in.”

Mother Marrow shifts from one clawed foot to the other, the first sign of nerves she’s displayed. Even for a hag with bones as old as she claimed, a High King’s wrath is dangerous. “Very well. An’ had you accepted all I would bestow upon you, you would have found yourself under a geas, allowing you to marry only a weaver of the cloth in my hands. Myself—or my daughter.”

A cold shudder goes through me at the thought of what might have happened then. Could the High King of Faerie have been compelled into such a marriage? Surely there would have been a way around it. I thought of the last High King, who never wed.

Marriage is unusual among the rulers of Faerie because once a ruler, one remains a ruler until death or abdication. Among commoners and the gentry, faerie marriages are arranged to be gotten out of—unlike the mortal “until death do us part,” they contain conditions like “until you shall both renounce each other” or “unless one strikes the other in anger” or the cleverly worded “for the duration of a life” without specifying whose. But a uniting of kings and/or queens can never be dissolved.

Should Cardan marry, I wouldn’t just have to get him off the throne to get

Oak on it. I'd have to remove his bride as well.

Cardan's eyebrows rise, but he has all the appearance of blissful unconcern. "My lady, you flatter me. I had no idea you were interested."

Her gaze is unflinching as she passes her gift to one of Cardan's personal guard. "May you grow into the wisdom of your counselors."

"The fervent prayer of many," he says. "Tell me. Has your daughter made the journey with you?"

"She is here," the hag says. A girl steps from the crowd to bow low before Cardan. She is young, with a mass of unbound hair. Like her mother, her limbs are oddly long and twiglike, but where her mother is unsettlingly bony, she has a kind of grace. Maybe it helps that her feet resemble human ones.

Although, to be fair, they are turned backward.

"I would make a poor husband," Cardan says, turning his attention to the girl, who appears to shrink down into herself at the force of his regard. "But grant me a dance, and I will show you my other talents."

I give him a suspicious look.

"Come," Mother Marrow says to the girl, and grabs her, not particularly gently, by the arm, dragging her into the crowd. Then she looks back at Cardan. "We three will meet again."

"They're all going to want to marry you, you know," Locke drawls. I know his voice even before I look to find that he has taken the position that Mother Marrow vacated.

He grins up at Cardan, looking delighted with himself and the world. "Better to take consorts," Locke says. "Lots and lots of consorts."

"Spoken like a man about to enter wedlock," Cardan reminds him.

"Oh, leave off. Like Mother Marrow, I have brought you a gift." Locke takes a step toward the dais. "One with fewer barbs." He doesn't look in my direction. It's as though he doesn't see me or that I am as uninteresting as a piece of furniture.

I wish it didn't bother me. I wish I didn't remember standing at the very top of the highest tower on his estate, his body warm against mine. I wish he hadn't used me to test my sister's love for him. I wish she hadn't let him.

If wishes were horses, my mortal father used to say, *beggars would ride*. Another one of those phrases that makes no sense until it does.

"Oh?" Cardan looks more puzzled than intrigued.

"I wish to give you *me*—as your Master of Revels," Locke announces.

“Grant me the position, and I will make it my duty and pleasure to keep the High King of Elfhome from being bored.”

There are so many jobs in a palace—servants and ministers, ambassadors and generals, advisors and tailors, jesters and makers of riddles, grooms for horses and keepers of spiders, and a dozen other positions I’ve forgotten. I didn’t even know there *was* a Master of Revels. Maybe there wasn’t, until now.

“I will serve up delights you’ve never imagined.” Locke’s smile is infectious. He will serve up trouble, that’s for sure. Trouble I have no time for.

“Have a care,” I say, drawing Locke’s attention to me for the first time. “I am sure you would not wish to insult the High King’s imagination.”

“Indeed, I’m sure not,” Cardan says in a way that’s difficult to interpret.

Locke’s smile doesn’t waver. Instead, he hops onto the dais, causing the knights on either side to move immediately to stop him. Cardan waves them away.

“If you make him Master of Revels—” I begin, quickly, desperately.

“Are you commanding me?” Cardan interrupts, eyebrow arched.

He knows I can’t say yes, not with the possibility of Locke’s overhearing. “Of course not,” I grind out.

“Good,” Cardan says, turning his gaze from me. “I’m of a mind to grant your request, Locke. Things have been so very dull of late.”

I see Locke’s smirk and bite the inside of my cheek to keep back the words of command. It would have been so satisfying to see his expression, to flaunt my power in front of him.

Satisfying, but stupid.

“Before, Grackles and Larks and Falcons vied for the heart of the Court,” Locke says, referring to the factions that preferred revelry, artistry, or war. Factions that fell in and out of favor with Eldred. “But now the Court’s heart is yours and yours alone. Let’s break it.”

Cardan looks at Locke oddly, as though considering, seemingly for the first time, that being High King might be *fun*. As though he’s imagining what it would be like to rule without straining against my leash.

Then, on the other side of the dais, I finally spot the Bomb, a spy in the Court of Shadows, her white hair a halo around her brown face. She signals to me.

I don't like Locke and Cardan together—don't like their idea of entertainments—but I try to put that aside as I leave the dais and make my way to her. After all, there is no way to scheme against Locke when he is drawn to whatever amuses him most in the moment...

Halfway to where the Bomb's standing, I hear Locke's voice ring out over the crowd. "We will celebrate the Hunter's Moon in the Milkwood, and there the High King will give you a debauch such that bards will sing of, this I promise you."

Dread coils in my belly.

Locke is pulling a few pixies from the crowd up onto the dais, their iridescent wings shining in the candlelight. A girl laughs uproariously and reaches for Cardan's goblet, drinking it to the dregs. I expect him to lash out, to humiliate her or shred her wings, but he only smiles and calls for more wine.

Whatever Locke has in store, Cardan seems all too ready to play along. All Faerie coronations are followed by a month of revelry—feasting, boozing, riddling, dueling, and more. The Folk are expected to dance through the soles of their shoes from sundown to sunup. But five months after Cardan's becoming High King, the great hall remains always full, the drinking horns overflowing with mead and clover wine. The revelry has barely slowed.

It has been a long time since Elfhame had such a young High King, and a wild, reckless air infects the courtiers. The Hunter's Moon is soon, sooner even than Taryn's wedding. If Locke intends to stoke the flames of revelry higher and higher still, how long before that becomes a danger?

With some difficulty, I turn my back on Cardan. After all, what would be the purpose in catching his eye? His hatred is such that he will do what he can, inside of my commands, to defy me. And he is very good at defiance.

I would like to say that he always hated me, but for a brief, strange time it felt as though we understood each other, maybe even liked each other. Altogether an unlikely alliance, begun with my blade to his throat, it resulted in his trusting me enough to put himself in my power.

A trust that I betrayed.

Once, he tormented me because he was young and bored and angry and cruel. Now he has better reasons for the torments he will inflict on me after a year and a day is gone. It will be very hard to keep him always under my

thumb.

I reach the Bomb and she shoves a piece of paper into my hand. “Another note for Cardan from Balekin,” she says. “This one made it all the way to the palace before we intercepted it.”

“Is it the same as the first two?”

She nods. “Much like. Balekin tries to flatter our High King into coming to his prison cell. He wants to propose some kind of bargain.”

“I’m sure he does,” I say, glad once again to have been brought into the Court of Shadows and to have them still watching my back.

“What will you do?” she asks me.

“I’ll go see Prince Balekin. If he wants to make the High King an offer, he’ll have to convince the High King’s seneschal first.”

A corner of her mouth lifts. “I’ll come with you.”

I glance back at the throne again, making a vague gesture. “No. Stay here. Try to keep Cardan from getting into trouble.”

“He *is* trouble,” she reminds me, but doesn’t seem particularly worried by her own worrying pronouncement.

As I head toward the passageways into the palace, I spot Madoc across the room, half in shadow, watching me with his cat eyes. He isn’t close enough to speak, but if he were, I have no doubt what he would say.

Power is much easier to acquire than it is to hold on to.

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