

POISONED

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HOT
KEY
BOOKS

PROLOGUE

Once upon long ago, always and evermore, a girl rode into the Darkwood.

Her lips were the color of ripe cherries, her skin as soft as new-fallen snow, her hair as dark as midnight.

The tall pines whispered and sighed as she passed under them, the queen's huntsman at her side. Crows, perched high in the branches, blinked their bright black eyes.

As the sky lightened, the huntsman pointed to a pond ahead and told the girl that they must dismount to let the horses drink. She did so, walking side by side with him. Lost in her thoughts, she did not hear the soft hiss of a dagger leaving its sheath. She did not see the huntsman lift his face to the dawn, or glimpse the anguish in his eyes.

A gasp of shock escaped the girl as the huntsman pulled her close, his broad hand spanning her narrow back. Her eyes, wide and questioning, sought his. She was not afraid—not yet. She felt almost nothing as he slid the blade between her ribs, just a slight, soft push and then a bloom of warmth, as if she'd spilled tea down her dress.

But then the pain came, red clawed and snarling.



The girl threw her head back and screamed. A stag bolted from the brush at the sound. The crows burst from their roosts, their wings beating madly.

The huntsman was skilled. He was quick. He had gutted a thousand deer. A few expert cuts with a knife so sharp it could slice blue from the sky and the delicate ribs were cleaved, the flesh and veins severed.

The girl's head lolled back. Her legs gave out. Gently, the huntsman lowered her to the ground, then knelt beside her.

"Forgive me, dear princess. Forgive me," he begged. "This foul deed was not my wish, but the queen's command."

"Why?" the girl cried, with her dying breath.

But the huntsman, tears in his eyes, could not speak. He finished his grim task and got to his feet. As he did, the girl got her answer. For the last thing she saw before her eyes closed was her heart, small and perfect, in the huntsman's trembling hands.


In the forest, the birds have gone silent. The creatures are still. Gloom lingers under the trees. And on the cold ground, a girl lies dying, a ragged red hole where her heart used to be.

"Hang the huntsman!" you shout. "Burn the evil queen!"
And who would fault you?

But you've missed the real villain.

It's easily done. He's stealthy and sly and comes when you're alone. He stands in the shadows and whispers his poison. His words drip, drip, drip into the small, secret chambers of your heart.

You think you know this tale, but you only know what



you've been told. "Who are you? How do you know these things?" you ask.

Fair questions, both.



I am the huntsman. Dead now, but that's no matter. The dead speak. With tongues blackened by time and regret. You can hear us if you listen.

You will say that I'm telling you tales. Fairy stories. That it's all make-believe. But there are more things afoot in the Darkwood than you can imagine, and only a fool would call them make-believe.

Keep to the path, the old wives say. Stay out of the forest.

But one day, you will have to walk deep into those dark woods and find what's waiting there.

For if you do not, it will surely find you.



ONE

The day before . . .

“Tally ho!” shouted the queen, spurring her fierce courser on.

The hounds had flushed their quarry. A gray wolf broke from the cover of a blackbriar patch and ran for the deep woods. The pack swept after it, baying for blood.

The bravest members of the hunting party followed the queen, galloping hard to keep up with her, but the princess, riding a swift, nimble palfrey, boldly streaked past her. She chased the wolf at breakneck speed, weaving in and out of trees, her skirts billowing behind her. She jumped a stone wall, a stream, a tangle of brush so high, there was no telling what lay beyond it. Her hat came off; her black hair unfurled like ribbons of night.

The queen couldn’t catch her. Nor could the princes, Haakon and Rodrigo. I saw them flashing through the woods, the queen in white, her nobles in rich hues of russet, moss, and ochre. I saw a baron crouched low over his horse’s neck, his hands high up in the animal’s mane. He narrowed the distance between himself and the queen, but just as he was about to pass her, his horse stumbled. The baron lost his balance. There was a cry, then a sickening crack as he hit the ground.

“Leave him, huntsman!” the queen shouted. “Leave anyone who falls!”

The man lay crumpled under a tree, his eyes closed, his head bloodied. I thundered past him; the rest of the riders did, too. Only the princess cast a look back.

We trailed the hounds, navigating by their cries, swerving through the woods as they changed direction. I lost sight of the queen as she rode through a pocket of mist, then found her again, some moments later, with the pack. And the princess.

The hounds had surrounded the wolf. The creature was huge and fearsome. It had killed two dogs already. Their broken bodies lay nearby.

And him? Oh, yes. He was there, too.

He was always close by. Watching. Waiting.

I heard him in the wolf’s low growl. Felt him in the nervous stamping of the horses. I saw him rise from the depths of the princess’s eyes, like a corpse bobbing up in a river.

And then, without warning, the wolf charged the horses, snarling. The palfrey whinnied and reared, but the princess kept her seat. The courser’s nostrils flared, he flattened his ears, but he stood his ground as the queen jumped down from her saddle.

Circling the fray, she shouted at the hounds, exhorting them to attack. They did, barking and slaving, snapping at their prey’s haunches. The wolf rounded on them, but it was one against many. The hounds knew it and grew bolder, but one, small and slight, hung back from the pack.

The queen saw it; her eyes darkened. “Fight, you coward!” she shouted.

The hound tucked its tail and retreated. Furious, the queen snatched a whip out of a groom's hands and started after the dog.

"Your Grace! The wolf is escaping!"

It was Prince Haakon. He'd just caught up to the pack. The queen threw the whip down and ran to her horse, but by the time she'd swung back into her saddle, the pack—and the princess—was already gone, in hot pursuit once more.

For a long and treacherous mile, the princess pursued the wolf, until a ravine brought them up short. She stopped her horse a few yards from the edge, but the wolf ran right to it. When it saw the sheer drop, it tried to backtrack, but the hounds closed in from the left. A tangle of blackbriar, a good ten feet high, ran from the woods to the edge of the ravine creating a wall on the right. The frantic animal paced back and forth, tensed itself to jump across the chasm, but saw that it was hopeless. Shoulders high, head low, it turned and readied itself for its last fight.

The princess had moved closer. She could see the scruff of white at the animal's throat now, the ragged edge of one ear. The wolf looked up at her, and she saw the fear in its silvery eyes. In a heartbeat, she was out of her saddle. Striding among the frenzied hounds, she drove them back, yelling at them, stamping them away, until she'd created an opening for the wolf.

"Go! Get out of here!" she shouted at the creature.

The wolf spied a small opening at the bottom of the blackbriar. The thorns were curved and cruel; they carved stripes in the desperate creature's snout and tore at its ears, but

it pushed under the dense vines and disappeared. The hounds rushed after it, but their snouts were tender, their hides thin; they could not break through.

The princess thought she was alone; she thought that no one saw this, but I did. I'd caught up to her but stayed hidden. I hunted many things for the queen, not all of them wolves.

I saw the princess lean her head into her horse's lathered neck. I saw a deep weariness settle on her shoulders like a shroud. I saw her press a hand to her chest, as if to soothe a fierce ache under her ribs.

How it cost her, this charade. How it would cost us all.

Hoofbeats sounded in the distance. Shouts echoed. By the time the queen drew up, with Haakon and a few other riders, the princess's back was straight again, her weariness buried.


"I'm afraid our sport is over, Stepmother," she said with feigned regret, nodding at the ravine. "The wolf chose a quicker death."

The queen rode to the edge and looked over it, frowning. "What a pity," she said, "that we are robbed of our kill."

Her eyes traveled to the hounds, then to the blackbriar. Her gaze sharpened. The princess did not see what had caught the queen's attention, for she was climbing back into her saddle, but I did. Snagged in the thorns was a tuft of fur. Gray fur. Wolf's fur.

The queen's frown hardened. "Blow for home, huntsman!" she commanded.

I sounded my trumpet, and the hounds set off, noses skimming the ground. The small, frightened one, her tail still between her legs, skittered along at the edge of the pack. The riders followed, chatting and laughing.



As the hoofbeats faded from the clearing, there was a dry, rustling sound, like the whispering of silk skirts. I looked up and saw a crow, blueblack and shrewd, drop down from the high branch where he'd perched.

He let out a shrill caw, then flew off into the Darkwood. I hear his call still, echoing down the centuries.

It sounded like a warning.

It sounded like a death knell.

It sounded, most of all, like laughter.

TWO

There was blood on the reins.

Sophie saw it as she handed them to a groom.

She turned her palms up. Four thin crimson crescents lay across each one, gouged by her own fingernails. Terror had flooded through her as she'd galloped through the woods. The horse she'd ridden was so fast, so high-strung, it had taken all her strength to control her. With every hoofbeat, Sophie had been certain she would fall and break her neck. She'd been frightened as she'd faced the wolf, too. The creature was huge; it could've torn her to shreds.

But her horse, the wolf—neither was the reason for the cuts in her palms, and she knew it. Her legs were still trembling even though the hunt was long over.

“Stupid, stupid, girl,” she hissed at herself.

What if the queen had seen her let the wolf go? What if someone else had? Her stepmother had eyes and ears everywhere.

Quickly, she pulled her gloves from her jacket pocket and slipped them on. The bold, fearless girl who could outride the princes, the huntsman, even the queen herself; the heartless

girl who was keen to chase down an animal just to watch a pack of hounds kill it, that girl was a lie. The cuts were the truth, written in blood, and no one must ever read it. Rulers were ruthless. They did not show weakness or fear. They did not cry. They made others cry. Hadn't her stepmother told her that a thousand times?

Sophie was standing in a large cobbled courtyard shared by the stables and kennels. She glanced around it now for the queen and her retinue, but they had not returned yet. *Good*, she thought. The hunt itself, the small talk made during the ride back, the constant pressure to be captivating and witty—it had all exhausted her. She wanted nothing more than to slip away to her chambers, get out of her sweaty clothing, and sink into a hot bath.

Servants had set out a long, linen-draped table in the courtyard. It was laden with meat pies, roasted game birds, smoked hams, cheeses, nuts, and fruit. Sophie made her way past it, head down, hoping to go unnoticed.

"Hail, bold Artemis, goddess of the hunt!" a voice bellowed from across the yard.

Sophie's heart sank. *So much for my escape*, she thought.

She looked up and saw Haakon making his way toward her. Handsome Haakon, golden-haired and bronzed, his face as perfect as a marble god's. Rodrigo was right behind him, his full lips curved into a seductive smile, his dark eyes full of promises. Sophie smiled brightly at them; she had no choice. One of these men might well become her husband.

The morning's hunt was the first in a series of events over the next few days to celebrate her birthday. There would be a

ball tonight as well, here in Konigsburg, at the palace. It would be a glittering affair with members of her stepmother's court and rulers from all the foreign realms in attendance. She would turn seventeen tomorrow and inherit her father's crown. Once she was queen, Sophie could marry, and her stepmother was determined to make Sophie an advantageous match with a powerful, titled man.

"The young prince of Skandinay, perhaps," the queen had said when she'd first raised the topic. "The emperor's nephew. Or the sultan's son."

"But, Stepmother, I don't even know these men. What if I don't fall in love with any of them?" Sophie had asked.

"Love?" the queen had said, contempt dripping from her voice. "Love is nothing but a fable, and a dangerous one at that. Your suitors should recite the size of their armies to you and the strength of their fortresses, not silly poems about flowers and doves."

There was a reason why her stepmother wanted a powerful husband for her, a shameful reason, and Sophie knew it—the queen thought her weak. The entire court did.

Sophie had grown up hearing the whispers, mocking her for being a shy, softhearted child. They'd begun as soon as the queen had married Sophie's father and had only grown louder over the years. The poisonous words had lodged in her heart like blackbriar thorns. They echoed there still . . . *The princess will never make a good queen . . . She's not smart enough . . . not tough enough . . .*

Haakon swaggered over to Sophie now. He was the eldest son of the king of Skandinay, and her stepmother's first choice

for her. He lifted the tankard of ale he was holding to her. “Fair Artemis has won my heart, but, oh, cruel, selfish deity! She will not give me hers!”

Rodrigo snorted. “Can you blame her?”

“I pine. I languish. I *starve* for love,” Haakon said, pressing a hand to his heart. Then he leaned over the breakfast table and tore a leg off a chicken. “I endure unending torment. Give me your heart, cold goddess, and end my torment!”

“That is impossible, sir,” Sophie said, her eyes teasing, her voice so breezy and bemused that no one would have guessed how desperately she longed for the quiet of her chambers.

“Why the devil not?” Haakon asked, gnawing the chicken leg. “Good-looking lad like me . . . Why, I’m probably a god myself. I must be.” He frowned, then nodded. “In fact, I’m sure of it. I’m the god . . . mmm, *Apollo*! Yes, that’s the fellow!” He pointed at Sophie with the chicken leg. “What a pair we would make, the two of us.”

“If you recall your classics, and I’m certain that you do—” Sophie began.

“Scholar that you are,” Rodrigo cut in.

“—then you know that Artemis swore she would never marry. And were she to break that vow, I doubt it would be for Apollo. Since he is her brother.”

Haakon wrinkled his nose. “Ew.”

“Very,” said Rodrigo.

Sophie laughed despite herself. It was impossible not to. Haakon was a bright, golden sun who pulled everyone into his orbit. He was arrogant and annoying but astonishingly beautiful, and beautiful people are so easily forgiven. Every

woman in the palace was in love with him. Sophie was a little, too, though she hated to admit it.

More members of the hunting party trotted into the courtyard now. Grooms and hounds followed them. Sophie thought she heard the queen's lord commander among them, barking orders. Haakon and Rodrigo turned to the party and waved some of the riders over. As they did, Sophie heard a smaller, softer sound than clopping hooves or Haakon's booming voice. She heard footsteps. They were quick but shambling.

"Tom?" she said, turning around.

A young boy was running toward her. He was undersized for his age, awkward, and shy.

"Be careful, Tom. Slow down before—" Sophie started to say. But it was too late. Tom caught the toe of his boot on a cobblestone, stumbled, and fell. Sophie bent down to help him up.

"Clumsy ox," a voice said.

"Should've drowned him at birth. Isn't that what one does with runts?" Tom winced at their cruel words. Sophie could see that they hurt him more than the fall. The women who'd made them, two of the queen's ladies-in-waiting, laughed as they hurried by.

"Don't listen to them," Sophie said, trying to make the boy feel better. "If you want to see clumsy, you should see Baroness von Arnim"—she nodded at the shorter of the two women—"dance a sarabande. She looks like a donkey on ice!"

Tom laughed and Sophie smiled, but her smile faded as she saw the boy's skinned knees. "You mustn't run," she scolded. "Haven't I told you so?" He was like the puppies he cared for, all loose limbs and big feet.

Tom brushed his bangs out of his eyes. “But I couldn’t help it, Your Grace! I had to tell you!”

“Tell me what?” Sophie asked.

“Duchess had her puppies!” Duchess was Sophie’s favorite spaniel. “She didn’t!” Sophie said, her eyes widening with excitement.

“She did! Seven healthy pups! All as fat as sausages, with snub noses and pink feet! Come see them!”


Tom grew so excited that he forgot himself and reached for Sophie’s hand. Sophie forgot herself and took it.

“What are you doing? Have you gone mad, boy?” a voice thundered. “How dare you put your hands on the princess!”

It was the lord commander, the man in charge of the queen’s military. He strode up to Tom, grabbed his shoulder, and gave him a tooth-rattling shake. As he did, Sophie brusquely pulled her hand away. As if it were all Tom’s doing.

It was a cowardly move, and shame curdled Sophie’s insides. She knew that she should come to Tom’s defense. She should explain to the lord commander that they’d both been carried away. But she did not. Holding hands with kennel boys, playing with puppies—this was not how a ruler behaved. Strong rulers were distant and aloof. If the queen heard of her lapse, she would be angry. This was not the wolf hunt, where there was no one at the ravine to see her weakness. Here, at the palace, the wolves were the ones who hunted.

“It won’t happen again, Your Grace,” the lord commander said to Sophie. Then he turned back to Tom. “Remember your place,” he growled, giving the boy another shake before he walked away.



Tom raised his eyes to Sophie's. The hurt and confusion she saw in them twisted her heart. "I-I'm sorry, Your Grace. I didn't . . . I didn't mean to—"

Tom's words were abruptly cut off by a blood-chilling sound. It was a high, keening wail.

And it was rising over the courtyard.

THREE

The wretched creature had been backed into a corner.

It was a hound, and it was crying and cowering, trying to make itself as small as possible. Sophie recognized it. It was the small, skittish dog that had refused to attack the wolf.

The queen had hit the creature with her riding crop and was now pointing at it. "That animal's worthless," she spat. "I want it killed."

Sophie stood frozen to the spot, horrified. It was Tom who tried to stop the queen.

"No!" he cried, lurching toward the hound. "Please don't, Your Grace! She's a good dog!"

The queen whirled around, incensed. Her eyes sought the one who'd dared to censure her. "Am I to be shouted at by a kennel boy?" she asked, her hand tightening on the crop.

Alistair, the kennel master and Tom's father, had come running from the dog pens, alarmed by the cries. He saw what was about to happen, and his eyes widened in terror. He grabbed Tom by the back of his shirt and pulled the boy to him just as the crop came whistling through the air. The blow missed the child but caught Alistair and split his cheek open.

Heedless of his pain and of the blood dripping from his jaw, Alistair begged for his son. "He's very sorry, Your Grace. He'll never do it again. Please forgive him. Apologize, Tom—"

"But, Papa—"

"*Apologize!*" Alistair shouted. "*Now!*"

It wasn't anger that made him shout at his boy. Sophie knew that. It was fear. The queen had carved a gully in Alistair's face, and he was a grown man. What would a blow like that have done to Tom's small body?

"I-I'm sorry, Your Grace," Tom stammered, looking at the ground.

"Attend to the rest of the hounds, both of you," the queen ordered.

Alistair let go of Tom. He drew a cloth from his pocket, pressed it to his cheek, and then called the pack to him. The small dog stayed in the corner, hopeless, helpless. As if it knew it had been condemned.

"Come and see my new brood mare!" the queen said to a group of nobles.

As they headed to the stables, Tom made his way back to Sophie. "Don't let her be killed. Please, my lady," he begged, his voice breaking. "Her name's Zara. She was the runt of her litter. How can you kill a wolf if you're so small?"

"You can't, Tom," Sophie said, watching the queen head into the stables.

Sophie remained rooted to the spot, astonished by her stepmother's cruelty. Sorrow corseted her chest so tightly she could barely breathe, but another emotion simmered underneath it now—*anger*. Anger at the injustice of her

stepmother's actions. Anger that no one cared, that every single person in the courtyard went on eating and drinking, laughing and chattering, as if nothing had happened.

No, you can't kill the wolf, she thought as the queen disappeared through the stable doors. *But maybe you can outfox her.*

Tom had not moved. He was still standing by Sophie's side, his hands clenched.

"Go help your father," Sophie said to him.

Tom's shoulders slumped. Hope drained from his small face. "But, my lady—"

"Go."

Fear made her voice harsh. Allowing a wolf to escape was foolish; what she was about to do now was insanity.

As Tom moved off, Sophie glanced around. No one was paying attention to her. The lord commander was cutting into a flaky venison pie. Haakon was picking up a slice of ham with his fingers. Rodrigo was biting into a peach. She walked to the far end of the courtyard, where the hound, her eyes closed, had slumped to the ground.

Sophie took a deep breath to shore up her nerve. She was quaking inside, but then she thought of Tom, shouting at the queen to spare the dog. He did not wear his courage as she did, as a mask to be slipped on and off. If a small boy could be brave, so could she.

"Zara, is it? You're a beauty," she said softly as she approached the dog.

At the sound of her name, the hound got to her feet. Her eyes were huge and pleading.

"Steady, girl," Sophie said. "I'm not going to hurt you. No

one is. Not if we're quick, you and I." She hooked two fingers under Zara's collar and coaxed her away from the wall. Her skirts shielded the dog from view. "Come on, girl, just a bit farther . . . Hurry now . . ."

A wooden gate stood only a few feet away. Sophie led Zara to it, then quickly unlatched it. "Go!" she whispered as she opened it. "Run from here and never come back!"

The dog was off in a flash. Sophie's heart swelled as she watched the cream-colored blur streak across the fields and disappear into the woods. She latched the gate, then turned and glanced around again. All the members of the hunting party were still occupied with breakfast; the servants were busy with their duties. No one had seen her. Sophie allowed herself to exhale. As she walked back across the courtyard, she passed Tom. He was standing in the center, turning around in a slow circle.

"My father says I'm to find Zara and bring her to him," he said dully. "Did you see where she went, Your Grace?"

Sophie affected a regretful expression. "The little hound?" she said. "I'm afraid she ran off, Tom. I opened the gate, and I shouldn't have. I wasn't paying attention."

Tom smiled. With his mouth, his face, his whole body. Sophie winked at him, then walked on, eager to finally get to her chambers.

It was then that she saw her stepmother.

The queen was standing in the open doorway of the stables, watching her. Dread's thin, icy fingers closed around Sophie. *How long has she been standing there?* she wondered frantically. *How much did she see?*

The queen's silence, cold and forbidding, quieted the chattering court.

After a moment, she spoke, her voice ringing across the yard. "Cowardice is like a plague; it spreads. One sick individual can infect an entire population. The hound—the one I ordered to be put down, the one who appears to have escaped—that hound should have attacked when it was ordered to. What will happen next time, should the other hounds decide to do as they wish, not as they're told? I shall tell you: The *wolf* will attack, and your queen will die."

Sophie's dread turned to fear. But not for herself. "It was my fault the dog got out, Your Grace. I opened the gate," she said, her words tumbling out in a rush.

"You are a princess of the realm, not a kennel hand," the queen retorted. "The boy was negligent. He should have leashed the dog immediately." She paused, allowing her gaze to settle on Tom. "I order every hound in the kennel to be slaughtered, lest any have caught the disease of cowardice. And I order that this boy here, who coddles cowards, who places more value on a dog's life than that of his queen . . . I order that he be taken to the guards' barracks, where he will receive ten lashes."

"No," Tom whispered, shaking his head. "*No*. Please. I'm sorry . . . I'm *sorry!*"

Sophie gasped. She wanted to shout at her stepmother, to beg her not to do this, but she knew she could do no such thing. So she watched, impotent and mute, as Tom backed away, stumbled, and fell once again. Two guards picked him up, then half marched, half dragged him out of the courtyard.

“Papa! *Papa!*” he cried, reaching back for his father.

Alistair took a step toward him, but the captain of the guards blocked his way. He turned toward the queen, to beg her to spare his child, but she was already gone.

Sophie knew what the queen was doing. She wished to teach lessons. Not to the boy. That was only a ruse. She wished to teach the powerful nobles who had accompanied her on the hunt that cowardice was dangerous and disobedience even more so.

And she wished to teach Sophie a lesson, too.

And that lesson was perfectly clear: There is nothing more dangerous than kindness.

FOUR

In her chambers, the queen stood gazing into a mirror.

The silver glass showed a tall, straight-backed woman with indigo eyes, blond hair, and high cheekbones. Her name was Adelaide.

She had once been more beautiful than the dawn, but the years had not been kind to her is how the storytellers start their tales about her. Or *Time had etched deep lines at the corners of her eyes and grooved furrows across her brow.*

Tell me, what stories of kings begin with their wrinkles?

Why did no one speak of her ferocious intelligence? Her bravery? Her strength?

The stone floor was ice-cold beneath the queen's bare feet, the air chilly on her skin. A shiver moved through her, for she had just bathed. Her skin was still damp, and the thin linen shift she wore provided little warmth, but she barely noticed. Her eyes, fever bright, were fixed on the silver glass as if searching its depths.

For what, no one could say. Though many did.

A lady-in-waiting appeared with a white satin gown and slipped it over the queen's head. Another laced her into a

stiff bodice, then pulled the strings tight. Two more brought a golden surcoat embellished with scores of flawless diamonds.

"It's as heavy as a suit of armor," said Lady Beatrice, the eldest of the queen's attendants, as she settled the costly garment on her mistress's shoulders.

"It is armor," said the queen. "I will meet with the Hinterlands' ambassador in an hour to discuss disputed territories in the north. He's a treacherous old snake, just like his master."

As Beatrice left the room to fetch the queen's shoes, one of the younger ladies-in-waiting, Elizabetta, shyly stepped forward. "You look very beautiful, Your Grace," she said.

Her words were all wrong. The hapless woman saw that immediately. Anger blanched the queen's face. She knew what her enemies said about her. That she was jealous and vain. That she cared only for her own reflection. She motioned Elizabetta to her.

"Do you think I cover myself in shiny stones out of vanity?" she asked. "Do you think I care a fig about my appearance, when enemies of my realm prowl my borders?"

Elizabetta swallowed. She glanced left and right, hoping for a shred of support, but everyone in the room, from noble ladies to lowly maids, had averted her eyes.

"I—I think . . . Well, no," she stutteringly began. "Actually, I do *not* think—"

"That much is clear," said the queen.

She walked to a window and raised her arms. Rays of sun, streaming in through the panes, turned the jewels on her surcoat into prisms, encasing her in a brilliant light.

"I use these diamonds to head off war," she said. "When the

ambassador sees me, he will conclude that if I can afford to strew gemstones over myself like confetti, I can also afford to strew warships along my coast. The best way to win a war is by not starting one.”

Elizabetta, her eyes downcast, nodded silently.

The queen lowered her arms. She glanced at a golden clock. “Where is she? Why is she not here?” she asked impatiently. “I summoned her half an hour ago.”

“She *is* here, Your Grace,” said Beatrice, returning with a pair of silk shoes. “She awaits you in your antechamber.”

Beatrice placed the shoes on the floor, and the queen slipped her feet into them. Then she snatched a gray tuft off a table and marched out of her dressing room, heels clicking against the stone floor.

The princess stood silhouetted in a window in the queen’s antechamber, twisting the ring on her left hand. It was the Ruler’s Ring—a gold oval with a unicorn in its center, framed by diamonds—and had been handed down through the centuries from the Greenlands’ monarchs to their heirs.

The queen could not think of anyone less suited to wear it. She walked up to the princess, took her hand, and smoothed it open, then dropped the fluff into it.

“Fur,” she said. “Pulled from blackbriar thorns. The wolf *didn’t* jump to its death, did it?”

Sophie stared down at the fluff. She made no reply.

The queen took hold of her chin and raised it. “You let it escape.”

“Yes.”

“*Why?*”



Sophie's eyes, bright with emotion, sought her stepmother's. "I—I felt sorry for it. It was so frightened."

With a snort of disgust, the queen released her. "The hunt was a chance for you to show strength, Sophia, not weakness."

Sophie lowered her eyes.

"You are soft when you should be shrewd, forgiving when you should be fierce," the queen continued. "You allow wolves to escape. You champion cowards and kennel boys."

"Ten lashes will kill him," Sophie said quietly.

"Ten lashes never killed anyone. And even if they did, what of it?" the queen snapped. "The boy, his father . . . They don't matter. Monarchs matter. Don't you see that?" She held her two hands out, palms up. "In my left hand, a boy. A weakling who likely won't live to see manhood," she said. "In my right hand, a queen . . . a ruler who must protect not one subject but an entire realm." Her left hand sank. Her right hand rose. "What is the life of one boy compared to a queen's?"

As the question hung in the air, the queen lowered her hands and asked another. "What kind of example does it set to allow disobedient creatures to go unpunished?"

It took all Sophie's courage to meet her stepmother's withering gaze again. "The dog was afraid. Is it so terrible to show a scared creature mercy?" she asked.

The queen laughed. It was a dry, dusty sound. "Mercy is just another word for weakness. Let a wolf live, and she'll repay your kindness by tearing out your throat. Fear is the only thing that keeps a queen safe. People obey me because they're frightened of me."

"People obeyed my father because they loved him."

The words popped out of Sophie's mouth before she could stop them. She regretted them immediately. Her stepmother hated any mention of her late husband, a man revered by his people.

"Your father had the luxury of love. He was a man," the queen spat. "No one, not even his enemies, questioned his right to sit on the throne. I do not have that luxury. You will not, either, you little fool. The people need a firm hand to keep them in place. I have been queen regent these past six years, ever since your father's death. Tomorrow is your coronation day. Tomorrow *you* become queen. How can you rule a country, Sophia, if you cannot rule yourself?"

Before Sophie could attempt to stammer out an answer, the sound of drums, beating like a dirge, was heard.

"Ah, I believe the captain of the guards is about to carry out my orders," said the queen. She opened the window and looked at the courtyard below. After a moment, she turned back to Sophie. "Would you like to watch?"

Sophie shook her head, her eyes shiny with tears.

"No? I didn't think so. It's too hard, too painful, isn't it? But that's what ruling is—hard and painful. It's making difficult decisions and handing down harsh sentences in order to keep your subjects in line and your enemies at bay." The queen pointed at her. "It's *your* fault the boy is being whipped, *your* fault the hounds will be slaughtered. Had you not set that cowardly dog free, none of this would be happening. Do you see now the havoc kindness wreaks?"

Sophie was unable to speak. Tears trickled down her cheeks. She pushed them away with the heel of her hand.

The queen clucked her tongue. "You are fortunate to have me here to help you rule until you marry." She jabbed a pointed nail into Sophie's ribs. "That thing in there . . . your soft, stupid heart? It will get you killed. Put it in a box and put that box on a high shelf. Never take it down."

"Am I dismissed?" Sophie asked in a small, broken voice, desperate to escape the terrible sound of the drums.

"Not yet. There is a ball tonight, as you are well aware. There are to be no red eyes, no blotchy cheeks. You have a stunning gown to wear, and a selection of jewels from the crown's vault will be brought to your chambers. You have your beauty and your youth. Use these things to secure a strong ruler for this realm. Today you have shown me, yet again, that it will need one."

Sophie, crumbling, gave a nod and hurried from the room. Adelaide watched her leave. Outside the window, the drumbeats stopped. The captain of the guards shouted his orders. The queen knew what was coming next. She could have closed her window, but she did not. Instead, she stood motionlessly, listening silently as the whip cracked. She did not blink. She did not flinch.

And if something flickered in her eyes, something like sorrow . . . well, what did it matter?

There was no one there to see it.

FIVE

There are bogs in the Darkwood, treacherous and deep. Take one wrong step, and they'll swallow you whole.

Most people stay well away from them, but in years past, when I'd stalked a stag too far into the forest and had to make my way home in the dark, I'd seen a lantern bobbing through the thick, clutching gloom that shrouds them. And then, days later, there came news of someone gone missing—a husband too ready with his fists, a mistress grown demanding, a miser with a sack of gold hidden under his floor.

The bodies were never found. The trials never held. The guilty went unpunished to comfortable graves in the churchyard. Time moved on. People forgot.

But the bogs never did.

Years, decades, sometimes centuries later, they gave up their restless dead, pushing the old bones out of their sodden black depths to the surface.

The truth is like that, too.

Bury it deep. Hope that it rots.

But one day, it will come back.

Tattered and shuffling and stinking of death, it comes home to knock on your door.

Adelaide committed many crimes. Rulers often do. A king beheads a wife for giving him daughters. A prince poisons a mutinous noble. A bishop burns a man at the stake because his God speaks English, not Latin. It is not murder, the history books say, but execution. Done to preserve the peace. Distasteful, yes, but necessary.

But in Adelaide's time, and perhaps still in yours, there was one crime that could not be countenanced. There was one abomination no king, no prince or pope could forgive . . .

A woman who wears a crown.

Mirror, mirror on the wall . . . who's the fairest of them all?

Do you know the villain yet? Do you see his face?

Ah, well, no matter. You will. He is coming ever closer.