

On a drowsy Sunday afternoon, a man in a long dark coat hesitated in front of a house on a tree-lined street. He hadn't parked a car, nor had he come by taxi. No neighbor had seen him strolling along the sidewalk. He simply appeared, as if stepping between one shadow and the next.

The man walked to the door and lifted his fist to knock.

Inside the house, Jude sat on the living room rug and ate fish sticks, soggy from the microwave and dragged through a sludge of ketchup. Her twin sister, Taryn, napped on the couch, curled around a blanket, thumb in her fruit-punch-stained mouth. And on the other end of the sofa, their older sister, Vivienne, stared at the television screen, her eerie, split-pupiled gaze fixed on the cartoon mouse as it ran from the cartoon cat. She laughed when it seemed as if the mouse was about to get eaten.

Vivi was different from other big sisters, but since seven-year-old Jude and Taryn were identical, with the same shaggy brown hair and

heart-shaped faces, they were different, too. Vivi's eyes and the lightly furred points of her ears were, to Jude, not so much more strange than being the mirror version of another person.

And if sometimes she noticed the way the neighborhood kids avoided Vivi or the way their parents talked about her in low, worried voices, Jude didn't think it was anything important. Grown-ups were always worried, always whispering.

Taryn yawned and stretched, pressing her cheek against Vivi's knee.

Outside, the sun was shining, scorching the asphalt of driveways. Lawn mower engines whirled, and children splashed in backyard pools. Dad was in the outbuilding, where he had a forge. Mom was in the kitchen cooking hamburgers. Everything was boring. Everything was fine.

When the knock came, Jude hopped up to answer it. She hoped it might be one of the girls from across the street, wanting to play video games or inviting her for an after-dinner swim.

The tall man stood on their mat, glaring down at her. He wore a brown leather duster despite the heat. His shoes were shod with silver, and they rang hollowly as he stepped over the threshold. Jude looked up into his shadowed face and shivered.

"Mom," she yelled. "Moooooooooom. Someone's here."

Her mother came from the kitchen, wiping wet hands on her jeans. When she saw the man, she went pale. "Go to your room," she told Jude in a scary voice. "*Now!*"

"Whose child is that?" the man asked, pointing at her. His voice was oddly accented. "Yours? His?"

"No one's." Mom didn't even look in Jude's direction. "She's no one's child."

That wasn't right. Jude and Taryn looked just like their dad. Everyone said so. She took a few steps toward the stairs but didn't want to be alone in her room. *Vivi*, Jude thought. *Vivi will know who the tall man is. Vivi will know what to do.*

But Jude couldn't seem to make herself move any farther.

"I've seen many impossible things," the man said. "I have seen the acorn before the oak. I have seen the spark before the flame. But never have I seen such as this: A dead woman living. A child born from nothing."

Mom seemed at a loss for words. Her body was vibrating with tension. Jude wanted to take her hand and squeeze it, but she didn't dare.

"I doubted Balekin when he told me I'd find you here," said the man, his voice softening. "The bones of an earthly woman and her unborn child in the burned remains of my estate were convincing. Do you know what it is to return from battle to find your wife dead, your only heir with her? To find your life reduced to ash?"

Mom shook her head, not as if she was answering him, but as though she was trying to shake off the words.

He took a step toward her, and she took a step back. There was something wrong with the tall man's leg. He moved stiffly, as though it hurt him. The light was different in the entry hall, and Jude could see the odd green tint of his skin and the way his lower teeth seemed too large for his mouth.

She was able to see that his eyes were like Vivi's.

"I was never going to be happy with you," Mom told him. "Your world isn't for people like me."

The tall man regarded her for a long moment. "You made vows," he said finally.

She lifted her chin. “And then I renounced them.”

His gaze went to Jude, and his expression hardened. “What is a promise from a mortal wife worth? I suppose I have my answer.”

Mom turned. At her mother’s look, Jude dashed into the living room.

Taryn was still sleeping. The television was still on. Vivienne looked up with half-lidded cat eyes. “Who’s at the door?” she asked. “I heard arguing.”

“A scary man,” Jude told her, out of breath even though she’d barely run at all. Her heart was pounding. “We’re supposed to go upstairs.”

She didn’t care that Mom had told only *her* to go upstairs. She wasn’t going by herself. With a sigh, Vivi unfolded from the couch and shook Taryn awake. Drowsily, Jude’s twin followed them into the hallway.

As they started toward the carpet-covered steps, Jude saw her father come in from the back garden. He held an axe in his hand—forged to be a near replica of one he’d studied in a museum in Iceland. It wasn’t weird to see Dad with an axe. He and his friends were into old weapons and would spend lots of time talking about “material culture” and sketching ideas for fantastical blades. What was odd was the way he held the weapon, as if he was going to—

Her father swung the axe toward the tall man.

He had never raised a hand to discipline Jude or her sisters, even when they got into big trouble. He wouldn’t hurt anyone. He just wouldn’t.

And yet. And yet.

The axe went past the tall man, biting into the wood trim of the door.

Taryn made an odd, high keening noise and slapped her palms over her mouth.

The tall man drew a curved blade from beneath his leather coat. A *sword*, like from a storybook. Dad was trying to pull the axe free from the doorframe when the man plunged the sword into Dad's stomach, pushing it upward. There was a sound, like sticks snapping, and an animal cry. Dad fell to the vestibule carpet, the one Mom always yelled about when they tracked mud on it.

The rug that was turning red.

Mom screamed. Jude screamed. Taryn and Vivi screamed. Everyone seemed to be screaming, except the tall man.

"Come here," he said, looking directly at Vivi.

"Y-you monster," their mother shouted, moving toward the kitchen. "He's dead!"

"Do not run from me," the man told her. "Not after what you've done. If you run again, I swear I—"

But she did run. She was almost around the corner when his blade struck her in the back. She crumpled to the linoleum, falling arms knocking magnets off the fridge.

The smell of fresh blood was heavy in the air, like wet, hot metal. Like those scrubbing pads Mom used to clean the frying pan when stuff was really stuck on.

Jude ran at the man, slamming her fists against his chest, kicking at his legs. She wasn't even scared. She wasn't sure she felt anything at all.

The man paid Jude no mind. For a long moment, he just stood there, as though he couldn't quite believe what he'd done. As though he wished he could take back the last five minutes. Then he sank to one

knee and caught hold of Jude's shoulders. He pinned her arms to her sides so she couldn't hit him anymore, but he wasn't even looking at her.

His gaze was on Vivienne.

"You were stolen from me," he told her. "I have come to take you to your true home, in Elfhome beneath the hill. There, you will be rich beyond measure. There, you will be with your own kind."

"No," Vivi told him in her somber little voice. "I'm never going anywhere with you."

"I'm your father," he told her, his voice harsh, rising like the crack of a lash. "You are my heir and my blood, and you will obey me in this as in all things."

She didn't move, but her jaw set.

"You're not her father," Jude shouted at the man. Even though he and Vivi had the same eyes, she wouldn't let herself believe it.

His grip tightened on her shoulders, and she made a little squeezed, squeaking sound, but she stared up defiantly. She'd won plenty of staring contests.

He looked away first, turning to watch Taryn, on her knees, shaking Mom while she sobbed, as though she was trying to wake her up. Mom didn't move. Mom and Dad were dead. They were never going to move again.

"I hate you," Vivi proclaimed to the tall man with a viciousness that Jude was glad of. "I will always hate you. I vow it."

The man's stony expression didn't change. "Nonetheless, you will come with me. Ready these little humans. Pack light. We ride before dark."

Vivienne's chin came up. "Leave them alone. If you have to, take me, but not them."

He stared at Vivi, and then he snorted. “You’d protect your sisters from me, would you? Tell me, then, where would you have them go?”

Vivi didn’t answer. They had no grandparents, no living family at all. At least, none they knew.

He looked at Jude again, released her shoulders, and rose to his feet. “They are the progeny of my wife and, thus, my responsibility. I may be cruel, a monster, and a murderer, but I do not shirk my responsibilities. Nor should you shirk yours as the eldest.”

Years later, when Jude told herself the story of what happened, she couldn’t recall the part where they packed. Shock seemed to have erased that hour entirely. Somehow Vivi must have found bags, must have put in their favorite picture books and their most beloved toys, along with photographs and pajamas and coats and shirts.

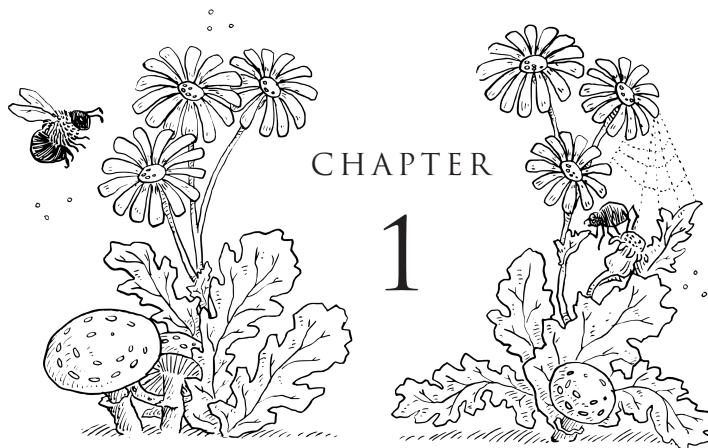
Or maybe Jude had packed for herself. She was never sure.

She couldn’t imagine how they’d done it, with their parents’ bodies cooling downstairs. She couldn’t imagine how it had felt, and as the years went by, she couldn’t make herself feel it again. The horror of the murders dulled with time. Her memories of the day blurred.

A black horse was nibbling the grass of the lawn when they went outside. Its eyes were big and soft. Jude wanted to throw her arms around its neck and press her wet face into its silky mane. Before she could, the tall man swung her and then Taryn across the saddle, handling them like baggage rather than children. He put Vivi up behind him.

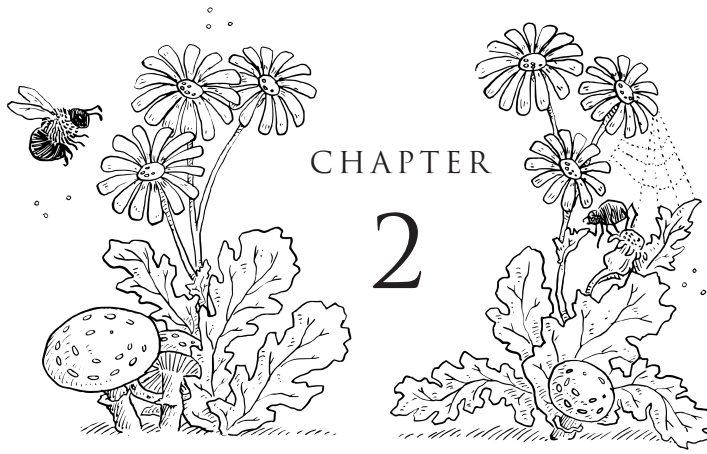
“Hold on,” he said.

Jude and her sisters wept the whole way to Faerieland.



In Faerie, there are no fish sticks, no ketchup, no television.





I sit on a cushion as an imp braids my hair back from my face. The imp's fingers are long, her nails sharp. I wince. Her black eyes meet mine in the claw-footed mirror on my dressing table.

"The tournament is still four nights away," the creature says. Her name is Tatterfell, and she's a servant in Madoc's household, stuck here until she works off her debt to him. She's cared for me since I was a child. It was Tatterfell who smeared stinging faerie ointment over my eyes to give me True Sight so that I could see through most glamours, who brushed the mud from my boots, and who strung dried rowan berries for me to wear around my neck so I might resist enchantments. She wiped my wet nose and reminded me to wear my stockings inside out, so I'd never be led astray in the forest. "And no matter how eager you are for it, you cannot make the moon set nor rise any faster. Try to bring glory to the general's household tonight by appearing as comely as we can make you."

I sigh.

She's never had much patience with my peevishness. "It's an honor to dance with the High King's Court under the hill."

The servants are overfond of telling me how fortunate I am, a bastard daughter of a faithless wife, a human without a drop of faerie blood, to be treated like a trueborn child of Faerie. They tell Taryn much the same thing.

I know it's an honor to be raised alongside the Gentry's own children. A terrifying honor, of which I will never be worthy.

It would be hard to forget it, with all the reminders I am given.

"Yes," I say instead, because she is trying to be kind. "It's great."

Faeries can't lie, so they tend to concentrate on words and ignore tone, especially if they haven't lived among humans. Tatterfell gives me an approving nod, her eyes like two wet beads of jet, neither pupil nor iris visible. "Perhaps someone will ask for your hand and you'll be made a permanent member of the High Court."

"I want to win my place," I tell her.

The imp pauses, hairpin between her fingers, probably considering pricking me with it. "Don't be foolish."

There's no point in arguing, no point to reminding her of my mother's disastrous marriage. There are two ways for mortals to become permanent subjects of the Court: marrying into it or honing some great skill—in metallurgy or lute playing or whatever. Not interested in the first, I have to hope I can be talented enough for the second.

She finishes braiding my hair into an elaborate style that makes me look as though I have horns. She dresses me in sapphire velvet. None of it disguises what I am: human.

"I put in three knots for luck," the little faerie says, not unkindly.

I sigh as she scuttles toward the door, getting up from my dressing table to sprawl facedown on my tapestry-covered bed. I am used to having servants attend to me. Imps and hobs, goblins and grigs. Gossamer wings and green nails, horns and fangs. I have been in Faerie for ten years. None of it seems all that strange anymore. Here, I am the strange one, with my blunt fingers, round ears, and mayfly life.

Ten years is a long time for a human.

After Madoc stole us from the human world, he brought us to his estates on Insmire, the Isle of Might, where the High King of Elfhame keeps his stronghold. There, Madoc raised us—me and Vivienne and Taryn—out of an obligation of honor. Even though Taryn and I are the evidence of Mom's betrayal, by the customs of Faerie, we're his wife's kids, so we're his problem.

As the High King's general, Madoc was away often, fighting for the crown. We were well cared for nonetheless. We slept on mattresses stuffed with the soft seed-heads of dandelions. Madoc personally instructed us in the art of fighting with the cutlass and dagger, the falchion and our fists. He played Nine Men's Morris, Fidchell, and Fox and Geese with us before a fire. He let us sit on his knee and eat off his plate.

Many nights I drifted off to sleep to his rumbling voice reading from a book of battle strategy. And despite myself, despite what he'd done and what he was, I came to love him. I do love him.

It's just not a comfortable kind of love.

"Nice braids," Taryn says, rushing into my room. She's dressed in crimson velvet. Her hair is loose—long chestnut curls that fly behind her like a capelet, a few strands braided with gleaming silver thread. She hops onto the bed beside me, disarranging my small pile of threadbare

stuffed animals—a koala, a snake, a black cat—all beloved of my seven-year-old self. I cannot bear to throw out any of my relics.

I sit up to take a self-conscious look in the mirror. “I like them.”

“I’m having a premonition,” Taryn says, surprising me. “We’re going to have fun tonight.”

“Fun?” I’d been imagining myself frowning at the crowd from our usual bolt-hole and worrying over whether I’d do well enough in the tournament to impress one of the royal family into granting me knight-hood. Just thinking about it makes me fidgety, yet I think about it constantly. My thumb brushes over the missing tip of my ring finger, my nervous tic.

“Yes,” she says, poking me in the side.

“Hey! Ow!” I scoot out of range. “What exactly does this plan entail?” Mostly, when we go to Court, we hide ourselves away. We’ve watched some very interesting things, but from a distance.

She throws up her hands. “What do you mean, what does fun entail? It’s fun!”

I laugh a little nervously. “You have no idea, either, do you? Fine. Let’s go see if you have a gift for prophecy.”

We are getting older and things are changing. We are changing. And as eager as I am for it, I am also afraid.

Taryn pushes herself off my bed and holds out her arm, as though she’s my escort for a dance. I allow myself to be guided from the room, my hand going automatically to assure myself that my knife is still strapped to my hip.

The interior of Madoc’s house is whitewashed plaster and massive, rough-cut wooden beams. The glass panes in the windows are stained

gray as trapped smoke, making the light strange. As Taryn and I go down the spiral stairs, I spot Vivi hiding in a little balcony, frowning over a comics zine stolen from the human world.

Vivi grins at me. She's in jeans and a billowy shirt—obviously not intending to go to the revel. Being Madoc's legitimate daughter, she feels no pressure to please him. She does what she likes. Including reading magazines that might have iron staples rather than glue binding their pages, not caring if her fingers get singed.

"Heading somewhere?" she asks softly from the shadows, startling Taryn.

Vivi knows perfectly well where we're heading.

When we first came here, Taryn and Vivi and I would huddle in Vivi's big bed and talk about what we remembered from home. We'd talk about the meals Mom burned and the popcorn Dad made. Our next-door neighbors' names, the way the house smelled, what school was like, the holidays, the taste of icing on birthday cakes. We'd talk about the shows we'd watched, rehashing the plots, recalling the dialogue until all our memories were polished smooth and false.

There's no more huddling in bed now, rehashing anything. All our new memories are of here, and Vivi has only a passing interest in those.

She'd vowed to hate Madoc, and she stuck to her vow. When Vivi wasn't reminiscing about home, she was a terror. She broke things. She screamed and raged and pinched us when we were content. Eventually, she stopped all of it, but I believe there is a part of her that hates us for adapting. For making the best of things. For making this our home.

"You should come," I tell her. "Taryn's in a weird mood."

Vivi gives her a speculative look and then shakes her head. "I've got

other plans.” Which might mean she’s going to sneak over to the mortal world for the evening or it might mean she’s going to spend it on the balcony, reading.

Either way, if it annoys Madoc, it pleases Vivi.

He’s waiting for us in the hall with his second wife, Oriana. Her skin is the bluish color of skim milk, and her hair is as white as fresh-fallen snow. She is beautiful but unnerving to look at, like a ghost. Tonight she is wearing green and gold, a mossy dress with an elaborate shining collar that makes the pink of her mouth, her ears, and her eyes stand out. Madoc is dressed in green, too, the color of deep forests. The sword at his hip is no ornament.

Outside, past the open double doors, a hob waits, holding the silver bridles of five dappled faerie steeds, their manes braided in complicated and probably magical knots. I think of the knots in my hair and wonder how similar they are.

“You both look well,” Madoc says to Taryn and me, the warmth in his tone making the words a rare compliment. His gaze goes to the stairs. “Is your sister on her way?”

“I don’t know where Vivi is,” I lie. Lying is so easy here. I can do it all day long and never be caught. “She must have forgotten.”

Disappointment passes over Madoc’s face, but not surprise. He heads outside to say something to the hob holding the reins. Nearby, I see one of his spies, a wrinkled creature with a nose like a parsnip and a back hunched higher than her head. She slips a note into his hand and darts off with surprising nimbleness.

Oriana looks us over carefully, as though she expects to find something amiss.

“Be careful tonight,” Oriana says. “Promise me you will neither eat nor drink nor dance.”

“We’ve been to Court before,” I remind her, a Faerie nonanswer if ever there was one.

“You may think salt is sufficient protection, but you children are forgetful. Better to go without. As for dancing, once begun, you mortals will dance yourselves to death if we don’t prevent it.”

I look at my feet and say nothing.

We children are not forgetful.

Madoc married her seven years ago, and shortly after, she gave him a child, a sickly boy named Oak, with tiny, adorable horns on his head. It has always been clear that Oriana puts up with me and Taryn only for Madoc’s sake. She seems to think of us as her husband’s favored hounds: poorly trained and likely to turn on our master at any moment.

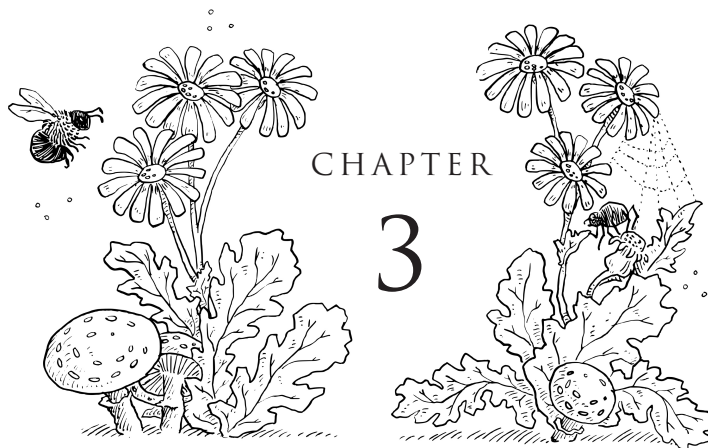
Oak thinks of us as sisters, which I can tell makes Oriana nervous, even though I would never do anything to hurt him.

“You are under Madoc’s protection, and he has the favor of the High King,” Oriana says. “I will not see Madoc made to look foolish because of your mistakes.”

With that little speech complete, she walks out toward the horses. One snorts and strikes the ground with a hoof.

Taryn and I share a look and then follow her. Madoc is already seated on the largest of the faerie steeds, an impressive creature with a scar beneath one eye. Its nostrils flare with impatience. It tosses its mane restlessly.

I swing up onto a pale green horse with sharp teeth and a swampy odor. Taryn chooses a rouncy and kicks her heels against its flanks. She takes off like a shot, and I follow, plunging into the night.



Faeries are twilight creatures, and I have become one, too. We rise when the shadows grow long and head to our beds before the sun rises. It is well after midnight when we arrive at the great hill at the Palace of Elfhome. To go inside, we must ride between two trees, an oak and a thorn, and then straight into what appears to be the stone wall of an abandoned folly. I've done it hundreds of times, but I flinch anyway. My whole body braces, I grip the reins hard, and my eyes mash shut.

When I open them, I am inside the hill.

We ride on through a cavern, between pillars of roots, over packed earth.

There are dozens of the Folk here, crowding around the entrance to the vast throne room, where Court is being held—long-nosed pixies with tattered wings; elegant, green-skinned ladies in long gowns with goblins holding up their trains; tricky boggans; laughing foxkin; a boy in an owl mask and a golden headdress; an elderly woman with crows



crowding her shoulders; a gaggle of girls with wild roses in their hair; a bark-skinned boy with feathers around his neck; a group of knights all in scarab-green armor. Many I've seen before; a few I have spoken with. Too many for my eyes to drink them all in, yet I cannot look away.

I never get tired of this—of the spectacle, of the pageantry. Maybe Oriana isn't entirely wrong to worry that we might one day get caught up in it, be carried away by it, and forget to take care. I can see why humans succumb to the beautiful nightmare of the Court, why they willingly drown in it.

I know I shouldn't love it as I do, stolen as I am from the mortal world, my parents murdered. But I love it all the same.

Madoc swings down from his horse. Oriana and Taryn are already off theirs, handing them over to grooms. It's me they're waiting for. Madoc reaches out his fingers like he is going to help me, but I hop off the saddle on my own. My leather slippers hit the ground like a slap.

I hope that I look like a knight to him.

Oriana steps forward, probably to remind Taryn and me of all the things she doesn't want us to do. I don't give her the chance. Instead, I hook my arm through Taryn's and hurry along inside. The room is redolent with burning rosemary and crushed herbs. Behind us, I can hear Madoc's heavy step, but I know where I am going. The first thing we have to do when we get to Court is greet the king.

The High King Eldred sits on his throne in gray robes of state, a heavy golden oak-leaf crown holding down his thin, spun-gold hair. When we bow, he touches our heads lightly with his knobby, be-ringed hands, and then we rise.

His grandmother was Queen Mab, of the House of the Greenbriar. She lived as one of the solitary fey before she began to conquer Faerie

with her horned consort and his stag-riders. Because of him, each of Eldred's six heirs are said to have some animal characteristic, a thing that is not unusual in Faerie but is unusual among the trooping Gentry of the Courts.

The eldest prince, Balekin, and his younger brother, Dain, stand nearby, drinking wine from wooden cups banded in silver. Dain wears breeches that stop at his knees, showing his hooves and deer legs. Balekin wears the greatcoat he favors, with a collar of bear fur. His fingers have a thorn at each knuckle, and thorns ridge his arm, running up under the cuffs of his shirt, visible when he and Dain urge Madoc over.

Oriana curtsies to them. Although Dain and Balekin are standing together, they are often at odds with each other and with their sister Elowyn—so often that the Court is considered to be divided into three warring circles of influence.

Prince Balekin, the firstborn, and his set are known as the Circle of Grackles, for those who enjoy merriment and who scorn anything getting in the way of it. They drink themselves sick and numb themselves with poisonous and delightful powders. His is the wildest circle, although he has always been perfectly composed and sober when speaking with me. I suppose I could throw myself into debauchery and hope to impress them. I'd rather not, though.

Princess Elowyn, the second-born, and her companions have the Circle of Larks. They value art above all else. Several mortals have found favor in her circle, but since I have no real skill with a lute or declaiming, I have no chance of being one of them.

Prince Dain, third-born, leads what's known as the Circle of Falcons. Knights, warriors, and strategists are in their favor. Madoc, obviously, belongs to this circle. They talk about honor, but what they really care

about is power. I am good enough with a blade, knowledgeable in strategy. All I need is a chance to prove myself.

“Go enjoy yourselves,” Madoc tells us. With a look back at the princes, Taryn and I head out into the throng.

The palace of the King of Elfhame has many secret alcoves and hidden corridors, perfect for trysts or assassins or staying out of the way and being really dull at parties. When Taryn and I were little, we would hide under the long banquet tables. But since she determined we were elegant ladies, too big to get our dresses dirty crawling around on the floor, we had to find a better spot. Just past the second landing of stone steps is an area where a large mass of shimmering rock juts out, creating a ledge. Normally, that’s where we settle ourselves to listen to the music and watch all the fun we aren’t supposed to be having.

Tonight, however, Taryn has a different idea. She passes the steps and grabs food off a silver tray—a green apple and a wedge of blue-veined cheese. Not bothering with salt, she takes a bite of each, holding the apple out for me to bite. Oriana thinks we can’t tell the difference between regular fruit and faerie fruit, which blooms a deep gold. Its flesh is red and dense, and the cloying smell of it fills the forests at harvest time.

The apple is crisp and cold in my mouth. We pass it back and forth, sharing down to the core, which I eat in two bites.

Near where I am standing, a tiny faerie girl with a clock of white hair, like that of a dandelion, and a little knife cuts the strap of an ogre’s belt. It’s slick work. A moment later, his sword and pouch are gone, she’s losing herself in the crowd, and I can almost believe it didn’t happen. Until the girl looks back at me.

She winks.

A moment after that, the ogre realizes he was robbed.

“I smell a thief!” he shouts, casting around him, knocking over a tankard of dark brown beer, his warty nose sniffing the air.

Nearby, there’s a commotion—one of the candles flares up in blue crackling flames, sparking loudly and distracting even the ogre. By the time it returns to normal, the white-haired thief is well gone.

With a half smile, I turn back to Taryn, who watches the dancers with longing, oblivious to much else.

“We could take turns,” she proposes. “If you can’t stop, I’ll pull you out. Then you’ll do the same for me.”

My heartbeat speeds at the thought. I look at the throng of revelers, trying to build up the daring of someone who would rob an ogre right under his nose.

Princess Elowyn whirls at the center of a circle of Larks. Her skin is a glittering gold, her hair the deep green of ivy. Beside her, a human boy plays the fiddle. Two more mortals accompany him less skillfully, but more joyfully, on ukuleles. Elowyn’s younger sister Caelia spins nearby, with corn silk hair like her father’s and a crown of flowers in it.

A new ballad begins, and the words drift up to me. “*Of all the sons King William had, Prince Jamie was the worst,*” they sing. “*And what made the sorrow even greater, Prince Jamie was the first.*”

I’ve never much liked that song because it reminds me of someone else. Someone who, along with Princess Rhyia, doesn’t appear to be attending tonight. But—oh no. I do see him.

Prince Cardan, sixth-born to the High King Eldred, yet still the absolute worst, strides across the floor toward us.

Valerian, Nicasia, and Locke—his three meanest, fanciest, and most loyal friends—follow him. The crowd parts and hushes, bowing as they

pass. Cardan is wearing his usual scowl, accessorized with kohl under his eyes and a circlet of gold in his midnight hair. He has on a long black coat with a high, jagged collar, the whole thing stitched with a pattern of constellations. Valerian is in deep red, cabochon rubies sparkling on his cuffs, each like a drop of frozen blood. Nicasia's hair is the blue-green of the ocean, crowned with a diadem of pearls. A glittering cobweb net covers her braids. Locke brings up the rear, looking bored, his hair the precise color of fox fur.

"They're ridiculous," I say to Taryn, who follows my gaze. I cannot deny that they're also beautiful. Faerie lords and ladies, just like in the songs. If we didn't have to take lessons alongside them, if I didn't know firsthand what a scourge they were to those who displeased them, I'd probably be as in love with them as everyone else is.

"Vivi says that Cardan has a tail," Taryn whispers. "She saw it when she was swimming in the lake with him and Princess Rhyia this past full moon night."

I can't imagine Cardan swimming in a lake, jumping in the water, splashing people, laughing at something other than their suffering. "A *tail*?" I echo, an incredulous smile starting on my face and then fading when I remember that Vivi didn't bother to tell me the story, even though it must have happened days ago. Three is an odd configuration of sisters. There's always one on the outside.

"With a tuft on the end! It coils up under his clothes and unfurls like a whip." She giggles, and I can barely understand her next words. "Vivi said she wishes she had one."

"I'm glad she doesn't," I say firmly, which is stupid. I have nothing against tails.

Then Cardan and his companions are too close for us to safely talk about them. I turn my gaze to the floor. Though I hate it, I sink to the

ground on one knee, bend my head, and grit my teeth. By my side, Taryn does something similar. All around us, people are making obeisances.

*Don't look at us, I think. Don't look.*

As Valerian passes, he grabs one of my braided horns. The others move on through the throng as Valerian sneers down at me.

"Did you think I didn't see you there? You and your sister stand out in any crowd," he says, leaning in close. His breath is heavy with the scent of honey wine. My hand balls into a fist at my side, and I am conscious of the nearness of my knife. Still, I do not look him in the eye. "No other head of hair so dull, no other face so plain."

"Valerian," Prince Cardan calls. He is glowering already and when he sees me, his eyes narrow further.

Valerian gives my braid a hard tug. I wince, useless fury coiling in my belly. He laughs and moves on.

My fury curdles into shame. I wish I had smacked his hand away, even though it would have made everything worse.

Taryn sees something in my face. "What did he say to you?"

I shake my head.

Cardan has stopped beside a boy with long copper hair and a pair of small moth wings—a boy who isn't bowing. The boy laughs and Cardan lunges. Between one eyeblink and the next, the prince's balled fist strikes the boy hard across the jaw, sending him sprawling. As the boy falls, Cardan grabs one of his wings. It tears like paper. The boy's scream is thin and reedy. He curls up into himself on the ground, agony plain on his face. I wonder if faerie wings grow back; I know that butterflies that lose a wing never fly again.

The courtiers around us gape and titter, but only for a moment. Then they go back to their dancing and their songs, and the revel spirals on.

This is how they are. Someone gets in Cardan's way, and they're instantly and brutally punished. Driven from taking lessons at the palace, sometimes out of the Court entirely. Hurt. Broken.

As Cardan walks past the boy, apparently done with him, I am grateful that Cardan has five more worthy brothers and sisters; it's practically guaranteed that he'll never sit on the throne. I don't want to think of him with more power than he has.

Even Nicasia and Valerian share a weighted glance. Then Valerian shrugs and follows Cardan. But Locke pauses by the boy, bending down to help him to his feet.

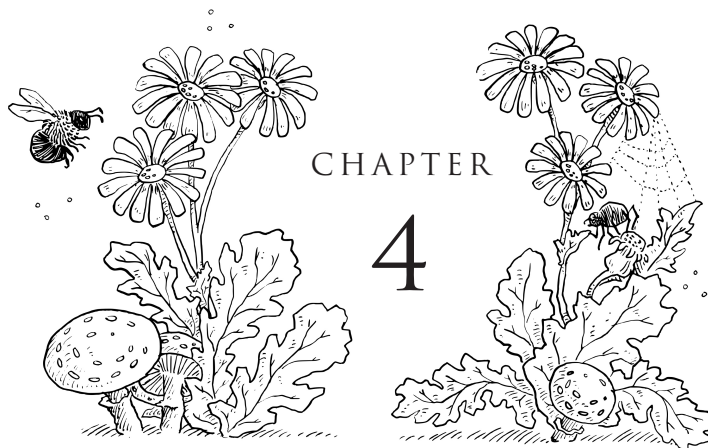
The boy's friends come over to lead him away, and at that moment, improbably, Locke's gaze lifts. His tawny fox eyes meet mine and widen in surprise. I am immobilized, my heart speeding. I brace myself for more scorn, but then one corner of his mouth lifts. He winks, as if in acknowledgment of being caught out. As if we're sharing a secret. As if he thinks I am not loathly, as though he does not find my mortality contagious.

"Stop staring at him," Taryn demands.

"Didn't you see—" I start to explain, but she cuts me off, grabbing hold of me and hauling us toward the stairs, toward our landing of shimmering stone, where we can hide. Her nails sink into my skin.

"Don't give them any more reason to bother you than they've already got!" The intensity of her response surprises me into snatching back my hand. Angry red half moons mark where she grabbed me.

I look back toward where Locke was, but the crowd has swallowed him up.



As dawn breaks, I open the windows to my bedroom and let the last of the cool night air flow in as I strip off my Court dress. I feel hot all over. My skin feels too tight, and my heart won't stop racing.

I've been to Court before many times. I've been witness to more awfulness than wings being torn or my person insulted. Faeries make up for their inability to lie with a panoply of deceptions and cruelties. Twisted words, pranks, omissions, riddles, scandals, not to mention their revenges upon one another for ancient, half-remembered slights. Storms are less fickle than they are, seas less capricious.

Like, for example, as a redcap, Madoc needs bloodshed the way a mermaid needs the salt spray of the sea. After every battle, he ritually dips his hood into the blood of his enemies. I've seen the hood, kept under glass in the armory. The fabric is stiff and stained a brown so deep it's almost black, except for a few smears of green.

Sometimes I go down and stare at it, trying to see my parents in the



tide lines of dried blood. I want to feel something, something besides a vague queasiness. I want to feel *more*, but every time I look at it, I feel less.

I think about going to the armory now, but I don't. I stand in front of my window and imagine myself a fearless knight, imagine myself a witch who hid her heart in her finger and then chopped her finger off.

"I'm so tired," I say out loud. "So tired."

I sit there for a long time, watching the rising sun gild the sky, listening to the waves crash as the tide goes out, when a creature flies up to alight on the edge of my window. At first it seems like an owl, but it's got hob eyes. "Tired of what, sweetmeat?" it asks me.

I sigh and answer honestly for once. "Of being powerless."

The hob studies my face, then flies off into the night.



I sleep the day away and wake disoriented, battling my way out of the long, embroidered curtains around my bed. Drool has dried along one of my cheeks.

I find bathwater waiting for me, but it has gone tepid. Servants must have come and gone. I climb in anyway and splash my face. Living in Faerie, it's impossible not to notice that everyone else smells like verbena or crushed pine needles, dried blood or milkweed. I smell like pit sweat and sour breath unless I scrub myself clean.

When Tatterfell comes in to light the lamps, she finds me dressing for a lecture, which begins in the late afternoons and stretches on into some evenings. I wear gray leather boots and a tunic with Madoc's crest—a dagger, a crescent moon turned on its side so it rests like a cup, and a single drop of blood falling from one corner embroidered in silk thread.

Downstairs, I find Taryn at the banquet table, alone, nursing a cup of nettle tea and picking at a bannock. Today, she does not suggest anything will be fun.

Madoc insists—perhaps out of guilt or shame—that we be treated like the children of Faerie. That we take the same lessons, that we be given whatever they have. Changelings have been brought to the High Court before, but none of them has been raised like Gentry.

He doesn't understand how much that makes them loathe us.

Not that I am not grateful. I like the lessons. Answering the lecturers cleverly is something no one can take from me, even if the lecturers themselves occasionally pretend otherwise. I will take a frustrated nod in place of effusive praise. I will take it and be glad because it means I can belong whether they like it or not.

Vivi used to go with us, but then she became bored and didn't bother. Madoc raged, but since his approval of a thing only makes her despise it, all his railing just made her more determined to never, ever go back. She has tried to persuade us to stay home with her, but if Taryn and I cannot manage the machinations of the children of Faerie without quitting our lessons or running to Madoc, how will he ever believe we can manage the Court, where those same machinations will play out on a grander and more deadly scale?

Taryn and I set off, swinging our baskets. We don't have to leave Ins-mire to get to the High King's palace, but we do skirt the edge of two other tiny islands, Insmoor, Isle of Stone, and Insweal, Isle of Woe. All three are connected by half-submerged rocky paths and stones large enough that it's possible to leap your way from one to the next. A herd of stags is swimming toward Insmoor, seeking the best grazing. Taryn and I walk past the Lake of Masks and through the far corner of the Milkwood,

picking our way past the pale, silvery trunks and bleached leaves. From there, we spot mermaids and merrows sunning themselves near craggy caves, their scales reflecting the amber glow of the late-afternoon sun.

All the children of the Gentry, regardless of age, are taught by lecturers from all over the kingdom on the grounds of the palace. Some afternoons we sit in groves carpeted with emerald moss, and other evenings we spend in high towers or up in trees. We learn about the movements of constellations in the sky, the medicinal and magical properties of herbs, the languages of birds and flowers and people as well as the language of the Folk (though it occasionally twists in my mouth), the composition of riddles, and how to walk soft-footed over leaves and brambles to leave neither trace nor sound. We are instructed in the finer points of the harp and the lute, the bow and the blade. Taryn and I watch them as they practice enchantments. For a break, we all play at war in a green field with a broad arc of trees.

Madoc trained me to be formidable even with a wooden sword. Taryn isn't bad, either, even though she doesn't bother practicing anymore. At the Summer Tournament, in only a few days, our mock war will take place in front of the royal family. With Madoc's endorsement, one of the princes or princesses might choose to grant me knighthood and take me into their personal guard. It would be a kind of power, a kind of protection.

And with it, I could protect Taryn, too.

We arrive at school. Prince Cardan, Locke, Valerian, and Nicasia are already sprawled in the grass with a few other faeries. A girl with deer horns—Poesy—is giggling over something Cardan has said. They do not so much as look at us as we spread our blanket and set out our notebooks and pens and pots of ink.

My relief is immense.

Our lesson involves the history of the delicately negotiated peace between Orlagh, Queen of the Undersea, and the various faerie kings and queens of the land. Nicasia is Orlagh's daughter, sent to be fostered in the High King's Court. Many odes have been composed to Queen Orlagh's beauty, although, if she's anything like her daughter, not to her personality.

Nicasia gloats through the lesson, proud of her heritage. When the instructor moves on to Lord Roiben of the Court of Termites, I lose interest. My thoughts drift. Instead, I find myself thinking through combinations—strike, thrust, parry, block. I grip my pen as though it were the hilt of a blade and forget to take notes.

As the sun dips low in the sky, Taryn and I unpack our baskets from home, which contain bread, butter, cheese, and plums. I butter a piece of bread hungrily.

Passing us, Cardan kicks dirt onto my food right before I put it into my mouth. The other faeries laugh.

I look up to see him watching me with cruel delight, like a raptor bird trying to decide whether to be bothered devouring a small mouse. He's wearing a high-collared tunic embroidered with thorns, his fingers heavy with rings. His sneer is well-practiced.

I grit my teeth. I tell myself that if I let the taunts roll off me, he will lose interest. He will go away. I can endure this a little longer, a few more days.

"Something the matter?" Nicasia asks sweetly, wandering up and 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."

"Make me," I say before I can stop myself. Not the greatest comeback, but my palms begin to sweat. Taryn looks startled.

"I *could*, you know," says Cardan, grinning as though nothing would please him more. My heart speeds. If I weren't wearing a string of rowan berries, he could ensorcell me so that I thought dirt was some kind of delicacy. Only Madoc's position would give him reason to hesitate. I do not move, do not touch the necklace hidden under the bodice of my tunic, the one that I hope will stop any glamour from working. The one I hope he doesn't discover and rip from my throat.

I glance in the direction of the day's lecturer, but the elderly phooka has his nose buried in a book.

Since Cardan's a prince, it's more than likely no one has ever cautioned him, has ever stayed his hand. I never know how far he'll go, and I never know how far our instructors will let him.

"You don't want that, do you?" Valerian asks with mock sympathy as he kicks more dirt onto our lunch. I didn't even see him come over. Once, Valerian stole a silver pen of mine, and Madoc replaced it with a ruby-studded one from his own desk. This threw Valerian into such a rage that he cracked me in the back of the head with his wooden practice sword. "What if we promise to be nice to you for the whole afternoon if you eat everything in your baskets?" His smile is wide and false. "Don't you want us for friends?"

Taryn looks down at her lap. *No*, I want to say. *We don't want you for friends.*

I don't answer, but I don't look down, either. I meet Cardan's gaze. There is nothing I can say to make them stop, and I know it. I have no power here. But today I can't seem to choke down my anger at my own impotence.

Nicasia pulls a pin from my hair, causing one of my braids to fall against my neck. I swat at her hand, but it happens too fast.

“What’s this?” She’s holding up the golden pin, with a tiny cluster of filigree hawthorn berries at the top. “Did you steal it? Did you think it would make you beautiful? Did you think it would make you as we are?”

I bite the inside of my cheek. Of course I want to be like them. They’re beautiful as blades forged in some divine fire. They will live forever. Valerian’s hair shines like polished gold. Nicasia’s limbs are long and perfectly shaped, her mouth the pink of coral, her hair the color of the deepest, coldest part of the sea. Fox-eyed Locke, standing silently behind Valerian, his expression schooled to careful indifference, has a chin as pointed as the tips of his ears. And Cardan is even more beautiful than the rest, with black hair as iridescent as a raven’s wing and cheekbones sharp enough to cut out a girl’s heart. I hate him more than all the others. I hate him so much that sometimes when I look at him, I can hardly breathe.

“You’ll never be our equal,” Nicasia says.

Of course I won’t.

“Oh, come on,” Locke says with a careless laugh, his hand going around Nicasia’s waist. “Let’s leave them to their misery.”

“Jude’s sorry,” Taryn says quickly. “We’re both really sorry.”

“She can show us how sorry she is,” Cardan drawls. “Tell her she doesn’t belong in the Summer Tournament.”

“Afraid I’ll win?” I ask, which isn’t smart.

“It’s not for mortals,” he informs us, voice chilly. “Withdraw, or wish that you had.”

I open my mouth, but Taryn speaks before I can. “I’ll talk to her about it. It’s nothing, just a game.”

Nicasia gives my sister a magnanimous smile. Valerian leers at Taryn, his eyes lingering on her curves. “It’s all just a game.”

Cardan’s gaze meets mine, and I know he isn’t finished with me, not by a long shot.

“Why did you dare them like that?” Taryn asks when they’ve walked back to their own merry luncheon, all spread out for them. “Talking back to him—that’s just stupid.”

*Make me.*

*Afraid I’ll win?*

“I know,” I tell her. “I’ll shut up. I just—I got angry.”

“You’re better off being scared,” she advises. And then, shaking her head, she packs up our ruined food. My stomach growls, and I try to ignore it.

They want me to be afraid, I know that. During the mock war that very afternoon, Valerian trips me, and Cardan whispers foul things in my ear. I head home with bruises on my skin from kicks, from falls.

What they don’t realize is this: Yes, they frighten me, but I have always been scared, since the day I got here. I was raised by the man who murdered my parents, reared in a land of monsters. I live with that fear, let it settle into my bones, and ignore it. If I didn’t pretend not to be scared, I would hide under my owl-down coverlets in Madoc’s estate forever. I would lie there and scream until there was nothing left of me. I refuse to do that. I will not do that.

Nicasia’s wrong about me. I don’t desire to do as well in the tournament as one of the fey. I want to win. I do not yearn to be their equal.

In my heart, I yearn to best them.