

THE WICKED KING

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HOT
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BOOKS

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For Kelly Link, one of the merfolk

Crooked Forest

Palace of Elfhame

Milkwood

INSMIRE

Lake of Masks

Madoc's Stronghold

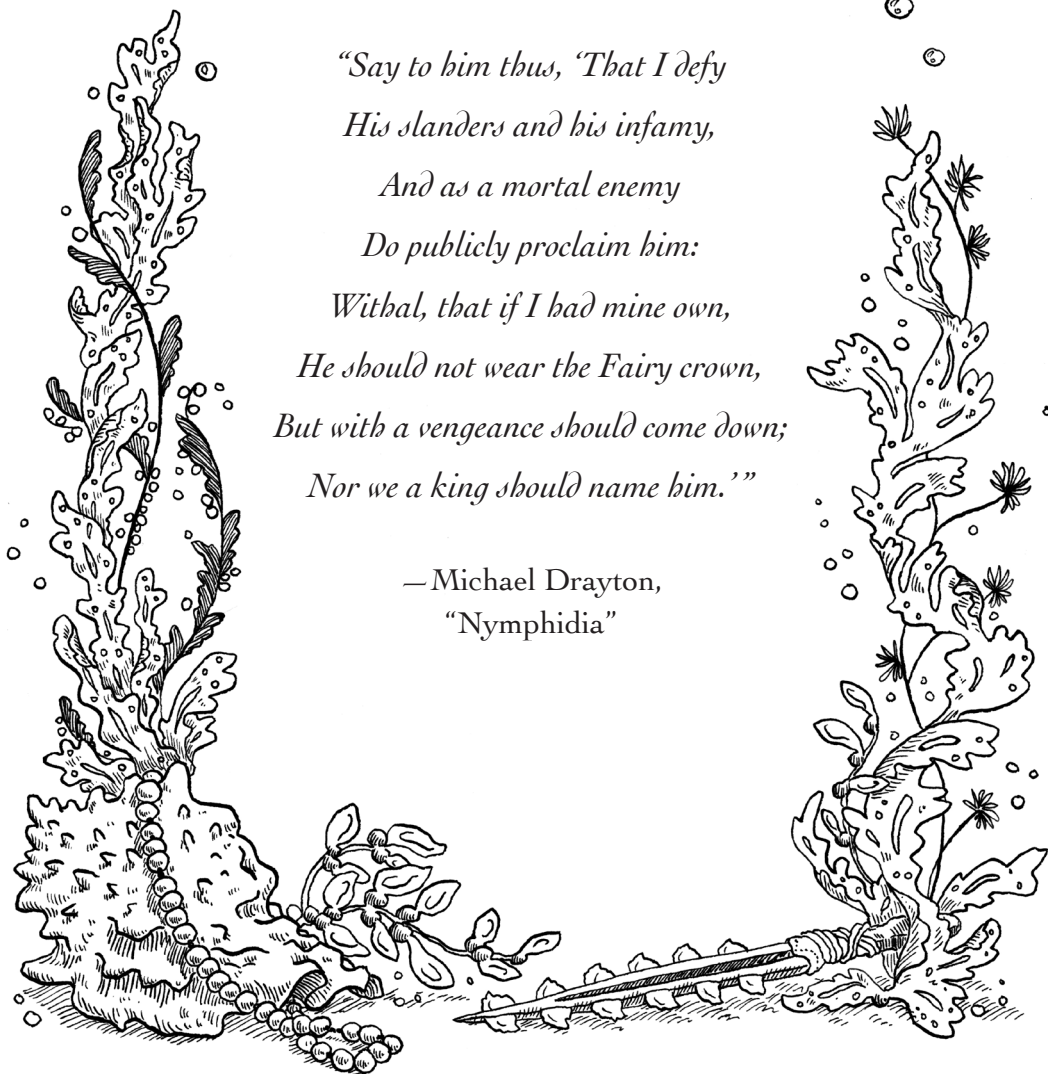


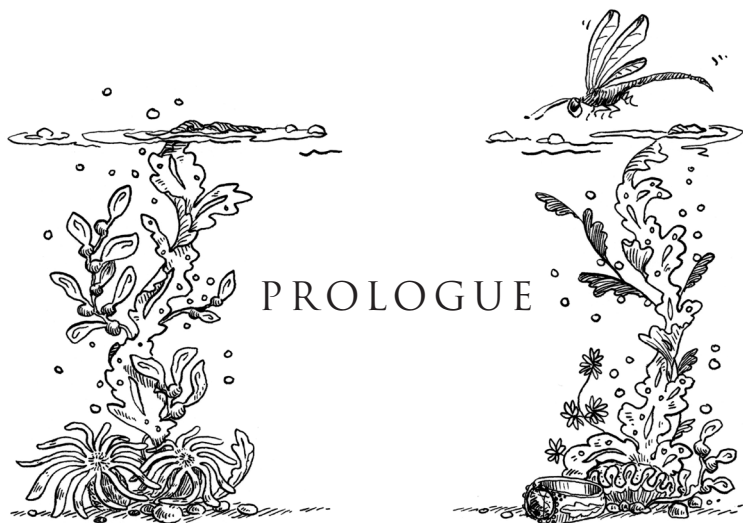


Book One

*"Say to him thus, 'That I defy
His slanders and his infamy,
And as a mortal enemy
Do publicly proclaim him:
Withal, that if I had mine own,
He should not wear the Fairy crown,
But with a vengeance should come down;
Nor we a king should name him.'"*

—Michael Drayton,
"Nymphidia"





Jude lifted the heavy practice sword, moving into the first stance—readiness.

Get used to the weight, Madoc had told her. You must be strong enough to strike and strike and strike again without tiring. The first lesson is to make yourself that strong.

It will hurt. Pain makes you strong.

She planted her feet in the grass. Wind ruffled her hair as she moved through the stances. One: the sword before her, canted to one side, protecting her body. Two: the pommel high, as though the blade were a horn coming from her head. Three: down to her hip, then in a deceptively casual droop in front of her. Then four: up again, to her shoulder. Each position could move easily into a strike or a defense. Fighting was chess, anticipating the move of one's opponent and countering it before one got hit.

But it was chess played with the whole body. Chess that left her



bruised and tired and frustrated with the whole world and with herself, too.

Or maybe it was more like riding a bike. When she'd been learning to do that, back in the real world, she'd fallen lots of times. Her knees had been scabby enough that Mom thought she might have scars. But Jude had taken off her training wheels herself and disdained riding carefully on the sidewalk, as Taryn did. Jude wanted to ride in the street, fast, like Vivi, and if she got gravel embedded in her skin for it, well, then she'd let Dad pick it out with tweezers at night.

Sometimes Jude longed for her bike, but there were none in Faerie. Instead, she had giant toads and thin greenish ponies and wild-eyed horses slim as shadows.

And she had weapons.

And her parents' murderer, now her foster father. The High King's general, Madoc, who wanted to teach her how to ride too fast and how to fight to the death. No matter how hard she swung at him, it just made him laugh. He liked her anger. *Fire*, he called it.

She liked it when she was angry, too. Angry was better than scared. Better than remembering she was a mortal among monsters. No one was offering her the option of training wheels anymore.

On the other side of the field, Madoc was guiding Taryn through a series of stances. Taryn was learning the sword, too, although she had different problems than Jude. Her stances were more perfect, but she hated sparring. She paired the obvious defenses with the obvious attacks, so it was easy to lure her into a series of moves and then score a hit by breaking the pattern. Each time it happened, Taryn got mad, as though Jude were flubbing the steps of a dance rather than winning.



"Come here," Madoc called to Jude across the silvery expanse of grass.

She walked to him, sword slung over her shoulders. The sun was just setting, but faeries are twilight creatures, and their day was not even half done. The sky was streaked with copper and gold. She inhaled a deep breath of pine needles. For a moment, she felt as though she were just a kid learning a new sport.

"Come spar," he said when Jude got closer. "Both of you girls against this old redcap." Taryn leaned against her sword, the tip of it sinking into the ground. She wasn't supposed to hold it that way—it wasn't good for the blade—but Madoc didn't reprimand her.

"Power," he said. "Power is the ability to get what you want. Power is the ability to be the one making the decisions. And how do we get power?"

Jude stepped beside her twin. It was obvious that Madoc expected a response, but also that he expected the wrong one. "We learn how to fight well?" she said to say *something*.

When Madoc smiled at her, she could see the points of his bottom cuspids, longer than the rest of his teeth. He tousled her hair, and she felt the sharp edges of his clawlike nails against her scalp, too light to hurt, but a reminder of what he was nonetheless. "We get power by taking it."

He pointed toward a low hill with a thorn tree growing on it. "Let's make a game of the next lesson. That's my hill. Go ahead and take it."

Taryn dutifully trooped toward it, Jude behind her. Madoc kept pace, his smile all teeth.

"Now what?" Taryn asked, without any particular excitement.



Madoc looked into the distance, as though he was contemplating and discarding various rules. "Now hold it against attack."

"Wait, what?" Jude asked. "From you?"

"Is this a strategy game or a sparring practice?" Taryn asked, frowning.

Madoc brought one finger under her chin, raising her head until she was looking into his golden cat eyes. "What is sparring but a game of strategy, played at speed?" he told her with a great seriousness. "Talk with your sister. When the sun reaches the trunk of that tree, I will come for my hill. Knock me down but once and you both win."

Then he departed for a copse of trees some ways away. Taryn sat down on the grass.

"I don't want to do this," she said.

"It's just a game," Jude reminded her nervously.

Taryn gave her a long look—the one that they gave each other when one of them was pretending things were normal. "Okay, so what do *you* think we should do?"

Jude looked up into the branches of the thorn tree. "What if one of us threw rocks while the other did the sparring?"

"Okay," Taryn said, pushing herself up and beginning to gather stones into the folds of her skirts. "You don't think he'll get mad, do you?"

Jude shook her head, but she understood Taryn's question. What if he killed them by accident?

You've got to choose which hill to die on, Mom used to tell Dad. It had been one of those weird sayings adults expected her to understand, even though they made no sense—like "one in the hand is worth two in the bush" or "every stick has two ends" or the totally mysterious "a cat



may look at a king.” Now, standing on an actual hill with a sword in her hand, she understood it a lot better.

“Get into position,” Jude said, and Taryn wasted no time in climbing the thorn tree. Jude checked the sunmark, wondering what sort of tricks Madoc might use. The longer he waited, the darker it would get, and while he could see in the dark, Jude and Taryn could not.

But, in the end, he didn’t use any tricks. He came out of the woods and in their direction, howling as though he were leading an army of a hundred. Jude’s knees went weak with terror.

This is just a game, she reminded herself frantically. The closer he got, though, the less her body believed her. Every animal instinct strained to run.

Their strategy seemed silly now in the face of his hugeness and their smallness, in the face of her fear. She thought of her mother bleeding on the ground, recalled the smell of her insides as they leaked out. The memory felt like thunder in her head. She was going to die.

Run, her whole body urged. *RUN!*

No, her mother had run. Jude planted her feet.

She made herself move into the first position, even though her legs felt wobbly. He had the advantage, even coming up that hill, because he had momentum on his side. The stones raining down on him from Taryn barely checked his pace.

Jude spun out of the way, not even bothering to try to block the first blow. Putting the tree between them, she dodged his second and third. When the fourth one came, it knocked her to the grass.

She closed her eyes against the killing strike.

“You can take a thing when no one’s looking. But defending it, even with all the advantage on your side, is no easy task,” Madoc told her



with a laugh. She looked up to find him offering her a hand. “Power is much easier to acquire than it is to hold on to.”

Relief broke over her. It was just a game, after all. Just another lesson.

“That wasn’t fair,” Taryn complained.

Jude didn’t say anything. Nothing was fair in Faerie. She had learned to stop expecting it to be.

Madoc hauled Jude to her feet and threw a heavy arm over her shoulders. He drew her and her twin in for an embrace. He smelled like smoke and dried blood, and Jude let herself sag against him. It was good to be hugged. Even by a monster.



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 Elf-hame 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 Elfhame, 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."

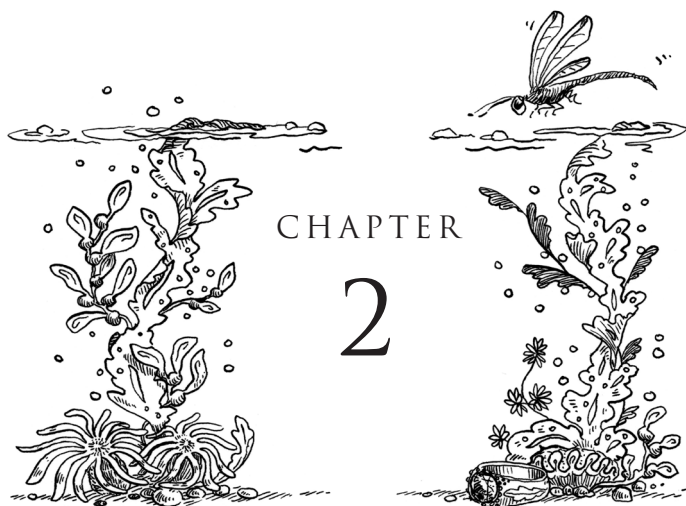
A corner of her mouth lifts. "I'll come with you."

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.



Balekin is imprisoned in the Tower of Forgetting on the northernmost part of Insweal, Isle of Woe. Insweal is one of the three islands of Elfhome, connected to Insmire and Insmoor by large rocks and patches of land, populated with only a few fir trees, silvery stags, and the occasional treefolk. It's possible to cross between Insmire and Insweal entirely on foot, if you don't mind leaping stone to stone, walking through the Milkwood by yourself, and probably getting at least somewhat wet.

I mind all those things and decide to ride.

As the High King's seneschal, I have the pick of his stables. Never much of a rider, I choose a horse that seems docile enough, her coat a soft black color, her mane in complicated and probably magical knots.

I lead her out while a goblin groom brings me a bit and bridle.

Then I swing onto her back and direct her toward the Tower of Forgetting. Waves crashing against the rocks beneath me. Salt spray



misting the air. Insweal is a forbidding island, large stretches of its landscape bare of greenery, just black rocks and tide pools and a tower threaded through with cold iron.

I tie the horse to one of the black metal rings driven into the stone wall of the tower. She whickers nervously, her tail tucked hard against her body. I touch her muzzle in what I hope is a reassuring way.

"I won't be long, and then we can get out of here," I tell her, wishing I'd asked the groom for her name.

I don't feel so differently from the horse as I knock on the heavy wooden door.

A large, hairy creature opens it. He's wearing beautifully wrought plate armor, blond fur sticking out from any gaps. He's obviously a soldier, which used to mean he would treat me well, for Madoc's sake, but now might mean just the opposite.

"I am Jude Duarte, seneschal to the High King," I tell him. "Here on the crown's business. Let me in."

He steps aside, pulling the door open, and I enter the dim antechamber of the Tower of Forgetting. My mortal eyes adjust slowly and poorly to the lack of light. I do not have the faerie ability to see in near darkness. At least three other guards are there, but I perceive them more as shapes than anything else.

"You're here to see Prince Balekin, one supposes," comes a voice from the back.

It is eerie not to be able to see the speaker clearly, but I pretend the discomfort away and nod. "Take me to him."

"Vulciber," the voice says. "You take her."

The Tower of Forgetting is so named because it exists as a place to put Folk when a monarch wants them struck from the Court's memory.



Most criminals are punished with clever curses, quests, or some other form of capricious faerie judgment. To wind up here, one has to have really pissed off someone important.

The guards are mostly soldiers for whom such a bleak and lonely location suits their temperament—or those whose commanders intend them to learn humility from the position. As I look over at the shadowy figures, it's hard to guess which sort they are.

Vulciber comes toward me, and I recognize the hairy soldier who opened the door. He looks to be at least part troll, heavy-browed and long-limbed.

“Lead on,” I say.

He gives me a hard look in return. I am not sure what he dislikes about me—my mortality, my position, my intruding on his evening. I don't ask. I just follow him down stone stairs into the wet, mineral-scented darkness. The bloom of soil is heavy in the air, and there is a rotten, mushroomy odor I cannot place.

I stop when the dark grows too deep and I fear I am going to stumble. “Light the lamps,” I say.

Vulciber moves in close, his breath on my face, carrying with it the scent of wet leaves. “And if I will not?”

A thin knife comes easily into my hand, slipping down out of a sleeve holster. I press the point against his side, just under the ribs. “Best you don't find out.”

“But you can't see,” he insists, as though I have played some kind of dirty trick on him by not being as intimidated as he'd hoped.

“Maybe I just prefer a little more light,” I say, trying to keep my voice even, though my heart is beating wildly, my palms starting to



sweat. If we have to fight on the stairs, I better strike fast and true, because I'll probably have only that one shot.

Vulciber moves away from me and my knife. I hear his heavy foot-falls on the steps and start counting in case I have to follow blind. But then a torch flares to life, emitting green fire.

"Well?" he demands. "Are you coming?"

The stairs pass several cells, some empty and some whose occupants sit far enough from the bars that the torchlight does not illuminate them. None do I recognize until the last.

Prince Balekin's black hair is held by a circlet, a reminder of his royalty. Despite being imprisoned, he barely looks discomfited. Three rugs cover the damp stone of the floor. He sits in a carved armchair, watching me with hooded, owl-bright eyes. A golden samovar rests on a small, elegant table. Balekin turns a handle, and steaming, fragrant tea spills into fragile porcelain. The scent of it makes me think of seaweed.

But no matter how elegant he appears, he is still in the Tower of Forgetting, a few ruddy moths alighting on the wall above him. When he spilled the old High King's blood, the droplets turned into moths, which fluttered through the air for a few stunning moments before seeming to die. I thought they were all gone, but it seems that a few follow him still, a reminder of his sins.

"Our Lady Jude of the Court of Shadows," he says, as though he believes that will charm me. "May I offer you a cup?"

There is a movement in one of the other cells. I consider what his tea parties are like when I'm not around.

I'm not pleased he's aware of the Court of Shadows or my association with them, but I can't be entirely surprised, either—Prince Dain,



our spymaster and employer, was Balekin's brother. And if Balekin knew about the Court of Shadows, he probably recognized one of them as they stole the Blood Crown and got it into my brother's hands so he could place it on Cardan's head.

Balekin has good reason to not be entirely pleased to see me.

"I must regretfully refuse tea," I say. "I won't be here long. You sent the High King some correspondence. Something about a deal? A bargain? I am here on his behalf to hear whatever it is you wish to say to him."

His smile seems to twist in on itself, to grow ugly. "You think me diminished," Balekin says. "But I am still a prince of Faerie, even here. Vulciber, won't you take my brother's seneschal and give her a smack in her pretty little face?"

The strike comes openhanded, faster than I would have guessed, the sound of the slap shockingly loud as his palm connects with my skin. It leaves my cheek stinging and me furious.

My knife is back in my right hand, its twin in my left.

Vulciber wears an eager expression.

My pride urges me to fight, but he's bigger than me and in a space familiar to him. This would be no mere sparring contest. Still, the urge to best him, the urge to wipe the expression from his smug face, is overwhelming.

Almost overwhelming. *Pride is for knights*, I remind myself, *not for spies*.

"My *pretty face*," I murmur to Balekin, putting away my knives slowly. I stretch my fingers to touch my cheek. Vulciber hit me hard enough for my own teeth to have cut the inside of my mouth. I spit blood onto the stone floor. "Such flattery. I cheated you out of a crown,



so I guess I can allow for some hard feelings. Especially when they come with a compliment. Just don't try me again."

Vulciber looks abruptly unsure of himself.

Balekin takes a sip of his tea. "You speak very freely, mortal girl."

"And why shouldn't I?" I say. "I speak with the High King's voice. Do you think he's interested in coming all the way down here, away from the palace and its pleasures, to treat with the elder brother at whose hands he suffered?"

Prince Balekin leans forward in his chair. "I wonder what you think you mean."

"And I wonder what message you'd like me to give the High King."

Balekin regards me—no doubt one of my cheeks must be flushed. He takes another careful sip of tea. "I have heard that for mortals, the feeling of falling in love is very like the feeling of fear. Your heart beats fast. Your senses are heightened. You grow light-headed, maybe even dizzy." He looks at me. "Is that right? It would explain much about your kind if it's possible to mistake the two."

"I've never been in love," I tell him, refusing to be rattled.

"And of course, you can lie," he says. "I can see why Cardan would find that helpful. Why Dain would have, too. It was clever of him to have brought you into his little gang of misfits. Clever to see that Madoc would spare you. Whatever else you could say about my brother, he was marvelously unsentimental.

"For my part, I barely thought of you at all, and when I did, it was only to goad Cardan with your accomplishments. But you have what Cardan never did: *ambition*. Had I only seen that, I would have a crown now. But I think you've misjudged me, too."

"Oh?" I know I am not going to like this.



"I won't give you the message I meant for Cardan. It will come to him another way, and it will come to him soon."

"Then you waste both our time," I say, annoyed. I have come all the way here, been hit, and frightened for nothing.

"Ah, time," he says. "You're the only one short on that, mortal." He nods at Vulciber. "You may escort her out."

"Let's go," the guard says, giving me a none-too-gentle shove toward the steps. As I ascend, I glance back at Balekin's face, severe in the green torchlight. He resembles Cardan too much for my comfort.

I am partway up when a long-fingered hand reaches out from between the bars and grips my ankle. Startled, I slip, scraping my palms and banging my knees as I go sprawling on the stairs. The old stab wound at the center of my left hand throbs suddenly. I barely catch myself before I tumble all the way down the steps.

Beside me is the thin face of a faerie woman. Her tail curls around one of the bars. Short horns sweep back from her brow. "I knew your Eva," she says to me, eyes glittering in the gloom. "I knew your mother. Knew so many of her little secrets."

I push myself to my feet and climb the steps as quickly as I can, my heart racing faster than when I thought I was going to have to fight Vulciber in the dark. My breath comes in short, rapid gasps that make my lungs hurt.

At the top of the stairs, I pause to wipe my stinging palms against my doublet and try to get myself under control.

"Ah," I say to Vulciber when my breathing has calmed a little. "I nearly forgot. The High King gave me a scroll of commands. There are a few changes in how he wishes his brother to be treated. They're outside in my saddlebags. If you could just follow me—"



Vulciber looks a question at the guard who sent him to guide me to Balekin.

“Go quickly,” the shadowy figure says.

And so Vulciber accompanies me through the great door of the Tower of Forgetting. Illuminated by the moon, the black rocks shine with salt spray, a glittering coating, like that on sugared fruit. I try to focus on the guard and not the sound of my mother’s name, which I haven’t heard in so many years that, for a moment, I didn’t know why it was important to me.

Eva.

“That horse has only a bit and bridle,” Vulciber says, frowning at the black steed tied to the wall. “But you said—”

I stab him in the arm with a little pin I keep hidden in the lining of my doublet. “I lied.”

It takes some doing to haul him up and sling him over the back of the horse. She is trained with familiar military commands, including kneeling, which helps. I move as quickly as I can, for fear that one of the guards will come to check on us, but I am lucky. No one comes before we are up and moving.

Another reason to ride to Insweal, rather than walk—you never know what you might be bringing back with you.