

Chapter 1

Madam Sauer was a witch. A real witch—not the way some petty people use the word to describe an unlikeable woman with a haggard appearance, though she was that, too. No, Serilda was convinced Madam Sauer was hiding ancient powers and enjoyed communion with the field spirits in the darkness of each new moon.

She had little evidence. Just a hunch, really. But what else could the old teacher be, with that surly disposition and those yellowish, slightly pointed teeth. (Truly—look closer, they have an unmistakable needle-like quality to them, at least when the light hits them in a certain way, or when she is complaining about her flock of wretched schoolchildren *again*.) The townspeople might insist on blaming Serilda for every tiny misfortune that befell them, but she knew better. If anyone was to blame, it was Madam Sauer.

She probably crafted potions from toenails and had an alpine newt for a familiar. Icky, slimy things. It would fit her temperament just right.

No, no, no. She didn't mean that. Serilda was fond of the alpine newt. She would never wish such a horrible thing upon them as being spiritually attached to this abhorrent human.

"Serilda," said Madam Sauer, with her favorite scowl. At least, Serilda had to assume she was wearing her favorite scowl. She couldn't actually

see the witch while her eyes were demurely lowered toward the dirt floor of the schoolhouse.

“You are not,” the woman continued, her words slow and sharp, “the godchild of Wyrdith. Or *any* of the old gods, for that matter. Your father may be a respected and honorable man, but he did not rescue a mythical beast who had been wounded by the wild hunt! These things you tell the children, they are . . . they are . . .”

Preposterous?

Absurd?

Sort of amusing?

“Wicked!” Madam Sauer blurted, with bits of spittle flying onto Serilda’s cheek. “What does it teach them, to believe that you are special? That your stories are a god’s gift, when we should be instilling them with virtues of honesty and humility. An hour spent listening to you and you’ve managed to tarnish everything I’ve striven for all year!”

Serilda screwed her mouth to one side and waited a beat. When it seemed that Madam Sauer had run out of accusations, she opened her mouth and inhaled deeply, prepared to defend herself—it had only been a story after all, and what did Madam Sauer know of it? Maybe her father really had rescued the god of lies on the winter solstice. He had told her the story himself when she was younger, and she had checked the astronomy charts. It *had* been an Endless Moon that year—as it would be again this coming winter.

But that was nearly an entire year away. An entire year to dream up delectable, fanciful tales to awe and frighten the little goslings who were forced to attend this soulless school.

Poor things.

“Madam Sauer—”

“Not a word!”

Serilda’s mouth slammed shut.

“I have heard enough out of that blasphemous mouth of yours to last a lifetime,” roared the witch, before releasing a frustrated huff. “Would that the gods had saved me from such a pupil.”

Serilda cleared her throat and tried to continue with a quiet, sensible tone. “I am not precisely a pupil anymore. Though you seem to forget that I volunteer my time here. I’m more of an assistant than a student. And . . . you must find some value in my presence, as you haven’t told me to stop coming. Yet?”

She dared to lift her gaze, smiling hopefully.

She had no love for the witch, and was well aware that Madam Sauer had no love for her. But visiting with the schoolchildren, helping them with their work—telling them stories when Madam Sauer wasn’t listening—these were some of the few things that brought her joy. If Madam Sauer did tell her to stop coming, she would be devastated. The children, all five of them, were the only people in this town who didn’t look at Serilda like she was a blight on their otherwise respectable community.

In fact, they were the few who regularly dared to look at Serilda at all. The golden spokes radiating across her gaze made most people uncomfortable. She had sometimes wondered if the god chose to mark her irises because you’re not supposed to be able to look someone in the eye when you’re lying to them. But Serilda had never had any trouble holding someone’s gaze, whether she was lying or not. It was everyone else in this town who struggled to hold hers.

Except the children.

She couldn’t leave. She needed them. She liked to think they might need her back.

Plus, if Madam Sauer did send her away, it would mean that she would be forced to get a job in town, and to her knowledge, the only available work was . . . *spinning*.

Blech.

But Madam Sauer's expression was solemn. Cold. Even bordering on angry. The skin under her left eye was twitching, a sure sign that Serilda had crossed a line.

With a whip of her hand, Madam Sauer grabbed the willow branch she kept on her desk and held it up.

Serilda shrank back, an instinct that lingered from all the years she *had* been one of the school's pupils. She hadn't had the backs of her hands struck in years, but she still felt the ghost of the stinging branch whenever she saw it. She still remembered the words she'd been told to repeat with every swish of the branch.

Lying is evil.

Lying is the work of demons.

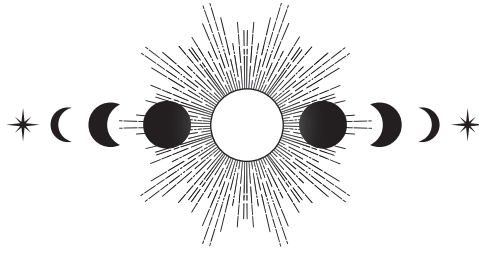
My stories are lies, therefore I am a liar.

It might not have been so awful, except that when people didn't trust you to tell the truth, they inevitably stopped trusting you in other matters as well. They didn't trust you not to steal from them. They didn't trust you not to cheat. They didn't believe you could be responsible or thoughtful. It tarnished all elements of your reputation, in a way that Serilda found remarkably unfair.

"Do not think," said Madam Sauer, "that just because you are of age, I will not strike the wickedness from you yet. Once my pupil, always my pupil, Miss Moller."

She bowed her head. "Forgive me. It won't happen again."

The witch scoffed. "Unfortunately, you and I both know that is just one more lie."



Chapter 2

Serilda drew her cloak tight as she left the schoolhouse. There was still an hour of daylight—plenty of time to get home to the mill—but this winter had been colder than any she could remember, with snow nearly to her knees and dangerous patches of ice where wagon wheels had cut slushy grooves along the roads. The wetness was sure to have soaked through her boots and into her stockings long before she got home, and she was dreading the misery of it just as much as she was looking forward to the fire her father would have started in the hearth and the bowl of steaming broth she would drink while she warmed her toes.

These midwinter walks home from the school were the only times Serilda wished they didn't live quite so far outside of town.

Bracing herself against the cold, she pulled up the hood and surged forward. Head lowered, arms crossed, pace as quick as she would allow while trying not to slip on the treacherous ice lurking under the most recent layer of feather-soft snow. The crisp air mingled with the smell of wood smoke from nearby chimneys.

At least they weren't meant to have more snow tonight. The sky was clear of threatening gray clouds. The Snow Moon would be on full display, and though it wasn't as notable as when the full moon crossed

with the solstice, she felt there must be some enchantment tethered to a full moon on the first night of the new year.

The world was full of small enchantments, when one was willing to look for them. And Serilda was always looking.

“The hunt will be celebrating the change of the calendar, as are we all,” she whispered, distracting herself as her teeth began to chatter. “After their demonic ride, there will be feasting on what beasts they’ve captured, and drinking of mulled wine spiced with the blood—”

Something hard hit Serilda on the back, right between her shoulder blades. She yelped and spun around, her foot slipping. She tumbled backward, her rump landing in a cushion of snow.

“I got her!” came Anna’s delighted cry. It was met with an eruption of cheers and laughter as the children emerged from their hiding places, five small figures padded in layers of wool and fur. They popped out from behind tree trunks and wagon wheels and an overgrown shrub weighed down with icicles.

“What took you so long?” said Fricz, a snowball ready in his mitened hand, while at his side, Anna busily started scraping together another one. “We’ve been waiting to ambush you near an hour. Nickel’s started complaining of frostbite!”

“It’s unmerciful cold out here,” said Nickel, Fricz’s twin, hopping from foot to foot.

“Oh, shut your whistler. Even the baby’s not complaining, you old cogwheel.”

Gerdrut, the youngest at five years old, turned to Fricz with an annoyed scowl. “I’m not a baby!” she shouted, hurling a snowball at him. And though her aim was good, it still landed with a sad *kerfluff* at his feet.

“Aw, I was just making a point,” said Fricz, which was as close as he ever got to an apology. “I know you’re about to be a big sister and all.”

This easily assuaged Gerdrut’s anger and she stuck up her nose with

a proud huff. It wasn't just being the youngest that made the others think of her as the baby of their group. She was particularly small for her age, and particularly precious, with a sprinkling of freckles across her round cheeks and strawberry ringlets that never seemed to tangle, no matter how much she tried to keep up with Anna's acrobatics.

"The point is," snapped Hans, "we're all shivering. There's no need to act the dying swan." At eleven, Hans was the oldest of their group. As such, he liked to overplay his role of leader and protector around the schoolhouse, a role the others had seemed content to let him claim.

"Speak for yourself," said Anna, winding up her arm before throwing her new snowball at the abandoned wagon wheel off the side of the road. It hit the center dead-on. "I'm not cold."

"Only because you've been doing cartwheels for the past hour," muttered Nickel.

Anna grinned, her smile gapped with a number of missing teeth, and launched herself into a somersault. Gerdrut squealed delightedly—somersaults were so far the only trick she'd mastered—and hurried to join her, both of them leaving trails in the snow.

"And just why were you all waiting to ambush me?" asked Serilda. "Don't any of you have a nice warm fire waiting for you at home?"

Gerdrut stopped, legs splayed in front of her and snow clinging to her hair. "We were waiting for you to finish the story." She liked the scary stories more than any of them, though she couldn't listen without burying her nose into Hans's shoulder. "About the wild hunt and the god of lies and—"

"Nope." Serilda shook her head. "Nope, nope, nope. I've been scolded by Madam Sauer for the last time. I'm done telling tales. Starting today, you'll get nothing but boring news and the most trivial of facts. For example, did you know that playing three particular notes on the hackbrett will summon a demon?"

"You are definitely making that up," said Nickel.

“Am not. It’s true. Ask anyone. Oh! Also, the only way to kill off a nachzehrer is by putting a stone into its mouth. That will keep it from gnawing on its own flesh while you cut off the head.”

“Now, that’s the sort of education that might come in handy someday,” said Fricz with an impish grin. Though he and his brother were identical on the outside—same blue eyes and fluffy blonde hair and dimpled chins—it was never difficult to tell them apart. Fricz was always the one looking for trouble, and Nickel was always the one looking embarrassed that they were related.

Serilda gave a sage nod. “My job is to prepare you for adulthood.”

“Ugh,” said Hans. “You’re playing at teacher, aren’t you?”

“I am your teacher.”

“No, you’re not. You’re barely Madam Sauer’s assistant. She only lets you around because you can get the littles to quiet down when she can’t.”

“You mean us?” asked Nickel, gesturing around to himself and the others. “Are we the littles?”

“We’re almost as old as you!” added Fricz.

Hans snorted. “You’re nine. That’s two whole years. It’s an eternity.”

“It’s not two years,” said Nickel, starting to count off on his thumb. “Our birthday is in August and yours—”

“All right, all right,” interrupted Serilda, who had heard this argument too many times. “You’re *all* littles to me, and it’s time for me to start taking your education more seriously. To stop filling your heads with nonsense. I’m afraid that story time has ended.”

This proclamation was met with a chorus of melodramatic groans, whining, pleas. Fricz even fell face-first into the snow and kicked his feet in a tantrum that may or may not have been in mimicry of one of Gerdrut’s bad days.

“I mean it this time,” she said, scowling.

“Sure you do,” said Anna with a robust laugh. She had stopped doing flips and was now testing the strength of a young linden tree by hanging

from one of the lower branches, her legs kicking back and forth. “Just like the last time. And the time before that.”

“But now I’m serious.”

They stared at her, unconvinced.

Which she supposed was fair. How many times had she told them that she was done telling stories? She was going to become a model teacher. A fine, honest lady once and for all.

It never lasted.

Just one more lie, as Madam Sauer had said.

“But, Serilda,” said Fricz, shuffling toward her on his knees and peering up at her with wide, charmed eyes, “winter in Märchenfeld is so awfully boring. Without your stories, what will we have to look forward to?”

“A life of hard labor,” muttered Hans. “Mending fences and plowing fields.”

“And spinning,” said Anna with a distraught sigh, before she curled her legs up and draped her knees over the branch, letting her hands and braids dangle. The tree groaned threateningly, but she ignored it. “So much spinning.”

Of all the children, Serilda thought that Anna looked the most like her, especially since Anna had started wearing her long brown hair in twin braids, as Serilda had worn hers for most of her life. But Anna’s tan skin was a few shades darker than Serilda’s, and her hair wasn’t quite as long yet. Plus, there were all the missing milk teeth . . . only some of which had fallen out naturally.

They also shared a mutual hatred for the laborious work of spinning wool. At eight years old, Anna had recently been taught the fine art on her family’s wheel. Serilda had looked upon her with appropriate sympathy when she heard the news, referring to the work as *tedium incarnate*. The description had been repeated among the children all the following week, amusing Serilda and infuriating the witch, who had spent an entire hour lecturing on the importance of honest work.

"Please, Serilda," continued Gerdrut. "Your stories, I think they're sort of like spinning, too. Because it's like you're making something beautiful out of nothing."

"Why, Gerdrut! What an astute metaphor," said Serilda, impressed that Gerdrut had thought of such a comparison, but that was one thing she loved about children. They were always surprising her.

"And you're right, Gerdy," said Hans. "Serilda's stories take our dull existence and transform it into something special. It's like . . . like spinning straw into gold."

"Oh, now you're just smearing honey on my mouth," Serilda scoffed, even as she cast her eyes toward the sky, quickly darkening overhead. "Would that I could spin straw into gold. It'd be far more useful than this . . . spinning nothing but silly stories. Rotting your minds, as Madam Sauer would say."

"Curse Madam Sauer!" said Fricz. His brother shot him a warning look for the harsh language.

"Fricz, mind your tongue," said Serilda, feeling like a little chastisement was warranted, even if she appreciated his coming to her defense.

"I mean it. There's no harm in a few stories. She's just jealous, 'cause the only stories she can tell us are about old dead kings and their grubby descendants. She wouldn't know a good tale if it rose up and bit her."

The children laughed, until the branch that Anna was hanging from gave a sudden crack and she fell into a heap in the snow.

Serilda gasped and rushed toward her. "Anna!"

"Still alive!" said Anna. It was her favorite phrase, and one she had cause to use frequently. Untangling herself from the branch, she sat up and beamed at them all. "Good thing Solvilde put all this snow here to break my fall." With a giggle, she gave her head a shake, sending a tiny flurry of snowflakes cascading onto her shoulders. When she was done, she blinked up at Serilda. "So. You are going to finish the story, aren't you?"

Serilda tried to frown disapprovingly, but she knew she wasn't doing a very good job at being the mature adult among them. "You're relentless. And, I must admit, quite persuasive." She heaved a drawn-out sigh. "Fine. Fine! A quick story, because the hunt will be riding tonight and we all should be getting home. Come here."

She forged a path through the snow to a small copse of trees, where there was a bed of dry pine needles and the drooping branches offered some protection from the chill. The children eagerly gathered around her, claiming spots amid the roots, shoulder to shoulder for what warmth they could share.

"Tell us more about the god of lies!" said Gerdrut, sliding beside Hans in case she got scared.

Serilda shook her head. "I have another story I want to tell you now. The sort of story that belongs under a full moon." She gestured toward the horizon, where the new-risen moon was stained the color of summer straw. "This is a different story about the wild hunt, which only rides beneath a full moon, storming over the landscape with their night horses and hellhounds. Today, the hunt has but one leader at their helm—the wicked Erlking. But hundreds of years ago, the hunt was led not by the Erlking, but by his paramour, Perchta, the great huntress."

She was met with eager curiosity, the children leaning closer with bright eyes and growing smiles. Despite the cold, Serilda flushed with her own excitement. There was a shiver of anticipation, for even she rarely knew what twists and turns her stories would take before the words slipped from her tongue. Half the time, she was as surprised by the revelations as her listeners. It was part of what drew her to storytelling—not knowing the end, not knowing what would happen next. She was on the adventure every bit as much as the children were.

"The two were wildly in love," she continued. "Their passion could bring lightning crashing down from the heavens. When the Erlking looked at his fierce mistress, his black heart was so moved that storms

would surge over the oceans and earthquakes would tremble the mountaintops.”

The children made faces. They tended to bemoan any mention of romance—even shy Nickel and dreamy Gerdrut, who Serilda suspected secretly enjoyed it.

“But there was one problem with their love. Perchta desperately yearned for a child. But the dark ones have more death than life in their blood, and thus cannot bring children into the world. Therefore, such a wish was impossible . . . or so Perchta thought.” Her eyes glinted as the story began to unfold in front of her.

“But it tore at the Erlking’s rotten heart to see his love pining away, year after year, for a child to call her own. How she wept, her tears becoming torrents of rain that soaked the fields. How she moaned, her cries rolling like thunder over the hills. Unable to stand seeing her thus, the Erlking traveled to the end of the world to plead to Eostrig, the god of fertility, begging them to place a child into Perchta’s womb. But Eostrig, who watches over all new life, could tell that Perchta was made of more cruelty than motherly affection and they dared not subject a child to such a parent. No amount of pleading from the Erlking could sway them.

“And so the Erlking made his way back through the wilderness, loathe to think how this news would disappoint his love. But—as he was riding through the Aschen Wood . . .” Serilda paused, meeting each of the children’s gazes in turn, for these words had sent a new energy thrilling through them. The Aschen Wood was the setting of so many stories, not just her own. It was the source of more folktales, more night terrors, more superstitions than she could count, especially here in Märchenfeld. The Aschen Wood lay just to the north of their small town, a short ride through the fields, and its haunting presence was felt by all the villagers from the time they were toddling babes, raised on warnings of all the creatures that lived in that forest, from those who were silly and mischievous, to others foul and cruel.

The name cast a new spell over the children. No longer was Serilda's story of Perchta and her Erlking a distant tale. Now it was at their very doorstep.

"As he traveled through the Aschen Wood, the Erlking heard a most unpleasant sound. Sniffing. Sobbing. Wet, blubbery, disgusting noises most often associated with wet, blubbery, disgusting . . . *children*. He saw the mongrel then, a pathetic little thing, barely big enough to walk about on its pudgy legs. It was a human baby boy, covered head to foot in scratches and mud, wailing for his mother. Which was when the Erlking had a most devious idea."

She smiled, and the children smiled back, for they, too, could see where the story was headed.

Or so they thought.

"And so, the Erlking picked up the child by his filthy nightgown and deposited him into one of the large sacks on the side of his horse. And off he went, racing back to Gravenstone Castle, where Perchta waited to greet him.

"He presented the child to his love, and her joy made the sun itself burn brighter. Months went by, and Perchta doted on that child as only a queen can. She took him on tours of the dead swamps that lie deep in the woods. She bathed him in sulfur springs and dressed him in the skins of the finest beasts she had ever hunted—the fur of a rasselbock and the feathers of a stoppelhahn. She rocked him in the branches of willow trees and sang lullabies to lull him to sleep. He was even gifted his own hellhound to ride, so that he might join his huntress mother on her monthly outings. She was content, then, for some years.

"However, as time passed, the Erlking began to notice a new melancholy overtaking his love. One night he asked her what was the matter, and with a sorrowful cry, Perchta gestured at her baby boy—who was no longer a baby, but had become a wiry, strong-willed child—and said, 'I have never wanted anything more than to have a babe of my

own. But alas—this creature before me is no baby. He is a child now, and soon he will be a man. I no longer want him.”

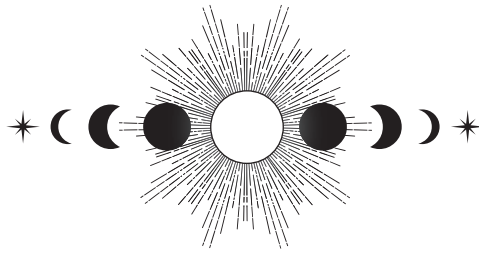
Nickel gasped, horrified to think that a mother, apparently so devoted, could say such a thing. He was a sensitive boy, and perhaps Serilda had not yet told him enough of the old tales, which so often began with parents or stepparents finding themselves utterly disenchanted with their offspring.

“And so, the Erlking lured the boy back out into the forest, telling him that they were going to practice his archery and bring home a game bird for a feast. But when they were deep enough in the woods, the Erlking took his long hunting blade from his belt, crept up behind the boy . . .”

The children sank away from her, aghast. Gerdrut buried her face in Hans’s arm.

“ . . . and slit his throat, leaving him in a cold creek to die.”

Serilda waited a moment for their shock and disgust to ease before she continued. “Then the Erlking went off in search of new prey. Not wild beasts this time, but another human child to give to his love. And the Erlking has been taking lost little children back to his castle ever since.”



Chapter 3

Serilda was half icicle by the time she spotted the cabin's light across the field, illuminating the snow in a halo of gold. The night was well-lit by the full moon, and she could clearly make out her small house, the gristmill behind it, the waterwheel on the edge of the Sorge River. She could smell the wood smoke, and this gave her a new spark of energy as she cut across the field.

Safety.

Warmth.

Home.

She yanked open the front door and stumbled inside with a dramatic sigh of relief. She fell back against the wood frame and began tearing off her soaked boots and stockings. She tossed them halfway across the room, where they landed with wet plops beside the hearth.

"I . . . am so . . . c-cold."

Her father jumped up from his seat beside the fireplace, where he'd been darning a pair of socks. "Where have you been? The sun set more than an hour ago!"

"S-sorry, Papa," she stammered, hanging her cloak on a peg by the door and peeling off her scarf to join it.

"And where are your mittens? Don't tell me you lost them again."

"Not lost," she breathed, pulling the second chair closer to the fire.

She crossed one foot over her knee and began working some feeling back into her toes. "I stayed late with the children, and didn't want them going home in the dark alone, so I walked with each of them. And the twins live way over on the other side of the river, so I had to go all the way back, and then—oh, it does feel good to be home."

Her father frowned. He was not an old man, but anxious wrinkles had become permanent fixtures on his face long ago. Maybe it was due to raising a child on his own, or fending off gossip from the rest of the town, or maybe he'd always been the sort to worry, whether it was warranted or not. When she was little, she'd made a game of telling him stories about the dangerous mischief she'd gotten herself into and delighted in his utter horror, before laughing and telling him she had made it all up.

Now she could see how that maybe wasn't the kindest way to treat the person she loved most in this world.

"And the mittens?" he asked.

"Traded them for some magic dandelion seeds," she said.

He glared at her.

She smiled sheepishly. "I gave them to Gerdrut. Water, please? I'm so thirsty."

He shook his head, grumbling to himself as he stepped over to the pail in the corner where they gathered snow to be melted nightly by the hearth. Taking a ladle from above the fireplace, he scooped out some water and held it out to her. It was still cold, and tasted of winter going down her throat.

Her father returned to the fire and stirred the hanging pot. "I hate for you to be out all alone, on a full moon at that. Things happen, you know. Children go missing."

She couldn't help smiling at this. Her story today had been inspired by years and years of her father's dire-filled warnings.

"I'm not a child anymore."

"It isn't just children. Full-grown men have been found the next

day, dazed and muttering about goblins and nixes. Don't be thinking it isn't dangerous on nights like this. Thought I raised you with more sense."

Serilda beamed at him, because they both knew that the way he'd raised her was on a steady stream of warnings and superstitions that had done more to ignite her imagination than they had to inspire the sense of self-preservation he'd been striving for.

"I'm fine, Papa. Not kidnapped, not ferried away by some ghoul. After all, who would want me, really?"

He fixed her with an irritated look. "Any ghoul would be blasted lucky to have you."

Reaching over, Serilda pressed her frigid-cold fingers against his cheeks. He flinched, but didn't pull away, allowing her to tilt his head down so she could press a kiss against his brow.

"If any come looking," she said, releasing him, "I'll tell them you said that."

"It is not a joking matter, Serilda. Next time you think you'll be late on a full moon, best you take the horse."

She refrained from pointing out that Zelig, their old horse who was more vintage decor now than useful farm stud, had no chance whatsoever of outrunning the wild hunt.

Instead, she said, "Gladly, Papa, if it will ease your heart. Now, let's eat. It smells scrumptious."

He pulled two wooden bowls down from a shelf. "Wise girl. Best to be asleep well before the witching hour."



The witching hour had come and the hunt surged across the countryside . . .

These were the words shimmering in Serilda's mind when her eyes snapped open. The fire in the hearth had burnt down to embers,

emanating only the faintest glow over the room. Her cot had been in the corner of this front room since she could remember, with her father taking the only other room at the back of the house, its back wall shared with the gristmill behind them. She could hear his heavy snores through the doorway and for a moment she wondered if that was what had startled her awake.

A log in the fire broke suddenly and collapsed, emitting a spray of sparks that singed the masonry before blackening, dying.

Then—a sound so distant it might have been her imagination if not for the ice-cold finger it sent skimming down her spine.

Howls.

Almost wolflike, which was not uncommon. Their neighbors took great care to protect their flocks from the predators that regularly came prowling.

But there was something different about this cry. Something unholy. Something savage.

“Hellhounds,” she whispered to herself. “The hunt.”

She sat wide-eyed in shaken silence for a long while, listening to see if she could discern whether they were coming closer or moving farther away, but there was only the crackling of the fire and the rowdy snores in the next room. She began to wonder whether it had been a dream. Her wandering mind getting her into trouble yet again.

Serilda sank back into the cot and pulled the blankets to her chin, but her eyes would not close. She stared at the door, where moonlight seeped through the gaps.

Another howl, then another, in rapid succession, sent her jerking upward again, her heart rattling in her chest. These had been loud. Much louder than before.

The hunt was coming closer.

Serilda once again forced herself to lie back down, and this time she screwed her eyes shut so tight her whole face was pinched up. She knew

that sleep was impossible now, but she had to pretend. She had heard too many stories of villagers being lured from their beds by the seduction of the hunt, only to be found shivering in their nightgowns at the edge of the forest the next dawn.

Or, for the unlucky ones, never seen again at all. And historically, she and luck didn't get along well. Best not to take her chances.

She vowed to stay right where she was, motionless, barely breathing, until the ghostly parade had passed. Let them find some other hapless peasant to prey on. Her need for excitement was not yet *that* desperate.

She curled herself into a ball, clutching the blanket in her fingertips, waiting for the night to be over. What a great story she would tell the children after this. *Of course the hunt is real, for I've heard it with my own—*

"No—Meadowsweet! This way!"

A girl's voice, trembling and shrill.

Serilda's eyes snapped open again.

The voice had been so clear. It had sounded as if it had come from right outside the window above her bed, which her father had nailed a board over at the start of winter to help keep out the cold.

The voice came again, more frightened still: "Quick! They're coming!"

Something banged against the wall.

"I'm trying," another feminine voice whined. "It's locked!"

They were so close, as if Serilda could reach her hand through the wall and touch them.

She realized with a start that whoever it was, they were trying to get into the cellar beneath the house.

They were trying to hide.

Whoever they were, they were being hunted.

Serilda gave herself no time to think, or to wonder whether it might

be a trick of the hunters to lure out fresh prey. To lure *her* from the safety of her bed.

She tossed her feet out from the blankets and rushed to the door. In a blink, she had thrown her cloak on over her nightgown and stuffed her feet into her still-damp boots. She grabbed the lantern off its shelf and fumbled briefly with a matchstick before the wick flared to life.

Serilda yanked open the door and was struck with a gust of wind, a flurry of snowflakes—and a squeal of surprise. She swiveled the lantern toward the cellar door. Two figures were crouched against the wall, their long arms entwined around each other, their immense eyes blinking at her.

Serilda blinked back, equally stunned. For though she had known *someone* was out here, she had not expected to discover that they were actually *something*.

These creatures were not human. At least, not entirely. Their eyes were enormous black pools, their faces as delicate as spindle flowers, their ears tall and pointed and a little fuzzy, like those of a fox. Their limbs were long and slender like willow branches and their skin shone tawny gold in the glow of the lantern—and there was a lot of skin to be seen. Despite being in the middle of winter, the collection of fur pelts they wore covered little more than what was necessary for the barest sense of modesty. Their hair was cut short and wild and, Serilda realized with a heady sense of awe, was not hair at all, but tufts of lichen and moss.

“Moss maidens,” she breathed. For of all her many tales of the dark ones and the nature spirits and all manner of ghosts and ghouls, in all her eighteen years Serilda had only ever met plain, boring humans.

One of the girls sprang to her feet, using her body to block the other from Serilda’s view.

“We are not thieves,” she said, her tone sharp. “We ask for nothing but shelter.”

Serilda flinched. She knew that humans bore a deep distrust for the forest folk. They were regarded as strange. Occasionally helpful at best, thieves and murderers at worst. To this day, the baker's wife insisted that her oldest child was a changeling. (Changeling or not, that child was now a full-grown man, happily married with four offspring of his own.)

Another howl echoed across the fields, sounding as if it came from every direction at once.

Serilda shivered and looked around, but though the fields stretching away from the mill were brightly illuminated under the full moon, she could see no sign of the hunt.

"Parsley, we must go," said the smaller of the two, jumping to her feet and grasping the other's arm. "They are near."

The other, Parsley, nodded fiercely, not taking her gaze from Serilda. "Into the river, then. Disguising our scent is our only hope."

They grasped hands and started to turn away.

"Wait!" Serilda cried. "Wait."

Setting the lantern down beside the cellar door, she reached beneath the wooden plank where her father kept the key. Though her hands were growing numb from the cold, it took her only a moment to undo the lock and throw open the wide flat door. The maidens eyed her warily.

"The river runs slow this time of year, the surface half frozen already. It won't offer much protection. Get in here and pass me up an onion. I'll rub it on the door, and hopefully it will disguise your scent well enough."

They stared at her, and for a long moment Serilda thought they would laugh at her ridiculous attempts to help them. They were forest folk. What need did they have for the pathetic efforts of humans?

But then Parsley nodded. The smaller maiden—Meadowsweet, if she had heard right—climbed down into the pitch-black of the cellar and

handed up an onion from one of the crates below. There was no word of gratitude—no word of anything.

As soon as they were both inside, Serilda shut the door and fitted the lock back onto the bolt.

Tearing the skin from the onion, she rubbed its flesh against the edges of the hatch. Her eyes began to sting and she tried not to worry about small details, like the pile of snow that had fallen from the cellar door when she'd thrown it open, or how the trail of the maidens would lead the hellhounds directly to her home.

Trail . . . *footsteps*.

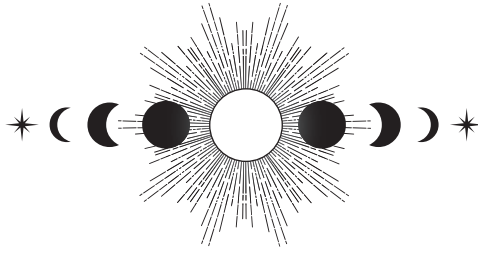
Spinning around, she searched the field, afraid to see two paths of footprints in the snow, leading straight to her.

But she couldn't see anything.

It all felt so surreal that if her eyes hadn't been watering from the onion, she would have been sure she was in the middle of a vivid dream.

She threw the onion away, as hard as she could. It landed in the river with a splash.

Not a moment later, she heard the growls.



Chapter 4

They came upon her like death itself—yapping and snarling as they charged across the fields. They were twice as big as any hunting dog she'd ever seen, the tops of their ears nearly as high as her shoulders. But their bodies were skinny, with ribs threatening to burst through their bristled fur. Strings of thick saliva clung to pronounced fangs. Most disturbing of all was the burning glow that could be seen through their throats, nostrils, eyes—even areas where their mangy skin was stretched too thin across their bones. As if they did not have blood coursing through their bodies, but the very fires of Verloren.

Serilda barely had time to scream before one of the beasts launched at her, its jaws snapping at her face. Humongous paws knocked into her shoulders. She fell into the snow, instinctively covering her face with her arms. The hound landed on all fours astride her, smelling of sulfur and rot.

To her surprise, it did not clamp its teeth into her, but waited. Trembling, Serilda dared to peer up through the gap in her arms. The hound's eyes blazed as it drew in a long sniff, the air kindling the glow behind its leathery nostrils. Something wet dripped onto her chin. Serilda gasped and tried to scrub it away, unable to stifle a whimper.

"Leave it," demanded a voice—quiet, yet sharp.

The hound pulled away, leaving Serilda shaking and gasping for

breath. As soon as she was sure she was free, she rolled over and scrambled back toward the cottage. She snatched up the shovel that lay against the wall and swung back around, her heart racing as she prepared to strike back at the beast.

But she was no longer facing the hounds.

She blinked up at the horse who had come to a halt mere steps from where she had just lain. A dappled warhorse, its muscles undulating, nostrils blowing great clouds of steam.

Its rider was cast in moonlight, beautiful and terrible at once, with silver-tinted skin and eyes the color of thin ice over a deep lake and long black hair that hung loose around his shoulders. He wore fine leather armor, with two thin belts at his hips holding an assortment of knives and a curved horn. A quiver of arrows jutted over one shoulder. He had the air of a king, confident in his control of the beast beneath him. Sure in the respect he commanded from anyone who crossed his path.

He was dangerous.

He was glorious.

He was not alone. There were at least two dozen other horses, each one black as coal, but for their lightning-white manes and tails. Each bore a rider—men and women, young and old, some dressed in fine robes, others in tattered rags.

Some were ghosts. She could tell from the way their silhouettes blurred against the night sky.

Others were dark ones, recognized by their unearthly beauty. Immortal demons who had long ago escaped from Verloren and their once master, the god of death.

And they were all watching her. The hounds, too. They had heeled to the leader's command and were now pacing hungrily at the back of the hunt, awaiting their next order.

Serilda looked back up at the leader. She knew who he was, but she

dared not think the name aloud in her thoughts, for fear she might be right.

He peered into her, through her, with the exact same look one gives a flea-ridden mutt who has just stolen one's supper. "In which direction have they gone?"

Serilda shivered. *His voice.* Serene. Cutting. If he'd bothered to speak poetry to her, rather than a simple question, she would have been ensorcelled already.

As it was, she found herself managing to shake away some of the spell his presence had cast, remembering the moss maidens who were, even now, mere feet away from her, hidden beneath the cellar door, and her father, hopefully still fast asleep inside the house.

She was alone, trapped in the attention of this being who was more demon than man.

Serilda tentatively set the shovel back down and asked, "In which direction have *who* gone, my lord?"

For surely he was nobility, in whatever hierarchy the dark ones claimed.

A king, her mind whispered, and she shushed it. It was simply too unthinkable.

His pale eyes narrowed. The question hung in the bitter air between them for a long time, while Serilda's shivers overtook her body. She *was* still in her nightgown beneath the cloak, and her toes were quickly going numb.

The Erl—no, the hunter, she would call him. The hunter did not respond to her question, to her disappointment. For if he'd answered *the moss maidens*, she would have been able to lob a question back at him. What was he doing hunting the forest folk? What did he want with them? They were not beasts to be slain and beheaded, their skins to decorate a castle hall.

At least, she certainly hoped that wasn't his intentions. The mere thought of it curdled her stomach.

But the hunter said nothing, just held her gaze while his steed held perfectly, unnaturally still.

Unable to stand any amount of silence for too long, and especially a silence while surrounded by phantoms and wraiths, Serilda let out a startled cry. "Oh, forgive me! Am I in your way? Please . . ." She stepped back and curtsied, waving them on. "Don't mind me. I was only about to do my midnight harvesting, but I'll wait for you to pass."

The hunter did not move. A few of the other steeds that had formed a crescent around them stamped their hoofs into the snow and let out impatient snorts.

After another long silence, the hunter said, "You do not intend to join us?"

Serilda swallowed. She could not tell if it was an invitation or a threat, but the thought of *joining* this ghastly troupe, of going along on the hunt, left a hollow terror in her chest.

She tried to keep from stammering as she said, "I'll be useless to you, my lord. Never learned any hunting skills, and can barely stay upright in a saddle. Best you go on and leave me to my work."

The hunter inclined his head, and for the first time, she sensed something new in his cold expression. Something like curiosity.

To her surprise, he swung his leg over the horse and before Serilda could gasp, he had landed on the ground before her.

Serilda was tall compared with most girls in the village, but the Erlki—the hunter dwarfed her by nearly a full head. His proportions were uncanny, long and slender as a water reed.

Or a sword, perhaps, was a more appropriate comparison.

She gulped hard as he took a step toward her.

"Pray tell," he said lowly, "what *is* your work, at such an hour, on such a night?"

She blinked rapidly, and for a terrifying moment, no words would come. Not only could she not speak, but her mind was desolate. Where normally there were stories and tales and lies, now there was a void. A nothingness like she'd never experienced.

So much for spinning straw into gold.

The hunter craned his head toward her, taunting. Knowing he had caught her. And next he would ask her again where the moss maidens were. What could she do but tell him? What option did she have?

Think. *Think.*

"I believe you said you were . . . harvesting?" he prompted, with a hint of lightness to his tone that was deceptive in its gentle curiosity. This was a trick—a trap.

Serilda managed to tear her gaze away from his, to a spot in the field where her own feet had trampled the snow when she'd rushed home earlier that evening. A few broken pieces of yellowed rye were poking up from the slush.

"Straw!" she said—practically shouted, so that the hunter actually looked startled. "I'm harvesting straw, of course. What else, my lord?"

His brows dipped in toward each other. "On New Year's Night? Under a Snow Moon?"

"Why—surely. It's the best time to do it. I mean . . . not that it's the new year, exactly, but . . . the full moon. Otherwise it won't have quite the right properties for the . . . the spinning." She gulped, before adding, somewhat nervously, "Into . . . gold?"

She finished this absurd statement with a cheeky smile that the hunter did not reciprocate. He kept his attention fixed on her, suspicious, yet still . . . interested, somehow.

Serilda wrapped her arms around herself, as much as a shield against his shrewd gaze as the cold. She was starting to shiver in earnest now, her teeth newly chattering.

Finally, the hunter spoke again, but whatever she had hoped or expected him to say, it was certainly not—

“You bear the mark of Hulda.”

Her heart skipped. “Hulda?”

“God of labor.”

She gaped at him. Of course she knew who Hulda was. There were only seven gods, after all—they weren’t difficult to keep track of. Hulda was the god mostly associated with good, honest work, as Madam Sauer would say. From farming to carpentry to, perhaps most of all, spinning.

She had hoped that the darkness of the night would have hidden her strange eyes with their embedded golden wheels, but perhaps the hunter had the keen sight of an owl, a nocturnal hunter through and through.

He had interpreted the mark as a spinning wheel. She opened her mouth, prepared, for once, to tell the truth. That she was not marked by the god of spinning, but rather, the god of lies. The mark he saw was the wheel of fate and fortune—or misfortune, as seemed to be the case more often than not.

It was an easy mistake to make.

But then she realized that being thus marked added some credibility to her lie of harvesting straw, so she forced herself to shrug, a little bashful at this supposed sorcery she contained.

“Yes,” she said, her voice suddenly faint. “Hulda gave their blessing before I was born.”

“For what purpose?”

“My mother was a talented seamstress,” she lied. “She gifted a fine cloak to Hulda, and the god was so impressed that they told my mother her firstborn child would be gifted with the most miraculous of skills.”

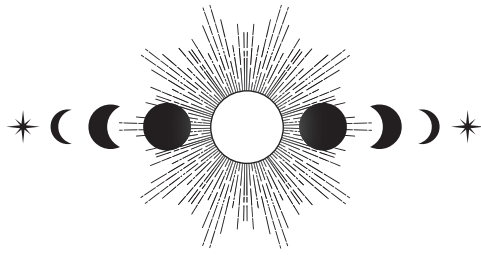
“Spinning straw into gold,” the hunter drawled, his voice thick with disbelief.

Serilda nodded. "I try not to tell many people. Might make the other maidens jealous, or the men greedy. I trust you'll keep the secret?"

For the briefest moment, the hunter looked amused at this statement. Then he took a step closer, and the air around Serilda became still and so very, very cold. She felt touched by frost and realized for the first time that there was no cloud steaming the space before him when he breathed.

Something sharp pressed into the base of her chin. Serilda gasped. Surely she should have sensed him drawing the weapon, but she had neither seen nor felt him move. Yet here he was, holding a hunting knife at her throat.

"I will ask again," he said, in a tone almost sweet, "where are the forest creatures?"



Chapter 5

Serilda held the hunter's soulless gaze, feeling too brittle, too vulnerable.

And yet her tongue—that idiotic, lying tongue—went right on talking. “My lord,” she said, with a tinge of sympathy, as if embarrassed to have to say this, for surely such a skilled hunter would not like appearing the simpleton, “the forest creatures live in the Aschen Wood, to the west of the Great Oak. And . . . a little to the north, I think. At least, that’s what the stories say.”

For the first time, a flicker of anger passed over the hunter’s face. Anger—but also uncertainty. He couldn’t quite tell whether she was playing games with him or not.

Even a great tyrant such as he couldn’t tell if she was lying.

She lifted a hand and laid her fingers ever so delicately on his wrist.

He twitched at the unexpected touch.

She started at the feel of his skin.

Her fingers might have been cold, but at least they still had warm blood coursing through them.

Whereas the hunter’s skin had quite frosted over.

Without warning, he jerked away, freeing her from the imminent threat of his blade.

"I mean no disrespect," Serilda said, "but I really must tend to my work. The moon will be gone soon and the straw will not be so compliant. I like to work with the best materials, when I can."

Without waiting for a response, Serilda picked up the shovel again, along with a bucket overflowing with snow, which she promptly dumped out. Head lifted high, she dared to walk past the hunter, past his horse, into the field. The rest of the hunting party backed away, giving her space, as Serilda began scooping away the top layer of snow to reveal the crushed grain underneath; the sad little stalks that had been left behind from the fall harvest.

It looked nothing like gold.

What a ridiculous lie this was turning into.

But Serilda knew that full-hearted commitment was the only way to persuade someone of an untruth. So she kept her face placid as she began to pull the stalks up with her bare, freezing hands and toss them into the bucket.

For a long while, there were only the sounds of her working, and the occasional shuffle of horse hooves, and the low growl of the hounds.

Then a light, raspy voice said, "I have heard tales of gold-spinners, blessed by Hulda."

Serilda looked up at the nearest rider. A pale-skinned woman, hazy around the edges, hair in a braided crown atop her head. She wore riding breeches and leather armor accented by a deep red stain all down the front of the tunic. It was a sickening amount of blood—all, no doubt, from the deep gash across her throat.

She held Serilda's gaze a moment—emotionless—before glancing at their leader. "I believe she speaks true."

The hunter did not acknowledge her statement. Instead, Serilda heard his boots crunching lightly through the snow until he was standing behind her. She lowered her gaze, focused on her task, though the

grain stalks were cutting her palms and mud was already caked beneath her fingernails. Why hadn't she grabbed her mittens? As soon as she thought it, she remembered that she'd given them to Gerdrut. She must look like such a fool.

Gathering straw to spin into gold. Honestly, Serilda. Of all the thoughtless, absurd things you might have said—

"How pleasant to know that Hulda's gift has not gone wasted," drawled the hunter. "It is a rare treasure indeed."

She glanced over her shoulder, but he was already turning away. Lithe as a spotted lynx, he mounted his steed. His horse snorted.

The hunter did not look at Serilda as he signaled to the other riders.

As fast as they had arrived, they were gone again. Nothing but thundering hooves, a flurry of snow and ice, the renewed howls of the hellhounds. A storm cloud, ominous and crackling, racing across the field.

Then, nothing but glistening snow and the round moon kissing the horizon.

Serilda let out a shaken breath, hardly able to believe her good fortune.

She had survived an encounter with the wild hunt.

She had lied to the face of the Erlking himself.

What a tragedy, she thought, that no one would ever believe her.

She waited until the usual sounds of the night had begun to return. Frozen branches creaking. The river's soothing burble. A distant hoot of an owl.

Finally, she retrieved the lantern and dared to throw open the cellar door.

The moss maidens emerged, staring at Serilda as if she had turned blue in the time since they'd last seen her.

She was so cold, she wouldn't have doubted it.

She tried to smile, but it was difficult to do when her teeth were

chattering. “Will you be all right now? Can you find your way back to the forest?”

The taller maiden, Parsley, sneered, as if insulted by such a question. “It is you humans who regularly lose yourselves, not us.”

“I didn’t mean to offend.” She glanced down at their immodest furs. “You must be so cold.”

The maiden didn’t respond, just stared intently at Serilda, both curious and irritated. “You have saved our lives, and risked your own to do it. What for?”

Serilda’s heart fluttered gleefully. It sounded so heroic, when put that way.

But heroes were supposed to be humble, so she merely shrugged. “It hardly seemed right, chasing you down like that, as if you were wild animals. What did the hunt want with you, anyway?”

It was Meadowsweet who spoke, seeming to overcome her shyness. “The Erlking has long hunted the forest folk, and all manner of magical kin besides.”

“He sees it as sport,” said Parsley. “Suppose, when you’ve been hunting so long as he has, taking home the head of a common stag must not seem like much of a prize.”

Serilda’s lips parted in shock. “He meant to *kill* you?”

They both looked at her as if she were dense. But Serilda had assumed the hunt was chasing them to capture them. Which, perhaps, was worse in some ways. But to murder such graceful beings for the fun of it? The idea sickened her.

“We typically have means of protecting ourselves from the hunt, and evading those hounds,” said Parsley. “They cannot find us when we stay under the protection of our Shrub Grandmother. But my sister and I were not able to make it back before nightfall.”

“I am glad I could help,” said Serilda. “You are welcome to hide in my root cellar anytime you’d like.”

“We owe you a debt,” said Meadowsweet.

Serilda shook her head. “I won’t hear of it. Believe me. The adventure was well worth the risk.”

The maidens exchanged a look, and whatever passed between them, Serilda could see they didn’t like it. But there was resignation in Parsley’s scowl as she stepped closer to Serilda and fidgeted with something on her finger.

“All magic requires payment, to keep our worlds in balance. Will you accept this token in return for the aid you’ve given me this night?”

Struck speechless, Serilda opened her palm. The maiden dropped a ring onto it. “This isn’t necessary . . . and I certainly didn’t do any *magic*.”

Parsley tilted her head, a rather birdlike gesture. “Are you certain?”

Before Serilda could respond, Meadowsweet had stepped closer and removed a thin chain from her neck.

“And will you accept this token,” she said, “in return for the aid you’ve given me?”

She looped the necklace around Serilda’s outstretched palm. It bore a small oval locket.

Both pieces of jewelry shone gold in the moonlight.

Actual gold.

They must be worth a great deal.

But what were forest folk doing with them? She had always believed that they had no use for material riches. That they saw humankind’s obsession with gold and gems as something unsavory, even repulsive.

Perhaps that was why it was so easy for them to give these gifts to Serilda. Whereas, for her and her father, these were a treasure like nothing she’d ever held.

And yet—

She shook her head and held her hand out toward them. “I can’t

take these. Thank you, but . . . anyone would have helped you. You don't need to pay me."

Parsley chuckled mildly. "You must not know much of humans, to believe that," she said sourly. She tilted her chin toward the gifts. "If you do not accept these tokens, then our debt has not been paid and we must be in your service until it is." Her gaze darkened warningly. "We would much prefer that you take the gifts."

Pressing her lips together, Serilda nodded and closed her hand around the jewelry. "Thank you, then," she said. "Consider the debt paid."

They nodded, and it felt as if a bargain had been struck and signed in blood for all the loftiness the moment carried.

Desperate to break the tension, Serilda held her arms out toward them. "I feel so close to you both. Shall we embrace?"

Meadowsweet gaped at her. Parsley outright *snarled*.

The tension did not break.

Serilda drew her arms quickly back. "No. That would be odd."

"Come," said Parsley. "Grandmother will be worried."

And just like skittish deer, they ran off, disappearing down the riverbank.

"By the old gods," muttered Serilda. "What a night."

She banged her boots on the side of the house to rid them of snow before going inside. Snores greeted her. Her father was still sleeping like a groundhog, utterly oblivious.

Serilda slipped off her cloak and sat with a sigh before the hearth. She added a block of bog peat to keep the fire smoldering. In the light of the embers, she tilted forward and peered down at her rewards.

One golden ring.

One golden locket.

When they caught the light, she saw that the ring bore a mark. A crest, like something a noble family might put on their fancy wax seals.

Serilda had to squint to make it out. The design appeared to be of a tatzelwurm, a great mythical beast that was mostly serpentine with a feline head. Its body was wrapped elegantly around the letter *R*. Serilda had never seen anything quite like it before.

Digging her thumbnails into the locket's clasp, she pried it open with a snap.

Her breath caught with delight.

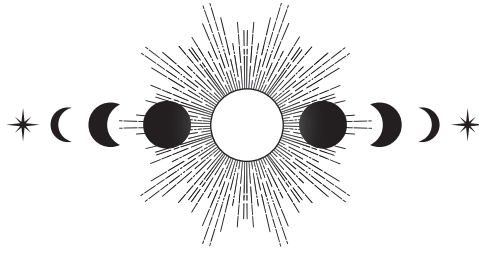
She'd expected the locket to be empty, but inside there was a portrait—the tiniest, most delicate painting she'd ever seen—showing the resemblance of a most lovely little girl. She was but a child, Anna's age if not a little younger, but clearly a princess or duchess or someone of much importance. Strings of pearls decorated her golden curls and a collar of lace framed her porcelain cheeks.

The regal lift of her chin was somehow completely at odds with the impish glint in her eyes.

Serilda shut the locket and slipped the chain over her head. She slid the ring onto her finger. With a sigh, she crawled back beneath her covers.

It was little comfort that she now had proof about what had transpired this night. Probably, if she showed anyone, they would think these things were stolen. Bad enough to be a liar. Becoming a thief was the logical progression.

Serilda lay sleepless, staring up at the golden patterns and creeping shadows on the ceiling rafters, gripping the locket in her fist.



Chapter 6

Sometimes Serilda would spend hours thinking about evidence. Those little clues left behind in a story that bridged the gap between fantasy and reality.

What evidence did she have that she'd been cursed by Wyrdith, the god of stories and fortune? The bedtime tales her father had told her, though she'd never dared to ask if they were real or not. The golden wheels over her black irises. Her uncontrollable tongue. A mother who had no interest in watching her grow up, who left without so much as a goodbye.

What evidence was there that the Erlking murdered the children who got lost in the woods? Not much. Mostly hearsay. Rumors of a haunting figure that stalked through the trees, listening for a child's frightened cries. And long ago, once every generation or so, a small body discovered at the forest's edge. Barely familiar, oft picked clean by the crows. But parents always recognized their own missing child, even a decade later. Even when all that was left was a corpse.

But that had not happened in recent memory, and it was hardly proof.

Superstitious nonsense.

This, however, was different.

Quite different.

What evidence did Serilda have that she had rescued two moss maidens who were being chased by the wild hunt? That she had outwitted the Erlking himself?

A golden ring and a necklace, warm against her skin when she awoke.

Outside—a square of dead grass revealed where she had shoveled away the snow.

An open cellar door, left unlocked, the wood still smelling of raw onion.

But not, she noted with bewilderment, hoofprints or tracks left in the fields. The snow was as pristine as it had been when she'd come trekking home the night before. The only footprints she saw were her own. There had been no mark left behind of her midnight visitors, not the delicate feet of the moss maidens nor the clomping hooves of the horses nor the lupine tracks of the hounds.

Just a delicate field of white, glittering almost cheerfully in the morning sun.

As it soon turned out, the evidence she *did* have would do her no good.

She told her father the story—every word a singular truth. And he listened, rapt, even horrified. He studied the seal on the ring and the locket's portrait with speechless awe. He went out to inspect the cellar door. He stood a long time, staring out at the empty horizon, beyond which lay the Aschen Wood.

Then, when Serilda thought she could stand the silence no longer, he began to laugh. A full belly laugh tinged with something dark that she couldn't quite place.

Panic? Fear?

"You'd think by now," he said, turning back to face her, "I'd have learned not to be so gullible. Oh, Serilda." He took her face into his rough palms. "How can you can speak these things without so much as a hint of a smile? You very nearly had me fooled, yet again. Where did

you get these, truthfully, now?” He lifted the locket from her collarbone, shaking his head. He’d gone pale while she recounted the events of the night before, but color was now rushing back into his cheeks. “Were they a gift from some young lad in town? I’ve been wondering if you might be sweet on someone and too shy to tell me.”

Serilda stepped back, tucking the locket beneath her dress. She hesitated, tempted to try again. To *insist*. He had to believe her. For once, it was real. It had happened. She wasn’t lying. And she might have tried again, if it hadn’t been for the haunted look lurking behind his gaze, not entirely covered up by his denial. He was worried about her. Despite his strained laughter, he was terrified that this one could be true.

She didn’t want that. He already worried enough.

“Of course not, Papa. I’m not sweet on anyone, and when have you ever known me to be shy?” She shrugged. “If you must know the truth of it, I found the ring stuck around a fairy’s toadstool, and I stole the necklace from the schellenrock who lives in the river.”

He guffawed. “Now *that* I’d be closer to believing.”

He went back inside and Serilda knew in that moment, in the deepest corner of her heart, that if he wouldn’t believe her, no one would.

They had heard far too many tales before.

She told herself it was better this way. If she wasn’t beholden to the truth of what had happened under the full moon, then she would have no qualms about embellishing it.

And she did dearly love to embellish.

“Speaking of young village lads,” Papa called through the open door, “I thought I should tell you. Thomas Lindbeck has agreed to help around the mill this spring.”

The name was a kick to her chest. “Thomas Lindbeck?” she said, darting back into the house. “Hans’s brother? What for? You’ve never hired help before.”

"I'm getting older. Thought it'd be nice to have a strapping young man to do some of the heavy lifting."

She scowled. "You're barely forty."

Her father glanced up from stoking the fire, chagrined. Sighing, he set down the poker and stood to face her, brushing off his hands. "All right. He came and asked for the work. He's hoping to earn some extra coin, so that . . ."

"So that what?" she prompted, his hesitation making her tense.

His look was pitying in a way that turned her stomach.

"So he can be making a proposal to Bluma Rask, is my understanding."

A proposal.

Of marriage.

"I see," said Serilda, forcing a tight smile. "I didn't realize they were so . . . well. Good. They're a charming match." She glanced at the fireplace. "I'll get some apples for our breakfast. Do you want anything else from the cellar?"

He shook his head, watching her carefully. Her nerves hummed with irritation. She was careful not to stomp or grind her teeth as she headed back outside.

What did she care if Thomas Lindbeck wanted to marry Bluma Rask, or anyone else for that matter? She had no claim to him, not anymore. It had been nearly two years since he'd stopped looking at Serilda like she was the sun itself, and started looking at her like she was a storm cloud brewing ominously on the horizon.

When he bothered to look at her at all, that is.

She wished a happy, long life on him and Bluma. A little farmhouse. A yard full of children. Endless conversations about the price of livestock and unfavorable weather.

A life without curses.

A life without stories.

Serilda paused as she threw open the cellar door, where just last night she had hidden two magical creatures. She stood in this very spot and faced down an otherworldly beast and a wicked king and a whole legion of undead hunters.

She was not the sort to pine for a simple life, and she would not pine for the likes of Thomas Lindbeck.



Stories change with repeated tellings, and hers was no different. The night of the Snow Moon became increasingly adventurous, and more and more surreal. When she told the tale to the children, it was not moss maidens she had rescued, but a vicious little water nix who had thanked her only by trying to bite off her fingers before it jumped into the river and disappeared.

When Farmer Baumann brought extra firewood for the schoolhouse and Gerdrut encouraged Serilda to repeat the story, she insisted that the Erlking had not ridden upon a black steed, but rather a massive wyvern who blew acrid smoke from its nostrils and oozed molten rock from between its scales.

When Serilda went to barter for some of Mother Weber's raw wool and was asked by Anna to again repeat the fantastical tale, she dared not explain how she had fooled the Erlking with a lie about her magical spinning abilities. Mother Weber had been the one to teach Serilda the technique when she was young, and she had never stopped criticizing Serilda for her lack of skill. To this day she liked to gripe about how the local sheep deserved to have their coats turned into something finer than the lumpy, uneven threads that would come off Serilda's bobbins. She probably would have laughed Serilda right out of their cottage if she heard how Serilda had lied to the Erlking about her spinning talent, of all things.

Instead, Serilda turned her story-self into a bold warrior. She regaled her small audience with a feat of daring and bravery. How she had brandished a lethal fire iron (no mere shovel for her!), threatening the Erlking and driving away his demon attendants. She mimicked precisely how she had swung, stabbed, and clobbered her enemies. How she had driven the poker into the heart of a hellhound, then flung it off into one of the buckets on the waterwheel.

The children were in stitches, and by the time Serilda's story ended with the Erlking fleeing from her with girlish squeals and a lump the size of a goose egg on his head, Anna and her toddler brother ran off to begin their own playacting, deciding who would be Serilda and who would be the terrible king. Mother Weber shook her head, but Serilda was sure she saw the hint of a smile disguised behind her knitting needles.

She tried to enjoy their reactions. The open mouths, the intent gazes, the giddy laughter. Usually, this was all she craved.

But with every telling, Serilda felt that the reality of the story was slipping away from her. Becoming fogged over by time and alterations.

She wondered how long it would be before she, too, began to doubt what had transpired that night.

Such thoughts filled her with unexpected regret. Sometimes, when she was alone, she would pull out the chain from beneath the collar of her dress and stare at the portrait of the young girl, who she'd declared a princess in her imagination. Then she would rub her thumb over the engraving on the ring. The tatzelwurm twisted around an ornate *R*.

She promised herself that she would never forget. Not a single detail.

A loud *caw* startled Serilda from her melancholy. She looked up to see a bird watching her through the cottage doorway, which she'd left open to air out the little home while the sun was shining, knowing another winter storm would be upon them any day.

And here she was, distracted once again from her task. She was

supposed to be spinning all this wool she'd gotten from Mother Weber, turning it into usable yarn for their mending and knitting.

The worst sort of work. *Tedium incarnate*. She would have rather been skating on the newly frozen pond or freezing caramel drops in the snow for an evening treat.

Instead, she'd been lost in thought again, staring at the small portrait.

She shut the locket and tucked it into her dress. Pushing back the three-legged stool, she walked around the spinning wheel to the door. She hadn't realized how cold it had gotten. She rubbed her hands together to try and return some warmth to her fingers.

She paused, one hand on the door, noticing the bird who had startled her from her reverie. It was perched on one of the barren branches of the hazelnut tree that stood just beyond their garden. It was the biggest raven she'd ever seen. A monstrous shadow of a creature silhouetted against the dusky sky.

Sometimes she would toss out bread crumbs for the birds. Probably this one had heard about the feast.

"Sincerest apologies," she said, preparing to shut the door. "I have nothing for you today."

The bird cocked its head to the side, which is when Serilda saw it. *Really* saw it. She went still.

It had seemed to be watching her before, but now—

With a ruffle of its feathers, the bird leaped from the branch. The tree branches swayed and released drifts of powdery snow as the bird soared off into the sky, growing smaller as it beat its heavy wings. Heading north, in the direction of the Aschen Wood.

Serilda would have thought nothing of it, except the creature had been missing its eyes. There had been nothing to watch her but empty sockets. And when it had taken to the air, bits of violet-gray sky had been visible through the threadbare holes in its wings.

“Nachtkrapp,” she whispered, bracing herself against the door.

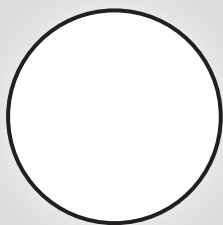
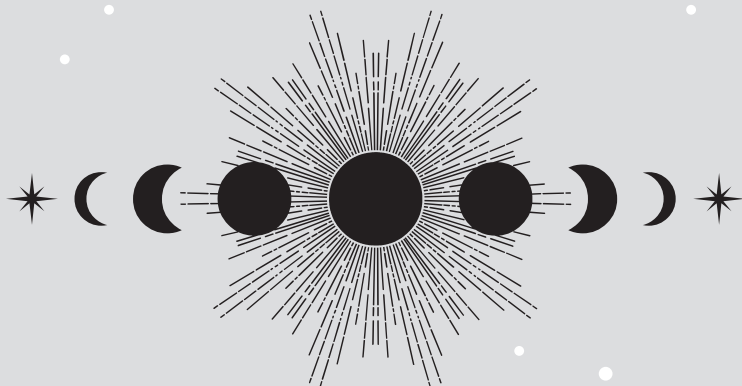
A night raven. Who could kill with one look of its empty eyes if it chose to. Who was said to devour the hearts of children.

She watched until the fiend was out of sight, and her gaze caught on the white moon beginning to rise in the distance. The Hunger Moon, rising when the world was at its most desolate, when humans and creatures alike began to wonder if they had stored away enough food to last them through the rest of the dreary winter.

Four weeks had passed.

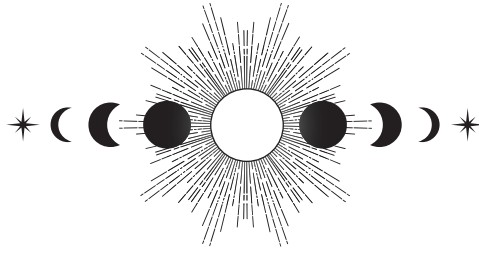
Tonight, the hunt would ride again.

With a shaky breath, Serilda slammed the door shut.



THE HUNGER MOON





Chapter 7

She had been trying not to think of the night raven as dusk slid away to darkness, but the chilling visitor maintained a hold over her thoughts. Serilda shivered each time she pictured those empty sockets where glossy black eyes should have been. The missing patches of feathers on its wings when it had taken to the air. Like a dead thing. A forsaken thing.

It felt like a bad omen.

Despite her efforts to appear jolly as she prepared the evening bread for her and Papa, she could feel his suspicions frosting the air of their small cabin. He could surely tell that something was bothering her, but he hadn't asked. Probably he knew he wouldn't get an honest answer if he did.

Serilda considered telling him about the bird, but what was the point? He would only shake his head at her wild imagination again. Or worse—get that distant, shadowed look, like his worst nightmare had come to call.

Instead, their talk was empty as they each sipped at their parsnip stew flavored with marjoram and veal sausage. He told her that he had been given a job laying bricks on the new town hall that was being built in Mondbrück, a small city to the south, which would pay enough to last them until the spring. Work was always slow in the winter, when

parts of the river froze over and the water flowed too slowly to create enough force for the waterwheel to power the millstones. Papa used the time to sharpen the stones and make any repairs to the equipment, but this late in the season, there was little to do until the snow thawed, and he was usually forced to find work elsewhere.

At least Zelig would appreciate the exercise, she said. Traveling to and from Mondbrück every day was sure to help keep the old horse agile for a little longer.

Then Serilda told him how excited little Gerdrut was over a wiggly milk tooth—her first. She'd already picked out a space in the garden where she would plant it, but was worried that the soil would be too hard in the winter and it wouldn't allow her new tooth to grow in nice and strong. Papa snickered and told Serilda that when she'd lost *her* first milk tooth, she'd refused to plant it in the garden, instead leaving it out on the front step alongside a plate of biscuits, in hopes that a tooth witch would come and steal both the tooth and Serilda away on a night of adventure.

"I must have been so disappointed when she didn't come."

Her father shrugged. "I wouldn't know. The next morning, you told me the wildest tale of your journeys with the witch. Took you all the way to the great palaces of Ottelien, if I remember right."

And on and on, each of them saying nothing at all, and her father's gaze becoming more speculative as he watched her over the rim of his bowl.

He had just opened his mouth, and Serilda was certain he was preparing to ask her what was the matter, when a knock sounded at the door.

Serilda jumped. Her stew would have sloshed over the sides of her bowl if she hadn't been nearly finished. She and her father both glanced at the closed door, then at each other, bewildered. Out here, in the dead of winter, when the world was quiet and still, one always heard when a

visitor was approaching. But they had heard no footsteps, no galloping horses, no carriage wheels in the snow.

They both stood, but Serilda was quicker on her feet.

“Serilda—”

“I’ll get it, Papa,” she said. “You finish your meal.”

She tipped up the bowl, slurping at the last dregs of stew, then dropped it onto her chair as she crossed the room.

She opened the door, and promptly drew in an icy breath.

The man was broad-shouldered and smartly dressed, and he had an iron chisel jutting from his left eye socket.

Serilda had barely registered the sight when a hand grabbed her shoulder, pulling her back. The door slammed shut. She was swung around to face her father, his eyes wild.

“That was—what—tell me that man wasn’t a . . . a . . .” Papa had gone ghostly white. Whiter, actually, than the ghost on their doorstep, who had been rather dark-skinned.

“Father,” Serilda whispered. “Calm yourself. We must see what he wants.”

She started to pull away, but he held tight to her arms. “What he wants?” he hissed, as if the idea were ludicrous. “He is a dead man! Standing at our door! What if he is . . . is one of *his*?”

One of his. The Erlking’s.

Serilda swallowed, knowing, without being able to explain how she knew, that the ghost was indeed a servant of the Erlking’s. Or, a confidant of sorts, if not a servant. She knew little about the inner workings of the dark ones’ court.

“We must be civil,” she said firmly, proud when her voice sounded not only brave, but practical. “Even to the dead. Especially to the dead.”

Prying away his fingers, she squared her shoulders and turned back to the door. When she opened it, the man had not moved and his expression was unchanged from its calm indifference. It was difficult not to

stare at the chisel or the line of dark blood that soaked into his gray-streaked beard, but Serilda forced herself to meet his good eye, which did not catch the light of the fire as one would expect. She did not think he was an old man, despite the flecks of gray. Perhaps only a few years older than her father. Again she couldn't help but notice his clothing, which, though fine, was also a century or two outdated. A flat black cap ornamented with golden plumes perfectly coordinated with a velvet cape over an ivory jerkin. If he weren't dead, he might have been a nobleman—but what would a nobleman be doing with a woodcarver's tool lodged in his eye?

Serilda desperately wanted to ask.

Instead, she curtsied as well as she could. "Good evening, sir. How may we be of service?"

"The honor of your presence has been requested by His Grim, Erlkönig, the Alder King."

"No!" said her father, once again taking her arm, but this time Serilda refused to be pulled back into the house. "Serilda, the Erlking!"

She glanced at him, and watched his disbelief turn swiftly to understanding.

He knew.

He knew her story had been the truth.

Serilda puffed up her chest, vindicated. "Yes, Papa. I truly did meet the Erlking on New Year's night. But I cannot imagine . . ." She turned back to the ghost. "What can he possibly want with me now?"

"At the moment?" drawled the apparition. "Obedience." He stepped back, gesturing into the night, and Serilda saw that he had brought a carriage.

Or—a cage.

It was difficult to tell for sure, as the rounded transport appeared to be made of curved bars that were as pale as the surrounding snow.

Inside the bars, heavy black curtains shimmered with a touch of silver underneath the bulbous moon. She could not see what might be inside.

The carriage-cage was being drawn by two *bahkauv*. They were miserable-looking beasts, bull-like, with horns that twisted in corkscrews from their ears and massive hunched backs that forced their heads to hang awkwardly toward the ground. Their tails were long and serpentine, their mouths wrapped around ill-fitting teeth. They waited motionless for the coachman, for as there was no one atop the driver's seat, she thought this ghost must be the one who would be driving them.

Back to Gravenstone, the Erlking's castle.

"No," said her father. "You can't take her. Please. Serilda."

She turned again to face him, startled by the look of anguish that greeted her. For though everyone held suspicions and fears of the Erlking and his ghostly courtiers, she thought she saw something else hidden behind her father's eyes. Not just fear sparked by a hundred haunting tales, but . . . knowledge, accompanied by despair. A certainty of the terrible things that might await her if she went with this man.

"Perhaps it would be useful if I were to tell you," said the ghost, "that this summoning is not by mere request. Should you decline, there will be unfortunate consequences."

Serilda's pulse stirred and she grabbed her father's hands, squeezing them tight. "He's right, Father. One cannot say no to a summons from the Erlking. Not unless they wish to bring some catastrophe upon themselves . . . or their family."

"Or their entire town, or everyone they've ever loved . . .," added the ghost in a bored tone. She expected him to yawn as a conclusion to the statement, but he managed to preserve his integrity with a sharp, warning glare instead.

"Serilda," said Papa, his voice lowered, though there was no hope

of speaking in secrecy. "What did you say when you met him before? What could he possibly want now?"

She shook her head. "Exactly what I told you, Papa. Just a story." She shrugged, as nonchalantly as she could. "Perhaps he wants to hear another."

Her father's eyes clouded over with doubt, and yet . . . also a slim bit of hope. As though this seemed plausible.

She guessed that he had forgotten what sort of story she had told that night.

The Erlking believed that she could spin straw into gold.

But—surely, *that* wasn't what this was about. What would the Erlking want with spun gold?

"I have to go, Papa. We both know it." She nodded at the coachman. "I need a moment."

Shutting the door, she quickly set about the room, changing into her warmest stockings, her riding cloak, her boots.

"Will you prepare a pack of food?" she asked her father when he did not move from the door, but stood sullen, wringing his hands in distress. Her request was as much a means of pulling him from his stupor as it was an acknowledgment that she'd need food. At the moment, she was still full from their evening bread and with the sudden nerves overtaking her insides, she doubted she would have an appetite anytime soon.

When she was ready and could think of nothing else she might need, her father had a yellow apple, a slice of buttered rye, and a square of hard cheese wrapped in a handkerchief. She took it from him in exchange for a kiss on his cheek.

"I will be all right," she whispered, hoping that her expression conveyed more certainty than she actually felt.

From Papa's furrowed brow, she didn't think it mattered. She knew he would not sleep tonight, not until she was safely returned.

“Be careful, my girl,” he said, pulling her into a tight embrace. “They say he is most charming, but never forget that such charm hides a cruel and wicked heart.”

She laughed. “Papa, I assure you, the Erlking has no interest in charming me. Whatever he has summoned me for, it is not *that*.”

He grunted, unwilling to agree, but said nothing more.

With one last squeeze of his hand, Serilda pulled open the door.

The ghost stood waiting beside the carriage. He watched her coolly as Serilda made her way along the garden’s snowy path.

Only once she got close did she see that what had appeared as the bars of a cage were, in fact, the rib cage of some enormous beast. Her feet halted as she stared at the whitened bones, each one intricately carved with barbed vines and budding moonflowers and creatures great and small. Bats and mice and owls. Tatzelwurm and nachtkrapp.

The coachman cleared his throat impatiently, and Serilda yanked her hand away from where she had been tracing a nachtkrapp’s bedraggled wing.

She accepted his hand, letting him assist her into the carriage. The ghost’s fingers were solid enough, but they felt like touching . . . well, a dead man. His skin was brittle, as if his hand would crumble to dust if she squeezed too tight, and there was no warmth to his touch. He was not *ice*-cold like the Erlking had been—the difference, she supposed, between a creature from the underworld whose blood likely ran cold in his veins and a specter who had no blood left at all.

She tried to stifle a shudder as she pulled back the curtain and stepped into the carriage, then wrapped her cloak around her arms and tried to pretend it was only the winter air making her shiver.

Inside, a cushioned bench awaited her. The carriage was small and would hardly have fit a second passenger, but as she was alone, she found it quite cozy, and surprisingly warm as the heavy drapes blocked out the frigid night air. A small lantern was attached to the ceiling,

crafted from the skull and jagged-toothed jaws of yet another creature. A candle made of dark green wax burned inside the skull, its warm flame not only making the space quite comfortable with its gentle heat, but also sending a golden light through the eye sockets, the nostrils, the spaces in between sharp, grinning teeth.

Serilda settled onto the bench, a little overwhelmed to be given traveling accommodations that were so eerily luxurious.

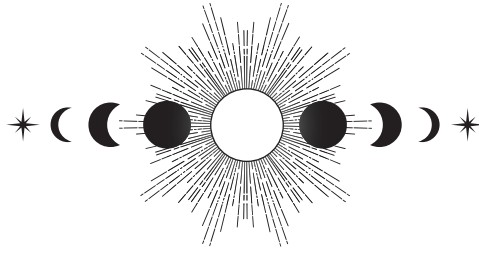
On a whim, she stretched up a finger and traced the lantern's jawbone. She whispered a quiet thank-you that it had given its life so she might ride in such comfort.

The jaws snapped shut.

Yelping, Serilda yanked her hand back.

A moment passed. The lantern opened its maw again. As if nothing had happened.

Outside, she heard the crack of a whip, and the carriage lurched into the night.



Chapter 8

Parting the heavy drapes, Serilda watched the passing landscape. Having only ever traveled to the neighboring towns of Mondbrück and Fleck, and once when she was a child to the city of Nordenburg, Serilda had little experience of the world beyond Märchenfeld, and a heart that yearned to see more. To know more. To capture every tiny detail and store it away in her memory for future musings.

They passed quickly over the rolling farmlands and then onto the road that ran parallel to the Sorge River. For a while, they were trapped between the winding black river to her right and the Aschen Wood, a dark threat to her left.

Until, finally, the carriage veered off the commonly traveled road onto a bumpier path heading straight into the forest.

Serilda braced herself as the tree cover loomed ahead of them, half expecting to feel a change in the air as they passed into the shadows of the boughs. A chill trickled down her spine. But she felt nothing out of the ordinary, except perhaps that the air grew a tinge warmer, with the trees offering shelter from the wind.

It was also much darker, and though she squinted for any glimpses afforded by the full moon, its light barely filtered through the tight-knit branches. Occasionally there were faint silver glimmers alighting on a

gnarled tree trunk. Illuminating a pool of standing water. Catching the beat of wings as some nocturnal bird flitted between the boughs.

It was a wonder the bahkauv could find their way, or that the coachman knew where to go in such darkness. But their pace never slowed. The thud of their hooves was louder here, echoing back to her from the forest.

Travelers rarely ventured into the Aschen Wood unless they had no other choice, and with good reason. Mortals did not belong here.

For the first time, she began to feel afraid.

“Stop it, Serilda,” she muttered, letting the curtain close. There wasn’t much point in looking out at the scenery, anyhow, with the darkness growing thicker by the moment. She glanced at the skull lantern and imagined that it was watching her.

She smiled at it.

It did not smile back.

“You look hungry,” she said, opening the pack her father had sent. “Just skin and bones . . . without even the skin.” She pulled out the cheese and broke it in half, then held one portion out to the lantern.

The nostrils flared, and she imagined she could hear a long, airy sniff. Before the teeth pulled back in disgust.

“Suit yourself.” Leaning against the bench, she took a bite, reveling in the comfort of something as simple as salty, crumbly cheese. “With teeth like that, you’re probably used to hunting for your food. I wonder what type of beast you were. Not a wolf. At least, not a normal one. A dire wolf perhaps, but no—even bigger.” She pondered a long time, while the candle flame wavered unhelpfully. “I suppose I could ask the coachman, but he doesn’t seem the chatty sort. You two must get along well.”

She had just finished the hunk of cheese when she felt a change in the path under the carriage wheels. From the vibration and bounce of a rough, rarely traversed forest road to something smooth and straight.

Serilda peeled back the curtain again.

To her surprise, they had passed outside of the woods and were heading toward an enormous lake that shimmered with moonlight. It was surrounded by more forests to the east and, though she couldn't see them in the darkness, no doubt the foothills of the Rückgrat Mountains to the north. The western edge of the lake disappeared in a shroud of thick mist. Otherwise, the world glittered in white diamond snow.

Most surprising was that they were nearing a city. It was surrounded by a thick stone wall with a wrought-iron gate, with tall thatched roofs on the outer buildings, tall spires and clock towers farther in. Beyond the rows of houses and shops, barely visible on the edge of the lake, stood a castle.

The carriage turned, and the castle was no longer in Serilda's view as they drove through the massive entry gate. It had not been shut, which surprised her. For a town so close to the Aschen Wood, she would have thought for sure they would keep their gate locked at night, especially during a full moon. She watched the buildings pass by, their facades a patchwork of half-timbered framing and ornamental designs carved into gables and overhangs. The city seemed huge and dense compared with their little town of Märchenfeld, but she knew, logically, that it was probably still quite small compared with the larger trade cities to the south, or the port cities to the far west.

At first, she thought the city might be abandoned; but no, it felt too tidy, too well-maintained. Upon closer inspection, there were subtle signs of life. Though she saw no one, and no window glowed with candlelight (not surprising, for they must be near the witching hour by now), there were neat, snow-dusted garden patches and the smell of recent chimney smoke. From the distance, she heard the unmistakable bleat of a goat and the answering yowl of a cat.

The people were simply asleep, she thought. As they should be. As *she* would have been, if she hadn't been summoned for this strange escapade.

Which brought her thoughts circling back to the more pressing mystery.

Where was she?

The Aschen Wood was the territory of the dark ones and the forest folk. She had always pictured Gravenstone Castle standing dark and ominous somewhere deep in the forest, a fortress of slim towers taller than the most ancient trees. No stories had ever mentioned a lake . . . or a city, for that matter.

As the carriage passed along the main thoroughfare of the town, the castle loomed back into view. It was a handsome building, stalwart and commanding, with a bevy of turrets and towers surrounding a large central keep.

It wasn't until the carriage turned away from the last row of houses and began crossing over a long, narrow bridge that Serilda realized the castle was not built at the edge of the town, but on an island out in the lake itself. The ink-black water reflected its moonlit stonework. The wheels of the carriage clattered loudly on the cobblestone bridge, and a chill enveloped Serilda as she craned her neck to see the imposing watchtowers flanking the barbican.

They passed over a wooden drawbridge, under the arched gateway, and into the courtyard. The mist hung cloyingly to the surrounding buildings, so that the castle was never revealed in its entirety, but shown only in glimpses before being shrouded once more. The carriage stopped and a figure darted out from a stable. A boy, perhaps a few years her junior, in a simple tunic and shaggy haircut.

A moment passed before the carriage door was opened, revealing the coachman. He stepped aside, gesturing for Serilda to follow. She bid farewell to the lantern, earning her a peculiar look from the ghostly driver, and stepped down onto the cobblestones, grateful when the coachman did not offer his hand again. The stable boy already had the huge beasts untethered and was ushering them back toward the stable.

Serilda wondered if the massive steeds she'd seen during the hunt were stabled there, as well, and what other creatures might be kept by the Erlking. She wanted to ask, but the coachman was already gliding toward the central keep. Serilda skipped after him, flashing a grateful smile at the stable boy as she passed.

He flinched away from the look, ducking his head, showing a mottle of bruises along the back of his neck that disappeared down the collar of his shirt.

Serilda's feet stumbled. Her heart squeezed. Were these bruises from his ghostly life here among the dark ones? Or were they from before? Possibly even the cause of his death? Otherwise, she couldn't see what might have killed him.

A startled cry drew Serilda's attention toward the other side of the courtyard.

Her eyes widened—first, to see an iron-barred kennel and the pack of burning hellhounds tied to a post at its center.

Second, to see the one hound that had broken loose. The one charging right at her. Eyes aflame. Searing lips pulled back against brazen fangs.

Serilda screamed and turned, sprinting back toward the open portcullis and lowered drawbridge. But she had no hope of outrunning the beast.

As she raced past the carriage, she changed course, hoisting herself up on a wheel and grabbing the bars of the rib cage and what might have been a piece of spine to scramble up onto the carriage roof. She had just pulled up her leg when she heard the snap and felt the surge of hot air blowing off the beast.

She scrambled around on her hands and knees. Below, the hound was pacing back and forth, its glowing eyes watching her, its nostrils flared with hunger. The chain that should have had it leashed to the post dragged loudly across the cobblestones.

Distantly, she heard shouts and orders. *Heel. Come. Leave it.*

Ignoring them all, the hound reared back on its hind legs, paws thrashing at the carriage door.

She shrank back. The creature was huge. If it tried to jump—

A loud *thwack* interrupted the thought.

The hound yelped and jerked, going stiff.

It took Serilda a gasping moment to notice the long arrow shaft fletched with shining black feathers. It had gone into one of the hound's eyes and out through the side of its jaw. Black smoke oozed from the wound, as the flames slowly dimmed behind its ragged fur.

The hound fell to the side, its legs twitching as it wheezed its last breaths.

Dizzy with the rush of blood, Serilda tore her gaze away. The Erlking stood on the steps of the castle's keep, dressed in the same fine leather, his black hair draped loosely across his shoulders. A massive crossbow hung at his side.

Ignoring Serilda, he turned his falcon's gaze on the woman who stood between the kennel and the carriage. She had the striking elegance of a dark one, but her clothing was utilitarian, her arms and legs covered in leather braces.

"What happened?" he asked, his tone suggesting a calm that Serilda didn't believe for a moment.

The woman dropped into a hasty bow. "I was preparing the hounds for the hunt, Your Grim. The kennel gate was open and I believe the chain had been cut. My back was turned. I didn't realize what was happening until the beast was free and . . ." Her gaze turned swiftly up to Serilda, still perched on top of the carriage, then down to the body of the hound. "I take full responsibility, my lord."

"Why?" drawled the Erlking. "Did you cut the chain?"

"Of course not, my lord. But they are in my care."

The king grunted. "Why didn't it respond to my commands?"

"That one was a pup, not yet fully trained. But no one gets fed until after the hunt, and so . . . it was hungry."

Serilda's eyes bugged as she looked again at the beast, whose body stretched out would have been nearly as long as she was tall. Its fires had been extinguished, leaving it a mound of black fur tight against its ribs, and teeth that looked strong enough to crush a human skull. She could see now that it *was* smaller than those she had seen during the hunt, but still. It was only a *pup*?

The thought was not comforting.

"Finish your work," said the king. "And clean up the body." He swung the crossbow up onto his back as he descended the steps, pausing before the woman, who Serilda guessed was the master of the hounds. "You are not responsible for this incident," he said to the top of her bowed head. "This could only have been the poltergeist."

His lip curled, just slightly, as if the word had a bitter taste.

"Thank you, Your Grim," murmured the woman. "I will ensure it does not happen again."

The Erlking crossed the courtyard and stood at the wheel of the carriage, peering up at Serilda. Knowing that it would be foolish to try to bow or curtsy while in such a predicament, Serilda merely smiled. "Are things always so exhilarating around here?"

"Not always," responded the Erlking in his measured tone. He moved closer, bringing the shadows along with him. Serilda's instincts told her to cower, despite how she towered above him on the carriage roof. "The hounds are rarely treated to the flesh of humans. One can understand why it was so easily excited."

Her eyebrows shot upward. She wanted to think it was a joke, but she wasn't convinced the dark ones knew what a joke was.

"Your Ma—Your Grim," she said, with only a bit of a waver. "What

a great honor it is to be once again in your presence. I hardly could have expected to be summoned to Gravenstone Castle by the Alder King himself.”

The corner of his luscious mouth twitched. In the moonlight, his lips were purple, like a fresh bruise or a squashed blackberry. Strangely, Serilda’s mouth watered at the thought.

“So you do know who I am,” he said almost mockingly. “I had wondered.” His gaze skittered quickly around the courtyard. The stables, the kennels, the ominous walls. “You are mistaken. This is not Gravenstone Castle. My home is haunted with memories I have no wish to relive, so I spend little time there. Instead, I have claimed Adalheid as my home and sanctuary.” He was smiling at some unknown pleasure when he met Serilda’s gaze again. “The royal family was not using it.”

Adalheid. The name seemed familiar, but Serilda could not place where, exactly, it was.

Just as she wasn’t sure what royal family he was talking about. Märchenfeld and the Aschen Wood were situated in the northernmost region of the Kingdom of Tulvask, currently under the rule of Queen Agnette II and the House of Rosenstadt. But as Serilda understood, it was a relationship based on arbitrary lines drawn on a map, a few taxes, the occasional trade road built or maintained, and the promise of military aid if required—which it never was, given that they were well-protected by the towering basalt cliffs that dropped off into a treacherous sea on one side, and the foreboding Rückgrat Mountains on the other. The capital city of Verene was so far to the south that she didn’t know a single person who had ever actually been there, nor could she recall a member of the royal family ever having come to their corner of the realm. People talked about the royal family and their laws like someone else’s problem—nothing that held direct consequence for them. Some people in town even thought that the government was content to leave them alone for fear of annoying the true rulers of the north.

The Erlking and his dark ones, who answered to no one when they stormed out from behind the veil.

And Shrub Grandmother and the forest folk, who would never succumb to the rule of humans.

"I suspect," said Serilda, "that few would argue with your laying claim to such a castle. Or . . . anything at all that you wanted."

"Indeed," said the Erlking, as he gestured at the coachman's bench. "You may come down now."

She glanced toward the kennel. The rest of the hounds were watching her eagerly, straining against their chains. But the chains did seem to be holding them, and the kennel door seemed securely latched.

She also noticed for the first time that they had gained an audience. More ghosts, with those wispy edges, as if they might fade away to nothing as soon as they passed out of the moonlight.

The dark ones frightened her more. Unlike the ghosts, they were as solid as she was. Almost elflike in appearance, with skin that shimmered in tones of silver and bronze and gold. Everything about them was sharp. Their cheekbones, the jut of their shoulders, their fingernails. They were the king's original court, had been at his side since the before-times, when they had first escaped from Verloren. They watched her now with keen, malicious eyes.

There were creatures, too. Some the size of cats, with black-taloned fingers and small pointed horns. Others the size of Serilda's hand, with batlike wings and sapphire-blue skin. Some might have been human, if it weren't for the scales on their skin or the mop of dripping seaweed that clung to their scalps. Goblins, kobolds, fairies, nix. She could not begin to guess at them all.

The king cleared his throat. "By all means, take your time. I am quite fond of being looked down upon by human children."

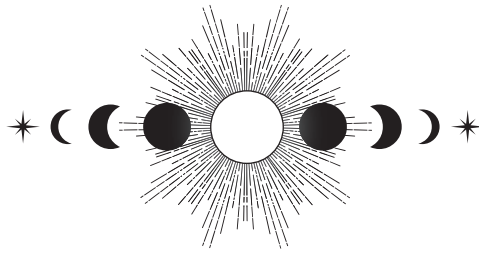
She frowned. "I'm eighteen."

"Precisely so."

She made a face, which he ignored.

Serilda climbed down onto the bench as gracefully as she could, accepting the king's hand as she descended to the ground. She tried to focus more on keeping her trembling legs strong beneath her than the feeling of cold dread that slithered up her arm at his touch.

"Ready the hunt!" the king bellowed as he led her toward the keep. "The mortal and I have business to attend to. I want the hounds and steeds ready as soon as we are finished."



Chapter 9

The entrance to the keep was flanked by two enormous bronze statues of hunting hounds—so lifelike Serilda shied away as she passed them. Ducking into the keep’s shadow, she had to jog to catch up with the king’s long strides. She wanted to pause and marvel at everything—the enormous and ancient wooden doors with their black metal hinges and raw chiseled bolts. The chandeliers crafted of iron and antlers and bone. Stone pillars carved with intricate designs of brambles and rosebuds.

They had entered into a massive entry hall, with two wide staircases curving upward and a set of doors leading into opposing corridors to Serilda’s left and right, but the king led them straight ahead. Through an arched doorway, into what must be the great hall, lit with candlelight at every turn. Sconces on the walls, tall candelabras in the corners, while more chandeliers, some as big as the carriage she’d ridden in, hung from the raftered ceiling. Thick carpets and animal pelts covered the floors. Tapestries decorated the walls, but they did little to add vibrancy to a space that was as soulless as it was majestic.

The decor was all reminiscent of a hunting lodge, with an impressive collection of taxidermy beasts. Disembodied heads on the walls and whole stuffed bodies ready to pounce from the corners. From a small basilisk to an enormous boar, a wingless dragon to a gem-eyed serpent.

There were beasts with crooked horns, mighty shells, and too many heads. Serilda was both horrified and fascinated. They were nightmares come to life. Well—not life. Clearly these were dead. But to think they might have been real gave her a thrill, to know so many of the stories she'd crafted over the years had some basis in reality.

At the same time, seeing such glorious creatures, lifeless and used as impressive props, made her feel a little sick to her stomach.

Even the fire crackling in the central hearth, inside a fireplace so tall that Serilda could have stood up inside without touching the flue, did little to chase away the chill that permeated the air. She was tempted to go and stand by that fire, if only for a moment—her instincts craving its homey warmth—until her eye caught on the massive creature mounted above the mantel.

She froze, unable to look away.

It was serpentine, with two crests of small pointed thorns curving across its brow, and needlelike teeth set into rows along its protruding mouth. Slitted green eyes were ringed with what appeared to be gray pearls embedded in its skin, and a single red stone sparkled in the center of its brow, a cross between a pretty bauble and a watchful third eye. An arrow with black fletching still protruded from its side, so small it seemed impossible that it could have been a killing strike. In fact, the beast hardly looked dead at all. The way it had been preserved and mounted, it looked ready to jump off the fireplace and snatch Serilda up in its jaws. As she drew closer, she wondered if she was only imagining the warm breath, the throaty purr, leaking out from the creature's jaws.

"Is that a . . . ?" she started, but words failed her. "What *is* that?"

"A rubinrot wyvern," came the answer from behind her. She jumped and spun around. She hadn't realized the coachman had followed them. He stood serenely a few feet away, his hands clasped behind his back, seemingly unbothered by the blood that was even now dripping from his impaled eye socket. "Very rare. His Grim traveled to Lysreich to hunt it."

"Lysreich?" said Serilda, stunned. She pictured the map on the wall

of the schoolhouse. Lysreich was across the sea, far to the west. “Does he often travel far to . . . hunt?”

“When there is a worthy prize,” came the vague answer. He glanced toward the door where the king had gone. “I suggest you keep up. His mild temper can be deceiving.”

“Right. Sorry.” Serilda hurried after the king. The next room might have been a parlor or game room, the massive fireplace that it shared with the great hall casting orange light across an assortment of richly upholstered chairs and lounges. But the king was not there.

She moved ahead. Through another door—into a dining hall. And there was the king, standing at the head of the ridiculous table, his arms crossed and a glower in his cool eyes.

“My goodness,” said Serilda, estimating that the table could likely seat a hundred guests along its never-ending length. “How old was the tree that gave its life to make that?”

“Not as old as I am, I assure you.” The king sounded displeased, and Serilda felt chastised and, briefly, afraid. Not that she hadn’t felt a little concerned from the moment a ghost appeared on her doorstep, but there was a thinly veiled warning in the king’s voice that made her stand taller. She was forced to acknowledge a fact she’d been trying hard to ignore all night.

The Erlking did not have a reputation for kindness.

“Come closer,” he said.

Trying to hide her nervousness, Serilda paced toward him. She glanced at the walls as she passed, which were hung with bright-colored tapestries. They continued the theme of the hunt, depicting images of hellhounds snarling around a frightened unicorn or a storm of hunters surging upon a winged lion.

As she walked, the images grew in brutality. Death. Blood. Anguished pain on the faces of the prey—in stark contrast to the glee in the eyes of the hunters.

Serilda shuddered and faced the king.

He was watching her closely, though she could read no emotion from him. "I trust you understand why I sent for you."

Her heart skipped. "I imagine it's because you found me so very charming."

"Do humans find you charming?"

He spoke with honest curiosity, but Serilda couldn't help feeling like it was an insult. "Some do. Children, mostly."

"Children have odious taste."

Serilda bit the inside of her cheek. "In some things, perhaps. But I've always appreciated their utter lack of bias."

The king stepped forward and, without warning, reached up to grasp her chin. He tilted her face upward. Her breath caught, staring into eyes the color of a clouded sky before a blizzard, with lashes as thick as pine needles. But while she might have been temporarily dazzled by his unnatural beauty, he was appraising her without any warmth in his expression. Only calculations, and the slightest shade of curiosity.

He studied her long enough for her breaths to quicken in discomfort and a cold sweat to prickle at the back of her neck. His attention lingered on her eyes, intrigued, if hardly entranced. Most people tried to study her face in secretive glances, as much curious as horrified, but the king stared openly.

Not disgusted, exactly, but . . .

Well. She couldn't tell *what* he felt.

Finally, he released her and nodded toward the dining table. "My court often dines here after a long hunt," he said. "As such, this has become one of my favorite rooms in the castle. I think of the dining hall as a sacred space, where bread is broken, wine is savored, toasts are made. It is for celebration and sustenance." He paused, sweeping a hand toward the tapestries. "As such, it is one of my preferred rooms in which to display our greatest victories. Each is a treasure. A reminder

that though the weeks are long, there is always a full moon to prepare for. Soon, we will ride again. I like to think that it keeps up morale.”

He turned his back on Serilda and moved toward a long buffet against the wall. Pewter goblets were stacked on one end, plates and bowls on the other, ready for the next meal. On the wall, a plaque held a taxidermy bird, with long legs and a narrow beak. It reminded Serilda of a water crane or heron, except that its wings, spread wide as if preparing to take flight, were cast in shades of luminescent yellow and orange, each feather tipped with cobalt blue. At first, Serilda thought it might be a trick of the candlelight, but the more she stared, the more she became convinced that the feathers were glowing.

“This is a hercinia,” said the king. “They live in the westernmost part of the Aschen Wood. It is one of the many forest creatures that is said to be under the protection of Pusch-Grohla and her maidens.”

Serilda stilled at the mention of the moss maidens and their Shrub Grandmother.

“I’m rather fond of this acquisition. Quite pretty, don’t you agree?”

“Lovely,” said Serilda around a heavy tongue.

“And yet, you see how it does not quite fit this wall.” He stepped back, eyeing the space with displeasure. “For some time now I have been waiting to find something just right to act as an ornament on either side of the bird. Imagine my delight when last full moon, my hounds picked up the scent of not one, but *two* moss maidens. Can you picture it? Their pretty faces, those foxlike ears, the crown of greenery. Here and here.” He gestured to the left and right of the bird’s wings. “Forever watching us feast upon the animals they strive so very hard to protect.” He glanced at Serilda. “I rather enjoy a bit of irony.”

Her stomach was roiling, and it was all she could do not to show how such an idea disgusted her. The moss maidens were not animals. They were not beasts to be hunted, to be murdered. They were not *decor*.

"Part of the brilliance of irony, I feel," continued the king, "is that it so often makes fools of others, without them being any the wiser." His tone sharpened. "I have had much time to think on our last meeting, and what a fool you must think I am."

Serilda's eyes widened. "No. Never."

"You were so very convincing, with your tale of gold, of having been god-blessed. It was only when the moon had set that I thought—why would a human girl, who can succumb so easily to the frost, be gathering straw in the snow without so much as a pair of gloves with which to protect her fragile hands?" He took Serilda's hands into his and her heart leaped into her throat. His voice froze over. "I don't know what magic you wove that night, but I am not one to forgive mockery." His grip tightened. She bit back a frightened whimper. One elegant eyebrow lifted, and she could tell the Erlking took some enjoyment in this. Watching her squirm. His prey, cornered. For a moment it looked like he might even smile. But it was not a smile, rather something cruel and victorious that curled back his lips. "But I believe in fair chances. And so—a test. You have until one hour before sunrise to complete it."

"A test?" she whispered. "What sort of test?"

"Nothing you aren't perfectly capable of," he said. "That is . . . unless you were lying."

Her stomach dropped.

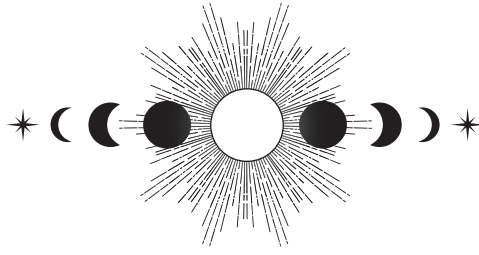
"And if that is the case," he continued, bending his head toward her, "then you not only lied to me, but also kept me from my prey that night, an offense that I find unforgivable. If such is the case, it will be *your* head that takes a place on my wall. Manfred"—he glanced at the coachman—"did she have family?"

"A father, I presume," he answered.

"Good. I will take his head, too. I appreciate symmetry."

“Wait,” cried Serilda. “My lord—please, I—”

“For your sake and his,” interrupted the Erlking, “I do hope you were telling the truth.” He lifted her hand and kissed the inside of her wrist. The iciness of his touch seared her skin. “If you’ll excuse me, I must see to the hunt.” He glanced at the coachman. “Take her to the dungeons.”



Chapter 10

Serilda had barely grasped the meaning of the king's words before the coachman had taken hold of her elbow and was dragging her from the dining hall.

"Wait! The dungeons?" she cried. "He can't mean that!"

"Can't he? His Darkness does not favor mercy," said the ghost, his grip never loosening. He dragged her down a narrow corridor, then paused at a doorway to a steep staircase. He peered at her. "Will you walk on your own, or must I drag you the entire way? I warn you, these stairs can be treacherous."

Serilda sagged, staring down the stairwell that spiraled fast from view. Her mind was spinning from everything the Erlking had said. Her head. Her father's. A test. The dungeons.

She swayed, and might have fallen if the ghost's grip hadn't tightened on her arm.

"I can walk," she whispered.

"Very convincing," said the coachman, though he did release her. Taking a torch from a bracket beside the door, he headed into the stairwell.

Serilda hesitated, glancing back down the corridor. She felt confident she could retrace her steps back through the keep, and there was no one else in sight. Was there any hope of escaping?

“Do not forget who this castle belongs to,” said the ghost. “If you run, he will only further relish the chase.”

Swallowing hard, Serilda turned back. Dread settled like a stone in her stomach, but when the ghost started down the steps, she followed. She kept one hand on the wall for balance on the steep, narrow stairs, feeling dizzy as they descended.

Down some more.

And down again.

They must be underground now, somewhere amid the ancient foundations of the castle. Perhaps even beneath the surface of the lake.

They reached the bottom level and tromped through an open set of barred gates. Serilda shuddered to see a row of heavy wooden doors lining the wall to her right, each one reinforced with iron.

Cell doors. Serilda craned her neck to peer through the slitted windows, catching glimpses of manacles and chains hung from the ceiling, though she could not see enough to know whether any prisoners were dangling from them. She tried not to wonder if that would be her fate. She heard no moans, no crying, not the sounds she would expect to hear from tortured and starving prisoners. Perhaps these cells were empty. Or perhaps the prisoners were long dead. The only “prisoners” she’d ever heard of the Erlking taking were the children he’d once gifted to Perchta, though they wouldn’t have been kept in the dungeons. Oh, and the lost souls that followed the hunt on its chaotic rides, though they were more often left for dead by the roadside, not spirited away to his castle.

Never had she heard rumors of the Erlking keeping humans locked up in a dungeon.

But then, perhaps there were no rumors because no one ever lived to tell them.

“Stop it,” she whispered harshly to herself.

The coachman glanced back at her.

"Sorry," she muttered. "Not you."

A small critter caught her eye then, darting along the corridor wall before scurrying into a small hole in the mortar. A rat.

Lovely.

Then—something strange. A new scent collecting around her. Something sweet and familiar and entirely unexpected in the musty air.

"Here." The ghost paused and gestured to a cell door that had been left open.

Serilda hesitated. This was it, then. She was to be a prisoner of the Erlking, locked in a dank, horrible cell. Left to starve and rot away into nothing. Or at least, trapped until morning, when she would have her head lopped off and hung up in the dining hall. She wondered if she would become a ghost herself, haunting these cold, dim corridors. Perhaps that was what the king wanted. Another servant for his dead retinue.

She looked at the phantom with the chisel in his eye. Could she fight him? Push him into the cell and lock the door, then hide somewhere until she found a chance to escape?

Returning her look, the ghost slowly smiled. "I'm already dead."

"I wasn't thinking about killing you."

"You are a terrible liar."

She wrinkled her nose.

"Go on. You're wasting time."

"You're all so impatient," she grumbled, ducking past him. "Don't you have an eternity ahead of you?"

"Yes," he said. "And you have until one hour to dawn."

Serilda stepped through the cell door, bracing herself for the inevitable slam and locking of the grate. She'd pictured bloodstains on the walls and shackles on the ceiling and rats darting into the corners.

Instead, she saw . . . straw.

Not a tidy bale of it, but a messy pile, a full cart load's worth. It was

the source of the sweet aroma she'd noticed before, carrying the faint familiarity of harvest work in the fall, when all the town pitched in.

In the back corner of the cell there stood a spinning wheel, surrounded by piles of empty wooden bobbins.

It made sense, and yet—it didn't.

The Erlking had brought her here to spin straw into gold, because once again her tongue had created a ridiculous story, meant to do nothing more than entertain. Well, in this case, to distract.

He was just giving her a chance to prove herself.

A chance.

A chance she would fail at.

Hopelessness had just begun to needle at her when the cell door slammed shut. She spun around, jumping as the lock thundered into place.

Through the grated window, the ghost peered at her with his good eye. "If it matters at all to you," he said thoughtfully, "I actually hope you succeed."

Then he yanked shut the wooden sash over the grate, cutting her off from everything.

Serilda stared at the door, listening to the retreat of his footsteps, dizzy with how quickly and completely her life had crumbled.

She had told her father it would be all right.

Kissed him goodbye, like it was nothing.

"I should have held him longer," she whispered to the solitude.

Turning, she surveyed the cell. Her sleeping cot at home might have fit inside, twice side by side, and she could easily have touched the ceiling without standing on tiptoes. It was all made more cramped by the spinning wheel and bobbins stacked against the far wall.

A single pewter candlestick had been left in the corner near the door, far enough from the straw that it wouldn't pose a hazard. Far enough to make the spinning wheel's shadow dance monstrosly against the stone

wall, which still showed chisel marks from when this cell had been cut into the island's rock. Serilda thought of the wastefulness—an entire candle left to burn only for her, so she might complete this absurd task. Candles were a valuable commodity, to be hoarded and preserved, to be used only when absolutely necessary.

Her stomach gurgled, and only then did she realize she'd forgotten the apple her father had packed inside the carriage.

At that thought, a stunted, panicky laugh fell from her lips. She was going to die here.

She studied the straw, toeing a few pieces that had drifted from the pile. It was clean straw. Sweet-smelling and dry. She wondered if the Erlking had ordered it harvested earlier that night, under the Hunger Moon, because she'd told him that gathering straw touched by the full moon made it better for her work. It seemed unlikely. Any straw gathered recently would still be wet from the snow.

Because, of course, the king did not believe her lies, and he was right. What he asked for could not be done. Or, at least, not by her. She had heard tales of magical ones who could do marvelous things. Of people who really had been blessed by Hulda. Who could spin not only gold, but also silver and silk and strands of perfect white pearls.

But the only blessing she carried was from the god of lies, and now her cursed tongue had ruined her.

How foolish she'd been to think for a moment that she had tricked the Erlking and gotten away with it. Of course he would realize that a simple village maiden could not possess such a gift. If she could spin straw into gold, her father would hardly still be toiling away at the grist-mill. The schoolhouse would not need new thatching, and the fountain that stood crumbling in the middle of Märchenfeld's square would have been repaired ages ago. If she could spin straw into gold, she would have ensured by now that her whole village prospered.

But she did not have such magic. And the king knew it.

A hand went to her throat as she worried over how he would do it—with a sword? An ax?—when her fingers brushed the slender chain of the necklace. She pulled it from beneath her dress collar and opened the locket, turning it so she could see the face of the girl inside. The child peered out at Serilda with her teasing eyes, as if there were a secret near to bursting inside of her.

“There’s no hurt in trying, is there?” she whispered.

The king had given her until one hour to sunrise. It was already after midnight. Here in the bowels of the castle, the only way to track the passing of time was by the candle burning in the corner. The persistent melting of wax.

Too slow.

Far too fast.

No matter. She was hardly one to sit still for hours, suffocating in her own self-pity.

“If Hulda can do it, why can’t I?” she said, grabbing a handful of straw from the pile. She approached the spinning wheel as if she were approaching a sleeping wyvern. Unclasping her traveling cloak, she folded it neatly and settled it in the corner. Then she hooked one ankle around the leg of the stool that had been provided and sat down.

The strands of straw were tough, the ends scratchy against her forearms. She stared at them and tried to picture tufts of wool like those Mother Weber had sold her countless times.

The straw was nothing like the thick, fuzzy wool she was used to, but she inhaled a deep breath anyway and loaded the first empty bobbin onto the flier. She spent a long time looking from the bobbin to the fistful of straw. Usually she started with a leader yarn, to make it easier for the wool to wrap around the bobbin, but she had no yarn. Shrugging, she tied on a piece of straw. The first one broke, but the second held. Now what? She couldn’t just twist the ends together to form one long strand.

Could she?

She twisted and twisted.

It held . . . sort of.

“Good enough,” she muttered, running the leader yarn through the hooks, then out through the maiden hole. The entire setup was beyond precarious, ready to fall apart as soon as she pulled too tight or released those weakly connected strands.

Afraid to let go, she leaned over and used her nose to push down on one of the wheel’s spokes, so that it gradually started to turn. “Here we go,” she said, pressing her foot onto the treadle.

The straw pulled from her fingers.

The tenuous connections disintegrated.

Serilda paused. Growled to herself.

Then she tried again.

This time, she started the wheel sooner.

No luck.

Next, she tried knotting a few ends of straw together.

“Please work,” she whispered as her foot started to pedal. The wheel turned. The straw wound around the bobbin. “Gold. Please. Please turn into gold.”

But the plain, dry straw continued to be plain, dry straw, no matter how many times it slipped through the maiden hole or wound around the bobbin.

Before long, she had run out of knotted strands, and what had been successfully looped around the bobbin started to splinter as soon as she took it off the flier.

“No, no, no . . .”

She grabbed a fresh bobbin and started over.

Pushing, forcing the straw through.

Her foot mashing against the treadle.

“Please,” she said again, pushing another strand in. Then another.

“Please.” Her voice broke, and the tears started. Tears she’d hardly known were waiting to be released until they all flooded forward at once. She hunched forward, clutching the useless straw in her fists, and sobbed. That one word stuck on her tongue, whispered to no one but the cell walls and the locked door and this awful castle full of awful ghosts and demons and monsters. “*Please.*”

“What are you doing to that poor spinning wheel?”

Serilda screamed and tumbled off the stool. She landed on the ground with a bewildered grunt, one shoulder smacking the stone wall. She looked up, pushing away the strands of hair that had fallen into her face and stuck to her damp cheek.

There was a figure sitting on top of the pile of straw, cross-legged, peering at her with mild curiosity.

A man.

Or . . . a boy. A boy about her age, she guessed, with copper hair that hung in wild tangles to his shoulders and a face that was covered in both freckles and dirt. He wore a simple linen shirt, slightly old-fashioned with its generous sleeves, which he’d left untucked over emerald-green hose. No shoes, no tunic, no overcoat, no hat. He might have been getting ready for bed, except he looked wide-awake.

She looked past him to the door, still shut tight.

“H-how did you get in here?” she stammered, pushing herself upright.

The boy cocked his head and said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, “Magic.”