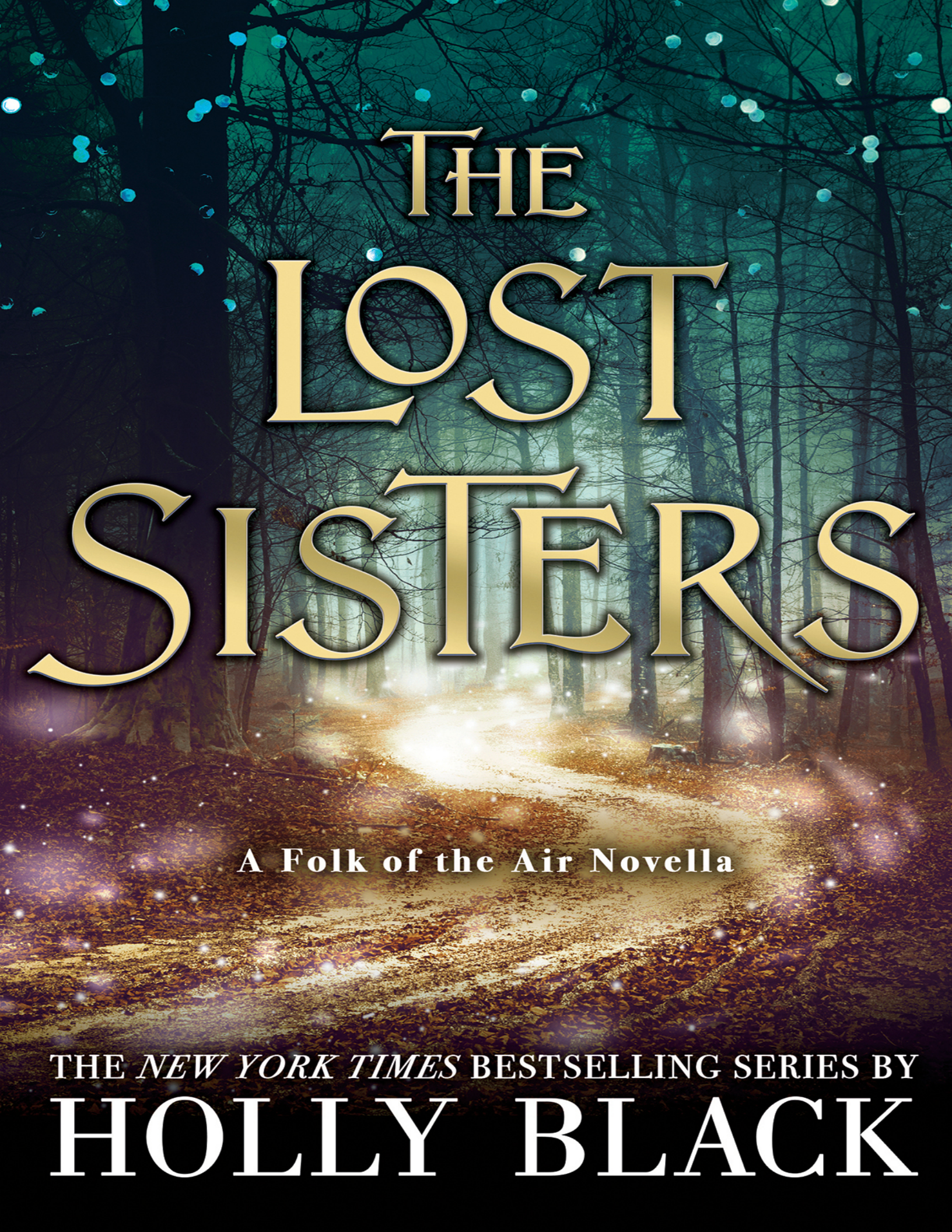


The background of the cover is a lush, dark forest. A path of golden light leads from the bottom center towards the middle of the image, disappearing into the trees. The trees are tall and thin, with bare branches. Small, glowing blue lights are scattered throughout the scene, particularly in the upper half. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and magical.

THE LOST SISTERS

A Folk of the Air Novella

THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING SERIES BY
HOLLY BLACK

The Lost Sisters

Holly Black



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
NEW YORK BOSTON

Copyright

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2018 by Holly Black

Excerpt from *The Wicked King* copyright © 2018 by Holly Black

Cover photograph © Robsonphoto/Shutterstock.com. Cover design by Karina Granda. Cover copyright © 2018 by Hachette Book Group, Inc.

Hachette Book Group supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact permissions@hbgusa.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Little, Brown and Company

Hachette Book Group

1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104

Visit us at LBYR.com

First ebook edition: October 2018

Little, Brown and Company is a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc.
The Little, Brown name and logo are trademarks of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

ISBN: 978-0-316-31044-4

E3-20180823-JV-PC

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Begin Reading](#)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Horried, the girl closed the door and ran down the stairs. She would have rushed out except, just at that moment, Mr. Fox came in the door carrying the body of his latest victim. The girl hid herself behind a large urn and made no sound as Mr. Fox carried his new bride up the stairs. At the

landing, he tried to prize a ring off the dead girl's finger, and when that failed, he took out a knife and sawed off her hand at the wrist. No sooner had he cut it off, though, slippery with blood as it was, it fell—right into the lap of the hidden girl. Resolving to look for it later, he carried the body into his charnel room, and the girl made her escape.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Let's start with a love story.

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

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

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

And so she went to dwell with him in his castle across the waves and discovered all the horrors he'd kept secret.

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

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

Be bold, be bold, but not too bold.

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

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

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

sound just like another tale?

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

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

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

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

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

I guess I caught his eye.

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

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

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

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

Then three days later, the message from him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Instead of telling you about my dilemma, I went to Vivi. She was outside,

staring up at the stars.

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

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

Vivi shook her head. “Thinking. About our mother. I was remembering something she’d told me.”

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

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

“That doesn’t seem fair,” I said, although I couldn’t help feeling a little resentful that Vivi had so many memories of Mom and Dad, while I couldn’t recall their faces with much detail.

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

“Oh,” I said, puzzled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

kids around the concrete edge of a pool.

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

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

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

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

"So forget him, then," Vivi said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I wanted to remind him, you see, that it wasn't without risk to treat me

poorly. You see, I wasn't stupid. At least not yet.

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

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

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

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

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

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

That first time Locke came to my window, I climbed down from the balcony and walked with him through the woods. In the distance, I heard the songs of revelers, but the forest around us was hushed.

"I'm glad you agreed to a stroll." He wore a russet coat and kept pushing

back his hair as though he were the one who was nervous. “I wish to ask you about love.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I felt a little light-headed.

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

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

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

I know what you’re thinking, that if I figured you’d be suspicious of his

motives, then maybe I should have been suspicious, too. That if fairy stories warn us about keeping promises, I shouldn't have given my word so easily. But there, under the stars, with everything feeling like a dream, I didn't even hesitate.

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

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

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

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

And yes, I told him about you.

I told him too much.

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

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

As though he couldn't tell us apart.

Prince Cardan saw him looking, too.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Jude's sorry," I told them, which probably annoyed you, but that's one

thing I don't regret. "We're both really sorry."

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

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

"It's not for mortals," he returned, voice cold, and when he looked at me, it seemed he was talking about more than the tournament. *It's not for mortals. It's not for you. Locke is not for you.* "Withdraw, or wish that you had."

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

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

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

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

He didn't.

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

And if there were hairline cracks in all that pretending, we pretended

those away, too.

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

I should have understood.

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

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

I thought you were just venting.

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

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

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

You had the nerve to grin at him.

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

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

Angry at you, angry at him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

You got a harder shove and went under the water, emerging spluttering, panicked. I tried to move toward you. Water soaked my skirts, dragging me down. I was terrified that I was going to slip, that the current was too strong. Locke’s words only made it worse. *This will be over quickly*, he’d said. But not everything is better for being fast.

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

I was scared. Really, really, really scared.

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

Nicasia splashed you with water.

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

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