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HOLLY BLACK



THE
PRISONER'S
THRONE

A NOVEL OF ELFHAME

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*For Joanna Volpe, who is, as her last name
suggests, every bit the charming and tricky fox*

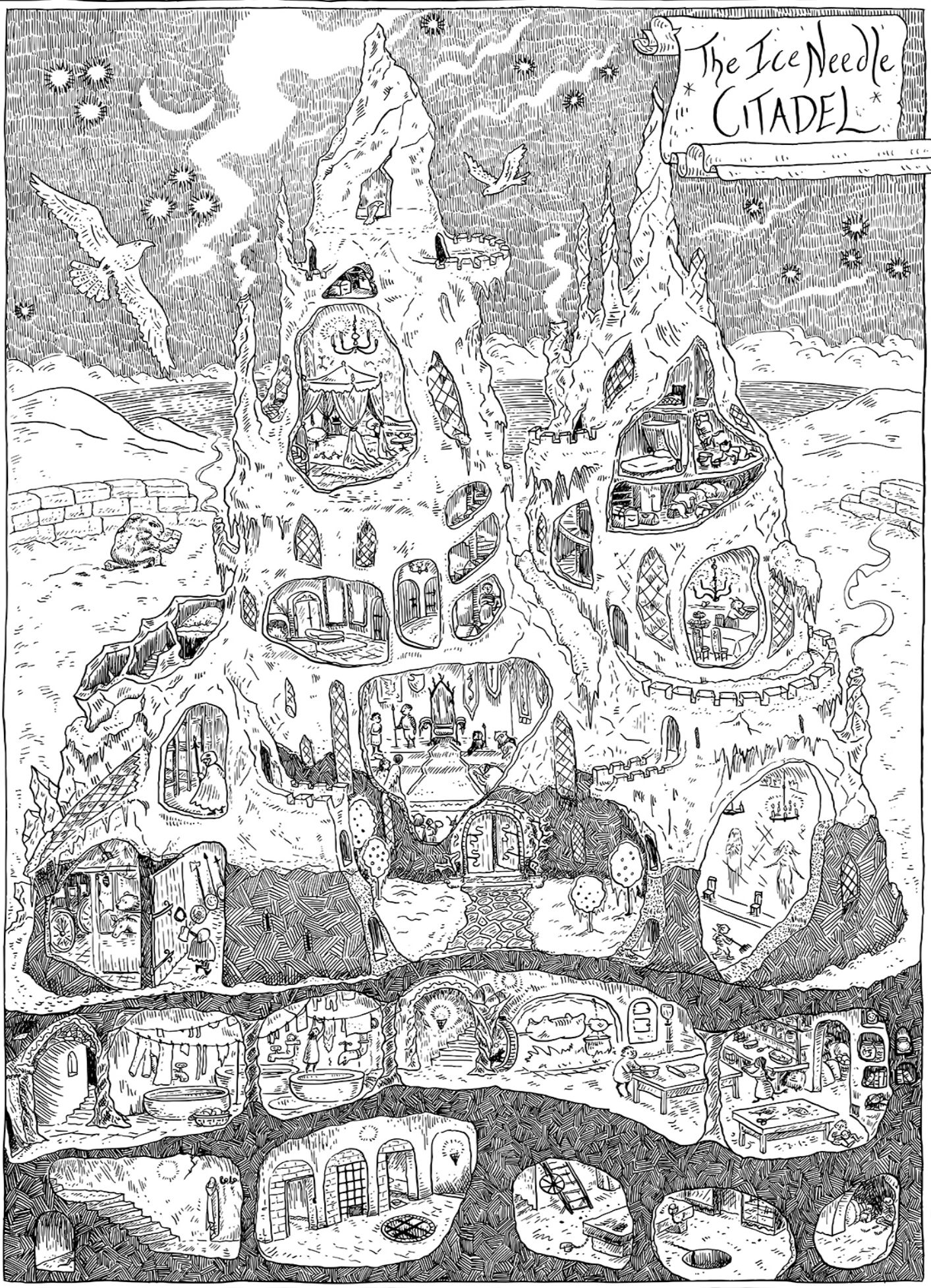
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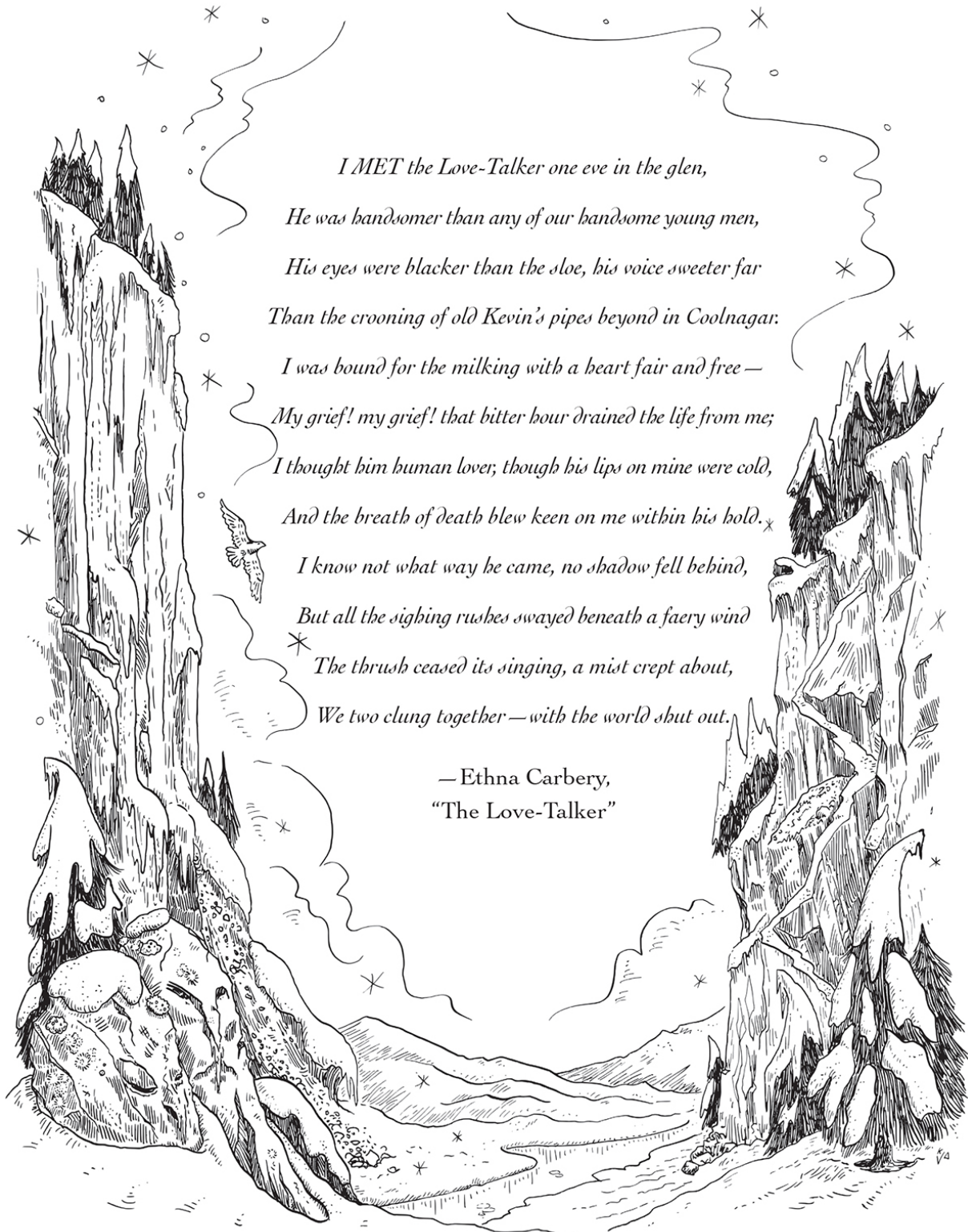
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The Ice Needle CITADEL





*I MET the Love-Talker one eve in the glen,
He was handsomer than any of our handsome young men,
His eyes were blacker than the sloe, his voice sweeter far
Than the crooning of old Kevin's pipes beyond in Coolnagar:
I was bound for the milking with a heart fair and free —
My grief! my grief! that bitter hour drained the life from me;
I thought him human lover, though his lips on mine were cold,
And the breath of death blew keen on me within his hold. ✕
I know not what way he came, no shadow fell behind,
But all the sighing rushes swayed beneath a faery wind
✕ The thrush ceased its singing, a mist crept about,
We two clung together — with the world shut out.*

— Ethna Carbery,
"The Love-Talker"

SIX WEEKS BEFORE IMPRISONMENT

Oak jammed his hooves into velvet pants.

“Have I made you late?” Lady Elaine asked from the bed, her voice full of wicked satisfaction. She propped up her head with an elbow and gave a little laugh. “It won’t be too much longer before you don’t have to do anything at their beck and call.”

“Yes,” Oak said, distracted. “Only yours, right?”

She laughed again.

Doublet only half-buttoned, he tried desperately to remember the fastest route to the gardens. He’d *meant* to be punctual, but then the opportunity to finally see the scope of the treasonous plot he’d been pursuing had presented itself.

I promise I will introduce you to the rest of my associates, she’d told him, her fingers sliding beneath his shirt, untucking it. *You will be impressed with how close to the throne we can get...*

Cursing himself, the sky, and the concept of time in general, Oak raced out the door.

“Hurry, you scamp,” one of the palace laundresses called after him. “It will look ill if they begin without you. And fix your hair!”

He tried to smooth down his curls as servants veered out of his way. In the palace of Elfhame, no matter how tall he grew, Oak was forever the mischievous, wild-haired boy who coaxed guards into playing conkers with horse chestnuts and stole honey cakes from the kitchens. Faerie caught its inhabitants in amber, so if they were not careful, a hundred years might pass in the lazy blink of an eye. And so, few noticed how much the prince had changed.

Not that he didn’t resemble his younger self right then, pelting down another corridor, hooves clattering against stone. He dodged left to avoid running into a page with an armful of scrolls, wove right so as not to knock

over a small table with an entire tea tray atop it, then almost slammed into Randalin, an elderly member of the Living Council.

By the time he made it to the gardens, Oak was out of breath. Panting, he took in the garlands of flowers and musicians, the courtiers and revelers. No High King or Queen yet. That meant he had a chance to make his way to the front with no one the wiser.

But before he could slip into the crowd, his mother, Oriana, grabbed hold of his sleeve. Her expression was stern, and since her skin was usually ghostly white, it was easy to see the flush of anger in her cheeks. It pinked them so they matched the rosy color of her eyes.

“Where have you been?” Her fingers went to Oak’s doublet, fixing his buttons.

“I lost track of time,” he admitted.

“Doing what?” She dusted off the velvet. Then she licked her finger and rubbed a smudge on Oak’s nose.

He grinned at her fondly, letting her fuss. If she thought of him as barely more than a boy, then she wouldn’t look more deeply into any trouble he made for himself. His gaze went to the crowd, looking for his guard. Tiernan was going to be angry when he understood Oak’s plan in full. But flushing out a conspiracy would be worth it. And Lady Elaine had been *so close* to telling him the names of the other people involved.

“We’d better head toward the dais,” he told Oriana, catching hold of her hand and giving it a squeeze.

She squeezed back, swift and punishingly hard. “You are heir to all of Elfhame,” she said as though he might have missed that bit. “It’s time to start behaving like someone who could rule. Never forget that you must inspire fear as well as love. Your sister hasn’t.”

Oak’s gaze went to the crowd. He had three sisters, but he knew which one she meant.

He put out his arm, like a gallant knight, and his mother allowed herself to be mollified enough to take it. Oak kept his expression every bit as grave as she could wish. That was easily done, because as he took the first step, the High King and Queen came into view at the edge of the gardens.

His sister Jude was in a gown the color of deep red roses, with high slashes on the sides so that the dress wouldn’t restrict her movements. She wore no blade at her waist, but her hair was done up in her familiar horns.

Oak was almost certain she hid a small knife in one of them. She would have a few more sewn into her garment and strapped beneath her sleeves.

Despite being the High Queen of Elfhome, with an army at her disposal and dozens of Courts at her command, she still acted as though she'd have to handle every problem herself—and that each one would best be solved through murder.

Beside her, Cardan was in black velvet adorned with even blacker feathers that shone like they'd been dragged through an oil spill, the darkness of his clothes the better to show off the heavy rings shining on his fingers and the large pearl swinging from one of his ears. He winked at Oak, and Oak smiled in return despite his intention to remain serious.

As Oak made his way forward, the crowd parted for him.

His other two sisters were among the throng. Taryn, Jude's twin, had clasped her son tightly by the hand, attempting to distract him from the running around he had probably been doing a moment before. Beside her, Vivienne giggled with her partner, Heather. Vivi was pointing to Folk in the audience and whispering into Heather's ear. Despite being the only one of his three sisters who was a faerie, it was Vivi who liked living in Faerie the least. She did, however, still keep up on the gossip.

The High King and Queen moved to stand before their Court, bathed in the light of the setting sun. Jude beckoned to Oak, as they'd practiced. A hush came over the gardens. He glanced to both sides, at the winged pixies and watery nixies, clever hobs and sinister fetches, kelpies and trolls, redcaps stinking of dried blood, silkies and selkies, fauns and brags, lobs and shagfoals, hags and treefolk, knights and winged ladies in tattered dresses. All subjects of Elfhome. All *his* subjects, he supposed, since he was their prince.

Not a one of them afraid of Oak, no matter what his mother hoped.

Not a one afraid, no matter the blood on his hands. That he'd tricked them all so handily frightened even him.

He halted in front of Jude and Cardan and made a shallow bow.

“Let all here bear witness,” Cardan began, his gold-rimmed eyes bright, his voice soft but carrying. “That Oak, son of Liriope and Dain of the Greenbriar line, is my heir, and should I pass from this world, he will rule in my place and with my blessing.”

Jude bent down to take a circlet of gold from the pillow a goblin page

held up to her. Not a crown, but not quite *not* one, either. “Let all here bear witness.” Her voice was chilly. She had never been allowed to forget that she was mortal, back when she was a child in Faerie. Now that she was queen, she never let the Folk feel entirely safe around her. “Oak, son of Liriope and Dain of the Greenbriar line, raised by Oriana and Madoc, *my brother*, is my heir, and when I pass from the world, he shall rule in my place and with my blessing.”

“Oak,” Cardan said. “Will you accept this responsibility?”

No, Oak yearned to say. There is no need. The both of you will rule forever.

But he hadn’t asked Oak if he *wanted* the responsibility, rather if he would accept it.

His sister had insisted he be formally named heir now that he was of an age when he could rule without a regent. He could have denied Jude, but he owed all his sisters so much that it felt impossible to deny them anything. If one of them asked for the sun, he’d better figure out how to pluck it from the sky without getting burned.

Of course, they’d never ask for that, or anything like it. They wanted him to be safe, and happy, and good. Wanted to give him the world, and yet keep it from hurting him.

Which was why it was imperative they never discovered what he was really up to.

“Yes,” Oak said. Perhaps he should make some kind of speech, or do something that would make him seem more suitable to rule, but his mind had gone utterly blank. It must have been enough, though, because a moment later, he was asked to kneel. He felt the cold metal on his brow.

Then Jude’s soft lips were against his cheek. “You’ll be a great king when you’re ready,” she whispered.

Oak knew he owed his family a debt so large he would never be able to repay it. As cheers rose all around him, he closed his eyes and promised he would try.



Oak was a living, breathing mistake.

Seventeen years ago, the last High King, Eldred, took the beautiful, honey-tongued Liriope to his bed. Never known for fidelity, he had other lovers, including Oriana. The two might have become rivals, but instead became fast friends, who walked together through the royal gardens, dipped their feet into the Lake of Masks, and spun together through circle dances at revels.

Liriope had one son already, and few faeries are blessed twice with progeny, so she was surprised when she found herself with child again. And conflicted, because she'd had other lovers, too, and knew the father of the child was not Eldred, but his favorite son, Dain.

All his life, Prince Dain had planned to rule Elfhome after his father. He had prepared for it, creating what he called his Court of Shadows, a group of spies and assassins that answered only to him. And he had sought to hasten his ascension to the throne, poisoning his father by incremental degrees to steal his vitality until he abdicated. So, when Liriope fell pregnant, Dain wasn't going to let his by-blow mess things up.

If Liriope bore Dain's child, and his father discovered it, Eldred might choose one of his other children for an heir. Better both mother and child should die, and Dain's future be assured.

Dain poisoned Liriope while Oak was still in the womb. Blusher mushrooms cause paralysis in small doses. In larger ones, the body slows its movements like a toy with a battery running down, slower and slower until it moves no more. Liriope died, and Oak would have died with her if Oriana hadn't carved him from her friend's body with a knife and her own soft hands.

That's how Oak came into the world, covered in poison and blood. Slashed across the thigh by a too-deep cut from Oriana's blade. Held desperately to her chest to smother his squalling.

No matter how loud he laughed or how merry he made, it would never drown that knowledge.

Oak knew what wanting the throne did to people.

He would never be like that.



After the ceremony, there was, of course, a banquet.

The royal family ate at a long table partially hidden from view beneath the branches of a weeping willow, not far from where the rest of the Court feasted. Oak sat at the right of Cardan, in the place of favor. His sister Jude, at the opposite head of the table, slumped in her chair. In front of family, she was totally different from the way she was in front of the Folk: a performer offstage, still wearing her costume.

Oriana was put at Jude's right. Also a place of honor, although Oak wasn't sure either of them was particularly happy to have to make conversation with the other.

Oak had an abundance of sisters—Jude, Taryn, Vivi—all of them no more related to him than Oriana or the exiled grand general, Madoc, who had raised them. But they were still his family. The only two people at the entire table who were kin to him by blood were Cardan and the small child squirming in the chair to his right: Leander, Taryn's child with Locke, Oak's half brother.

An assortment of candles covered the table, and flowers had been tied to the hanging branches of the weeping willow, along with gleaming pieces of quartz. They made a beautiful bower. He would have probably appreciated it more had it been in anyone else's honor.

Oak realized he'd been so lost in his thoughts that he'd missed the beginning of a conversation.

"I didn't enjoy being a snake, and yet I appear to be doomed to be reminded of it for all eternity," Cardan was saying, black curls falling across his face. He held a three-pronged fork aloft, as though to emphasize his point. "The excess of songs hasn't helped, nor has their longevity. It's been what? Eight years? Nine? Truly, the celebratory air about the whole business has been excessive. You'd think I never did a more popular thing than sit in the dark on a throne and bite people who annoyed me. I could have always done that. I could do that now."

"Bite people?" echoed Jude from the other end of the table.

Cardan grinned at her. "Yes, if that's what they like." He snapped his teeth at the air as though to demonstrate.

"No one is interested in that," Jude said, shaking her head.

Taryn rolled her eyes at Heather, who smiled and took a sip of wine.

Cardan raised his brows. "I could *try*. A small bite. Just to see if

someone would write a song about it.”

“So,” Oriana said, looking down the table at Oak. “You did very well up there. It made me imagine your coronation.”

Vivi snorted delicately.

“I don’t want to rule anything, no less Elfhome,” Oak reminded her.

Jude kept her face carefully neutral through what appeared to be sheer force of will. “No need to worry. I don’t plan on kicking the bucket anytime soon, and neither does Cardan.”

Oak turned to the High King, who shrugged elegantly. “Seems hard on pointy boots, kicking buckets.”

When Oak was Leander’s age, Oriana hadn’t wanted him to be king. But the years had made her more ambitious on his behalf. Perhaps she’d even begun to think that Jude had stolen his birthright instead of saved him from it.

He hoped not. It was one thing to flush out plots against the throne, but if he found out his mother was involved in one, he didn’t know what he’d do.

Don’t make me choose, he thought with a ferocity that unsettled him.

This was a problem that ought to solve itself. Jude was mortal. Mortals conceived children more easily than faeries. If she had a baby, it would supplant his claim to the throne.

Considering that, his gaze went to Leander.

Eight, and adorable, with his father’s fox eyes. The same color as Oak’s, amber with a lot of yellow in it. Hair dark as Taryn’s. Leander was almost the same age Oak had been when Madoc had schemed to get him the crown of Elfhome. When Oak looked at Leander, he saw the innocence that his sisters and mother must have been trying to protect. It gave him an ugly feeling, something that was anger and guilt and panic all mixed up together.

Leander noticed himself being studied and pulled on Oak’s sleeve. “You look bored. Want to play a game?” he asked, harnessing the guile of a child eager to press someone into the service of amusement.

“After dinner,” Oak told him with a glance at Oriana, who was already looking rather pained. “Your grandmother will be angry if we make a spectacle of ourselves at the table.”

“*Cardan* plays with me,” Leander said, obviously well prepared for this argument. “And he’s the *High King*. He showed me how to make a bird

with two forks and a spoon. Then our birds fought until one fell apart.”

Cardan was spectacle incarnate and wouldn't care if Oriana scolded him. Oak could only smile, though. He had often been a child at a table of adults and remembered how dull it had been. He would have loved to fight with silverware birds. “What other games have you played with the king?”

That launched a distractingly long catalog of misbehavior, from tossing mushrooms into cups of wine on the other ends of tables to folding napkins into hats to making awful faces at each other. “And he tells me funny stories about my father, Locke,” Leander concluded.

At that, Oak's smile stiffened. He barely remembered Locke. His clearest memories revolved around Locke's wedding to Taryn, and even those were mostly about how Heather had been turned into a cat and got really upset. It had been one of the moments that had made Oak realize that magic wasn't fun for everyone.

On that thought, he looked across the table at Heather, suddenly wanting to reassure himself she was okay. Her hair was in microbraids with strands of vibrant, synthetic pink woven through them. Her dark skin glowed with shimmering pink highlights on her cheeks. He tried to catch her eye, but she was too busy studying a tiny sprite attempting to steal a fig off the center of the table.

His gaze went to Taryn next. Locke's wife and murderer, tucking a lacy napkin into Leander's shirt. It would be no wonder if Heather was nervous to sit at this table. Oak's family was soaked in blood, the lot of them.

“How's Dad?” Jude asked abruptly, raising her eyebrows.

Vivi shrugged and nodded in Oak's direction. He'd been the one to see their father last. In fact, he'd spent a lot of time with their father over the past year.

“Keeping out of trouble,” Oak said, hoping it stayed that way.



After dinner, the royal family rejoined the Court. Oak danced with Lady Elaine, who smiled her cat-who-swallowed-a-mouse-and-is-still-hungry smile and whispered in Oak's ear about how she was arranging a meeting in three days' time with some people who believed in “their cause.”

“You’re certain you can go through with this?” she asked him, breath hot against his neck. Her thick red hair hung down her back in a single wide braid, strands of rubies woven into the plaits. She wore a dress adorned with threads of gold, as though already auditioning to become his queen.

“I’ve never thought of Cardan as any relation of mine, but I have often resented what he took from me,” Oak reassured her. And if he shuddered a little at her touch, she might imagine it was a shudder of passion. “I have been looking for just this opportunity.”

And she, misunderstanding in just the way he hoped, smiled against his skin. “And Jude isn’t your real sister.”

At that, Oak smiled back but made no reply. He knew what she meant, but he could never have agreed.

She departed after the end of the dance, pressing a last kiss on his throat.

He *was* certain he could go through with this. Though it led inexorably to her death and he wasn’t at all sure what that meant about him.

He’d done it before. When he glanced around the room, he couldn’t help noticing the absence of those whom he’d already manipulated and then betrayed. Members of three conspiracies he’d undone in the past, tricking members into turning against one another—and him. They’d gone to the Tower of Forgetting or the chopping block for those crimes, never even knowing they’d fallen into his trap.

In this garden full of asps, he was a pitcher plant, beckoning them to a tumble. Sometimes there was a part of him that wanted to scream: *Look at me. See what I am. See what I’ve done.*

As though drawn by self-destructive thoughts, his bodyguard, Tiernan, approached with an accusatory look, brows drawn sharply together. He was dressed in banded leather armor with the crest of the royal family pinning a short cape across one shoulder. “You’re making a scandal of yourself.”

Conspiracies were often foolish things, wishful thinking combined with a paucity of interesting Court intrigues. Gossip and too much wine and too little sense. But he had a feeling this one was different. “She’s arranging the meeting. It’s almost over.”

Tiernan cut his glance toward the throne and the High King lounging on it. “He knows.”

“Knows what?” Oak had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

“Exactly? I’m not sure. But someone overheard something. The rumor is

that you want to put a knife in his back.”

Oak scoffed. “He’s not going to believe that.”

Tiernan gave Oak an incredulous look. “His own brothers betrayed him. He’d be a fool if he didn’t.”

Oak turned his attention to Cardan again, and this time the High King met his eyes. Cardan’s eyebrows rose. There was a challenge in his gaze and the promise of lazy cruelty. *Game on.*

The prince turned away, frustrated. The last thing he wanted was for Cardan to think of him as an enemy. He ought to go to Jude. Try to explain.

Tomorrow, Oak told himself. When it would not spoil her evening. Or the day after next, when it would be too late for her to prevent him from meeting the conspirators, when he still might accomplish what he had hoped. When he learned who was behind the conspiracy. After that, he’d do his usual thing—pretend to panic. Tell the conspirators he wanted out. Give them reason to become afraid he was going to go to the High King and Queen with what he knew.

Attempting *his* murder was what he planned on their going down for, rather than treason. Because multiple attempts on Oak’s life allowed him to retain his reputation for fecklessness. No one would guess that he deliberately brought down this conspiracy, leaving him free to do it again.

And Jude wouldn’t guess he’d been putting himself in danger, not now and not those other times.

Unless, of course, he had to confess to all of it in order to convince Cardan he wasn’t against him. A shudder went through him at the thought of how horrified Jude would be, how upset his whole family would get. His well-being was the thing they all used to justify their own sacrifices, their own losses. *At least Oak was happy, at least Oak had the childhood we didn’t, at least Oak...*

Oak bit the inside of his cheek so hard he tasted blood. He needed to make sure his family never truly knew what he’d turned himself into. Once the traitors were caught, Cardan might forget about his suspicions. Maybe nothing needed to be said to anyone.

“Prince!” Oak’s friend Vier pulled free from a knot of young courtiers to sling an arm over Oak’s shoulder. “There you are. Come celebrate with us!”

Oak pushed his concerns aside with a forced laugh. It was his party, after all. And so he danced under the stars with the rest of the Court of Elfame.

Made merry. Played his part.

A pixie approached the prince, her skin grasshopper green, with wings to match. She brought two friends with her, and they twined their arms around his neck. Their mouths tasted of herbs and wine.

He moved from one partner to another in the moonlight, spinning beneath the stars. Laughing at nonsense.

A sluagh pressed herself to him, her lips stained black. He smiled down at her as they were swept up into another of the circle dances. Her mouth had the sweetness of bruised plums.

“Look at my face and I am someone,” she whispered in his ear. “Look at my back and I am no one. What am I?”

“I don’t know,” Oak admitted, a shiver running between his shoulders.

“Your mirror, Highness,” she said, her breath tickling the hairs on his neck.

And then she slipped away.



Hours later, Oak staggered back to the palace, his head hurting and dizziness making his steps uneven. In the mortal world, at seventeen, alcohol was illegal and, by consequence, something you hid. That night, however, he’d been expected to drink with every toast—blood-dark wines, fizzing green ones, and a sweet purple draught that tasted of violets.

Unable to discern whether he already had a hangover, or if something still worse was yet to come once he slept, Oak decided to try to find some aspirin. Vivi had handed a bag from Walgreens to Jude upon their arrival, one which he was almost certain contained painkillers.

He staggered toward the royal chambers.

“What are we doing here, exactly?” Tiernan asked, catching the prince’s elbow when he stumbled.

“Looking for a remedy for what ails me,” said Oak.

Tiernan, taciturn at the best of moments, only raised a brow.

Oak waved a hand at him. “You may keep your quips—spoken and unspoken—to yourself.”

“Your Highness,” Tiernan acknowledged, a judgment in and of itself.

The prince gestured toward the guard standing in front of the entrance to Jude and Cardan's rooms—an ogress with a single eye, leather armor, and short hair. “She can look after me from here.”

Tiernan hesitated. But he would want to visit Hyacinthe, bored and angry and fomenting escape, as he'd been every night since being bridled. Tiernan didn't like leaving him too long alone for lots of reasons. “If you're sure...”

The ogress stood up straighter. “The High Queen is not in residence.”

Oak shrugged. “That's okay.” It was probably better for him to get the stuff when Jude wasn't there to laugh at the state of him. And while the ogress appeared not to like it, she didn't stop him from walking past her, pushing open one of the double doors, and going inside.

The chambers of the High King and Queen were hung with tapestries and brocades depicting magical forests hiding even more magical beasts, with most surfaces covered in unlit, fat pillar candles. Those would be for his sister, who couldn't see in the dark the way the Folk could.

Oak found the Walgreens bag tossed onto a painted table to one side of the bed. He dumped the contents onto the elaborately embroidered blanket thrown across a low couch.

There were, in fact, three bottles of store-brand ibuprofen. He opened one, stuck his thumb through the plastic seal, and fished out three gelcaps.

There was a castle alchemist he could go to who would give him a terrible-tasting potion if he was really hurting, but Oak didn't want to be prodded, nor make conversation while the cure was prepared. He tossed the pills back and dry-swallowed them.

Now what he needed was a lot of water and his bed.

Swaying a little, he started shoving the contents back into the bag. As he did, he noticed a packet of pills in a paper sleeve. Curious, he turned it over and then blinked down in surprise that it was a prescription. Birth control.

Jude was only twenty-six. Lots of twenty-six-year-olds didn't want kids yet. Or at all.

Of course, most of them didn't have to secure a dynasty.

Most weren't worried about cutting their little brother out of the line of succession, either. He hoped he wasn't the reason she was taking these. But even if he wasn't the only reason, he couldn't help thinking he was in the mix.

And on that dismal thought, he heard steps in the hall. Cardan's familiar drawling voice carried, although he couldn't make out the words.

Panicking, Oak shoved the rest of the drugstore stuff back into the bag, flung it onto the table, and then scrambled beneath. The door opened a moment later. Cardan's pointy boots clacked on the tiles, followed by Jude's soft tread.

As soon as Oak's belly hit the dusty floor, he realized how foolish he was being. Why hide, when neither Jude nor Cardan would have been angry to find him there? It was his own shame at invading his sister's privacy. Guilt and wine had combined to make him absurd. Yet he would be even more absurd if he emerged now, so he rested next to an abandoned slipper and hoped they left again before he sneezed.

His sister sat on one of the couches with a vast sigh.

"We cannot ransom him," Cardan said softly.

"I know that," Jude snapped. "I am the one who sent him into exile. I *know that*."

Were they speaking of his father? And ransom? Oak had been with them most of the night, and no mention had been made of this. But who else had she exiled that she would care enough to want to ransom? Then he remembered Jude's question at dinner. Perhaps she hadn't been asking after Madoc at all. Perhaps she'd been trying to determine whether any of them knew something.

Cardan sighed. "Let it be some comfort that we don't have what Lady Nore wants, even should we allow ourselves to be blackmailed."

Jude opened something out of the line of Oak's sight. He crawled a little to get a better angle and see the box of woven branches she had in her hand. Tangled in her fingers was a chain, strung with a glass orb. Inside it, something rolled restlessly. "The message speaks of Mellith's heart. Some ancient artifact? I think she looks for an excuse to hold him."

"If I didn't know better, I might think this is your brother's fault," Cardan said in a teasing tone, and Oak almost banged his head against the wood frame of the table in surprise at hearing himself referenced. "First, he wanted you to be nice to that little queen with the sharp teeth and the crazy eyes. Then he wanted you to forgive that former falcon his bodyguard likes for trying to murder me. It seems too great a coincidence that Hyacinthe came from Lady Nore, spent time with Madoc, and had no hand in his

abduction.”

Those words were laced with suspicion, although Cardan was smiling. His mistrust hardly mattered beside the danger their father was in, though.

“Oak got mixed up with the wrong people, that’s all,” Jude said wearily.

Cardan smiled, a curl of black hair falling in front of his face. “He’s more like you than you want to see. *Clever. Ambitious.*”

“If what’s happening is anyone’s fault, it’s mine,” Jude said with another sigh. “For not ordering Lady Nore’s execution when I had the chance.”

“All the obscene snake songs must have been greatly distracting,” Cardan said lightly, moving on from the discussion of Oak. “Generosity of spirit is so uncharacteristic in you.”

They were silent for a moment, and Oak saw his sister’s face. There was something private there, and painful. He hadn’t known, back then, how close she’d come to losing Cardan forever, and maybe losing herself, too.

Mind slowed by drink, Oak was still putting all this information together. Lady Nore, of the Court of Teeth, held Madoc. And Jude wasn’t going to try to get him back. Oak wanted to crawl out from beneath the table and plead with her. *Jude, we can’t leave him there. We can’t let him die.*

“Rumor has it that Lady Nore is creating an army of stick and stone and snow creatures,” Jude murmured.

Lady Nore was from the old Court of Teeth. After allying with Madoc and attempting to steal the crown of Elfhome, her entire Court had been disbanded. Their best warriors—including Tiernan’s beloved, Hyacinthe—were turned into birds. Madoc had been sent into exile. And Lady Nore had been made to swear fealty to the daughter she tormented: Suren. The little queen with the sharp teeth that Cardan mentioned.

Oak felt a flush of an unfamiliar emotion at the thought of her. Remembered running away to her woods and the rasp of her voice in the dark.

His sister went on. “Whether Lady Nore wishes to use them to attack us or the mortal world or just have them fight for her amusement, we ought to stop her. If we delay, she has time to build up her forces. But attacking her stronghold would mean my father’s death. If we move against her, he dies.”

“We can wait,” Cardan said. “But not long.”

Jude frowned. “If she steps from that Citadel, I will cut her throat from

ear to ear.”

Cardan drew a dramatic line across his throat and then slumped exaggeratedly over, eyes closed, mouth open. Playing dead.

Jude scowled. “You need not make fun.”

“Have I ever told you how much you sound like Madoc when you talk about murder?” Cardan said, opening one eye. “Because you do.”

Oak expected his sister to be angry, but she only laughed. “That must be what you like about me.”

“That you’re terrifying?” he asked, his drawl becoming exaggeratedly languorous, almost a purr. “I adore it.”

She leaned against him, resting her head on his shoulder, and closed her eyes. The king’s arms came around her, and she shivered once, as though letting something fall away.

Watching her, Oak turned his thoughts to what he knew would happen. He, the useless youngest child, the heir, would be protected from the information that his father was in peril.

Hyacinthe would be dragged away for questioning. Or execution. Probably both, one following on the other. He might well deserve it, too. Oak knew, as his sister did not yet, that Madoc had spoken with the former falcon many times in recent months. If Hyacinthe *was* responsible, Oak would cut his throat himself.

But what would come after that? Nothing. No help for their father. Lady Nore bought herself time to build the army Jude described, but eventually Elfame would move against her. When war came, no one would be spared.

He had to act quickly.

Mellith’s heart. That’s what Lady Nore wanted. He wasn’t sure if he could get it, but even if he couldn’t, that didn’t mean there wasn’t a way to stop her. Though he hadn’t seen Suren in years, he knew where she was, and he doubted anyone else in the High Court did. They’d been friends once. Moreover, Lady Nore had sworn a vow to her. She had the power of command over her mother. One word from her could end this conflict before it started.

The thought of seeking Wren out filled him with an emotion he didn’t want to inspect too closely, as drunk and upset as he already was. But he could plan instead how he would use the secret passageway to sneak out of his sister’s room once she was asleep, how he would interrogate Hyacinthe

as Tiernan packed up their things. How he would go to Mandrake Market and find out more about this ancient heart from Mother Marrow, who knew nearly everything about everything.

The conspiracy would wait. It wasn't as though they could make their move without a candidate for the throne standing by.

Oak would save their father. Maybe he could never fix his family, but he could try to make up for what he'd already cost them. He could try to measure up to them. If he went, if he persuaded Wren, if they succeeded, then Madoc would live and Jude wouldn't have to make another impossible choice.



They would have all forbidden him from going, of course. But before they had a chance, he was already gone.