



MALINDA LO

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In memory of my grandmother,

Ruth Earnshaw Lo

(1910–2006)



The Fairy

Chapter I

Aisling's mother died at midsummer. She had fallen sick so suddenly that some of the villagers wondered if the fairies had come and taken her, for she was still young and beautiful. She was buried three days later beneath the hawthorn tree behind the house, just as twilight was darkening the sky.

Maire Solanya, the village greenwitch, came that evening to perform the old rituals over the grave. She stood at the foot of the mound of black soil, a thin old woman with white hair bound in a braid that reached her hips, her face a finely drawn map of lines. Aisling and her father stood across from each other on either side of the grave, and at the head of it, resting on the simple headstone, was the burning candle. Aisling's father had lit it shortly after Elinor died, and it would burn all night, sheltered by the curving glass around it. The gravestone was a plain piece of slate carved with her name: Elinor. Grass and tree roots would grow up around it as the months and years passed, until it would seem as if it had always been there.

Maire Solanya said in her low, clear voice, "From life to life, from breath to breath, we remember Elinor." She held a round loaf of bread in her hands, and she tore off a small piece and ate it, chewing deliberately, before handing the loaf to Aisling's father. He pulled off his own piece, then passed it to his daughter. It was still warm, and it smelled like her mother's kitchen after baking. But it hadn't come from her mother's hands, and that realization made a hard lump rise in her throat. The bread was tasteless.

Maire Solanya took the loaf from her, its crust gaping open, and placed it on the gravestone next to the candle. Aisling couldn't shake the feeling that her mother had merely gone out on an errand and would come home at any moment and wonder what the three of them were doing. It didn't seem possible that she was buried there, at the foot of the hawthorn tree, in the ground. She had seen her mother's body after she died, of course, but her face had lost all of the vibrancy that made her recognizable. And it was easier to believe the village rumors than to sit with the ache inside herself.

She remembered those rumors now, while she stood with her father and Maire Solanya in a tense silence, waiting as the sun set over the Wood. Everyone had always said that Elinor had some magic over her, and everyone knew that fairies—if they existed—were drawn to that. So Aisling's father had ordered all the old rituals, even though he did not believe in them, just in case. She was not entirely sure what she herself believed, but she knew that her mother would want them to do these rituals for her, and that was enough.

When the sun slipped below the horizon, the greenwitch said, "Sleep in peace, Elinor," and scattered a gold powder over the grave to bind Elinor to the earth. On the freshly turned soil, the gold glittered like fairy dust.

Aisling's father stepped around the grave and put a hand on her shoulder. "Go back to the house, Ash." He had told her that he would keep vigil over the grave all night. Some said that the Fairy Hunt sought out souls on the night after burial, and only those who were guarded by their loved ones would be left to rest in peace.

She walked slowly up the hill toward the house. When she turned back at the kitchen door to look down toward the garden, Maire Solanya was making three circles around the grave before she left. Just beyond the hawthorn tree, the Wood was dark and silent. The single candle glimmered, and Ash could see the shape of her father as he knelt beside the grave.

The housekeeper, Anya, came out the kitchen door and caressed Ash's hair. "It will be all right," Anya said. "Come inside before night falls. Your mother's spirit will be safe with your father—watching over her."



Ash woke in the middle of the night from a dream of horses—tall, thundering white horses with foaming mouths and slender, wraithlike riders. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and went to the window that looked out over the Wood. She searched for the light of the candle by the grave but saw only darkness. Then there was movement at the edge of the trees, and she shivered. Where was her father?

She ran down the stairs, through the kitchen, and out the back door. The wind was rising. She ran down the hillside in her bare feet, feeling the earth alive beneath her toes, her nightgown flying behind her in white linen wings. She ran past the garden's rows of carrots and cabbages and toward the dark, hulking line of the Wood. Beneath the hawthorn tree, the glass cover was tipped over on its side, the candle was snuffed out, and her father was gone. She knelt on the ground and reached for the candle, but she hadn't brought matches and could not light it.

The wind gusted over her, whipping her hair around her face. The dark pressed against her, and she wondered if her father had given up his vigil because of the weight of the night on his back. She heard the hoofbeats then, coming closer and closer. She thought she saw a faint glimmer of white in the dark Wood, a glow of otherworldly light, like stardust caught behind glass. She was frightened, but she would not leave her mother. She lay down on the grave, pressing her body into the warm earth and her cheek against the gravestone. The hooves came closer, and she heard the high, thin sound of a bugle. The wind rushed toward her, and the cries of the riders were clear upon the air: They called for her mother, for Elinor. The ground beneath Ash's body heaved, and she let out a scream of fright as she felt the world buckle beneath her, earth and stone and moss and root twisting up as if it were clawed by a mighty hand. There was a roaring sound in her ears as the horses surrounded her, and she squeezed her eyes shut, afraid of what she might see. She dug her fingers into the ground, clinging to the earth where her mother lay buried.

And then there was a sudden silence, and in that silence she could hear the breathing of horses, the heaving of their lungs, the musical jingle of bit and bridle, and the whisper of voices like silvery bells. She thought she heard someone say, "She is only a child. Let her go."

The wind roared again, so fierce that she thought she would be pulled from the ground and thrown aside like a rag doll, but when it died down the horses were gone, and the night was quiet. The air hummed as it did after a storm. When she opened her eyes, the ground all around her was marked with hoofprints.



Ash woke up suddenly in her own bed, her heart pounding. She sat up, gasping for breath as though she were being suffocated, and saw the early morning light coming through the curtains. She ran to the window and looked out; her father was coming slowly up the hill. When she heard him come into the house and close the kitchen door, she realized she had been gripping the windowsill with white fingers. She let go, feeling foolish. But just as she began to turn away, she saw something gleaming on the windowsill: In the spaces where the paint had cracked, gold dust glittered.

Chapter II

In that country, *the great expanse* of the Wood descends from the Northern Mountains in foothills of blue pine, sweeping south toward the more civilized oak and birch of the King's Forest. No one travels into the interior of the Wood, although it must once have been populated, because numerous roads and tracks lead into it. Those tracks have long been abandoned, and the Wood is thought to be the home of dangerous beasts and the most powerful of all the fairies. Some scholars speculate that once upon a time, the country was thick with magic; in addition to fairies there were powerful sorcerers and witches who did more than brew willow bark tea to calm a child's fever.

But as time passed, the magic faded, leaving behind only a faint memory of its power. Some said there was a great war that drove away the sorcerers and lasted for so many years that the very shape of the land changed: Mountains became valleys beneath the tread of thousands of soldiers, and rivers were rerouted to make way for grand new palaces. But all that is merely conjecture; no history books survived to tell the tale. Only the greenwitches remained, and their magic was limited to saying the old rites for birth and marriage and death. Sometimes they brewed love potions for girls who hadn't met their lovers by Midsummer's Eve, and sometimes the love potions even worked. Usually that was enough to remind the people that magic still lurked in half-forgotten places.

But even if magic was so rare it was more like myth than reality, the people of that country still loved their fairy tales. They told stories about brownies, who helpfully did the chores overnight in exchange for a bowl of cream. There were boggarts, mischievous creatures who slammed doors and shattered pottery or pawed through a household's winter stores in search of sweets. There were handsome love-talkers, who seduced girls with their charm and wit and then left them to pine away for a love that could never be. Children were warned to stay away from strange flickering lights at midnight, for if a person once set foot inside a fairy ring, he would never be able to leave.

Most of the people of that country lived on the borders of the Wood in pine-board houses built up close to the trees, where the old magic lingered. South of the Wood the land sloped down in fertile, rich farmland toward the sea. The farmers, who lived in quaint stone cottages surrounded by broad fields, grew yellow squash and long green beans and bushels of wheat. In the very southern tip of the country they grew oranges and lemons, which were shipped north to the Royal City during harvest season to be made into lemonade and orange punch. The farmers didn't believe in Wood fairies, but they listened for the tread of field dwellers and hobgoblins, who could bless a crop or eat it all. They set out bowls of honey wine to tempt the fairies away from milking cows, and left out baskets of fruit to distract them from their orchards.

In a country so fond of its fairy stories, where the people clung to the memory of magic with a deep and hungry nostalgia, it was no surprise that philosophers and their church faced a difficult task when they landed in Seatown four generations ago. Legends began to spring up about the philosophers—that they were the sorcerers of old who had lost their magic; that they came from the hot desert places of the Far South, where illusions and spells abounded; that they once were royal advisors who had betrayed their rulers. But the philosophers themselves disliked this penchant for telling tales and insisted upon their own, much plainer history.

They reported that they were indeed from the south, from the empire of Concordia to be exact, and they had come north to spread the wisdom of their emperor. They built churches out of plaster and

wood and sat within them, reading books written in foreign tongues. They argued passionately with the village greenwitches, claiming that all those fairy tales were nothing but the stuff of nonsense—there were no greenies or goblins. Had anyone ever actually seen a brag or a dunter or a mermaid? Or were they only stories told to children at bedtime? The greenwitches grumbled in response, and some insisted that they *had* run into klippes at twilight, or seen sprites slipping among the shadows of the Wood at Midsummer.

Perhaps because philosophers tended to be men and greenwitches tended to be women, the argument took on an overly heated tone. Insults were hurled: The philosophers called the greenwitches superstitious old wives, and the greenwitches retorted that not one of them was married. The greenwitches derided the philosophers as joyless old men afraid of magic, and the philosophers, not surprisingly, protested that they found much joy in the *real* world. And then they brought out their largest tomes bound in gold, the leather covers stamped with the five-cornered star of the Concordian Empire, and threw open the heavy covers. They pointed to the unreadable text and said, “Look! There is the real world. All our learning, all our experiences, written down fact by fact. There are no myths here; only facts. Fairies are mere fictions. We deal in the truth.”

The oldest, most powerful greenwitch at the time, a wise and wiry woman by the name of Maire Nicneva, laughed at those white-bearded men in their red-pointed caps and replied, “You shall not discover the truth by being blinded to faith.”

From then on, for a period of at least two generations, philosophers had a hard time in that country. They continued to build their churches in village greens dotting the coast, but found it difficult to progress into the interior of the country. The closer they came to the Wood, the more angry the people became. They were called liars and unbelievers, and while they were never physically harmed, even children laughed at them—at their strange crimson costumes and heavy, dusty books locked in huge, iron-bound trunks. But one day the King met a philosopher who was less stubborn than the others, and they sat down together and talked about the smell of spring and the taste of the sweetest oranges, and they grew to like one another. The King even took the philosopher on a hunt, and as hunting is that people’s favorite sport, all the country began to listen more seriously to the philosophers.

By that time the philosophers had also begun to change their approach to this people. Rather than insisting that there was no such thing as magic, they began to merely suggest that perhaps magic was not as prevalent as it once was. They asked, have you ever seen an elf? Or did you work hard on your own to build your house, to feed your children, to put clothes on your family’s backs? And gradually the idea took root that magic was merely an old country superstition.

The people of Rook Hill, however, the small northern village where Aisling lived with her father, kept to the old ways. It was far enough from the Royal City to make the philosophy being preached by the King’s many advisors seem stranger than the fairy tales most mothers told their children. Ash remembered playing in her mother’s herb garden while listening to tales about brownies or picts or selkies. Sometimes the greenwitch Maire Solanya joined them, and she too told tales, though hers were darker. Once she told a story about a young woman who wandered for a month through the silver mines in the Northern Mountains, seeking her lost lover, only to find herself confronted by a family of knockers who demanded her first-born child in return for their help in finding him.

When Ash looked frightened, Maire Solanya said, “Fear will teach you where to be careful.”

Her mother had been apprenticed to Maire Solanya when she was a girl, and sometimes she taught Ash the differences between various herbs that grew in her garden—feverfew for headache, meadowsweet for a burn—but when she married William, a merchant, she left her apprenticeship. Sometimes in the evenings after supper, they would argue about whether or not she should go back to

that calling, and usually Ash remembered those conversations as friendly debates, but once her parents' voices took on harder tones. "The King's chief philosopher himself has said that greenwitch do nothing more than calm one's nerves—which is no small thing," William said. Ash had been sent up to bed, but she had come back downstairs to ask her mother a question, and when she heard her father's voice, she hesitated in the hall outside the parlor.

"Those philosophers only sit in their churches and issue judgments based on inaccurate texts from Concordia," her mother said. "They know nothing about what a greenwitch does."

William sighed. "They are not distant scholars, Elinor; they have studied your herbal practices in detail."

"It is about more than herbal practices," she countered. "You know that."

"Are you saying that all those tales you tell Ash have any basis in reality?" he said in disbelief. "They are only bedtime stories—it is superstition, nothing more."

Elinor's voice took on an edge that Ash had never heard before. "Those tales serve a purpose, William, and how dare you dismiss our traditions as superstition? There is a reason they have survived."

"It will do you and our daughter no good to align yourselves with the past," William said, sounding frustrated. "The King does not follow those ways anymore, and you must understand that keeping to those traditions will only harm my standing in court."

Her mother said curtly, "I won't abandon the truth, William, and I won't lie about it, either."

There was a sharp silence after that, and Ash retreated back upstairs, her question forgotten. It was unsettling to hear them argue; she had never before realized the depth of their disagreement. But the next morning there was no trace of the argument in her parents' faces. In the months that followed, Ash listened a bit anxiously whenever her parents' conversation began to turn in that direction, but she never heard them bring it up again. When her mother fell sick so suddenly, her father called Maire Solanya to attend her, and Ash knew it was because he loved Elinor more than his beliefs.



Two weeks after her mother's funeral, Ash's father left for the Royal City. At breakfast that morning she asked him, "When will you come back?"

"Possibly not until autumn," he said. Before her mother died, her father would leave them for months at a time to do business in the south. When he returned he would bring back gifts: slippery, shiny silks, or thick woolen tweeds, or toy dolls made of pale, cold porcelain.

"Did Mother ever go with you?" she asked, and he seemed surprised by her question.

"She did travel with me to Seatown once," he answered, "but she did not like it. She said she missed the Wood." He suddenly looked deeply sad, and he rubbed his hand over his face as if he were brushing away the memories. "She did like visiting the booksellers' bazaar, though. She'd spend hours there while I worked."

Ash asked, "Will you bring me a new book, Father?"

He seemed taken aback, but then he said gruffly, "I suppose you are your mother's daughter." He reached out and ruffled her hair, and he let his hand linger, warm and firm, on her forehead.

After breakfast, Ash sat on the front steps and watched her father and his driver loading trunks on the carriage. It was a week's journey from Rook Hill to the Royal City, barring any mishaps. When they were ready to depart, he came over to Ash. She stood up, and he put a hand on her shoulder and said, "Be a good girl and listen to Anya. I'll send news when I can."

"Yes, Father," she replied, and looked down at the ground, staring at the toes of his polished black

boots.

He lifted her chin in his hand and said, “Don’t spend too much time daydreaming. You’re a big girl now.” He touched her cheek and then turned to go to the carriage. She watched as it pulled away, and she stood on the steps long after it had gone out of sight around the bend.



After her father left for the City, she went down to the grave every day, usually at twilight. The letters carved into the headstone spelling out her mother’s name were sharp and fresh, and the rectangle of earth that marked the length of the grave was still distinct, but even within a few weeks of the burial, wildflowers and grasses had begun to grow. Sitting with her back against the tree, she remembered a tale her mother had once told her about a fairy who lived in the mountains north of Rook Hill. This fairy was a shape-shifter, and a cruel one at that. If a family had just lost someone, this fairy would visit them, knocking on their door after sunset. When they opened the door, they would see their departed loved one standing there, as real as could be. It would be tempting to invite her in, for in the depths of grief, sometimes one cannot tell the difference between illusion and reality. But those who gave in had to pay a price, for to invite death inside would mean striking a bargain with it.

“What price did they have to pay?” Ash asked her mother.

“Generally,” her mother responded, “the fairies ask for the same thing: a family’s first-born child to take back with them to Taninli and mold into their own creature.”

“What sort of creature?” Ash asked curiously.

Her mother had been kneading dough that morning, and she paused in her work to look out the kitchen window at the Wood. “You know, I’ve never seen such a creature,” her mother said thoughtfully. “It must be a strange one.” And then to dispel the dark mood, her mother laughed and said, “It’s nothing to worry about, my dear. Simply don’t answer the door after sunset.”

And she reached over and caressed her daughter’s cheek, leaving a light dusting of flour on her face.



The summer passed slowly. Her father sent news every few weeks, punctuating the warm stillness with reports from the south: There had been a storm on the road, and it had delayed them. When they arrived in the Royal City, a new King’s Huntress had just been appointed, and there was a grand parade. In Seatown, her father had attended a ball at a grand estate on the cliffs. Ash and Anya read his letters together, and afterward, Ash folded them between the pages of her mother’s favorite book, a collection of fairy tales that had been read so often the cover had come loose.

One market day, Ash went with Anya into the village. While Anya finished her errands, Ash wandered among the peddler’s stalls in the village green. Coming to a cart piled high with herbs, she buried her nose among them and inhaled. When she looked up, the greenwitch was standing beside the cart, watching her.

“Where is Anya?” Maire Solanya asked.

“She is at the candlemaker’s,” Ash said.

“And your father? Has he sent news of when he will return?”

“No,” Ash answered. “Why?”

But the greenwitch did not answer her question. Instead, she bent down to Ash’s eye level and looked at her closely. The woman had strangely pale blue eyes and sharply arched gray eyebrows. “Do you miss your mother?” she asked.

Ash stepped back, startled. “Of course I miss her,” she said.

“You must let her go,” Maire Solanya said softly. Ash felt tears prick at the corners of her eyes. “Your mother was a great woman,” the greenwitch continued. “She is happy where she is now. You must not wish her back.”

Ash blinked, and the tears spilled over; she felt as if the greenwitch were tugging them out of her one by one.

Maire Solanya’s features softened with compassion, and she reached out and brushed away the teardrops. Her fingertips were cool and dry. “It will be all right,” she said gently. “We will never forget her.”

By the time Anya came to collect her, she had stopped crying and was sitting on the stone bench at the edge of the green, and Maire Solanya had gone. They walked home silently, and though Anya asked her if she was upset, Ash only shook her head. At home a letter had been left for them, wedged into the edge of the front door, and Anya handed it to Ash as they went inside. While Anya put away the items she had purchased at the market, Ash unsealed the letter, spreading it out on the kitchen table. She read it twice, because the first time she read it she could not believe it.

“What news?” Anya finally asked, coming to join her at the table.

“Father is coming back,” Ash said.

“Well, that’s wonderful,” Anya said with a smile. “Sooner than expected!”

“He is bringing someone with him,” Ash said. Something in her voice caused Anya to take the letter from her, puzzled, and read it herself. “I am to have a stepmother, and two stepsisters,” Ash said. She was stunned. “They will be here in two weeks.”



After the letter arrived, the days passed in a blur. Anya was busy preparing the house as William had instructed. Later, Ash could never remember if she had helped to clean her mother’s things out of her parents’ bedchamber, or if Anya had simply swept them all into a trunk and out of sight. But she did remember that on the morning of her father’s scheduled return, she visited what had been her mother’s room and stood on the thick gold-and-brown rug in a pool of sunlight coming through the leaded glass windows. The wardrobe was empty now, and the door was partway open, as if inviting Ash to look inside and make sure that all traces of her mother were gone.

It was late in the day when the carriage finally pulled into the courtyard. Ash went outside to meet them, and her new stepmother, Lady Isobel Quinn, looked at Ash with an expression hovering between resignation and impatience. As her new stepsisters climbed out of the carriage, Ana, who was twelve—“just your age; she will make a wonderful playmate for you,” her father had written hopefully—complained of hunger. Clara, who was only ten, looked up at the house with wide, anxious eyes. Anya had told Ash to be polite to them, but all she could feel at the moment of their arrival was a thick, burning anger inside her. It licked at her belly when she heard her stepmother comment on the smallness of the staircase; it throbbed at her temples when Ana demanded that Ash’s own room be given up for her; it roared inside her when her father reached for his new wife’s hand and led her into her mother’s room.

That night, while her father and stepmother and stepsisters sat together in the parlor, exclaiming over the gifts he had brought them from Seatown, Ash slipped away from them all. She skidded down the hill on feet made clumsy from suppressed emotion, and sank down on the ground beside her mother’s grave, clutching her knees tight to her chest. All her frustration and sadness began to bubble up to the surface, sliding out of her in hot teardrops. She tried to not make a sound—she did not want

anyone to hear her—but her body shook as she cried. When the tightness inside her finally relaxed, she lay down on the earth, her cheek pillowed on her hand, staring slackly at the faint outlines of her mother's tombstone in the dark.

She didn't see the man standing in the Wood beyond the house, watching her. He had white hair and eyes so blue they were like jewels, and he was dressed all in silvery white. The air around him seemed to crack in places, and his moonlight-colored cloak wavered at those cracks as if he weren't quite all there. If Ash had seen him, she might have thought that he was a fairy, for all around him the Wood seemed enmeshed in a web of illusion. One moment the trees were solid as stone around him; the next it was as if he were standing among grand marble pillars in a magnificent palace. But Ash did not see him. She lay there in the dark, rubbing away her tears, and when she was too tired to cry anymore, she turned over onto her back and fell asleep.

Chapter III

Her father had been back for nearly a week when Maire Solanya came to see him. Ash almost missed her visit entirely, because she had been forced to go into Rook Hill with her stepmother and stepsisters. When they returned to the house, a horse was tethered in front of it. Lady Isobel looked at it suspiciously but merely herded her daughters upstairs and called for Anya to attend them. Ash dawdled behind, stroking the horse's nose, hoping her stepmother would forget about her. When she went back inside she heard voices coming toward the front hall, and she ducked into the parlor to hide. As they came closer, she realized one of them belonged to the greenwitch, and she sounded upset.

"I think you are making the wrong decision," said Maire Solanya angrily.

"You have no evidence to support your claims," Ash's father objected in frustration. "What you are saying is simply—they are simply tales told to children."

The greenwitch snorted. "Very well," she said coldly. "If you do not believe what has been true for thousands of years, I cannot change your mind now. But you have to watch out for her—your only daughter. Her mother would have sent her to me in time. Without her mother here to watch over her—"

"She has a stepmother now," William interrupted.

"That woman knows nothing of this," Maire Solanya hissed. Ash peered into the hall and saw the greenwitch standing just inside the front door. "You have lived in Rook Hill long enough to know better," she said, lowering her voice. "Letting her sit out there at her mother's grave every night—the will come for her."

Ash's father did not seem convinced. "Elinor may have shared your fancies, but I do not," he said. And then he put his hand on the doorknob in a clear indication that the greenwitch should leave. "Have a safe journey home." After he closed the door he sighed, rubbing his eyes. Ash slid back into the parlor before her father turned around, and she tiptoed to the front window. The courtyard was empty; the greenwitch had already left.

Ash wanted to know what Maire Solanya had meant—who would come for her?—but she did not dare ask her father. He was restless and aggravated for the rest of the day after the greenwitch's visit. What she had overheard reminded her of the argument he had had with her mother, and she wondered not for the first time, how many of those tales told to children were true.

Her mother had told her plenty of fairy tales, of course. If they were to be believed, any fairies who still walked this land were most likely to be found deep in the Wood, where no one had traveled for generations. Sometimes at twilight, when Ash was sitting at her mother's grave, she thought she saw things—a silverish shadow, like heat waves in the summer, or the movement of a creature who did not quite set foot upon the ground—but it was only out of the corner of her eye. Whenever she turned to look, there was never anything there. She knew her father would tell her that it was only the fading light playing tricks on her.

So she had been surprised when the book that he brought back for her was a volume of fairy tales. It was bound in dark brown tooled leather, and the frontispiece was a painting of a fairy woman, elegant and pale, wearing a beautiful golden gown. The title of the book was lettered in bold, dark calligraphy: *Tales of Wonder and Grace*. Each story was preceded by a detailed illustration, hand-painted in royal blue and crimson, silver and gilt.

“Thank you,” she said to her father. “It is beautiful.”

The tales were not all about fairies—some were hunting stories, some were adventures—but many of them were. When her father saw how she was transfixed by the book, he allowed her to skip Ana and Clara’s lessons with Lady Isobel. “She is young,” he said to his new wife, who frowned at this indulgence. “And she misses her mother. Let her be.”

Ash recognized some of the stories in the book as tales that her mother had told her: “The Golden Ball,” “The Three Good Advices,” “The Beast and the Thorn.” But the lengthiest story in the book, “The Farmer and the Hunt,” was unfamiliar to her, and she stared often and long at the illustration that accompanied it. In the picture, a ruddy-faced farmer stood at the edge of a broad field, and riding across it was a ghostly host of hunters outlined in silver paint, their horses’ eyes glinting gold. The riders were as pale as the fairy woman on the frontispiece, and their faces were hollow skulls, their mouths gaping open.

In the tale, the farmer, a well-liked man named Thom, vanished on his way home from a village tavern. He was found three days later when one of his neighbors discovered his horse tethered near a wooded copse down by the river. Within the copse, Thom was fast asleep on a bed of dried leaves. Although he was very confused when he awoke, after he had been brought home and fed a good supper, he remembered what had happened. On the night he had disappeared, he waited until the full moon had risen before leaving the tavern, and then he took his customary route home. He was walking past the fallow field west of the Wood when he saw lights dancing in the copse by the river, accompanied by the most beautiful flute music he had ever heard. Because his sweetheart, who had died several years before, had played the flute, Thom was drawn toward the music and wondered who was behind it.

Within the copse he came across a scene so beautiful it made his heart ache. There were sparkling lanterns hanging from the branches, illuminating the clearing where dozens of finely dressed men and women were dancing, their bodies as graceful as blossoms bending in a spring breeze. At first they took no notice of the farmer standing on the edge of their circle, and as his dazzled eyes adjusted to the light, he finally noticed the musicians playing along the sidelines. There was a violinist who played a gilded instrument with finesse, but whose face seemed strangely weary for someone who was making such sweet music. And there was the piper whose flute had called to the farmer; she was a young woman wearing a relatively plain gown in comparison to the dancing ladies. As the farmer gazed at her face, it was as if a glamour slowly fell away from it, and he recognized her as his sweetheart, Grace, who was believed to be dead.

When she looked up and met his eyes, the illusion disappeared, and she put down the flute and came to him. In wonder, he took her hands in his, and her hands were as cold as death. She said to him: “You must go back, Thom. I am lost to you forever, but you can still leave.”

As she spoke, the dancing people began to notice him, and one of the women came toward them, her eyes great and blue, and offered him a goblet of wine. “Will you drink, sir?” she asked sweetly.

He took the goblet without thinking, and the girl departed, but just as he was about to take a sip Grace said urgently, “You must not drink of that wine. If you do you will be trapped forever in this world, never to see your family again.”

Her words made him hesitate, but he said, “I had thought you were lost to me; where is this place you have come to?”

“You have stepped into fairy land,” she answered. “Three years ago, I was walking home one night when I encountered the Fairy Hunt, and they offered to take me the rest of the way. I should not have believed them. As soon as I mounted one of their horses, they took me to Taninli, their home, where

they gave me food and drink. I was so hungry and thirsty that I gave in, but now I must serve them for eternity, for no humans are allowed to taste their delicacies.”

“I will join you,” he said, “for I love you and would be with you for eternity.”

But she shook her head, and her eyes were dark with pain. “I am but a shadow of myself and can never love you as a human could,” she said. “The fairies have taken my heart away from me.”

He could see that she told the truth, for no blood warmed her skin, and there was no pulse beating in her throat. Yet a part of him still wished to be with her regardless of what form she had taken, and when she saw this in his heart, she led him out of the copse, fearing for his safety, and took the goblet away from his hand. “You must forget about me from now on, and if you see the Fairy Hunt riding, never approach them,” she warned him. And then she touched his cheek and he fell down in an enchanted sleep and did not awaken until his neighbor discovered him.

But as is the way with these encounters, Thom could not forget what he had seen, and every night he yearned for Grace, his heart aching anew. At last he took to wandering near the wooded copse by the river, hoping to hear Grace’s flute. One night at twilight, Thom saw a dozen ghostly riders coming toward him, and soon he recognized them as the Fairy Hunt. But he ignored Grace’s words of warning and gladly went to meet them. After that night he was never seen again, and no one knows if he succeeded in finding his way back to Grace. But a month later, the same neighbor who had awakened Thom from his enchanted sleep came across the farmer again, except this time he would not awaken, for he was dead.



The *Tales of Wonder and Grace* only sparked more questions in Ash. At night when she sat beside her mother’s grave, wondering if this would be the night that someone—something—came to take her away, as Maire Solanya had warned, she watched the darkness gathering in the nearby trees with equal parts dread and anticipation. What lay beyond those trees? Would she ever dare to do what Thom had done? If the stories were true, as Maire Solanya had seemed to imply, then there might be a way to see her mother again.

There were some common threads among the fairy tales she had read. Fairies were drawn to in-between times like Midsummer’s Eve, when the full weight of summer begins to tip toward the shorter days of autumn; or Souls Night, when the spirits of the newly departed walk the land. But fairies were never seen in common daylight, and they preferred the light of the full moon for their hunts and celebrations. So on the night of the next full moon, Ash rose from her bed at midnight, trembling with excitement. She pulled on her woolen cloak and tiptoed halfway down the upstairs corridor before her stepsister’s door cracked open. She heard Ana’s voice whispering, “Where are you going?” Ash froze, turning to look at her stepsister. Ana was peering out at her curiously, holding a lit candle stub beneath her face.

“It’s none of your business,” Ash whispered. “Go back to bed.”

Ana’s eyes narrowed and she stepped out into the corridor, pulling her door shut behind her. She observed, “You are dressed to go outside. Where do you think you’re going?”

“I can go wherever I want,” Ash said curtly.

She turned her back on her stepsister and began to walk toward the stairs, but stopped when Ana said, “I’ll tell. I’ll wake up your father and tell him you’re going out.”

Anger rose inside her—she would *not* let this girl stop her—and she glared at Ana. “Do whatever you like,” Ash said dismissively. She did not wait for Ana’s reaction but went down the stairs quickly, her heart racing with fear and exhilaration.

In the pantry, she lit the covered lantern before going to the back door. She put her hand on the doorknob and looked behind her. In the glow of the lantern the kitchen was comforting and ordinary. Ana had not followed her. Taking a deep breath, she turned the doorknob and plunged out into the night.

As she went down toward the Wood, the full moon hung like a giant, pale eye above her, unwavering in its gaze. At the foot of the hill, she paused and looked up at the house, and the windows were dark, reflecting only the heavy moon. The lantern threw her shadow up the hill, a black ghost attached to her feet, and she shivered as the wind came rattling through the pine branches. Steeling herself, she turned toward the Wood and her mother's grave, and just beyond it was the track she and her mother had sometimes taken to gather mushrooms or wild plants. They had never gone far enough to lose sight of the house, and Ash did not know how far the path went, but tonight she meant to find out.

Entering the Wood was like entering a vast cavern: The sound of her footsteps was magnified by the branches arching above. Her lantern cast only a tiny glow in the immense black, for now she could no longer see the moon. As she went deeper into the trees, she heard the call of a night owl, and an animal bounded through the undergrowth—a rabbit? In the distance, the howl of a wolf raised the hair on the back of her neck. She thought she could see eyes glowing on the trail ahead of her, but a moment later they had slid to the right, and she could not follow them as well as keep her eyes on the path. Her hands trembled and made the lantern bob, casting wild shadows on the ground, but she pressed on and tried to ignore the frightened voice in her head that told her to go back. Moving made her feel better: At least she could run.

She came to a tangle of fallen branches that blocked her way, and in order to continue she had to leave the path to pick her way around them. The ground was uneven, with roots protruding from the forest floor, and when she reached out to steady herself on a nearby tree trunk she felt something move beneath her fingers. She gasped in fright and hastened forward, clinging to the lantern, suddenly afraid she would drop it and be left in the pitch-black night.

She did not know how long she had been walking before she realized she had lost her way back to the path. She was standing among tall trunks of blue pine, their bark mottled gray and black in the lantern light, and this time when she turned to look around herself at the waiting dark, she was sure that she saw something glittering back at her: eyes, yellow and blinking. She heard her own breath, quick and frantic, like a hunted creature. And then the whispering began. It came on the wind, sweeping toward her in scratchy bursts, and then was borne away again before she could discern any words. She held out the lantern like a weapon, calling out, "Who is there?"

There was the sound of laughter—thin, distant, like bells. Was this the sign she had been seeking? She turned toward the sound and stumbled forward, tripping over the undergrowth. As the laughter came more frequently, the whispering began to separate out into sentences spoken in a language she did not understand. It could only be the fairies, she thought, for who else would be deep in the Wood at midnight? The thought raised a cold sweat on her skin, for if they were real, then all the consequences in those tales must be real, too. But that was the last clear thought she had, because then she saw the lights in the distance. They did not waver; they were beacons in the night. She started to walk toward them, but they always seemed just out of reach. She began to feel a deep longing in the pit of her stomach: When would she get there? She feared she would wander in the dark Wood forever until she was only a skeleton powered by sheer will.

That was when the drumbeat of horses' hooves came toward her, the ground rumbling with the force of their passage. She stood transfixed, and the wind rose, buffeting her in cold gusts. It became

more difficult to see, as if there were a fog rising, and just when the horses seemed to be nearly upon her, her lantern went out, leaving her momentarily blind. But soon afterward the fog began to glow with an otherworldly light, and she shivered in its damp chill. When she saw the first horse, she felt her heart leap up into her throat. This moment would be fixed in her memory forever: the moment she saw with her own eyes the creatures she had heard about all her life. They were grand and beautiful and frightening—the horses' heads shining white, their eyes burning like a blacksmith's forge. The riders, too, were like nothing she had ever seen before: ethereal men and women with pale visages, their cheekbones so sharply sculpted that she could see their skulls through translucent skin. They surrounded her and looked at her with steely blue eyes, each gaze an arrow staking her to that spot, and she could not close her eyes though the sight of them made her eyes burn as if she were looking at the sun.

They seemed to speak to each other, but she could not see their mouths moving, and she could only hear the strange, uneven whispering she had heard before. Suddenly the riders moved in unison, circling her, and she felt like she was being spun like a limp doll held by a willful child. When the motion stopped, the riders were streaming away from her in an elegant spiral, leaving her alone with one man who looked down at her from his tall white horse. He was more handsome than any man she had ever seen, but like the other riders, he was pale as a ghost. When he spoke, she was stunned that she could understand him, and he said, "You must go back."

She opened her mouth to say, "I came to find you." It felt as though she hadn't spoken in years.

He looked deeply angry, and she cowered beneath his glare. He said: "Then you are a fool."

She sank to her knees and begged, "Please—listen to me—"

He extended his arm, pointing back the way she had come. "Go now—the way is clear to you. And do not return." She felt herself scramble to her feet as if he had picked her up, and behind her the path was clear through the Wood. At the end of it, in the far distance, a light in the kitchen window gleamed. She felt the force of the air behind her, propelling her to turn around, and her legs took her at breakneck speed down the path. It was wide open, free of pebbles or fallen branches or even the thick padding of last year's leaves. She could not slow down, and she could not look back, either. The ground was hard and cold beneath her feet, and when she burst through the border of the Wood and came upon the hawthorn tree, it was as if she had been slapped forward by the wind and forbidden to return. The lantern was dead in her hand, and the Wood was a stone wall behind her.

Anya was standing at the top of the hill, calling her name, and when she saw Ash coming up the hill she ran down to meet her. "Where have you been?" she cried. "Ana said you ran away—are you all right?" She bent toward Ash and pulled her into an embrace. "Aisling," she said in a ragged voice, "your father—he is not well."

"What do you mean?" Ash demanded, pushing her away. "What do you mean he's not well?"

"The greenwitch is here," Anya said. "Maire Solanya is here. She has given him a draught to calm him, but he shouts in his fever."

Ash ran into the house and upstairs, down the hallway lit with flaming sconces and into her father's room, where he lay in bed tossing and turning, the greenwitch chanting something unfamiliar yet unmistakably old. Lady Isobel sat in the window seat, turned away from them. Maire Solanya saw Ash and halted her chanting, coming toward her. "This is a sickroom, Ash," she said. "You must stay away." And she pushed Ash out of the room and closed the door.

Standing in the hallway, Ash could hear her father shouting. It sounded like he was calling for her mother.

Chapter IV

The fever lasted for two days. But a week after it broke, Ash's father had still not recovered, and Maire Solanya returned to speak with Lady Isobel. Hovering outside her father's room, Ash heard their voices rise with emotion.

"Nothing you have done has worked," Lady Isobel said bitterly. "Why should I follow this new course of treatment? He has not improved."

"You are not understanding what has afflicted him," Maire Solanya said. "He is only now coming out of the worst of it. He must continue to drink this."

"It has only made him feel worse," Lady Isobel said. "I won't allow it."

"With all due respect, madam, he is too ill to decide for himself, and you do not understand what I am trying to do. You must let me make the decisions in this matter."

"I understand that your old-fashioned ways are not working," Lady Isobel said harshly, clearly frustrated. "I think it is best that I send for a physician."

"But they will bleed him," Maire Solanya objected. "That will only make him weaker."

"You do not understand medicine," Lady Isobel said derisively. "It will clear out the bad blood."

"You will kill him if you do that," the greenwitch said, her tone low and hard. "Is that what you wish to do?"

Suddenly the footsteps came toward the door, which was wrenched open. Lady Isobel stood on the other side, her hand on the doorknob, visibly shaking. "Get out of my house," she snapped at Maire Solanya. "Get out!"

Ash had not moved quickly enough; she stood in the corridor, gaping at the two women. Maire Solanya did not say another word, but only swept through the doorway. When she passed Ash, frozen in the hallway, she briefly touched her shoulder as if to reassure her. But then Lady Isobel saw Ash and demanded, "What are you doing there? Have you been eavesdropping? Go to your room!"

"I want to see my father," Ash said stubbornly.

Her stepmother's face darkened with anger and she pointed down the hall toward Ash's chamber. "Go to your room. Now. Your father will send for you when he wishes to see you." But she did not even wait to see if Ash had obeyed; instead she went back inside, closed the door, and, a moment later, slid the bolt in place.



Ash had not slept well since her walk in the Wood. After Maire Solanya had shut her out of her father's room, she had lain sleepless in her bed until the sun rose. Every night since then, she was haunted by the fear that she had somehow made things worse by seeking out the Fairy Hunt. When she closed her eyes she could see the eerie grace of the riders as if they were circling her bed at night.

When she finally fell asleep, she slept deeply, and waking up was like dragging herself through mud. Sometimes she awoke gasping for air as if she had been in the midst of a nightmare, but she could not remember what she had dreamed. One morning she was pulled out of her uneasy, thick sleep by a steady pounding that sharpened into a knocking at her bedroom door. She blinked her eyes open, her gaze unfocused, and saw her stepsister, Ana, in the doorway. The morning light coming through the window was gray and watery, giving her skin an unhealthy pallor. She said, "Mother says we must

hurry and pack up our things. Your father is not well and he must see a physician in the Royal City.”

Ash was confused. “What—what do you mean?”

“We’re going home,” Ana said. “Finally.”

They packed the trunks that morning, first dragging them up from the cellar and then—loudly—back downstairs again. Lady Isobel said they would return in the spring, so Ash packed her two books of fairy tales and all her winter dresses. Anya was not going. Lady Isobel had her own manor house near the City and her own housekeeper there. Instead, Anya would stay behind to close up the house for the winter, and then she would go back to Rook Hill and stay with her daughter. All that day, Ash felt an underlying sense of surprise: She had never imagined the possibility that she might leave Rook Hill. And she was not ready to go.

By noon the carriage had arrived, and the driver helped Anya load their trunks onto the rack. After a cold, hurried lunch eaten in silence, Ash stood on the front stoop, waiting, and felt like her entire world was being erased. Anya came out and put her arms around her and said, “Lady Isobel will take good care of you.”

She hugged Anya close, with tears pricking her eyes. “I don’t want to go,” she whispered.

“Hush,” Anya said, smoothing her hand over Ash’s hair. “It’s the best for your father.” She put her hands on Ash’s shoulders and looked down at her. “You be a good girl, Ash.” She kissed her on her forehead.

Her father came outside, supported by Lady Isobel and the driver. Ash had not seen him in nearly two weeks, and he looked, in that noon light, like an old man; she was shocked by the change in him.

They drove for a week, pausing only to rest the horses. Ash’s father slept for most of the journey, and when he awoke he was often disoriented. On the first day they left the Northern Mountains behind heading south toward the King’s Highway. On the second day the land widened until all that Ash could see from one horizon to another was spreading golden fields ready for harvest. Then the broad fields gave way to softly rolling hills covered with orchards, and through the carriage windows Ash watched the fruit being plucked from the trees, red and round.

They arrived at Quinn House in the village of West Riding well after dark, and as soon as the carriage pulled to a halt at the end of the long driveway, Lady Isobel leapt out, calling for assistance. A man came to help her bring Ash’s father inside, and Clara and Ana ran after them, excited to be home. A woman wearing an apron came toward the carriage holding a lantern and shone it at her, saying gruffly, “You must be the new girl. Come inside.” Ash climbed out of the carriage in a daze; she saw a large stone building before her, the front door yawning open. The woman took Ash upstairs leading her down a dim corridor to a dark room. “This is your room,” she said, lighting a candle for her. “You may as well go to bed; it’s late.” She shut the door behind her.

The room was plainly furnished with simple wooden furniture; in addition to the small bed there was a wardrobe beside the door, and beneath the casement window was a cushioned bench. She lay down on the bed, pulling her traveling cloak over herself. The blanket beneath her was rough and thin; the bed was hard and creaked when she moved. Conscious of the long days they had traveled, she felt very far from Rook Hill. The distance awoke a longing in her like a cord pulled suddenly taut: She wanted so much to go back.

She leaned over and blew out the candle, but sleep did not come quickly enough.



The first thing she saw when she woke up was her trunk: It had been delivered while she was asleep, and it sat locked and still beside the wardrobe. She got out of bed and went to the window, pushing

open the dark brown draperies. To her surprise, outside the window she saw a forest—the southern end of the Wood. There was no sloping hillside as there had been in Rook Hill; here the land was flat, and between the house and the trees was a meadow, the grasses golden and knee-high. She saw a kitchen garden below, planted in neat squares marked off in red brick; a profusion of herbs staked out territory directly below her window. Ash twisted the window lock and pushed open the diamond-paned glass, leaning out into the morning. It was cool outside, and the scent of the air was new to her—meadow grass mingled with herbs from the garden. She took a deep breath and hoped that her father would regain his health here.

The physicians, however, were not as hopeful. They were already in the house that morning; Ash could hear the murmur of their voices coming from down the hall when she came out of her room. They drew her father's blood and gave him a noxious-smelling tea to drink, and she could hear him coughing. She heard the physicians say that the journey must have tired him out, but her father did not regain his strength. They let her in to see him, and he did not recognize her; his eyes were milky and distant.

He died almost two weeks later. Ash woke up that morning with her heart pounding, and she knew that something was wrong because the house was full of noise. She threw back the covers and jumped out of bed, running down the hallway toward her father's room. A black-robed physician with a long, moody face was opening his door, and when he saw her approaching he said, "This is not the place for you."

"What's going on?" she asked.

"Your father does not need you now," the physician said, trying to block her way. But Ash slipped around him and pushed through the doorway. Her father's body was convulsing out of control, and red spittle dotted his cheeks and the snow-white sheets that were pulled up to his chin. He was being held down by two physicians, one on either side of him, and Lady Isobel stood as far from him as possible, her hands covering her mouth.

Ash ran toward the bed as the third physician tried to stop her again, and she clutched at her father's twitching right hand. "Father," she said in a frightened voice. "Father, what is wrong?" His cheeks were pale and sunken, and bandages covered his wrists. "What have you done to him?" she demanded, recalling Maire Solanya's distrust of the physicians' methods.

"He is ill," one of them said. "You must leave."

Then there were two pairs of hands holding her shoulders back, and though she screamed for them to let her go to her father, they dragged her from the room and slammed the door in her face. She pounded at the door when she heard the lock click shut, crying, "Let me in!" But they did not answer.

She stood there for what seemed like hours, tears slowly leaking from her eyes, her bare feet growing colder minute by minute. And then there was a great noise, followed by silence, and the sound of Lady Isobel sobbing.



Two men from the village church came to take her father's body away later that morning. Lady Isobel came down from her bedroom dressed in black, a veil covering her face, and announced that the funeral would take place the next day in the church at noon. Ash's father would be buried in the cemetery, and Lady Isobel told her there was no need for an overnight vigil. "You must leave your superstitions behind now," her stepmother said sternly.

At the funeral, Ash wore the stiff black dress that Lady Isobel gave her; the collar felt like hands around her throat. She sat still, looking down at the floorboards, too stunned to cry. Although there

was a service led by the village philosopher, Ash did not hear a word of it. She felt smothered by the church walls, and as soon as she could escape outside she did, taking deep breaths of the muggy air.

Behind the church, a rectangular pit in the ground gaped open, awaiting her father's body. His gravestone was not ready yet; until it was carved, his grave would be marked by the red banner that flew now, waist-high, a splash of color against the slate-colored sky. When the mourners began to throw handfuls of earth onto the body, Ash had to look away.

When it was over, they climbed back into the carriage and returned to Quinn House. The glowering sky hinted of rain, and it had grown colder. Ash went upstairs to her bedroom; the house smelled of the bitter medicines the physicians had brewed. In her room, she opened the window and curled up on the seat beneath it, waiting for the first drops of rain to fall. It smelled like moss and oak and the dank dark spaces of the Wood beyond the meadow. She looked out at the wide expanse of golden grass being lashed by the rising wind, and wondered whether Anya had closed all the windows in their house in Rook Hill.

She thought: *Now, I am all alone.*

Chapter V

Everything changed after her father died. Ash had known every inch of her home in Rook Hill; Quinn House was strange and large and cold. In Rook Hill, everyone knew and cherished her mother and father; here, she was pitied by others: *Poor girl. Orphan.* Though Lady Isobel had never treated her with much fondness, now that Ash's father was gone, she no longer tried to hide her disapproval. And West Riding itself was a world away from Rook Hill, which was small and sleepy and content to be nothing more than that. West Riding, scarcely five miles from the Royal City, was known far and wide as the staging ground for the Royal Hunt—and hunting season had already begun.

Rook Hill had its own hunt and its own huntress, of course, for hunts had always been led by women. But Ash had never seen a hunting party as grand as the Royal Hunt. Not a day went by that fall without the sounds of hunting horns in the distance. When she saw the hunters in the village, Ash was transfixed by the sight of them. The women, especially, with their casual camaraderie and easy grace, seemed like entirely different creatures than her stepmother and stepsisters.

Fall turned into winter, and Lady Isobel had the rest of their things sent down from Rook Hill. The day the trunks arrived was a harsh reminder to Ash of how much her life had changed since the summer. When she opened her trunk, it smelled of the house at Rook Hill, and it all came back: the way her father smiled at her on her birthday. The sound of her mother's laughter. The time she and her parents had walked into Rook Hill on a fall day, the leaves as gold as coins, the air crisp and dry. When the memories came, Ash felt her heart constrict as if she were being bound by ropes so tight she would lose all breath. It hurt in a way she had never felt before, and she did not know how to make it stop.

As Yule approached, with all of its attendant memories—the smell of pastries in the oven, the spicy tang of pine boughs in the house—she thought the pain might never cease. Yule week in Rook Hill was celebrated with nightly gatherings at different houses throughout the village, where friends and family shared stories about the years past. The week culminated in a masque, where the villagers dressed in fantastical costumes as kings and queens and witches and fairies, going from door to door to bring each family to the bonfire in the village green. Ash had loved the roar of the fire—it sounded like a wild beast, crackling and growling and hot as summer. She remembered her mother, dressed in paper crown and red velvet cloak, blowing kisses across the flames to her father, dressed as a joker with gold and silver baubles hanging from his cap.

This winter, Yule would be a much more subdued affair, “out of respect for my husband's untimely passing,” Lady Isobel declared. She would refrain from wearing a costume, though she had ordered matching shepherdess dresses for Ana and Clara. “You must wear your black dress,” Lady Isobel told Ash one night at supper. “It is not right for you to celebrate this year.”

All week Beatrice and the chambermaid, Sara, had been at work in the kitchen, preparing pastries and sweetmeats for Lady Isobel's feast on Yule night. Ash and Ana and Clara waited in the parlor, watching as the musicians set up in the front hall. Shortly before the first guests arrived, Lady Isobel came downstairs dressed in a gown of black velvet and lace, with a headdress made of black feathers rising from her auburn hair. Even Ash had to admit that she was an imposing figure, and when she gathered Ana and Clara to her to kiss their beribboned heads, Ash felt like a sparrow among peacocks.

That night the house was full of light and noise, with people dressed as soldiers and queens and

dancers and chieftains. Ash watched them laughing and dancing from her corner in the front hall, and no one noticed her. Halfway through the evening there was a pounding on the front door, and when Lady Isobel opened it there seemed to be a gang of thieves on the doorstep—half a dozen men dressed in worn leather with caps pulled low over their heads, and hands that seemed to be stained with blood. Even Lady Isobel recoiled at the unexpected ferocity of these visitors, until the men were pushed aside and a woman dressed in hunting gear threw back her green hooded cloak to reveal a smiling face. “Don’t mind my men,” she said, bowing to Lady Isobel, her dark blond hair falling over her shoulder in a thick braid. “We come bearing new meat—in return, of course, for a drink or two.” The men behind her cheered loudly and thrust forward into the room, one of them carrying the head of a stag, its dead eyes glassy, the tongue hanging out of its slightly open mouth.

Visibly shaken, Lady Isobel called for Beatrice to attend them, and Ash wondered if it was customary in West Riding for the hunt to come in like that, all bloody and fresh from the kill. But Beatrice came forward without a word and led two of the men and their haunch of venison into the kitchen. The man with the stag’s head began to go into the parlor, but the huntress caught his arm and said something to him in a curt, low tone of voice, and he looked sheepish and took the head outside. The huntress saw Ash then, standing with her back to the wall. She must have had a stricken expression on her face because the huntress smiled at her and said, “I’m sorry if my boys frightened you. They mean no harm; they’ve just been in the Wood for too long.”

“I’m not frightened,” Ash said, although she had been, just a little. “Did you hunt all day?”

“Yes,” the huntress said, pulling off her cloak and beginning to yank off her thick leather gloves. “But it’s all right if you were afraid,” she said with a sideways look at Ash. “It’s smart to be afraid of things that smell of death.” She came closer to the girl and bent toward her, putting a firm hand on Ash’s shoulder. “Just don’t be afraid to look them in the eye,” she said with a grin, and then ruffled Ash’s hair before moving on into the dining room. No one else had paid the slightest attention to her all night, and Ash felt as though the huntress had suddenly called her into being. She slid out from her corner and went after her, watching as the huntress took a seat at the long table with one of her men and a masked reveler dressed as a queen. When they saw Ash standing hesitantly nearby, the man asked, “Whose child is that?”

The huntress looked over at her. “Come and sit with us,” she said.

The woman dressed as a queen smiled at her and asked, “Are you hungry?”

Ash shook her head but came and sat next to the huntress as Sara poured wine into their goblets. “Where is your costume tonight?” the huntress asked. All around them the guests were dressed as princesses or lords, their masks glittering with garnets and plumed with feathers.

“I do not have one,” Ash answered.

“Poor thing,” said the masked queen. “She needs cheering up.”

“You could tell her a story,” the man prompted, looking at the huntress.

The masked queen said, “Yes, a story—a hunting story!”

The huntress grinned and asked Ash, “Is that what you’d like?”

Ash colored, but said, “Yes, I would.”

“Very well, then,” said the huntress. “I will tell you the story of Eilis and the Changeling. Do you know that tale?”

Ash shook her head.

“Eilis was one of our earliest huntresses; King Roland called her to service when she was only eighteen, and many people questioned whether she was ready to lead the Royal Hunt,” the huntress explained. “The same year that Eilis was chosen, the Queen gave birth to her first child, a girl. But our

sample content of Ash

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