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The Folk of the Air series

The Cruel Prince

The Wicked King

The Queen of Nothing

How the King of Elfhame Learned to Hate Stories

THE QUEEN OF NOTHING

HOLLY BLACK

HOT
KEY
BOOKS

Cardan forced a laugh as he relaxed the bowstring, letting the arrow fall out of the notch. "I simply will not shoot under these conditions," he said, feeling ridiculous at having backed down. "The wind is coming from the north and mussing my hair. It's getting all in my eyes."

But Prince Dain raised his bow and loosed the arrow Cardan had exchanged with him. It struck the mortal through the throat. He dropped with almost no sound, eyes still open, now staring at nothing.

It happened so fast that Cardan didn't cry out, didn't react. He just stared at his brother, slow, terrible understanding crashing over him.

"Ah," said Prince Dain with a satisfied smile. "A shame. It seems *your* arrow went awry. Perhaps you can complain to our father about that hair in your eyes."

After, though he protested, no one would hear Prince Cardan's side. Dain saw to that. He told the story of the youngest prince's recklessness, his arrogance, his arrow. The High King would not even allow Cardan an audience.

Despite Val Moren's pleas for execution, Cardan was punished for the mortal's death in the way that princes are punished. The High King had Lady Asha locked away in the Tower of Forgetting in Cardan's stead—something Eldred was relieved to have a reason to do, since he found her both tiresome and troublesome. Care of Prince Cardan was given over to Balekin, the eldest of the siblings, the cruelest, and the only one willing to take him.

And so was Prince Cardan's reputation made. He had little to do but further it.



CHAPTER

1

I, Jude Duarte, High Queen of Elfhome in exile, spend most mornings dozing in front of daytime television, watching cooking competitions and cartoons and reruns of a show where people have to complete a gauntlet by stabbing boxes and bottles and cutting through a whole fish. In the afternoons, if he lets me, I train my brother, Oak. Nights, I run errands for the local faeries.

I keep my head down, as I probably should have done in the first place. And if I curse Cardan, then I have to curse myself, too, for being the fool who walked right into the trap he set for me.

As a child, I imagined returning to the mortal world. Taryn and Vivi and I would rehash what it was like there, recalling the scents of fresh-cut grass and gasoline, reminiscing over playing tag through neighborhood backyards and bobbing in the bleachy chlorine of summer pools. I dreamed of iced tea, reconstituted from powder, and orange

I have to grind my teeth together to keep from screaming. “I can’t, as you know, because I’m in exile,” I remind him.

He stamps a hooved foot. “So am I! And the only reason I’m in the human world is because Dad wants the stupid crown and you want it and everyone wants it. Well, I don’t. It’s cursed.”

“All power is cursed,” I say. “The most terrible among us will do anything to get it, and those who’d wield power best don’t want it thrust upon them. But that doesn’t mean they can avoid their responsibilities forever.”

“You can’t make me be High King,” he says, and wheeling away from me, breaks into a run in the direction of the apartment building.

I sit down on the cold ground, knowing that I screwed up the conversation completely. Knowing that Madoc trained Taryn and me better than I am training Oak. Knowing that I was arrogant and foolish to think I could control Cardan.

Knowing that in the great game of princes and queens, I have been swept off the board.



Inside the apartment, Oak’s door is shut firmly against me. Vivienne, my faerie sister, stands at the kitchen counter, grinning into her phone.

When she notices me, she grabs my hands and spins me around and around until I’m dizzy.

“Heather loves me again,” she says, wild laughter in her voice.

Heather was Vivi’s human girlfriend. She’d put up with Vivi’s evasions about her past. She even put up with Oak’s coming to live with them in this apartment. But when she found out that Vivi wasn’t human *and* that Vivi had used magic on her, she dumped her and moved out. I

hate to say this, because I want my sister to be happy—and Heather did make her happy—but it was a richly deserved dumping.

I pull away to blink at her in confusion. “What?”

Vivi waves her phone at me. “She texted me. She wants to come back. Everything is going to be like it was before.”

Leaves don’t grow back onto a vine, cracked walnuts don’t fit back into their shells, and girlfriends who’ve been enchanted don’t just wake up and decide to let things slide with their terrifying exes.

“Let me see that,” I say, reaching for Vivi’s phone. She allows me to take it.

I scroll back through the texts, most of them coming from Vivi and full of apologies, ill-considered promises, and increasingly desperate pleas. On Heather’s end, there was a lot of silence and a few messages that read “I need more time to think.”

Then this:

I want to forget Faerie. I want to forget that you and Oak aren’t human. I don’t want to feel like this anymore. If I asked you to make me forget, would you?

I stare at the words for a long moment, drawing in a breath.

I can see why Vivi has read the message the way she has, but I think she’s read it wrong. If I’d written that, the last thing I would want was for Vivi to agree. I’d want her to help me see that even if Vivi and Oak weren’t human, they still loved me. I would want Vivi to insist that pretending away Faerie wouldn’t help. I would want Vivi to tell me that she’d made a mistake and that she’d never ever make that mistake again, no matter what.

If I'd sent that text, it would be a test.

I hand the phone back to Vivi. "What are you going to tell her?"

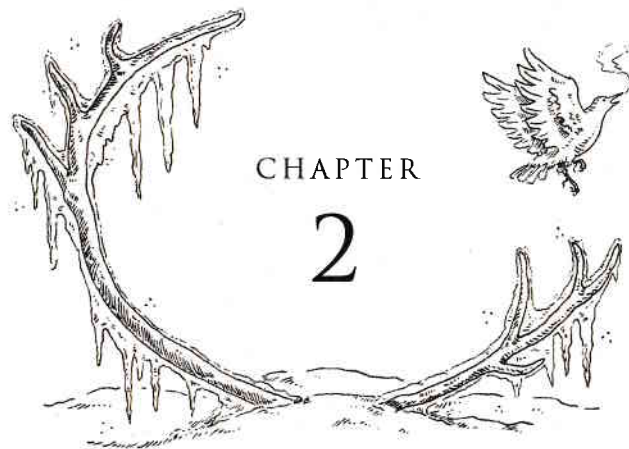
"That I'll do whatever she wants," my sister says, an extravagant vow for a mortal and a downright terrifying vow from someone who would be bound to that promise.

"Maybe she doesn't know what she wants," I say. I am disloyal no matter what I do. Vivi is my sister, but Heather is human. I owe them both something.

And right now, Vivi isn't interested in supposing anything but that all will be well. She gives me a big, relaxed smile and picks up an apple from the fruit bowl, tossing it in the air. "What's wrong with Oak? He stomped in here and slammed his door. Is he going to be this dramatic when he's a teenager?"

"He doesn't want to be High King," I tell her.

"Oh. That." Vivi glances toward his bedroom. "I thought it was something important."



CHAPTER

2

Tonight, it's a relief to head to work.

Faeries in the mortal world have a different set of needs than those in Elfhome. The solitary fey, surviving at the edges of Faerie, do not concern themselves with revels and courtly machinations.

And it turns out they have plenty of odd jobs for someone like me, a mortal who knows their ways and isn't worried about getting into the occasional fight. I met Bryern a week after I left Elfhome. He turned up outside the apartment complex, a black-furred, goat-headed, and goat-hooved faerie with bowler hat in hand, saying he was an old friend of the Roach.

"I understand you're in a unique position," he said, looking at me with those strange golden goat eyes, their black pupils a horizontal rectangle. "Presumed dead, is that correct? No Social Security number. No mortal schooling."

"And looking for work," I told him, figuring out where this was going. "Off the books."

"You cannot get any further off the books than with me," he assured me, placing one clawed hand over his heart. "Allow me to introduce myself. Bryern. A phooka, if you hadn't already guessed."

He didn't ask for oaths of loyalty or any promises whatsoever. I could work as much as I wanted, and the pay was commensurate with my daring.

Tonight, I meet him by the water. I glide up on the secondhand bike I acquired. The back tire deflates quickly, but I got it cheap. It works pretty well to get me around. Bryern is dressed with typical fussiness: His hat has a band decorated with a few brightly colored duck feathers, and he's paired that with a tweed jacket. As I come closer, he withdraws a watch from one pocket and peers at it with an exaggerated frown.

"Oh, am I late?" I ask. "Sorry. I'm used to telling time by the slant of moonlight."

He gives me an annoyed look. "Just because you've lived in the High Court, you need not put on airs. You're no one special now."

I am the High Queen of Elfhome. The thought comes to me unbidden, and I bite the inside of my cheek to keep myself from saying those ridiculous words. He's right: I am no one special now.

"What's the job?" I ask instead, as blandly as I can.

"One of the Folk in Old Port has been eating locals. I have a contract for someone willing to extract a promise from her to cease."

I find it hard to believe that he cares what happens to humans—or cares enough to pay for me to do something about it. "Local *mortals*?"

He shakes his head. "No. No. Us Folk." Then he seems to remember

to whom he's speaking and looks a little flustered. I try not to take his slip as a compliment.

Killing and eating the Folk? Nothing about that signals an easy job. "Who's hiring?"

He gives a nervous laugh. "No one who wants their name associated with the deed. But they're willing to remunerate you for making it happen."

One of the reasons Bryern likes hiring me is that I can get close to the Folk. They don't expect a mortal to be the one to pickpocket them or to stick a knife in their side. They don't expect a mortal to be unaffected by glamour or to know their customs or to see through their terrible bargains.

Another reason is, I need the money enough that I'm willing to take jobs like this—ones that I know right from the start are going to suck.

"Address?" I ask, and he slips me a folded paper.

I open it and glance down. "This better pay well."

"Five hundred American dollars," he says, as though this is an extravagant sum.

Our rent is twelve hundred a month, not to mention groceries and utilities. With Heather gone, my half is about eight hundred. And I'd like to get a new tire for my bike. Five hundred isn't nearly enough, not for something like this.

"Fifteen hundred," I counter, raising my eyebrows. "In cash, verifiable by iron. Half up front, and if I don't come back, you pay Vivienne the other half as a gift to my bereaved family."

Bryern presses his lips together, but I know he's got the money. He just doesn't want to pay me enough that I can get choosy about jobs.

"A thousand," he compromises, reaching into a pocket inside his tweed jacket and withdrawing a stack of bills banded by a silver clip. "And look, I have half on me right now. You can take it."

"Fine," I agree. It's a decent paycheck for what could be a single night's work if I'm lucky.

He hands over the cash with a sniff. "Let me know when you've completed the task."

There's an iron fob on my key chain. I run it ostentatiously over the edges of the money to make sure it's real. It never hurts to remind Bryern that I'm careful.

"Plus fifty bucks for expenses," I say on impulse.

He frowns. After a moment, he reaches into a different part of his jacket and hands over the extra cash. "Just take care of this," he says. The lack of quibbling is a bad sign. Maybe I should have asked more questions before I agreed to this job. I definitely should have negotiated harder.

Too late now.

I get back on my bike and, with a farewell wave to Bryern, kick off toward downtown. Once upon a time, I imagined myself as a knight astride a steed, glorying in contests of skill and honor. Too bad my talents turned out to lie in another direction entirely.

I suppose I am a skilled enough murderer of Folk, but what I really excel at is getting under their skin. Hopefully that will serve me well in persuading a cannibal faerie to do what I want.

Before I go to confront her, I decide to ask around.

First, I see a hob named Magpie, who lives in a tree in Deering Oaks Park. He says he's heard she's a redcap, which isn't great news, but at least since I grew up with one, I am well informed about their nature.

Redcaps crave violence and blood and murder—in fact, they get a little twitchy when there's none to be had for stretches of time. And if they're traditionalists, they have a cap they dip in the blood of their vanquished enemies, supposedly to grant them some stolen vitality of the slain.

I ask for a name, but Magpie doesn't know. He sends me to Ladhar, a clurichaun who slinks around the back of bars, sucking froth from the tops of beers when no one is looking and swindling mortals in games of chance.

"You didn't know?" Ladhar says, lowering his voice. "*Grima Mog*."

I almost accuse him of lying, despite knowing better. Then I have a brief, intense fantasy of tracking down Bryern and making him choke on every dollar he gave me. "What the hell is *she* doing *here*?"

Grima Mog is the fearsome general of the Court of Teeth in the North. The same Court that the Roach and the Bomb escaped from. When I was little, Madoc read to me at bedtime from the memoirs of her battle strategies. Just thinking about facing her, I break out in a cold sweat.

I can't fight her. And I don't think I have a good chance of tricking her, either.

"Given the boot, I hear," Ladhar says. "Maybe she ate someone Lady Nore liked."

I don't have to do this job, I remind myself. I am no longer part of Dain's Court of Shadows. I am no longer trying to rule from behind High King Cardan's throne. I don't need to take big risks.

But I am curious.

Combine that with an abundance of wounded pride and you find yourself on the front steps of Grima Mog's warehouse around dawn. I know better than to go empty-handed. I've got raw meat from a butcher

shop chilling in a Styrofoam cooler, a few sloppily made honey sandwiches wrapped in foil, and a bottle of decent sour beer.

Inside, I wander down a hall until I come to the door to what appears to be an apartment. I knock three times and hope that if nothing else, maybe the smell of the food will cover up the smell of my fear.

The door opens, and a woman in a housecoat peers out. She's bent over, leaning on a polished cane of black wood. "What do you want, deary?"

Seeing through her glamour as I do, I note the green tint to her skin and her overlarge teeth. Like my foster father: Madoc. The guy who killed my parents. The guy who read me her battle strategies. Madoc, once the Grand General of the High Court. Now enemy of the throne and not real happy with me, either.

Hopefully he and High King Cardan will ruin each other's lives.

"I brought you some gifts," I say, holding up the cooler. "Can I come in? I want to make a bargain."

She frowns a little.

"You can't keep eating random Folk without someone being sent to try to persuade you to stop," I say.

"Perhaps I will eat *you*, pretty child," she counters, brightening. But she steps back to allow me into her lair. I guess she can't make a meal of me in the hall.

The apartment is loft-style, with high ceilings and brick walls. Nice. Floors polished and glossed up. Big windows letting in light and a decent view of the town. It's furnished with old things. The tufting on a few of the pieces is torn, and there are marks that could have come from a stray cut of a knife.

The whole place smells like blood. A coppery, metal smell, overlaid with a slightly cloying sweetness. I put my gifts on a heavy wooden table.

"For you," I say. "In the hopes you'll overlook my rudeness in calling on you uninvited."

She sniffs at the meat, turns a honey sandwich over in her hand, and pops off the cap on the beer with her fist. Taking a long draught, she looks me over.

"Someone instructed you in the niceties. I wonder why they bothered, little goat. You're obviously the sacrifice sent in the hopes my appetite can be sated with mortal flesh." She smiles, showing her teeth. It's possible she dropped her glamour in that moment, although, since I saw through it already, I can't tell.

I blink at her. She blinks back, clearly waiting for a reaction.

By not screaming and running for the door, I have annoyed her. I can tell. I think she was looking forward to chasing me when I ran.

"You're Grima Mog," I say. "Leader of armies. Destroyer of your enemies. Is this really how you want to spend your retirement?"

"*Retirement?*" She echoes the word as though I have dealt her the deadliest insult. "Though I have been cast down, I will find another army to lead. An army bigger than the first."

Sometimes I tell myself something a lot like that. Hearing it aloud, from someone else's mouth, is jarring. But it gives me an idea. "Well, the local Folk would prefer not to get eaten while you're planning your next move. Obviously, being human, I'd rather you didn't eat mortals—I doubt they'd give you what you're looking for anyway."

She waits for me to go on.

"A challenge," I say, thinking of everything I know about redcaps.