

LBRIS

We know
books

Books by Holly Black

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 Stolen Heir

THE WICKED KING

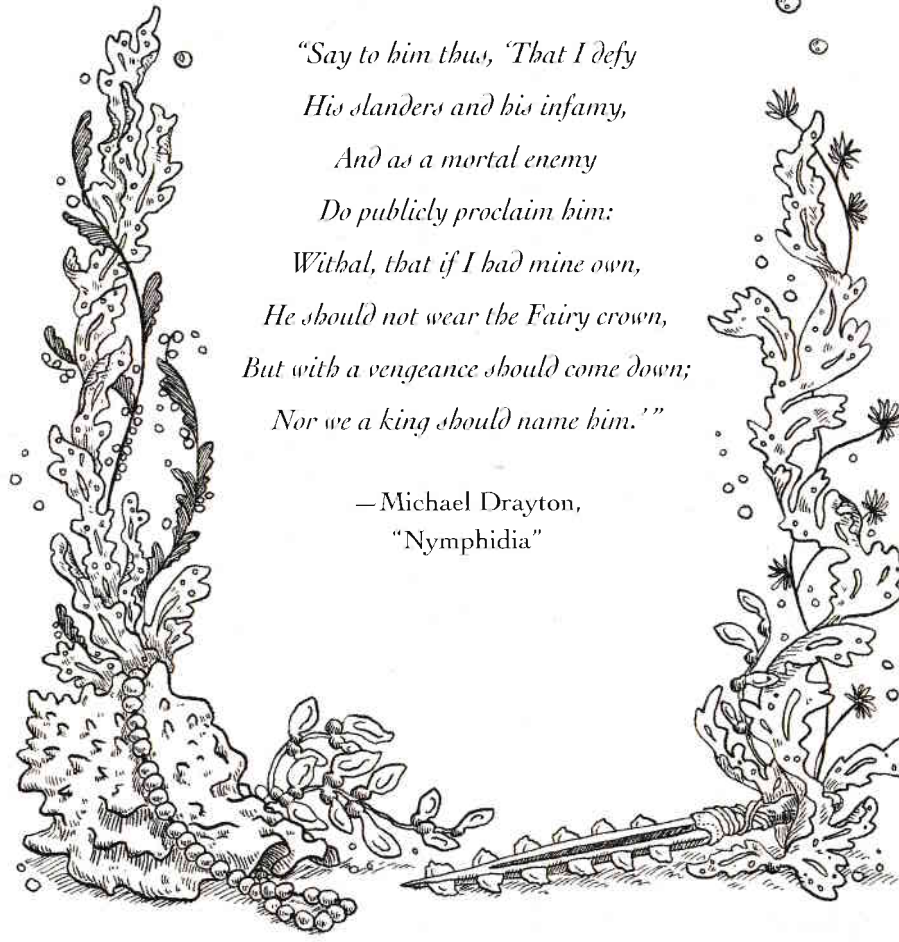
HOLLY BLACK

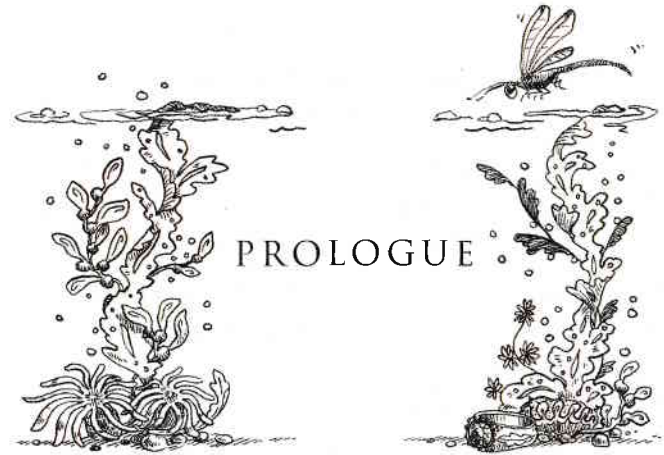
HOT
KEY
BOOKS

Book One

*"Say to him thus, 'That I defy
His slanders and his infamy,
And as a mortal enemy
Do publicly proclaim him:
Withal, that if I had mine own,
He should not wear the Fairy crown,
But with a vengeance should come down;
Nor we a king should name him.'"*

—Michael Drayton,
"Nymphidia"





Jude lifted the heavy practice sword, moving into the first stance—readiness.

Get used to the weight, Madoc had told her. You must be strong enough to strike and strike and strike again without tiring. The first lesson is to make yourself that strong.

It will hurt. Pain makes you strong.

She planted her feet in the grass. Wind ruffled her hair as she moved through the stances. One: the sword before her, canted to one side, protecting her body. Two: the pommel high, as though the blade were a horn coming from her head. Three: down to her hip, then in a deceptively casual droop in front of her. Then four: up again, to her shoulder. Each position could move easily into a strike or a defense. Fighting was chess, anticipating the move of one's opponent and countering it before one got hit.

But it was chess played with the whole body. Chess that left her



bruised and tired and frustrated with the whole world and with herself, too.

Or maybe it was more like riding a bike. When she'd been learning to do that, back in the real world, she'd fallen lots of times. Her knees had been scabby enough that Mom thought she might have scars. But Jude had taken off her training wheels herself and disdained riding carefully on the sidewalk, as Taryn did. Jude wanted to ride in the street, fast, like Vivi, and if she got gravel embedded in her skin for it, well, then she'd let Dad pick it out with tweezers at night.

Sometimes Jude longed for her bike, but there were none in Faerie. Instead, she had giant toads and thin greenish ponies and wild-eyed horses slim as shadows.

And she had weapons.

And her parents' murderer, now her foster father. The High King's general, Madoc, who wanted to teach her how to ride too fast and how to fight to the death. No matter how hard she swung at him, it just made him laugh. He liked her anger. *Fire*, he called it.

She liked it when she was angry, too. Angry was better than scared. Better than remembering she was a mortal among monsters. No one was offering her the option of training wheels anymore.

On the other side of the field, Madoc was guiding Taryn through a series of stances. Taryn was learning the sword, too, although she had different problems than Jude. Her stances were more perfect, but she hated sparring. She paired the obvious defenses with the obvious attacks, so it was easy to lure her into a series of moves and then score a hit by breaking the pattern. Each time it happened, Taryn got mad, as though Jude were flubbing the steps of a dance rather than winning.

"Come here," Madoc called to Jude across the silvery expanse of grass.

She walked to him, sword slung over her shoulders. The sun was just setting, but faeries are twilight creatures, and their day was not even half done. The sky was streaked with copper and gold. She inhaled a deep breath of pine needles. For a moment, she felt as though she were just a kid learning a new sport.

"Come spar," he said when Jude got closer. "Both of you girls against this old redcap." Taryn leaned against her sword, the tip of it sinking into the ground. She wasn't supposed to hold it that way—it wasn't good for the blade—but Madoc didn't reprimand her.

"Power," he said. "Power is the ability to get what you want. Power is the ability to be the one making the decisions. And how do we get power?"

Jude stepped beside her twin. It was obvious that Madoc expected a response, but also that he expected the wrong one. "We learn how to fight well?" she said to say *something*.

When Madoc smiled at her, she could see the points of his bottom cuspids, longer than the rest of his teeth. He tousled her hair, and she felt the sharp edges of his clawlike nails against her scalp, too light to hurt, but a reminder of what he was nonetheless. "We get power by taking it."

He pointed toward a low hill with a thorn tree growing on it. "Let's make a game of the next lesson. That's my hill. Go ahead and take it."

Taryn dutifully trooped toward it, Jude behind her. Madoc kept pace, his smile all teeth.

"Now what?" Taryn asked, without any particular excitement.



Madoc looked into the distance, as though he was contemplating and discarding various rules. “Now hold it against attack.”

“Wait, what?” Jude asked. “From you?”

“Is this a strategy game or a sparring practice?” Taryn asked, frowning.

Madoc brought one finger under her chin, raising her head until she was looking into his golden cat eyes. “What is sparring but a game of strategy, played at speed?” he told her with a great seriousness. “Talk with your sister. When the sun reaches the trunk of that tree, I will come for my hill. Knock me down but once and you both win.”

Then he departed for a copse of trees some ways away. Taryn sat down on the grass.

“I don’t want to do this,” she said.

“It’s just a game,” Jude reminded her nervously.

Taryn gave her a long look—the one that they gave each other when one of them was pretending things were normal. “Okay, so what do *you* think we should do?”

Jude looked up into the branches of the thorn tree. “What if one of us threw rocks while the other did the sparring?”

“Okay,” Taryn said, pushing herself up and beginning to gather stones into the folds of her skirts. “You don’t think he’ll get mad, do you?”

Jude shook her head, but she understood Taryn’s question. What if he killed them by accident?

You’ve got to choose which hill to die on, Mom used to tell Dad. It had been one of those weird sayings adults expected her to understand, even though they made no sense—like “one in the hand is worth two in the bush” or “every stick has two ends” or the totally mysterious “a cat

may look at a king.” Now, standing on an actual hill with a sword in her hand, she understood it a lot better.

“Get into position,” Jude said, and Taryn wasted no time in climbing the thorn tree. Jude checked the sunmark, wondering what sort of tricks Madoc might use. The longer he waited, the darker it would get, and while he could see in the dark, Jude and Taryn could not.

But, in the end, he didn’t use any tricks. He came out of the woods and in their direction, howling as though he were leading an army of a hundred. Jude’s knees went weak with terror.

This is just a game, she reminded herself frantically. The closer he got, though, the less her body believed her. Every animal instinct strained to run.

Their strategy seemed silly now in the face of his hugeness and their smallness, in the face of her fear. She thought of her mother bleeding on the ground, recalled the smell of her insides as they leaked out. The memory felt like thunder in her head. She was going to die.

Run, her whole body urged. *RUN!*

No, her mother had run. Jude planted her feet.

She made herself move into the first position, even though her legs felt wobbly. He had the advantage, even coming up that hill, because he had momentum on his side. The stones raining down on him from Taryn barely checked his pace.

Jude spun out of the way, not even bothering to try to block the first blow. Putting the tree between them, she dodged his second and third. When the fourth one came, it knocked her to the grass.

She closed her eyes against the killing strike.

“You can take a thing when no one’s looking. But defending it, even with all the advantage on your side, is no easy task,” Madoc told her

with a laugh. She looked up to find him offering her a hand. "Power is much easier to acquire than it is to hold on to."

Relief broke over her. It was just a game, after all. Just another lesson.

"That wasn't fair," Taryn complained.

Jude didn't say anything. Nothing was fair in Faerie. She had learned to stop expecting it to be.

Madoc hauled Jude to her feet and threw a heavy arm over her shoulders. He drew her and her twin in for an embrace. He smelled like smoke and dried blood, and Jude let herself sag against him. It was good to be hugged. Even by a monster.



The new High King of Faerie lounges on his throne, his crown resting at an insouciant angle, his long, villainously scarlet cloak pinned at his shoulders and sweeping the floor. An earring shines from the peak of one pointed ear. Heavy rings glitter along his knuckles. His most ostentatious decoration, however, is his soft, sullen mouth.

It makes him look every bit the jerk that he is.

I stand to one side of him, in the honored position of seneschal. I am supposed to be High King Cardan's most trusted advisor, and so I play that part, rather than my real role—the hand behind the throne, with the power to compel him to obey should he try to cross me.

Scanning the crowd, I look for a spy from the Court of Shadows. They intercepted a communication from the Tower of Forgetting, where Cardan's brother is jailed, and are bringing it to me instead of to its intended recipient.

And that's only the latest crisis.

It's been five months since I forced Cardan onto the throne of Elf-hame as my puppet king, five months since I betrayed my family, since my sister carried my little brother to the mortal realm and away from the crown that he might have worn, since I crossed swords with Madoc.

Five months since I've slept for more than a few hours at a stretch.

It seemed like a good trade—a very *faerie* trade, even: put someone who despised me on the throne so that Oak would be out of danger. It was thrilling to trick Cardan into promising to serve me for a year and a day, exhilarating when my plan came together. Then, a year and a day seemed like forever. But now I must figure out how to keep him in my power—and out of trouble—for longer than that. Long enough to give Oak a chance to have what I didn't: a childhood.

Now a year and a day seems like no time at all.

And despite having put Cardan on the throne through my own machinations, despite scheming to keep him there, I cannot help being unnerved by how comfortable he looks.

Faerie rulers are tied to the land. They are the lifeblood and the beating heart of their realm in some mystical way that I don't fully understand. But surely Cardan isn't that, not with his commitment to being a layabout who does none of the real work of governance.

Mostly, his obligations appear to be allowing his ring-covered hands to be kissed and accepting the blandishments of the Folk. I'm sure he enjoys that part of it—the kisses, the bowing and scraping. He's certainly enjoying the wine. He calls again and again for his cabochon-encrusted goblet to be refilled with a pale green liquor. The very smell of it makes my head spin.

During a lull, he glances up at me, raising one black brow. "Enjoying yourself?"



"Not as much as you are," I tell him.

No matter how much he disliked me when we were in school, that was a guttering candle to the steady flame of his hatred now. His mouth curls into a smile. His eyes shine with wicked intent. "Look at them all, your subjects. A shame not a one knows who their true ruler is."

My face heats a little at his words. His gift is to take a compliment and turn it into an insult, a jab that hurts more for the temptation to take it at face value.

I spent so many revels avoiding notice. Now everyone sees me, bathed in candlelight, in one of the three nearly identical black doublets I wear each evening, my sword Nightfell at my hip. They twirl in their circle dances and play their songs, they drink their golden wine and compose their riddles and their curses while I look down on them from the royal dais. They are beautiful and terrible, and they might despise my mortality, might mock it, but I am up here and they are not.

Of course, perhaps that isn't so different from hiding. Perhaps it is just hiding in plain sight. But I cannot deny that the power I hold gives me a kick, a jolt of pleasure whenever I think on it. I just wish Cardan couldn't tell.

If I look carefully, I can spot my twin sister, Taryn, dancing with Locke, her betrothed. Locke, who I once thought might love me. Locke, whom I once thought I could love. It's Taryn I miss, though. Nights like tonight, I imagine hopping down from the dais and going to her, trying to explain my choices.

Her marriage is only three weeks away, and still we haven't spoken.

I keep telling myself I need her to come to me first. She played me for a fool with Locke. I still feel stupid when I look at them. If she won't apologize, then at least she should be the one to pretend there's nothing