Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Tales from the Kingdoms

Written by Sarah Pinborough

Published by Gollancz

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Tales from the Kingdoms

Sarah Pinborough

GOLLANCZ
LONDON

Omnibus copyright © Sarah Pinborough 2016
Interior illustrations copyright © Les Edwards 2013
All rights reserved

Poison copyright © Sarah Pinborough 2013
Charm copyright © Sarah Pinborough 2013
Beauty copyright © Sarah Pinborough 2013

The right of Sarah Pinborough to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in Great Britain in 2016
by Gollancz
An imprint of the Orion Publishing Group
Carmelite House, 50 Victoria Embankment,
London EC4Y 0DZ
An Hachette UK Company

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 473 20233 7

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by Input Data Services Ltd, Bridgwater, Somerset

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

The Orion Publishing Group's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.



www.sarahpinborough.com
www.orionbooks.co.uk
www.gollancz.co.uk

Contents

1. Poison 1
2. Charm 205
3. Beauty 425

Poison
For Paul Kane & Marie O'Regan,
Seeing how happy you two are
gives me faith in true love
(that can, to be fair, be a mean feat at times!)

Charm
For Phyllis, Di and Lindy

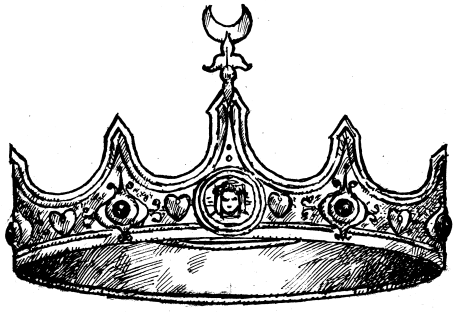
Beauty
For Lou and Joe Abercrombie.
Great friends and great people. With love.

Poison

Sarah Pinborough



GOLLANCZ
LONDON



1

'Air and earth. Light and dark.'

'She's too old for that nickname,' the queen said. She was standing at the window of the royal bedchamber and looking down at the courtyard below. Morning sun beat on the ground, but the air was still chilly. She shivered. 'She needs to start behaving like a lady. A princess.'

'She's young. There's time enough for that yet. And anyway,' the king laughed – a throaty sound that could have been born in the bowels of the earth or in the mud of the battlefield. 'You gave it to her.' He hauled himself out of bed and his footsteps were heavy. *He* was heavy. Getting heavier too. She'd married a glutton.

'She's not that young. Only four years younger than me,' the queen muttered. From behind her came the sound of liquid hitting ceramic and for the

thousandth time she wished he'd have the good grace to at least piss in a different room. 'It was simply a passing remark that she was pale. It wasn't a compliment. It was meant to be a joke.' Her quiet words went unheard as her husband continued noisily with his bodily functions. 'And it was a long time ago,' she whispered, bitterly.

She watched as, far below, the young woman dismounted from her horse. She wore brown breeches and rode with her long legs astride the beast like a man. Her shirt was loose but, as the light breeze touched it, it clung to her slim form, flowing over the curve of her full breasts onto her flat stomach. Her thick raven hair fell around her shoulders and as she handed the reins of her stallion to the stable boy she tossed the dark mane to one side and the sunlight shone on it. She smiled and touched the boy's arm, and they shared a joke that made her laugh out loud. Cherry red lips. Pale skin with just a touch of dusky rose on her cheeks. Sparkling violet eyes. A living swirl of clichés. So free. So *care*free.

The queen's mouth tightened. 'She shouldn't ride in the forest so early. It isn't safe. And she shouldn't ride anywhere dressed like a common boy.'

'Everyone in the kingdom knows who Snow is,' the king said. 'No one would dare harm her. No one

would want to. She's like her mother; everyone loves her.'

There was no reproach in his voice. The barb was unintended but it stung all the same. The saintly dead wife. The glorified beautiful daughter. The queen's mouth twisted slightly. 'She should be thinking about marriage. Finding a decent match for the kingdom.'

Below, Snow White slapped the horse affectionately on the rear as the boy led him away, and then turned to head into the castle. With the sudden awareness a mouse might get as an owl swoops above it she glanced up, her eyes meeting her step-mother's. Her smile wavered nervously for a second and then she raised her hand in a gesture of hello. The queen did not return it. Snow White dropped her hand.

How did she look from down there, the queen wondered. Did her own blonde hair shine in the sunlight? Or was she merely a resentful ghost – a shadow against the glass? She clenched her delicate jaw. The girl disappeared from view but still the queen's teeth remained gritted. They couldn't both stay in this castle for much longer. She couldn't stand it. She stayed where she was, gazing out of the window, and after a few moments the king came and stood behind her.

'It's still early,' he said, his thick body pressed hard against her back. He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her closer before one hand slid between the ribbons of her nightdress, seeking out her breast. His fingers were rough against her soft skin; a soldier's touch. She let him caress her.

'We should go back to bed,' he whispered hot in her ear. 'You know I go to war again tomorrow.' He pulled her back from the window, one hand inside her clothes as the other tugged at the bows that held it together. 'Show me how much you'll miss me.'

Finally, she turned away from the window and faced him. His eyes were glazed already and that made her smile. It took so very little from her to make him this way. His dead wife might have been well-loved, but she had never had this power. She had never realised her husband was a glutton for everything, or that all men wanted more than just good food on the table and excitement on the battlefield. They wanted excitement in the bedroom too.

She pushed the king back onto the bed and then finished the work he'd started on her shift. It slipped to the floor and she stood naked before him. She smiled and stepped forward, brushing his lips with hers, teasing him, before lowering onto her knees. She met his gaze – hers wanton and challenging, his

powerless and full of need. The knot in her stomach unfurled. He was her puppet. His dead wife might have been loved more than she, but love was irrelevant. She didn't care how much he loved her, it was more important that he *wanted* her. And as much as his attentions were rough and coarse, she had learned how to please him beyond any other he had ever had, her dead predecessor included. He called her his water witch – because if there had ever been a lady of the Lake then she must have looked like her, his new queen who had so enchanted him. And even though he was old enough to be her father, she understood the power that gave her. Men were base. They were manageable. The king was her puppet and she would keep it that way. She hardened her heart and ran her slim fingers across his thighs so her red nails scored his skin slightly.

He flinched. She leaned forward and teased the tip of him with her tongue.

'You are so beautiful,' the king murmured.

Yes, the queen thought. *Yes, I am*. Snow White's face rose unbidden in her mind, and she pushed it angrily away as she took him in her mouth.



The king and his men left the next day in a glorious parade of pomp and ceremony. The queen watched from the battlements as he went off to wage his war against the neighbouring kingdoms. Although it was summer rain fell in a fine mist. Courtiers said that the sky was crying to see their king leave and risk his life for their safety and their kingdom's strength. Lilith, the queen, his water witch, knew better. Rain was just rain, and the king fought for his own ambition, not for his kingdom. It was the one quality she liked about him. The one she could understand.

As the gates opened, he turned and waved up at her and she nodded her farewell, the eyes of the city beyond straining to see her. They waited for her to cry, to show some emotion from behind her icy beauty, but she would not oblige them. She was a queen. She did not perform for the populace. They did not matter to her; they weren't *her* people.

A cheer went up, and the crowd turned their collective gaze from her as if she had been but a momentary distraction. The king's horse stopped as a figure ran towards it; a girl in blue, holding up her dress so the hems didn't get ruined, but still running with the joy of a child who has yet to be corseted instead of cosseted. Snow White. Of course. Above them all

the grey sky broke and a shaft of sunlight struck the castle and its grounds. Where the common people had looked at Lilith with wary fascination, they looked upon the father and daughter – especially the daughter – with fondness and love.

The queen kept her chin high. Her spine was straight from the tight stays that bound her, but it stiffened further at the crude display of emotion taking place below. Snow White reached up on her tip toes as her father leaned forward and she threw her arm around his neck, before handing him something she'd held behind her back. An apple. A bright red, perfect apple, the waxy skin catching the sudden light. The crowd cheered again as the king took the fruit, his face splitting into an enormous grin. Snow White stepped back and then curtseyed, her head bowed; once again the dutiful daughter and princess. The people went wild. Snow White, the queen of their hearts. The girl who could wow them all with something as simple as an apple. Everything was so easy for beautiful, lovable, perfect Snow White.

Lilith did not wait for the gates to close behind her husband, but turned and stormed haughtily back into the castle. The king was gone. The last time he had gone to war she had been a young bride, but now she was a woman. A queen. She was in charge

and this time she'd make sure her presence was felt.

The drizzle developed into a storm and the whole castle was enveloped in a gloomy hush. The queen did not go to the formal banqueting room for dinner, but instead had a small supper sent to her room. She waited until the last minute, knowing that the cooks would have prepared several roasted meats and delicacies for her to choose from, before she sent a servant to fetch only bread and cheese and wine. The cooks would moan about the waste in a way they never would if the king did the same, but none would do it to her face and that was all that mattered. The king would be gone a long time and the sooner they learned to do as they were told the better. She had been forced to this kingdom and her marriage much against her will but she was learning to make the best of it. Her life could have been much worse.

Waiting for her bath to be filled, she gazed out at the rain and the distant glow of the foundries and the mines where the dwarves laboured. Each team worked long shifts and the fires never went out. This was a hardy land and the dwarves were the hardiest of its peoples. She wondered sometimes if they were hardy simply from years spent breaking their backs at the rock face, but when she'd mentioned it to the king he'd grown angry. He'd said that the dwarves

enjoyed their work. Hadn't she heard them singing? Her words had stung him – he didn't like to be seen as unkind, even by her.

She had kept her thoughts to herself after that, but she could remember men who sang from the land of her own birth. Those men had been captured in foreign lands and brought across the seas, their dark skin so different from the milky cream of her own, and they too had sung as they'd been forced to beat at the earth and dig fresh roads. Sometimes a song was all a people had.

In its way the king's reaction, however, had amused her. What was this need to be seen as benevolent? If you were going to be cruel, then admit it. Embrace it. Anything else was just self-delusion and weakness.

The clatter of horse's hooves sung out above the rain and she opened the window to peer out into the evening. The rain was cold on her face and she squinted against it. The slim, cloaked figure on the horse was holding a heavily laden basket, and a wisp of dark hair was blowing free in the wind.



'I've changed my mind,' the queen said haughtily. 'I'd like my dinner now.'

The cooks and scullery maids kept their heads down. She could see their skin flushing from the rarity of this visit. She was the queen. She did not venture to the kitchens.

'All of it. I know the courses and I expect to see them all here.' Her words were greeted with silence. Outside, thunder rumbled. She walked carefully along the kitchen table where the platters from the dining room had been laid out. 'And yet they are not. Where is the pigeon? And the venison? There is always a haunch.' Her words were as sharp as the diamonds that covered her, shards of ice filling the air. 'Has one of you stolen it?'

'No, your Majesty.' Finally, the head cook, a fat ageing woman with warts on her chin and yet the softness of expression that told stories of a long and happy marriage and children at her ankles, spoke up. 'You know we would not do that.'

Lilith heard the slight reproach in her voice. As if she were talking to a spoilt child, rather than her queen.

'Then who did?'

'The princess. She said it was a shame for it all to go to waste. She said there were plenty that were in need of such a feast.'

'Who exactly?' Her stomach twisted in a knot of

cold snakes as it so often did when the girl was mentioned, but she remained cool. She was practised at it. 'My husband is a generous king. To say otherwise is treason.'

The servants' heads dipped lower, suddenly aware that they had inadvertently trodden on dangerous ground, but the cook simply twitched an eyebrow.

'The dwarves, your Majesty. She took the food to the dwarves. They've been working through the storm. She's very fond of them.'

'Why was she in the kitchens at all?' The queen continued to move around the table, one slim pale hand poking and touching the dishes, spoiling them for whoever in the room might have thought to eat them for supper. 'This is no place for the royal family.'

'She's always come in here,' the cook said. 'Ever since she was small and the good queen passed away.'

The *good* queen. The word didn't escape her.

'She needed some love,' the cook continued. 'It didn't do her no harm.'

'That's debatable.' Her smile was a razor slash. 'She hardly behaves as a lady of her standing should. I fear your interference has spoiled her.' She drew herself up tall. 'She will not come in here again. If she does, I shall throw whichever of you condones it

into the dungeons. You know the kind of creatures we keep down there. You would not last long.'

'The king would not—'

'The king isn't here,' Lilith cut her off. 'And I doubt he'd be impressed at his fine dinners being given to the dwarves. He won't be here for a long time, so you will do as I command.' She turned to leave, her heavy dress scratching at the floor. 'Oh, and one more thing.' Her cold eyes rested on the cook. 'You are dismissed. Get your things and leave the castle by morning. I will not have you here again.'

The gasps that rippled around the room were satisfaction enough, as was the expression on the woman's face, her mouth and eyes wide in disbelief as if she'd suddenly been slapped hard. In a way she had.

'And count yourself lucky,' the queen added. 'You've all heard the rumours about me. How I enchanted the king? How he calls me his witch? There is magic in my blood and you all know it. I have been kind, old woman. I could have turned you into a crone.'

She did not wait for their reaction but strode away from the suffocating warmth at the heart of the castle. She might not have their love. But she would have their fear.



The only place the queen truly relaxed was in the hidden room she had claimed for her own ever since she arrived. It was in the West Wing of the castle, the side that rarely caught the light and had therefore been mainly abandoned. The servants moved like ghosts through the rooms polishing the floors and ensuring everything sparkled regardless whether any but the queen ever visited.

Her sanctuary was at the back of the great library, a vast and beautiful domed room filled with row upon row of dusty books that held every story and history of this land, some true, some simply believed to be true, some that had somehow become truth as the years had passed. When they had first married the king had intended to clear the library out and turn it into a winter ballroom. What was the point of it? She had persuaded him otherwise. He had always found it hard to resist her persuasion, and when the day came that he could, then she would resort to other means to keep his interest. The rumours aside, she hadn't needed to enchant him *yet*.

Her secret room had no windows but she didn't mind that, preferring the softer light from candles

and lamps as they danced on her treasures. She took a long swallow of red wine and leaned back in her chair, letting her fine blonde hair run down the mahogany back like a waterfall. Tatters of fabric were scattered across the floor and she viewed them with satisfaction. That was one mess she'd have to clean up herself. No servants were allowed in here.

Her gaze grazed the sparkling glass cabinets that housed her possessions. Some she had brought with her on her reluctant journey into marriage, others she had purchased surreptitiously, her nose always checking the wind for the scent of magic, but of late most had come from the boy she sent to search them out. Soon he'd be back again. What would he have found this time? As her great-grandmother had taught her, a wise woman could never have enough magic.

She got to her feet and tugged her black robe tighter, moving through the room and taking comfort from the items and bottled potions and poisons. It wasn't enough to own them, you had to know how and when to use them. More than that, you had to be *prepared* to use them. Her face was reflected in the glass like a ghost on water; fascinating and untouchable. She was beautiful. She had always been the most beautiful woman wherever she was. Ethereal,

that's what they called her, both in her own lands and in this new one which she had been forced to take as her home.

Her mother had the same beauty and it was perhaps only that which had saved them both from burning when her father had discovered that they were cuckoos in the royal nest. When he'd found out about her great-grandmother in the woods, the crone in her candy house, where Lilith had spent childhood days learning the craft and playing with the bones of lost children. When he'd realised a witch's curse ran through their blood, he'd locked them both away for days. But her mother was no fool. She'd used her beauty against him. Lilith had been banished into marriage and her father, the king, had declared that cottage and part of the forest out of bounds. Men would do a lot for beauty, that's what Lilith learned in that time. Beauty had a magic all of its own.

'I know you're in there!' The words were accompanied by a pummelling fist on the door. The queen jumped, her reverie broken. She looked down at the mess on the floor again.

Snow White.

'I know you're in there! Open the door!'

How did she know about this room? No one knew