POISONED

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ONE

The day before . . .

"Tally ho!" shouted the queen, spurring her fierce courser on.

The hounds had flushed their quarry. A gray wolf broke from the cover of a blackbriar patch and ran for the deep woods. The pack swept after it, baying for blood.

The bravest members of the hunting party followed the queen, galloping hard to keep up with her, but the princess, riding a swift, nimble palfrey, boldly streaked past her. She chased the wolf at breakneck speed, weaving in and out of trees, her skirts billowing behind her. She jumped a stone wall, a stream, a tangle of brush so high, there was no telling what lay beyond it. Her hat came off; her black hair unfurled like ribbons of night.

The queen couldn't catch her. Nor could the princes, Haakon and Rodrigo. I saw them flashing through the woods, the queen in white, her nobles in rich hues of russet, moss, and ochre. I saw a baron crouched low over his horse's neck, his hands high up in the animal's mane. He narrowed the distance between himself and the queen, but just as he was about to pass her, his horse stumbled. The baron lost his balance. There was a cry, then a sickening crack as he hit the ground.

"Leave him, huntsman!" the queen shouted. "Leave anyone who falls!"

The man lay crumpled under a tree, his eyes closed, his head bloodied. I thundered past him; the rest of the riders did, too. Only the princess cast a look back.

We trailed the hounds, navigating by their cries, swerving through the woods as they changed direction. I lost sight of the queen as she rode through a pocket of mist, then found her again, some moments later, with the pack. And the princess.

The hounds had surrounded the wolf. The creature was huge and fearsome. It had killed two dogs already. Their broken bodies lay nearby.

And him? Oh, yes. He was there, too.

He was always close by. Watching. Waiting.

I heard him in the wolf's low growl. Felt him in the nervous stamping of the horses. I saw him rise from the depths of the princess's eyes, like a corpse bobbing up in a river.

And then, without warning, the wolf charged the horses, snarling. The palfrey whinnied and reared, but the princess kept her seat. The courser's nostrils flared, he flattened his ears, but he stood his ground as the queen jumped down from her saddle.

Circling the fray, she shouted at the hounds, exhorting them to attack. They did, barking and slavering, snapping at their prey's haunches. The wolf rounded on them, but it was one against many. The hounds knew it and grew bolder, but one, small and slight, hung back from the pack.

The queen saw it; her eyes darkened. "Fight, you coward!" she shouted.

The hound tucked its tail and retreated. Furious, the queen snatched a whip out of a groom's hands and started after the dog.

"Your Grace! The wolf is escaping!"

It was Prince Haakon. He'd just caught up to the pack. The queen threw the whip down and ran to her horse, but by the time she'd swung back into her saddle, the pack—and the princess—was already gone, in hot pursuit once more.

For a long and treacherous mile, the princess pursued the wolf, until a ravine brought them up short. She stopped her horse a few yards from the edge, but the wolf ran right to it. When it saw the sheer drop, it tried to backtrack, but the hounds closed in from the left. A tangle of blackbriar, a good ten feet high, ran from the woods to the edge of the ravine creating a wall on the right. The frantic animal paced back and forth, tensed itself to jump across the chasm, but saw that it was hopeless. Shoulders high, head low, it turned and readied itself for its last fight.

The princess had moved closer. She could see the scruff of white at the animal's throat now, the ragged edge of one ear. The wolf looked up at her, and she saw the fear in its silvery eyes. In a heartbeat, she was out of her saddle. Striding among the frenzied hounds, she drove them back, yelling at them, stamping them away, until she'd created an opening for the wolf.

"Go! Get out of here!" she shouted at the creature.

The wolf spied a small opening at the bottom of the blackbriar. The thorns were curved and cruel; they carved stripes in the desperate creature's snout and tore at its ears, but

it pushed under the dense vines and disappeared. The hounds rushed after it, but their snouts were tender, their hides thin; they could not break through.

The princess thought she was alone; she thought that no one saw this, but I did. I'd caught up to her but stayed hidden. I hunted many things for the queen, not all of them wolves.

I saw the princess lean her head into her horse's lathered neck. I saw a deep weariness settle on her shoulders like a shroud. I saw her press a hand to her chest, as if to soothe a fierce ache under her ribs.

How it cost her, this charade. How it would cost us all.

Hoofbeats sounded in the distance. Shouts echoed. By the time the queen drew up, with Haakon and a few other riders, the princess's back was straight again, her weariness buried.

"I'm afraid our sport is over, Stepmother," she said with feigned regret, nodding at the ravine. "The wolf chose a quicker death."

The queen rode to the edge and looked over it, frowning. "What a pity," she said, "that we are robbed of our kill."

Her eyes traveled to the hounds, then to the blackbriar. Her gaze sharpened. The princess did not see what had caught the queen's attention, for she was climbing back into her saddle, but I did. Snagged in the thorns was a tuft of fur. Gray fur. Wolf's fur.

The queen's frown hardened. "Blow for home, huntsman!" she commanded.

I sounded my trumpet, and the hounds set off, noses skimming the ground. The small, frightened one, her tail still between her legs, skittered along at the edge of the pack. The riders followed, chatting and laughing.

As the hoofbeats faded from the clearing, there was a dry, rustling sound, like the whispering of silk skirts. I looked up and saw a crow, blueblack and shrewd, drop down from the high branch where he'd perched.

He let out a shrill caw, then flew off into the Darkwood. I hear his call still, echoing down the centuries.

It sounded like a warning.

It sounded like a death knell.

It sounded, most of all, like laughter.