

Hate is a clenched fist in my heart. It keeps my nerves numb as I lie in the dark, pretending to be asleep, waiting for my husband's breathing to grow slow and even. It takes some time; he tosses and mumbles before falling still at last. Once I know the draught I poured into his wine has done its work, I slide out of bed and dress as soundlessly as I can, and oh, I can be very quiet indeed—I am well practiced in silence. I do not light a candle. The room is pitch black, for the fire has long since died in the fireplace, but I have no need of sight to find my clothes, to skirt the perils of invisible corners: this has been my bedroom for the past thirteen years—thirteen and a half, to be precise—and I have measured its every inch in hours of wall-to-wall pacing. And a candle might wake Brie and Nibbles, who are such nervous sleepers.

The shoes, the lightest among a hundred ballroom pairs I own, are lined up by the dresser, and the borrowed cloak, the color of shadows, is waiting folded on the chair. As I put it on, I grope for the sewing scissors I slipped into its pocket earlier in the day, and the touch of cold metal reassures me. Ready at last, I tiptoe to my husband's side of the bed—and at once, without warning, I am rattled by a memory of our wedding. The moon was enchanted that night, white as the richest cream, bright as the brightest candle, as is traditional on similar momentous occasions; once he slept, I stared at his profile, outlined by the moon's brilliance against the pillow plush with the Golden Goose down, and cried tears of joy at my great fortune. But tonight, there is no moon, and all I can see is a pool of denser darkness in the dark. For a minute I stand unmoving, just listening to him breathe, until I become aware of the scissors' edge cutting painfully into the palm of my hand. And now I want to cry again, if for a vastly different reason. I do not cry. I bend lower instead and feel amidst the moist swirls of satin sheets. When I alight upon his curls at last, the perfumed waviness of his hair is soft, so very soft, under my fingertips.

I swoop down upon him with the scissors.

The mice do not stir in their walnut-shell beds as I creep out of the bedroom, the snipped lock of hair tucked away in the pouch concealed at my hip, next to a few other things already there: a bunch of dried flowers tied with a fading lavender ribbon, a miniature portrait in a bejeweled locket, a sapphire brooch that I will hand over as payment when all this is over, and fingernail clippings from my husband's left hand.

“It must be the hand he uses to shoot,” the witch told me the night I went to see her.

“Shoot?” I repeated, confused. “Shoot what?”

“How should I know?” she snarled. “Stags, swans, sirens, whatever it might be his pleasure to shoot. They all shoot something, dearie.”

I stayed quiet then, because the echo in the witch’s cave filled all words with a cold, hollow menace and I felt afraid of the treacherous sound of my own voice, and also because I never like to contradict anyone, but I thought: My husband doesn’t shoot, he just signs papers—still, as some of them are execution orders, perhaps it comes to much the same thing? And at dawn of the fall equinox, as instructed, I gathered the yellowing crescents of his left-hand nails off the floor of his changing room before the Singing Maids got to them, hoping it would be enough.

I carry my lantern unlit under the plain gray cloak as I hurry along the corridors. Out of the corner of one eye, I catch the reflection of an escaped blond strand and a pale cheekbone in the glass of a grandfather clock, and pull the hood lower, so no one will wonder where I am going at this late hour. But the hallways are deserted, which is just as it should be, for here, all things run on schedule. Every afternoon, at five o’clock on the dot, porcelain teapots bustle through the palace, knocking on doors with their gleaming spouts, splashing tea into dancing teacups wherever required, after which chandelier crystals begin to tinkle in all the ballrooms, chamber orchestras commence playing repetitive waltzes, and courtiers twirl, one-two-three, one-two-three, and gift one another with fatuous smiles, and dine on roasted quail and little cakes with apricot icing, and talk about the new fashion for pastel-colored gloves. Then the music winds down and they curtsy and part ways until breakfast the following morning, when the busy flock of teapots flits through the hallways once more, steaming with tea, not too strong, plenty of cream, plenty of sugar, every day, every month, every year, over and over again. At this late hour, so close to midnight, everyone is long since in bed. Only once do I meet a solitary candle sprite hurrying to an assignation with a candle burning somewhere, but it is too aquiver to pay my passage any heed; for love makes everyone blind, as simpering court storytellers are forever fond of intoning, quite as if blindness were a happy circumstance in which we all long to share.

Storytellers are dangerous fools, and my eyes are wide open now.

I sweep past dim expanses of reception chambers, past mirrored staircases leading down into multiplied shadows. As I near the Ancestor Gallery, I slow my steps, but the portraits are dozing, the kings snoring mightily, their beards rising and falling, the queens making thin, delicate noises through dusty smiles. No ancestors of *mine*, I tell them soundlessly as I slip by. In the Great Hall, candelabra are ablaze along the walls and two guards stand flanking the iron-bound doors. I freeze, my heart lurching, then see that they, too, are asleep, helmets drooping over ceremonial lances, the gargantuan visitor log book sprawling unattended between the ostentatious flower arrangement and the old-fashioned apparatus on the slumbering concierge's desk. Sliding a little on the marble floor, I steal across to the doors, lean on them with my shoulder, gather all my strength, and push.