

*New York Times* bestselling author of **CINDERELLA IS DEAD**



**SLEEP  
LIKE DEATH**

**KALYNN BAYRON**

BLOOMSBURY

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*For Rolanda, Gwen, Pearl, and Annette*



## CHAPTER 1

It is easier to track an animal—or a person—if it is bleeding.

Drops of crimson in the snow are easy to follow. Blood on fallen autumn leaves or the earth tones of a harvest forest floor is harder to spot but still easier than relying on footprints alone. The method works for tracking people, too. An arrow through the thigh or the flank is sure to leave a trail I can follow.

Tracking is an art. Huntress can spot a leaf bent ever so slightly out of place from a distance. She can tell the weight and age of a bear, a wolf, or a wild boar by leaning close to its tracks and measuring the impression with her fingertips. Her tactics don't work as well on people, which is why I am mostly disinterested. The things I put my mind to must be in service to my true purpose. If the lesson is not shortening the path between myself and my enemy, what is the point? Huntress

has assured me that I will eventually learn to savor the hunt. In my mind, the only way that happens is when I have *him* in my sights.

“Eve,” says Huntress. “I need you to focus.”

Focus.

Easier said than done when I’m lying under a darkening sky, across a scattering of jagged rocks and damp earth, trying to press myself flat so the gathering of deer in the clearing ahead of us can’t see me or the arrow I have trained on them. I prefer the blade, but Huntress insists that I improve upon my skills with the bow. A part of me believes it is because she would prefer not to feel her blade scraping the bones beneath the wounded flesh. She likes the distance a bow provides. I have no such reservations.

Huntress is happy I’ve managed to track the deer to the clearing, but I haven’t been honest with her. I’ve had help. I can still hear him, my gentle helper, as I lie still—the sound is less like a voice and more like a low hum that works its way up my back and settles at the nape of my neck. Each delicate intonation contains a meaning—fear, curiosity, happiness—I know them all. I’ve been listening to the sounds of the forest my entire life.

My helper is pacing on the other side of the meadow, just beyond the tree line. He has brought me here. We have always had an understanding, he and I.

“Draw back the bow and bag us a deer to take back to your mother,” Huntress whispers. “I’m tired of lying in the dirt.”

I notch my arrow and feel the muscles across my back

tense as I pull the bowstring toward my shoulder. I breathe in, listening to the beat of my own heart. My arrow will hit its target if I let it fly between breaths, between beats.

The deer's slender neck is fully exposed. It has wandered just away from the others, but that is enough.

One.

Two.

Three.

I let go and my arrow hits its mark with a soft, wet thud. The animal stumbles and then falls on its side. I stand, shaking off the dirt and damp, and walk into the clearing. The other deer scatter, leaving their fallen friend behind. I kneel at the animal's side and put her out of her misery with my freshly sharpened dagger.

"Good," says Huntress. "We cannot allow them to suffer, and we do not take more than we can use."

"There are some who should suffer," I say.

Huntress pushes a few errant strands of her graying hair away from her face. "That thinking will do you no good." She strides up to me and puts her finger in my shoulder. "Your head should be clear. Revenge, bitterness—arrogance. They'll rot you from the inside."

I sheath my knife and sling my bow across my back.

"You think I'm arrogant?" I ask.

She huffs and slaps me hard on the shoulder. "I *know* you are."

Huntress pulls a length of twine from her bag and ties the deer's legs together so we can transport it back to Castle Veil.



As she busies herself, I spot my helpful friend as he emerges from the underbrush.

His fur is shining and black as the evening sky, as are his wide curious eyes. His tail and each of his four paws are tipped with red. The hum in my head grows louder as he approaches. He is curious. I breathe deep, steadying the beat of my heart.

*I mean you no harm.*

The fox's ears lay flat as he angles his head down in a sort of bow. I tap the ground with the sole of my boot, and he scurries off.

Huntress watches him leave and then glances at me with a look of utter disappointment in her eyes.

"Please tell me you didn't," she sighs, rubbing her temple. "You used the fox to lead us here? Were you even trying to track the deer at all?"

"I tried," I say. "It's harder than it looks."

Huntress straightens up and faces me, her expression pinched. "You have to learn to do it on your own. You must be the one to do the work. You can't cheat every time, Eve."

I don't see why not. I can hear the unique signature of any animal. The hum from the fox is like a twinge behind my neck. Birds are like melodic whistling. Horses are low and resonant. Each animal has a voice that I can hear and understand, each and every one of them. I don't see it as cheating in the way Huntress does. If she had this ability, I know she would use it just as I do.

A rumble ripples through the cloud cover, and there is a loud crack in the distance. The air around me is suddenly

alive, and the pitter-patter of rain sounds on the leaves and branches. Within moments, the sky opens up and we are stuck in a torrential downpour.

“We got the deer, didn’t we?” I ask. “That’s all that matters.”

“It is not all that matters,” Huntress says, her tone clipped. “I’m in awe of your gifts, Eve, you know that, but you can’t just—”

A loud crack splits the overcast sky, and the forest is lit up like midday for a brief moment as lightning arcs over the canopy.

“Wonderful,” Huntress grumbles.

She quickly slides her walking stick through the deer’s legs and motions for me to grab the other end so that we can hoist it up and carry it home.

I reach for the stick when something—a distinct rumble—reverberates in my bones. It is not the thunder or the crack of lightning, but another animal’s call. This is only the second time in my life I’ve heard it. A shudder of fear ripples through me, but I deny it and tightly grasp my dagger.

“Get behind me,” I say.

“What is it?” Huntress asks, panic invading her voice. She glances around, then moves just behind my right shoulder without another word.

Only I can hear the animal’s voice. It sounds in my head, getting louder as the seconds pass, and when I finally see it through the sheeting rain, it is too late to run or hide, though I would have done neither.

Huntress inhales sharply as the wolf steps into the clearing

in front of us. Common wolves wander in and out of Queen's Bridge often enough that people know to avoid them or come prepared with a weapon when traveling through the woods. I know their call, but this is something different. It is not a common wolf at all. It is a dire wolf. A giant of its kind, lethal to nearly anyone or anything that has the unfortunate luck of crossing its path.

Its eyes are level with mine as it moves deeper into the clearing. If it were to stand on its hind legs it would be taller than me by an entire length of my own body. In the rain it is a hulking, monstrous shadow, with yellow eyes and long glinting teeth.

We came to the forest to hunt deer and pheasant. Huntress and I are both armed but not heavily enough to defend ourselves against a wolf this size. Huntress takes a step back and the animal crouches low, pinning its ears back, baring its wicked fangs.

"Do not move," I say in a tone so low it is barely a whisper.

The wolf growls and the sound overpowers even the rain. The wolf sniffs at our kill, and once it has the scent of blood in its nose it becomes protective of the carcass. Claiming it as its own, it now turns to me and settles back on its haunches, preparing to launch itself directly at me.

My heart beats like a bird in a cage as I let my gaze drift to the sky. Thunder rumbles in the distance, and I slowly extend my arm above my head. I open my fingers as the wolf snarls. The massive creature launches itself at me as an arc of white-hot lightning slices through the sky and finds its way to my

outstretched hand. There is always pain when I harness lightning, but I've learned to welcome the shock of it. It reminds me that I am alive and possessed of something more powerful than almost anything or anyone in Queen's Bridge.

I grip the bolt, and as it disconnects itself from the sky it becomes a weapon made of heat and light. A nearly weightless sword, conjured from the storm itself. It is a weapon unlike any other in existence, and it will exist for only this moment. A shudder runs through my body as my skin is raised to gooseflesh.

I pull it through the air as the wolf lands just a few paces ahead of me and digs its paws into the muddy ground, skittering to a full stop. The hum of its unique voice falters inside my head. We stare into each other's eyes. It is a magnificent creature, but I need to get home to my mother. I am all she has left, and I will not be separated from her for any reason.

The wolf prepares to lunge again, but as its gaze drifts to the shining blade, it reconsiders. It sniffs at the deer one more time before skulking off into the underbrush. I don't move until its voice is gone from my head.

Huntress rests her hand on my shoulder, and I open my death grip on the sword. It dissolves into the air with a wispy puff of black smoke as the rain continues to sheet down around us.

"I thought we were in trouble," Huntress says.

"We were," I say as I try to catch my breath. "I haven't seen a wolf that big in years and certainly not anywhere near here."

"There has been one lurking near Rotterdam," Huntress says. "I've heard rumors it is hunting people."

“Gossip,” I say. “Let’s get the deer home.”

Huntress nods, and we begin the long trek through the western forest of Queen’s Bridge toward home.

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Huntress and I carry the deer between us, having left our horses in the stables. It was only meant to be a brief hunt, a tracking exercise with a small prize for our efforts. I hadn’t fully expected us to snare a deer this size, and by the time Castle Veil comes into view, we’re both sweating, exhausted. The rain has stopped and the clouds are moving out, allowing a bit of sallow light to break through.

“Let’s take it to the kitchen immediately,” Huntress says. “I’m sure your mother would enjoy a bit of venison for dinner this evening.”

We haul the animal through the labyrinth of passageways that snake through the castle and drop the spoils of our hunt at the feet of our head cook, Lady Anne. She looks on the kill with disgust.

“Well, what am I supposed to do with this?” Lady Anne asks, her round face slick with sweat, a light dusting of flour covering her apron front. “You didn’t even field dress it?”

“I thought you’d want to do that yourself,” I say. I’ve known Lady Anne my entire life, and I know full well that she can’t stand the sight of blood and has never in all her long years skinned and harvested the edible bits off a freshly killed deer.

“Either you handle it, or I’ll have to call on Mr. Finley to

take care of it.” There’s a little ring to her voice when she says Mr. Finley’s name. “In fact . . .” She trails off like she’s lost in her own thoughts.

“I’ll go get him,” Huntress says. “I’m sure he’d be happy to do it.”

“You’re going to go get him right now?” Lady Anne asks, snapping herself out of whatever daydream she’d gotten lost in. She tucks a few stray pieces of her curly black hair under her head scarf and wipes her hands on her apron.

Huntress rolls her eyes. “Of all the people in Queen’s Bridge, of all the people you could possibly choose, you’ve set your sights on Mr. Finley?”

Lady Anne looks to me. “You disapprove?”

“No,” I say. “It’s just, well . . . he’s bald.”

Lady Anne sighs as if she’s picturing him in her head. “He’s beautiful.”

I try very hard not to laugh. I think it’s sweet, but Huntress looks absolutely disgusted.

Lady Anne shoos Huntress out of the kitchen. “Oh, stop. Go get him.”

Huntress goes off mumbling something about Mr. Finley under her breath as Lady Anne continues to primp and preen.

“Ignore her,” I say as I help dust off Lady Anne’s apron. “She’s just upset no one is as happy to see her as you are to see Mr. Finley.”

“Is there ever a time when she isn’t upset?” Lady Anne asks. “That woman lives in a perpetual state of unhappiness.”

It’s a bit harsh. “It’s just her way,” I say. “You know that.”

Lady Anne shakes her head and tries standing in several different positions as she glances toward the door. “Your mother was looking for you earlier,” she says. “She was in her drawing room last time I checked.”

I nod and put my hand on her arm. “I’m sure Mr. Finley will be happy to see you.”

Lady Anne gently touches my cheek, then shoos me out of the kitchen. I make my way to the uppermost floor where my mother’s private chambers are. Her drawing room is just off the landing, and as I approach, the door sits ajar. I catch a glimpse of my mother pacing in front of a long table.

I slip inside, and she gives me a tight smile. She’s not alone. Captain Amaranth Mock, head of the royal guard, is here. Lady Harold in her constant state of worry is also present. She is my mother’s second closest adviser—second, because I am her first.

They are leaning over the table, staring with concern at a map of Queen’s Bridge. I move to the window where a gilded cage is situated and listen to the russet-colored nightingale fluttering on its perch, singing sweetly as my mother stews.

“Their land is overrun,” Captain Mock says. “Their other crops are being choked out. It is an absolute disaster, and we cannot allow it to continue.”

“Hasn’t he been harvesting?” Lady Harold asks, a clear ring of annoyance in her tone.

“I believe he has,” says Captain Mock. “But at a rate that cannot compete with what is being produced. The surveyor has informed me that if this continues, the overgrowth will reach the River Farris in less than a month.”

“The entire Queen’s Bridge water supply comes from the River Farris,” I say, approaching the table.

My mother’s discerning brown eyes are so dark they’re almost black as she places a small weight on the outline of a farm near the river. Her hair is braided around the top of her head and her crown, a halo of golden maple leaves dotted with bright green emeralds sits nestled in among the errant coils. She palms a small emerald cut into the shape of a star that hangs from a silver chain around her neck. The smooth brown skin on the back of her right hand is flawless aside from a jagged scar running from her thumb to her wrist.

“The water supply will indeed be in danger if this continues,” says Captain Mock. “What do we do, my Queen?”

My mother rests her long slender fingers on the map. “Sir Gregory has always been a good steward of these lands. He is watchful, and it is entirely unlike him to allow this.” She sighs and pushes her hand down on the table. The dagger on her waist glints in the afternoon light, and she taps the heel of her riding boot against the stone floor. She suddenly turns to me and rests her hand on my shoulder. “Eve, I know you’ve just come from a hunt, but would you like to accompany me? I’d like to talk to Sir Gregory myself.”

I nod. She knows she doesn’t have to ask. There is nothing I wouldn’t do for my mother.

“Let us make a little trip, then,” she says.

“Is that necessary, my Queen?” Captain Mock asks. “It is concerning, yes, but surely it doesn’t warrant a visit from her Majesty.”



I turn to face him and roll my eyes. I want to make sure he sees how ridiculous I think he is. Captain Mock clenches his jaw and looks away from me. The captain is oppositional, always. My mother thinks it's wise to have someone on her council who isn't afraid to voice a differing opinion, but I have always thought the captain enjoys it just a little too much. He is enamored with royal life. So much so that he often makes disparaging comments about the residents of Queen's Bridge. My mother never fails to put him in his place, because it is her firm belief that she is meant to serve the people and that everyone under her eye is worthy of protection and concern. Captain Mock also never fails in ceding to her will.

My mother shoots him a glance that says even if the trip isn't necessary, it is happening and there will be no further conversation about it. Captain Mock bows his head and takes a step back.

I trail my mother to the stables where she mounts her horse, a midnight black mare with a silver-plated saddle and the Miller family crest embroidered on a flag draped over its side. The crest is a wheel set against an emerald backdrop, said to represent the unrelenting passage of time. Golden bands unfurl from either side of the wheel, forming a flourish in the shape of a crown at the bottom. It is the symbol of my family, a line of Millers stretching back generations, so far back that our history has taken on a life of its own in the folklore of this land. Nothing from the time before my great-grandmother's reign has survived except our crest, our name, and our responsibility to this place and its people. For my mother, that is all

that is required. She is a queen by birth, by right, but more importantly in the hearts of the people, and she does not suffer anyone who would put them in danger.

As she climbs into her saddle, the horse whinnies and shakes its head. My mother glances at me. I can hear her horse's low hum in my head.

"How is she?" my mother asks.

There is always other information carried in the unique voices of the animals. I had sensed fear in the dire wolf, curiosity in the fox, and now I concentrate on my mother's horse.

"She's well," I say. "She was reshod yesterday and I think she's eager to get out of the stable."

"Ah," my mother says, patting the side of the mare's neck. "She'll get what she wants today."

I prepare to mount my own horse, a smaller mare with a deep brown coat and the same crest draped across her back. She's older but reliable, and I can tell by her unique hum that she could also use a little time in the fresh air. I lean my face against her neck, and she gently presses her head against my shoulder. She smells of straw and the wind. I run my fingers through her mane and give her a good scratch between the ears. The hum in my head goes from low and resonant to a higher pitch, almost frenzied. It is excitement, anticipation.

"Let's go, then," I say as I pull myself into the saddle and take hold of the reins.

I follow my mother out of the stable as the sun cuts through the partially overcast sky. Queen's Bridge looks like a vision when the light is just so. Cobbled roads snake through

sleepy stone buildings. Smoke billows from chimneys and curls upward, mingling with a layer of low-lying clouds. The greenspaces that dot the landscape are not so green as autumn leans toward winter, but they are still full of the town's residents. Harvest time is upon us and there is all manner of goods for sale at stands and open carts as Queen's Bridge prepares to settle in for the coming winter.

As we near the center of Queen's Bridge, a woman cradling a small child rushes out of her home. My mother brings her horse to a stop and dismounts. The other woman starts to lower herself into a low bow but my mother catches her by the elbow, bringing her back up.

"You and I have known each other too long for you to risk dropping this precious child in the leaves for the likes of me," my mother says, hugging her and taking the baby into her arms.

The woman is named Nina, and she has known my mother longer than I've been alive.

My mother coos into the baby's cheek, and Nina gives me a gentle smile. "Princess Eve," she says. "Looking fierce as ever."

I dismount and stand near my mother. Nina is a friend, but I don't let my guard down for anyone. My mother suddenly thrusts the baby toward me, and I step back.

"No," I say. "I don't want to hold it."

"It?" Mother asks, her brow knitting together.

Nina casts a concerned glance from me to the baby. It is no secret that there are many within our queendom who fear me but Nina should know that despite my aversion to her drooling child, I would not do him any harm.

“Princess, his name is Aldis,” Nina says gently. “And he’s not made of glass. Hold him. He might grow on you.”

I might drop him directly on his head, but I don’t say that out loud. My mother pushes the child closer to me and I take him up. I keep him at arm’s length. I’m wearing all black and I don’t want him throwing up on me as babies are known to do. Why are their insides always upset? Why do they feel the need to empty their stomachs or bowels at the most inopportune times?

Mother and Nina cluck like hens as they laugh, and while I hold tight to the boy called Aldis, more than once I consider just putting him down on the ground to fend for himself.

“I’m off to see about some business at the Gregory farm,” my mother says. She takes the baby from me, and I’ve never felt more relieved. She kisses him and hands him back to his mother. “Be safe. You know where to find me if you should need anything.”

My mother treats Nina the way she treats all residents of Queen’s Bridge—with kindness and respect. Captain Mock has expressed how nervous this makes him. He says that blurring the line between royalty and common folk is dangerous. My mother disagrees and has set him so firmly in place that he rarely brings it up anymore. I stand with my mother—the people of Queen’s Bridge are its lifeblood, and it is our duty to serve them, to protect them against all enemies, no matter how formidable they may be.

As we leave Nina behind, my mother glances at me. “He is just the cutest thing, isn’t he? Baby Aldis?”

“Is he?” I ask. “I think I’ve seen cuter things. He has a quite a large head.”

My mother laughs uproariously until little tears stand in the corners of her eyes.

“I hope you’re not expecting that of me,” I say, glancing back toward Nina’s home.

My mother reaches across the space between our horses and pats my leg. “What I expect of you is whatever you deem appropriate. I want you happy.” Something unreadable passes over her face, an expression drawn tight like a mask. I notice but say nothing.

Sir Gregory’s farm is at the foot of the mountains, near the head of the River Farris, and as my mother and I push our horses in that direction, they gallop hard, their hearts beating, their muscles taut. They race along, their voices harmonizing in my head. When we arrive, they are nearly singing with content.

As we approach Sir Gregory’s farm, I get a clear sense of what the issue is and why everyone had seemed so concerned. Sir Gregory grows flax, keeping nearly twenty acres of it. He is a regular at the market and is known for the impeccable quality of his crop. I am surprised to see that the fields of flax still retain their purple blooms but even more surprised to see that the plants have overflowed their acreage and are now spilling across the road into the neighboring field, creeping their way toward a wide swath of the River Farris. My mother dismounts, and I do the same. I tether our horses to a fence post.

“Stay put,” I say to them. I listen for their response and they both seem agreeable.

I follow my mother up the overgrown path to Sir Gregory's front door. I stop and break off a sprig of the flax to examine its insides. The stalks are well formed and the green wick of the plant is wet. They are in perfect health, so I am at a loss. Why didn't he cut them and take them into town to sell? I toss the plant aside and, as it lands on the damp earth, one of the stalks sprouts a lavender purple bloom right before my eyes. I grab my mother's elbow and point to the newly sprouted stalks.

"Look!" I say. "They're—they're growing. Right in front of my face."

My mother examines the stalk. As she leans forward to get a better look, another one sprouts from the earth and blooms. She gently touches the petals and her expression changes from wonderment to quiet concern and then—to something else. Her mouth turns down at the corners and some of the color in her normally beautifully deep umber skin drains away from her.

"Mother," I say. "What magic is this?"

She straightens up and lets her gloved fingers rest on the dagger at her hip.

"Come," she says. "Let us see what Sir Gregory has to say."