



THE
THIRTEENTH
CHILD

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For Grace.
In the tapestry of my life,
you will always be my brightest thread.







THE BIRTHDAY STORY

WITH A PUNCH OF SHARP SULFUR, THE LITTLE match snapped to life, flame biting at its wooden stump, hungry for a wick to feed on.

My godfather's voice rose out of the dark like a ghoulish creature crawling from its crypt, all rustling leaves and the smoky taste of autumn.

"There once was a very foolish huntsman who lived at the heart of the Gravia Forest."

The match's flame was nearly at his fingertips, eager to singe his skin, the wooden stick all but spent, but he paid no mind.

"We don't have to do this, you know," I said, and offered him a long taper to light. It was amber in color, rich and golden and warm and lovely.

The candle cast dancing shadows across my cottage as the flame grew stronger, more resolute. I met Merrick's eyes—a strange combination of silver and red irises surrounded by a void of pure black—and smiled. I could recite this story by heart, but I let him tell it. It was his favorite part of my birthday.

"Throughout his life, this very foolish huntsman made series

after series of very foolish decisions, until at long last, on one particular night, he finally made one very clever choice.” With a swift snap of his elongated, knobby fingers, the match went out, and a curl of silvery smoke wafted into the rafters. “The huntsman, you see, though very poor and very foolish, had somehow found himself a very pretty, very young wife.”

“And we all know what happens when very poor men have very pretty wives,” I cut in, unable to help myself.

“They’re blessed with lots of pretty children,” Merrick intoned testily. “Are you telling this story or am I?”

Turning from him, I peeked into the oven, checking on the bread. Birthday tradition or not, we both needed to eat—well, *I* needed to eat—and supper wouldn’t prepare itself.

“Sorry, sorry,” I said, grabbing for the loaf pan with towel-covered hands. “Go on.”

“Now, where was I?” he asked with practiced theatricality. “Oh yes, the children. The many, *many* pretty children. First one or two, then, before you know it, four, five, six, and so on and on, until you come to a complete dozen. Twelve lovely, perfect, and pretty children. Most men would have stopped long before, but I do believe I’ve already quite established that this huntsman was particularly foolish.”

“You have,” I agreed, as I always did.

He looked pleased. “I have. And so the years went by—as years so often do—and the very foolish huntsman got older—as mortals also so often do. More villages and towns sprouted up along the edge of the Gravia, and the forest was no longer as plentiful as it had been in the days of the huntsman’s youth. Without game to sell and with so many mouths to feed, the very foolish huntsman despaired,

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wondering how much longer he could support his ever-growing family.”

“And then one day—”

“And then one *night*,” my godfather corrected me, peevish. “Really, Hazel, if you insist upon interrupting my narrative flow, you might at least make sure your details are right.” He tapped my nose with a disappointed *tsk*. “And then one night, while in bed, the very foolish huntsman’s very pretty wife told him she was carrying yet another child.

“‘Thirteen children!’ he cried. ‘How will I ever provide for thirteen children?’”

This was the part of the story I most hated, but Merrick never seemed to notice my discomfort. He always threw himself with gusto into the role of the very pretty wife, his usually graveled voice rising to an acute falsetto, hands clasped with girlish affectation.

“‘We could get rid of it as soon as it’s born,’ the very pretty wife offered. ‘Drop it into the river and let it fend for itself. Someone is sure to find it. Someone is sure to hear the cries. And if they don’t . . .’ She shrugged and the huntsman gaped at her, suddenly frightened. How had he failed to notice his wife’s black heart?

“‘We could leave it at one of the temples in town,’ he suggested instead.”

I pictured myself as a baby, swaddled among the reeds and clay mud of a riverbank as frigid water seeped into my basket, rising higher and higher. Or at a temple’s orphanage, one of dozens of children jostling for every scrap of food or ounce of attention, crying louder and louder but never truly heard.

Merrick held up his pointer finger. It was so much longer than his others, crooked at the knuckles like the limb of a contorted beech

tree. “‘Or you could consider giving her to me,’ called a soft and silvery voice from deep within the cabin.

“‘Who . . . who is there?’ the huntsman dared to ask. His voice trembled as his wife tried to push him from their bed to ward off the intruder.”

“And who should stroll out from those dark and shadowy depths but the Holy First,” I said, now in the dining room, smoothing the creases in my floral tablecloth.

Merrick rolled his eyes. “Of course it was the First, and of course she promised to take and raise the hapless babe, nurturing her into a good and beautiful child, a postulant of perfect devotion and grace.

“‘Who are you to offer such a thing?’ demanded the very pretty wife, feeling not quite as pretty as usual as she faced the beatific goddess.

“‘Do you really not know me, mortal?’ the goddess asked, tilting her head with curiosity, her eyes burning like opals behind her gauzy veil.”

Merrick cleared his throat, relishing the narration.

“The very foolish huntsman pushed his wife aside. ‘Of course we know you,’ he clamored. ‘But we would not welcome you as godmother to this child. You are the Holy First, all love and light and things of beauty. But your love has brought nothing but poverty to my wife and me. Twelve children in as many years, with another on the way! Our thirteenth will manage just fine without you.’”

I lit three more candles and set them on the table, letting their happy glow warm the dark room.

What would my life have been like if my father had accepted the Holy First’s offer? I pictured swanning about in the Ivory Temple, in the diaphanous, shimmering robes of the First’s postulants. My light

brown hair would be long, with lush curls, and my skin as perfect and freckle-free as a porcelain doll's. I would be reverent and devout. It would be a peaceful life, a beautiful one. One without shame or regret.

A glance at the line of dirt beneath my nails—always there no matter how hard I scrubbed—was enough to curdle that daydream.

"The Holy First left, and the huntsman and his wife somehow went back to sleep," Merrick continued. "Until . . . there was a crashing boom of thunder!" He clapped his hands together, creating the sound effect.

"'Who's there now?' called the very pretty wife, anger coloring her tone. 'We're trying to sleep.'

"'And we're trying to help you,' answered a sly and slippery voice. A long, thin figure stretched out from a shadow, slinking into the candlelight. 'Give your child to us and we shall raise her into a woman of great power and wealth. She will know fortune beyond measure, beyond calculation, and—' The god stopped.

"The wife leaned forward. 'And? Yes? Fortune and?'"

Merrick chuckled darkly, now pantomiming the movements of each of the characters. He threw his hand over his forehead with trumped despair.

"'No!' cried the very foolish huntsman, for though he was very foolish, he still recognized the deity for who it was."

"Who *they* were," I corrected him.

"The Divided Ones stared down at the pair, regarding the husband and wife from one eye each, shared on the same face. And when they asked why the very foolish huntsman had declined their offer, they did it with two voices from one throat.

"'You are the Divided Ones,' the huntsman began. 'You may

promise to give this child wealth and power and fortune, but fortunes can turn’—he snapped his fingers—‘in the split of a second, like the split of your face. What will happen to our child then?’

“The Divided Ones cocked their head, studying the very foolish huntsman with wary respect. ‘This is your final answer?’ they asked, and their voices were so many strong. So many, yet only one.

“The huntsman nodded, even as his wife struck him, and the Divided Ones disappeared in a flash of lightning and shadow and mischief.

“The couple did not return to sleep, wondering what dreadful thing might befall them next. They huddled together against the darkness until the wee hours of morning, just before sunrise, when the night is at its blackest. Only then were they visited by a third god.” Merrick’s smile turned indulgent, the sharp tips of his teeth winking in the firelight. “Me.”

Merrick paused, looking about the kitchen, then let out a noise of dismay. “The cake!”

He took out canisters of flour and sugar. Scooping up handfuls of each, he let the powders sort through his fingers. The white granules transformed as they fell, turning into layers of cake, dense and golden brown.

When Merrick blew the last of the sugar away, it turned into pale pink icing so delicate that tiers of the cake could still be seen underneath. A dusting of gold leaf shimmered across the top. From thin air, Merrick plucked a peony, frilly and fragrant and just about to burst into bloom. He laid it across the top of the cake, where tiny tapers had suddenly sprouted, an identical pink to the peony’s petals.

It was exquisite, over-the-top in its magnificence, and so terribly Merrick.

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“How’s that?” he asked, admiring his work before leaning over to kiss the top of my head with fatherly affection. He smelled superficially of warm cardamom and clove, vanilla, and molasses, but a darker, somewhat unpleasant scent lurked beneath. It was something no pomander, however strong, could completely mask. Iron, copper, and the funk of meat sat out too long and on the verge of turning.

“You know, I’ll never forget the first time I saw you, all those birthdays ago. So scrunched and squalling. Such a fragile, tiny creature. I hardly knew what to do when you were foisted into my arms.”

My smile faltered, dimming. I knew exactly what Merrick had done: he’d handed me right back to my mother and turned tailed, disappearing for years. But I let him tell the story the way he remembered it. My birthday had always meant much more to him than it had to me.

“I had a mind to name you Joy, because your arrival brought such delight to my heart.” His forehead furrowed as he struggled to hold back a swell of emotion. “But then you opened your eyes and I was struck dumb, completely smitten. Such depth and intelligence pooling in those hazel wonders.” Merrick released a shaky breath. “I’m very proud to call you mine and am grateful to celebrate this day with you.”

As I watched my godfather, my heart panged with affection. He was not an attractive figure, not by half. Certainly not a being to whom most parents would willingly give their child.

Merrick had no nose, only a hollowed-out cavity shaped like an upside-down heart, and his deep obsidian skin rippled back painfully tight across his cheeks, causing his expression to read as a scowl of menace, no matter how happy he might be. He was extraordinarily gaunt and tall. Even with the high gabled peaks of my

cottage, he had to stoop low under the rafters, forever ducking to avoid the bunches of flowers and herbs hung up to dry. And the fullness of his thick, dark robes couldn't hide the skeletal ridges of his figure. The black wool hung in strange shapes from the bony angles of his spine and shoulder blades, nearly giving him the appearance of having wings, much like a bat.

No. Most parents would not hand their child over to someone like Merrick.

Then again, my parents weren't like most.

And to me, his was not a face to be feared. His was the face of the Dreaded End, the god who loved me. Who'd saved me, eventually. A god who had raised me when my own flesh and blood cast me aside. This was the face of my salvation, however unearned, however unasked for.

Merrick raised his glass toward mine. "To this birthday and to all the many, many more to come."

Our goblets clinked together, and I pushed aside his words with an uneasy smile.

So many, many more to come.

"Now," he said, eyeing his pink confection with glee, unaware of my inner turmoil.

Always, always unaware.

"Shall we start with cake?"



CHAPTER 1

THE EIGHTH BIRTHDAY

“ANOTHER YEAR, ANOTHER YEAR, ANOTHER YEAR HAS come,” sang the children gathered about the long table. Their voices rose, both in pitch and volume, as the final verse wound to a merciful end. “You are one year older now, so shout ‘Hooray!’ You’re done!”

The room filled with shrieks and giggles as Bertie, the day’s star, jumped on top of his chair and gave a great cheer of triumph before leaning in to blow out the nine candles topping the small nut cake.

“Start with me, Mama? Start with me?” he begged, his little voice piercing through the room’s tumult with far more clarity than it had any right to.

“Yes, yes,” our mother answered, pushing through the clamoring crowd of my siblings to the table’s edge with a practiced nudge of her hips. “After Papa, of course.”

She pulled the platter toward her and, with swift slices of the butter knife, cut a scant sliver of cake. She deposited it on a plate

and pushed it down the length of the table to where our father sat watching the evening's festivities play out with glassy eyes.

He'd opened a new cask of ale for the occasion and was already three mugs in. He grunted in acknowledgment as the first piece of cake—the biggest there would be, if my eyes calculated correctly—landed in front of him. Without waiting for the rest of us to be served, Papa picked up his fork and began shoveling it into his mouth.

My siblings began to wriggle with impatience. Every eye was on Mama as she sliced the remainder of the cake.

As it *was* his birthday, Bertie got the next piece, and he crowed over its size, reckoning it was nearly as big as Papa's.

Remy came next, then Genevieve, then Emmeline, and I began to lose interest. Mama was serving down the line of us, in birth order, and I was bound to be waiting for a long time to come.

Sometimes it felt as though I was fated to spend my entire life waiting.

Everyone began to eat their fill as soon as the plates appeared before them, noisily exclaiming how good it tasted, how rich and moist the cake was, how sweet the frosting.

As Mathilde—the third youngest—got her piece, I glanced over with interest at the remaining wedgelette, and a stupid spark of hope kindled inside me. My mouth watered as I dared to imagine how nutty my bites would taste. It didn't matter that my serving would be not even half what Bertie was afforded, didn't matter that there was barely a covering of icing on its surface; I would still receive a sample.

But Mama picked up the last piece and popped it between her lips without even bothering to serve it up on a plate first.

Bertie, who had been watching the rest of the portioning with

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greedy eyes, hoping he might somehow snag a second helping, had the decency to remark upon it. "Mama, you forgot Hazel!"

Mama glanced down the long table and she did look surprised, as though she might have well and truly forgotten me, wedged away in the farthest corner, rubbing elbows with Mathilde and the cracked plaster wall.

"Oh, Hazel!" she exclaimed, and then raised her shoulders, not exactly with a look of apology, but more with an expression of "Well, what am I to do about it now?"

My lips tightened. It wasn't a smile of forgiveness, only a grim acknowledgment of understanding. She hadn't forgotten me and we both knew it, just like I also knew that there was nothing I could say or do that would cause her a moment of remorse, a pang of repentance.

"May I be excused?" I asked, my feet already swinging as I readied to jump down from a bench cut too tall for my tiny frame.

"Have you finished your chores?" Papa asked, startling, as if he had just noticed my presence. I didn't doubt he *had* forgotten about me. I took up a scant amount of room in both his house and his thoughts, little more than a footnote in the great, bloated volume of his life's memoir.

The thirteenth child. The daughter never meant to have been his.

"No, Papa," I lied, keeping my gaze downward, more on his hands than his face. Even direct eye contact with me took more energy than he was usually willing to spend.

"Then what are you doing in here, dawdling like a lazy wench?" he snapped.

"It's my birthday, Papa," Bertie interrupted, his blond eyebrows furrowed.

“So it is, so it is.”

“Hazel couldn’t miss my birthday!” he exclaimed with indignation.

A blush of pride crept over my cheeks as my brother stood up—stood up to Papa!—for me.

Papa’s jaw worked, as though he was chewing on a wad of tobacco, even though he’d not been able to buy a tin of it in months. “Dinner is done. The cake is gone,” he finally said. “Your birthday is well and truly celebrated. Hazel needs to go off and do her chores.”

I nodded, my two brown braids brushing the tops of my shoulders. I scooted off the back of the bench and gave a little curtsy to Papa. Before I hurried out of the crowded dining room, I dared to pause, looking back at Bertie to offer him the tiniest grin.

“Happy birthday, Bertie.”

With a twirl of my pinafore, I rushed out of the house and into the chilly spring air. Twilight was just about to give way to true and proper night, the time of shadow-men and woodland creatures with limbs too long and mouths full of teeth, and my heart raced with an uneasy thrill as I imagined one of them stumbling across me on my way to the barn.

With a grunt of effort, I pulled the big sliding door shut and made my way to the back worktable. It was dark, but I knew the route by heart. I found Papa’s tin of matches and lit my oil lamp, casting weak golden light into the darkened stalls.

My chores *had* been done long before dinner—I’d even managed to do some of Bertie’s for him in lieu of a gift. I knew it was wrong to lie to Papa—Mama was always going on and on about keeping yourself free of sin, somehow only ever cuffing *me* on the back of the head during her admonishments—but if I stayed in that happy, celebratory chaos for a second longer, my walls would crack and tears would begin to roll free.

And nothing put Mama or Papa in a worse mood than seeing me cry.

With care, I climbed the ladder to the loft, balancing the lantern precariously on one arm as I made my way up to my bedroom.

I'd been sleeping in the barn ever since I'd outgrown the exhausted little cradle that had held all thirteen of us as babies. The cabin's attic could fit only four beds—my brothers and sisters slept three to a mattress—and there was simply no space for me.

I found my quilt and curled it over my shoulders, snuggling into its decadence. It was the one thing I had that proved my godfather actually existed, that he had come for me once and would maybe one day return.

It was also an enormous sore spot between Papa and Mama.

Mama wanted to sell it off at market, arguing that the silk velvet alone would bring in at least three years' worth of coins. Papa said that selling off the Dreaded End's gift would bring an unholy mess of perdition upon the family and forbade her to touch it.

I traced the swirls of gold thread—real gold, Bertie had often murmured in wondered admiration—that spelled out my name.

HAZEL.

This was not a blanket that belonged in a barn, on a bed of straw. It didn't belong with a family of too many mouths and too few rations, too much noise and too few hugs.

But neither did the little girl whose shoulders it now covered.

"Oh, Godfather," I whispered, sending my plea out into the dark night. "Will this be the year? Will tomorrow be the day?"

I listened to the sounds of the barn, waiting and wishing for him to respond. Waiting as I did every year on this night, the night before my birthday.

Waiting.

I drifted in and out of sleep peppered with bad dreams.

Down in the valley, in Rouxbouillet, the little village skirting our forest, the bells of the Holy First's temple chimed, waking me.

Once, twice . . . seven times, then eight, and so on, until they struck their twelfth note.

Twelve.

The hours of sunlight.

The months of a year.

An even dozen.

I saw my siblings lined up from biggest to smallest, their smiles bright, their faces so lovely and shining and beaming.

A perfect set. The perfect number.

And then there was me. Small, dark, freckled, miserably mismatched me.

As the last of the twelfth chime died away in the clear midnight air, I breathed in the first moments of my eighth year. I waited to feel different, but nothing had changed. I raised my hands, spreading the fingers as wide as they would go, wondering if they looked older. I stared at the end of my nose, hoping my freckles had somehow miraculously disappeared from the swell of my cheeks.

I hadn't grown up.

Would the Dreaded End care?

"Another year, another year, another year has come," I sang to myself, nestling into the straw and velvet. My voice sounded small within the great space of the barn. "You are one year older now, so shout 'Hooray!' You're done."

I paused once more, straining my ears for any sign of my godfather's approach. Still nothing.

"Hooray," I muttered, then turned over to sleep.