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everless



ORCHARD

ORCHARD BOOKS

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To my parents, for all the stories



1

Most people find the forest frightening, believing the old tales of fairies who will freeze the time in your blood, or witches who can spill your years out over the snow with only a whisper. Even the spirit of the Alchemist himself is said to wander these woods, trapping whole eternities in a breath.

I know better than to be afraid of stories. The forest holds real danger—thieves who lie in wait, crude knives and alchemic powder on their belts, to steal time from anyone venturing outside the safety of the village. We call them bleeders. They're why Papa doesn't like me hunting, but we have no choice. Luckily, in the winter, there's no undergrowth to hide the thieves from sight, no birdsong to muffle their footsteps.

Besides, I know these woods better than anyone else. I've always loved it here, the way the tangled branches overhead

shutter out the sun and block the bitter wind. I could stay out here all day, or just keep walking through trees glittering with webs of fine ice, through the sunlight sifted into daggers. Goodbye.

Fantasy. I would never leave my father alone, especially not if he's—

He's not, I tell myself.

The lie freezes in the winter air, falls to the ground like snow. I kick at it with the toe of my boot.

Papa says some of the trees in the forest are a thousand years old. They were here before anyone alive now was born, even the Queen, even before the Alchemist and the Sorceress bound time to blood and metal—if there ever was such a time. These trees will be standing tall long after we're gone. Yet they aren't predators like wolves or people. The roots beneath my feet don't live for centuries by causing other plants to shrivel and turn gray. And their time cannot be bled from them.

If only we were more like trees.

Papa's old musket weighs heavy on my back, useless. There's been no game for miles, and in just a few hours it will be dark and the market stalls will draw their shades, one by one. Soon I'll have to go into town and face the time lender. I'd hoped hunting would calm my nerves, prepare me for what I must do. But now I only feel more afraid.

Rent is due tomorrow for Crofton. Like every month, the Gerling family will replenish its coffers with our blood-iron,

claiming we owe them for their protection. Their land. Last month, when we couldn't pay, the collector let us off with a warning—Papa looked so sickly, and I so young—but it was not a kindness. This month, he'll ask for double, maybe more. Now that I'm seventeen, legally allowed to bleed my years, I know what I have to do.

Papa will be furious, if he has his wits.

Just one more try, I tell myself as I come across a small creek running through the trees. Its trickle has gone silent, frozen over—but underneath, there's a quick flicker of green and brown and gold: a trout, wriggling alone, along some invisible current. Alive under all that ice.

I kneel quickly and smash the skein of ice with the butt of the gun. I wait for the water to settle, for the flash of scales, sending up a silent plea to the Sorceress out of desperation. The blood-iron this trout would fetch wouldn't make a dent in the rent Papa owes, but I don't want to enter the market empty-handed. I won't.

I focus, willing my racing heart to calm.

And then—as sometimes happens—the world seems to slow. No, not seems. The branches really do stop whispering in the wind. Even the almost inaudible crackle of the snow melting on the ground stops, like the world is holding its breath.

I look down, at a pale glimmer in the muddy water—it too is caught in the breath of time. Before the moment can lapse, I strike, plunging my bare hand into the creek.

The shock of the cold travels up my wrist, dulling sensation in my fingers. The fish remains still—stunned—as I reach toward it, as though it wants to be caught.

When I close my hand around its slick body, time speeds up again. The fish flails in my grip, pure muscle, and I gasp, almost losing it. Before it can fling itself to freedom, I yank it from the water and dump it into my bag in one practiced motion. For a second I watch, a little nauseated, as the fish flops around inside, making the burlap twitch.

Then, the bag is still.

I don't know why time sometimes slows like that, completely at random. Heeding Papa, I keep it to myself—he once saw a man bled twenty years for simply claiming he could make an hour flow backward with a wave of his hand. Hedge witches, like Calla in our village, are tolerated as an amusement for the superstitious—as long as they pay rent. I used to go and listen to her stories about time rippling, slowing, sometimes even causing rifts or quakes in the earth, until Papa forbade me from visiting her shop, leery of drawing attention to us. I still remember its perfume—spice mingled with the blood of ancient rites. But if Papa has taught me anything, it's that keeping my head down means staying safe.

I stick my hands in my underarms to warm them and crouch over the river again, trying to slip back into focus. But no more fish come, and slowly the sun lowers its arms through the trees.

Anxiety knots my stomach.

I can't put off the marketplace any longer.

I've known for years it would eventually come to this, but still I curse under my breath. Turning back toward town, I sling my dripping satchel over my shoulder. I've gone farther out than usual, and I regret it now with the snow soaking through my worn-out boots, the trees intercepting what remains of the day's warmth.

Eventually the woods thin out and give way to the dirt road leading into town, which has been churned into frozen mud by hundreds of wagon wheels. I trudge along its side, steeling myself for the marketplace. I'm haunted by thoughts of the time lender's blade, the vials waiting to be filled with blood. And then the blood waiting to be turned to iron, the wave of exhaustion I've heard follows as he leeches time from one's veins.

Worse, though, is the thought of listening through the thin walls of the cottage as Papa tosses and turns on his straw mattress. Sorceress knows he needs the rest. This last month, I saw him waning before my eyes, like a winter moon.

I swear his eyes are graying—a sign that one's time is running out.

If only there weren't such a simple explanation for this morning, when he forgot my birthday.

Papa has never forgotten my birthday before, not once. If only he would just admit that he's been selling time, despite my begging him not to, and let me give him a few years. If only

the Sorceress and Alchemist were real and I could lock them up, demand that they find a way to give him lasting life.

What if—I can't look at the thought straight on—what if he only has a month, a day?

A memory floats to the top of my mind of an old beggar woman in Crofton who had bled her last week for a bowl of soup, stumbling from door to door, greeting every person in town and pleading for a day-iron or two, or even just a bit of bread. She forgot the names of the people first—then she forgot the shape of the village entirely, and wandered around the fields, raising her hand to knock on air.

Papa and I found her curled in the wheat, her skin cold as ice. Her time had run out. And it all started with the forgetting.

Thinking of her, I run. My blood urges me on, begging to be turned to coin.

Crofton announces itself first by a few spindly columns of smoke, then the patchwork of rooftops peeking out over the hills. The narrow path leading to our cottage turns east off the main road, well before the village. But I pass it by and keep walking, toward the noise and smoke of the market.

Inside the low stone wall that roughly marks the village periphery, row houses lean together like a huddling crowd, as if by being close they'll succeed in keeping out the cold, or the woods, or the slow suck of time. People hurry by me here and there, bodies hidden in layers, heads ducked against the wind.

The marketplace is nothing more than a long stretch of muddy cobblestone where three roads meet. It's crowded and noisy this afternoon: rent is due for everyone, and the space is thick with people selling. Men in rough farmers' clothes and women with babies slung across their backs haggle over bolts of cloth and loaves of bread and cattle bones thick with marrow, ignoring the handful of beggars who wander from stall to stall, their refrain—an hour? An hour?—blurring into the general hum of activity. The air is dim with smoke from the oily cook fires.

There's a long line winding from Edwin Duade's time lending shop; Papa and I are scarcely the only ones who scramble every month to make ends meet. The sight always makes my stomach hurt—dozens of people grouped up along the walls, waiting to have time drawn out from their blood and forged into blood-iron coins. I know I have to join them, but somehow, I can't force myself into the queue. If Papa finds out . . .

Better to get something to eat first, to fortify my strength before I sell my time. And I may as well sell my catch, measly as it is.

I start for the butcher's stall, where my friend Amma stands behind the counter, doling out strips of dried meat to a cluster of schoolgirls in clean pinafores. A pang of mixed nostalgia and envy goes through me. I could have been one of those children. I was, once. After Papa's expulsion from Everless, the Gerling estate—the flash of anger as I think of it is as familiar as my

own heartbeat—he spent his savings on books and paper for me, so I could go to school. But as his sight worsened, the money for books and paper ran out along with his work. Papa’s taught me everything he knows, but it’s not the same.

I push the thought away and wave at Amma when she catches my eye. She smiles, creasing the scar that runs down one cheek. It’s a relic of a bleeder raid on the village where she was born, an attack that left her father dead and her mother with only a few days left in her blood. She clung to life long enough to bring her daughters to Crofton before her time ran out completely, leaving only Amma to provide for her little sister, Alia.

To Amma—probably, to many of the schoolgirls I wade through—my hatred of the Gerlings would seem petty. They keep their towns free of bleeders and highwaymen like the ones that killed Amma’s parents, and oversee trade. For their protection, they expect loyalty—and, of course, blood-irons every month. Sempera’s borders are guarded to prevent anyone from slipping away with the secrets of blood-iron, which is why Papa and I stayed on Gerling lands even after we were expelled from Everless for burning down the forge all those years ago.

I remember Everless—its tapestry-lined hallways and gleaming bronze doors, its occupants flitting about in gold and silk and jewels. No Gerling would stalk you in the forest to slit your throat, but they are thieves all the same.

“I heard they’ve set the date, for the first day of spring,” one of the schoolchildren gushes.

“No, it’s sooner,” another insists. “He’s so in love, he can’t wait till spring to marry her.”

Only half listening, I know they’re chattering about what seems like the only topic on anyone’s lips these days—Roan’s wedding, the joining of the two most powerful families in Sempera.

Lord Gerling’s wedding, I correct myself. He’s not the sticky, gap-toothed boy I knew, who would join the servant children in a game of hide-and-seek. As soon as he’s married to Ina Gold, the Queen’s ward, he’ll be as good as Her Majesty’s son. The kingdom of Sempera is divided between five families, yet the Gerlings control over a third of the land. Roan’s wedding will make them even more powerful. Amma rolls her eyes at me.

“Go on,” she says, shooing the schoolgirls away. “Enough chatter.”

They scamper away in a swirl of too-bright colors, their faces aglow. In contrast, Amma looks exhausted, hair tied tightly back, dark circles beneath her eyes. I know she must have been up since before sunrise hanging and cutting meat. I pull out the measly trout to place on her scale.

“Long day?” Her hands are already moving to wrap the fish in paper.

I smile at her as best I can. “It’ll be better in the spring.”

Amma's my best friend in the world, but even she doesn't know how bad things have gotten for Papa and me. If she knew that I was about to be bled, she'd pity me—or worse, offer to help. I don't want that. She has enough troubles.

She gives me a bloodstained hour-coin for the fish and adds a strip of dried meat as a gift for me. When I accept them, she doesn't take her hand from mine. "I was hoping you'd come by today," she says, her voice lower now. "There's something I need to tell you."

Her fingers are icy and her tone too serious. "What?" I say, trying to keep my voice light. "Has Jacob finally asked you to run away with him?" Jacob is a local boy whose obvious crush on Amma has been the subject of our jokes for years.

She shakes her head and doesn't smile. "I'm leaving the village," she says, still gripping my hands tightly. "I'm going to work at Everless. They're hiring servants to help with preparations for the wedding." She smiles uncertainly.

The smile slips from my own face and cold spills through my chest. "Everless," I repeat after her numbly.

"Jules, I've heard they're paying a year on the month." Her eyes are bright now. "A whole year! Can you imagine?"

A year they've stolen from us, I think.

"But . . ." My throat is tight. Most of the time, I try to hold the memories of Everless, of my childhood, at bay. But Amma's face, full of hope, is bringing it all back to me in a flood—the labyrinthine halls, the sweeping lawn, Roan's smile. Then, the

memory of flames burns everything else away. My mouth suddenly tastes bitter.

“Haven’t you heard the rumors?” I ask. Her smile falters, and I pause, hating to puncture her happiness. But I can’t take the words back, so I plow on instead. “That they’re only hiring girls. Pretty women. The elder Lord Gerling treats servants like toys, right under his wife’s nose.”

“That’s a risk I’ll have to take,” she says softly. Her hands fall from mine. “Alia is going too, and Karina—her husband is gambling away their time.” I can see the anger in her eyes—Karina is like a mother to her, and it enrages Amma to watch her suffer. “No one has work. Everless is the only real chance I’ve got, Jules.”

I want to argue further, to convince her that the fate of an Everless girl is thankless and degrading, that they all just become the title without a name of their own, but I can’t. Amma’s right—those who serve the Gerlings are compensated well, at least by Crofton’s standards, though the blood-irons they’re paid are taken—stolen—from people like Amma, me, and Papa.

But I know what it is to be hungry, and Amma doesn’t share my hatred of the Gerlings, or my knowledge of their cruelty. So I smile at Amma as best I can.

“I’m sure it’ll be wonderful,” I say, hoping she doesn’t hear the doubt in my voice.

“Just think, I’ll see the Queen with my own eyes,” she

gushes. While Papa secretly scorns the Queen, in most families, she is little less than a goddess. She might as well be a goddess: she's been alive since the time of the Sorceress. When blood-iron spread through everyone's veins, invaders descended from other kingdoms. The Queen, then the head of the Semperan army, crushed them, and has been ruling ever since.

"And Ina Gold," Amma continues. "She's supposed to be very beautiful."

"Well, if she's marrying Lord Gerling, she must be," I reply lightly. But my stomach clenches at the thought of Lady Gold. Everyone knows her story: an orphan like so many, abandoned as an infant on the rocky beaches near the palace on Sempera's shore as a sacrifice to the Queen. In light of the many attempts on the Queen's life, especially in her early years, she refused to have her own child or take a spouse; instead, she promised to choose a child to bring up as a prince or princess—and if they were worthy, to inherit the crown when the Queen was ready to pass on the throne. Possibly Ina's parents were even more desperate than the peasants of Crofton are. She caught the eye of the Queen's lady-in-waiting, and the Queen chose Ina Gold as her daughter—and two years ago, officially named Ina as her own heir.

Now she's seventeen. The same age as Amma and me—but she'll inherit the throne, and the royal time bank, and live for centuries. And her time will be filled with feasts and balls and

things I can't even imagine, unconcerned with me and everyone else burning through our little lives outside the palace walls.

I tell myself the envy that sticks in my throat is because of this, and not because she will be Roan's wife.

"You could come too, Jules," Amma says quietly. "It wouldn't be so bad if we were there to look after each other."

For a second, I imagine it—the narrow servants' halls and vast sweep of the lawn, the grand marble staircases.

But it's impossible. Papa would never stand for it. We were forced to flee Everless, flee the Gerlings. It's because of them that we're starving.

Because of Liam.

"I can't leave Papa," I say. "You know that."

Amma sighs. "Well, I'll see you when I return. I want to save up enough time to go back to school."

"Why stop there?" I tease. "Perhaps a nobleman will fall in love with you and sweep you away to a castle."

"But what would Jacob do then?" she says with a wink, and I force a laugh. Suddenly I realize just how lonely I'll be in the long months that Amma is gone. Seized by a sudden fear that I'll never see her again, I pull her into a hug. Despite the long hours spent separating bone and gristle, her hair still smells like wildflowers. "Goodbye for now, Amma."

"I'll be back before you know it," she says, "full of stories."

"I don't doubt it," I say. I don't say: *I just hope they're the happy kind.*

* * *

I tarry with Amma for as long as I can, but the sun doesn't stop sinking. My stomach heavy with dread, I trudge off to the time lender. I weave between stalls to find the end of the still-too-long line, winding toward Duade's door with its burnt-in hourglass symbol. Behind it will be the flash of the blade, the powder that turns blood and time to iron.

I keep my eyes on the ground in an effort to avoid the sight of the people who leave the shop, pale and breathless and a little bit closer to death. I try to tell myself that some of them will never visit the time lender again—that next week, after they find work, they will go home and melt a blood-iron in their tea and drink it down. But that doesn't happen here in Crofton; at least, I've never seen it. We only ever bleed, only ever sell.

After a few minutes, a commotion draws my eyes up. Three men are emerging from the store—two collectors, Everless men, the family crest gleaming on their chests and short swords swinging on their belts; and between them, the time lender, Duade, his arms pinned in their grip.

“Let me go,” Duade shouts. “I didn't do nothing wrong.”

The crowd murmurs, and I feel panic cinch around us all. Certainly no small number of illegal happenings go on in Duade's shop, but the Gerlings' police have always let them pass with a wink and a nod and a month-iron slipped from palm to palm. The time lender might be an oily, greedy sort, but we all need him at one time or another.

I need him today.

As Duade struggles uselessly against the officers, the sound of hooves rings out through the square. Everyone quiets at once, Duade going still in the collectors' grip as a young man on a white mare rounds the corner into the marketplace, hood drawn up against the cold.

Roan. In spite of myself, my heart lifts. Over the past few months, now that he is of age, Roan Gerling has started to pay visits to the villages his family holds. The first time he appeared, I scarcely recognized him, lean and blindingly handsome as he's become—but now, whenever I go to market, I secretly hope to see him, though I know he can never see me. I want to hate him for his fine clothes, the way he looks around with that slight, benevolent smile, reminding us that he owns every tree and cottage and pebble in the road. But my memories of Roan run too deep for hatred, no matter how I try. And besides, the collectors are more lenient when he's around. Whatever is happening with Duade, Roan will put an end to it.

But when I glance back at the storefront, the look on Duade's face as he stands pinioned between the two guards isn't relief. It's pure fear.

Confused, I turn as the boy yanks down his hood. He has the right broad shoulders, golden skin, and dark hair. But he is all severity: stormy brows; hard nose; a high, aristocratic forehead.

The breath vanishes from my lungs.

Not Roan. Liam. Liam, Roan's older brother, who I thought was safely off studying history at some ivied academy by the ocean. Liam, who for ten years has walked in my nightmares. I've dreamed so often about the night we fled, I can't separate nightmare from memory, but Papa made sure that I retained one thing: Liam Gerling was not our friend.

Liam tried to kill Roan when we were children. The three of us were playing in the forge, and Liam pushed his brother into the fire. If I hadn't pulled Roan out before the flames could catch, he would have been burned alive. And as my reward, we had to flee the only home I had ever known, because Papa was afraid of what Liam would do to me if we stayed at Everless, knowing what I had seen.

Later, when I was twelve, Liam found Papa and me in our cottage outside of Rodshire. Their scuffle woke me in the middle of the night, and when I left my bedroom, my father grabbed my hand—he'd chased Liam off—and we fled a second time.

I'm paralyzed, seized by the sense that my worst fears have come to life—after all these years, he's found me, found my father, again.

I know I should turn away, but I can't tear my eyes from him, can't stop picturing that face as it was ten years ago, staring at me in hatred through a wall of smoke, on the day we fled Everless for good.

I hear Papa's voice in my ears: *If you ever see Liam Gerling, run.*