



the
FOREST
of
GHOSTS
and
BONES



Also by Lisa Lueddecke

A Shiver of Snow and Sky

A Storm of Ice and Stars

the
FOREST
of
GHOSTS
and
B  NES

LISA LUEDDECKE

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For Tom and Atlas, my everything.
And, of course, for my Szilvási grandparents.

S Ó A R



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Please note that I have taken some liberties with how things are pronounced in the world of *The Forest of Ghosts and Bones*.

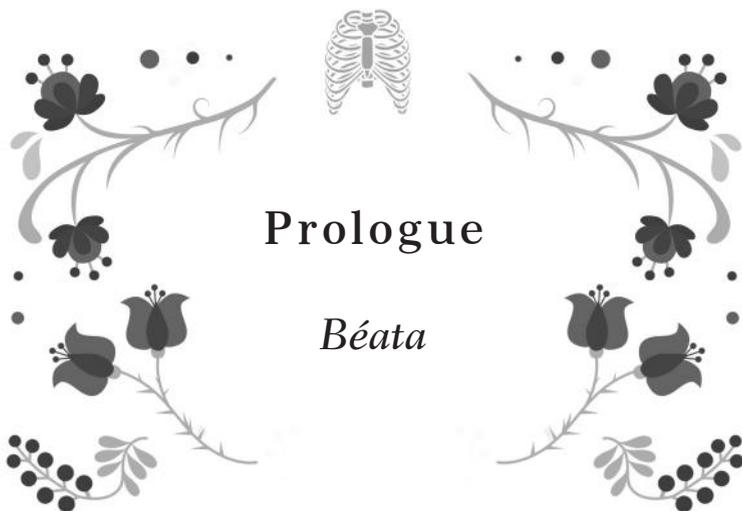
QUICK GUIDE:

zs - the zh of measure	ț - the zz of pizza	žs - the sh of ship
sz - the s of sad	cs - the ch of change	č - the ch of change
ș - the sh of ship	ž - the zh of measure	

Benedek Csekeny	BEN-uh-deck check-EN-ee
Liljana Vahani	lil-YAWN-uh va-HAHN-ee
Béata Rovedosi	bay-AH-ta rove-eh-DOSE-ee
Marcosza	mar-CO-sa
Zirany	zeer-AHN-ee
Dungléd	DUN-glade
Izsak	EE-zhak
Miha	MEE-ha
Szaliri House	sa-LEER-ee House
Roșesti	roh-SHEST-ee
Tăru	ta-RU
Miloš	ME-losh
Morós	more-OHSS (rhymes with gross)
Zalya	ZAHL-ya
Tabíta	tab-EE-ta
Sóar	so-ARE
Iulia	YOO-lee-uh
Morța	MORT-za
Senža	SEN-zha
Csáno	CHAIN-oh
Sovažska	so-VASH-ka
Savenče	sa-VENCH-ee
Anastadt	ANN-uh-stot
Wöernz Pass	WOORNZ Pass
Vyesta	vee-EST-uh
Alíz	uh-LEEZ

Hell is empty and all the devils are here.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *The Tempest*



My mother said the deadly rains over the castle wept for the fallen king and queen. They never abated, for their sorrow was unending. *Stay far away from that place*, she said. *Do not let the magic draw you in. Do not get close enough to tempt it. You are too young now, but one day you will know why.* Her words invited a chill into the room where candlelight sent wild shadows dancing along the walls. The warning felt like a breath close by my ear, raising hairs along my neck.

And for a time, I heeded those words. For a time, the whispers and shudders when people mentioned the castle kept my feet close to home. But as the days wore on, seasons melting together, snows and winds rushing in the warmth of spring, time put a distance between me and those fears.

As tales were told beside hearths on autumn evenings, I could not help but wonder if the stories of the castle and the killing rains were just as fanciful, dreamed up to keep wild children from wandering into the empty castle and getting lost amongst its towering halls. *You cannot enter the rains*, they said. *Not you, nor me, nor anyone, for a single drop of the castle's rain on your skin is enough to end your life.*

But as twilight approached on a warm, clear evening, my chores behind me and the tavern too busy for Mother or Father to notice my absence, I found my feet drawing me through the forest lane to the castle. My eleven years should have been enough to warn me away – I was far from the child I'd once been, and grown enough to fancy myself an adult. But the allure of the cursed castle was too much to bear, so at last, I'd given in.

I slipped along the lane beside the rushing river with the careful footsteps of a child playing hide-and-seek, glancing about for whatever prying eyes might be watching. But only the silent, vast forest stared back. The trees soon yielded to the mighty, baleful Castle Vyesta. The reddish-grey stone of the keep rose up overhead, elevated to the sky by the low hill on which the castle made its home. Arrow slits glared down, the narrowed eyes of a cat that dared me closer. They seemed to flash red suddenly, as if the rumours had grown flesh and become real. I shuddered and took a step further away from the small river that wound past the castle and off into the great forest.

Ancient trees dotted the grounds, their gnarled branches growing at the odd angles of broken limbs. Here and there, across the river that ran in a circle around the castle – part of which broke off and flowed directly through the castle itself – bones bleached by the poisonous rain lay stark white against the ground, and in a few places, so did bodies that were somewhere between flesh and bones. I knew I should look away, save myself from the nightmares that would no doubt haunt my dreams tonight, but I stared instead. I'd never seen death so bare and real, the bodies of what had once been people like me. I ran a hand along my arms, imagining the bones lurking beneath my skin, just like the bones littering the grass.

Malevolence thickened the air. *It's just rain*, I thought, staring up at the droplets that made a wall around the castle grounds. It looked like rain. Smelled like rain. Sent mist along the ground the way summer rains always did.

But it wasn't just rain.

Whatever wickedness filled each droplet had managed to kill everyone lying here on the castle grounds.

My mother's voice somewhere in the back of my mind ordered me home with stern words, but I pressed forward. In the tavern, not long ago, I'd heard a boy tell his sister in a whisper that that there were some who could survive. That there were some, though few, who could step into the deadly shower and live to tell the tale. I'd never met anyone

who had claimed to have done so themselves, but I wanted it to be true. I wanted there to be a way in.

“Father said they’re angels,” the boy had whispered. “Mother thinks they’re demons.”

Go home, my heart whispered. *Go home*.

But an invisible rope seemed to be thrust suddenly from the castle, and my feet began to move. *Home is the other way*, I thought, but in that moment, I was powerless.

Taking slow but deliberate steps across the bridge, I made my way on to the castle grounds and into the deadly rains.

Droplets kissed my skin, as gentle as a passing storm on a summer’s day. Where was the pain? Where was death? I waited and waited, then smoothed down my white dress with shaking hands. I edged closer to one of the bodies lying slumped in the grass. His hands were red and peeling, a harsh stench rising up even despite the downpour.

“I’m sorry you died,” I said softly, because speaking seemed like the only way to calm the fear clawing away at me. “You don’t deserve to lie here like this.” Whoever this man was, he deserved a ritual. A grave. Somewhere his family could visit. But I was just a girl, skulking about a murderous castle, too weak to lift a body on my own. “Maybe one day I’ll give you a proper burial.”

The castle glowered down, something in the air around me whispering its displeasure at my intrusion. “I’ll find out what happened in there, you know,” I said quietly, staring

into two arrow-slit windows. “And you won’t like it when I do.”

Standing, I looked back out to where the forest waited, not another soul in sight. No one came here, if they could help it. Not unless they were foolhardy enough to fancy they could make their way in to save us all, or were caught up by its deadly draw when night fell. The Round Road that came close to the castle had all but been abandoned, leaving travellers to journey further afield to skirt this cursed place.

The rain hadn’t killed me. I did not know why, or how, or what that meant. All around me were the bodies of those who’d died before me, those the rain had murdered for reasons no one seemed to know.

But I was alive.

My head pounded a bit, my heart racing at all the dreadful possibilities, but I would have days enough to worry later. So, in the freedom of isolation, I raised my arms to the rain and spun in a slow circle. The raindrops ran down my face, tickling my neck, soaking my dress. I spun again and again, ignited by the sense of wrongdoing, knowing I should never have come here. But the day was warm and muggy, the air almost too thick to breathe. The glorious chill of the rain on my skin was as welcome as a glass of fresh water.

I swayed and swirled about, palms to the sky, water flying from the hem of my dress at every turn. I had already shattered the rules beyond recognition; a brief frolic in

the rains would do no further harm. So twirl I did – until dizziness got the better of me and my foot caught on a pile of bones, sending me tumbling to the ground. Mud clung to my skirt as I stared at the pale bits of what had once been a person, my stomach turning.

Why had I come here? I could imagine Mother's voice now. *You've been tainted by the rain. It should have killed you, yet here you are. Your blood will be black like the devil's by now.* There had been a draw, an insatiable curiosity that had pulled me here but now made little sense. I remembered jumping off a rock into a deep pool in the river once. The older children had all done it, and I hated feeling too small to follow them, so I'd summed up what courage I could find and leapt. The feeling of falling had made me sick, and the drop seemed never to end. When at last I reached the water, it was hard and cold, and not at all like I had imagined. I swam quietly to the shore and slipped away towards home, working to remember why I'd been drawn to do something so impulsive in the first place.

This felt much the same. A foolish deed behind me, with nothing remaining but a sense of uncertainty as to what had led me here.

From the great archway into the courtyard of the castle, I felt – rather than heard – a voice call to me. Something beckoned, something hissed; a sense of being invited into the castle danced along my skin. My lip quivered.

An invisible thread tugged me towards the entryway.

No. Entering these wicked rains, impulsive and ill-advised though it was, had given me enough unease for a lifetime. The castle could wait for another day, or another girl.

The sound of my heartbeat was so loud it drowned out the rain. I gathered myself up calmly, smoothing down my dress. I had come here. What was done was done. There was no use fretting over what was in the past.

I turned and trotted across the bridge, each step faster than the one before it. A need to hurry overcame me, like a dream where danger snapped at my heels but I could not bring myself to run fast enough. *Hurry. Hurry. Hurry.* The word propelled me onward until I'd broken into a run. Despite my rush, I could feel the shaking in my limbs. The quivering of my fingers. I could not present myself back at home in a manner such as this, but I could not think about that now. There was only the need to be away from here, to make myself believe I had never come.

Just before the trees of the great forest swallowed me, I stopped suddenly, feeling eyes close at hand.

A boy with dark hair and muddy boots stood half hidden behind a tree. His eyes were wide and his hands hung limp at his sides. He stared, and I stared back. He had seen me, of course. He had seen me dancing about in the rain.

Dread stirred in my stomach.

I could ask him to keep my secret, but somehow that only felt as though ensuring its escape. I could threaten

him, but I'd never done so before, and wasn't sure I knew how.

So instead, I stared a bit longer, imagining all the words I would say to refute his claim if he ever breathed a word to anyone, how I could bury myself in lies and say he was spinning tales about me. People in Zírany knew me well. I liked to think they would take my word over that of a boy I'd never seen.

But the ache of unease wormed its way into my stomach and settled in, making my jaw clench and my heart sink. The boy said nothing, and I wasn't sure if I wished he would speak to shatter the rising panic or if I'd rather he stayed silent and made as if this had never happened at all. In the end, I turned away slowly, walking with measured steps down the overgrown pathway back towards home, half drowning in fear over what might happen if the town learned my secret, and half shivering with unbridled excitement over what I'd just done.