

ROSEMARY HART

BRIDE

OF THE

HARVEST

KING



BRIDE OF THE HARVEST KING is a publication of Rosemary Hart
Books, the Netherlands

First published: 2025

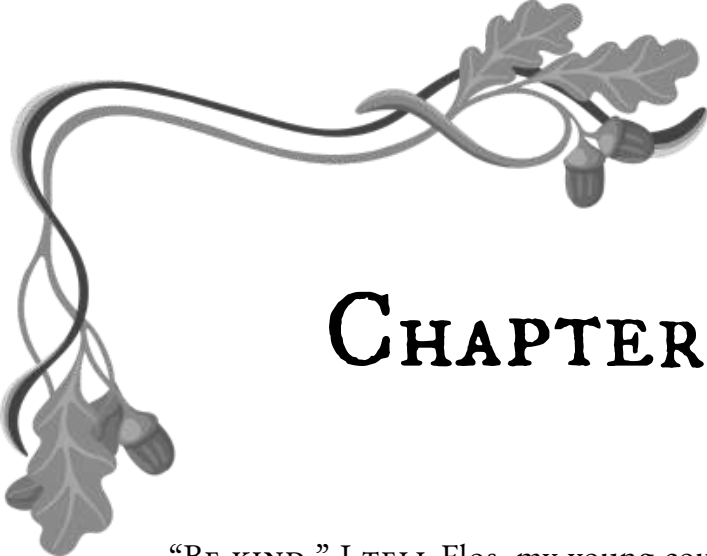
Design: Marieke Veringa

ISBN 9789403845364

Copyright © 2025 by Rosemary Hart

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written
permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S.
copyright law.



CHAPTER I

“BE KIND,” I TELL Flos, my young cousin, as he looks back at me with a stubbornness that only a six-year-old boy can display. “We don’t steal each other’s sweets, especially not tonight. Give it back to your sister now.”

He scrunches up his nose, but holds out the pear pastry to the little girl with flaxen blonde hair.

She grabs it back from him and sticks out her tongue. “Idiot.”

“Ass,” Flos mutters.

“Gyda says you have to be kind!”

“I mean both of you, Fjala. Flos, I’ve already given you a pastry. Fjala, don’t call your brother names.” I gently grab Flos by the shoulders and turn him back around.

“Now, off you go. Your mother must be looking for you, and I have plenty more pastries to bake before sunset.”

They run off, their little argument already forgotten, and I watch them chase each other around the ancient apple tree in the village square. Soon, that tree will be

adorned with lanterns and garlands, and every home will be decorated with wreaths.

I lean against the dark green doorpost, the paint long overdue for an update. The first signs of dusk are already settling over the land. I can tell this from the broad, golden rays of sunlight filtering through the forest that's skirting the village, and from the way the oaks and alders are alight with the colors of autumn, as though the woods themselves are quietly burning against the encroaching darkness.

"Today was your mother's favorite day of the year." Grandma's voice is gentle as she steps out and comes to stand next to me. "She always said the land would adorn itself in beauty one last time, before settling deep into its long, dark sleep."

"Mother was never chosen," I argue softly. "Of course she felt safe."

"Are you worried?" Grandma's face wrinkles even more when she smiles up at me. "That's not like you, Gyda."

"No." I take a slow, deep breath, inhaling the chill that hangs in the air. No hint of frost quite yet, but the unmistakable scent of a cold evening beneath a buttery yellow moon hangs all around me.

This time of year is known as the Harvest Moon, when the wheat has been brought in from the fields and the orchards have yielded their fruit. Tonight, the moon will travel full and pregnant across the sky, looking down on

the people below as they offer gifts and celebrate the harvest's bounty.

But there is no abundance to speak of this year. Last year's yields were meagre, and this year we have barely enough to see us through winter. Rainfall and dry spells have impoverished the fields, as though the earth itself has grown weary of feeding us. Many of the orchard trees stand gaunt, their fruit already rotten, and the grain that once bent heavily under the scythe has wasted away before even half of it could be gathered. Nevertheless, the Harvest Moon rises above the horizon, vast and luminous, casting its light over our withered soil, as if its beauty alone might be enough to sustain us through the darkening months.

And perhaps, in a more sinister way, this is true. Tonight, one maiden will be chosen from many – an offering to the dark, silent king who controls the growth and ripening of the land.

“No, I’m not worried,” I mutter. Not yet, anyway.

“We have prospered for seven years.” Grandma taps a crooked finger against her lips. “We shall renew our contract for another seven years. Trust me, Gyda, all will be well.”

That’s easy for her to say. My mother had already been married by the time her seven years were up, and my grandmother is far too old to be chosen. Fjala, my little cousin, is still years from growing into a young woman.

That leaves only me. But I'm no one. Out of the hundred and one young women who will gather in our village tonight, what chance is there that fate will single *me* out?

"Come now," Grandma chides me gently, when she sees the frown creeping between my eyebrows. "Smile, pumpkin. There's plenty to be grateful for."



Yes – smile. Be thankful, be kind, and always give back what you have been given. She has instilled these lessons in me ever since I was a toddler, given into her care after my mother passed away.

And I am. Truly. I am thankful for our modest life, for the shelter our cottage provides, for the clothes that are never too threadbare and the food that never runs too low. I'm also thankful for tonight's celebrations, and for the great bonfire that reaches far into the darkening sky. I dance with Fjala and Flos, twirling them around in wild circles until they collapse on the ground, breathless and laughing. Beer and cider overflow our cups as if there were no shortage, as if our cellars were not half empty.

But as the full moon peaks over the turret of the old town hall, the music dies down.

My mood darkens as I join the group of maidens from the neighboring villages and, together, we circle the old apple tree. Grandmother has braided my hair and woven it around a wreath of wheat stalks.

I look at their faces; at the way even the soft golden hues of the lanterns can't hide the tension fixed between their eyebrows. These girls are young – some are no older than fifteen. At twenty-one, I'm probably the oldest, and far from the prettiest. There's Hilda, with cheeks as red as apples; so beautiful despite the nervous gleam in her blue eyes. Next to me stands Wisla, her chestnut curls cascading down to her hips. They already look like brides.

I wonder if I look like one in my white gown and the golden wreath in my blonde hair.

I don't believe I look displeasing, but I'm one step above plain. Compared to these younger, fairer girls, I can't possibly be the most tempting bride-to-be.

Just a few more tense minutes, then, and then I can relax back into my simple life for another seven years.

It's with that comforting thought that I manage a smile as Bjorton hands me a slice of apple. He passes around the circle slowly, because his gout hurts his leg. I've lost count of his years – he must be close to a hundred – but although his voice is weak, his eyes still gleam shrewdly when he looks at us all.

“Let fate land where it will. Whoever is chosen among you, be humble and offer yourself joyfully as the great gift that you are.”

My nerves knot around my insides. One of us may be a gift, but why should any of us be joyful about that? Not every bride comes back home, after all. And when they do, they all speak of the Harvest King's nightmarish face with fear.

They say he's a ghost. They say he has a demonic appearance, with cruel eyes and blood dripping down his garments. They say that one look at him leaves you shaken with fright. I hate to think what happens to his bride when he takes her and fills her belly with his child.

Because that is what must happen to renew our contract with the Harvest King. Every seven years, we thank him for his gifts and offer a maiden as a bride in return.

Every seven years, we pray that the bride returns alive, whether she has conceived a child or not.

The last bride returned, but her womb remained barren, and slowly, our fields withered. So, no matter who is chosen tonight, her only task is to submit herself to the Harvest King and bear him a child, so that he will once again be pleased with us, and we will be fed for another seven years.

“Eat,” says Bjorton, raising his hands as though bestowing a special blessing upon us.

Obediently, I bring the slice of apple to my mouth. It is sweet and fresh on my tongue, a little tart when I swallow my first bite. My teeth sink into its flesh unhindered, and for a moment, I allow blessed relief to fill me.

It's not me.

I knew it wouldn't be, but even so, I breathe easier. It's not me, and after tonight, I can...

I freeze when I bite down on something hard. My heart immediately jumps into my throat as I search for the source of the hardness with my tongue. It could just be a little chunk of apple... Dread pools in my belly when my tongue runs over the smoothest, tiniest apple seed I've ever encountered. A haze settles over my mind. Slowly, as if I'm half petrified with shock, I raise my hand and spit the seed into my palm.

No one has said anything. I don't think they've even noticed yet. Some girls are still chewing, while others throw furtive glances around our lantern-lit circle. The people of the community are gathered around us, muttering softly and waiting expectantly. They are half-scared and half-hopeful that one of their daughters will bring blessings to our people.

I know I can't hide from this. Yet I stand absolutely still, while the other girls begin to shift on their feet, clearly wondering why no one has spoken out yet.

"Well?" Bjorton finally asks, sensing the nervous jitters running through the group. "Step forward, chosen one."

A flash of a thought runs through my mind: how easy would it be to drop the little apple seed from my hand? It would land somewhere amongst the wet grass, small and almost invisible. Darkness would hide my secret, perhaps forever.

“Step forward!” Bjorton sounds nervous now, and I know why. What if no bride is chosen? What if we are doomed to famine and starvation? “Come now, girls. There must be someone.”

“Yes,” I whisper. Always give back for what you’ve been given – and I’ve been given much in my life, more than enough to be grateful for. “Yes, I have it. It’s me.”

Cradling the seed in my hand, I step inside the circle. Bjorton squints at the shadows, then holds a lantern up to me. I unfold my fingers to show him the seed lying on my palm and try to calm my wildly racing heart.

“Gyda,” the old man mutters, nodding once at the evidence of my fate. “Blessed are you.”

I look up at the faces surrounding me, all so full of relief that they have been spared.

“Blessed are you,” the girls repeat, and Hilda and Wisla both embrace me. I sense relief in their embrace, too, but I can’t truly begrudge them for it. They’re so young, after all.

And me? Well, I’m almost a spinster.

That doesn’t mean I ever wanted to become the bride of this eerie, otherworldly king, but how can I tell Grandma

that when she comes over and cups my cheeks in her hands? “I’m so proud of you, my girl.”

“What if I don’t come back?” I mutter, barely loud enough for her to hear.

“Gyda.” Her touch grows firmer, her eyes locking onto mine. “You are strong. Of course you’ll come back.”

“What if I fail to please him?”

“Oh, girl.” Grandma purses her lips, as she always does when she thinks someone is being silly. “Listen to your heart, remember to be kind, and you’ll do quite well.”

“You don’t know that.”

She sighs and simply pats my cheek before letting go. “You must prepare. Come, we have so little time.”



CHAPTER 2

JUST LIKE THE BIG pine tree at the Midwinter Feast, the womenfolk of the village deck and decorate me. A white veil covers my hair, a crown woven of wheat resting heavily around my brow. They hang a wicker basket on my arm, filled with apples, pears, a loaf of bread and a small jar of honey – all yields of the harvest, to be returned as gifts for the Harvest King.

They paint my lips red, brush my cheeks with soft pink powder, perhaps to make me look prettier than I am. I don't like how it feels; sticky, like it's clogging my skin.

"You look like the prettiest bride," Grandma tells me, grabbing my shoulders to take me in.

Or a nice little lamb, all ready to be taken to the slaughter.

"Is she ready?" Bjorton asks from the doorway of our cottage.

"Gyda?" Grandma asks.

As if there's room to refuse. I glance down at Fjala, the only one who doesn't look relieved or hopeful.