

HEART OF THE HOLLY
KING

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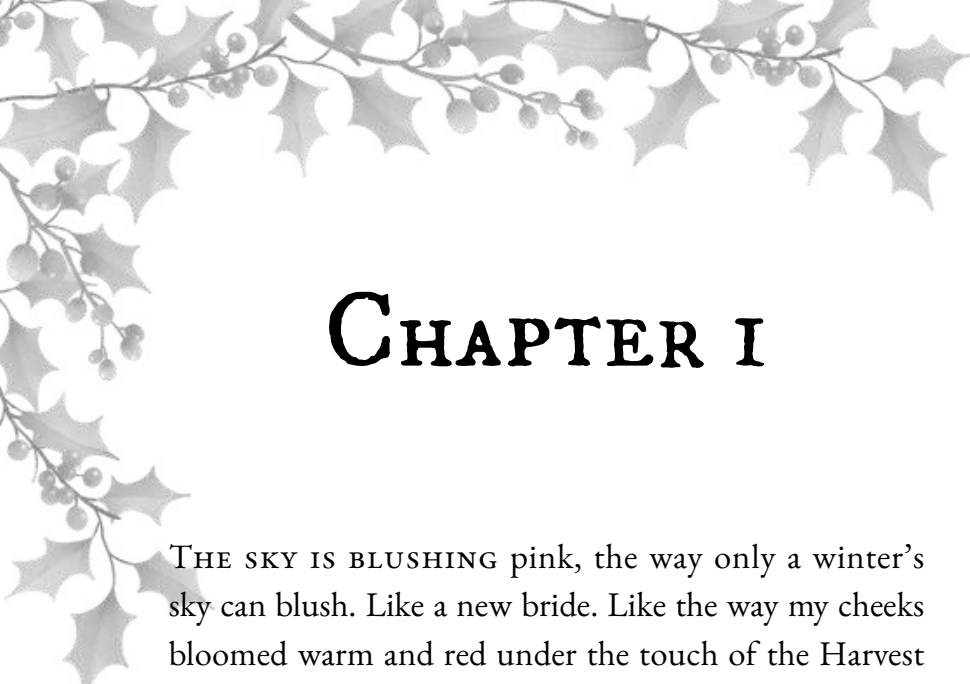
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CHAPTER I

THE SKY IS BLUSHING pink, the way only a winter's sky can blush. Like a new bride. Like the way my cheeks bloomed warm and red under the touch of the Harvest King. Only a handful of hours past noon, and the sun is already dipping low. My feet halt on the uneven dirt track that skirts the forest's edge, my eyes lifted toward that crystalline stretch of cyan blue and bridal pink, when a flock of geese passes overhead.

I breathe in, my lungs full of crisp air. Frost will kiss the ground tonight. Yesterday, the snow visited us for the first time, drifting lazily across the bare fields. A virginal white that reminded me of a bride's gown – *my* gown – the one I wore two months ago and the one that is still waiting for me.

I know what grandmother would say – she's said it to me a dozen times: "You cannot let your heart linger on what was never yours to keep."

I blow out all the air I inhaled so deeply a moment ago, and it returns to the sky in a cloud of pale mist.

I'm supposed to think about the Harvest King as much as I'm supposed to wander into these woods at dusk –

Never.

But... gods help me, I feel him everywhere: in the rush of the geese's beating wings, in the gnarled branches of the bare trees whenever I think I catch a glimpse of antlers from the corner of my eye. I feel him in the slanted rays of sunlight filtering through the young birches, warming the woods the same way his amber eyes used to warm my skin when he looked at me.

He is everywhere. And yet, he is nowhere. Believe me, I've searched. This forest is vast, and I've wandered every twisty path, far from the beaten track that connects our village to the next one. What I've found is a wood changing with the sun's waning path across the sky – I've seen it turn from russet and gold to bare, stark limbs clawing at a sky that darkens earlier by the day.

I've found beauty deep between the trees, even when it got so cold I couldn't stop shivering in my winter cloak. Even after the last golden leaf was swept away on an icy gale, I still searched, hoping for a glimpse of him, speaking to him as though he were hiding just out of sight, as if the wild brambles and briar would carry my tales back to him.

Yes, I've found beauty. But never him.

Sometimes, I leave him gifts. Just small things, and I suppose they're only silly little human offerings...: freshly baked cookies wrapped in a clean kerchief, a bottle of

creamy milk. Or simply a ribbon from my hair, tied around the fingers of a slender silver birch.

I'm never scared when I wander between the trees on my own. These are *his* woods, after all – even if it seems he has vanished from them entirely. Even if he has abandoned me.

The geese fly on, honking their raucous opinions over the thatched roofs of the village, until they are nothing more than black dots against the fading light.

Flos and Fjala are onto me the moment I step into the village square. The big tree, where I once stood with my hair braided into a crown of wheat beneath the full Harvest Moon, now stands as bare and gaunt as the forest.

"You have gifts again," Fjala says excitedly, weaving her fingers through mine before she shrieks, "You're icy!"

"She wandered the woods again," Flos says knowingly. "Grandmother says it's dangerous. Mama says it too."

"Of course it is." I grab Flos' hand with my other, grinning when he, too, protests at the chill of my fingers.

"There are wolves and wild boars and foxes, not to mention all the things that crawl in the dark and wait in the shadows for wandering children..."

"Then why do you go there?" My cousin looks at me with a mixture of awe and chagrin. "Do you *want* to get eaten by wolves? Is that it? Are you tired of living, Gyda?"

"I go there because I want some peace and quiet now and then, little cleverboots." We walk towards my cottage – the one I share with grandmother – and the little house

right next to it, where my cousins live with their mother, my aunt Gunda. And because I have to at least pretend to be curious, I reluctantly add, “What gifts did he leave this time...?”

“Really pretty beads,” Fjala says. “And ribbons. Can I have some of them?”

“Were they meant for you?” I ask, semi-sternly, looking down at her blond head.

She pouts. “We should all get something if you’re going to marry the richest farmer boy around.”

“Who says I’m going to marry Tilman Sevenacre?”

Her pout twists into a scowl. “Everyone does. They all want you now, even that stupid swine Siegmar from the other village. Do you know him? He called me pigtails last summer. But he’s the pigface.”

I groan, stepping into our cottage with my young cousins trailing right behind me. Lo and behold, on the table waits a package: a little wooden box finely carved with miniature chickens, roosters, and cows.

I suppose that’s fitting for a farmer whose wealth depends on his cattle.

As I open lid, I feel a familiar tightening of knots in my belly. The beads inside are pretty – each painted in a different color, some with flowers and others – hah – with more chickens.

I pick one up and roll it between my fingers, the ceramic catching the sparse light that filters through the narrow kitchen window.

What am I supposed to do with them?

My chagrin grows when I realize I'll now have to send a note back as a thank-you. Then Tilman will take it as encouragement and send me yet another one of his gifts, and so on, trapping me in this stupid cycle.

This courtship happened entirely without my intention and, frankly, quite unexpectedly, though if grandmother is to be believed, that only makes me a foolish girl.

I suppose I should have known that suitors would be lining up to try and claim me for themselves, now that I am no longer just Gyda, the near-spinster minding her own business, but Gyda the Harvest Bride.

The chosen maiden.

The one with the blessed child in her womb.

And while it's true that Siegmar and Oldwin and Ecbert are all vying for my attention, it is Tilman who holds the best cards. He's young, merry, affluent, and annoyingly confident that I will soon be his.

I take one last look at the bead between my fingers, then press it into Fjala's hand. "They're all yours. I think they'll make excellent marbles."

Her eyes go wide, then she breaks into a grin and runs off, clutching the beads.

“There you are,” grandmother says, entering the room through the back door. “What kept you, child?”

“I was just out,” I mumble, lowering my eyes to avoid hers.

She clucks her tongue, shaking her grey head. “You wander too far, too often. Surely you’ve found your answers by now.”

She means that the Harvest King will not return for me.

She’s right, of course. He left me on that hill to go back to my normal, mortal life.

“Now, take this to Ziska. It’s been one illness after another for her family lately.” Grandmother places a pan of soup in my arms. “And no wandering off this time, Gyda, you hear? The sun’s all but gone.”

I nod – what else is there to do? I carry the soup across the village to Ziska’s house, where I find her with a babe suckling at her breast and a toddler whining in the kitchen. Her eldest, Swetlana, lies tossing and turning in the bedstead, glowing with fever.

“Can I help with that?” I ask gently, nodding toward the toddler. “If you need a break...”

“I’m all right,” Ziska replies, covering her breast as the baby lets go. “It’s just a cold. Though I can’t say when one ends and another begins. You’ll find out when you have your own. Though gods willing, you’ll never have to learn how to live after losing your man, like I did.”

I think about my belly – how there’s not even the slightest swell to show my condition – then glance at Ziska. She’s busy making the little one burp, rocking him softly on her shoulder. It was just a passing remark, of course. No one knows I’m with child except for grandmother. I couldn’t hide it from her – she noticed the absence of my monthly bleedings in the laundry pile.

“Let me.” I take the baby from her, along with the cloth to catch the milk burp, and gently pat the little boy’s back until he *flurps* and relaxes against me.

“There you go,” I snicker. “That was a good one, wasn’t it?”

“You seem comfortable with him,” Ziska remarks as she stirs the soup on the stove.

“I helped Aunt Gunda a lot, when Flos and Fjala were this tiny.”

In the corner, the toddler sneezes loudly.

“Ah, bless you,” Ziska mutters. “Thank you, Gyda, but you might want to leave before you catch it and carry it back to your grandmother.”

“Good luck, then.” I hand the baby boy back and step out onto the dark street. Little spidery shivers run across my back, and it takes me a moment to understand what I’m feeling.

It’s unease.

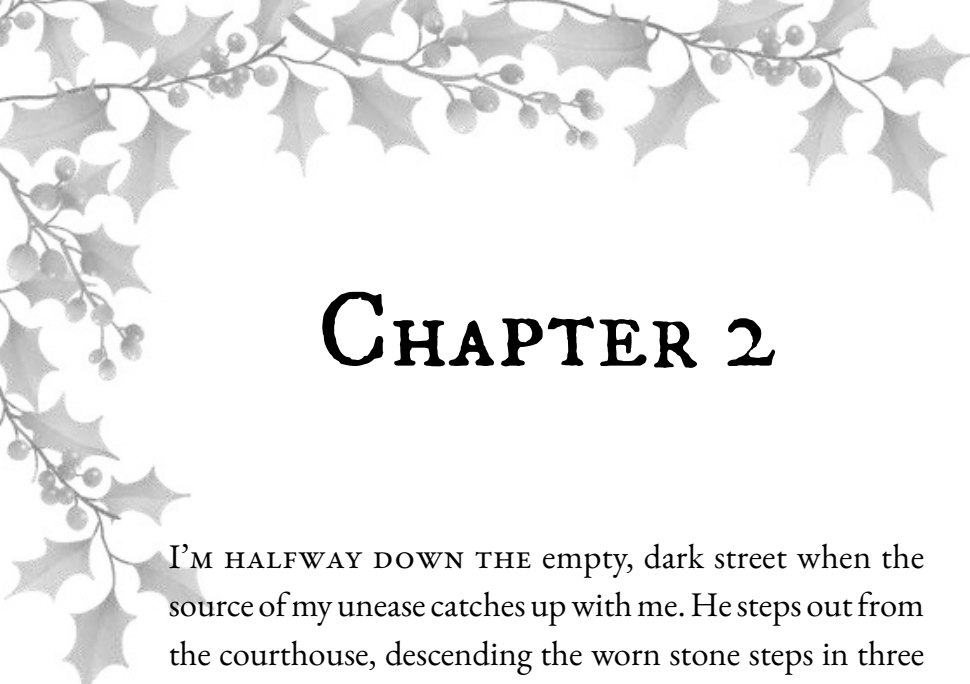
Becoming a mother was never my heart’s desire. When I confessed this to the Harvest King, he was entirely

unbothered by it – only kind and curious. But he is gone, while his seed has taken root inside me, and I –

I'm full of quiet, rumbling anger.

Not because I hate the idea of having this child. No, having his child will forever remind me of the three loveliest nights of my life. I can live with that and be content, but...

But Ziska is right – being a woman on your own is hard enough, and with a child it will be nothing short of hardship. I'm angry because I have no desire to live that life of hardship all by myself, which means that no matter how little I care for courtship, I can't bring myself to refuse a good marriage proposal.



CHAPTER 2

I'M HALFWAY DOWN THE empty, dark street when the source of my unease catches up with me. He steps out from the courthouse, descending the worn stone steps in three long, easy strides, offering me a bright smile.

“Gyda! Out so late?”

“Hello, Tilman. You’re the one out late.”

His grin doesn’t fade at my unwelcoming tone. A few lanterns are scattered among the houses, resting in alcoves or on windowsills, and their sparse light catches in his curly blond hair.

“I suppose I am. Father had some business at the council, but he hasn’t been feeling well, so I went in his stead.”

“Another one of those colds, is it?” I murmur.

“As a matter of fact. How’d you know?”

I wave toward Ziska’s house behind us. “Apparently, it’s contagious.”

“Well, you still look radiant.”

I stumble, my foot catching a rock or a bump in the road.

Tilman's hand shoots out, catching my arm.

"Alright?"

"I should have brought a light," I mutter. "Besides, you don't know. I could be full of sickness right now, passing it on to you."

He laughs, and I must admit his laugh is pleasant to hear, even if it's not the deep, warm rumble of the Harvest King. But that is unfair of me, for nothing could compare to him.

"Gyda..." His hand remains on my arm, and I'm not quite sure whether he means to steady me against another stumble in the night, or if he fears I'll run off if he lets go.

"Yes, Tilman?"

"I can't help but notice... You haven't given me an answer yet."

Silence grows inside of me. "You haven't really *asked* me anything."

"I thought it was fairly obvious." His grin thins to a smile – I can just make it out as we pass by another house, light pouring out from its window. "It would be my family's honor to welcome the Harvest Bride to our home."

"Your family," I remark, raising my eyebrows. "What about you?"

"I thought that was even more obvious," Tilman says, wearing a sheepish expression. "I like you very much."

As far as proposals go, it's not exactly Rana with her beastly dragon-prince. My heart tightens in my chest, then continues beating with a dull, persistent ache.

"It's just been..." I'm not even sure what I want to say. One day soon I'll have to tell him *yes*. I just don't think I want this to be the moment – not here, on this cold night, my heart full of longing for a man who feels as far away and silent as the stars gazing down on me. "I haven't really had time to process everything."

"There are others, I-I know." He says it in a rush. "But I truly enjoy your company, Gyda, and I believe you would enjoy mine, if you gave me a chance."

I bow my head, certain that Tilman is indeed a very pleasant young man.

"I will give you time, of course." He meets my gaze, his blue eyes dark in the night. "You can tell me, though... if there's something else weighing on your mind."

I can't.

He steps closer, his breath warm against my cheek. He smells faintly of cider. "If you are... with child... you know... from *him*..." Even under the pale starlight, I see his face flush. He casts a furtive glance over his shoulder, where the dark fringe of the woods presses in on the village like a tight, chafing collar. "I want you to know I'll raise it as my own. It would be an honor, Gyda."

My throat tightens, but I force a smile. "I haven't felt much yet."

“Well. Just remember it, then. I don’t want you to worry about any of it.”

“Kind of you,” I mutter. I mean it.

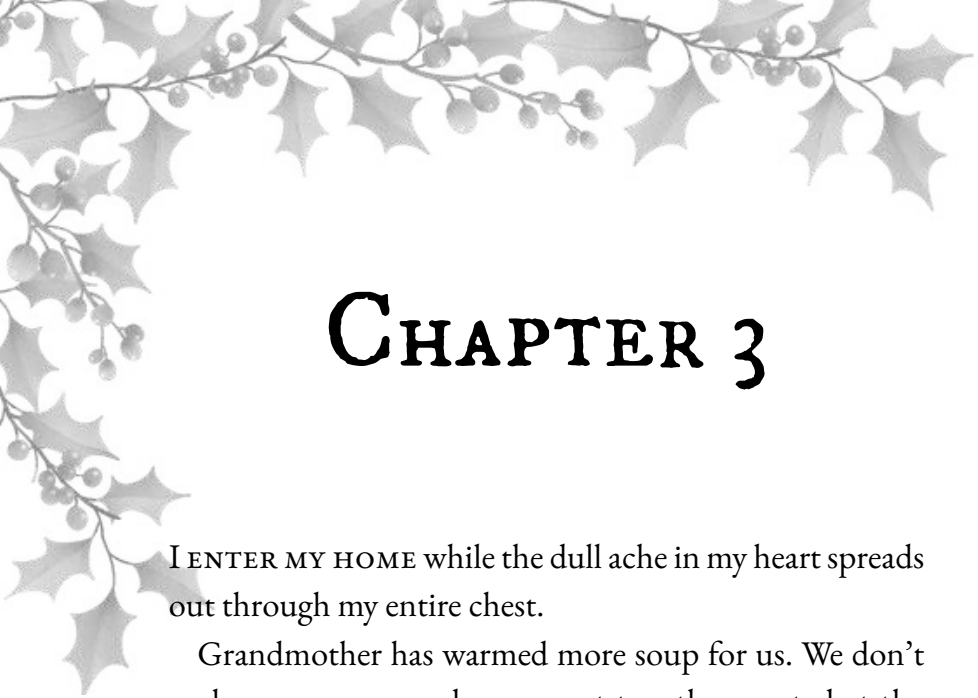
“You’re home,” he says, letting go of my arm as our cottage comes into view at the end of the street. “Give my best to your grandmother.”

“I will.”

“Oh, and Gyda.”

I turn.

He watches me, hands in his pockets, a serious look on his face. “Tomorrow, under the mistletoe, I’ll kiss you.”



CHAPTER 3

I ENTER MY HOME while the dull ache in my heart spreads out through my entire chest.

Grandmother has warmed more soup for us. We don't exchange many words as we eat together, seated at the small wooden table in the corner of the kitchen. The light grows dim and soft. After our meal, I toss an extra log onto the fire and tidy up while grandmother sinks into her comfortable chair, warming her weary bones.

"Your socks will catch fire," I warn her.

Grandmother grins, shifting a little closer, stretching her feet toward the flames. "Old people get cold, my dear."

"I can smell your toes. Like roasted chicken."

She laughs, and I hand her a steaming cup of brew. I've made her favorite – a strong mix of dried apple, pumpkin, and a handful of warming spices. Cradling my own cup between my hands, I sit down beside her.

"How is your young man?" she asks, glancing down at me with eyes pale and wrinkled with age. "And how was your gift?"