

PROLOGUE



WHEN HE GRABS Mama's wrist and yanks her toward the wall-hanging like that, it must hurt. Mama doesn't cry out. She tries to hide her pain from him, but she looks back at me, and in her face, she shows me everything she feels. If Father knows she's in pain and is showing me, Father will take Mama's pain away and replace it with something else.

He will say to Mama, "Darling, nothing's wrong. It doesn't hurt, you're not frightened," and in Mama's face I'll see her doubt, the beginnings of her confusion. He'll say, "Look at our beautiful child. Look at this beautiful room. How happy we are. Nothing is wrong. Come with me, darling." Mama will stare back at him, puzzled, and then she'll look at me, her beautiful child in this beautiful room, and her eyes will go smooth and empty, and she'll smile at how happy we are. I'll smile too, because my mind is no stronger than Mama's. I'll say, "Have fun! Come back soon!" Then Father will produce the keys that open the door behind the hanging and Mama will glide through. Thiel, tall, troubled, bewildered in the middle of the room, will bolt in after her, and Father will follow.

When the lock slides home behind them, I'll stand there trying to remember what I was doing before all of this happened. Before Thiel, father's foremost adviser, came into Mama's rooms looking for Father. Before Thiel, holding his hands so tight at his sides that

they shook, tried to tell Father something that made Father angry, so that Father stood up from the table, his papers scattering, his pen dropping, and said, “Thiel, you’re a fool who cannot make sensical decisions. Come with us now. I’ll show you what happens when you think for yourself.” And then crossed to the sofa and grabbed Mama’s wrist so fast that Mama gasped and dropped her embroidery, but did not cry out.

“Come back soon!” I say cheerily as the hidden door closes behind them.

I REMAIN, STARING into the sad eyes of the blue horse in the hanging. Snow gusts at the windows. I’m trying to remember what I was doing before everyone went away.

What just happened? Why can’t I remember what just happened? Why do I feel so—

Numbers.

Mama says that when I’m confused or can’t remember, I must do arithmetic, because numbers are an anchor. She’s written out problems for me so that I have them at these moments. They’re here next to the papers Father has been writing in his funny, loopy script.

46 into 1058.

I could work it out on paper in two seconds, but Mama always tells me to work it out in my head. “Clear your mind of everything but the numbers,” she says. “Pretend you’re alone with the numbers in an empty room.” She’s taught me shortcuts. For example, 46 is almost 50, and 1058 is only a little more than 1000. 50 goes into 1000 exactly 20 times. I start there and work with what’s left. A minute later, I’ve figured out that 46 into 1058 is 23.

I do another one. 75 into 2850 is 38. Another. 32 into 1600 is 50.

Oh! These are good numbers Mama has chosen. They touch my

memory and build a story, for fifty is Father's age and thirty-two is Mama's. They've been married for fourteen years and I am nine and a half. Mama was a Lienid princess. Father visited the island kingdom of Lienid and chose her when she was only eighteen. He brought her here and she's never been back. She misses home, her father, her brothers and sisters, her brother Ror the king. She talks sometimes of sending me there, where I will be safe, and I cover her mouth and wrap a hand in her scarves and pull myself against her because I will not leave her.

Am I not safe here?

The numbers and the story are clearing my head, and it feels like I'm falling. Breathe.

Father is the King of Monsea. No one knows he has the two different colored eyes of a Graceling; no one wonders, for his is a terrible Grace hidden beneath his eye patch: When he speaks, his words fog people's minds so that they'll believe everything he says. Usually, he lies. This is why, as I sit here now, the numbers are clear but other things in my mind are muddled. Father has just been lying.

Now I understand why I'm in this room alone. Father has taken Mama and Thiel down to his own chambers and is doing something awful to Thiel so that Thiel will learn to be obedient and will not come to Father again with announcements that make Father angry. What the awful thing is, I don't know. Father never shows me the things he does, and Mama never remembers enough to tell me. She's forbidden me to try to follow Father down there, ever. She says that when I am thinking of following Father downstairs, I must forget about it and do more numbers. She says that if I disobey, she'll send me away to Lienid.

I try. I really do. But I can't make myself alone with the numbers in an empty room, and suddenly I'm screaming.

The next thing I know, I'm throwing Father's papers into the fire. Running back to the table, gathering them in armfuls, tripping across the rug, throwing them on the flames, screaming as I watch Father's strange, beautiful writing disappear. Screaming it out of existence. I trip over Mama's embroidery, her sheets with their cheerful little rows of embroidered stars, moons, castles; cheerful, colorful flowers and keys and candles. I hate the embroidery. It's a lie of happiness that Father convinces her is true. I drag it to the fire.

When Father comes bursting through the hidden door I'm still standing there screaming my head off and the air is putrid, full of the stinky smoke of silk. A bit of carpet is burning. He stamps it out. He grabs my shoulders, then shakes me so hard that I bite my own tongue. "Bitterblue," he says, actually frightened. "Have you gone mad? You could suffocate in a room like this!"

"I hate you!" I yell, and spit blood into his face. He does the strangest thing: His single eye lights up and he starts to laugh.

"You don't hate me," he says. "You love me and I love you."

"I hate you," I say, but I'm doubting it now, I'm confused. His arms enfold me in a hug.

"You love me," he says. "You're my wonderful, strong darling, and you'll be queen someday. Wouldn't you like to be queen?"

I'm hugging Father, who is kneeling on the floor before me in a smoky room, so big, so comforting. Father is warm and nice to hug, though his shirt smells funny, like something sweet and rotten. "Queen of all Monsea?" I say in wonderment. The words are thick in my mouth. My tongue hurts. I don't remember why.

"You'll be queen someday," Father says. "I'll teach you all the important things, for we must prepare you. You'll have to work hard, my Bitterblue. You don't have all my advantages. But I'll mold you, yes?"

"Yes, Father."

“And you must never, ever disobey me. The next time you destroy my papers, Bitterblue, I’ll cut off one of your mother’s fingers.”

This confuses me. “What? Father! You mustn’t!”

“The time after that,” Father says, “I’ll hand you the knife and *you’ll* cut off one of her fingers.”

Falling again. I’m alone in the sky with the words Father just said; I plummet into comprehension. “No,” I say, certain. “You couldn’t make me do that.”

“I think you know that I could,” he says, trapping me close to him with hands clasped above my elbows. “You’re my strong-minded girl and I think you know exactly what I can do. Shall we make a promise, darling? Shall we promise to be honest with each other from now on? I shall make you into the most luminous queen.”

“You can’t make me hurt Mama,” I say.

Father raises a hand and cracks me across the face. I’m blind and gasping and would fall if he weren’t holding me up. “I can make anyone do anything,” he says with perfect calm.

“You can’t make me hurt Mama,” I yell through my face that is stinging and running with tears and snot. “One day I’m going to be big enough to kill you.”

Father is laughing again. “Sweetheart,” he says, forcing me back into his embrace. “Oh, see how perfect you are. You will be my masterpiece.”

When Mama and Thiel come through the hidden door, Father is murmuring to me and I’m resting my cheek on his nice shoulder, safe in his arms, wondering why the room smells like smoke and why my nose hurts so much. “Bitterblue?” Mama says, sounding scared. I raise my face to her. Her eyes go wide and she comes to me and pulls me away from Father. “What did you do?” she hisses at Father. “You struck her. You animal. I’ll kill you.”

“Darling, don’t be silly,” Father says, standing, looming over us. Mama and I are so small, so small wound together, and I’m confused because Mama is angry at Father. Father says to Mama, “I didn’t strike her. You did.”

“I know that I did not,” Mama says.

“I tried to stop you,” Father says, “but I couldn’t, and you struck her.”

“You will never convince me of that,” Mama says, her words clear, her voice beautiful inside her chest, where I’m pressing my ear.

“Interesting,” Father says. He studies us for a moment, head tilted, then says to Mama, “She is a lovely age. It’s time she and I became better acquainted. Bitterblue and I will start having private lessons.”

Mama turns her body so that she’s between me and Father. Her arms around me are like iron bars. “You will not,” she says to Father. “Get out. Get out of these rooms.”

“This really could not be more fascinating,” Father says. “What if I were to tell you that Thiel struck her?”

“You struck her,” Mama says, “and now you’ll leave.”

“Brilliant!” Father says. He walks up to Mama. His fist comes out of nowhere, he punches her in the face and Mama plummets to the floor, and I’m falling again, but for real this time, falling down with Mama. “Take some time to clean up, if you like,” Father suggests as he stands over us, nudging us with his toe. “I have some thinking to do. We’ll continue this discussion later.”

Father is gone. Thiel is kneeling, leaning over us, dripping bloody tears onto us from the fresh cuts he seems to have acquired on either cheek. “Ashen,” he says. “Ashen, I’m sorry. Princess Bitterblue, forgive me.”

“You didn’t strike her, Thiel,” my mother says thickly, pushing

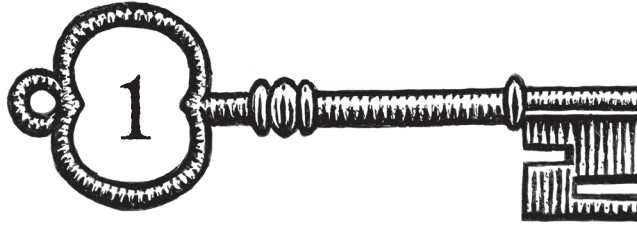
herself up, pulling me into her lap and rocking me, whispering words of love to me. I cling to her, crying. There is blood everywhere. “Help her, Thiel, won’t you?” Mama says.

Thiel’s firm, gentle hands are touching my nose, my cheeks, my jaw; his watery eyes are inspecting my face. “Nothing is broken,” he says. “Let me look at you now, Ashen. Oh, how I beg you to forgive me.”

We are all three huddled on the floor together, joined, crying. The words Mama murmurs to me are everything. When Mama speaks to Thiel again, her voice is so tired. “You’ve done nothing you could help, Thiel, and you did not strike her. All of this is Leck’s doing. Bitterblue,” Mama says to me. “Is your mind clear?”

“Yes, Mama,” I whisper. “Father hit me, and then he hit you. He wants to mold me into the perfect queen.”

“I need you to be strong, Bitterblue,” Mama says. “Stronger than ever, for things are going to get worse.”



QUEEN BITTERBLUE NEVER meant to tell so many people so many lies.

IT ALL BEGAN with the High Court case about the madman and the watermelons. The man in question, named Ivan, lived along the River Dell in an eastern section of the city near the merchant docks. To one side of his house resided a cutter and engraver of gravestones, and to the other side was a neighbor's watermelon patch. Ivan had contrived somehow in the dark of night to replace every watermelon in the watermelon patch with a gravestone, and every gravestone in the engraver's lot with a watermelon. He'd then shoved cryptic instructions under each neighbor's door with the intention of setting each on a scavenger hunt to find his missing items, a move useless in one case and unnecessary in the other, as the watermelon-grower could not read and the gravestone-carver could see her gravestones from her doorstep quite plainly, planted in the watermelon patch two lots down. Both had guessed the culprit immediately, for Ivan's antics were not uncommon. Only a month ago, Ivan had stolen a neighbor's cow and perched her atop yet another neighbor's candle shop, where she mooed mournfully until someone climbed the roof to milk her, and where she was compelled to live for several days, the kingdom's most elevated and probably most mystified cow, while the few literate neighbors on

the street worked through Ivan's cryptic clues for how to build the rope and pulley device to bring her down. Ivan was an engineer by trade.

Ivan was, in fact, the engineer who'd designed, during Leck's reign, the three city bridges.

Sitting at the high table of the High Court, Bitterblue was a trifle annoyed with her advisers, whose job it was to decide what court cases were worth the queen's time. It seemed to her that they were always doing this, sending her to preside over the kingdom's silliest business, then whisking her back to her office the moment something juicy cropped up. "This seems like a straightforward nuisance complaint, doesn't it?" she said to the four men to her left and the four to her right, the eight judges who supported her when she was present at this table and handled the proceedings themselves when she was not. "If so, I'll leave it to you."

"Bones," said Judge Quall at her right elbow.

"What?"

Judge Quall glared at Bitterblue, then glared at the parties on the floor awaiting trial. "Anyone who mentions bones in the course of this trial will be fined," he said sternly. "I don't even want to hear mention of the word. Understood?"

"Lord Quall," said Bitterblue, scrutinizing him through narrowed eyes. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"In a recent divorce trial, Lady Queen," said Quall, "the defendant kept mumbling about bones for no reason, like a man off his head, and I will not sit through that again! It was distressing!"

"But you often judge murder trials. Surely you're accustomed to talk of bones."

"This is a trial about watermelons! Watermelons are invertebrate creatures!" cried Quall.

“Yes, all right,” said Bitterblue, rubbing her face, trying to rub away her incredulous expression. “No talk of—”

Quall flinched.

Bones, finished Bitterblue in her own mind. *Everyone is mad.* “In addition to the findings of my associates,” she said, standing to go, “the people on Ivan’s street near the merchant docks who cannot read shall be taught to do so at the court’s expense. Is that understood?”

Her words were met with a silence so profound that it startled her; her judges peered at her in alarm. She ran through her words again: The people shall be taught to read. Surely there was nothing so strange in that?

“It is in your power to make such a declaration,” said Quall, “Lady Queen.” He spoke with an implication in every syllable that she’d done something ridiculous. And why should he be so condescending? She knew perfectly well that it was within her power, just as she knew it was within her power to remove any judge she felt like removing from the service of this Court. The watermelon-grower was also staring at her with an expression of sheerest confusion. Beyond him, a scattering of amused faces brought the heat crawling up Bitterblue’s neck.

How typical of this Court for everyone else to act mad and then, when I’ve behaved in a perfectly reasonable manner, compel me to feel as if I were the mad one.

“See to it,” she said to Quall, then turned to make her escape. As she passed through the exit at the back of the dais, she forced her small shoulders straight and proud, even though it was not what she felt.

IN HER ROUND tower office, the windows were open, the light was beginning to change to evening, and her advisers weren’t happy.

“We don’t have limitless resources, Lady Queen,” said Thiel, steel-haired, steel-eyed, standing before her desk like a glacier. “A declaration like that, once you’ve made it public, is difficult to reverse.”

“But, Thiel, why should we reverse it? Shouldn’t it distress us to hear of a street in the east city where people can’t read?”

“There will always be the occasional person in the city who can’t read, Lady Queen. It’s hardly a matter that requires the direct intervention of the crown. You’ve now created a precedent which intimates that the queen’s court is available to educate any citizen who comes forward claiming to be illiterate!”

“My citizens *should* be able to come forward. My father saw that they were deprived of education for thirty-five years. Their illiteracy is the responsibility of the crown!”

“But we don’t have the time or the means to address it on an individual basis, Lady Queen. You’re not a schoolteacher; you’re the Queen of Monsea. What the people need right now is for you to behave like it, so that they can feel that they’re in good hands.”

“Anyway,” broke in her adviser Runnemood, who was sitting in one of the windows, “nearly everyone can read. And has it occurred to you, Lady Queen, that those who can’t might not want to? The people on Ivan’s street have businesses and families to feed. When do they have time for lessons?”

“How would I know?” Bitterblue exclaimed. “What do I know about the people and their businesses?”

Sometimes she felt lost behind this desk in the middle of the room, this desk that was so big for her smallness. She could hear every word they were being tactful enough not to say: that she’d made a fool of herself; that she’d proven the queen to be young, silly, and naïve about her station. It had seemed a powerful thing to say at the time. Were her instincts so terrible?

“It’s all right, Bitterblue,” said Thiel, more gently now. “We can move on from this.”

There was kindness in the use of her name rather than her title. The glacier showing its willingness to recede. Bitterblue looked into the eyes of her top adviser and saw that he was worried, anxious that he’d harangued her too much. “I’ll make no more declarations without consulting you first,” she said quietly.

“There now,” said Thiel, relieved. “See? That’s a wise decision. Wisdom is queenly, Lady Queen.”

FOR AN HOUR or so, Thiel kept her captive behind towers of paper. Runnemood, in contrast, circled along the windows, exclaiming at the pink light, bouncing on the balls of his feet, and distracting her with tales of consummately happy illiterate people. Finally, mercifully, he went away to some evening meeting with city lords. Runnemood was a pleasant man to look at and an adviser she needed, the one most adept at warding away ministers and lords who wished to talk Bitterblue’s ear off with requests, complaints, and obsequies. But that was because he himself knew how to be pushy with words. His younger brother, Rood, was also one of Bitterblue’s advisers. The two brothers, Thiel, and her secretary and fourth adviser, Darby, were all about sixty or so, though Runnemood didn’t look it. The others did. All four had been advisers to Leck. “Were we short-staffed today?” Bitterblue asked Thiel. “I don’t remember seeing Rood.”

“Rood is resting today,” said Thiel. “And Darby is unwell.”

“Ah.” Bitterblue understood the code: Rood was having one of his nervous episodes and Darby was drunk. She rested her forehead on the desk for a moment, afraid that otherwise she’d laugh. What would her uncle, who was the King of Lienid, think of the state of

her advisers? King Ror had chosen these men as her team, judging them, on the basis of their previous experience, to be the men most knowledgeable about the kingdom's needs for recovery. Would their behavior today surprise him? Or were Ror's own advisers equally colorful? Perhaps this was the way in all seven kingdoms.

And perhaps it didn't matter. She had nothing to complain of when it came to her advisers' productivity, except perhaps that they were *too* productive. The paper that piled itself on her desk every day, every hour, was the evidence: taxes levied, court judgments rendered, prisons proposed, laws enacted, towns chartered; paper, paper, until her fingers smelled like paper and her eyes teared at the sight of paper and sometimes her head pounded.

"Watermelons," Bitterblue said into the surface of her desk.

"Lady Queen?" said Thiel.

Bitterblue rubbed at the heavy braids wound around her head, then sat up. "I never knew there were watermelon patches in the city, Thiel. On my next yearly tour, may I see one?"

"We intend your next tour to coincide with your uncle's visit this winter, Lady Queen. I'm no expert on watermelons, but I don't believe they're particularly impressive in January."

"Could I go out on a tour now?"

"Lady Queen, it is the very middle of August. When do you imagine we could make time for such a thing in August?"

The sky all around this tower was the color of watermelon flesh. The tall clock against the wall ticked the evening away, and above her, through the glass ceiling, the light darkened to purple. One star shone. "Oh, Thiel," Bitterblue said, sighing. "Go away, won't you?"

"I will, Lady Queen," said Thiel, "but first, I wish to discuss the matter of your marriage."

"No."

“You’re eighteen, Lady Queen, with no heir. A number of the six kings have sons yet unmarried, including two of your own cousins—”

“Thiel, if you start listing princes again, I’ll throw ink at you. If you so much as whisper the names of my cousins—”

“Lady Queen,” Thiel said, talking over her, completely unperturbed, “as little as I wish to upset you, this is a reality that must be faced. You’ve developed a fine rapport with your cousin Skye in the course of his ambassadorial visits. When King Ror comes this winter, he’ll probably bring Prince Skye with him. Between now and then, we’ll have to have this discussion.”

“We won’t,” Bitterblue said, clutching her pen hard. “There’s nothing to discuss.”

“We will,” said Thiel firmly.

If she looked closely enough, Bitterblue could make out the lines of healed scars on Thiel’s cheekbones. “There’s something I’d like to discuss,” she said. “Do you remember the time you came into my mother’s rooms to say something to my father that made him angry and he brought you downstairs through the hidden door? What did he do to you down there?”

It was as if she’d blown out a candle. He stood before her, tall, gaunt, and confused. Then even the confusion faded and the light went out of his eyes. He smoothed his impeccable shirtfront, staring down at it, tugging, as if tidiness mattered greatly in this moment. Then he bowed once, quietly; turned; and walked out of the room.

LEFT ALONE, BITTERBLUE shuffled papers, signed things, sneezed at the dust—tried, and failed, to talk herself out of a small shame. She’d done it on purpose. She’d known full well that he wouldn’t be able to bear her question. In fact, almost all of the men who worked in her offices, from her advisers to her ministers and clerks to her

personal guard—those who had been Leck’s men—flinched away from direct reminders of the time of Leck’s reign—flinched away, or fell apart. It was the weapon she always used when one of them pushed her too far, for it was the only weapon she had that worked. She suspected that there’d be no more marriage talk for a while.

Her advisers had a single-mindedness that left her behind sometimes. That was why the marriage talk frightened her: Things that started as mere talk among them seemed to become real institutions, suddenly, forcefully, before she’d ever managed to comprehend them or form an opinion. It had happened with the law that gave blanket pardons for all crimes committed during Leck’s reign. It had happened with the charter provision that allowed towns to break free of their governing lords and rule themselves. It had happened with the suggestion—just a suggestion!—to block off Leck’s old living chambers, take down his animal cages in the back garden, and burn his belongings.

And it wasn’t that she was necessarily opposed to any of these measures, or regretted her approval once things settled down enough for her to comprehend that she’d approved. It was only that she didn’t *know* what she thought, she needed more time than they did, she couldn’t always be rushing ahead the way they were, and it frustrated her to look back and realize that she’d let herself be pushed into something. “It’s deliberate, Lady Queen,” they’d told her, “a deliberate philosophy of forward-thinkingness. You’re right to encourage it.”

“But—”

“Lady Queen,” Thiel had said gently, “we’re trying to lift people out of Leck’s spell and help them move on, you understand? Otherwise, people will wallow in their own upsetting stories. Have you spoken to your uncle about it?”

Yes, she had. Bitterblue's uncle, after Leck's death, had come half-way across the world for his niece. King Ror had created Monsea's new statutes, formed its ministries and courts, chosen its administrators, then passed the kingdom into Bitterblue's ten-year-old hands. He'd seen to the burning of Leck's body and mourned the murder of his own sister, Bitterblue's mother, who was gone. Ror had brought order out of chaos in Monsea. "Leck is still lodged in too many people's minds," he had said to her. "His Grace is a sickness that lingers, a nightmare you must help people to forget."

But how was forgetting possible? Could she forget her own father? Could she forget that her father had murdered her mother? How could she forget the rape of her own mind?

Bitterblue laid her pen down and went, cautiously, to an east-facing window. She put a hand to the frame to steady herself and rested her temple against the glass, closing her eyes until the falling sensation receded. At the base of her tower, the River Dell formed the city's northern boundary. Opening her eyes, she followed the river's south bank east, past the three bridges, past where she guessed the silver docks and lumber docks, fish and merchant docks to be. "Watermelon patch," she said, sighing. Of course, it was too far and too dark to see any such thing.

The River Dell here, as it lapped at the castle's north walls, was slow-moving and wide as a bay. The boggy ground on the opposite shore was undeveloped, untraveled except by those who lived in Monsea's far north, but still, for some unaccountable reason, her father had built the three bridges, each higher and more magnificent than any bridge needed to be. Winged Bridge, the closest, had a floor of white and blue marble, like clouds. Monster Bridge, the highest, had a walkway that rose as high as its highest arch. Winter Bridge, made of mirrors, was eerily hard to distinguish from the sky

during the day, and sparkled with the light of the stars, the water, the city at night. They were purple and crimson shapes now in the sunset, the bridges, unreal and almost animal. Huge, slender creatures that stretched north across flashing water to useless land.

The falling sensation crept up on her again. Her father had told her a story of another sparkling city, also with bridges and a river—a rushing river whose water leapt off a cliff, plummeted through the air, and plunged into the sea far below. Bitterblue had laughed in delight to hear of that flying river. She had been five or six. She'd been sitting in his lap.

Leck, who tortured animals. Leck, who made little girls and hundreds of other people disappear. Leck, who became obsessed with me and chased me across the world.

Why do I push myself to these windows when I know I'll be too dizzy to get a good look at anything? What is it that I'm trying to see?

SHE ENTERED THE foyer of her rooms that night, turned right to her sitting room, and found Helda knitting on the sofa. The servant girl Fox was washing the windows.

Helda, who was Bitterblue's housekeeper, ladservant, and spy-master, reached a hand into a pocket and passed Bitterblue two letters. "Here you are, dear. I'll ring for dinner," she said, heaving herself up, patting her white hair, and leaving the room.

"Oh!" Bitterblue flushed with pleasure. "Two letters." She broke open the plain seals and peeked inside. Both were ciphred and both written in hands she knew instantly, the messy scrawl belonging to Lady Katsa of the Middluns, the careful, strong markings belonging to Prince Po of Lienid, who was Skye's younger brother, and, with Skye, one of the two unmarried sons of Ror who would make Bitterblue dreadful husbands. Truly, comically dreadful.

She found a corner of the sofa to curl up in and read Po's first. Po had lost his sight eight years ago. He could not read words on paper, for while the part of his Grace that allowed him to sense the physical world around him compensated for many aspects of his blindness, he had trouble demystifying differences on flat surfaces, and he could not sense color. He wrote in large letters with a sharp piece of graphite, because graphite was easier to control than ink, and he wrote with a ruler as a guide, since he could not see what he was writing. He also used a small set of movable wooden letters as a reference to help him keep his own ciphers straight in his mind.

Just now, his letter said, he was in the northern kingdom of Nander, stirring up trouble. Switching letters, Bitterblue read that Katsa, who was an unparalleled fighter and Graced with survival skills, had been dividing her time among the kingdoms of Estill, Sunder, and Wester, where she was also stirring up trouble. That was what they did with themselves, those two Gracelings, along with a small band of friends: They stirred up trouble on a serious scale—bribery, coercion, sabotage, organized rebellion—all directed at stopping the worst behavior of the world's most seriously corrupt kings. "King Drowden of Nander has been imprisoning his nobles randomly and executing them, because he knows some are disloyal, but isn't sure which," wrote Po. "We're going to spring them from prison. Giddon and I have been teaching townspeople to fight. There's going to be a revolution, Cousin."

Both letters ended the same way. Po and Katsa hadn't seen each other in months, and neither of them had seen Bitterblue in over a year. Both intended to come to Bitterblue as soon as their work could spare them, and stay as long as they could.

Bitterblue was so happy that she curled herself up in a ball on the sofa and hugged a pillow for a full minute.

At the far end of the room, Fox had managed to climb to the very top of the tall windows, bracing her hands and feet against the window frames. There, she rubbed at her own reflection vigorously, polishing the surface to a high shine. Wearing a divided skirt of blue, Fox matched her surroundings, for Bitterblue's sitting room was blue, from the carpet to the blue-and-gold walls to the ceiling, which was midnight blue and stenciled with gold and scarlet stars. The royal crown sat on a blue velvet cushion in this room, always, except when Bitterblue wore it. A hanging of a fantastical sky-blue horse with green eyes marked the hidden door that had once given passage down to Leck's rooms below, before people had come in and done something to block off the stairway.

Fox was a Graceling, with one eye pale gray and the other dark gray, and she was startlingly pretty, almost glamorous, red-haired and strong-featured. Her Grace was a strange one: fearlessness. But it was not fearlessness combined with recklessness; it was only a lack of the unpleasant sensation of fear; and, in fact, Fox had what Bitterblue interpreted to be an almost mathematical ability to calculate physical consequences. Fox knew better than anyone what was likely to happen if she slipped and fell out of the window. It was that knowledge that kept her careful, rather than the feeling of fear.

Bitterblue thought such a Grace was wasted in a castle servant, but in post-Leck Monsea, Gracelings were not the property of the kings; they were free to work where they liked. And Fox seemed to like doing odd jobs in the upper north floors of the castle—though Helda did talk about trying her as a spy sometime.

“Do you live in the castle, Fox?” asked Bitterblue.

“No, Lady Queen,” answered Fox from her perch. “I live in the east city.”

“You work strange hours, don't you?”

“It suits me, Lady Queen,” Fox responded. “Sometimes, I work the night through.”

“How do you get in and out of the castle at such odd hours? Does the Door Guard ever give you a hard time?”

“Well, it’s never any trouble getting out; they’ll let anyone out, Lady Queen. But to come in at the gatehouse at night, I show a bracelet that Helda’s given me, and to get past the Lienid at your own doors, I show the bracelet again and give the password.”

“The password?”

“It changes every day, Lady Queen.”

“And how do you get the password yourself?”

“Helda hides it for us somewhere, in a different place every day of the week, Lady Queen.”

“Oh? What is it today?”

“‘Chocolate pancake,’ Lady Queen,” said Fox.

Bitterblue lay on her back on the sofa for a while, giving this its due consideration. Every morning at breakfast, Helda asked Bitterblue to name a word or words that could serve as the key for any ciphered notes they were likely to pass to each other during the day. Yesterday morning, Bitterblue had chosen “chocolate pancake.” “What was yesterday’s password, Fox?”

“‘Salted caramel,’” said Fox.

Which had been the key Bitterblue had chosen two days ago. “What delicious passwords,” Bitterblue said idly, an idea forming in her mind.

“Yes, Helda’s passwords always make me hungry,” Fox said.

A hood lay draped on the edge of Bitterblue’s sofa, deep blue, like the sofa. Fox’s hood, certainly; Bitterblue had seen her wear simple coverings like that before. It was much plainer than any of Bitterblue’s coats.

“How often do you suppose the Lienid Door Guard changes guard?” Bitterblue asked Fox.

“Every hour on the hour, Lady Queen,” Fox responded.

“Every hour! That’s quite often.”

“Yes, Lady Queen,” replied Fox blandly. “I don’t suppose there’s much continuity in what any of them sees.”

Fox stood on the solid floor again, bent over a bucket of suds, her back to the queen.

Bitterblue took the hood, tucked it under her arm, and slipped out of the room.

BITTERBLUE HAD WATCHED spies enter her rooms at night before, hooded, hunched, unrecognizable until they’d removed their covering garments. Her Lienid Door Guard, a gift from King Ror, guarded the castle’s main entrance and the entrance to Bitterblue’s living quarters, and did so with discretion. They were under no obligation to answer the questions of anyone but Bitterblue and Helda, not even the Monsean Guard, which was the kingdom’s official army and police. This gave Bitterblue’s personal spies the freedom to come and go without their presence being noted by her administration. It was a strange little provision of Ror’s, to protect Bitterblue’s privacy. Ror had a similar arrangement in Lienid.

The bracelet was no problem, for the bracelet Helda gave her spies was a plain leather cord on which hung a replica of a ring Ashen had worn. It was a proper Lienid ring in design: gold, inset with tiny, sparkly, deep gray stones. Every ring worn by a Lienid represented a particular family member, and this was the ring Ashen had worn for Bitterblue. Bitterblue had the original. She kept it in her mother’s wooden chest in the bedroom, along with all of Ashen’s rings.

It was strangely affecting to tie this ring to her wrist. Her mother had shown it to her many times, explained that she'd chosen the stones to match Bitterblue's eyes. Bitterblue hugged her wrist to her body, trying to decide what her mother would think of what she was about to do.

Well. And Mama and I snuck out of the castle once too. Though not this way; by the windows. And with good reason. She was trying to save me from him.

She did save me. She sent me on ahead and stayed behind to die.

Mama, I'm not sure why I'm doing what I'm about to do. Something is missing, do you see? Piles of paper at my desk in my tower, day in, day out. That can't be all there is. You understand, don't you?

SNEAKING WAS A kind of deceit. So was disguise. Just past midnight, wearing dark trousers and Fox's hood, the queen snuck out of her own rooms and stepped into a world of stories and lies.