

A prince of Faerie, nourished on cat milk and contempt, born into a family overburdened with heirs, with a nasty little prophecy hanging over his head—since the hour of Cardan's birth, he has been alternately adored and despised. Perhaps it's no surprise that he turned out the way he did; the only surprise is that he managed to become the High King of Elfhome anyway.

Some might think of him as a strong draught, burning the back of one's throat, but invigorating all the same.

You might beg to differ.

So long as you're begging, he doesn't mind a bit.



HOW THE
KING
OF
ELFHAME
LEARNED TO
HATE STORIES





I
The King
of Elfhame
Visits the
Mortal
World





his?” he demands, looking down at the waves far beneath them. “*This* is how you traveled? What if the enchantment ended while Vivi wasn’t with you?”

“I suppose I would have plummeted out of the air,” Jude tells him with troubling equanimity, her expression saying, *Horrible risks are entirely normal to me.*

Cardan has to admit that the ragwort steeds are swift and that there is something thrilling about tangling his hand in a leafy mane and racing across the sky. It’s not as though he doesn’t enjoy a little danger, just that he doesn’t gorge himself on it, unlike *some people*. He cuts his gaze toward his unpredictable,



mortal High Queen, whose wild brown hair is blowing around her face, whose amber eyes are alight when she looks at him.

They are two people who ought to have, by all rights, remained enemies forever.

He can't believe his good fortune, can't trace the path that got him here.

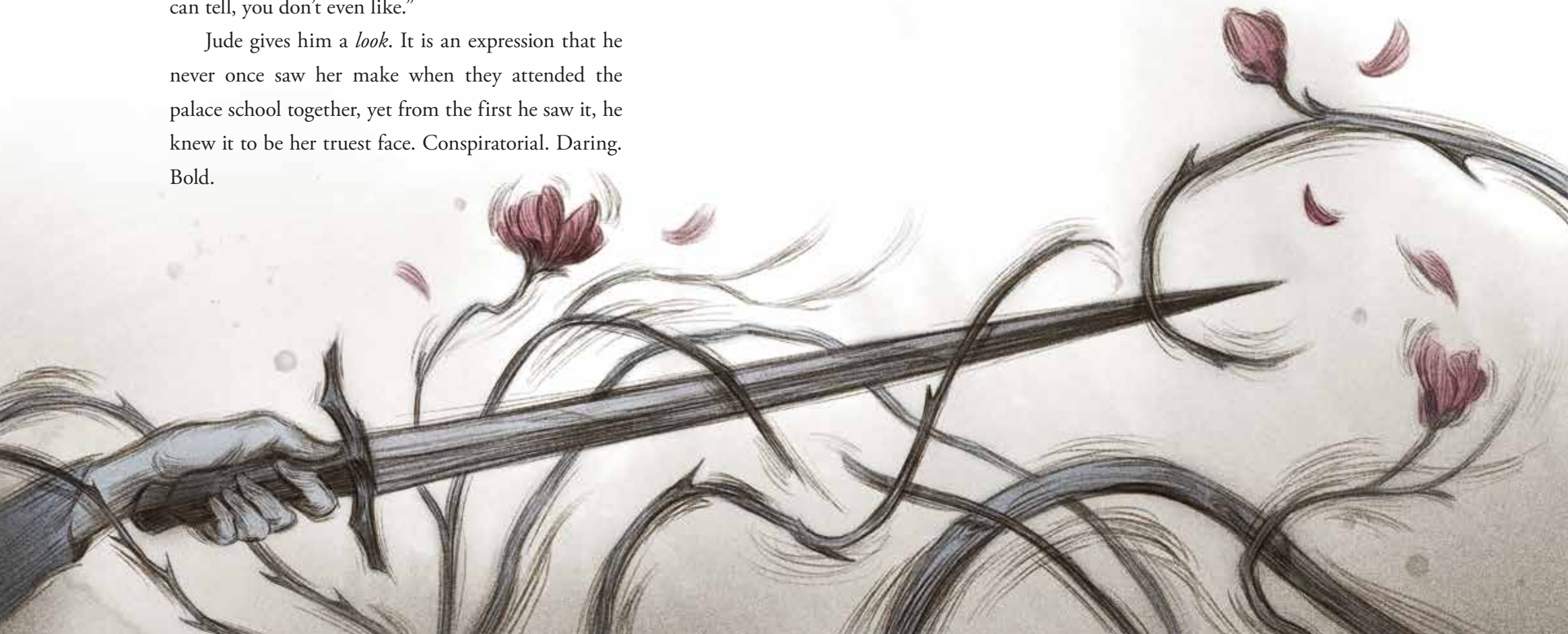
"Now that I agreed to travel your way," he shouts over the wind, "you ought to give me something I want. Like a promise you won't fight some monster just to impress one of the solitary fey who, as far as I can tell, you don't even like."

Jude gives him a *look*. It is an expression that he never once saw her make when they attended the palace school together, yet from the first he saw it, he knew it to be her truest face. Conspiratorial. Daring. Bold.



Even without the look, he ought to know her answer. Of course she wants to fight it, whatever it is. She feels as though she has something to prove at all times. Feels as though she has to earn the crown on her head over and over again.

Once, she told Cardan the story of confronting Madoc after she'd drugged him, but before the poison began to work. While Cardan was in the next room, drinking wine and chatting, she was swinging a sword at her foster father, stalling for time.





I am what you made me, she'd told him as they battled.

Cardan knows Madoc isn't the only one who made her the way she is. He had a hand in it as well.

It's absurd, sometimes, the thought that she loves him. He's grateful, of course, but it feels as though it's just another of the ridiculous, absurd, dangerous things she does. She wants to fight monsters, and she wants him for a lover, the same boy she fantasized about murdering. She likes nothing easy or safe or sure.

Nothing good for her.

"I'm not trying to impress Bryern," Jude says. "He says I owe him a favor for giving me a job when no one else would. I guess that's true."

"I think his presumption is deserving of a reward," he tells her, voice dry. "Not, alas, the one you intend to give him."

She sighs. "If there's a monster among the solitary Folk, we ought to do something about it."

There is no reason for him to feel a frisson of dread at those words, no cause for the unease he can't shake.

"We have knights, sworn to our service," Cardan says. "You're cheating one of them out of an opportunity for glory."



Jude gives a little snort, pushing back her thick, dark hair, trying to tuck it into her golden circlet and out of her eyes. "All queens become greedy."

He vows to continue this argument later. One of his primary duties as the High King appears to be reminding her she isn't personally responsible for solving every tedious problem and carrying out every tedious execution in all of Elfhome. He wouldn't mind causing a little torment here or there, of a non-murderly sort, but her view of their positions seems overburdened with chores. "Let us meet with this Bryern person and hear his tale. If you must fight this thing, there's no reason to go alone. You could take a battalion of knights or, failing that, me."

"You think you're the equal of a battalion of knights?" she asks with a smile.

He might be, he supposes, although there's no telling how the mortal world will affect his magic. He did once raise an isle from the bottom of the sea. He wonders if he ought to remind her of that, wonders if she had been impressed. "I believe that I could easily best all of them combined, in a suitable contest. Perhaps one involving drink."

She kicks her ragwort steed forward with a laugh. "We meet Bryern tomorrow at dusk," she calls back,



and her grin dares him to race. “And after that, we can decide who gets to play the hero.”

Having only recently stopped playing the villain, Cardan thinks again of the winding path of decisions that brought him to this unlikely place, here with her, racing over the sky, planning to end trouble instead of making more of it.