Praise for

GILDED

*** A *New York Times* Best Book of 2021 ***

'When it comes to reimagined fairy tales, the reigning queen of the genre is Marissa Meyer . . .
Fresh and utterly engrossing.'
New York Times

'Glitters as brightly as the stories and gold that Serilda and Gild spin.'
Kate Corr (The Corr Sisters), authors of
The Witch's Kiss trilogy and A Throne of Swans duology

'The queen of fairy-tale retellings is back . . . a gorgeously intricate tale that will have readers locked in from the start.'
Booklist

'Intricate worldbuilding and star-crossed romance . . . will leave readers craving a sequel.'
Publishers Weekly

'A dark tale full of fear, creepiness and a bit of romance . . . will keep many YA readers totally engaged.'
Reading Zone

'Had me under its spell from start to finish.
I loved each and every minute of it.'
Stacy M, NetGalley reviewer

'Will leave you breathless.'
Armadillo Magazine

'The queen of fairy tale retellings has spun what
is sure to be another best seller.'
School Library Journal

'I loved it! I was completely gripped and I am so, so
looking forward to reading the sequel.'
Jo S, NetGalley reviewer

'Forget spinning straw into gold, Meyer can spin words into
magic and worlds into reality.'
Alexandra Christo, author of *To Kill a Kingdom*,
Into the Crooked Place and *City of Spells*

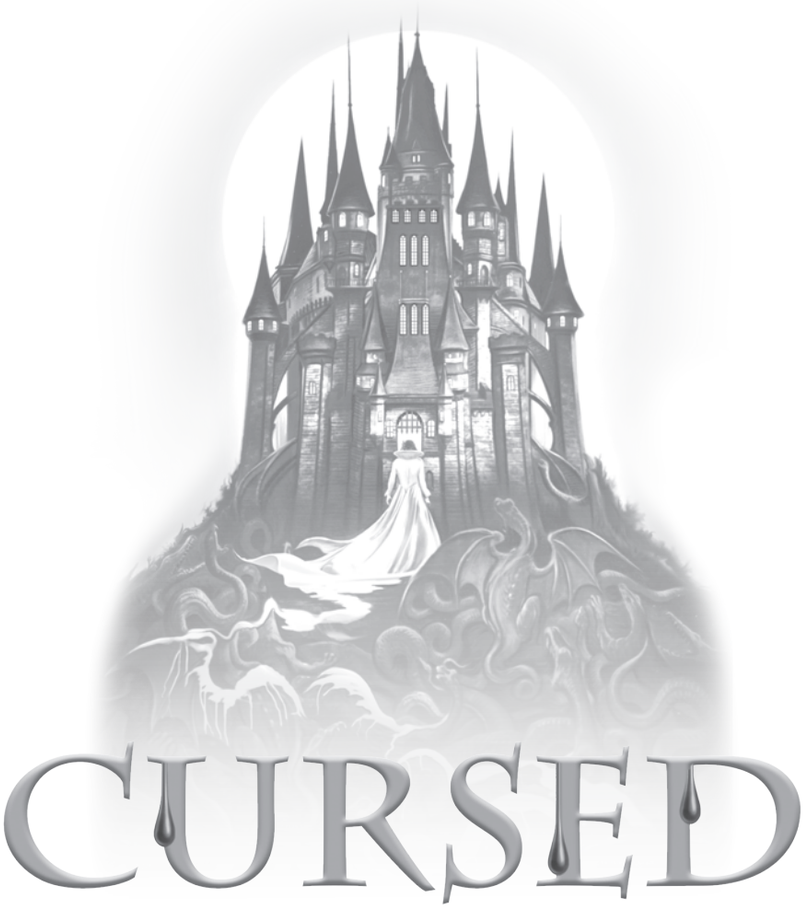
'Compelling.'
Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books

'Addictive and filled with wonderful characters.
Highly recommended!'
Sarah W, Librarian, NetGalley reviewer

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marissa Meyer is the #1 *New York Times*-bestselling author of the Renegades Trilogy, The Lunar Chronicles series, the Wires and Nerve graphic novels, and *The Lunar Chronicles Coloring Book*. Her first standalone novel, *Heartless*, was also a #1 *New York Times* bestseller. Marissa created and hosts a podcast called *The Happy Writer*. She lives in Tacoma, Washington, with her husband and their two daughters.

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CURSED

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This one's for the writers, the dreamers, the creators—
from one storyteller to another.



Be still now, and I will tell you a tale.

It begins deep within Verloren, the land of the lost. From the time the first humans were buried in damp, fertile earth or sent out to sea on burning pyres, their souls have been guided into Verloren by the eternal lantern of Velos, the god of wisdom and death. Taken to rest and to dream and—once a year, beneath the Mourning Moon—to return as spirits to the mortal realm and spend one night in the company of their loved ones left behind.

No, no, of course that does not happen anymore. This was a very long time ago. Hush, now, and listen.

Though Velos has always been the ruler of the underworld, there was a time when the god was not alone. Monsters roamed the dark kingdom, and spirits filled the caverns with laughter and song.

And then there were the demons. Wicked beings, the embodiment of all things foul and cruel, made of mortals' sin and shame. When humans passed through the gates into Verloren, these despairs drained out of them, step by step, staining the bridge that connected our world to the next and dripping into the river beneath. It was from these poisoned waters that the demons were born, flesh and beauty—crafted from the regrets and secrets and selfish deeds that mortals carried with them after death. Today, we call these demons the dark ones.

Their numbers swelled as centuries passed, and with time the dark ones grew restless. They yearned for independence. Thirsted for a life beyond the shimmering caves and misted swamps of Verloren. They went to Velos and asked to be allowed to travel forth into the mortal realm, to gaze upon the constellations of stars, to taste a salty wind on their tongues, to feel the press of warm sunlight on their ice-cold skin.

But Velos ignored such pleas, for even gods can be foolish.

Or perhaps it was not foolishness, but cruelty, for the god to keep the demons thus imprisoned, century after century. Or perhaps it was wise, for having been born of

wickedness, the demons were capable of nothing but envy, brutality, and deception. Perhaps the god already knew the truth: There was no place for these creatures among humans, who—despite their many faults—had also shown that they could lead lives full of goodness and grace.

The dark ones stopped asking for freedom, and instead—clever things—they waited.

Hundreds of years they waited.

Watching and listening and planning.

Until one Mourning Moon, when the sky was so thick with clouds the moon's swell was shrouded from view. While Velos held their lantern aloft at the gates, showing the lost souls the way to return to the world above—the dark ones suddenly surged forward.

They cut through the throngs of waiting spirits. Slaughtered what beasts tried to stop them. They were prepared for the hellhounds, Velos's beloved servants, having cut strips of their own bodies' flesh to lure the hounds to their side. It worked. With the hounds placated and the god unprepared, the demons overtook the bridge.

In a desperate attempt to stop the horde, Velos shifted into their beastly form—the great black wolf that even today is said to guard Verloren's gates. The beast was as big as a house, with fur like ink, massive, protruding fangs, and twin stars like burning flames buried deep in each eye socket.

But the dark ones were not frightened.

The one who would become Erlkönig, the Alder King, lifted a bow that he himself had crafted from the bones of heroes and the ligaments of warriors. From his quiver, he took an arrow—its fletching made from the fingernails of dead children, its head cut from the hardened tears of their mothers.

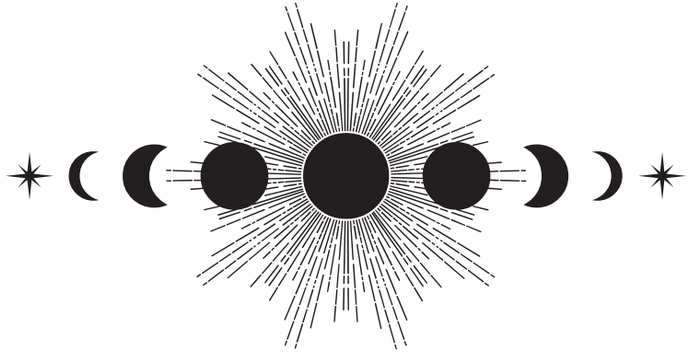
The demon nocked the arrow into place, took his aim, and let it fly.

Straight into the heart of the god of death.

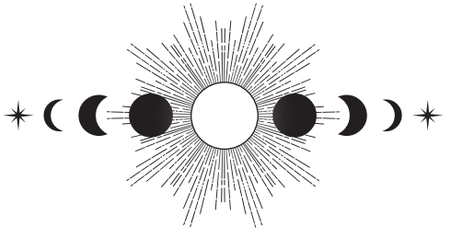
The wolf roared and stumbled from the bridge, down into the depths of the thrashing river below.

Where Velos fell, the arrow that had pierced their heart stuck deep into the riverbed, where it would take root. Where it would grow, pushing past the bridge and through the gates. A great alder tree that would never stop reaching for the sky.

Velos would not die that day, if gods can die at all. But while the god of death lay powerless in the river below, the dark ones stormed overhead, their king at the helm. They emerged into a pitch-black night. Torrents of rain splattered upon their glorious faces, while the Mourning Moon hid behind lightning and thunder, choosing not to bear witness to the horrors that had just been unleashed upon the mortal world.



THE SUMMER SOLSTICE



Chapter One

Serilda stopped telling her tale, checking to see if the children had finally fallen asleep.

A moment passed, before Nickel opened bleary eyes. "Is the story over already?"

Serilda shifted toward him. "You should know by now," she whispered, pressing down a lock of his fluffy blond hair, "that the best stories are never truly over. I would argue that 'happily ever after' is one of my more popular lies."

He yawned. "Maybe. But it sure is a nice lie."

"It sure is," she agreed. "Now hush. It's time to go to sleep. I'll tell you more tomorrow."

He posed no argument, just rolled onto his side to make more space for little Gerdrut, who was sandwiched between Nickel and Hans, with Fricz and Anna splayed at awkward angles at the foot of the bed. The five children had taken to sleeping in Serilda's bed, even though they had been given their own cots in the servants' halls. She didn't mind. There was something about their cluster of tangled limbs and open mouths, blue-tinged eyelids and muttered complaints that someone was hogging the blankets that filled her heart with something close to contentment.

How she did love these children.

How she hated what had been done to them. How she tortured herself with guilt, knowing it was her fault. Her and her traitorous tongue and the

stories she couldn't stop telling. The imagination that had carried her away on so many fancies ever since she could remember . . . yet had brought her nothing but trouble. A life full of misfortunes.

The worst misfortune of all—the lives taken from these five precious souls.

But they kept asking her to tell her tales, so what could she say? She could deny them nothing.

"Good night." She tugged the blankets up to Nickel's chin, covering the spot of blood that had leaked through his nightshirt over the hole in his chest, where the Erlking's night ravens had eaten his heart.

Leaning forward, she brushed a kiss to Nickel's temple. She had to bite back a grimace at the sensation of cool slipperiness on his skin. As though even the gentlest touch might crush his skull, as if he were as brittle as autumn leaves in a child's fist. Ghosts were not delicate beings—they were already dead, and not much more harm could come to them. But they were caught somewhere in between their mortal forms and decaying corpses, and as such, it was as though their figures could not decide where to end, what amount of space to occupy. To look at a ghost was a bit like looking at a mirage, their outlines shifting and blurring into the air. To touch one felt like the most unnatural thing in the world. A bit like touching a dead slug, one that had been left to rot in blistering-hot sun. But . . . colder.

Still, Serilda loved these five little ghosts with all her being, and even if her body was missing, trapped in a haunted castle, and she could no longer feel her heart beat, she would never let them know how much she wanted to pull away every time one of them wrapped her in a hug or slipped their dead little hand into hers.

Serilda waited until she was certain that Nickel was asleep and Gerdrut had started to snore, quite impressively for such a tiny thing. Then she eased herself off the bed and dimmed the lantern on the bedside table. She approached one of the leaded windows that overlooked the great lake surrounding the castle, where evening sunlight shimmered on the water.

Tomorrow was the summer solstice.

Tomorrow she would be wed.

A light tap at the door interrupted Serilda's thoughts before they could fall into despair. She paced across the carpet, keeping her footsteps light to avoid disturbing the children, and opened the door.

Manfred, the Erlking's coachman and the first ghost Serilda had ever met, stood on the other side. There was a time when Manfred had served the king and queen of Adalheid, but he had died in the massacre when the Erlking and his dark ones murdered all the inhabitants and claimed the castle for themselves. Manfred's death, like so many, had been brutal—in his case, a steel chisel through one eye. The chisel was stuck in his skull even now, the blood dripping slowly, eternally, from his eye socket. After all this time, Serilda had begun to get used to the sight, and she greeted Manfred with a smile.

"I wasn't expecting you this evening."

Manfred bowed. "His Grim has requested your presence."

Her smile fell fast. "Of course he has," she said, her tone sour. "The children have just fallen asleep. Give me a moment."

"Take your time. I don't mind making him wait."

Serilda nodded knowingly and shut the door. Manfred and the other ghosts might be serving the dark ones, but they loathed their masters. They tried to find small ways to annoy the Erlking and his court whenever they could. Small acts of rebellion, but rebellion all the same.

She retied her long hair into twin braids. It occurred to her that many girls, upon being summoned to the side of their husband-to-be, might pinch some color into their cheeks or place a dab of rose water along their collarbone. Whereas Serilda was tempted to sneak a dagger into her stocking on the chance she might have an opportunity to stick it into her betrothed's throat.

She cast one more glance at the children, noting how they did not exactly appear to be sleeping. They were too pale, their breathing too still. In rest, they looked utterly dead.

Until Gerdrut's head drooped to one side and she let out a sound like grinding millstones.

Serilda bit her lip against a laugh, remembering why she was doing this.

For them.

Only for them.

Turning away, she slipped out into the stairwell.

Serilda had memorized the route to the Erlking's chambers, but she was nevertheless grateful for Manfred's company as they made their way through the corridors, lit with torches and hung with eerie tapestries that depicted the most grotesque scenes of hunting hounds and ravaged prey. She was growing accustomed to the ominous, haunting shadows that filled the castle halls, but she doubted she would ever feel comfortable here. Not when any corner could reveal a dark one sneering at her or some otherworldly monster watching her with hungry eyes.

Soon she would be queen of this place, but she doubted even that would bring her much security. The ghouls and creatures that had been here long before her made it clear in their haughty expressions and snide remarks that they would sooner devour the skin from her bones than bow before a mortal queen.

She tried not to take it personally.

"Is everyone eager for the festivities to be over?" Serilda asked as she and Manfred wound their way through the labyrinthine halls.

Manfred responded in his usual monotone. "Not at all, my queen," he said. Opposite to the dark ones' indifference—perhaps, in part, *because* of it—the ghostly servants had adapted quite graciously to Serilda's rise in station. Many had already begun to use royal titles when they addressed her—*Majesty* and *Queen* and occasionally even *Your Radiance*. "My understanding is that many have seen the wedding preparations as an enjoyable distraction."

"Distraction from what?"

He glanced sideways at her with his good eye, a subtle smirk making his

gray-speckled beard twitch. "Our lives," he said dryly. Then, with a shrug, he added, "Or lack thereof."

Serilda frowned. Though Manfred and many of the ghosts had been dead for centuries, it was obvious how their deaths remained open wounds. Literally, in many cases.

"Manfred," she said slowly, "do you remember serving the former royal family? The ones who lived here before the dark ones came?"

"I remember little of life in the castle before. But I do recall feeling"—he considered his words a long moment, and appeared oddly wistful when he finally said—"proud. Of my work. Though what I had to be proud of, I could not say."

Serilda offered him a soft smile, which quickly shuttered his expression back to stoicism. She was tempted to say more, to push him on this, to urge him to remember something, anything—but it was useless. All memories of the former royal family had been eradicated when the Erlking cursed the prince and his name, erasing the royal family from history.

She found, in trying to get to know the resident ghosts, that the closer someone had been to the royal family, the fewer memories they had of their lives before the massacre. A maid who scrubbed pots and pans in the scullery might remember her former life almost in its entirety, but someone who had regularly been in the presence of the king and queen, or prince and princess, would remember almost nothing.

No one else knew it, but their prince was still here among them. A forgotten prince.

These days, the people of Adalheid knew him as Vergoldetgeist. The Gilded Ghost.

Others called him poltergeist. Gold-spinner.

Serilda knew him simply as Gild. The boy who had gone along with her lies, spun straw into gold in order to save her life, again and again. Who had unwittingly crafted the golden chains that the Erlking planned to use to capture a god.

Even Gild's own memories had been stolen from him. He could

remember nothing. Not of his life. Not of his death. Nothing from the time before he was a cursed boy, a poltergeist trapped in this horrid place. The Erlking had even erased his name from all of history—from the books to the gravestones. Gild had not known he was a prince until Serilda told him the truth of what had happened to him and his family. Him, cursed. The others, dead. Murdered, all in an act of vengeance against the prince who had killed Erlkönig's great love—the huntress Perchta. To this day Gild acted skeptical whenever Serilda mentioned it.

But Serilda didn't care about any of that. Not his name. Not his legacy.

She cared that Gild was the father of her unborn child.

She cared that once, in a fit of desperation, she had promised this unborn child to him, in return for his help spinning straw into gold.

She cared that she was a little bit in love with him.

Maybe—more than a little bit.

"I imagine you were very important," she said as she and Manfred passed a series of parlors. "Higher ranking than a coachman, for sure. The king's valet, perhaps. Or a royal adviser. That's why you can't remember much. But I am sure that you have every reason to be proud."

Manfred remained quiet. She had told him, during their nightly walks, a little bit of the story of what had happened here. To the royal family. To *him* and all the people who had been unfortunate enough to be in this castle when the Erlking exacted his revenge. There was a time when she had told the story to Gild, believing it all to be a made-up fairy tale, but now she knew it was true. A gift from Wyrdith, her storytelling godparent, no doubt.

None of this castle's tragic past came as much of a surprise to those who had been forced into servitude to the dark ones for hundreds of years. They knew *something* horrible had happened to them. Many had the wounds to prove it. Some had fleeting memories of life before. They wore clothes befitting various roles in the castle, from chambermaids to pages to fancy courtiers, though former status meant nothing to the dark ones.

It was no far stretch to assume they had been serving royalty when the

Erlking took over and murdered them all, even if they could not recall their monarchs' faces or names or whether they had been respected and loved.

No one knew that Gild, the meddlesome poltergeist, was their forgotten prince. She dared not tell anyone the truth. She could not risk the Erlking finding out that she knew, and she couldn't trust anyone to stay silent. Much as she liked many of these spirits, their souls belonged to the Erlking. He might allow them some freedoms, but ultimately, they obeyed him.

They had no choice.

It was the same with the children left sleeping in her chambers. The Erlking pretended they were a gift for her. Attendants for his queen. But they were also his spies. Or they could be, if she gave the Erlking any reason to spy on her.

She couldn't trust anyone in this castle.

Anyone, except—

Ahead of them, a glint of gold caught her eye. A tiny thread looped around the base of a candle on one of the wall sconces. The tiniest detail, easily missed by anyone. By everyone.

But these past weeks, Serilda had grown accustomed to searching out tiny details.

She stood straighter. "Thank you, Manfred, but you needn't escort me the rest of the way. I can find it from here."

"I do not mind, my lady."

"I know you don't. But I have to learn my way around this maze eventually, don't I? And I could use a moment . . . to steel myself."

A touch of pity flashed over his features. "Of course, my lady," he said, bowing. "I will leave you be, then."

"Thank you, Manfred."

He walked away with the same unyielding posture and measured steps with which he always carried himself, and Serilda couldn't help but think of him as one of the few true gentlemen in this castle, surrounded by the demons and all their callous frivolity.

As soon as he'd turned the corner, Serilda let her shoulders relax. She reached for the candlestick and slipped the knot of golden thread up and over the flame. She wrapped it around her finger as she studied the hall.

Silence and shadows.

"Come on out, Gild," she said, smiling. "I know you're there."