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opening extract from

# Knife

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"I only want to go out for a little, little while," the faery child pleaded. "Just outside the window, on that branch. I won't fly away and I won't tell anyone, I promise."

"Oh, Bryony, you know you can't." Wink's voice came from the other side of the sewing table, muffled by a mouthful of pins. Her red hair had come free of its knot, falling in bedraggled ringlets, and her cheeks were pink with the room's oppressive heat. "None of us can. It isn't safe."

"But the Gatherers go out all the time," said Bryony. "And so does Thorn."

"Thorn is the Queen's Hunter," Wink told her with unusual sternness, "and without her and the Gatherers we'd all starve. But they only go out when they have to, and they don't stay out any longer than they have to, and you and I don't have to, so there."

Bryony jumped up and dragged a stool over to the window, hopping up on the seat for a better view. If she looked straight out there was nothing but leaves and branches. But if she craned her neck and peered all the way down, she could just see—

"Oh, Bryony, do sit down," said Wink wearily. "You're blocking all the fresh air."

Bryony made a face and plopped back onto her seat, a wobbly construction of twigs and dried grass that felt as though it might come to pieces any minute. "But it's hot in here," she muttered. "And so *ugly."* Like most of the other rooms inside the Oak, the apartment she shared with Wink was plain-walled, clumsily furnished, and cramped. Not like the garden she had glimpsed through the open window, its velvety stretch of lawn framed by shrubberies and dotted with bright flowers. *That* was beauty.

"Why don't you go down to the kitchen?" said Wink distractedly, eyes fixed on the seam she was pinning. "I hear the Gatherers found a bees' nest this morning—if you wipe dishes or sweep the

floor a bit, they might let you have a piece of honeycomb."

"I'm not hungry." Besides, Mallow was in the kitchen, and no one would dare offer Bryony such a sweet bargain when the Chief Cook was around. Except perhaps Sorrel, who was old and kindly and more than a little absent-minded—but Bryony had not seen Sorrel in days.

"Polish the looking-glass, then," said Wink.

Bryony perked up. The full-length mirror on its carved stand was the one lovely object in the room, a relic from the Days of Magic. It had belonged to the previous seamstress, who was Bryony's own egg-mother and namesake, and Bryony had spent many hours in front of it, whispering secrets to her own reflection. There were no other children in the Oak, so the white-haired girl in the mirror was the closest thing to a playmate she knew.

She rose and stepped toward the glass—but even as she moved, the window caught her eye again. Between the branches of the great Oak glowed dazzling gems of blue sky, and the leaves whispered promises of a breeze she longed to feel. A robin lighted on a nearby twig, cocking its head at her, and Bryony felt a sudden urge to dive through the window and leap upon its back. Together they would soar far away from the Oak, to a place where she too could fly free…

With a flick of its wings, the robin vanished. Another chance missed, thought Bryony, and frustration swelled like a wasp's nest inside her. "It's not fair," she burst out. "Why can't we go outside? Just because the Queen says it's not safe—how does she know? She never leaves the Oak either!"

Wink snatched the last pin out of her mouth, looking shocked. "Of course she doesn't leave the Oak! She's the one who's kept us all alive since the rest of us lost our magic. If it weren't for her protection the Oak would sicken and die, and all sorts of horrible creatures would come crawling inside to gobble us up. She doesn't dare go out, because if anything happens to her, it'd be the end for all of us!" Her voice trembled on the last phrase, as though she could already see the disaster

happening.

Bryony leaned on the windowsill, staring out at the sky. "It's still not fair," she muttered.

Her words were followed by a heavy pause, then a sigh from Wink. "I suppose you're old enough to know," she said. "I didn't like to tell you before, but—"

"I already know about the Sundering," interrupted Bryony, who had spent a whole afternoon dusting bookshelves to get the story from Campion, the Oak's Librarian. "A long time ago someone put a curse on everyone in the Oak, so we couldn't do magic any more. And everybody got confused and scared and a lot of faeries died. And then Queen Amaryllis came, only she wasn't called Amaryllis then and she wasn't a Queen, but I can't remember that part—"

"Her name was Alder," said Wink softly.

Bryony ignored the interruption. "And she still had her magic because she wasn't in the Oak when the Sundering happened, so she had to become Queen because nobody else was clever or strong enough any more. And she made lots of different rules to try and keep people safe from the crows and foxes and things outside but they kept making silly mistakes and getting killed anyway, and finally she told everyone that it wasn't safe to go outside the Oak, ever." She finished the last sentence in a single breath, and turned defiantly to look at Wink. "See, I told you I knew."

"Oh… yes," said Wink, flustered. "Well, I suppose—"

"Except that it's still a stupid rule," Bryony went on hotly, "because I'm not silly and I'm *not* going to be killed, so there!" With a flash of her wings, she hopped onto the windowsill.

"Bryony!" Wink shrieked. "Get down!"

But Bryony did not hesitate. Crouching on the window ledge, she studied the distance between herself and the nearest branch. Then, just before Wink's flailing hands could seize her, she leaped.

Wings outspread, she landed neatly as a dragonfly. As she straightened up, flushed and proud, she was rewarded with a touch of summer breeze, lifting the sticky hair away from her forehead. It

felt wonderful.

"Bryony, come back! No, wait. Stay right there, and I'll get help—but no, I can't leave you—oh, what shall I do?" Wink fluttered back and forth by the open window. But she was clearly too frightened to step outside herself, and that meant that Bryony could count on at least a few more minutes of freedom.

Eagerly the faery girl scrambled up the branch to its very tip. She wrapped her arms about a supple twig and hung there, enraptured. Below lay the garden she had always longed to explore: the barely-tamed wildness of the rose hedge on the east, a stout line of privet to the west, the flower-stippled lawn, and in the distance the daunting bulk of the House.

There had been faeries in the Oak for more than four hundred years, Campion had said. That made the House a latecomer, and a rude one at that. No one had invited it to settle here, but its stony face, blank windows and arrogantly peaked roof did not invite question, let alone argument. Rumor said that it was full of monsters, but Bryony had never seen one. Perhaps she would see a monster today?

"Bryony, oh Bryony, *please,"* Wink entreated, but her voice was faint now and easy to ignore. Bryony slid down the twig and straddled the end of the branch, kicking her bare heels. How had she borne it so long, shut up in the Oak like a prisoner?

Her thoughts were distracted by a scuffling noise below. Bryony peered over the edge of the branch to see an enormous creature, with sun-browned limbs and a round, hairless face, standing at the foot of the Oak. As she watched, it leaped up to grasp the lowest branch and began climbing the tree toward her.

*It must have been right underneath me the whole time,* she thought with a thrill that was half delight, half terror. *And now it's coming up. Should I run? Should I fly? Or should I stay here, very small and quiet, and hope it doesn't see me?*

The monster had hair almost as pale as her own, but yellower and cropped close to its head, exposing a pair of oddly rounded ears. Its eyes, when it lifted them upward in search of the next branch, were as blue as Wink's. And despite their enormous size, there was something familiar about its features…

It was a child, Bryony realized, her excitement rising. Just like herself. A real playmate at last!

Meanwhile, Wink had stopped dithering and begun to lose her temper instead. "Bryony, if you don't come back in the Oak this very minute—"

"Shh!" said Bryony. "You're going to frighten it away!"

That stopped Wink short. "Frighten… what?"

"The monster, of course," Bryony told her impatiently, without taking her attention from the child. It was only a couple of branches below her now, and although it did not appear to have seen her, it paused and tipped its head to one side as though listening.

Several heartbeats passed in silence. Then she heard Wink say in a strained whisper, barely audible above the rustling of the leaves, "Bryony. Don't… oh, please, whatever you do, *don't move."*

Bryony had lived with Wink all her life, but she had never heard that particular note in her foster-mother's voice before. Wink didn't just sound nervous, or even worried: she sounded terrified.

Bryony's confidence wavered, and she began to wriggle backward, very cautiously, toward the Oak. She could hear the monster's labored breathing as it resumed the climb, and her own breath quickened as she realized how close it was now, close enough to seize her in that grubby hand, to tear off her wings, to cram her into that red, half-open mouth…

Then the child looked up, and its gaze met hers.

The fear within Bryony burst like a soap bubble. She saw astonishment on the creature's face, but no hint of malice or hunger. In fact, if she had not been assured all her life that faeries were the

only real *people* in the world, she might have taken the alertness in those eyes for intelligence.

Impulsively Bryony stretched out her hand. The other child's teeth gleamed as it pulled itself level with her branch, and its huge fingers reached out toward hers…

All at once Bryony felt herself seized from behind and wrenched into the air. Throat tight with terror, she could not even squeak as her captor dragged her down the length of the branch and tossed her through the window into the Oak. Bryony tumbled to the dusty floor, flinging up an arm to protect herself—only to realize that it was Thorn standing over her, panting and furious.

She had been rescued by the Queen's Hunter.

Thorn's dark hair was windblown, her tunic and leggings streaked with dirt. Her face a scowl of concentration, she slammed the window shut and leaned against it, listening intently. Then she spun about and snapped at Bryony, "You ignorant, selfish little gnat. And you, Wink—" She stopped, the anger fading from her face. "Wink?"

There was no reply. Bryony turned, to see Wink lying on the rug an arm's length away. Her eyes were closed, her face colorless.

"Oh, blight," said Thorn wearily. Reaching down, she hauled Bryony to her feet and shoved her into a nearby chair. "Sit there, and don't move. I'll ring for the Healer."

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"She has merely fainted," said Valerian, straightening up from the sofa where Wink lay. "I will give her some chamomile tea when she wakes, but she will need rest and quiet to recover."

"Well, she won't get much of that with this one underfoot," said Thorn with a glance at Bryony. "All right, girl, come with me. You can explain yourself to the Queen—"

"That will not be necessary," said a lofty voice, and they all turned to see Bluebell, the Queen's lady-in-waiting, standing in the doorway. "Her Majesty has sent me to investigate. Am I to understand that this child actually—" she paused, and gave a little shudder—"crawled *outside* the

Oak?"

"Yes, and in another two heartbeats she'd have been down that human boy's gullet," said Thorn. "If there weren't so few of us already, I'd say it was no more than the silly chit deserved."

"Human?" said Bryony, testing out the strange word.

"But this cannot be," said Bluebell, looking alarmed. "Every morning the Queen renews her spells of protection about the Oak for this very purpose—to keep the humans away."

"It works on grown humans, no doubt," said Thorn. "But children are chancy little weasels. And speaking of which, this one—" she pointed at Bryony—"has obviously grown too wild for Wink to manage. Someone else will have to take the brat."

"I shall consult Her Majesty," said Bluebell, and Bryony's stomach squirmed. What if the Queen sent her to live with someone like Thorn? Or even worse, Mallow?

"I'm sorry," she burst out. "Let me stay with Wink, I'll be good from now on—"

"You," said Thorn, whipping around to glare at her, "shut up. The trouble you're in right now, you'll be lucky if the Queen doesn't clip your wings and make you scrub the chamber pots until you're fifty."

Bryony's eyes grew huge. She sat back in the chair, hands clasped meekly in her lap.

"Well," said Bluebell, "that seems a little extreme—the Queen is merciful. But clearly the child needs to be educated."

"Leave her to me," said Thorn. She strode forward, seizing Bryony by the elbow and yanking her to her feet. "I'll put some fear into her."

"If you plan to beat her," began Bluebell, but Thorn cut her off.

"I've something better than a willow switch," she said. "Believe me," and with that she pushed Bryony toward the door.

Panicking, Bryony dug in her heels, but Thorn merely grabbed the back of her tunic and lifted

her into the air. The fabric bunched beneath her wings, and Bryony kicked and twisted, but Thorn marched out of the room with her undaunted. When they reached the landing she dropped Bryony back onto her feet and said, "Six winters ago your egg-mother wandered outside in the middle of an ice storm and froze herself to death. By the time I found her, she'd already given up the last of her magic and vanished: there was nothing left but a pile of old clothes—and you. The first intact egg we'd found in Gardener knows how many years, and we all held our breath for fear you wouldn't hatch. D'you think the Queen a fool, making rules on a whim? You could have died out there today."

"He wasn't going to hurt me," Bryony protested. "He only wanted to play—"

"So do cats," said Thorn. "And they eat you afterward. Now you can walk, or I can carry you over my shoulder like a dead shrew, but either way you're going down that Stair."

"What are you going to do to me?"

"You'll see," said Thorn. "Now move."

With dry mouth and leaden feet, Bryony obeyed. Thorn prodded her down two full turns of the Spiral Stair to the next landing, then across the walkway and around the curve of the hall to an unfamiliar door. There Thorn rapped with her knuckles and waited, fingers drumming on the hilt of her bone dagger. When it became clear that no one would answer, she put her shoulder to the door and shoved it open.

Inside the room smelled stale, and the air was cloudy with dust. Thorn lit a lamp and carried it over to a narrow cot heaped with blankets, where a faery lay on her back, open-eyed and still.

"Look," said Thorn. "Do you recognize her?"

Of course Bryony knew who it must be. But the figure in the bed looked so wizened and frail, so unlike her former apple-cheeked self, that it would have been easier to believe her a stranger. Her once ageless skin had turned white as ash-flakes, showing the veins beneath. Her arms and legs were

gaunt, and her scalp bore only a few clumps of grayish hair. She smelled of comfrey ointment, but even more strongly of decay, and Bryony stumbled back from the bed, clapping her hands to her mouth.

"That's right," said Thorn. "It's Sorrel. She used to slip you treats from the kitchen, didn't she, when Mallow wasn't looking? She wasn't even that old, you know. Only a hundred and ninety."

"What… happened to her?"

"We call it the Silence." Thorn drew the blankets back up over Sorrel again. "First you become short-tempered—sometimes even violent. Then you get confused, and babble nonsense. Soon you're too weak to move, too cold for any fire to warm. Finally you end up like this." She gestured to the figure in the bed. "Not moving, not responding. You lose your hearing, your sight, every sense and feeling. Eventually you just… fade… away."

Bryony swallowed. "But I thought… we didn't get sick."

"So did the rest of us," said Thorn, "until this started happening. Did you never wonder why there are so few of us? I suppose not, as an empty Oak is all you've ever known. But when I was your age, there were twice as many of us—and that was even after things got so bad the Queen had to order everyone to stay inside."

Bryony's head swam. She closed her eyes, trying to shut out the image of Sorrel's wasted body. "You mean they all—died like this?"

"Great Gardener, no," said Thorn. "But even a few is too many. It was bad enough when we only had to worry about faeries doing fool things out-of-doors and getting themselves killed; more often than not their eggs got smashed or eaten by the crows before we could find them. But when the Silence takes a faery it's even worse, because then there's no egg at all."

Nausea overwhelmed Bryony. "I didn't—I never knew—"

"Of course you didn't," said Thorn flatly, "because Wink didn't want to give you nightmares. I

always did say that woman was too soft-hearted."

"But—" Bryony was still struggling to understand. "Where does the Silence come from?"

"Ah, that's the question," said Thorn. "Nobody knows, not even the Queen. But I've seen this happen a few times now, and you know what I think?" She beckoned Bryony closer, bent and hissed in her ear, "It's the *humans."*

Shocked, Bryony jerked away. "Got your attention now, haven't I?" Thorn said. "Think about it. The House was built just over a hundred years ago… and the Silence came not long after. Do you really think that's just coincidence?"

She was right, Bryony realized, and looked down at her own hands in horror. She had reached out to the human child—the *boy*. What would have happened if she had touched him?

"There are only forty-six of us left now," Thorn pressed on, "and with those humans right on our doorstep, staying in the Oak's our best hope of staying alive. So if you don't want to end up in the same nutshell as Sorrel—"

Bryony could bear it no longer. She whirled, stumbling on the rug, and rushed from the room as fast as her legs would carry her. As she dashed back up the Spiral Stair, she tried to think of her toys, her books, Wink's mirror, anything but the terrible thing Thorn had shown her—

She flung herself through Wink's door and collided with someone tall. Staggering back, she looked up into the austere face and grave gray eyes of Valerian—and with that, Bryony burst into tears.

"You needn't worry about the child now," said Thorn's voice from behind her, as Bluebell clucked reproachfully and Valerian stroked Bryony's hair. "She won't do it again."