

A ROYAL GUIDE TO MONSTER SLAYING

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CHAPTER ONE

“I know you love unicorns, Rowan, but please stop staring at mine. You’re making him nervous.”

I do not love unicorns, as my aunt Jannah knows. Jerks. All of them. I’m not staring *at* Courtois. I’m staring him *down*. Unfortunately, she’s wrong about the third part, too. I can’t make him nervous, no matter how hard I try.

We’re in the castle courtyard, the high stone walls stealing the morning sun. Around us, the royal hunters prepare for their mission. A mission I *should* be joining. My twin brother, Rhydd, is and I belong at his side, keeping him safe.

As I scowl at Courtois, Rhydd’s hand thumps on my shoulder. “Give it up, Ro.”

“That beast stepped on my foot,” I say. “On purpose.”

“Yep, I’m sure he did. He *is* a unicorn.”

I move away from Courtois only to stumble over my aunt’s warg, Malric. The giant wolf lifts his head, upper lip curling to reveal canines as long as my hand. The last person who tried to pet him lost two fingers. Even I know better. I quickstep out of his reach.

“Making friends with *all* the monsters this morning, aren’t you?” Rhydd teases.

As I grumble, he leans in to whisper, “I know you’re upset. You’re worried about me going on the gryphon hunt.”

“I’m not wor—”

“You’re worried, and this is how you show it. By grumbling and scowling and staring down unicorns.”

“It’s not fair.”

“I know,” he says.

My scowl deepens, and I want to kick the dirt and growl and stomp. That would be childish, though, and I am not a child. I’m twelve. I’m a princess. One day, I’ll be queen.

I don’t want to be queen. I’ll be horrible at it. Rhydd should get the throne. Even now, as scared as he is, he’s trying to calm *me*. That’s what a real leader does.

“Rhydd?” Jannah calls. “Saddle up.”

As Jannah climbs onto Courtois, her sheathed sword swings by her side. I look at that sword, a gleaming ebony-wood fuller with a razor-sharp obsidian edge. I imagine it in my hands, and a lump rises in my throat.

This is who I want to be. This is who I *should* be. Not the queen, but the royal monster hunter. *Everyone* knows it. I hear the whispers, how my thoughtful brother should sit on the ivory throne, how his headstrong twin sister should wield the ebony sword.

We are Clan Dacre, the greatest hunters in the land, and we united the clans with one promise: We will keep the monsters away. The oldest royal child always takes the ivory throne, and the next gets the ebony sword.

What if they’re twins and one is a mere *two minutes* older? What if they’re better suited for the opposite jobs? If they’d happily switch places? Too bad. This is how we do things.

I glance at Jannah again. She nods, her face impassive. Any other time, she’d be over here, teasing me and teaching me and telling me to saddle up, too. This hunt is different.

Today, my aunt and my brother go to kill a gryphon, the one monster we can’t just drive back to the mountains. Once gryphons find our fat cattle and sheep, they’re like starving travelers stumbling on a midwinter feast. They aren’t leaving. Ever.

The last gryphon slaughtered a dozen people before my aunt slew it.

It also killed my father.

When I think of that, my fists ball up and my eyes fill with hot, angry tears. I want to run to my aunt and hug her and tell her I'm scared for her, beg her not to go. I want to grab my brother's leg and pull him off his horse and take his place, like I used to when we were little. I want to shout at my mother that this isn't fair, that if it's too dangerous for me, why is Rhydd going? I'm a better hunter. Let me go along to protect him.

My scowl swings to my mother. She stands at the gate, wearing a simple brown dress only a shade lighter than her skin. Her honey-brown curls are drawn up in a twist, secured with an ebony pin shaped like a sword. That pin reminds everyone that she's also a trained monster hunter, which means she knows exactly how dangerous this mission is.

When Mom glances at me, I look away. I should go to her. That's what Rhydd would do. He'd know she's thinking of our father, and he'd go over and tell her he understands she has no choice here. But I am not my brother.

The iron gates swing open. Beyond the courtyard, people line the streets to see the hunters pass. My aunt leads the procession on Courtois. The unicorn is what the children have come to see. He's as tall and sturdy as a draft horse, with a gleaming jet-black coat. His horn is iridescent, glittering pink and blue and silver in the morning sun. He's a wondrous sight, but I'd take a light-footed mountain mare any day. Or, better yet, a pegasus.

As the hunting party rides out, the children race to shower Courtois with rose petals. The older girls keep up with my brother, trying to get the young prince's attention. That almost makes me smile. But then I see the empty road behind them, littered with petals, and I remember the same scene from five years ago, when my father rode out to face a gryphon.

I turn away, my stomach knotting, and I notice a girl by the gate. About my age, she carries a basket of flowers. Her dress is coarse muslin, her sandals rough leather. Dirt smears one cheek.

Her light brown hair blows in the wind, without even a band to keep it tamed.

I see her, and shame washes through me. I'm feeling sorry for myself because I'm going to be queen. How much would this girl give to change places with me?

"A rose, your highness?" she says, seeing me watching her.

I start toward her. My mother's maid hurries to press coins into my palm. I give them to the girl, and she hands me the whole basket. When her hair blows into her eyes, she shoves it back, nose wrinkling in annoyance.

I take out my hair clip. "This will help."

As I pass it over, her eyes glitter, blue as the clip's sapphires.

She curtsies, awkwardly, as if she's never done it before. Then she thanks me and takes off running along the cobbled road.

"That was very kind," my mother says as she walks up behind me.

I shrug. "I have others."

"That was your favorite."

I shrug again as I walk toward the castle.

"If you need me," I say, "I'll be in the rear courtyard."

Mom opens her mouth to protest. She doesn't want me to be alone today. Being alone means I could sneak off after Rhydd.

"I'm taking my sword lessons," I say. "And then archery."

She nods. "Excellent."

"Though I don't know why I bother," I call back. "Since I'll never be allowed to fight actual monsters."

Her sigh floats after me as I leave. Now I just need to keep busy until sundown . . . and then I can go after my brother.

As angry as I am with my mother for sending Rhydd, I know she didn't have a choice. I've read about kingdoms where the king's or queen's word is law. Tamarel is different. We used to be a nation of warring clans. When we weren't fighting each other, we were fighting the monsters that came from the mountains to the west. My ancestors—Clan Dacre—had a special talent for monster hunting, so we made a pact with the others. If we rid them of the

monsters, the clans would unite under us. We did it, and we continue doing it, so we are the royal family.

Except it wasn't just my great-great-grandfather and his sister who cleared out the monsters. The entire clan helped. So while he got the ivory throne—and she took the ebony sword—the others understandably wanted their share of power. They get it through the royal council. The council's four members—all from Clan Dacre—votes on all major decisions.

When news came that a gryphon had been sighted, one council member—my mother's cousin Heward—wanted Rhydd to join the hunt. Heward's children are next in line to the throne, he'll jump on any chance to get rid of us, he'll take it. If either Rhydd or I die before we inherit our roles, they pass to the next pair of siblings.

When Heward insisted on Rhydd joining the hunt, the council had to vote. In the event of a tie, my mother would cast the deciding vote. She didn't get that chance. Heward convinced two of the other members to back him, so Rhydd had to join the hunt.

Mom might be acting calm, as if sending Rhydd is her idea, but I know she's furious. I know she's plotting her revenge. And I know Jannah will keep Rhydd out of battle. I don't care. I still want to be there for him. And I will be.

I spend the day keeping busy, so no one will suspect a thing. Between lessons, though, I gather what I'll need for my trip.

I'm heading to the kitchen when a hulking figure steps from a side passage. I don't even jump. Some of my earliest memories are of seeing this shadow on a wall. Then Rhydd and I would run, screaming in delight, and wait for Berinon to scoop us up and swing us around, one under each arm.

Berinon is the captain of the guard. Growing up, he'd been my father's bodyguard and best friend, and a friend of my mother's, too, when she'd been a princess. Since Dad died, Berinon has kind of . . . I won't say he's taken over as our father—he'd never try to replace Dad—but he's edged into that empty space, accepting at least a sliver of it.

Berinon is the tallest man I know, and his shoulders are twice

as wide as mine. His skin is as dark as Jannah's sword, and he has amber eyes and a wild mop of long sable hair never quite contained by its braid. Growing up, I heard my parents calling him "Ber" and thought his nickname was Bear. That's what he looked like to me—a huge, shaggy cave bear.

Today he swings out of that side passage and blocks my path.

"No, little one," he says.

I pull myself up to my full height.

He chuckles. "Even when you're grown, I'll be able to call you that. Now turn around, and we'll go riding before teatime."

"I'm hungry, and I want a snack."

"Tell me what you'd like, and I'll get it for you."

I glower up at him. He only crosses his arms and lifts an eyebrow.

"You want to sneak off and protect Rhydd," he says. "I understand. I'd even agree, if not for one thing: You are too much like your father, Rowan."

I glare up at him. "You mean I'm no match for a gryphon. You think I don't have the hunter's gift. I do. Dad wasn't Clan Dacre. I am."

"Yes, but it wasn't lack of natural talent that killed your father." He settles against a windowsill. "You've heard how I met him?"

"I know the song."

"Well, there's more to the story. Your father had been fostering with Heward's family, but like a certain princess, your father wasn't fond of the high-born life, and he'd sneak into the village. Once, when he was nine, he found boys taunting a younger child. He rushed to help, though the boys were years older."

"You heard the fight," I say. "You were apprenticed to the blacksmith, and my father confronted the boys right outside the smithy."

"Yes. Now, in the song, others tried to join the fight, and I held them off while your father defeated the three bullies. Which is . . ." He shifts on the sill. "That's not quite what happened. I found your father fighting like a cornered warg. He was a better warrior than any of those boys. Better than all three combined, though?"

No. I had to help him, or he might have been killed. In reward, I was made your father's bodyguard."

Berion leans forward. "Your father was an incredible warrior. That's why he asked your mother's to let him remain a monster hunter even after became the royal consort. He was the bravest and kindest man I ever knew. But he could never look at a fight and realize he had no chance of winning. He rushed in when he should have hung back, as he did with that gryphon, too. You have his skill, and his bravery, and his heart. You also have his recklessness. Jannah will protect your brother."

He stands. "Now, are we riding, or are you going to stomp off in a temper?"

I scowl.

"Riding then?" he says. "Excellent. Let's go."

Later that day, I take tea with my mother and two visiting dignitaries, which pleases Mom enough that she doesn't insist I join the boring state dinner that follows. I tell the serving maid I'll take my meal in my room. Then I wolf down my fish and shove the bread and fruit into my travel pack, along with some dried meat.

My blade hangs sheathed at my side. It's a short sword, with an ebony wood hilt and a silver blade. Only two people in the kingdom can carry an ebony and silver sword; Rhydd has the matching one. We got them for our twelfth birthday, replacing our dull steel training weapons. I keep mine razor-sharp and gleaming bright, mostly because I like the excuse to take it out and run my fingers over the etchings and feel the weight of the sword in my hand and dream of one made of ebony and obsidian.

I have a dagger, too, but I store that in my pack. I also carry rope, a needle and a bottle of sedative. Those are used to relocate beasts that can't be driven off easily. Finally, I pack my quill pens and my field journal. I'm very proud of my journal—it's full of notes and observations and sketches of every monster I've ever encountered. The book is nearly as beautiful as my sword, hand-crafted paper with a soft leather cover dyed dark burgundy. On the first page there's an inscription:

*To my favorite monster,
May you find a way to fill each and every one of these pages.
May you travel to the ends of our world and see every monster
ever discovered and discover a few more besides.*

*May you draw them all, and may you record every fact that
excites that wonderful brain of yours.*

*And may you never be too old to stop running to your father and
sharing all of it with him.*

Love, Dad

I read the inscription, blink back tears and tell myself that he's watching from the other side, and he's there every time I add a new page or a new fact or a new sketch.

I tuck the journal into its protective case and put it into my bag. After I've packed everything and double-checked it all, I fashion a figure in my bed—clothing bunched up under the covers, with a brown fur wrap for my hair. Once Rhydd and I turned twelve, our mother forbade anyone from entering our bedchambers between dusk and dawn. As young adults, we were entitled to our privacy. The most anyone will do tonight is peek in with a candle, and the bed figure will pass for me.

Before I go, I leave my mother a note for morning.

I've gone to protect Rhydd. I will NOT fight the gryphon myself. I'm only going to watch over Rhydd and make sure he doesn't fight either. I'll bring him home safe. I promise.

Escaping the castle isn't easy. With the state dinner, staff and guards are everywhere. I know which halls are least used, though, and I've chosen a path with hidey-holes that I can duck into when I hear footsteps. I'm racing along one of those, my boots in hand, when I hear voices raised in argument.

It's one of the guards and a maid. Apparently, she caught him flirting with the maid of a visiting lady. She's upset, and he's trying to tell her it meant nothing, and I'm stuck in a window alcove, wishing they'd just kiss and make up. I have a castle to escape.

Then the guard and maid do make up. And they do kiss. They don't *stop* kissing. I don't watch them, of course. That's gross. But I

can tell they're kissing by the noises, which are also gross. They kiss and whisper, and whisper and kiss.

I peek out, in case they're busy enough that I can sneak past them, but the corridor is too narrow for that.

I creep the other way. I'll have to take a different route. I can—
Footsteps sound. Heavy ones that I recognize.

Berinon.

He's heading straight for me. I look around. There's no place to go, no place to hide. I'm in a shallow window alcove, and the nearest room is too far away.

Maybe he'll turn into that room. It leads to a storage closet, so he's probably heading there to get something for my mother.

"Digory!" Berinon's voice echoes down the hallway.

I hear the maid squeak . . . because Digory is the guard she's kissing.

"Yes, sir!" Digory calls. "Coming, sir!"

I look from side to side. Digory is down the hall to my right . . . and Berinon is to my left. The clomp of their boots tells me they're both on the move. Both headed this way.

In a few heartbeats, one of them will be here. Even if I flee, Berinon will see my travel pack. He'll know exactly what I'm doing and order the guards to block my way.

I need to get rid of my pack.

I wheel to toss it out the window . . . and instead I find *myself* going out the window. Which isn't what I meant to do at all. I don't even really realize I'm climbing out until I'm hanging by my fingertips from the sill.

The footfalls stop.

Berinon or Digory must have spotted me. I should jump.

I look down . . . to the cobblestones thirty feet below.

No, I should *not* jump.

What was I thinking?

I wasn't thinking, as usual. It's like part of my brain works things through calmly and gives reasonable instructions like "Toss your pack out the window." Then the other part says, "Why just throw your pack out when you can jump out, too?"

Berion is telling Digory to return to his post. Digory stammers apologies, but Berion is already walking away. Digory scampers off in the other direction.

After a few moments, the hall goes silent.

I exhale a whooshing sigh of relief. Then I brace to heave myself up—

My body just dangles there, arms barely flexing. I don't have a good enough hold. When I try harder, my fingers slide.

I'm going to fall. I'm going to drop like a rock and crash onto the cobblestones below.

Or I can shout for help.

Those are my choices. Drop or shout for help. The first is madness. I could die. Even if I only twist my ankle, I won't be able to go after Rhydd.

Yet if I shout for help, the travel pack on my shoulder will tell everyone what I was doing. I won't be able to go after Rhydd then either.

What made me think I could do this anyway? It's not like when Rhydd and I would sneak away to a village festival. I'm about to set out into the countryside alone.

I'm *twelve*. And yes, if I lived in the village, I'd be done school and off to work like a grown-up, but I can't even imagine that. I don't feel grown up. At all. I feel like a foolish child, hanging outside a window.

Is that it then? Am I giving up? Leaving Rhydd to face a gryphon alone?

I grit my teeth. Never. I can do this.

Or, at least, I can really, really try.

I close my eyes and ignore the pain shooting through my arms.

Relax and concentrate. That's what all my trainers tell me. Stop being in such a rush to do things and think about what you plan to do.

I shift my hands to find a better grip. At first, there's nothing, and I start panicking again. Then I find a divot where a stone has fallen out. I wedge my fingers into it. Once my right hand is secure,

I move the left until I find the inside windowsill. I grab that and bring my right hand to join it.

My feet scabble against the castle wall. One finds a shallow hole, and it gives me a foothold. I take a deep breath and then haul myself onto the window ledge and tumble through.

I leap up to look around. The hall is quiet. I stay crouched in the alcove, catching my breath and listening. When I'm sure the way is clear, I take off out the small rear door that leads to the stables.

Once I'm outside, the falling sun casts enough shadow for me to creep unnoticed to the stables. The grooms are gone—they're playing footmen for the dinner guests. I slip past my mare. She whinnies, and I back up to feed her an apple. That keeps her from noticing I'm saddling another horse tonight. I would love to take her, but if she's missing, the grooms will know I'm gone, so I choose a gelding instead.

A guard patrols the stables, but Rhydd and I have long known his route. I wait for him to pass before I hurry the gelding out, knowing it'll be ten minutes before the guard returns.

I make straight for the castle forest. I keep my lantern unlit and let the moonlight guide me down trails as familiar as the hallways of our castle.

A stone wall surrounds the castle forest. There's a gate at the back, which is guarded only when we're at war. Otherwise it's latched inside with a massive timber. Heaving that open takes as much effort as hauling myself through the window. I finally get it and lead the horse through. When the gate closes, the latch thuds back into place.

One last glance over my shoulder, and then I'm off.

CHAPTER TWO

I'd eavesdropped on Jannah's plans, so I know where they're spending the night. If I ride straight through, I'll catch up to them before they break camp. The moon is bright, but when it slips behind clouds, I realize how dark and quiet it is, and how alone I am out here. I've never ventured beyond the village by myself, and as much as I'm trying to be brave, every crackle in the bushes sounds like a warg's paw crunching a dried twig, and every owl gliding overhead looks like a gryphon.

I remind myself I am *not* alone. I have the gelding. But this isn't *my* horse. He's new, and I am ashamed to admit that in my haste, I hadn't even checked his stall for his name. I apologize for that, and while he may not understand my words, my tone should be enough. People whisper that Clan Dacre hunters can talk to monsters. We can't. We understand animals' body language and their vocalizations: the noises they make. That isn't magic.

I talk to the gelding and rub his neck. He doesn't swivel his ears to catch my voice. He doesn't chuff in thanks at the petting. He is kind enough, but he isn't my mare and I am not comforted.

When the moon is high, I find a stream and tether the gelding for a brief rest. I'm crouching by the water, cupping some to my mouth, when I hear a weird chattering behind me. I squint into the

darkness. I haven't bothered to light my lantern, but the moon has disappeared behind clouds, and all I see are shadows.

The chattering comes again.

The gelding stamps and whinnies. As I rise, my fingers reach for the lantern ring. Then a dark shape flies from the bushes and my hands sail up, knocking the lantern aside as the blur smacks into my chest.

A small horned beast hangs from my tunic. Its teeth clamp down as all four legs claw at me for a better hold.

I look down at the creature, no bigger than a small rabbit. And I laugh. I can't help it. My laugh only enrages the beast more. Its head shoots up to bite me . . . but that means releasing my tunic. It squeals in alarm as it starts to fall. I catch and then hold it at arm's length while it squirms and chatters and tries to head-butt me.

It's a baby jackalope. At this age, it looks like a rabbit with horns, but when it's grown, it'll be twice the size of a hare and sport a full rack of antlers. *Dangerous* antlers. Jackalopes use them for fighting, along with their jagged teeth and semi-retractable claws.

Before Clan Dacre took the throne, people used to catch jackalopes and make them fight in pits. They nearly went extinct. We've outlawed all monster fights, but people still poach jackalopes for their antlers, which they think can be ground up as a cure for infertility.

Nonsense like that is all too common. When people see monsters, they see the work of magic and witchcraft. But monsters are as natural as any other creature. They're just rarer and more unique. A jackalope, for example, is a carnivorous rabbit, with a predator's claws and teeth and horns.

"You don't look very predatory," I say.

The jackalope gnashes its teeth at me, and I can't help laughing again. I give it a closer look. It's a male, a few months old, which means he should be eating solid food. Holding him at a safe distance, I rummage through my pack for dried meat. Then I put him down with a few scraps. He gulps those and snatches a second helping right from my fingers.

"You're hungry," I say. "Where's your mother?"

Because jackalopes are predators, they stay with their mothers longer than regular rabbits. This one is barely old enough to hunt, so his mother should still be around.

I give him more meat, and he lets me stroke his soft fur. Then he leans against my hand, and a weird grumbling vibrates through his flanks, like a cat's purr. I pat him some more. Then I rise to search for his mother.

I haven't had much experience with jackalopes. The only time monster hunters get involved with them is when they're poached. But for Clan Dacre children, monster studies are a daily lesson, like geography and history. From that, I know jackalopes live in dens.

While I search for the jackalope's home, he hops along behind me, squeaking. The squeaks are attention calls—*Hey, don't forget me, and by the way, do you have more food?*

As I walk, the jackalope's squeaks change to alert cries. The farther I go, the louder they get. When I change direction, he stops. That means he's warning me about something.

It must be his den. I continue, braced for his attack if I get too close to his home. I push past a shrub and then . . .

I see what he's warning me about.

I steel myself to walk closer. Then I crouch, sweep aside long grass and mutter a few words that I'm not supposed to know. My hand flies to my sword, but I don't pull it out. The person I want to fight is long gone.

The mother jackalope lies on the ground, her body riddled with arrow piercings. The killer took only her antlers. Somehow that makes it worse. I understand you might need to eat a jackalope if you're starving. You'd still harvest the antlers then. If we must slay a monster, we take everything. Even the meat goes to dogs if it's unfit for our table. We respect the life of a monster by making full use of it in death.

This isn't like that. It's poaching, and I vow to tell my mother and Jannah. They will send spies to nearby markets, searching for whoever is selling jackalope antlers. Once I've made my promise, the outrage passes and I look at the dead mother, tears blurring my eyes.

When the young jackalope squeaks behind me, I back out of that grove. Then I sit on the stream bank and watch him drink.

I can't bring the jackalope with me. It's wrong to take a wild monster from nature unless you can keep it as a companion. Jackalopes are untamable. All the field guides say so.

As I watch, the jackalope chases a toad. When he catches it, he squeals in shock and my laugh rings out, startling him again.

Obviously, he can hunt. He'll be fine. I'll leave him the rest of my meat. If I'm worried, I can stop by after the gryphon hunt and—

A voice drifts over on the breeze. Another one answers. It sounds like a boy and a girl. I squint up at the moon, now freed from cloud cover. It's past midnight. Kids shouldn't be out this late.

As the voices continue, the jackalope chitters and gnashes his teeth.

"You don't like the sounds of that either, huh?" I murmur to him.

He hops closer to me. The voices are coming this way.

"She must have had a den around here," the boy says.

I glance down at the jackalope. Then I scoop him up. He squeaks but doesn't protest. I hurry to a clump of tall grass and hide him in there and creep toward the stream—and my gelding—as I listen.

"It's spring, so she should have kits," the boy says. "Father says their antlers will be small, but he'll still give us three coppers each."

I'm nearly at the stream when the boy and the girl appear, two other kids following. They're all a year or two older than me.

When they see me, they stop. They eye me, and there's no sign they recognize me. I'm dressed in breeches and a tunic, the leather soft but unadorned, the sort of thing they'd expect from a landowner's daughter. I have my mother's honey-brown curls and heart-shaped face. From my father, I inherited my green eyes and my skin tone, a few shades darker than my hair. My snub nose and freckles are—unfortunately—all my own. Put it together, and no one sees me and says, "That must be the queen's daughter."

As the kids' gazes pass over me, my hand goes to my sword.

They don't seem to notice. They look from me to my horse. Then the biggest boy smiles, flashing a gap between his front teeth.

"That's a fine horse you have, girl," he says.

"It's a fine sword I have, too," I reply.

They look down at my blade, still in its sheath, and the gap-toothed boy snickers.

"A fine *toy* sword," he says.

They chortle and elbow one another.

The gap-toothed boy says, "Give us your horse, my *lady*, and there'll be no need to draw your toy."

"I'll give you nothing but a stern warning. I found the jackalope you killed. That's poaching, and it's punishable by one year of hard labor."

"Jackalope? I've never even *seen* a—"

"Her body is lying over there, and I heard you say you were looking for her kits."

The gap-toothed boy steps forward. "Are you sure you heard that, my lady? I hope you didn't, or we'd have to make you forget it." He lifts his fists. "Knock it clean out of your head."

I pull my sword. He snorts. One of the other boys takes a sling-shot from his pocket. The girl draws a knife.

I'm surrounded by four older kids, all bigger than me. I might be well trained in sword fighting, but I can't beat four of them. I've done exactly what my father did: started a fight I can't win.

I'm suddenly very aware of how quiet it is. How far we are from the nearest village. I could disappear, and my family would never know what happened to me.

I should lower my sword. Tell the poachers that I heard wrong. Let them take my horse, even. At least I'd escape with my life. But my hand won't move. My lips won't either. I see these four poachers, and all I can think about is that dead mother jackalope.

Rage swirls through me.

Put the sword down, Rowan. Berinon's voice echoes in my head. *Part of being a warrior is knowing when you can't win. When you must step aside. When you must run.*

I can't. I'm trying, but I can't.

A stone strikes my temple. I spin on the boy with the slingshot, and my sword spins, too. The tip of it catches his sleeve, and he yelps as if I've stabbed him.

The gap-toothed boy slams his fist into my jaw. I reel, pain ripping through me, and he charges, fists still clenched.

I lift my sword. I don't swing it. The gap-toothed boy isn't armed, so I cannot attack with my weapon. I only lift it to remind him that I have one. He leaps out of my way, but the girl charges. I smack my sword against her knife, the metal clanging. She gasps as her knife goes flying. Then all four of them charge me.

I back up, my sword raised. I don't want to use it. These aren't monsters. They're my subjects. They're kids, like me. If I accidentally kill one—

The gap-toothed boy yowls, and everyone freezes. He's dancing on one leg, the baby jackalope hanging off his trousers.

Another boy swings a club at the beast. I dive, hitting the ground in a slide, my sword still in one hand as I grab the jackalope. I manage to scramble up. Under my arm, the jackalope gnashes his teeth at the poachers.

"Stop that," I hiss to him. "You aren't helping."

The beast grumbles. Then he climbs onto my shoulder. He's too big to perch there, so he puts his forelegs on my head and chatters at the poachers.

The kids stare at me. I must look a little odd, with a jackalope on my head, and I'm waiting for them to laugh. But they only stare.

Then the girl whispers, "Her sword. I thought it was tin and blackened wood. But it's . . . it's silver and ebony. And the beast . . ."

"It obeys her," the smallest one says. "She speaks, and the monster obeys."

The third boy—the one with the slingshot—turns and runs.

The gap-toothed boy shouts, "Hey!" but the other one keeps going as fast as he can.

"It's the princess," the girl whispers. "Princess Rowan."

Oh no.

No, no, no.

I am going to be in so much trouble.

Which is, I guess, better than being dead. I could have told them who I was earlier, but Mom says we can't trust all our subjects. If someone finds me wandering about on my own, they might take me hostage. That's why Rhydd and I are never supposed to be alone, and if we are, we are supposed to hide the one thing that would identify us: our ebony-and-silver swords.

The gap-toothed boy stares at me. He looks at my sword. He looks at the jackalope. Then he runs.

"Wait!" I call. "Don't—!"

"I'm sorry, my lady," the girl says, as she falls to one knee, the youngest doing the same. "We didn't know it was you."

I want to deny it, insist they've made a mistake. Yet my sword—and the jackalope on my head—gives me away.

I should flee. Well, flee in the most dignified way. Sheath my sword and climb on my horse and be gone with a queenly nod and a "blessings upon thee."

But I keep thinking about that dead jackalope, and I can't leave.

"Yes." I straighten. "I am Princess Rowan, heir to the ivory throne. And you have poached on my royal lands."

The girl takes a step back, as if ready to bolt. I lift my sword and point the tip at her throat.

"Running from royalty is a capital offense," I lie, in what I hope is a convincing voice. "Stand firm and hear my message. I will not turn you in for your crime. You are young, and I will show mercy. I know that you may have been forced to commit this crime."

"Yes, yes, we were," the girl says, and she rushes on to tell a tale of woe, involving a sick mother, injured father, colicky baby brother and lame horse. Either she's an excellent storyteller or she's been born to the most unfortunate family ever. I'm sure it's the former, but it is a good tale, and I listen to the end. Then I take a money pouch from my pocket. I fish out two silvers—the largest coins I have—and I give them each one.

"This is your reward for not fleeing," I say. "And for the two who fled?" I give the girl two coppers. "That is my donation to their

families, plus encouragement to cease their poaching. *Strong* encouragement. I have noted all your faces, and if you are ever found killing a jackalope again, you will lose *both* your hands.”

The boy pales and teeters. I realize I may have overdone it, but it's too late to go back. At least it'll keep them from killing more jackalopes.

“Now take my royal blessing,” I say. “Begone and poach no more.”

They run, tripping over themselves as they disappear into the night.