



TEARS OF

Frost

BREE BARTON



KATHERINE TEGEN BOOKS

An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

*Long before blood poured from flesh,  
and breath clung to bone,  
before the ancient runes were ground to glass  
to shift shapes in the aether,  
back when mothers whispered truths  
cloaked as once-upon-a-times,  
Know this, little ones, they said.  
When day breaks, frost becomes a flame.  
When dusk falls, beasts become the prey.  
And when the moon is weeping,  
the witches do their reaping.*

—Addi proverb



## 28 DAYS TILL THE WEEPING MOON

*My dearest sister,*

*Let me tell you a story.*

*Once upon a time, there was a reinsdyr. She had soft gray fur with white patches like spilled milk. The reinsdyr lived alone, apart from the herd, in a snow-sugared forest. When she grew hungry during the long winters, she wandered closer to the mountains to find food.*

*From their den, the ice leopards watched the reinsdyr graze the fields below. They saw her munching on roots and frostflowers, nibbling pink apples and mushrooms with tiny caps. They rejoiced when she found a nest of robins' eggs or an arctic char flopping beside the lake, knowing she would grow fat and flavorful. "A reinsdyr is only as good as its meat," they said, "and we need meat to survive. You cannot change your nature."*

*While the ice leopardesses nursed their young, the largest, fiercest leopards left a trail of frostflower petals, luring the reinsdyr up into the mountains.*

They waited. They did not have to wait long.

When she came, the leopards proposed a trade. "We will give you food," they said, "if you give us something first."

So the reinsdyr gave them what they wanted. They were not gentle, and they were not kind.

Perhaps you have heard this story before, dear sister. It is an ancient legend of the snow kingdom, a story the Luumi tell their children before tucking them in at night.

They tell me you have awoken, that you are traveling to the land of ice leopards and reinsdyr just in time for the Jyöltide celebration. But your place is here with me, not in Luumia. You belong by my side.

Zaga has sharpened my men into a keen, deadly blade. They are hunting you, joined by an army a thousand Dujia strong.

I trust you will come willingly when they arrive.

All my love,  
Angelyne





# Chapter 1

## FUGITIVES

THERE WERE FIVE OF them. Thick chested. White faces filthy with dirt and scruff. After stomping through the forest each day, they sat around the fire at night, roasting fatty goose legs and swigging tin cups of stonemalt. Coarse men, eating and drinking and farting like the brutes they were. From the shadows outside their camp, she listened to them swap stories about the brawls they'd won and the girls they'd lost.

She had no plans to kill them.

Not at first.

She knew Angelyne had sent the men to track her down and haul her back to Kaer Killian. So far they'd done a piss-poor job. If anything, they were keeping her fed: she circled back every

morning and sifted through the charred remains of their campfire. Slurped greasy meat off leftover bird bones. Drained the dregs from a forgotten flask. She even shat in a man's hat the morning he was fool enough to leave it behind. He came back for the ugly rag and had it halfway to his head before he started screeching. She'd laughed so hard from her hiding spot she nearly gave herself away.

If they thought they were tailing her, they were mistaken. The advantage was hers and she intended to keep it. She would die before letting them drag her back to the castle.

But Pilar d'Aqila was a decent sort of person.

She'd give them a fair shot at dying first.

As Pilar lurked on the outskirts of their camp, her thoughts grew darker, more violent. The men spoke of the servant girls—girls she'd met at the castle—ranking them by the firmness of their breasts or the plumpness of their asses.

"I like 'em pretty and pint-sized." The first man slapped his thigh. "Spunky, too."

The fifth man, who seemed to be the leader, groaned. "Too spunky is no good. They make trouble when you grab them for a kiss."

The story he told next, to a chorus of claps and guffaws, made Pilar's blood burn.

She didn't know the men's names, but she didn't need to. *First. Second. Third. Fourth. Fifth.* The order in which she would destroy them. Like notes on a scale, one leading to the next.



She knew she should keep quiet and concealed. Five brutes, one girl: the odds were stacked against her. But the fouler the men got, the fouler her temper.

By the time the river rats shoved a fresh-caught prisoner into the circle—hands bound, potato sack over his head—her fists were itching for a fight.

“Look what I found,” said the third man. “Our thief.”

Pilar’s pride flared—*she* was the one thieving, not this clod in a potato sack. The fourth man kicked the back of the prisoner’s legs and his knees buckled. He dropped dangerously close to the crackling fire.

The fifth man stepped forward and whipped off the sack. Kneeling on the forest floor was the prince of the river kingdom.

Former prince, anyway. Last surviving son of Clan Killian and all that.

Quin looked rough. His eyes were wild, his blond curls matted with dirt and leaves.

“Please, wait. I can explain.” He fumbled for the leather pouch looped onto his belt, hands clumsy from the ropes around his wrists.

“What’s this? Gold?” The fifth man snatched the pouch, tested its weight, and laughed. “You think we want your coins? The young queen has put a fine price on your head. She sits on *all* the Killian gold.”

He stooped to look his prisoner in the eye. “Have you been stealing our food, Your Highness? Sucking down our scraps?”

“N-no,” Quin stammered. “I swear to all four gods, I haven’t.”



Pilar balled her fists so tight, her nails cut into her palms. The prince wasn't her responsibility—but he didn't deserve to be punished for her crimes.

The fifth man had a hungry gleam in his eye. She knew that gleam.

“Take a man's meat and he might forgive you.” He scraped a dagger from its sheath. “Take a man's malt and he'll slit your throat.”

To hells with it. Pilar attacked.

She launched herself from behind a tree and into the circle. Skidded through the fire with the side of her boot, kicking a spray of smoldering coals into the first man's face. Sparks scorched his eyes as he leapt back cursing.

The second man lunged, grabbing a fistful of her glossy black hair. She clenched his fleshy palm tightly to her skull. Slammed her free hand into his elbow, popping the bone backward. He screamed.

She wasn't done.

With her feet firmly planted, she hinged at the waist, spinning him in a half moon until he lost his balance and plowed into the ground. The bigger they were, the harder they fell. She crushed his nose with her boot—the sole of which was still mildly on fire from the coal trick—stamping out the embers on his face. Two birds, one boot.

The third man let out a war cry and grabbed her from behind. He hooked his brawny arm around her neck and tried to drag her down. Not a chance. She arched her spine and thrust her hips





back, driving both elbows hard into his ribs, over and over, until she heard the bones crack. Her hand swung between his legs, palm up, striking his groin. He gasped and stumbled backward.

The fourth man was hardly worth mentioning. One solid punch to the throat and he crashed to the earth, strangling on a broken windpipe. The gurgle like a song.

There was a rhythm to fighting, a tempo. The men lumbered. She danced.

A fist collided with her face.

She took the punch gracefully. Not that knuckles to the nose ever brought much opportunity for grace. She staggered back as red streaks clouded her vision.

“Demon witch,” growled the fifth man.

She spat blood-saliva. “Why don’t you grab me for a kiss?”

He took the bait. Grabbed her wrist and pulled her closer. His other hand was occupied—with the dagger, she noticed. Not ideal. He swiped at her and she dodged the blade, barreling into him instead of away. The boldness of the move surprised him. She balled up her trapped fist and clasped her free hand over it, using her shoulder strength to wrest her arm out of the spot where his grip was weakest. One of her favorite tricks.

He looked impressed.

“Aren’t you going to enthrall me, little spitfire? I’d welcome your sweet touch.”

Rage flooded every muscle of her body. In her mind she saw the cottage by the lake. Wooden rafters. Dirt floor. Broken horse-hair bow.



When the man raised the dagger, she smashed her arm bone into his, knocking the blade off course. Then she flattened her free hand and rammed all five fingers into his milky blue eyes. *Don't only block—counterattack.* That was her training: *Defend yourself, but do not hesitate to hurt him.*

Her fingertips had eye juice on them. She didn't care. All her training was worth it, even the ugliest parts.

Pilar seized his wrist and wrenched it, loosening his grip. The dagger dropped—directly into her sticky hand, which was ready and waiting.

“For the girls,” she said. “All of us.”

She plunged the blade straight into his heart.

He burred air and blood, then sank—*not* gracefully—to the ground. The quiet was pleasant. Or it would have been, if not for the groans and whimpers of the surviving men.

“Pil?”

She whirled around, ready to take on a sixth, before remembering there was no sixth. Just Prince **Quin**, kneeling on the forest floor. Staring at her in shock and disbelief. Which was kind of insulting, when she thought about it.

“Pilar Zorastín d'Aquila.” She spat a long red dribble into the fire. “Only my friends call me Pil.”

Never mind she didn't have any.

Pilar wiped her mouth on the back of her hand, leaving a brown smudge on her tawny gold skin. Shook her short black hair out of her eyes. Crouched and yanked the blade from the fifth man's chest.

In a few strokes she sliced through the ropes binding Quin's hands.

"Thank you," he murmured, rubbing his wrists. She wondered how he'd managed to escape Angelyne's magic when he couldn't even escape five men. The prince wasn't exactly built for a life on the run.

He met her eyes. "I owe you one."

The words jarred. This was the boy she'd shot by arrow—an arrow meant for Mia Rose. The boy she'd plied with rai rouj their one drunken night on Refúj. The boy whose sister was dead because of her.

If anything, *she* owed *him*.

Pilar made an instinctual decision. Her favorite kind.

"If you're headed to the snow kingdom," she said, "come with me."

"How did you know I was going to Luumia?"

"You're running too, aren't you?" She slid the blood-slicked dagger into her boot. "Two fugitives are better than one."