

THRONE OF BONES

H. M. WOLFE

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For my readers.
For the ones the nightmares threaten to consume.
You are the light.





CHAPTER ONE

JOAN

AN EXECUTIONER'S BLOCK DID not scare me, nor did the hangman's noose. What scared me most, is that I had lost my fear completely.

That emotion no longer plagued my veins. No, it had been replaced by a rage that was burning hotter by the second. There was nothing I would not do to protect my family, no lengths I would not go to keep my sister safe from the wrath of the Cruel King.

My breath caught in my throat as Wendy's anguished screams echoed through the stone corridors of the Black Keep, my heart pounding against my ribs as I gripped the windowsill until my knuckles turned white. I leaned forward, watching in horror at the chaos unfolding in the courtyard below. The royal guard swarmed like angry hornets, their armor glinting in the dim firelight as they blocked off every archway that led to and from the circular opening.

Their torches flickered in the midnight air, casting eerie shadows across the ancient flagstones as Wendy came sprinting into view. Her lace nightgown nipped at her heels as she wailed into the night, fleeing from the men pursuing her.

My stomach plummeted to the cold stone floor as I watched her frantically skid to a stop and my throat constricted.

She was cornered.

Trapped like prey between guards that had once sworn to protect her. And I knew as they slowly closed the circle around her, they would show her no mercy. It didn't matter that she was their Queen, the Keovian Guard only answered to their King—and he was the devil incarnate.

“Please, you don’t understand!” Wendy cried, her voice cracking with desperation as her body turned in rapid, panicked circles, her eyes searching for any way out. “William—your Prince, he’s missing! I haven’t done anything wrong!”

I forced my feet to stay planted at the pain that drenched her voice, the sound splintering into the dark. If I intervened now, it would only cause more damage, would only put me in a cell at her side, unable to do anything.

This was a court of schemes, a court of lies and politics, and I would have to be smart about my next steps. I would have to move carefully in my planning to stop the fate that was coming for her.

A growl rumbled in my chest as a guard’s iron grip clamped around her forearm, dragging her toward the hoard. She struggled against his hold, her crimson silk gown tearing as she fought to break free.

“Listen to me!” she pleaded, her eyes wild. “You have to help me . . . we have to find him! My son has been taken, your Prince has been taken. Do something, please!”

The captain of the guard stepped out from his sea of men, his hand clamped around the hilt of his sword as his face twisted into a sneer. “Spare us your lies, Lady Oberon. The evidence against you is damning. You’ll face the King’s justice soon enough.”

“I am your Queen!” Wendy screamed back at him, tears staining her face as she thrashed against the guard’s hold.

A cruel chuckle fell from the captain’s lips as he took another step toward her. “It would seem your husband, our King, does not care about your title. He is the one that gave the order.”

The guards paid no heed to her pleas, their faces set in grim lines as they hauled her forward with blind, unwavering loyalty to the crown. Her bare feet scrambled for purchase on the flagstones as they neared the archway, cuts beginning to mar the soles as they scraped against the rough ground.

My stomach twisted, writhing like a serpent readying to strike as I watched her summon a final burst of strength. She wrenched one arm free with a cry of defiance and clawed at the nearest guard. Her nails raked across

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his cheek, bloody furrows appearing in their wake as a snarl ripped from his throat. His hand cracked across her face, snapping her head to the side as she collided with the ground, dust flying into the air around her.

I could see it from where I perched above them, the blood that trickled from her nose and split lip, but she refused to yield. She lunged forward, a wordless scream of fury tearing from her lungs, only to be caught once more in the guard's brutal embrace.

My fingers curled tighter around the windowsill, the jagged edge of the stone biting into my palms as I fought every urge, every instinct to protect her. Every fiber of my being screamed at me to act, to careen down the castle wall and confront the guards myself.

The breath I'd been holding hissed through clenched teeth, a simmering rage building in my chest contained only by the barest thread of reason. For one fleeting moment, Wendy's gaze found mine, locking onto me in desperation. In that silent exchange, passed a world of understanding—a plea for help and a promise.

Her pain was my own, it always had been.

She was never supposed to carry this weight for our family, the crowns burden should have never been placed on her head. But it was, because I'd failed to obey. Failed to do my duty as the firstborn daughter, and now she would pay the price.

My soul screamed in silent agony as they dragged her away, the heavy gates to the courtyard slamming shut behind her with a resounding clang. The echo of finality hung in the air—a grim portent of the fight to come.

Deafening, haunting silence followed, broken only by the distant cries of ravens circling the battlements. The kingdom would turn against her if the king branded her a traitor to the crown, if he placed the blame on her for our missing prince. She had already given him one heir, and he did not care about the other.

I forced myself to take a deep breath, my mind racing in circles as I tried to make sense of what was happening. This castle was a fortress, in the thousands of years it stood, not once had its walls been breached.

I noticed it then, the crowd that had gathered in the corridor beside me. Nobles whispering to each other as they watched the scene play out in front of them.

Every single one of them was vile.

I despised the Queen's court, they were nothing but sycophants, a nest of vipers who pledged their loyalty to power alone. They would not hesitate to stab you in the back at the first opportunity if it meant rising in the ranks. I was sure Wendy's ladies-in-waiting were already scheming on how to take her place, vying for the King's favor like starving dogs fighting over scraps.

Snippets of quiet conversation reached my ears as my fists tightened around the lip of the window.

"... always knew she was trouble ... she'll hang for this ... should have never married her ..."

Bile rose in my throat, hot and acrid. I wanted to scream at them, to defend my sister's honor, to finally snap just like the rumors they spread said I eventually would. But I swallowed it down, schooling my features into a mask of icy composure. I couldn't afford to show weakness, not now. Not when Wendy's life hung in the balance.

The sound of their whisperings crawled across my skin as I pushed away from the windowsill, turning toward the prying eyes as a hush fell over the corridor. I met their gazes with hardened resolve, my head held high as fury raged underneath my chest.

Lady Margery glided forward, the rustle of her skirts clashing with the silence that had seeped into the corridor. Her voice dripped with forced, honeyed sympathy as she spoke. "Lady Joan, I cannot imagine the pain you must be feeling"—she hooked her arm into the elbow of mine—"to think our beloved Queen could commit such a heinous ac—"

"The Queen is innocent until proven guilty, Lady Margery. I would advise against spreading unfounded rumors." I forced myself to stop speaking before I said what I really wanted, biting back the venom that threatened to spill from my tongue.

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She blinked, taken aback by the hardness of my tone that I'd always kept perfectly hidden as I pulled my arm from her grasp. "Of course, my lady. I meant no offense. We are all simply . . . shocked by these dreadful events."

I swept past her without another word, the crowd parting before me like the Hangman's Sea. My back burned from the eyes boring into it, their whispers rising once more as I turned the corner.

I had to find allies, had to gather information. Someone in this castle knew something about William's disappearance, I could feel it pulsing in my marrow. I would find him. I would get to the truth, even if I had to rip it from the lying throats of this hostile court.

I would not rest until my sister was free and her name cleared. I would burn Keovia—the entire seven kingdoms—to ash before I let them execute her for a crime she did not commit.