



## This Blood Means Life: After Ever After, Book Two

**Mindi Meltz**

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*This Blood Means Life is a resplendent and intoxicating fairy tale that mixes pagan magic and the feminine divine into stories we only think we know.*

Four fairy tales are infused with new life in Mindi Meltz's sensual, affecting novel *This Blood Means Life*.

Though a plague left (Cinder)Ella's kingdom decimated, it did not teach her people not to decimate. In the North Moors and in Zara, those who resent Sirenia's rapacious reach still plot to overthrow her throne. But Ella, who worries and wonders about the power of her long ago seduction of a prince, has the power to make others love her, too—including Queen Mina, who once helped a beast become a man again, and whose careful movements in the Ghost Kingdom can't properly be called ruling at all; and Rufus, a Barbarian huntsman who knows what it means to love a being of mist and changing forms. These alliances prove crucial to her continuing tale.

The love between these queens is complicated, though—by their sometimes reticence to articulate their secrets to each other; by the lasciviousness of Ella's husband, Sol, whose long looks undermine the women's periods of sharing in wide meadows where unicorns used to roam. It's complicated by the resentments of Zara's queen, too—a priestess who slept for a hundred years before waking to a world wherein pagan religions had been squelched, and the jungles that held the world together had been destroyed by treasure seekers who blinded themselves to the treasures right before them. And it's complicated by Leo, the banished, bastard son of a king, who plots against Sol in the Moors, and who forced a child on a half faerie to grow his power. Still, the women work to lead their kingdoms well, to protect delicate ecosystems, and to serve their sense of the divine. But these efforts may have begun too late: the shadow of Rhiannon, a dark faerie, hangs over all.

This second volume in the After Ever After series is as resplendent and intoxicating as the first. Queens and princesses whom fairy tale aficionados think they know are fleshed out in new, humanizing, and divine ways: made priestesses whose songs bind the sky and earth together, and who mourn every life taken without need; made to own the space between the supernatural and the everyday. Here, Barbarians “have words for things no other people have words for, like the way a man looks after seeing a dragon,” and poet princes who lose themselves in unrequited love know that “a fairy tale is always cursed because it is a circle.”

Though the story moves toward violent, dismaying events—events perhaps made inevitable by the carelessness with which kings treat commoners, and the ill regard given to people and lands that are conquered with thoughtless might—it is centered, and made vibrant, by the pagan magic that pulses through its pages. Here, human beings ignore the feminine divine at their own peril, and those who deafen themselves to the keening of the earth will have their just deserts. Each page is a wonder; each scene is thick with electrifying disappointments and delights. Even in progressing toward heartbreak, these intertwined stories demand a little falling in love.

“Where it starts is where it ends,” remarks a prince of his own fairy tale, which has twisted upon itself. *This Blood Means Life* is a gorgeous entry into a high fantasy series that may be marked by endings, but whose story is, to the

gratification of all, far from over.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (September 29, 2021)

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