





# ALOREN

E.D. Ebeling

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Hippolyta Press  
Chicago, Illinois  
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First Edition  
ISBN-13: 978-1497432147

## One

When I was three, my nurse brought me to see Leode—my fourth brother.

Mother sat up in the bed and sang softly into his ear. A salt wind came through the window and stung my eyes. I'd wanted a sister, and was determined everyone should know it, so I wailed and fell across the bed.

Nurse picked me up and took me into the corner where a rocking chair collected the last of the sunlight. She sat down and placed me in her lap, her hand over my mouth. We rocked slowly and Mother sang. I was the only one of us who remembered.

*The ice aster throws high her gossamer skirts  
On the brow of the Pirnon Mireir.  
She laces her slippers and dances a waltz,  
And she weaves her a door in the air.*

*Could she weave herself through,  
She would find a sweet land  
Filled with noon-tides of nectar and cream.  
But the door wants a key,  
And the key will not show  
Till she walks neath the water in dream.*

The light slid off my lap, and I fell asleep with Mother's dark head in my mind's eye, crowned in the sunset. When I woke she was dead.

When a person's body is tired, my father told us, the body gives up, regardless of what the person wants. So even then I knew it wasn't her fault. But her death shook everything apart.

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Norembry was a small country, cut off from the rest of the world by mountains and sea, and the Lauriad family was bound to Norembry like bittersweet to a hemlock. My parents were bound tighter. The Queen died in childbirth and dragged the King halfway after her.

The King, my father, disappeared westward for long circles of time—in part, I suspect, because my eldest brother and I so resembled our mother.

A year passed. On an early spring morning he came back to us with a new wife. I've been told a number of explanations, this the most common: My father was wandering the western mountains, hunting a fox. Some folk say not a fox, but a doe. Others a wolf, or hound. I prefer the fox—a black fox, which was strange enough, and suited her besides.

Father's situation grew significantly stranger when he held the fox at the point of a precipice—his arrow eager and his horse blowing—and she proceeded to speak to him in the most common of the Elde tongues. "Spare me the arrow, sir," she said. "How will you find your way without a guide?"

Father looked about him, at the dark, misty hills, and saw he was lost. "What ought I to do?" he said.

"Accept my condition, and then I will lead you back."

Father asked what the condition was.

"After I have led you back, you must chop off my head."

He was taken aback. "Seems a wicked thing to do."

“You must. And then you must marry the first woman you see.”

He accepted, and followed her through glens and marshes, over canyons churning with meltwater and great, broken stones, until they were out of the wild. The mist pulled back and the sun shone, and the fox lay in front of him, waiting. The King unpacked his little hatchet.

In one blow the job was done. And the fox twisted into a woman: a marvelous lady with a face white and sweet as the flesh of an apple.

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That mayn't have been the true version of events, but to be sure, Faiorsa was brought home to Ellyned, seated behind Father on his grey horse. Temmaic, Mordan, Arin, Leode, and I were having our morning lessons when the horn sounded.

We had a glimpse of her out the northwest windows, but weren't properly introduced until six years later, because we were immediately taken away westward to a big house of wood and stone. I remember the trip. The sky was leaden, and our way hampered by mud. Our caretakers sat stony-faced and silent, packed alongside us, and my legs stuck out over the top of my trunk.

I looked out the carriage at the rising mountains, and listened as Mordan whispered to Tem, “It's because of her.”

“Shut it.” Tem sounded sick.

“He's putting us away. Or they're going to kill us.”

“Shut your mouth, I said.”

Father arrived at the house a week later to see if we were unhappy. Unhappy wasn't the word. We were bewildered.

“Did you forget us?” I said. We were out in the yard, and he still smelled of his horse.

He buried my frown in his jerkin. “How, when I've been so worried you'd forgotten me?” Something was amiss. He spoke too loudly and his face had all the wrong sort of look.

He needn't have worried over our happiness, though. My brothers and I were young and free at last of ceremonies and processions. Between lessons and household duties we had glorious fun striking trails through the woods and playing at games of make-believe. Our roles never changed: Leode and Arin were the poor, brave folk enslaved and tortured by saebels at the beginning of time; and the humans, Tem and Mordan, always came at the last hope, pulling the sun behind them and purging the land of the demon saebels cleverly orchestrated and acted out by me, because I was the only girl. We fought battles, too, with sticks and clods of dirt that always sent someone running home weeping muddy tears—most often me, because I was the only girl.

Actually, Nilsa was a girl, but this was easy to forget. She had come with the house as keeper and cook, and looked very like the wooden gargoyles leering over the cornice. She acted like them, too. She'd probably hopped off the roof, Mordan said, so we stayed outside when we could. Hal was often outside too, as he tended the yard and caught game.

Hal owned a red fiddle even older than he was, but it sang like an oriole when he held it under his chin. After dinner he played tunes on the lawn, close to the banks of the green Gael so it seemed as though the river were fiddling. We'd begin to clap and I would dance, sometimes with a partner, sometimes without. And when I lost all concentration my feet would catch in the air and float. No one ever told me why. They just did.

My older brothers could do strange things, too. They sometimes made the grass underfoot greener or browner when they laughed or yelled. Only Galde people could make plants bloom or wither just by touching them. But I wasn't old enough, yet. That's what our tutor, Master Tippelain, said.

He came up the road and over the river more than Father did, bringing us metaphysics and history and economics and politics and rumors from the outside world. After a while Tem traded his human hero for a Galde one in our games. And then he stopped playing with us altogether. Humans were no longer so brave, he said, and he would pointlessly remind us we were all Elde. Galde—the tallest, most noble kind of Elde.

"The kind who fart in the wind and shit upstream," Mordan would say.

Mordan thought books more interesting than people, and Tem thought himself a man grown at twelve, too old for children. I had to make do with Arin and Leode.

Perhaps Arin and I should have been friends. We were similar enough: scheming, stubborn, covered with freckles. But the stubbornness always won out, and it troubled me constantly that I had only brothers.

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One autumn, a few days after I turned eight, Father crossed the bridge with Floy set before him on his horse. She was a Rielde girl, with sandy curls, brown eyes, and no parents; they'd been killed by raiders in Lorila.

Floy was the answer to a call for assistance sent out by our grossly overworked housekeeper, but Nilsa never get much assistance from Floy.

The day after Floy arrived she was mopping the floor in my room. I crept behind her and flicked soapy water on her hair. "Why've you glue on your head?" I said. "Is your hair falling out?"

Then I looked at the ceiling and yelled, “It’s sparrow poop dripping from the garret.” She felt her head and screamed, and I tackled her around the waist and threw us onto my bed, where we jumped and wrestled, mucking up the quilt.

I did my best to strip Floy of her sensibility, and before the autumn was out we’d made harmful mischief together. One day we found the stinking carcass of a deer in the wood, and made senseless by whatever grudge I was nursing at the time, I convinced her to help me carry it back to the house. We threw it down the well. Everyone got sick, and spent lots of time in the privy, and we had to drink from the river like wildmen.

Boredom and idleness made occasional monsters of all of us, but I suppose the initiation of Floy into our coterie proved too much. Two years later, someone—someone right among us—turned against us.

We’d heard rumors about the new Queen, of course. Adults whispered, never quite softly enough, behind the kitchen door. Ridiculous things. (She’d a magic amulet that could strike down whole armies, and a pact with the djain, and twenty-five black dragons from her lover in Omben. And an infant son.)

Curiosity drove us to creeping. Mordan caught sight, one midsummer morning, of a strange man closeted in the pantry with Hal. Arin (with the loosest tongue) asked Father later why the man had his cloak and cowl drawn so tight around him on such a summer’s day in the warmest corner of the house.

Hal seemed like to throttle the cloaked man in Mordan’s retelling. He’d been throwing flatware around. But Arin never listened very closely to Mordan, and only Arin and I were about the house when Hal received his dismissal.

I could have stopped it. But Arin was yelping in the front hall and I didn’t want my own knees caned for eavesdropping. So Hal walked down the road between two men in green and grey, and never came back.

I could scarcely eat for a week. And then I mostly forgot about Hal when Biador replaced him as groundskeeper, though I dearly missed the sound of the fiddle.

Arin was bitter about his knees, though. “If they find that man, will they pull his Marionin?” he asked.

“No,” said Tem. “Don’t say such things.”

“What’s a Marionin?” I asked Mordan that evening.

He was sitting on the hearth, hair wet, shirt steaming. It had been raining all that day. “Birth flowers. Only Gralde have them.”

He didn’t say anything else, and I only learned the particulars in a lesson: A Marionin was a flowering physical extension of the spirit. It sprang from the ground whenever a Gralde was born. Nobody knew where.

“Then how does anyone know they have one?” I asked.

“Mothers see them,” said Tem.

“Did ours?”

“Yes.” He had on his stern face, and I knew not to bother him further.

## Two

On the day the Queen came, Mordan and Arin locked me in the privy. It began with a rat. I'd discovered it—a large, handsome, but dead specimen—floating in a pail of milk in the pantry.

It was a while yet before supper. I held it well away from my gown so it dripped into a cauldron full of Nilsa's chicken stock. "Big sea rat like him," I said, "he'll be happier in brine." But what I really wanted was for Arin to pull a rat tail out of his bowl. Just yesterday he'd ground horseshit into my pillow.

I looked back at Floy, who was sidling nearer and glancing at the kitchen door every minute.

She gave a great, hopeless shrug. I dropped the rat into the cauldron.

"I'm not hungry, anyhow," I said.

"You're going to get me whipped," said Floy. "Not that you'd care a whit."

"Not so," I said, "not unless you tell. It'll look like chicken in three hours."

Floy looked into the cauldron. "She'll know. It'll taste bad."

"It'll taste better."

"Excellent, I'll warrant," said Nilsa. She'd crept up behind us while we were looking into the cauldron. Floy turned round, face tucked in, prepared for a slap. I hid my nose in my shoulder—Nilsa always smelled of fish. "But I wouldn't have to toss rats in my soup for excitement if ninny-hammer got her onions chopped when she's told."

Though Nilsa was old, she was built like an ox, and she picked poor Floy up by her collar.

Nilsa's face was redder than I'd ever seen it—it must be the heat, I thought. But she hooked Floy on the wall next to the cloaks and stripped a pot of its leather thong.

"Oh, ma'am." Floy hid her arms in a cloak: they were still bruised from her last beating. I felt a prick of guilt.

"If you're going to belt Floy," I said to Nilsa, "you'll have to do me as well, and you can't belt me."

Nilsa bent so close to me I could see the boil under her left eye. "I'm sore tired of your voice, madam. Sore tired of you, in here, tramping and jawing about like the Queen of Quabberqetzle. I've had enough." She took hold of my arm, so tightly my eyes watered. "Given me grey hairs in my nose, armpits, and arse, but I won't have any more." She flung me into a cupboard. Bowls spun about me like tops, and I sat where I'd fallen, too shocked to get up.

But Floy was spared the beating, because right as Nilsa raised



the thong, a cat wound through her legs and knocked her over.

Close behind were my brothers Mordan and Arin, who both did their best to prevent Nilsa from rising by tripping over her, one right after the other.

The cat sought refuge under a chopping block. There was a bird in her mouth, flapping wildly. My brothers must've been trying to rescue it.

I didn't much care; I unhooked Floy from the wall, grabbed her wrist, and pulled her out the door.

We ran up the back stairs, and I thought vaguely about the punishment I was likely to receive when Father arrived. It was the afternoon of Leode's seventh birthday. Father never missed birthdays.

We reached the second landing, and Floy took a deep breath and said, "Why'd I listen? Why do I always listen? By the blessed Mother—"

"Shut it." I pulled her along the second-floor corridor and flung open a big chest. "In here."

"It smells like mushrooms," Floy said.

Her head was already inside, so I pushed the rest of her in and slammed the top down. "If you stay in there long enough, maybe she'll forget."

I heard the thunk of boots running along the corridor. The cat ran by, and then the boys, so fast that my skirts blew out. "Is Nilsa coming?" I asked them.

"I hope not." Mordan took big, wheezing breaths.

"We're going to be thumped." Arin shook the hair from his eyes and he and Mordan followed the cat into the privy.

"She'll lock me in the garret with the bats," wailed Floy. I gave the chest a thump and walked after my brothers.

The door was flung wide. I invited myself in, and the cat set to clawing through my skirts. Arin grappled round us with his gangly arms, caught her, hoisted her over the latrine. She let the bird loose, and he let go the cat to shoo the bird away. The yowling cat plummeted down the latrine chute.

Arin looked down the hole.

"What've you done?" I breathed. I was thrilled about it, almost ecstatic, and I made toward the door to tell Biador or Tem. One of them was perhaps close enough to hear.

"Reyna—" said Mordan.

"Biador!" I called. Before I could progress further Arin, who had just last month got caned for dropping my kitten in the river, put his hand over my mouth. Mordan grabbed my flailing arms and twisted them behind my back.

In two blinks of an eye they had shut the door and were somehow bolting it from the outside. "Just calm down," said Mordan through the keyhole, "and we'll let you out."

“Mordan!” I pummeled my fists on the door. “You jackhole.”

“Mind you take extra care to hold your bladder,” said Arin. “Puss doesn’t like the wet.”

Biador shouted something up the stairwell—I could hardly make it out, but the boys exchanged whoops of excitement. Father must be here.

“You’ll get your hides tanned black,” I said. I heard the knob rattling from the outside, and Mordan’s voice:

“It’s stuck.”

“Let me try.”

“You idiot, you tied it too tight.”

The door shook, and Floy’s voice came through the keyhole: “Reyna?”

“Let me out!”

“Give it a minute.”

I heard them rustling around. “Hurry up,” I said. “It reeks something awful.”

“Knot’s slippery as a fish,” said Floy.

“Floy, go get a knife,” said Mordan.

“A knife?” said Floy. “Nilsa’s in the kitchen, and you almost cracked her head open. I’m getting your father.”

“No, you’re not,” said Arin.

Floy didn’t answer, but I heard her boots running down the hall

The boys rushed after, leaving me alone.

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Later, when I was wet from the river and Floy was a sparrow, she told me everything.

She’d gone out the pantry door with Mordan and Arin, and raced them all the way to the place where my eldest brother, Temmaic, was teaching my littlest, Leode, how to thrust and parry with staves.

Tem, fourteen, threw down his pole. “He can’t be here yet, it’s too early.”

Arin pointed at the rider on the south road. “Biador said—”

“It’s probably the supplies man,” Tem said. “The dogs haven’t even come out.” The wind whipped his words about, and he blocked the sun with a hand.

The rider was a woman. A tall woman with black hair unbound and falling over her grey mantle. She crossed the rickety bridge of pine masts, sitting sidesaddle on a brown palfrey. The bells on the halter sang like stars.

She reined in the horse and they all gawked at her. Floy saw that she was human—her eyes shone gold in her white face.

“You’re not Father,” said Leode.

“No,” she said. “But I know him well, I think. Are you the Lauriad children?”

Tem gave a tiny shake of his head.

“Yes,” said Arin, flattening his hair. “Who are you?”

“Faiorsa. Your father sent me. How funny you shouldn’t know my face at all.”

Arin tilted his head, scratched it. “You’re supposed to look something eviler than you do.”

“Arin,” whispered Mordan. The lady gave a gay laugh

“We must start anew.” She demounted in a fluid motion, and the palfrey shook her head and snorted. “I have a gift for all of you.” She took a bundle of satin from her mantle. “From the south.”

“The real south?” Leode swept hair from his brow to better see. “Across the oceans?”

“Yes. Where the sun is so bright it fills every shadow and never sets.”

“That’s impossible.” But Mordan’s grey eyes widened in his thin face. She had unwrapped the fabric. It held five flowers, colored the deep warning red of poppies. They shimmered slightly, giving off a faint heat.

“Stand back a bit.” Tem took Arin by the arm. Arin jerked out of his grip.

“Do you want to fly?” She bent over them so that the gown hung loose on her chest and hair slipped over her shoulders.

“No,” said Tem.

She ignored him. The rest of them did, too. “Do you want to touch the top of the sky, where you can dip your toes into the sunlight and cup it in your hands like water?”

“Arin,” said Tem, “take Leode and go home.”

“I want to stay,” said Leode. Arin never turned his head.

“The blooms of *Cam Belnech* will lift your feet from the ground.” Her voice swelled musically, her eyes widened, and Leode was first to reach for a flower. Made foolish by his bravery the others, except for Tem, moved closer.

The woman’s teeth pulled blood from her lip, and the grass dried under Tem’s feet.

“She means us harm.” Tem plucked at Floy’s dress. “Don’t touch them.” Floy took a flower. The others did, too, and the woman caught Tem by the wrist. She drew him into her chest, and ground a bloom into his palm with the kerchief.

The juice ran down his arm. The rest dropped the flowers, palms stained red.

She laughed. “Take to the air all of you,” she said. “Forget the ground and fade away.”

She turned to her palfrey and mounted, astride this time. The stain sank into Floy’s hands. Inside Floy a desire grew: a desire to stop her heart, to draw back into nothing, and melt into the air. But something was off; her flesh stayed solid.

The boys gave the woman’s command no such resistance.

Lauriad feet turned to ash, and Lauriad hands melted away.

Never turning round, never seeing Floy's stubborn, solid body, the woman leaned into her saddle and fled. Dust blew around Floy, and she threw her arms over her face.

Then the miracle happened. Pain teased through Floy's arms, and the boys stopped crumbling. A strange thing, a divine hand, hollowed bones and pinched fingers to pinions. The ground flew up and Floy crouched over toes gone hard and horny.

A solid sparrow rose first, then four black birds made of dust. They beat wings north, too thin against the blue to catch the eye of the lady rider.

She mistook my brothers and me for dead. And how she could have mistaken a pot girl for the only daughter of Daonac Lauriad was incomprehensible. But she did.

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I ripped up the old tapestry that hung in the privy.

There was a swan on it. Her wings were raised and she held her chest aloft with such haughtiness that she made the mistake of resembling Arin. I caught a loop of thread with my finger and pulled. The weathered stuff tore easily.

"Arin," I cried, ripping the swan's head off, "were you to turn into a great, stupid bird, I would be the happiest girl on earth." I ripped it down the middle. "And Mordan, I wish the same fate upon you." I pulled it from the wall, and used shoes to maul as well as hands. "All of you may have it."

Tem, Leode, and Floy had rarely done me any wrong, but such was my passion that I treated them all the same. I threw the pieces of tapestry against the door. "I wish you would all sprout wings and fly away."

And even as I spoke I had a vision: a girl, running in a wood. She stopped and looked around as though she'd heard my voice. Her eyes were big and black, and her feathery hair whirled around her face, becoming wings—the great, white wings of an albatross, beating, beating, making a wind.

I fell silent. Something had heard me.

Our house was deep in the *Vara*—a place in the mountains where the air was thin enough and the ground high enough to catch the interest of strange beings.

I felt bones hollowing, lengthening. I looked at my fingers: there was nothing odd, no feathers.

But I knew in my gut something was wrong. The blood hammered in my ears, and I knelt next to the toilet. The cat's mews rang below—she must have caught hold of a crack in the wall.

I sat down, sticky and cold, and heard a noise behind me. A sibilant hiss, growing louder. Almost a whistle now, and I turned

round just in time to see it shoot through the privy window. It stuck, vibrating, in the bottom of the doorframe.

An arrow.

There was a flaming rag wrapped around the shaft.

The fire licked down, set the tapestry alight. I watched the flames snake through the wool, caressing new life into the shredded breast and wing. The door ignited, and I jumped to my feet. “Wildmen,” I said. The shutters caught fire from another arrow, and my breath turned ragged.

The shutters groaned. I pulled at the door-handle; it was hot to the touch. Another arrow hissed round and seared my ears, and the wood flowered red above my head. I turned, palms pressed to my neck. Already the room glowed like the belly of a forge.

The hills just south of us were thick with brigands; and I thought of the tales Arin and Mordan told, of bloodthirsty ruffians hacking and burning their way through the wilds.

My mouth tasted bitter. I imagined Leode’s small body lying broken and Tem kneeling with a knife in his back.

The fire drew close and my skin tightened. I couldn’t see for the smoke. I doubled over, coughing, nauseous. I remembered the toilet.

I ran over and looked down into it. It had a wide shaft, and I was small and skinny. “Cat,” I yelled. “Damn me, but I’m coming down.” But the smell was awful, and I hesitated. The floor snapped at my feet.

I stopped thinking on it, and stepped onto the seat. I lowered myself into the hole, and cold air raised the hair on my legs. I was hanging by my fingers. Above, the shutters clapped over the seat, pinching them, and I let go.

The chute didn’t go straight down—I slid and rolled. My feet ran into the cat on the way down, and we proceeded together.

The chute stretched south and emptied us into a deep part of the river. The cold collapsed my lungs. I swam right through my overtunic; and the cat swam for shore, whereupon reaching it, she disappeared into the trees.

I clambered out after her. I rattled the dead bracken, and stumbled hot and cold through ash and beech. The trees fell away, the sun poured round my head, a clump of fescue beckoned at my knees, and I crumpled.

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When I awoke, the late sun shone on my face. A bird sat on my chest—a song sparrow.

She was quite bold. When I sputtered and began to cry, she said sternly, *Get up and follow*. I didn’t obey. Her breast heaved. *Follow!*

She had a fit, pulling at my hair, tickling my nose, scratching my skin. I got up to run away. But she got hold of my gown and made such a bluster with her little body that I gave up and walked in the direction she was pulling.

“What do you want?” She hopped from tree to tree, and I raked branches away, trying to keep up. “Where are you going? Slow down.”

But she didn’t, and my legs and feet bled. I had kicked off my shoes in the water, and the sparrow favored the routes tangled with thimble and blackberry brambles, uncomfortable as the cold air clinging to my gown.

I wove through trees, splashed through puddles, and slid over the river on a rotten plank bridge; and finally we reached the ridge where the ruined Galde watchtowers leaned toward the sunset, as if to take in the last light.

I slowed as we drew near their long shadows. I imagined dead faces peering out the long black windows.

The little brown bird flew right into the nearest one. The top half was gone, where to I couldn’t guess. It looked like a broken tooth.

“I’m not following you into there,” I said.

I turned away, and saw a splash of dapples moving in the shade: Father’s grey horse, chewing on the new greens by the river.

I picked my way down to her. “Liskara, where’s Father?”

She raised her head and looked on me with a dark eye. The brown blurred into the white, and she told me in images.

She gave a sneeze and went back to chewing, and I made my legs carry me up the steps, thick with wet loam and rock creepers, toward the tower. I hated it bitterly.

Around the back the entrance was misshapen and dark as a cat’s mouth. A strip of sunlight fell in and lit the floor under a window. The late sun made him glow red. He woke when I blocked the light, but he didn’t recognize me until I came closer.

“Reyna,” he said. “I must speak with you before I go.”

“Where’re you going?” I said.

I saw the glint of a thin shaft, a feather. An arrow, pinning his shirt to his chest.

“Father.” I knelt close and touched it with shaking fingers. “Father, what happened?”

“Bandits, I—” I grabbed hold of the shaft and snapped it. He tore at his lip, and I eased the broken bit out through the cloth. The blood had spread through the shirt; my hands were slick with it.

“I don’t know how to help.” I lifted my head, and glanced around. “I have to find someone, somebody, please—”

“Don’t be silly, girl,” he said. “No one here. There were eight, about eight of them—” He coughed and dark stuff wet his lips. I tore his shirt at the amigaut. “No.” He stopped me with a hand. “You shouldn’t see it.”

“I don’t know how to help.” I stood and dug my toes into the floor. “I don’t know how to help.” I began crying softly, and he looked behind me.

“I’m here to tell you how,” he said. “You see them?” He lifted his hand to point, and I looked over my shoulder. “She’s cursed their Marione.”

The sparrow, perched on a windowsill, was the only real bird. The ones on the floor had been too well hidden for me to notice before. They were black, semi-transparent like shadows or smoke, and the sun shone darkly through them: an egret, a raven, a swan and a dove. My brothers.

I don’t know how I knew, but I did. They felt like my brothers. An egret, a raven, a swan, and a dove. My skin pricked, and the air thickened in the tower, and I struggled to draw breath. One breath, and then another. My spirit quailed and I stopped breathing altogether—one puff of wind might blow them away like dust.

“She’s cursed their Marione,” said Father. “Birth flowers. I haven’t much time to explain.”

“Who’s she?” I said. “How did she know where they are? We don’t even know.”

“Doesn’t matter,” said Father. “It’s already been done. You must undo it.”

He cried out and hacked blood on his shirt. I pulled away.

“I know where they are,” he said. “They’re growing at the crest of the hill with the standing-stone, just north of here. The red staring out from the green.”

I knew the place. A strange place, where the wind breathed down the back of your neck. We stayed well clear of it. Mother must have seen the place in her mind—sometimes new mothers could. We’d been raised here for a reason. “They’re growing behind the towers?” I said.

“Yes,” Father said. “You must pull them from the ground.”

I stared at him, and the tower darkened around me. Pulling someone’s Marione was more terrible than murder. Pulling your own was inconceivable.

“Why—” I swallowed. “Why should I want to do that?”

His voice shook. “The *Cam Belnech*. If you break the spirits, the curse will no longer take effect.”

“What?” I shook my head and wrung my wet skirts.

“Reyna,” he said, “Reyna, you must listen to me. They’re dying—you see?” He nodded at the birds—my brothers. “All smoke and dust. Because they touched the red flowers, they say. I can hear them. I’ve heard of these red flowers—*Cam Belnech*, they’re called. They kill Galde. I don’t know how to explain. You’re much too young.” He was silent for a moment, thinking. He said, finally, “The flowers cause suicidal thoughts in Galde. If you touch the flowers, you desire death. You want to die.”

“They want to die?”

“Yes. Something is holding them here.” He shook his head. “I don’t know what. Something has changed their shape, made them birds.”

*Had I done that?* I thought of the black-eyed girl, the albatross.

“I don’t understand it,” he said. “And it’s not enough. They’re still fading. You can see right through them. You must weaken them so they do themselves no more damage. You must pull the plants. All of them. A broken spirit can’t destroy itself.”

I understood very little of this. And I understood even less why it had to involve me. “I didn’t touch the red flowers, why should I have to pull my own—?”

“You must pull all of them,” he said sharply. “Yours, too. After you pull them, after you break the spirits, you will have to mend them at some point, and for the mending you need *all* the plants. So. Pull them all. When you do this, your brothers will stop fading, I think.”

“You *think*?” My fists were clenched; I might have stamped my foot.

“Be quiet and listen. I haven’t much time.”

“No.” His every word was absurd. “You’ve lost too much blood.” He shook his head, and I sat on the stones, arms around my knees, crying.

He reached out and took my hand. “After you break the spirits, when your brothers are safe—”

I wiped my sleeve across my nose. “What about Foy?”

He moved his head impatiently. “Floy is Rielde, doesn’t have a Marionin. The *Cam Belnech* affected her differently—see?” He pointed to the sparrow. “She’s a real bird, safe for now, and as I was saying, after your brothers’ spirits are broken, you will have to find the cure. The cure for the red flowers, the *Cam Belnech*.”

“I thought the broken spirits were the cure—”

“No, they’re not. They’ll just give you more time to find it.” He shifted his weight under him, and blood bubbled on his lip. “So you must look for the cure, and at the same time you must mend the spirits you broke.” His voice was terrible, rasping, jumping octaves. “To mend them—“ His head fell forward, and his eyes moved back and forth, and he muttered to himself.

He looked up. “I know this from an old story. About the Oredh Brothers. I have no time to tell it; you’ll just have to follow my instructions. To mend your Marione, you must sow the seeds—so keep the flowers after you pull the plants. Grow a crop of the Marione seeds, and another from that crop, and another, until you have harvested enough of the plants to weave with. When you have enough, you must weave tunics out of the plants, sleeveless tunics, like surcoats. Five tunics of the combined plants, each shirt must be a mixture of the five different plants. When you complete these



tunics, throw them over yourself and your brothers, and that will mend the spirits.”

He took my arm, pulled me closer, and said: “You must mend them within five years. After you pull the plants from the ground, you have five years to grow them and weave with them, five years to find the cure; if you go longer than five years with a broken spirit, you will go mad. Do you understand?”

He had forgotten I was ten.

But for all his blindness, bungling, and bad luck, my father wasn’t stupid. He’d studied across the sea before Tem was born, and it wasn’t his fault his encyclopedic memory squashed the common sense right out of him.

“Do you understand how to do this?” he said again.

I nodded, only to mollify him.

“Good. You and your brothers will be able to live five years with your broken Marione, a time enough that you may find the cure for the *Cam Belnech*. Ice asters.” He spoke between gulps of air. “*Reinenea Corliogra*. They’ll heal the wound done by the red flowers. They cure everything.

“The boys and Floy must each have an aster, a whole flower, pistil and stamen, ground into a palm. After you’ve finished the tunics, after you’ve cast the tunics over yourself and the boys, right after you’ve mended your spirits, the boys will only fade, crumble again, and so they must have the asters ready.

“But more immediately,” he said, squeezing my hand, “after you pull your Marionin, you will have to be careful, very careful, when you are dealing with normal people. You absolutely cannot speak about yourself to whole people. You cannot talk about what you are doing. You cannot take responsibility for your actions. You cannot defend yourself. And you’d be better off not expressing your opinions. Do any of these things and you risk going mad.”

He scrunched his face up. “You’re too young to understand. You aren’t allowed certain things.” He squeezed my hand again, so hard he shook. “I’m sorry.” His hand went limp. His ring fell through my fingers and chimed on the stone.

“Don’t leave.” My temples burned and my stomach sickened.

“Be brave.”

“Don’t leave me.”

Stillness crept through the tower, cold and blue, a bruise stealing into every nook of me.

## Three

As I wept, darkness fell and the stars above me grew bright. The last of the light went, and dust blew up from the ground, catching in my throat. The shadows on the walls lengthened.

I turned and there they stood, bodies whole, hands and feet solid. Hair wildly mussed, tunics askew—it looked as though they had been standing in a great wind. They were white-eyed with shock.

“I don’t understand,” said Tem, looking at his hands.

“Starlight.” Mordan looked out the broken roof. “It’s a new moon.”

The new moon was a traditional time of magic and strangeness. Or it could’ve been the starlight. The Elde had worshipped the stars before humans came and brought the sun.

Tem stuck his hand into a shadow and out of the starlight, and a few transparent pinion feathers took its place. “All right.” He sounded remarkably calm. “Stay out of the shadows.” He looked at Mordan. “Let’s put Father on the river while we still can.”

“Why? This is his fault.” Arin didn’t move, and the freckles stood out from his white face.

“You’ll help us,” said Tem quietly, “or I’ll thump you.”

Arin said no more about it, and the older boys picked Father up and carried him down to the murmuring Gael River to give him a proper Galde goodbye.

With numb fingers we tied bunches of last autumn’s rushes into a pallet, and for lack of our family’s wild-roses, threaded it through with snow glories and larkspur while Liskara nickered in the night. We placed Father upon it with his sword on his breast, and set him afloat on the black water.

I wiped my nose and looked away before he drifted out of sight. My hand found Tem’s and he held me next to him.

At some point I realized Floy wasn’t there. I ran back up the steps and into the tower.

She stood against the wall, white-faced in the starlight. When she saw me, she slipped half into a shadow and I saw half of her disappear. I grappled for her hand and pulled her into the light.

“What happened to you?” I said.

She told me the whole story. I gaped at her, and the boys came in, keeping clear of the shadows. “All right,” Arin said shakily. “What are we going to do?”

“Stay out of the wind,” said Mordan. “Try not to die. Watch the country fall apart.”

“We’ve got instructions,” said Tem. He pointed to the signet ring glinting on the stone. “And that.”

“You could just put it on,” Arin said, “march down to Ellyned—”

“Not in a night. This is temporary—we have until morning.” He put his arm into a shadow, and it became a wing.

“You’re birds,” I said, staring at the feathers. “All of you. You’re all birds.”

Arin eyed me sullenly. “What about you? Always skiving off family occasions.”

“You locked me in the *privy*.”

“It is strange,” Mordan said, “that we should be birds. And Floy—she’s an actual bird.” He turned to Floy. “Are you dumb like a beast?”

“Dumb like a beast?” She shoved him away from her. “Straight out of hell this came.”

She hid her face in her hands, and I kept quiet; and Tem said to me: “We sent Floy to look for you when we found Father. As she was a real bird. Solid, I mean. The hall was burning, she told us.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I can’t believe this,” he said to Mordan. “Outlaws and some bitch’s curse on the same day?”

“Could be more than a coincidence,” said Mordan.

Tem touched a bruise at the nape of my neck. “This is a wicked piece of work.”

“From a cupboard,” I said. “Nilsa did it.”

He pulled his hand away. “Nilsa?”

“Hardly matters now, does it?” I blinked back tears.

“How’d you get out?” said Mordan. “You’re wet.”

“The toilet.” Arin’s eyes bugged. Before he could say anything, I said viciously, “I didn’t have feathers, at least”

They all stared at me solemnly.

I backed away and cut the arch of my left foot. I looked down: the ring glinted.

“You’ll have to keep it. You’re the only one left.” Tem’s eyes didn’t move from the ring.

“Did you understand any of what Father said?” Mordan said.

“Don’t talk about Father.”

“Once we uproot the Marione,” said Mordan, “we’ve only got five years to find the ice asters.”

“While we’re searching for those, you’ll be sowing the Marione seeds,” said Tem, “so you have enough of a crop to weave tunics.”

“Stop it,” I said. “I’d kill us.”

“And you can’t speak about yourself to anyone,” said Mordan, “except us, I expect, once we’ve broken—”

“You believed him?” Tears wet my face. “Mordan, he was out of his mind.”

A silence followed, unbearably tense. “I’d rather be dead than have this disease,” said Arin. Leode started to cry again, and Mordan took hold of his wrist. Outside the wind picked up and

slipped through the cracks, and Floy, still pinned to the wall, grew bold.

“Let her be,” she said. “See how small she is? She’d get no help at all.”

“We’ll won’t do the country any good as dust,” Mordan said.

Tem nodded. “If she’s willing—”

“She’s right, you know.” Arin didn’t look at them. “We’re done for, we’re through, whether or not she decides to do it.”

“Thank you, Arin. Your optimism is appreciated.” Mordan turned to everyone else: “Anything she does later—it can’t get much worse than this.”

“Yes it can,” said Arin. “Reyna with all our Marione?”

I looked at Arin and licked my lips. “Fine,” I said. “I’ll do it.” My heart lurched up and hammered in my throat.

“You won’t last a day,” Arin said to me. “You won’t be able to tell anyone your name, who you are, what’s your favorite color, whether or not you murdered someone—”

“I said I’ll do it.”

He wiped spit off his nose.

“You’ll go hungry, Reyna. You don’t know how horrible it is,” said Floy. My hand crept up to run over the back of my neck.

“Make sure you understand,” said Tem. “A broken spirit—it’s supposed to feel truly awful.”

This was beyond my comprehension. “Can’t you help me? Even a bit?”

“When it’s moonless. Twelve nights a year.” He sounded more miserable than I’d ever heard him.

“Let me try it, Tem,” I said. “Do. Let me just try.”

“And then there’re the ice asters,” said Arin, as though that put the cap on it.

“They’re real,” said Tem.

“How’re you so cocksure?”

“Because the *Cam Belnech* are, obviously enough.”

A wind caught in Tem’s hair and he turned toward the window. “It’s late,” he said. The first pale light shone through, coloring the floor green.

I backed against the wall and waited. Their fingertips caught the light and changed, lengthened into feathers that spread down their arms like sleeves.

Tem’s arms became long, wide, an egret’s wings. Mordan’s nose curved into the beak of a raven, Arin grew the slender neck of a swan, and the dove that used to be Leode waited for the others to be done.

I wondered what bird I might have been. The sparrow, the only solid one, sat on her windowsill and looked at me.

I picked up Father’s ring, put it in my chemise pocket. I walked out the door, turned, and called back into it, not sure they could

understand me, “I’m uprooting our Marione. You come and watch.”

## Four

The morning was windy and chill, but a balm sweetened the air and heralded the arrival of milder days. Stars shone in the west, faint in the green. The birds flew in front of me, and the wind flew behind. It moved through my brothers with such a roar I feared they would be blown asunder, and I started into a run.

The hill swam with mist. Its foot was strewn with gigantic granite stones, grey-green and starry as the rim of the sky. The only stone still standing was rosy gneiss, brought to that place time out of mind to mark the wheeling of stars.

It jutted from the side of the hill like the last tooth in an ancient gum. “Old Mother’s Snaggletooth,” I had heard someone call it, and I wondered if Old Mother was the earth, or a giant saebel under the ground. “Excuse me, Mother,” I said on my way up.

The hill was bald, and eons of wind had stripped the west side to mostly rock. I kept to that side—the red stone was to the east, and I feared it.

I found them near the crown, growing in a circle among the stones: bright blue gentians and tiny saxifrage, columbine, nettle, and wood sorrel. They had each a blood-red throat.

I stood still, sweat running down my nose. I had no right to disturb them, couldn’t believe I was looking at them.

My brothers gathered near my feet, nipping at each other, Floy standing a little to the side. The standing stones glowered up at us, a disapproving jury come to witness my blasphemy. My hands shook. The sun reached the hill, and light fell through the boys.

Wind blew into my back, lifting my skirts. A great gust rocked the trees. The birds shook and wavered; I reached for them as they vanished, and dove into the circle, bloodying my knees.

I broke stems and roots, and the wind changed to wings, a flurry of them falling round my shoulders. I reached the nettles last, and the spines sank into my forearms, palms. And then it happened.

My lungs blew from my mouth, or so it felt. A flaming rope stretched out from my chest, thin and brittle, unraveling, twisting, and breaking until only a string stretched taut.

I lay down, chest afire with pain. Ice followed the fire and spread through me, dulling the hurt. My senses heightened so that I could hear the new grass struggling to stand beneath me. And they were nearby, still birds, still yoked to my wish.

“I think the bell flowers were mine,” one of them said. “Reyna must be the nettles.”

“What feels different? I can’t put my finger on it.”

“Won’t put your finger on anything for a while, Tem.”

“Beasts act on instinct, and people on obligation and ration, and I’m thinking rationally enough—”

“Stop hurting my head.”

“—but I wonder if presently we’ll lose all idea of words and have to resort to base—”

I lifted my head. Tem, Mordan, Arin, and Leode had ceased to fade, but only Mordan the raven was comfortable in a black suit. Leode could have been a pigeon, but Arin and Tem looked ridiculous. Floy sat before me, just as she had been.

“Corps’ eyes from a tomb in Tinop.” The white at her throat leapt. “Broken anything?”

“I’m talking to a sparrow.” I got to my feet and touched a scraped knee. “I’m talking to a sparrow.” I wasn’t doing it consciously. The morphemes organized themselves like clockwork in my mouth, as well as in my fingers and eyes. “Was this supposed to happen?”

“Don’t know,” said Mordan. They gathered around me, feathers moving in the wind, looking ready to dissolve at a touch.

“May I?” I asked Tem. I sank my fingers into his plumage and closed my eyes.

“Let’s go away from this place.” Tem stepped away from me and folded in his neck.

I gathered up the scraps of our Marione and crept down through columns of shadow. Most of them took flight, but not so high we couldn’t continue talking.

Tem said, “How do you suppose she found us?” We all knew he was talking about the Queen.

“They’re likely both dead,” said Floy, referring to Biador and Nilsa.

We were quiet for a while. Then Arin suggested Master Toppelain, our tutor, who had tried to teach to me real dances, poetry, music, and how to sit up straight. I wasn’t fond of him.

“No,” said Tem. “He was one of Father’s oldest friends. Nilsa, though—”

“What about big, slow Dwithy,” said Arin. “Came on the cart every month? Brought us food and clothes. Had a face puckered like a cat’s arse—”

“He was simple,” said Mordan.

“Maybe he only *acted* simple.”

“Only you act simple, Arin. It was probably Hal. He was given the boot, after all.”

I could feel Tem readying a reply, but whatever it was he kept it silent.

My stomach growled, but there was no food, and I didn’t much feel like eating anything. I doggedly walked forward, making for the river. When I tripped over a root, I stopped, and thought of sitting down to have another cry. “Where am I going?” I said.

“Don’t worry so,” said Tem, but he was worried.

Liskara hadn’t strayed far. I unbuckled a saddlebag full of provisions that Mordan assured me I would be unhappy without. I put it on the ground, and the horse sneezed at me.

“You needn’t ask,” I said. “Wherever you go, someone will take care of you.” I put the Marione at the bottom of the saddlebag, and studied Father’s ring. Gold, with a green stone carved like a wild rose.

I untied a blanket from the saddle and sat down in the sun next to the river. I rubbed my dirty arms all over the blanket, wrapped it around me, and yawned hugely.

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When I woke, the stars shone, and a sliver of waxing moon. Leode roosted in an oak, his beak in his breast. The others spoke softly with their heads together, and I closed my eyes, heard my name, and turned on my side to listen.

“She’ll starve to death, or freeze.”

“We’ll find her a place before winter. A farm.”

“Ha! Farming?”

“Not as though she’s never dug up a turnip for Biador.”

“You can hardly compare a kitchen garden to a field—”

“It’s not so difficult—you’ve just never done it before.”

“Watch it. Raven’s bigger than a sparrow.”

“I can fly faster.”

“You’re just a pot girl.”

“Where, though?” the egret cut in. “We’re in the middle of the wild.”

“There’s a village north of here,” said the swan. “Up the road, Hal said once.”

“We’ll fly that way tomorrow.”

“Reyna can’t fly.”

I sat up at this. “I can walk.”

Suddenly hungry, I rummaged through the saddlebag and found a piece of bread stuffed with salted pork. I ate it slowly.

“Once she’s established herself somewhere,” said Tem, “we’ll scout out the country.”

“Maybe Floy and Mordan,” I said. “But how’s a black egret going to scout out anything?”

“Go back to sleep,” Tem said.

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“Mordan,” I said the next morning, “I still know who I am and what I am and where I am.”

He told me this was good evidence that I was still sane.



He, Floy, and I walked up the road, or rather, they flew from tree to tree and I walked. We'd forgotten to tie Liskara the night before, and when I woke she was gone. The others hadn't come along. I refused to take a step towards civilization with black egrets, swans and doves.

"Why should I not be crazy?" I stopped and looked up at him. "I've pulled my Marionin. I'm not dead—why shouldn't I be crazy?"

"I don't know. Maybe you are. All the more reason to do *exactly* as I say."

"That'll go over smoothly," Floy said.

All the morning I listened to the arguments and jeers pouring from the trees: sounds I'd never thought more than birdsong.

Around midday we stopped for a rest in a hollow dark with pines. I should have known better, been more wary—the place felt old, resentful. Such places were often thick with saebels, but I sat thoughtlessly upon a boulder jutting out from a little stream.

The boulder flung arms of shingle from the ice. I leapt up quick as a snake.

He dislodged his bulk from the stream and the water gnawed into my feet. He towered over me, a mammoth cairn. His eyes were blue-black tunnels, and his teeth ground together like a lake in midwinter: *Does warm heart care to know what it feels like to be sat on?*

"No," I said.

*Does she taste nice? Her haunches were tender. We are hungry after our sleep, always hungry.*

I thought of tumbling around his belly, and dumped the food from the saddlebag at his feet. Mordan cackled so hard he threatened to fall out of his yew. The saebel ate all my bread and salt pork, then he gave a burp like an avalanche, clamped himself over the stream, and went back to sleep.

Mordan was still laughing.

"You big tit." I rubbed my cold feet. "A rock ate all my food."

"Let's keep to the road," said Floy. "The monsters don't like ways and roads. And there's food up the road."

The road scarcely hinted at food. It climbed all day, and became slick with a ceaseless, miserable drizzle. My brothers and I had sometimes played at being travelers, journeying as far as we dared on the deer paths, always with sausage and cheese, and heading back as soon as it was eaten. This was the real road, though. I hadn't sausage or cheese, and I half expected a city, or at least a soft, green country beyond the first rise to the north. I neared the top, walked up a stair broken up by juniper roots, and stopped short in dismay. Black mountains rolled away on all sides, fading to blue on the horizon. The road wound down and disappeared into a muddle of pines, crumbling towers, and old walls keeping nothing

out and leading nowhere. As I slogged on, the day waned and the drizzle clouded the view, and I kept to the middle of the path.

“Do you suppose,” I remember grumbling to Floy, “that this village is one of those that appear for a day and then fade into the mist for another thousand years?”

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As the last of the light fled west I smelled the tang of smoke. My heart lifted.

Farther up the road light came from windows in the mountain’s very arm. There was a fortress of some sort, atop the arm’s nub and long fallen into ruin. Some of the stones had been rebuilt into the second story of a building. The first story was dug out from the hillside.

A lantern hung on a post, sputtering in the rain—a welcoming sound. The rest of the village twinkled below, and I gave a sigh of relief, and walked quickly forward for fear the place would be swallowed by mist before I reached the door.

“Wait a moment,” called Mordan. “There’re people down there.”

“There’re people everywhere.” But I hesitated.

“It’s an inn.” Floy flew up between us. “The Milodygraug Inn. Noisy and crowded this time of day. I doubt she’ll be noticed.”

“A little girl in from the rain and dark?” said Mordan. “Let’s wait till tomorrow.”

I knew what he was really thinking. *She’ll forget herself and say something stupid, and we’ll be undone.*

“I won’t say anything,” I grumbled.

“When your mouth drops off.”

“Jackhole,” I said, and Floy suggested loudly that we sneak round to the back.

I stepped over a stout stone wall and began salivating. Hints of rosemary, garlic, and roasting fowl hung about the back door. There was a saucer of cream on the stoop.

“What’s wrong?” said Floy from the dripping eaves. “Think the cat’s going to tell?”

I walked with the bowl to the shadows at the edge of the lawn. The cream was thick and frothy, and I drank it down. All it did was make me hungrier.

I threw the bowl on the ground and cursed all saebels in all forms of water, rock, mud, and plant in a loud voice that earned me a hiss from Mordan.

“Reyna,” said Floy, “you could pretend you’re a saebel.”

“Why should I want to do that?”

“You’d get fed.” I stared at her. “Don’t you remember,” said Floy, “the stories about saebels that do yard work at night and get

paid with meals in the evening, because the homeowners don't want their fingers fused together?"

"They're true?"

"True enough for these folk."

"Saebels have insatiable appetites," quoted Mordan. "*And they don't talk sense.*"

"They'd do anything for a bit of meat," said Floy.

"I'd anything for a bit of meat," I said.

"Then you'd better get some sleep before working tonight," said Floy.

When the windows of the place were all dark I struggled with hushing the cow and hauling tool after tool out of the shed. Then I stood despairingly at the edge of the large vegetable plot.

"Don't look so glum," Floy said. "It's half done already and the ground's wet."

I walked through the wattle fence and picked at the ground.

"You're not planting wildflowers. Use some leverage—stick the pole between your elbow and knee."

Floy's heckling set a fire in my limbs and I gradually pushed all the way through the unbroken ground.

After that I strung up the poles that had been lying in a pile for the runner beans. Then I slid around on the wet grass to rid myself of mud, stumbled about in the woods, and fell into a pile of leaves.

I slept like a boulder all through the next day and woke in the evening, sore and sick with hunger.

The birds were roosting in a pine. I threw a clod of dirt at Mordan.

"None of that!" He shuffled out of range. "I'm trying to keep cleaner than you, at least." They both followed me to the back door to find what the innkeeps had left. There was a bucket of cream this time, but more exciting were the loaf of rye and the round of white cheese.

"Don't eat too fast. You'll throw it up," said Floy. I wasn't listening. I sat on the stoop and threw Floy and Mordan morsels of bread; and was finishing the cheese when somebody who wasn't a bird interrupted:

"Lord, do you eat once a month?"

I jumped up and slopped cream down my dress.

"Quiet," said Floy and Mordan. I choked on a piece of cheese. The boy, a few years older than me, slugged me between the shoulders. The cheese came up in my mouth.

"Bright one, ain't you? Can't even chew properly."

A little girl poked her head through the door. "You're *loud*, Wille Illinla." She spied me and her eyes grew wide. I didn't wonder at it. My yellow dress was mottled with mud and my hair bristled with sticks and dead leaves.

"Our saebel!" The little girl stepped off the stoop.

In the little girl's place stood a woman with a red nose and ashy hair pinned tightly to her head. She looked like an outgrowth of the house. "Adzookers!" she said. "It's hideous." She grabbed the little girl and pulled her back. "Not so close, Emry, it's like to ravish you."

The boy Wille burst out laughing.

"Ravish?" I said, and Mordan cawed angrily from the roof; and at that moment I felt contrary enough to test my limits. "I—"

My stomach squirmed and vomit came up in my mouth. I shook, sweating under my dress.

"She in't a saebel, Marna, I don't think," Wille said.

"How would *you* know?" said the woman.

"Saebels don't have mothers—just spring out of the earth, don't they? If she's really a saebel she won't have a belly-scar."

Marna got hold of me under the arms. She lifted my dress and chemise, and my navel poked out above my undergarments. Wille nodded solemnly.

"What do you want?" The woman became weary. "And what happened to you?" She wiped her hands, filthy from my gown, on her apron.

"Brigands." I twisted my skirt into knots. Her face softened.

"Those? Been pouring over the border in droves. If t'weren't for the fact we're out of the way, I would march up to that Lorilan Ravyir and give him and all his wild folk a good thrashing. I suppose you'll want to stay on." I said nothing, and she blew her nose in her apron. "Those skinny arms don't look up to much. But you'll do fine for planting, running, cooking, even, I suppose."

She walked back into the house and Wille followed close behind. The little girl stepped in front of me, picking her nose.

"You're a saebel, ain't you?" she said. "Don't worry, I won't tell." She took me by the hand and pulled me through the door.

## Five

The little girl, Emry, was the daughter of Marna Nydderwaic's dead sister. Emry was Marna's darling, and as spoiled as I had been. She threw a fit when Wille dragged her upstairs to bed. Then Wille, who liked to explain things, explained to Marna about a poultice the miller needed for a bite on his arm.

The village was called Milodygraig. Marna Nydderwaic was Milodygraig's leech, though she spent most of her time running Milodygraig's inn in the absence of her dead husband. I soon found a place for myself as the orphan of Milodygraig, Floy became a sparrow of Milodygraig, and Mordan became very scarce in Milodygraig, as he was helping his brothers poke around the more exciting regions of the country.

That first night Marna strew me some bedding by the hearth. Sleep didn't come for a long time—the people in the next room spent half the night loudly downing their beer, and thoughts chased around my head like a cat after a bird.

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At first light Marna woke me and gave me a big basket. She told me not to come back until it was filled to the brim with palendries, and thrust me outdoors.

Palendries, water-loving plants that sprouted silvery fronds year-round, carried no useful properties to the best of my knowledge.

Nevertheless, she seemed pleased when I came back with a goodly amount. Sneezing something fierce, she placed some above the door lintel and put the rest in the brewing shed. The palendries above the door kept the torkies away. I asked Emry what a torkie was.

"Crag wraiths," she said. "They sneak through cracks, crawl into your head, light your eyes up like torches, then make you up and slaughter everyone in the house."

"Ugh," I said.

"They can't abide palendries for some reason."

"I told you these people were superstitious," said Floy from a rafter.

It was true. Marna had rituals and remedies for everything from curbing libido to driving snakes out of the outhouse. When I suggested a remedy for sneezing (which involved sitting on a stone outside Carderford Barrow and howling like a wolf towards Glasgenny Peak while eating the heart of a newt), she gave me a clout to the ear.

Floy found me in the larder, sobbing between the apples and potatoes. “She’s just another frazzled old bat,” she said.

“Nilsa didn’t hit—” I stopped myself.

“Nilsa didn’t hit you. When they’re in a temper, you keep from the room. That’s all.”

I stopped my crying, and resolved to make Floy’s job easier.

“Careful Reyna,” she said two days later as I stewed laundry in a cauldron. “When the water’s bubbling like that it’s hot.”

“I *know*.” My face dripped with steam.

“Have you even put any soap in?”

“Ten bars.”

Later that day I made friends with the leach barrel.

“The water burnt me.” I showed her my red hand. “It wasn’t even hot.”

“It’s not water. It’s lye water. Pour the vinegar over your hand, it’ll feel better.”

“I’m never touching soap again,” I said.

“You never touched it anyway.”

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Washing the sheets wasn’t something I had to worry about much—Marna did her utmost to scrimp. The meat in the pie was always mutton, no matter the rodent skulls you picked out of it; the porridge was so watered down you could wash in it; the bread was mostly holes; and the ale possessed a peculiar quality I was to find more about later.

I couldn’t give my name, of course, so the folk who wanted horses watered, more beer, or the fire built up, took to calling me Sprout. A timid little drudge, I was threatened, harassed, and beaten into trying simply and constantly to please Marna. She inspired admiration, throwing equal effort into her immoral work habits and mollification of the outdated and resentful mountain spirits.

Wille Illinla inspired admiration, too. One afternoon Marna sent us to collect flour from the miller. The miller’s wife had a lame ankle, and her maid a broken nose—from fighting wild dogs, she said. This was clearly a tale, and Wille told everyone in the common room she’d tripped in the broom closet and fell on top of her husband, who was already on top of the maid. “Then there was a glorious brawl,” he said, “where she took a big bite out of him, and they all started whacking each other with broomsticks.”

Wille spread lies thicker than a thief at a theophany. I didn’t care. When the village boys ran after me throwing rocks, he would catch them and rub dung in their hair.

Nobody knew Wille’s age, so he switched between being young enough for dung throwing and old enough to get pickled off the ale Marna kept for special guests. (Nobody knew my age either, but I

only ever got small beer and river water.) Everyone said Wille was going to out-drink his tippler father, who'd run off to be an insurgent in Ellyned. Wille was keen on insurgency, too.

"The city garrison almost strung Nat Bredlin up by his neck," he told me as soon as he got me alone, "but before they dropped the hatch a mob of White-Ship rebels overran the scaffold and rescued Nat and six other fellows in the name of the real Lauriads that's gone missing. Then the nobs got angry and a rebellion broke out when they tried to confiscate weaponry and enforce a bunch of horrible new laws."

It took me a while to realize he was reporting current events.

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"Who's enforcing a bunch of horrible new laws?" I asked.

"Lord Turncoat, Commander Blackguard, and Lady Odious. They're stirring up trouble," said Leode. We sat in a round maple deep in the woods, hidden in the shadow of a mountain the locals called Glasgenny and took extra trouble to avoid. It was two weeks after I'd become an inn-girl.

"Bless you, Leode," said Mordan. "They *are* stirring up trouble. Bloated laws lead to a bloated guard leads to angry people. Ellyned's like to go off like a firecracker. I can hardly wait."

"You want a rebellion?" Tem swung his head down to Mordan's.

"I don't know. Yes."

"A government is an inconvenient necessity, Mordan."

"This one's really inconvenient, then. Especially since the humans overran it."

"Humans?" I said, not really interested. "It's only been, what, two—"

"They've been pouring in from Lorila since before Father died," said Tem. "Refugee nobles, mostly. The Queen has been very accommodating." It struck me how frustrated he was when a new maple leaf yellowed and fell into my lap.

"Most accommodating," Mordan agreed.

I was becoming antsy. "Who's Lord Blackguard?"

"Turncoat," corrected Leode. "Chancellor Daifen turned his coat."

"How?"

"Used to be Gralde. Didn't he, Tem?"

"He's still Gralde," Arin said. "Just a stupid one, rewriting laws, getting all matey with Faiorsa's people, leaving our uncle to fix things by himself—"

I started from my doze. "We've got an uncle?"

"Blood of the earth, Reyna," said Arin, "where've you been for ten years?"

"She's too young to remember," said Mordan, "and so are you.

The Queen has discharged Commander Ackerly. She's blaming Father's death on him, I expect. And meanwhile she's promoted human Herist to Commander, and he, she, and the ex-Gralde have made an industrious triangle devoted to the implementation of nefarious plots."

"Have you brought the paper, quill, and ink?" Tem asked me.

"Yes." I shifted my weight to wrestle them from my apron pocket. "What do you want with them? You can't write with those." I looked at his long legs.

"You're writing the letter, silly."

"To who?"

"To whom. Prince Ederach, the uncle you didn't know about."

And so I transferred Tem's message about Mordan's industrious triangle onto a page torn from a record book, for the illumination of my uncle Ederach. I understood very little of it.

As I wrote, Mordan looked at my hands. "Your hands look horrible."

"I've been working." Underneath the ink stains they were blistered red. "I like to work." Work made me too exhausted to cry. Except when old Mandy Olen hobbled down to the inn to play tunes limber as trumpet vine on her silver flute. She filled me with a terrible longing to dance. I wept because I refused it.

I felt untethered, as though the earth no longer held me down. I couldn't trust myself not to float away.

It was a blessing I hadn't the energy for darker bouts of self-pity. I was kept busy working, as well as dictating and tying letters to Mordan's leg. I sealed the letters with Father's ring, and until much later, wasn't sure what my uncle did with them, let alone what he must have thought receiving all those letters stamped with his missing brother's rosette seal and tied to the leg of a raven.



## Six

“They say King Daonac’s dead,” said the waymapper. Wille had directly sat down on the bench across from him, because the man was from the south, and Wille was awfully interested in the south. Ellyned was in the south. “Someone spotted him floating in the Gael on his way to the sea. With a bloody sword. At least, that’s what the folks in Domestodd are saying.”

Wille sank his elbow into the butter, and I stopped to listen.

“And his children gat themselves killed by wildmen,” said a man at the next table over. “All seven of em.”

“Five,” I said. I dropped the mug I was carrying. It cracked on the floor; beer splashed over my feet.

“Sprout,” called Marna from her corner, “that’s the third mug slipped through your greasy fingers. One more and you’ll be gluing yourself back together as well.”

“Oh, five was it?” Wille flicked a ladybird from his arm.

“Five petals”—I bent to pick up the shards—“mark two seed leaves.” They stared at me and my face burned.

“You’ve got a terrible bad habit of changing subjects right when we get to the good part.” Wille turned back to the waymapper. “So all the Lauriads are dead?”

“I didn’t say Ederach was dead,” the waymapper said. “And he’s a Lauriad so far’s I know, but I only knows what they tell me, so don’t go taking any of this as though it was true. I’m only dishing out the rumor that comes before the real food, as them gossips down in Domestodd say. Whetting your appetite’s all I’m doing. If you want to know what’s really happening, I would give you the Queen’s address, but I hain’t got me address book with me, and I couldn’t go about reading it, anyway.”

Beside the waymapper a big brown man sat with his back in the corner.

“He’s joined his black-haired lady,” he said. His voice was true, and when he started singing people lifted their heads and listened.

*“They lost their heartless king in the evening  
When into the river he dove.  
He wound nightshade around, bound his hands with anemone  
Rope for the want of his love.  
He shackled his ankles with weeds from the pool  
Stitched his mouth shut with blackthorn and thimblethorn cruel,  
And sank with the weight of his lady’s death jewel,  
When into the river he dove.”*

The song must have been new-made, because I had never heard it before. Other people had, though, and they started singing, too.

*“He lost his raven-haired love in the evening  
When out of the window she blew.  
She left him six birds, six broken-winged swans  
Who pecked out his eyes as they grew.  
But his old heart was gone when they looked through the holes,  
No fire was left but some smoldering coals  
That could scarce warm their wings on the grey northern knolls,  
Since when out of the window she blew.*

*They lost their father to Dark in the evening  
When she took the place of his heart.  
She entangled his hands in a golden-white trap,  
And used all of her miserable art  
To confound a sad mind and lead sorrow awry.  
Too loud was the anguish to hear us the cry  
Of the broken-winged swans in their struggle to fly  
From the Dark in the place of his heart.”*

I wasn't very surprised. Noremes make songs for everything.

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“They saw Father,” I told Mordan when he stopped by to dictate a letter. “They know he’s gone.” I stuck my finger into the soil and dropped seeds in the holes.

I had hidden the saddlebag in a hollow wall at the back of the cowshed. Inside, the Marione had crumbled to dust, leaving a strange assortment of flower stones. Roughly three hundred of them.

An obscure part of the north pasture overlooking a pond made a fine plot. The hills circled round so that the place looked like a green bowl with sun and water in the bottom. I put a pinch of the Marione dust in each hole, hoping it would help somehow, before folding dirt over the seeds. “And they think we’re dead, too. From bandits.”

“I suppose it’s best they don’t try to look for us,” said Mordan. I scooped water from a pail and threw it over the loose ground. “They won’t question Father’s death. He rode around unescorted most of the time.”

My knee upset the pail. “Those stupids won’t think how it might’ve happened?” I swung the pail over my head and it landed in the pond. “I needed that for dandelions.” I eyed it contritely. “Marna’s out of rubbish things to throw in her pot—”

“You said yourself it was bandits,” said Mordan. “And as you’d

have absolutely no trouble passing for one, you could do with a swim.”

I retrieved the bucket, emptied it over Mordan’s head, and promised to meet him later with my pen and ink.

\*\*\*

I should have anticipated Emry. Floy had warned me: “She’s following you around with a honey jar. I expect she’s looking for an everlasting charm and still thinks you’re a saebel.”

She found me that afternoon. I was sitting on a stump, copying down a sentence with a quill I’d cut myself.

“Daifen has been told by an informer that the raid on the armory was lead by Ackerly Celdior, one of Daifen’s council and a White-Ship spy, so a prompt departure from the lord’s service is strongly recommended for Celdior,” Mordan said at the top of his voice. “Do you need me to repeat it again?”

He launched himself into the air when Emry climbed up beside me.

“You were talking to that crow, weren’t you?”

“You’d make yourself sick on an everlasting honey pot,” I said.

She caught sight of the letter before I could get it behind my back. “You’re writing.”

“Jam, too.”

“Or are you pretending? Can you read?”

“Why do you care?”

“I’ve never met someone who can read.”

I was confounded. “Marna can’t read?” I hadn’t thought much about reading, couldn’t remember a time when I wasn’t literate. I’d assumed everyone was born that way.

“Numbers, maybe.” Emry picked her nose. “Not words. A girl’s brain’s too small. With all that stuff inside she’ll get *notions*. Her head’ll crack. That’s what happened to Mammy.”

God knew what Emry thought *notions* were.

“Reyna,” called Mordan from a nearby tree. “Please keep quiet.” I bit angrily at my lip.

“Do you want to learn how?” I asked Emry.

Her eyes became round. “But my head—”

“You’ll just be learning to write. Your head’ll be fine.”

Mordan had to wait to finish his letter, because we started immediately on vowels. I used names from old stories, drawing letters in the dust with a stick.

“W starts off Wdirn, who cut off his toe and stuck it in the crack in the sea wall to keep Anefeln safe from the Green Sea.”

“The Green Sea’s gone.” Emry flattened the dust with her palm and drew a slipshod W.

“Say it,” I commanded.

“Ooodairn.”

We slogged through O, Ai, and E, and then Emry got stuck.

“Agedne,” I said, “the saebel girl who turned into a cedar—”

“Wait.” She pulled on her braids. “Ain’t that same as Aidel?”

I cast about for another example, noticed a blue flower at the foot of our stump. I picked it.

“A is for Aloren.”

She frowned. “That’s an aster.”

“Aloren’s the Gralde name,” I said. “Not as common.” The flower’s eye was yellow. Perhaps it was my face and hands, also yellow from the dandelions I had gathered earlier, or maybe it was my blue eyes, or stained dress.

“You look like an Aloren today,” said Emry. “Sprout.” Then she laughed herself off the stump, and I decided our lesson was done.

“Your aunt’s calling you,” I said. “She’s a walnut pie needs testing.”

Emry got up and ran toward her imaginary walnut pie. She wouldn’t speak to me for an hour afterwards, but when that had passed she called me Aloren, which caught on rapidly as a hay fire and clung to me like a spurned lover.

\*\*\*

“Ice aster.” Tem spat water. “*Where* have I heard it before?”

He wasn’t the only one. We all felt something when we heard the word.

I sat in a patch of meadowsweet at the edge of the pond. The water had sunk, and my seeds had risen, grown into plants that looked like pale versions of their Marione parents. The red-eyed saxifrage had bloomed alone in the spring; and as the others flowered (with the exception of the autumn gentians), I tended them as best I knew how—thinning, weeding, watering, spreading chicken manure.

Some of the heads had already withered. I held the saddlebag open beneath them, and flicked seeds inside. It was late, and the sorrel had folded its leaves for the night.

“Maybe they’re like real asters,” said Mordan. “Daisies, fleabane, you know—”

“I don’t know,” said Tem.

“They’re composites. Got lots of little flowers on each head. They like the sun. Bloom in late summer, early fall.”

“They’re *ice* asters,” I said. “Maybe they bloom in the winter.” I shook a stalk of Mordan’s columbine and rubbed the pods between my fingers.

“Oh, aye,” said Arin, and he surprised me. For two seconds. “D’you suppose they sprout out of the tips of icicles?”

“Our Marione flowered in the winter.” I thought of tying his neck into a knot, and accidentally snapped the flower’s stem. Mordan gave a foul curse. “Sorry.”

“How do you know?” said Arin. “We only saw them in the spring.”

“How do you know they don’t?”

“Bird sense.”

“She’s a fair point,” Mordan said in a loud voice. “Maybe they shoot up in the middle of some snowy field at solstice.”

Satisfied, I tied up the saddlebag and sat, quite by accident, on the plump waterskin I had just filled and lugged from the river. The cord popped, the bag’s neck stiffened, and water poured between my legs.

I sprang up, hugging the skin round the middle, but the neck pointed to the ground and my arms did nothing save squeeze the thing dry.

“She’ll flay my skin off! I haven’t time to fetch more—”

“Don’t carry on so,” said Arin. “You’ve just got to tell her, ‘Oh, oh, I went to the river and a wolf was there, and he gave me such a fright I soiled my dress, and the waterskin—the wolf ate it.’”

“How mature you are,” said Floy. Then she said to me, “The pond’s plenty full enough, and the only thing anyone’s going to drink right now is ale, unless you count the horses.”

I waded into the dark water, dragging the skin behind. Mandy Olen’s flute wafted from a window. Tem stepped after and watched my progress with such an air of irritation that I turned and asked him what the matter was.

“I don’t like that woman.”

“Marna?”

“Wouldn’t think twice about turning you out midwinter with a horse blanket.”

My legs went weak.

Tem had always been frank, but this was bad. I looked down and grew dizzy. My eyes closed and my mouth grew wide, breathing balance into my body. The mud gave way beneath my feet, and I fell in.

“Reyna,” Tem called, “did you step in a hole?”

I stood up, spitting and squeezing out my skirts.

“If only—” Tem tucked in his neck and his breast puffed out. “Never mind, my head’s scrambled.”

“Just noticed, did you?” said Mordan.

Tem ignored him. “If she can’t talk about herself, she wouldn’t be able to write about herself either, would she? In one of those letters to Ederach.”

“She could’ve carried it to him.” Mordan fluffed water from his back when Arin hunkered down in the shallows next to him. “Wouldn’t he recognize her without a letter?”

“He hasn’t seen her since she was four. And if he were to recognize her, she’d have considerable difficulty explaining herself.”

I had another idea.

“Couldn’t any of *you* to write a letter about me in”—I glanced at the moon—“half a month? When you have hands?”

Tem’s head shot up. “Yes! But I still don’t know... Let’s wait for the next time around—a month and a half.”

I didn’t know what to think, scarcely dared trust to hope. And after two weeks I forgot all about it. The foreigners came up the road, and the pace of living was troubled enough to quicken.

## Seven

Norembry's water was sweet, the old envoy said, and looked wistfully at his tankard of ale.

Ironic that the water he liked so much was pond water. The pond was harmless, I had decided, and hauling water from the river an unnecessary bother. Marna didn't know about the switch. Her attention was set elsewhere, because the envoy and his three fellows had traveled to Milodygraig all the way from Benmarum, over the sea.

Wille was ecstatic. "Bless my birth flowers," he said. It was their first morning at the inn, and they sat bent over a pile of notes, long-stemmed pipes crisscrossed over the table. "Do you fellows really have windragons across the sea? In Evenalehn?" Unlike Mordan, who jumped to every conclusion possible, Wille only jumped to the conclusions he liked.

I swept filth into a crack under the table. "It's Virnraya with the windragons," I said quietly, "not Evenalehn. And it's not across the sea. It's south of it."

"This is Aloren, the midget smartass, and I'm Will," he introduced us.

I jumped when Marna poked me in the back with a finger. She was reinforcing the cellar for the winter, and I went outside to haul stones and barrels of new sloe-wine all morning under her acrid supervision.

That done, I drew a tankard of pond water for myself and stumbled back into the common room. Wille had made quick work of ingratiating himself; he sat right among them, communicating mostly in gestures. I sat on the bench beside him so Marna wouldn't spy me and send me groaning in another direction.

I must have stunk. "Where've *you* been?" He wrinkled his nose and said to the envoy beside him, "She doesn't say much." When Wille was in a crowd, nobody but Wille said much. It didn't help that the emissaries could speak only bits of Gralde and Wille only bits of the trader's tongue.

I tried to help. The foreigners spoke with harsh, quick accents, too quick for me. And they were human. I couldn't tell the color of their eyes in the dim room, but it was obvious in their movements—picking teeth, drinking, retiring to the john. Each purposeful and premeditated.

I'd heard terrible things about humans, but these fellows were so mundanely pleasant I forgot they were human after a while; and word by word we learned they'd been sent across the sea by the council of Evenalehn, capital of Benmarum, to scout out Lorila and

determine whether she needed help. For Lorila, Norembry, Aclun, and the other sea-states fit into a substantial trade loop with the republic, and the republic of Benmarum eyed them with a motherly regard for economic welfare.

I leaned in. “What about Norembry? She needs help too.”

The oldest of the humans smiled down at me (so indulgently I wanted to kick him). “What’s wrong with Norembry, little one?”

“Lorila has four men hostile to each other,” said the skinny man across from him, “all with claims to the throne. When the Ravyir dies it’s likely to be a bloodbath.”

Wille muttered in Gralde, “We’ve got more than four men and none of them have claims to the throne.”

I translated: “Norembry has lost her king and his children are missing. All of them. And the Queen’s a witch.”

They laughed. Another envoy took his pipe from his mouth. “We disembarked in Ellyned, and the city was quiet as the sea.”

“Hold your tongue, Reyna,” said Floy from the windowsill.

“I don’t want to leave, though.” The old envoy looked out the window. “This land has the sweetest rivers. Beer can’t compare.” He pushed his mug away.

I looked down at my own mug—full of my country’s sweet water. I slid it beneath the envoy’s chin. “Stay,” I said. “You’ll get all the water you want.”

The skinny envoy chuckled. He said it ought to be a fair trade, and he took the old envoy’s ale and set it ceremoniously before me.

“Bit strong for babes?” said the old man.

“It’ll quiet her crying,” said another, and they laughed.

I ignored them, looking at the amber-colored stuff. There was something odd about the ale Marna set aside for guests, I knew. It wasn’t uncommon for them to put in for the night, call for a drink, and board for a month.

I took a whiff of the stuff: it calmed me, made me think of spicy lavender, of silver-green by still pools where river-daughters sleep with open mouths.

“Palendries,” I called to Floy. “She brews them.” I took a swallow of the stuff. It felt thick in my throat and heavy in my belly, making my limbs relax and my eyelids droop. In the back of my mind came a picture of yellow roses on a white wall, and the feeling that came with it seemed foreign as the humans. I smiled. I felt utterly, dangerously content.

Across from me the old envoy drank my pond water. He was smiling, too.

Foreign folk said the water was bitter outside Norembry, that we were a lucky people with our sweetwater wells and shining rivers. But I’d never left Norembry, and what I knew, I knew only from Master Toppelain.

I’d been eight or nine. My brothers and I were having a lesson,



and I stared at the rain running down the windowpane.

“Reyna,” the master said.

I blinked. “Uh?”

“Perhaps you could give us the answer?”

I leaned back and rolled my eyes up into my head, and said, “What’s the question?”

He sighed. “Your mother wasn’t nearly so empty-headed.”

Forever pulling my mother into it, was Master Toppelain. “She didn’t have a shitflinger for a tutor, I bet. And you didn’t say what the question was.”

“Don’t be an ass,” said Tem.

“What question was it, though?” I turned and made a face at my brother.

The master said wearily, “Where does Norembry get her water?”

“The sky.” I pointed toward the window.

Arin sniggered, and Master Toppelain pulled at his beard. He had come to us with a full set of whiskers. They were looking sparse and scraggly of late.

“From Avila, scatbrain,” Mordan said. “Most of it comes from the River Cheldony—she starts somewhere in Avila and passes into Norembry.”

“Bugger your River Cheldony.” But I remember brooding on how a river so vital could pour from a land so terrible. Avila, in the far north, was home only to the lunatic saebels. After the River Cheldony crossed the border into Avila she passed out of existence on the maps.

“And the property?” said Master Toppelain. “The most important property of water?”

I put my chin in my hands. “Keeps us alive.”

“Have I got through to any of you?” He rapped his cane on the floor.

“Yes,” said Mordan, who was half Father and half encyclopedia. “You can’t bend water to your will—it’ll run through your fingers. Because it used to be the only thing around. It was here before the struggle. Refuses to take sides—”

“We get it,” Tem said.

“What struggle?” said Arin.

“*The struggle*,” said Mordan.

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Good and evil did battle in my mind that night, and evil won because I drank the whole mug.

My pleasure was cut short by Padlimaird Crescentnet. Paddy was an irritable boy, about Arin’s age, with a head of flaming hair and a horde of mean older brothers. He’d sat down next to Wille and was watching the envoy drink his water.

“What the hell’s so thrilling about a mug of water?” he said, and reached over and snatched the mug from the envoy. The old man looked confusedly at his empty hands.

Marna saw it. She cuffed Padlimaird’s ear. “Got no manners, the whole brood of you.”

Padlimaird ignored her and took a great gulp. He twisted his plump cheeks, turned in his seat, and spat the water into Marna’s face.

“This,” he cried, “this stuff’s *nasty*.”

Unfortunately, Marna had got a mouthful from Padlimaird. “Standing water?” She seized my arm and dragged me from the bench. “How long’s this been going on?”

“Oh, Reyna.” Floy was up and throwing dust from the rafters. “I thought you’d stopped with that nonsense.”

Marna turned my head with a ferocious whack. “*You*, red-toed little eft, will be the death of my inn.” She shook me furiously—the blood thumped so loudly in my head I thought it might pour out my eyes.

The old human got up, eased my shoulders from her grasp, and pushed me behind him. “Calm yourself, madam. You’ll frighten the girl to death. I hardly care what I’ve drunk the past few days—I haven’t taken sick.

“The girl must go.” Her face was red, her hair falling from its knot, and I stood very still behind my human. “This, sir, is a gross dereliction of duty. I sincerely apologize. I didn’t guess at first, I had no idea, but she is most certainly a halfwit.”

“My good woman,” said the human. “My good woman! I fear our conversation would slow to a trickle if the girl left. She’s more fluent in the common speech than even you.”

So I stayed, though my cheeks grew red with Marna’s slaps, my legs swayed for exhaustion, and she personally tasted the stuff I poured into the cistern.

Not brave enough to ask their names, we called the envoys Hoary, Skinny, Stocky, and Silent, and laughed over their peculiarities. Emry found them so peculiar she hid like a frightened rabbit whenever they came into the common room. Like most mountain folk, she believed humans exhaled noxious fumes and shot fire from their golden eyes. She’d claw her way up a support and sit in the eaves listening to the gems Wille and a handful of other boys extracted from more talkative Hoary and Skinny, and wouldn’t come closer until Padlimaird Crescentnet started catcalling.

At first she was content to stick her tongue out. Then one day she grew bolder and dragged a stool over to the table where she could glare more comfortably at him. Marna was off in the village easing a birth, and the envoys were discussing the tangled state of the peerage in Lorila.

I leaned over the table I was scouring to listen, but Paddy soon drowned them out:

“You’re too titchy to know jackshit,” he said to Emry. “You don’t even know where Lorila is.”

“I do,” said Emry. “It’s on the other side of the hills.”

“There’s a lake you’d have to swim across first. Can you even swim, slop-for-brains?”

Emry looked round, and lowering her voice, said, “I can write.”

Indeed, astonishing herself and me, Emry was progressing in leaps with her writing. We had to wipe paragraphs from the dust in front of the beech stump.

Paddy scoffed. “Then why hain’t your head cracked like your mam’s?”

“Writing don’t do that,” Emry said. “Mammy was reading.”

“Reading what, exactly?”

“A book...about Lorila. She *came* from there.”

Emry upset her stool and ran up the stairs. I looked after, wiping sand from my elbows. She had a *book*?

There came a righteous thumping from the staircase. Pulling it from under her arm, Emry showed us her small, moldy, water-stained wreck of a book. Judging by the straw sticking out of the binding it was accustomed to being jammed into her mattress.

She slammed it on the table, spilling a few mugs and slopping up the cover. She flipped it open near the middle and clumsily read an excerpt:

*“Sunny today. It’s hard to keep the boy from getting burned without smothering him in linen. He’s a good babe, though—a blessing, because she hasn’t much patience with crying, but I’m beginning to fear his silence means illness. Illness or not, she insists on pressing eastward, and I believe she is making towards...”*

Emry stumbled over a word, and I slid beside her, pretending to scrub, looking at the messy writing.

“Virnraya,” I whispered into her ear. She said it aloud.

“There, see? See what I just wrote?”

Scouring tables hadn’t put me in a friendly mood. “Stop acting like a goose with its head stuck up its butt.”

“Really,” said Floy, who was picking at the crumbs beneath the table.

I kept on, getting louder: “Your mother wrote the book and you’ve just read it—there’s no difference—and your mother’s head never cracked, just like yours isn’t going to, unless someone sticks a firecracker in your ear, or you drive yourself crazy, which is far more likely.”

Of the tongues I’d tied around the table, old Hoary’s was first to recover. He pulled an eyeglass from his cloak. “Let me have a look.” He wiped the leather with his sleeve, and opened it to a different page.

I leaned over his shoulder. “Need translating, sir?”

He frowned at me. “I understand Rileldine, little gaireld-dun, but you’re welcome to join me at my studies.”

“Well, if that ain’t the stupidest thing,” said Wille, and he began chatting in Rielde with the human next to him. I hadn’t noticed the journal was in Rielde, or Rileldine, as he called it. The Elde languages are very closely related, more dialects than anything, particularly for the border folk.

But I was upset by something else— “Tree-girl? Floy, he just called me a little tree-girl.”

“You are one, aren’t you?” Floy flew to my shoulder and hid herself in my hair. I sat next to the envoy and soon forgot what a nitwit he was; the pages were full of intriguing passages, such as:

*‘She’s desperate to reach Virnraya, and I think I know why. I think I know more than I ought, though most of it’s guesswork. She took me on later, but I know she did it. There’s guilt in her eyes, and it increases ten-fold when she holds, even looks at the boy. She’s anxious. Everyone in Merstig, Neridona, the whole country, believes the Ravyina and her boy were torn apart by beasts. Except the Ravyir. He won’t believe it. They think he’s gone in the head, but he knows.’*

*Or, ‘The Ravyir is searching for us. She’s frightened. I can tell by her horrible pinched face. Not as frightened as I am of her—that she’ll mark me out as dangerous, think this journal is more than medicinal simples, find someone who knows Rielde.*

*‘We’ve reached Dirlan, and the duke received us—I don’t know why. I’ve never seen the ocean before and neither has baby, so I stood him on the wall and he laughed. We’ve decided it’s too big for us.*

*‘I wonder what she has in mind. She can’t want him dead. She could have done it a long time before, and I’m still here.’*

Hoary read on, unfazed. He didn’t seem to understand.

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The next day it rained torrents, and I locked the journal, Emry (who couldn’t bear to be separated from her mother’s book), Floy, a candle, and myself into the larder for a private discussion.

“He was the king’s son,” I said, “of Lorila—the one eaten by wild animals! But he wasn’t really, because someone took him away. That’s who she’s talking about, the lost king’s son.”

“Doubt it,” said Floy. “And who cares, anyway?”

“It’s your country.”

“Norembry’s my country.”

“Come on, Floy, don’t you remember anything?”

“I was a year old. The baby’s dead, long dead—and good

riddance. Royals are batshit crazy.”

“I’m royal.”

“Case in point.”

“Where’s your sense of intrigue?”

“Lost it along with my arms and legs.”

“Emry,” I said aloud. “Did you know your mother was a prince’s wetnurse?”

“I’m a prince?” said Emry.

“No. Stupid hill.” Water leaked from the ceiling onto my head. “Going to get everything moldy.”

“And we’ve no proof,” twaddled Floy. “No proof she’s telling the truth, or the boy was royal—”

I ignored her—she was only a pot girl, after all, and I began flipping through the book. I felt a lump in the bottom of the spine.

I tore the moldy leather, dug into it with my finger, felt something. I pulled out a piece of silver. Floy tangled herself in burlap.

It was a dragonfly broach, wide as my little finger. The wings had clusters of strange circles, like characters from a beautiful language. Two diamonds shone on the tips of its wings, and its abdomen was hollow, wrapped around by delicate, angular legs. The head was stamped with a tiny pickaxe. It glittered in the candlelight.

“Ooh, might ’nt I hold it?” said Emry.

“Emry.” We jumped at Marna’s voice. “Emry, what is it you feel you must hold before giving the dog his scraps? Is Aloren in there?”

“Does Marna know?” I whispered. “About the book?”

“Hurry out. He’s nipping my ankles.”

“No, no, she doesn’t,” said Emry. She obviously wanted to keep it that way.

I blew the candle out and put a sack of potatoes over the book, and we piled out with the broach hidden in my hand. “We were playing at being princes,” Emry told her aunt.

“What I wouldn’t give to be a prince.” Marna shoved the puppy away and peered into the larder. “I want that hole stuffed up.”

“It’s pouring.” I held the silver tighter.

“I wouldn’t care if it was raining stars, miss high-airs. I won’t hold with moldy potatoes.”

I hid the broach under a stone in the kitchen, and ran outside to patch the hole.

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Later that afternoon, Floy and I found a telling passage.

“Here,” I said, “she mentions it here:

*‘We’ve just met with Dravadha Broteldu. He’s why we’re in*

*Virnraya, I think. Baby has a Dravadha broach pinning his wraps together. And she must've gave Dravadha a commission a good month back; when we arrived he'd something already made for her, some bit of jewelry that fits right into the broach.'*

"There's a pickaxe on it, remember?" I said to Floy. "That's Dravadha's emblem."

"He forges his silver with magic," said Floy.

"I know."

"Well, is there anything magical about that broach?"

"Maybe. How'm I supposed to know?"

I flipped to a section nearer the back. *'I was terrified. Sore tired of being scared. I hadn't any choice. If I'd stayed longer it would have been obvious I'm with child. It knocks against my heart to abandon that child for my own.*

*'I stole the broach. But that's nothing to stealing a baby. And what else could I have done, going all the way to the tip of the Daynens? I shall try not to pawn it unless starvation proves the only other road. I am almost doing her a favor—the boy has no longer a means of identification. She still has the other piece, the specially made piece, and it was more important, I believe, to her at least—'*

That was enough for me. I took the broach up to Hoary's room and thrust the thing under his nose. He'd just returned from his walk. He was sitting in a chair next to the hearth, cloak flung over the fire screen.

"It's true," I said. "Animals never killed the crown prince of Lorila. You could find him and fix Lorila, then come back here with a great many soldiers and Aclunese fire artillery."

"What is it?" He took it from me and held it up to his failing eyes.

"A Dravadha broach."

He sat up straighter. "Dear me."

"It was lodged in the book." I showed him the tear in the spine, and read him the passage.

He sat back, folded his hands in front of him. "I thought that book was nonsense."

"But the broach—"

"Oh, yes, it belonged to someone very important, I'm sure."

He was awfully hard-nosed, but I kept going: "You'd have to look for the other piece of it, to find the boy."

"We don't know what we're looking *for*. Wait." He squinted at the wings. "There's something written here. In Simargh." He held the thing up to the window.

The Simargh were said to be marvelous winged beings made all of light. "Can you read it?" I said. "What's it say?" He held up his hand for silence.

It took him a time to decipher; even with his eyeglass the filigree

was miniscule. “I carry between colors.” He smiled. “Maybe it was made to carry something.”

“What’s it really say?” I said, sliding my hand around the back of the chair. I felt I wasn’t hearing it in full, as if Rielde were a defective language.

“*Nain e gaev pirnon mireir.*”

The last bit caught my ear. I whispered it softly a couple of times. “Pirnon mireir.”

My intonation went down and up. A musical phrase ran through my head, neatly fitted with words: *The ice aster throws high her gossamer skirts on the brow of the Pirnon Mireir.*

## Eight

Halfway out the door I turned and asked, “What’s the Pirnon Mireir, Hoar—Master Envoy?”

“Between? Colors? I don’t know of any such thing. You’re better suited asking a Simargh.”

“Mordan,” I exclaimed aloud. “Where’s that know-all tell-all idiot when you need him?” Without building up his fire I threw myself down the stairs to tell Floy.

Floy was as excited as I, but did a better job containing it. “Be patient,” she said. “We’ve a week left to our new moon.”

Hoary drew a detailed sketch of the broach—he was quite a good draftsman—and gave it back to Emry and me to hide, saying he didn’t need something so valuable on the road.

He became fascinated with Emry’s mother’s journal. One morning he made the mistake of helping Emry with her reading when Marna was in rather than out. The ground had frosted in the night and I’d gone down to the cellar to check the crocks.

When I came back up Hoary and Marna were yelling. Emry sat hunched on the bench, looking as though she’d like to sink into the floor. “You know what became of her mother?” said Marna. “Unwed, with child. Ill to her death.”

I stepped back into the kitchen and watched from the doorway.

“You think learning her letters killed her?” Hoary shut the journal with a clap. “Patently ridiculous, madam.”

“Discontent killed her. She could’ve been happy, but she had to *know* things.”

“My good woman, certainly you know things, too. You delivered a baby just last week.”

“That’s different.” She folded her arms. “I’m still here, aren’t I? How long have you been teaching her?”

“I? You’ve blamed the wrong man. Probably taught herself.”

I ran my sweaty palms down my skirts, waiting for Emry to spill. She only looked at the floor, face red as a beetroot. I could have kissed her.

“Then who does that thing belong to?” Marna pointed to the journal with a trembling finger.

“Emry,” said Padlimaird Crescentnet, who’d just come in the front door. He’d a keen nose for arguments. “It was your sister’s book, Mrs. Nydderwaic. And Emry’s been busy reading it for all of six years. Maybe seven.”

Marna saw me in the doorway. Immediately, and as an indication the envoys had worn out their welcome, she ordered me gather up their belongings and dump them in the street.



There was a snap in the air, and the aspens shook gold from their branches as the Benmar humans walked south down the road with their winter cloaks at hand. Emry's mother's journal went with them.

"Floy." I looked after the travelers until the trees swallowed them. "If it weren't for Marna d'you think they might have stayed and helped?"

"If it weren't for Marna they wouldn't have spent a day here," said Floy from my shoulder, thinking of the palendries.

"That ale," I said. "Probably keeps the whole village happy and stupid with it."

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I felt wretched. As though my silence instead of Marna's noise had chased the envoys toward Lorila. Emry felt worse. After her paddling she didn't want anything more to do with her mother's journal, and so four days later, during the new moon, she slipped the Dravadha broach into my apron pocket and ratted on me for stealing.

She was hanging about the kitchen that evening, asking how she might learn to un-read. After she left the room for bed, I stood over the cistern, wiping a dish. Marna came up behind and ripped the broach from my pocket.

"Aghast," she said in a hushed voice. "What's this? Came it from them human devils?"

She rapped me with her knuckles; the broach stuck out from her fingers and tore into my arm.

"A thief!" She glowered over me, and I held my bleeding arm, watching her fists. "I suppose it's my own fault listening to that human dotard, but it's time the girl got her comeuppance. Well?" She flew at me and I ducked beneath a chop-block. "What's her excuse?"

"Someone else did it." My stomach squeezed and I tasted bile.

She threw her head back and snorted. "How much more have you got in your pillowcase?"

*I don't have a pillow, you old toad.* I was sweating and dizzy. The word would spread—I'd be drummed from the village with a missing hand—and a great deal of help that would be for the weaving of tunics! I didn't understand the justice of it; I'd done everything in my power to please her, but she grabbed my arm and pulled me towards the door.

Wille shot through it. He ran into the wall, knocking down a shelf of earthenware.

He shook dust out of his hair and said to Marna, "The village is being raided, ma'am. They say inns are a prime target, so you may want to clear out." He looked at me. I was trembling

uncontrollably. “What’s wrong with her?”

But Marna was already upstairs, and judging from the noise, hiding her valuables.

Wille patted me on the head. He ran into the common room shouting, “Brigands! Brigands!”

Floy flew through the door and slammed into a sack of flour. I pulled her upright, and she cried, “Run! Get moving, they’re almost here.”

The message sank in. I skidded out the door, the sparrow banging into my neck. I ran hard down the hill, fleabane and yarrow slicing into my legs. The sun sank behind blowing clouds, and I made toward the cowshed to collect my saddlebag.

I saw them at the bottom of the hill, mowing down the fences, drumming through the pumpkins. A cold wind blew and my skin pricked—I remembered the flaming arrows, the smoke. I’d never seen men like these, with chests bare and shining with torchlight, and hair like cobwebs.

“Reyna,” sang Floy. They rode closer—I saw the flash of teeth and eyes.

The ground groaned; I ran behind a heap of thatching bracken next to the cowshed. Someone threw a torch and the bracken caught fire. It seared a hole through my skirts. I rubbed it out in the dirt and crept into the shed.

I stayed clear of the mad, lowing cow. I put my fist in a hole in the wall, dug out the saddlebag, and heard someone sniffing.

She was up in the haymow. I couldn’t guess why she’d chosen the haymow.

“Emry,” I said, “you’ll roast like a peahen on a spit.” She only sobbed louder, so I pulled her down, not very gently, and dragged her out the door.

The inn was burning at the top, and I couldn’t very well send her back into it. I took her hand, and we raced through the north field to the pond, tripping on tufts of reaped hay. Halfway there the clouds thinned and parted: Floy wasn’t flying any longer. She ran, making tracks in the frost. Emry stared. “It’s just a ghost,” I said, tugging her along.

The pond was lit with orange and rent with noise. Floy and I waded into the flowerbed, arms outstretched. “Ouch!” I glared at my thumb.

“What?”

“Gentians don’t—oh—” I’d brushed a nettle. “Come and help,” I hissed at Emry. She stood looking on, half-dead with fear.

I wrapped my hands in my apron and pulled my nettles. My insides churned; I knelt in the dirt. I clenched my teeth and ripped them free. It felt like a kick in the chest. “Must it hurt this much?” I ripped more from the ground and cried out.

I jumped near out of my skin when more hands joined in: Tem

and Arin, both very Elde in the starlight.

“God!” Tem gathered gentian stems, his back bowed and shuddering. “It hurts so!” We bit our tongues until the saddlebag bulged. Tem’s movements grew frantic. “Hurry.” He pushed us towards the forest. “The other half is riding through the pasture; they’ll be here soon.”

“There’s another half?” I ripped free the last stalk of gentians.

“Stop.” Tem bowled me over.

“It doesn’t seem like enough, though,” said Arin. I wondered if he had gone mad, then saw he was looking at the flower heads in the bag. “It’s enough for a scarf. Like as not, for five tunics they’ll need to cover the hills.”

They were supposed to cover the hills?

“Do you have the letter things, Reyna?” said Tem. I ran to an oak on the opposite bank and pulled an inkwell and parchment from a knothole. The quill wasn’t there.

“Where is it?” I looked around the roots and into the water.

“Don’t be dumb,” said Arin, who had come with me. “If it wasn’t an iron feather it’s long gone.” Then he took me by the hand, and I took Emry by the hand, and we ran after Floy with Tem in the rear.

We were splashing across Carder’s Ford in the tall bottom woods, when torchlight shone through the beeches east of us. A line of it stretched down a ridge not far from the ford. It moved in our direction.

Floy slid on the wet shingle. “Which half is *this*?” There was an absence of underbrush. We had nowhere to hide.

“Oy!” Tem beckoned and slipped between the beeches and oaks on the opposite side of the stream. He was an eerie sight, now an egret, now a boy, shifting in the shadow and light; and we stumbled after him. We hadn’t gone far when a big bald hill stood in our way. I saw the bone-white stones in its foot, half concealed by ferns, and the black between them.

“It’s the barrow, Tem, the ford’s barrow. You don’t mean to go in there?”

“It isn’t a barrow.” He stood just outside the entrance, his left arm feathered and in shadow. I peered into the dark.

“But—”

“Quickly now. We need you.” He pointed to his feathers. Arin had to use all his strength to push Emry and me inside, and Floy hesitated before she followed.

In the dark beneath the hill the birds sat on my shoulders, and I stumbled along, banging my feet. Emry held my hand in a tight, wet grip.

“Keep up,” I told her, “and you won’t get eaten by ghouls.” As we walked, the passage sloped down and widened, and the dust became wet, collecting between my toes. The air was musty and

thick and we pushed through it like a curtain.

The place wasn't a barrow, but a tunnel, arching higher than I wished to reach, worn into waves by subterranean streams that surprised us unpleasantly now and again. No barrow, but haunted nonetheless.

My palms brushed runes in the rock, stories that soaked into my skin with the dampness: Coronets of stars and sea-spray, and a saebel king, crowned with laurel and holly, moonlight in his eyes. A field of red flowers at the foot of a sand dune. An ice-woman with a dagger in her breast. A bridge of gold stretching across an abyss, and over it coming a girl, a hart, and a light. The light was a pinprick that grew and kept growing, and then I saw Emry's dirty face, and stepped into the outside air.

We were in a huge, square tower—we'd gone backwards through what must have been its escape route. The walls leaned drunkenly to one side, looking ready to collapse. The roof already had, blocking the entrance with a pile of rubble.

In the corner was a rope ladder leading to a loft of wooden beams that should have rotted away long ago. Nobody noticed this. Nor did we notice the barrels in the corners, or the characters, neither old, nor runic, scratched into the chalky walls.

"Look who it is," said Mordan. I put my hands over Emry's ears. "And a good thing, too. Felt like my chest was being wrenched to pieces." Leode, looking more wan than usual, grinned and clapped his hands.

"It was the last of the flowers," I said, and looked round me. "How on earth did you find this place?"

"We're birds most of the time," Leode said. Mordan went straight to business.

"You might as well be kept up to date, so here's the bad news."

"Wait," I said, "Emry—"

I pulled her into the corner under the loft. I sat next to her and sang a song about a girl who heard a nightingale singing with her dead mother's voice. Emry was asleep before I'd finished.

I'd half a mind to go to sleep next to her, but I walked back to where the boys and Floy had gathered. Mordan shook me awake. "Uncle Ederach hasn't been crowned King or even made Regent."

"The Queen has a son," said Tem.

"Oh," I said. "Is he a half brother?"

"He's a poisonous little toad," said Arin.

"You'd become fast friends," I said. "What's the good news?"

"What good news?" said Mordan sadly.

I leaned forward. "I've got some."

"What?" Leode leaned in with me. I sang the first line of Mother's ice aster song.

Tem started to laugh. Mordan's eyes grew wide, and the moss sprang green beneath their feet.

“That’s only the first line,” crowed Tem. “How many verses are there?” he asked Mordan. “Seven? Eight?”

“Find out, shall we?” Mordan began to sing in his funny, half-grown voice:

*“The ice aster throws high her gossamer skirts  
On the brow of the Pirnon Mireir.  
She laces her slippers and dances a waltz,  
And she weaves her a door in the air.  
Could she weave herself through, she would find a sweet land  
Filled with noon-tides of nectar and cream  
But the key and the door and the door and the key—”*

He tilted his head. “How’s the rest go?”  
Tem shook his head, sang,

*“But the door wants a key, and the key will not show  
Till she walks neath the water in dream.*

“How’s the next bit start?” He was looking at Arin.

“Don’t know,” said Arin, looking up at the stars. “I was six.”

“You were singing it in the bath well after you were six,” said Tem.

“Underwater,” said Mordan, “so loud I could hear it.”

I started laughing.

“Now I’m definitely not telling,” said Arin.

“It’s a matter of life or death, Arin,” said Tem.

Arin easily had the best voice of all of us. But he could howl like a dog when he wanted, and he did so now:

*“Before she was gowned in her petals of white,  
Aster dreamed herself out through her door,  
Now were she to dance all her fragrance away,  
She would weave herself entrance no more.*

*She floats free of the earth, just a crafter of doors  
For the feet standing stark in the ground,  
Ever weighting a warp round the runaway pain  
From a hurt that cries nary a sound.”*

*“No ear does she have, nor a mouth that can scream  
To fill suffering’s silent appeal,  
But she’ll dance and she’ll bleed and she’ll dream out a key  
For the door she has sworn to unseal.*

*She courts weft with her shuttle and measures her stride,  
Then sets out to envelop the earth.*

*All her unfolding florets, her sorrow and stem  
Can't begin to encompass its girth.*

*She weaves light with a fire that shows in her step,  
And shines out through the snow and despair,  
But the demons have slipped through a much larger door,  
And they scheme to indict and impair*

*All the sweet thoughts above, all the gladness and joy  
That she spins into delicate strands.  
Though no hope for her dance, Aster spins out the whole,  
Making warmth with her feathery hands."*

"Thank you," said Tem. "What have we learned?"  
"She's white," said Leode, "she floats free of the ground, and she hasn't ears or a mouth, and she lives under the stars."

"Which is true of a lot of flowers," said Mordan.

"Alright, Mordan," I said. "What's the Pirnon Mireir?"

"I don't know."

We all stared at him.

"It's Simargh," said Mordan.

"I know," I said. "It means 'between colors'."

"How'd you—?"

"A human told me."

"Really? If everyone had stopped repeating what humans told them—"

"All the world's problems would be solved because we did what *you* said?"

"Stow it," snapped Tem, and we did because Tem only snapped when he was very put out. "The asters have a place-name, now," he said, moving carefully around disappointment. "We just need to find out what it is."

Floy spoke up, "If it's mentioned even once in an old song, it has to exist somewhere."

"It may just go by a common name," I said.

"We shan't give up hope," said Tem.

"Or the search," said Mordan.

"We're not allowed to," said Arin.

"Let's finish the letter before dawn comes, at any rate," said Tem.

"I lost the quill," I said. "Who's closest to a goose?"

"You," said Arin. But everyone was looking at him. He blinked, startled. "Oh, no. No, no, no." I shoved him towards the shadows in the tunnel. "Can't you use a stick?" And then he was a flapping swan that threw a tirade of spits when I pulled a feather. He made for the light and turned back to a boy.

I knelt on the ground to pare down the black feather with a little

knife. I handed the pen to Tem.

He gave a nod to Arin. "I'll knight you if ever I make a king."

Arin snorted and Tem sat down on the stones with the quill, parchment and ink. Mordan sat next to him and together they set to work. Once they both looked up at me and laughed softly.

"I'm funny?" I said.

"You're gorgeous," said Tem.

I scrubbed my face with my apron. Tem folded the letter into thirds. "This letter will have to have a seal—Reyna, listen!" Arin was throwing clods of loam at me. "You mustn't seal it until you give it to Ederach. There're no names written on the parchment, but it could be very bad if the letter falls into the wrong hands with the seal attached. Do you understand?"

"Yes." I lobbed moss at Arin, then took the letter and dropped it into my bag.

"That saddlebag's becoming more and more valuable," said Mordan.

"And I've been taking excellent care of it." I threw it down to grapple for moss. The air was thick with it when Floy, standing outside the mouth of the tunnel, heard a noise.

"Hush." She looked round. A drumming echoed through the dark and faded into the cool air.

"Horses," said Arin. My last dirt clod clapped him on the cheek.

Tem's face turned lard-grey and he walked over to an old cask in a corner. He gave it a heave with his arms; it looked like a lot of effort for an empty barrel.

"Wake the little girl," Tem told me. I couldn't move—there was shouting now, coming up through the tunnel. "Wake her and climb up to the loft."

"It's beer," whispered Floy. "Beer! They're all filled with it. Stars help us."

"Get up, you little fool." Mordan shoved me toward the corner.

I patted Emry around the cheeks and yanked her up by the wrist. She fell over. I straightened her and pushed her up the ladder.

"Bloody hell, Tem," said Arin. "Brigands?"

"I know," said Tem. "It's too late to leave through the tunnel and too early to fly out the roof." Tem smashed a small keg, rotted through, and slapped half a barrel hoop into Arin's hands. He gave the other half to Mordan, and taking one himself, called up to me: "Throw me your apron." I tore it off my waist.

"You don't mean to fight them?" said Floy. Tem wrapped a shred of apron around one jagged end to protect his hands so that it looked like a grotesque sort of scimitar.

"I mean to hide..."

"No fear," said Mordan. "They'll be so drunk by the time they do they won't be able to find—whatever they use—"

"Enormous whips," said Arin, wrapping a cloth round his barrel

hoop, “spiked with iron—”

“Quiet.” Floy took up the discarded half of Tem’s.

“The loft,” said Tem, “all of you.”

Mordan pushed Leode’s rump up the ladder after me so I might pull him over the top.

“Where’s my sword?” Leode grumbled, and Mordan climbed up after him. Then came Floy, Arin, and Tem, all armed.

The loft was built into a corner with a pine mast holding it aloft. It was stacked with empty kegs. Mordan pulled up the ladder, thinking it might discourage a search.

“You’ll both have to hide, now.” Tem ushered Emry and me over to an enormous barrel. He hoisted Emry (who later thought the whole affair a dream) into the barrel, but I struggled as he picked me up and tried to pour me over the side.

“I can fight.”

“No doubt.” He grunted when I kicked him. “But what really matters is you haven’t got wings.” He pushed me down by the top of my head, where I sat disgruntled with the saddlebag in my lap.

“Get low.” Mordan tackled Tem from my sight. The riders burst through the entrance. I saw only the stars through the top of the barrel, but I heard the men—loud, drunk, and violent with it.

“Mach’s balls, Miggon,” shouted one. “If yer tryin to collapse the grotty place round our ears, just bang yer head against the stones at the bottom. Less work then screamin the tower down.”

“I’ll scream till I got the silver in me fist.” There was a loud thunk and a yelp. “Give it here, Thew, or I’ll give you another lump. I’m the one shaked her by the ankles so she spate it out.”

“Spate it out?”

“It’s mine.”

“It’s Fillegal’s, and I’m holdin it safe fer him.”

A civil war engaged everyone on the ground level. There came bangs, clangs, thuds, yells, and moans, and then a metallic ring sounded through the tower.

I heard a whir in the air above me. Something dropped into the barrel from overhead.

The Dravadha broach.

“Oh, no,” I whispered.

“Throw it back,” said Arin.

“No, don’t,” said Mordan.

“Give it to me,” said Tem, reaching inside the barrel, so I did, and he set it very clearly right on the edge of the loft, whispering to everyone to get behind their barrels.

There was a scrambling, clawing noise, and I peered over my barrel. A great, shaggy head appeared at the edge of the loft, red and gasping because its owner had just shimmied up the support. Leode squirmed forward, and before any of us thought to pull him back, he brained the head with half a barrel hoop. It disappeared,



followed by a thump.

“Got him,” said Leode.

“It was nice knowing you all,” said Arin from behind a barrel.

Dawn came, then.

“Oh, no,” said Tem, looking above him. “Not yet, not now.”

He sprouted black plumage at his fingertips, and went completely egret just as another brigand jumped up on the ledge. His teeth and saber were gleaming with morning green.

The egret flew up and ravaged his face. The man caught hold of the egret’s neck.

Then something strange happened. Elde Tem flickered to life, punched the man in the nose, and knocked him over the edge. The boy flickered off and was gone. “What in hell?” said Tem, who was an egret again.

Mordan said, “That happened to me the other week.”

“What?”

“I was raging mad about something, and—bam! I was a boy for a second. You must’ve been really angry.”

“Scared, more like—”

An arrow clattered off the walls, and I ducked. “Leave,” I shouted, “leave, they’ll shoot you!”

The men below laughed. One said, “We’ve found us a nest of wild chickens.” The boys left through the roof, and Floy flew into my hand.

My fingers closed round her. “Don’t strangle me,” she said.

I knelt beside Emry, whose eyes were wide as moons, and a brigand stuck his head inside the barrel. The stench was awful.

“Bugger me bloody. It’s a barr’l of girls.” A hand pushed his head out of the way, and another head looked in.

“Save some for me, Tom, you horny ox.”

“Where’s my barr’l o’ girls?” called someone from the ground.

“Not them kind of girls,” said Tom. “These is jist liddle lockshooters.”

“Not even,” said the second man. “We could play dollies wid em.”

“The last burning gave us naught but a puddle of kids so you keep yer hands off em, Begley Turnip.”

And Emry and I were hoicked up and passed down to the floor, where I wrapped the saddlebag and Floy up in my skirts before we were assigned riders and carried away through the dark.

## Nine

We rode upwards through the tunnel, and came out on the top of Glasgenny Peak. The countryside looked ghostly and menacing under rags of morning mist. I sat between the arms of the man they called Begley, who was gentle enough despite wanting to play dollies, and I noticed after a while he had only one ear. The other was a hole and a seam of scar tissue. Occasionally I gathered courage enough to glance at it.

I wiggled to loosen Floy from my skirts. She darted through the air, and fell back with the four dark birds following in the treetops.

The riders spread through a copse of aspens, and stopped so abruptly I was almost slung from the horse. The air smelled of apples. Further down could be made a valley, lined rim to rim with old apple trees gone red with the season.

The brigands broke into song and unloaded barrels that had been strapped to carts and dragged goodness knew how through the tunnels and down the slopes. They dispersed towards a hollow full of smoke and the smell of sausage. Emry and I were carried along, and dropped beneath the widest, hoariest apple tree, under which sat five other children.

“Aloren,” said Wille. “Sun bless me birth flowers. And you brung Emry, too? Good fun.”

“You’ve gone cockeyed,” I said.

“Gorn.” Wille shook dew from his hair and rolled his eyes at Seacho Llumrew.

“Daft as your old dad,” Seacho said. Red-haired Padlimaird put his face in his hands and moaned. Little Oseavern Tilgy wiped his eyes with his arm, and the oldest, Gattren Grenoak, shivered in her thin dress, muttering about her grandfer and the man who had killed him last night in the fires.

Emry decided suddenly she wanted to leave. But when she jumped up, Wille took her skirt and sat her back down.

“Careful,” he said. “That goon with the snarl over there said something about ants. Hey, Toughy,” Wille called over to him, “what’s that about the ants?”

“Them’s tracker ants,” said Toughy, who was sitting on a stool, eating an apple. (His teeth had been filed into sharp points.) He pointed to a line of black ants circling the trunk. “If yer shadder so much’s falls over em, they all gets confused, and that line gets broke—and if I catches just one break, yer’re all getting introduced to the rod.”

“Croopus.” Seacho backed up and flattened his hair against the trunk. “Keep still, all of you.”

“Sure,” said Gattren. “I’ll keep still as a cat on fire when I get a knife in my—” A shadow fell over us and a boot scattered the ants.

“If these’re Noreme children,” said the man who cast it, “we shouldn’t have no trouble with the biguns. Bunch of skinned frogs.”

He’d a closely trimmed black beard, and a roll of pipe-leaf between his teeth; and glinting between his thumb and finger was the Dravatha broach. I couldn’t believe he’d called Gattren a skinned frog, who glared at him with such hatred she looked like she might burst into flames. But he wasn’t looking at her.

“That one’s too small. Runtish.” He pointed his pipe-leaf at Emry, and said to the bald brigand standing next to him, “Get rid of her.”

We gaped. The bald man walked towards a ruined chimney sticking out from the grass, and I imagined hatchets and knives leaning against it, all gory with runtish children.

“But wait. Wait.” Padlimaird climbed to his feet. “She can read.” Blackbeard turned and sneered at Padlimaird.

“You can read, can ye?” he said to Emry. “Hold it a minute, Thew,” he called to the bald man. “What says you? Could we use a midget scholar?”

“We could use her to read maps, I s’ppose, Chief.” Thew picked at the cravat tied around his neck.

“I was thinking ransom notes, you half-brained simian. Forged letters, messages, banknotes... But we gotta make certain.” He called over to the rest of the wildmen, who were roasting sausages around the fire: “Any o’ ye know how to spell yer name? And I don’t mean a X. Any idjit can read a X.”

“I can spell me name,” said Tom.

“Me,” said Miggon, “I can spell ‘Sheriff’s a-comin.’”

“N-O-G-O-O-D,” said Tom. “Me mam taught me.”

“How bout *Begley Turnip*?” shouted another. “Write it out here in the dirt, Begs, then we’ll see if she can read it.”

“Bite yer goddamn tongues,” said blackbeard. “The Virnrayan were a jeweler, weren’t he? He’ll know how. Get him up here afore I lose me wasted wits.”

A big man came forward, darked-skinned, with a mop of dreads and a golden tooth. He pulled a cutlass from his belt and drew five characters in the dirt at Emry’s feet:

N-E-F-E-R.

“N-neffer,” said Emry. The wildmen laughed and pinched Emry’s bottom.

“She can read Virnrayan, but she can’t pronounce it.” The man’s tooth glinted. “In Virnraya single F’s is always V’s, lass, so me name’s more Never than Neffer. What might your’n be?”

“Emry.”

He bowed to her like a gentleman, shook her hand, and said, “Welcome to brigand cadet school.”

“Stars preserve us,” said Floy from a bough somewhere above.

Our first lesson introduced us to starvation: how to survive it and how to avoid it. “Extra quick your hands’ll be in a month,” said Toughy, after he explained we were to receive hardly any food. “Y’see, Cook in’t too fond of children. She’ll throw the liddle shits inter her pot should she so much as sees one.” He showed us his hands. There were stumps where the thumbs should’ve been, and he said he’d been so hungry as a boy he’d bitten them off and eaten them.

There were apples a-plenty, so it wasn’t until a few days later, when we packed up and continued on, that my thumbs started looking good enough to eat. We traveled two days north on foot without eating anything save nuts, worms, and roots, while stumbling ahead of switches flicked lazily from the backs of horses. The mountains every day and patrols every night made it so we never thought of running off, and we were warned of wiry little Miggon’s tracking skills and Toughy’s chipped saber.

Outside a town on the Gael we settled for a time in a hollow shaded by big, hollow hemlocks. The stealing began there. Wille and Gattren, grown tired of tears from the smaller ones, slipped away for two hours and came back with food. Gattren with three loaves of bread, and Wille, a sack of potatoes.

“Went smooth as a greased cat,” he said, dropping the potatoes on the ground.

“He did grease a cat,” said Gattren. “With schmaltz. And he dropped it into a grocer’s stall which was guarded by a mastiff.” She shoved a hunk of bread into Emry’s mouth—wailing had got us into trouble.

Other methods were soon discovered. We threw pinecones into Cook’s concoctions from trees and bushes; and while she fished them out, yelling at Peach, her bleary-eyed slut of a scullion, we nipped in and out with stolen bread and beans. Nefer, the Virnrayan ex-jeweler, started off our careers by stuffing the pockets of his enormous overcoat with pork and leaving them wide open. Later, mostly during raids, the brave-hearted progressed to townspeople and stumbled upon coins—confusing, ridiculous things.

Our depravity astounded Mordan and Floy. When Padlimaird picked a penny from Tom’s pocket, Mordan said to me, “If I ever catch you stealing I’ll be angry enough to change back to a boy and wallop you over the head.” I explained that if he wasn’t aware of my learned indifference to wallops then he certainly wasn’t keeping enough of an eye out to know whether or not I was stealing. Then I assured him that I wasn’t selfless enough anyway, because every coin anyone filched went straight to perpetually destitute black-beard, unless you wanted a truly harmful wallop.

Black-beard’s name was either Marruc Fillegal or Fillegal Marruc. Nobody was sure which, as we were obliged to call him

Chief. He'd fought his way to that position according to what he said was the Brigands' Book of Rules (a three-way oxymoron), and he walked about chewing on his leaf roll and holding the position with a tight fist.

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Nearer the beginning, before any of the children were tough enough to help on a raid, the brigands had a night of revelry.

When almost everyone had gone over to the brushfire to hear the fiddles, I took Emry's hand and crept through a coppice of hawthorns towards the cooking smells. Emry's dimples had disappeared into her hollow cheeks, and it put the fear of death in me. I'd eaten nothing all day, and my stomach flopped about, and Floy, who should have been there to put a check on my idiocy, was off foraging for her own meal.

I dug up a stone, eyeing a cauldron full of stew. It wasn't the stew I wanted. It was the bannocks on the opposite side of the kitchen. All we needed was a ten-second disturbance.

Peach was off somewhere with Begley, but Cook's little eyes shifted everywhere. She mumbled complaints to herself and moved stiffly about on her gouty joints, adding to this, tasting that, and sniffing the air for sneak thieves.

She was back to mumbling now, and I tossed the stone towards the cauldron. Just then the stew started bubbling over the sides and Cook turned round to sort it out. The stone hit her on the brow with a loud *thunk*.

She marched over to our bush, stuck her arm into it, and pulled Emry out.

I heard Emry's shrieks, but didn't see anything, because I hid my face in my hands until my face was dirty and my hands wet.

When she was done Cook threw Emry back into the bush. She was unconscious, in a bad state, and I ran to get Wille. He carried Emry to an out of the way place behind the light. Gattren emptied a water pouch over Emry's head, and Emry gurgled, screwed up her face and started bawling.

"The baby." Padlimaird stuck his fingers in his ears. "She'll get us all whomped."

"I think," said Gattren, "you'd be howling something worse if you had half that much blood spurting from your head."

"How d'we make it stop?" said Seacho, almost crying himself as he mopped her head up with half his shirt.

"Yarrow." Oseavern backed away from her and sat down.

"Yarrow?" said Padlimaird. "Osh, you're a doink. She needs bloodwort."

"Me mam used yarrow fer everything," said Oseavern.

"Bloodwort's a kind of nettle," said Seacho. "How about

myrtle?”

“Why d’you think bloodwort’s got ‘blood’ in it?” said Padlimaird.

“Bloodwort *is* yarrow,” I said.

“Yarrow, harebells, cobweb, whiskey, hot iron.” Wille tore a strip from the hem of his tunic. “Argue anymore and I’ll get a nosebleed.”

“You figure it out, girly-curls,” said Padlimaird.

“Ask Emry.” Wille tore another strip. “Her aunt were the healer.”

“Emry,” I turned to her, frustrated. “What’d Marna do with a head wound bleeding fast as all hell?”

Emry began crying fast as all hell.

“Mach’s balls, Aloren.” Wille jumped up and put his hand over her mouth. “You have to tell her that?”

“You said—”

“Shh.” He turned his head. “I hear fiddlin.”

“You’re behind the bonfire,” I pointed out.

“This is a song I knows. Goin to let me listen to a song I knows, ain’t you?”

It was a song I knew too, and the brigands were singing it so raucously it cut like a saw through the trees:

*Golly claims he holds the sky up with his pinky and his thumb  
But his face is red as flame from the molasses in his rum.  
He’s got acorns fer his buttons an’ a smile fer a frown  
An’ he makes his mammy weep fer him when’re he comes  
around.*

Wille tightened his belt.

“Do y’like the dance, Emry?” he said. “Do ye?” Then he pulled me up by my arms and forced me into a reel.

*Tip top tip lads, tip yer hat to Golly Stooner.  
Tip top tip, bow down when he’s about,  
Tip top tip lads, afore the sky’s a-fallen sooner,  
Tip top tip, a’cause he’s true beyond a doubt.*

I followed him, barely lifting my feet from the ground. He said he’d seen more life in an old man’s diddle, and Floy laughed from her tree. “It’ll happen,” I cried to her. “I’ll float away.” But when nothing unusual happened, I stopped thinking on it. My feet went their own way, kicking up dust and mincing the simple movements past recognition. Wille looked down at them in awe, and Emry started to laugh.

“Nobody beats Wille at the two-step.” He quickened his feet to match mine, but his long legs tangled together, and his face screwed

up in exertion. After he'd been trodden on and kicked several times, he tripped over my feet and fell.

With dignity he picked himself off the ground, and went to sit with Padlimaird and Seacho.

*Golly swears he shoots the stars down with his arrows and his bow*

*But's been making love and laughter with the barrels down below.*

*He has tankards on his ears an' both his sleeves are on his legs  
An' he rides a chicken backwards while he quaffs em to the dregs.*

*Tip top tip lads, tip yer hat to Golly Stooner.*

*Tip top tip, sing praise when he's about,*

*Tip top tip lads, afore the stars are rising sooner,*

*Tip top tip, a'cause he's true beyond a doubt.*

My matted hair flew around me, and I lost control of my legs: *step and two, step and two—step and two weave step and two—step front ball change twirl change leap change* and on and on, faster and faster until all the children were clapping and I was dizzy and smiling. Wille hooted and sang:

*"Tip top tip lads, tip yer hat to dancing Aster.*

*Tip top tip, sing prayers that she will tire,*

*Tip top tip lads, afore she starts a-dancing faster,*

*Tip top tip, or her feet'll start a fire."*

"Look." Seacho tugged Padlimaird by the shirt. "Look—she ain't touchin the ground."

I looked down; the shadows leaped just short of my feet.

A jolt of alarm went through me. I gave one last kick and saw Nefer's teeth winking in the trees. I came round, chest heaving. Floy sang to me from her elderberry bush.

"He saw? The man saw?" I felt immensely stupid.

"He saw the whole thing," she said, and Gattren interrupted:

"You're a *Daralaibel*. Why didn't you say so?"

"Did you see Nefer?" I said, catching my breath.

"Big, dark Nefer?" She eyed me strangely. "No. Did you?"

"He was right there, in that grove before the fire." I sat down and pulled my legs beneath my skirts.

Padlimaird decided to investigate and slipped into the trees. He came out with plants clenched in his fist—harebells and yarrow—and three great burnt-black bannocks under his arm.

"This was in a little pile," he said.

"That would be Nefer," said Seacho, as Gattren, giving my skirts

a last glance, took the plants from Padlimaird and sat down to mash the leaves and roots for a poultice.



## Ten

The next morning I sat on a shock of grass, glowering into my saddlebag.

A shadow fell over my lap. I turned around; Nefer looked past my shoulder.

“Ye don’t look happy,” he said.

I opened my mouth to tell him off, but something in his face made me say, instead, “It’s seeds. They’ve got to cover the hills.” I took a deep breath. “But there ain’t enough.”

Nefer threw his head back and laughed. “A Gralde without a green thumb?” He swallowed his voice some, as though he were telling a secret, “I knows a trick from West Gavoran, where some of your kind dwell, that makes family trees grow big, whether the branches be full o’ Elde, humans—or plants.”

“How d’you do it?” I said immediately.

“I’m a brigand, girl.”

“How d’you mean—?”

“I’ll be lookin fer somethin in return.”

If he thought I was going to dance in front of all those horrible men, he was horribly mistaken.

“Ye’ve got a while till the next keg night.” It seemed he had read my mind. “I’ll let you brood on it.”

Brood on it I did. Virnryan artisans pound and shape emotion like it’s a gold ingot. And when faced with curiosity, I was a pushover.

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My descent into what Mordan called depravity began with the comb. One autumn afternoon, when Toughy was having a game of dice, Padlimaird and I ventured into a little town on the River Cheldony to ply our new trade. (I was to be lookout.) The market was stocked with beautiful things that had come up the river in sturdy little currachs.

Curious, I moved away from Padlimaird and a wholesaler’s purse, and wandered towards a stall full of cups and bowls carved from horn. A woman was bent over the bowls, picking them up, turning them over. A comb pinned her hair in place.

The vendor was saying, “Mammoth tooth it is, madam, from Avila.”

I stepped close to the woman’s back. The comb was ivory—a leaping roe with jet spots. I ogled it, imagining the feel of it on my scalp. For five months the only things I had run through my hair

were my fingers.

“Wondrous, hairy creatures they are,” said the vendor, “bigger ’n a whale, each with eight tusks...”

I reached up and took the comb out so gently her hair stayed in its knot. I put the little roe into a pocket on my apron and moseyed off towards Padlimaird. Floy hadn’t come with me, and she didn’t find out until it became very obvious something had been done to my hair.

Padlimaird was working the quay, so I sat on a bench beneath a glowing linden and led the roe through my tangles. When I’d combed it all through, it hung straight and shining to the small of my back.

Someone was selling meat pies nearby. My mouth watered; I had not eaten for two days. My stomach groaned as a little boy devoured a pie, his fingers dripping with gravy.

“Blood of the earth,” said someone behind me. “I’ve never seen such straight hair on a Gralde.” A little woman leaned over me; she’d a gapped grin and a red cloak drawn around her head and chest. Her breath smelled of sage. “Lucky girl.” She ran a hand through my hair and asked for a price.

I drew away from her breath. And I thought of the pies so that it became impossible to think of anything else; and I held out my hair to the woman, who smiled wider.

She bound it into a braid and chopped it off at the base. She gave me three bronze pieces.

The three pies were hot and sweet with cinnamon and cloves, and I ate them with indecent fervor. When I’d finished, the juice dripped off my face.

I walked down to the riverbank for a wash. My hair felt odd enough swinging just past my ears, but realization didn’t hit until Padlimaird walked by without ever a hello. I waded into the river.

My reflection was unrecognizable. A glowering, wild thing, eyes pulled downwards by sadness and ill use, so the world could see and wonder at what the hard mouth wouldn’t tell. And all this framed by a thatch of black. I jumped away and ran to the shore, where I hid my head between my knees and laughed.

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The ash and maple yellowed, my birthday came and went, and the brigands held the next music night after they’d looted a barge loaded with damson wine. Wille gave me a mug of the stuff. It was late in the fall and snowing. The drink steamed into my face, and I wondered, out loud, where the summer had gone.

“Over the south hills to green the gardens of Virnraya and Aclun, and warm the fins of the Iraelde.” Nefer sat on his battered three-legged stool, smoking. A cloud of smoke floated around him, and

we were becoming a bit green-faced.

“The Iraelde don’t live in the sea, Nev,” said Padlimaird. “In’t big enough.”

“No,” said Nefer, “not in the Benara. But they do swim in the bigger ones. I seen em.”

“You seen the oceans?” said Oseavern.

“Sailed em,” said Nefer. Oseavern stared at him, dark eyes big.

“Gorn, Osh,” said Padlimaird. “They ain’t *so* far from here.”

“Look at that,” said Wille. “Don’t that remind you of Mandy’s flute?”

Begley Turnip, his pinprick eyes twinkling on the opposite side of the fire, was holding a flute that did look like the one Mandy Olen played in Milodygraig.

Seacho looked with his sharp eyes, and said it was the very same. I wondered what had become of Mandy, who’d brought me to tears with her jigs and reels.

Just then Toughy began pounding a dance on his bodhran. His thumbless hands turned to blurs, and Tom got to his feet with a two-stringed rebec. He played a lively but forlorn tune, like winter wind through the mountaintops. Begley took the flute up to his mouth, and blew a counterpart. After a couple of phrases he threw it over his shoulder to Miggon, and yanked Peach up by her arms. They danced wildly and the men slapped their knees.

My feet bounced and Wille grinned. “Lally wants a dance.” I stopped moving.

“Go on, Al,” said Seacho, who was lying on the ground, his brown hair covering a stone. “I’ll steal you a horse blanket if you dance.”

“Don’t,” said Gattren. “Don’t let them twist you up like a spring-toy.”

Padlimaird was still sore over an argument with Gattren. “If you don’t dance,” he said, “I’ll tell Fillegal about them pies you was eatin.”

“Weren’t stolen, were they?” I said. But Padlimaird was as pernicious as his words, and Nefer’s bargain was picking at my thoughts.

So I stood up and and unhappily tapped out the rhythm with my toes.

The men jeered. Then the children began to clap, and my legs to loosen, and I lost myself in a silent scream. Hair whirled around my cheeks, and my skirts billowed past my knees. *Kick-slide-ball-front*, my feet went, *kick-slide-ball-front*. *Left-weave-left-back up-weave-left-back kick twirl tear rip hack pummel crush kick choke grind and hate, hate and hate*.

The music stopped after a while. Floy was yelling at me from some tree. It had gone silent, except for snow rattling against leaves, and I saw eyes, all of them shining at me. Begley tossed

Mandy's flute in the air so that it leaped with firelight.

"I'll be damned," he said. "It's like them saebels tootin their pipes in all them old stories and the trees start a-dancin."

"Her feet." Tom pulled off his stocking cap and scratched his head. "Climbing the air like stairs they was."

"I've heard of it," said Miggon. "Can all Gralde types do it?"

"I can't," said Wille.

"I said the little girl could dance, didn't I?" Nefer sat hunched, smoking, on his stool. Fillegal smiled at me and chewed on his tongue instead of his leaf-roll.

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"The trick," said Nefer the next day, "it needs sweetness from the Cheldony, so it's lucky we're up this far north, so near to her."

It was dawn. Fillegal had informed us we were setting south immediately, down to thicker soil and fatter pickings, so I slipped away towards the east-west running river with an empty bladder-bag.

I was bewildered upon reaching the Cheldony. The river ran so low she could've been a large creek. I hadn't noticed back in the town—the river flowed wide and placid through that area.

"She's flowing shallower than she ought, Floy, in't she?" I looked for a place to fill the pouch.

"It's the late fall," said Floy. "Rivers run at their lowest."

"She's sick. Can't you hear her crying?"

"She does sound a bit *off*," Floy admitted.

I dipped my hand in to better listen. Minnows threw shadows across my arm, and water, shade, and rock twisted into a face. My fingertips opened a mouth and I heard words, the song of a stony-hearted river-daughter:

*Our long lady spat us from dwindling meres  
When her cheeks grew exhausted with pocketed stone,  
For to polish our hearts was to beg for her tears,  
And she'd rather her weeping replenish her own.*

I pulled my hand out, shook the water from it. "She lost her heart. Floy, let's go—I don't like it."

As I walked back, I touched the trees and shuddered, hoping I was imagining them—the oaks, elms, beeches, birches, firs, fruit-trees, all of them, moaning in a deep thirst.

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The horses jostled each other to get out of the way of the switches. Most of them were laden with baggage, and the men

walked alongside them, howling lewd ballads. Wille sang as loud as his pipes let him, making Emry and Osh giggle.

“Can’t hear meself think,” said Padlimaird.

“You wouldn’t hear a perishin thing, anyways,” said Seacho.

The caravan stopped to rest by a pool below a slope of scree. Nefer, sitting on his old stool, began explaining to me the details of his family tree blessing.

“Ye starts off feet standin in the dirt, in a place where you can feel the earth movin an’ talkin specially good, so she can hear ye talk back. And them seeds, they has to soak in this all winter—” He frowned, weighed the bladder in his big hand, and held it to his ear. “This water feels sad.”

“A lot o’ rivers run sadly, mate,” Begley pointed out. “Cryin like they was all whupped bloody.” He was sprawled out on a rock, smoking a clay pipe and not looking remotely interested.

“Not Noreme rivers.” Nefer walked over to the rock pool and submerged his head in the water. He shook it like a dog when he came up. “Somethin’s wrong.” He looked profoundly uneasy for a few seconds.

“Anyways, lass,” he said, dripping on my lap, “after they’ve soaked through winter, you take up the seeds, what’ll be as sad as the water, no doubt, and hold em in yer cupped hands—like this—an’ sing to the earth in yer own tongue, cause Gralde’s closest to saebeline.” (Fillegal’s brigands spoke an argot of mostly Rielde.)

“What d’you sing?”

“This:

*Norem braechlen lend melluin,  
Algarod darnd melair,  
Witna ade oed dedwyn.  
Rew elde maifgin dair  
Cairbelde elnaeghl elde rwb  
Na gaerwrn eaor lorena.  
Wot gaira sod dem goa go chw  
Ruin elde lingend brena”*

“You’d better be around come spring,” I said. “You’re gonna have to repeat it then.”

“And you better be scarce come winter, or Fillegal will dance you dotty.”

## Eleven

“Dancing for money?” said Mordan. “I hate to tell you, Reyna, but you’ve hit rock-bottom.”

“It’s a decoy,” I said.

“A decoy? For getting what?”

“Money. It can’t hardly be helped—”

“Lawks, Reyna, you’re eleven. Start speaking like it.”

By the time the snows came and stuck, such conversations were sounding all over the middle hills.

True to his word, Seacho had come back from a raid with a big woolen blanket, and after giving it to me, sorely regretted it, until he came back with another for Emry, then another for Gattren, then the last for himself.

So Tem’s prediction came true, and I was stuck in midwinter with a horse blanket. The others weren’t much better off, or worse. Wille stole an overcoat off a scarecrow, and poor little Oseavern went to a better place. Early in the winter he grew quiet and pale. A cherry-red rash spread from his cheeks to his chest, and we looked after him as best we could, but one morning he didn’t wake up. We buried him beneath some boughs cut from a yew, and thought no more on it.

My first raid took place in the early morning after winter solstice. The little town was silent, sleeping off last night’s festivities, and Wille, Seacho, Begly, Tom, Toughy, and I walked boldly up to the gates, pretending we were itinerant musicians.

No Noreme town refused entrance to musicians. We were cheerily let in by a few sentries who still seemed a bit drunk.

We set up on a street corner near the front-gate. The street was soon filled with townsfolk going about their morning errands, and Toughy pounded away at his drum, Tom fiddled a hornpipe, Begley played Mandy’s flute, and I began to dance.

People gathered round. Even the sentries came over for a look, and as the morning wore on, we drew a goodly crowd. They clapped and laughed, more and more coming until I suspected the whole town was gathered before us. They tapped all the misgivings from my chest; and I was caught up in the joy of it, floating a hand-span above the ground, when something unexpected happened.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Wille and Seacho unbarring the town gate to let the brigands through. And the oblivious townspeople dug their hands into their pockets, and threw their coins at Begley, Tom, Toughy and me.

“What the hell’s this?” A copper bounced off Toughy’s drum.

“Look at that,” shouted Begley over the clapping. “We’re working fer our money—a mortal insult!”

“If this here’s an insult, y’can call me a whiskey-wallopin broken-belted blackguard wid his arse knockin at his knees.” Toughy launched into a quicker time with his drum. “An gimme s’more, please.”

“Do we gets to keep it?” Tom’s fingers zipped up and down his fretboard.

“Why, o’ course Tommy. Earned it hain’t we?” said Begley. “But best not tell old Chief, eh? So’s to avoid getting our thumbs twisted off.” And he lay out his coat to collect the coins.

When we were through, Begley, a decent chap at heart, decided we’d split the earnings four ways as they’d been made fairly.

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We stole the scrutiny of too many. Seven houses were plundered and six people killed.

I took my coins into the woods that evening and buried them under a little rowan. I refused to dance for a while, but Fillegal beat me until my mouth ran red, and threatened to cut off my foot. I had no doubt he would. Begley was missing an ear, and Toughy had no thumbs.

So I danced at knifepoint for other raids. I spent the coins on food, persevered through the guilt, and in time only felt indifference for what I did. And when Emry, small enough to fit, was shoved up latrine chutes and pushed through sluice gates, everyone was acquiescently helping except Gattren, made to scour the pots and dole out favors with Peach.

The raids were dangerous and seldom rewarded. All the profits went to Fillegal to parcel out as he pleased (but neither I, nor anyone with me, said anything about the busker’s wages we were earning), and late in the winter I had a miserable experience with a floodgate beneath a city wall.

Being the smallest, I was expected to dive beneath the water, slip through the bars, and loosen the bolts on the other side to let the boys in. But as I pulled myself through, my dress knotted on a catch in the metal. I believe I hung there for a minute before tearing the dress from my back. When I climbed out half naked, Wille wrapped his overcoat around me and told Seacho to hug me so I wouldn’t freeze, while he, tall but skinny, did the job himself.

That winter I had little but a horse blanket, my chemise, and the rags I tied around my arms and legs. Though Noreme winters are mild, I remember the cold as a constant ache. I danced barefoot, but wasn’t so keen on the feeling any other time, so I grabbed a pair of boots, three sizes too big, off a farmhouse stoop in Domestodd and stuffed them with rags. But they still wobbled and clunked on silent stone floors.

I don’t remember much else about that winter. Only that I

learned very well how to cheat at dice, call nasty insults, sing nasty songs, mend broken fingers, ride a horse backwards, punch a man in the privates, plan and commit various crimes, fletch an arrow, trap and skin a rabbit, and sundry other strange things.

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Early in the spring I was sitting atop a small tower, picking a lock. The door stood between me and a weaponry room and the lock had three pins. I'd just broken the third with my needle and chisel, when Tem, who was in the area, landed next to me polite as you please.

I let go of the chisel and the pins fell back in place. "What're you doing here?"

"I could be asking you the same question." .

I shrugged. "Got to unbolt the postern." But he didn't understand why I needed to break into the weaponry room to unbolt the postern, and Floy, flown up to check on me, agreed with him.

I picked a nit from my hair and ate it. "I need a knife, or a dagger, or a dirk."

"Why?"

"To slit Fillegal's throat while he's sleeping tonight."

"Oh," said Floy. "Mind you make a neat job of it."

"I want Nefer to teach me to throw a knife, but he won't till I give him something new to throw himself."

"Here's a big wolf," said Tem. "I think she's eaten my little sister."

"True enough," I said. "She's dead."

Tem found me because Mordan was tracking my movements and reporting back to a meeting place: another ruined tower in the north. I was still writing letters for them, but not as many. Parchment was scarce among the brigands.

Arin wondered if I was becoming friendly with Father's killers, but I put a query to Nefer about where they'd been before Milodygraig. He said Fillegal and his crew had come from southeast Lorila, and he had little reason to lie.

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Spring grew up and the world softened, and I thought of the seeds that had soaked in the river water all through the dark season.

Nefer thought of them too, but he put far too little thought into the thing, according to Mordan, who had a fit when he heard what I'd done. "Let me get this straight," he said, picking at his tail. "You don't know where they *are*?"

"I do, though. They're growing right as rain between that hill and the next one." I gestured vaguely at the hills.



“Reyna!” Feathers fell around my head. “You’ve lost them all! What’re we going to do?”

“Haven’t you never heard of the Gavoran Blessing? Great gallons of grog, Mordan. Slow down, ye’ll run into a tree.”

Had I been older and my circumstances less strange I would’ve been more skeptical. But when I took the seeds from the water they hadn’t germinated and rotted. They’d turned silver.

I spread these to dry in the sun, and Nefer led me into a spinney of alders. He put my palm on the moss and asked if I could feel anything. The tree song was clear as morning, and after I told him so he poured the seeds into my hands and refreshed my memory.

He left me there, and I felt lonely in the new green. But when I dug my feet into the soil, closed my eyes, and began singing, “*Norem braechlen lend melluin*,” a wind flew up. The shoots tangled in my hair, scratched and broke my skin, filled my ears with sticky words:

*Let us draw on thy sap, child of clay,  
And we shall cease our selfish play  
And pay thee back in kind.*

When I was done I wiped the blood from my arms and neck and took the seeds back to Nefer. He put them into a little burlap sack, cut three slits in the sack, and handed it to me. Then he set me backwards on an old horse. He secured me in place with a rope, and before I could protest, pricked the horse’s skewbald hindquarters with his cutlass.

The horse and I ran for an exhilarating half a mile, wherein the seeds flew out the holes into the air.

“It’s up to the earth now,” said Nefer when I came back. “Give it two springtides an’ they’ll be coverin these hills like a sea.” I had no choice but to believe him.

\*\*\*

Midsummer came with its swathes of goldenrod, and a drunken Halfwit-Tom leaked news of our buskers’ wages. The men were jealous, of course. Soon full-out brawls determined who were going to accompany me on street corners with pipe, fiddle and drum.

This got Fillegal brooding. He didn’t like his brigands doing paid work and honest, and he became frightened for his exquisitely wrought autocracy. He cast about for someone to blame. Wille didn’t help.

“Merruc’s band of brigands?” he said loudly one evening. “More like Merruc’s band of minstrels. Or maybe Lally’s.” He turned with a smirk to Fillegal, who knocked him flat.

I did my best to avoid Fillegal, and deep in my second autumn—

I believe it was the night Wille, Seacho, Padlimaird and I passed around our first pipe, a shoddy thing that turned our faces yellow and made us spit until our laps were wet—there was a desertion. Begley, Tom, Peach, and Miggon all went missing. Along with two fiddles, the flute, a drum, a set of reed pipes, a gittern, and a lute.

Together they made a fifth of Fillegal's men. Fillegal was furious, flummoxed, seething and stumped, because Miggon had been the best tracker and couldn't very well track himself down.

The deserters hadn't thought to invite me. Nevertheless, Fillegal decided it was my fault, and began looking for ways to empty his shoe of the dancing pebble.

Gattren, meanwhile, was looking for ways to scrag Fillegal. She had always been headstrong, but now she had taken a bitter cast as well; and because Toughy ran her grandfer through with his saber under Fillegal's jurisdiction, Fillegal was as much in peril as Toughy.

I'm not sure why she waited until early in our second spring to make her move. It might've been because she'd grown up in the past year, and the men had settled on fooling with her rather than us. Or perhaps after long months of hearing "It can't be helped, Gatty" and "We've no choice" and "They'll break our necks, else" her wits finally snapped.

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Early that day Toughy set me to cleaning his scabby tent canvas as a punishment for mouthing-off. I wound sacking around my hands because I had to use black-bandorscroll: a horrible, poisonous plant with blistering juices. Its flesh was a powerful scour, and Toughy had gathered some from the mountains.

I was scrubbing the canvas with the evil stuff, gasping in pain, when Gattren came by and rolled up a bit of bandorscroll in a strip of cloth.

"What are ye doin'?" I said.

"Scouring a cauldron." Her face could've curdled water. "Go back to your business and leave me with mine."

I scarcely heard her; I was trying very hard not to cry.

There was more talk than music by the fire—Fillegal didn't like fiddling as much as he used to. Everyone was listening to the storytelling and I couldn't see Gattren anywhere. I assumed one of the men had led her away.

As usual, drinks were served first to Toughy and Fillegal. Toughy downed his in two gulps. After this he'd launched into a tale (about how he once climbed into the bower of a courtesan to bag her collection of Neridonan crystal roosters) when suddenly his muscles began to spasm and his mouth to foam. He parted his lips and emitted a series of sharp shrieks, like a little dog. His black

tongue curled in the air like the scroll of a bandore.

I sat on my blistered hands. And Toughy toppled from his log and lay in the fire-lit snow, completely still.

Wille let out a breath. "That's what happens when ye tell lies like an old djain."

"That in't lies," Padlimaird cut in. "That's black-bandorscroll. See his tongue, didn't ye?"

"I drank a whole half of this." Fillegal stared at his tankard. With shaking hands he thrust it at Currip, a man who had left his job as an apothecary to lead a more fulfilling life as a brigand. "Is there summat bad in there? Tell me quick, you knobby-nosed cur."

Currip stuck his warty nose into the tankard. He curled his lip. "Like sweet, carrotty death."

"Does any o' you know a cure? Anythin?" said Thew, tugging on his cravat. Padlimaird gave Emry a nudge, which sent her mouth spinning.

"Me Auntie Marna knew how." She stood up. "For the evilest plants, the blackest, she used them...but she didn't want me to tell nobody."

"You'll feckin tell *me*," Fillegal roared, throwing his tankard at her. She ran and disappeared into the dark woods. Nefer leapt from his stool and ran after her.

She came back soon enough, hair plastered all over her face, and a handful of ragged, green leaves squashed in her fist. Nefer sauntered behind her, and I caught a whiff of palendry when they walked by. "What is it?" said Fillegal. The Chief's mouth was turning black in his yellow face.

"Evil-spurn," Nefer said.

Fillegal took the stuff from Emry and swallowed it in one gulp.

It worked. As soon as Fillegal was able to laugh, he laughed until everyone joined him.

Then he growled, "Stick yer hands in the air where I can see em, all o' ye."

My heart sped. Toughy, the only man who could've vouched for my blisters, was dead. From a tree Floy told me to turn a bit to the side with my palms face down, and so I did, and the palms quaked. I heard the crunch of Fillegal's boots in the snow, the silence when they stopped at my back.

"Was it a-getting cold, me dancin dear?"

I turned round. They say change is least detectible in yourself, as you see yourself in the abstract. I couldn't see anything right then except Fillegal's idiotic face.

"It's always cold," I said.

"What's that?"

"It's always cold, cause you take everything for yourself, always wantin more, freezing up in your warm tent, and wondering why a ham feels like a chicken bone in your fat stomach, you clove-toed,

horned bag o' offal."

Fillegal's mouth was hanging open; I could see every one of his blackened teeth. "Hands look like she were birthin a baby dragon," he said.

Fear tightened my throat.

Wille frowned at me. "Her try to poison someone? Smells like pigshit to me."

"She just gave a pretty speech, Sir," said Paddy, "but I didn't hear nothin in the way of confession."

"She might've borned a dragon, but t'weren't in an effort to poison nobody, as I'd be the first dead, Chief, she's so jealous of me flash fingers."

"She couldn't poison a fish. Hell, she couldn't even poison a death adder. Just a girl, in't she?"

"Gattren, she'd poison a death adder, but not Aloren. Aloren'd feel sorry fer it, Chief."

"She'd nurse it back to health after Gattren poisoned it. She wouldn't be a-feared of it, neither. Seacho is more of a girl than she is."

"She'd just be a-feared of killin it."

"Where is Gattren?"

"Hold yer gobs," said Fillegal.

"Why?" said Padlimaird, who was getting his color up.

"I'm Chief, ye jackal's arse."

Padlimaird jumped up. "Only cause we allows it!"

"Some Chief," said Willie. "Chief of twenty sad rags, and none able to play a tune."

"I'll tie yer tongue round every peak o' the Daynens!" Fillegal wiped black spittle from his chin. "I'll gut yer liver to bait me snares. I'll chain yer feet to a rock in Lorila an' yer nadgers to a tree in Pemrenia. I'll use yer lugs as a rudder, yer stalk as a tiller an' yer duggs as me oars on the sea. I'll sentence ye, the both o' ye, to a life of menial slavery fer yer first punishment."

Padlimaird sat down and closed his mouth.

"Me poor mam," said Wille. "She'll split in half and dance a reel together in her grave."

"And you, ye snot-nosed sow," Fillegal said to me. "I'm torn between hackin you up with a blunt piece of flint or strangling you with a thorn bush. But I've a mind to leach a hard day's work o' you, afore I kill ye."

"And I know what ye'll be doin right off," said Cook, probably thinking of the pots that had got blacker and blacker since Peach had deserted her. But Cook had to scrub them herself.

## Twelve

“Mach’s balls, Lally,” said Wille the next day. “Couldn’t keep quiet, could ye?” He heaved a shovelful of dirt over his shoulder.

Padlimaird shook dirt out of his hair. “Couldn’t keep her fat mouth shut.”

“Shaddup,” called Fillegal from his canvas hammock, “or I’ll change me mind about the depth.”

It had taken us most of the day to dig a ditch wide enough to fit all of Fillegal’s loot. I stuck my shovel in the loam and leaned over the handle, and heard a rustling in the underbrush.

I rubbed dirt from my eyes. Of a sudden Wille shunted us out of the hole and into a clump of willows.

A screaming, flailing sorrel burst from the wood. She had a rider. She slid sideways at the edge of our pit and dumped him in, and then scrambling round it, upset the bank of rubble. Dirt poured over and around the man; and a grey wolf burst through the cottonwoods and made after the sorrel.

Quick as fire Fillegal nocked an arrow on his bowstring and shot the wolf in the side. The beast slid around in a circle, whining and bloodying the snow. Then it lay still, tongue hanging out.

“All that fer nothin?” said Padlimaird.

Wille threw his shovel aside and jumped into the hole. He scraped some dirt from the rider. He began laughing. “It’s Hoary!”

I could hardly believe my eyes—I wondered if I’d fallen asleep where I stood. But the old envoy spit dirt from his mouth, and I knew the Hoary of my dreams wouldn’t have stood for looking so filthy. “Don’t stand there with your jaw unhinged, Master Illinla,” he said to Wille. “Dig me out.”

“Bless me beard.” Fillegal jumped down and dug around the human’s waist. He came up with a string-bag. “What’s this pretty liddle bauble?”

“Not full o’ your money’s what it is,” I said. Fillegal knocked me over.

The sorrel’s reins had snagged on a branch, and she stepped nervously back and forth. Fillegal untangled the leads, whispered into her ear, and walloped her on the rump. And after Wille, Paddy and I had buried his goods, the Chief tied all our hands to a rope lead, and goaded us with a nocked arrow back to camp and the oak we’d been tied to the night before. Hoary was tied to an ash across from us.

The Chief bid us goodnight, promised me a painful death at dawn, and left us to ourselves.

I jerked against my bonds.

“Stop that,” said Padlimaird. “Ye’re sawing inter me skin.”

“You remembered me surname,” said Wille to the envoy.

“You’re hard to forget, Master Illinla.”

“Aye,” said Padlimaird. “Sticks on yer boot like a wad of spit. What’s yer name, anyways?” He pressed his hands behind his rump.

“Starts with an R,” said Wille.

“My name is Calragen Eligarda. You may call me Calragen, if you wish.”

“So, Raggy,” said Wille, “what happened to the other three of you?”

“Dechvano and Euristride have passed beyond,” he said delicately.

“How?” I said, in an attempt to keep my mind off dawn.

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It was a complicated story, full of untied endings and unanswered questions, but Calragen told it as best he could, and we listened. We had nothing much else to do except shiver.

After coming into Lorila, Calragen and the others had spent two years in the province of Dirlan, on the eastern marches, because it was unsafe to travel westward even with full escort, as the Duke of Dirlan was in the middle of a vicious spat with the Lord of Olefeln (both being potential heirs to the kingdom); and anyone traveling from the east into Olefeln was likely to be killed, robbed, or tortured, and sometimes all three at the same time.

In Dirlan, Calragen mentioned a broach of Dravadha make that disappeared from the possession of the royal family thirteen years back. This caused discomfort in Duke Caveira of Dirlan, and when Calragen asked whether the broach had ever turned up, Caveira turned white and mumbled about rivers in Norembry.

“And I showed him a sketch of the broach I had drawn back in Milodygraig,” said Calragen, “and told him I may have found the thing. And Euristride wouldn’t let up about Ellyned’s garrison just lately grown bigger. I fear that’s what did it.”

“Did what?” Padlimaird picked threads from his shirt.

“The following spring Caveira told us he knew a secret road west to Akurya, where the Ravyir is. He bade five of his men guide us through the water meadows west of Dirlan. We were betrayed. They led us to the center of the swamps, and night fell and they were gone.”

He needn’t have gone further. We’d all heard tales of the bloated stomach of the Nolak River: the Gagathene. Of glowing saebels that lured travelers to putrid deaths; mud imps that invited folk into their underground lairs and fed them frogs until they grew webbed fingers and slimy, spotted skins.

But Calragen and his fellows had met with something else—a

black shadow, cat-shaped, that stalked and filled the humans' heads with vice. Dechvano and Euristrude quarreled, fought, and sank in the mud. It was a djain, Calragen said. We tightened with cold.

\*\*\*

When I was eight or nine I asked Tem what a djain was. (Mordan had been uncharacteristically vague about it.)

"Nothing," Tem said.

I'd got much the same from Mordan. "What d'you mean, *nothing*?"

"A hole. Nothing."

The way Tem said *nothing*—it sounded like a horrible wound, or the huge pupils of a mad cat. Unnatural and sick. I felt dirty. "How does it happen? How are they made?"

He shrugged. "A bright light goes out."

In my grandfather's time a Simargh gave birth. The light was brighter then, folk said, the air like a diamond. Right afterwards the baby Simargh was stolen, and the world darkened back to how it used to be. No one knew what happened to the baby, but long, long ago, before the oceans changed, another Simargh had been stolen by the djain. They stamped out the Simargh's soul, and it grew up to be a *Seyora*—a very terrible djain.

No one fancied talking about the djain—it was bad luck. It drew them to you.

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In desperation, Calragen and Solisreme, the man we had called Silent, fled down the river until they were free of the marshes. Weak and disoriented, they were set upon by wildmen, and thrown into the river.

"I was washed up, and my horse found me," said Calragen. "I've been looking for Solisreme. Wasn't aware I'd wandered into Noremby. Poor Redstart's past her prime, but if she could speak she'd tell me what a fool I am for bothering to look."

"She says you're a blockhead," said Padlimaird. "I calmed her when her leads got caught in the branch. She was sorry she throwed you, but it was in the heat of the moment, she said."

"See her?" said Wille. "Tied to the post over there by the fire. Got a blanket, even. Fillegal must've took a shine to her."

"Who's Fillegal?"

"That warblin woodlark so worried about your bad posture he decided you'd better spend the night tied to a tree," Wille said.

"What're you doin with that axe, Nefer?" said Padlimaird, as Nefer, on watch that night, walked over whistling and wiping grease off a wood axe.

“I gotta kill the human.”

If our oak had been in season, her leaves would have wilted and fallen off.

Nefer looked at our faces. “Me orders.”

“What’s he ever done to you?” said Padlimaird.

“Grew hisself a stomach to feed.”

“You get rid of Fillegal,” I said. “All you got to do is drub him a couple whacks, then you’ll be Chief next an’ you can do what you want. He don’t deserve to be Chief anyways.”

“And if I get made Chief, Lally,” said Nefer, “the human’ll have to be scragged anyhow, as outsiders ain’t ever supposed to know who’s Chief.”

“Hang the rules.” I cared more for my own safety than Calragen’s at the moment. “What good’ve they ever done?”

“They’re the on’y thing keeping a bunch of bad men from doing much worse.”

“What’s worse than this?” I said.

Nefer looked at me, scratching his tooth.

Wille said, “You swings the axe too hard and fell the tree.”

“Now, look,” said Nefer, “what was you doing that this human saw, that Fillegal’s so keen on killing him for?”

“His grave needed diggin,” I said.

“We was diggin Fillegal a loot-hole,” said Wille.

Nefer scratched his tooth again, and said, “Only the Chief’s supposed to know where our loot’s hidden.”

“How is that a good rule?” I said.

“Hey,” said Wille, comprehension dawning in his face. “Hey, I suppose we’re all in for it, then.”

This got Padlimaird’s attention. “Let’s haul off,” he cried, banging his shoulder against my head.

“Fillegal’ll kill you either way, probably.” Nefer chewed his knuckle.

“He’s gone daft,” said Padlimaird, and I looked at his shirt. He’d bored a hole through it with his fingers.

“Nefer,” I said, “he can’t kill folk who ain’t here.”

I’m not completely sure why Nefer did it. Perhaps he felt guilty, as he had bribed me into dancing. But I suspect it was more because he’d grown bored with the looting, and burning, and Fillegal in particular.

So he swung his axe at our binds rather than our necks, and with the robust encouragement of Wille we decided to make a breakaway down the River Swisa toward the city of Ellyned, which sat on her estuary.

Calragen untied his sorrel from her tree, and the four of us nipped around filching supplies.

Everything went smoothly, until Nefer clonked his elbow against a tub full of potatoes. Thew, who’d been lying beside it, sat up. He



looked groggily at Nefer.

I stopped breathing, sausages dangling from my arm. Nefer pointed to his boots with a look of wonderment, and poor Thew, who'd never been a bright star, glanced over to where Nefer pointed.

Nefer's cutlass flicked out and gently, almost lovingly, cut a slit across Thew's neck. He collapsed. Nefer shrugged sadly, and continued gathering potatoes. Squeamish Padlimaird took one look and went to heave in the bushes. I wondered if my hands would ever stop shaking.

Finally, mercifully, loaded with bedrolls, food bags, Toughy's tent, and Nefer's stool, we made towards the river. Waiting for us was a skiff of oak and pitch patches that Nefer had stolen off an eel-trapper earlier that week.

It would have been difficult for Calragen alone to drag nervous old Redstart onto the boat, but we four Elde convinced her to lie down on a mat of fishing nets surrounded by our baggage. The boat, tied to a stump, sank a couple inches in the cold Swisa. I hopped aboard after Wille. Floy, alighting on my shoulder, reminded me there was no way Mordan would ever find us once we took off downstream in a small boat. I insisted that my being alive and lost was better than my being dead and found. And anyway, my uncle Ederach lived in Ellyned and the river was the quickest route.

Padlimaird, last to step into the boat, turned at a noise. He banged his shin and bit back a yelp. Emry swept aside the branch of a river birch.

"Emry, get back to bed," Wille whispered.

"Where are you goin'?"

"Taking the boat out fer a little while," said Padlimaird.

"With a horse?"

"She wanted to come, too."

"I'm not stupid, Padlimaird Crescentnet. You're desertin, ain't you?"

"Look, Emry," I said, thinking of poor Thew, "you'd better come with now. Get on. It's a big enough boat, there's room for seven."

Nefer extended his big hand to help her aboard, but she backed against the birch, a dangerous look on her face.

"It in't allowed," she said. "We'll get killed. It's against the rules."

I thought of the writing, the journal, the stone and Cook's bannocks; and my stomach sank like a stone.

"O' course we'll get killed. All of us—if you call out," said Padlimaird.

"Hush, Emry," said Wille, "and when morning comes tell Seacho we're comin to rescue you later."

"And if Gattren comes back," said Padlimaird, "tell her to jump off a cliff fer me, cause me arms is too tired to stay an' push her

meself.”

Some days Padlimaird could be surprisingly clever. This wasn't one of them.

Emry turned round and yelled, “Chief! Chief! They're leavin in a big old boat, all six of em!”

Nefer cursed. There was a shouting and rustling in the trees; and in no time at all the whole camp had woken and run to the riverbank. Fillegal was in the lead, looking mad as a skinned cat. Nefer cut through the mooring rope with his cutlass.

“What the hell are you doin?” yelled Seacho from the bank.

“Seacho! Jump in, Seacho!” Wille waved at the shore.

“Geddown, all o' ye.” Nefer tripped and shoved everyone to the bottom of the boat. Bowstrings twanged in the trees and arrows flew over the water.

Redstart's eyes rolled in terror, and she rose onto her knees. She lifted all her bulk until she was up and skidding in the swill on the bottom. *Wait, wait, stay put!* We cried to her, and the boat, rushing forward, rocked and threatened to tip.

The arrows whistled overhead, and the horse's legs caught in the nets. Nefer tackled her around the barrel. She stumbled onto her knees and fell on her side, right onto his left arm. The boat gave a shudder. Nefer grimaced and looked at the left bank.

“We're too far out of range now,” he said. “But they'll run long the banks, waiting for them falls to come up.” He put his other hand on the horse's heaving side. The whites of her eyes disappeared into the brown.

“The gold,” said Padlimaird. “The loot. It's downriver—let's take some with us.” He clawed his way to the side of the boat, looking sick.

“And I'm sure as anythin me arm's broke,” said Nefer.

“Let me have a look,” said Calragen. Nefer offered his arm, and Calragen set to prodding it. Nefer yelped. “I'm very sorry,” said Calragen, running a finger along Nefer's forearm. “Here, I think. I know a bit of doctoring. I'll set it to the best of my ability, soon as we have time.”

We reached the digging site, and Wille punted us ashore with the pole. The boys dug up a few purses, and then hopped back in and we pushed off again.

Day came and the river bottom darkened and dropped beneath us. The banks climbed, pushing the fir trees high above the water, and a white-yellow canyon closed out the sky ahead. Thunder hung faint in the air, and Nefer had us pull up the boat at a chalky bank. “We've got to portage from 'ere, mates.”

“We could've gone a little farrer, Nev,” said Padlimaird. “We can't even see them falls yet—”

“See that canyon there?” said Nefer. “Soon's ye set prow in it, the current'll take ye along so fast you won't stop till you has to.”

Wille helped to prop the prow upon Nefer's good shoulder. Then Calragen and Wille took the stern between them, and I took up the packs: one in back, one in front, and one in my arms. And Padlimaird gave Redstart the sorrel, still stumbling on her sea-legs, a push after Wille's back, which had set off downhill with the boat.

The waterfall crashed from a great height into a deep pool that smelled of boiled cabbage.

Calragen went to the edge and peered into the water. "I know these falls," he said. "They call this place *Oldeyda Lun*. Carpet Pool." He laughed. "We can all take baths."

"Baths?" said Padlimaird in disgust.

I put down the packs and walked up to the pool. The stones in the water were eerily beautiful: vein blue and hawkseye yellow, and the spray wet my face. I scooped up some water in my hands, let it run through my fingers. "This water's warm," I said. "What's wrong with the earth?"

"It's supposed to be warm," said Calragen. "It comes from the Leden Pass." I gave him a blank look. "My fellows and I passed that way, and it's perilous, full of boiling rivers, deep, scalding pools that extend to the bottom of the earth, red stones and—"

"That's where Enol dropped the starlight he'd got from a lake," said Wille, dipping his feet into the pool. "He dropped it into a volcano to freeze it up. The djain in the volcano let the sun come up for the first time in thousands of years to unfreeze it, but the sun heated the starlight so hot it blasted the volcano to smithereens and made the Pass to let the humans through to—"

"Where it becomes a bunch of silly tales," said Calragen.

"Lorila and the Green Basin. Then the humans got so bad."

"Oh?" said Calragen.

"Some of em. And we're gonna run em off when we gets to Ellyned, ain't we, Nefer?"

Nefer looked up. "I hate to cheat ye out of a bath, sir, but we gotta go."

"Does the rest of them know this water's warm?" said Padlimaird to Nefer.

"I didn't know it."

"We could jus pretend like we was in a wreck." Padlimaird rubbed his arms and winced. "Like we fell off those falls. Y'don't think they'd bother a bunch of drowned deserters?"

\*\*\*

The overturned fishing boat echoed like a cavern, and we kept silent as death, clinging to the nets Nefer had tacked to the bottom for holding our food. The tent canvas swirled around our legs, and the poles straggled behind, clunking below the surface in a drumbeat of ill news.

Voices carried from the shore: “I’m not getting wet and froze fer a shoddy tent, nor a boat, neither.”

“Idiots got what was comin to em...”

The voices faded, replaced by the roar of the falls. “Idiots?” said Wille. “Maybe the rest of you, but as I was the one modestly whisperin me idea into Padlimaird’s ear—”

Padlimaird knocked him in and the two boys wrestled in the water. They heard me laughing and Wille pulled me in for a dunking. I fought back, pounding on their heads, sneezing and coughing up the nasty-tasting stuff, and Nefer had to separate us.

We waited a few minutes more, then slipped behind the falls and wrapped ourselves against the cold to check up on Redstart.

## Thirteen

The river carried our skiff southeast, and we crossed paths with spring.

This did little to cheer me—I'd left my Marione seeds behind. The earth had pledged to nourish and protect the seeds, but I forgot this and lolled about the boat with angst screwed into my face until one day Wille said that I was apt to bite off my bottom lip. Padlimaird eyed me from where he dangled a bit of sausage over the side to tempt the small green trout.

"I never seen you cry, Aloren. Why don't you never cry?"

"You're dumb," I said.

"Let's hook her and sink her." Padlimaird beat the water with his tent hook. "See if the fishes like sourpuss more than sausage."

I stood up to jump on him, but Nefer let the handle of his oar swing into the small of my back. I tumbled over. My elbows drummed on the bottom of the boat, and Redstart whickered. "In't fair!" I said.

Padlimaird laughed. Nefer took the other oar from Calragen and placed it into Padlimaird's hand.

"Mr. Calragen's a-gettin fatigued, bless his heart, and it's been a fair time since I rowed two oars wid one arm." His bad arm was set with an ash stick, supported in a sling made from a piece of his shirt.

"The current's pushing us," said Padlimaird. "Why d'we have to row?"

"Cause it'll give us some peace. Now hop to it, young Paddy." And Nefer launched into a Rielde river shanty to drown out Padlimaird's voice:

*"Taut as a sail when the west wind rends his skyways,  
Spreads the oldest path through the golden breath of sunrays.  
How merrily she winds,  
And with the clip of sailors' lines  
Shunts me forward, chained and flying by my arms.  
Tide has crept in from the sands,  
Cooled my feet and shackled my hands,  
Wrapped the ocean's salve around the inland's harms.*

*O! My heart, she longs for open skies  
O'er the pitching and the list,  
And my oars drive me on, ever forward drawn  
By a force I can't resist.  
If resist I can, due east I'll sail,*

*For to curb their longsome stride  
I must mend the rip in the ocean's lip  
Or be taken by the tide.*

*Caught like a leaf in the noldra's wild fountain,  
Rolls my ragged soul, unbeset by soaring mountain,  
High hillock, wall or stone.  
Hear her wearily bemoan  
The river's chattel with his ankle in the wet  
By his will and nothing more.  
Lash the tiller t'ward the shore  
Or my heart will burst her bent and bony net.*

*For my heart, she longs for countless stars  
O'er the squalling and the mist,  
And my pole spurs me on, ever forward drawn  
By a call I can't resist.  
If resist I can, due north I'll sail  
For to quell its crippled run  
I must beg the snow to strike still the flow  
Ere I'm lost behind the sun."*

\*\*\*

"Dwindling, you say?" said Wille, after Nefer and Calragen gave us the news they'd heard in a village pub.

Wille, Paddy and I had been left behind to scrounge up what food we could, and we hurried to get underway before the townsfolk found their larders lacking.

"Aye," said Nefer, "dwindlin."

"How, I ask you"—Wille pointed a parsnip at Nefer—"in this stallion's jack of a hope-forsaken world is the Cheldony's depth supposed to dwindle?" He crunched off the end and chewed angrily.

"I told ye somethin was wrong," I called between my knees to Floy.

"It's just a river," said Padlimaird. "Rivers tend to dwindle once in a while."

"In't just a river. The Cheldony's the reason our trees grow taller than a mountain. The reason our saebels don't eat us, and we all got sparkle in our eyes and wings on our heels. The Cheldony's the reason our eyes color and our faces freckle, the reason we're joyful like humans ain't—"

"Wille," said Nefer between his long strokes, "explain how me unfortunate Virnrayan eyes color just as much as your'n."

"I'm joyful," said Calragen. "What makes you think I can't be joyful?"

“Raggy has a grin like a watermelon compared to Aloren,” said Paddy. “No offense meant.” He slid away from me and ripped his breeches on a nail.

We caught sight of the Benara Sea before the city appeared. All at once the hills peeled away and the horizon became frighteningly flat, and the clouds grew smaller and smaller until they rolled off the edge of the earth.

My eyes smarted with the salt air. I remembered yellow roses and dark-haired Mother, streets white with lime and Temmaic before he became Tem. The river widened, and slowly, rolling by in little bits at first, the port city of Ellyned rose to greet us in the morning with her mossy limestone towers and roofs of blue slate; and Padlimaird threw up after drinking the estuary water.

\*\*\*

Nefer moored the boat at the third wharf from the breakwater. All around us were trawlers, schooners and gigantic merchant vessels loading and docking with chaos enough to send all our heads spinning when we jumped onto the wood and shook out our legs.

Right away Nefer began extolling our faithful vessel with enough earnestness that it was soon sold to a young fisherman for one hundred silver celms. This allowed us to pay the mooring fee of sixty silvers. The fee was so high, we were told, because the Daldera shipping line owned three wharves and closely minded the other two’s business.

“Fancy the name sounding so human.” Wille glanced at a ship with three masts and *Daldera* painted across the side in strange letters.

“It is.” The dockhand took a swig from a bottle. “Belongs to Herist. The big whoreson snake owns the whole fleet. Mind you call him Commander to his face, though.”

Calragen booked a passage aboard a little clipper bound for Evenalehn, and we spent a last awkward night with him in a quayside boardinghouse.

We went down to the docks the next morning to see him off. The air smelled of tar and pine, and fog curled out of the streets in shreds, melting away in the sunlight. Calragen had asked us the night before if we would like to come with him, to live in Evenalehn. Nefer and the boys declined, thinking of their loot and what they might make of it here. I couldn’t answer.

Redstart boarded early with the other passengers’ horses. Before joining her, Calragen said to me, “Pity about that broach. It was so close.”

“Got your sketch, still, mate?” said Nefer, who had heard the tale from us. “I might have made you another, if t’weren’t fer me arm. If ye’ve drawn up all the correct measurements...” He laughed,

peering at his left arm in its sling.

"I fear you'll have to find a better healer," said Calragen. "I've probably set it badly."

"Or chop it off and stick Dravadha's arm inter the socket," said Padlimaird. "Ye can't make a replica of somethin like that unless you bargain hard with a demon."

"Don't talk about demons." Calragen pulled a ragged bit of parchment from his cloak. "See what you can make of it." He put it into Nefer's hand. "The girl can help, if you manage to get that far." He looked at me and frowned.

"I asked Marna about you once. She said you were a fidgety twit who didn't know a spindle from a needle. Said the boys would've chased you off, weren't for her." He shook his head. "I can't imagine the boys chasing you anywhere now."

"Lally'd be chasing *them*," said Padlimaird, and Wille pulled his ear.

"You'd have been one of them boys, Padlimaird."

I pretended to see something interesting on the horizon. Calragen spoke to the back of my head:

"Nevertheless, I think you ought to come with me. There's plenty of room—we can just nip back to the booking tables—"

"Only those without burdens can scale walls." It was silly; a proverb our old groundskeeper, Hal, used to say. "But you promise," I said. "Promise you'll bring back help. After all, you just about lost yer head in a country you claimed was untroubled. Promise!"

"I promise." He gave our faces a last look. Then he turned his back to us, the hunched back of an old man, and for the second time he was gone.

The boys stood looking after him. But I remembered something from long before, and walked from the wharf before the clipper had left the harbor.

\*\*\*

No one came after me, and Floy flitted nervously around my head while I wove through crates and stinking heaps of fish. My saddlebag had acquired a character all its own of chapped and cracked leather, and I felt very fond of it as I dug for the letter Tem had written two years ago. I found it, and crept into the shadows under a low eve to read:

*Uncle,*

*This letter's messenger may look different by the time she reaches you, but you should find this description somewhat alike: A girl of ten or eleven with straight, dark hair, a round face with a sharp chin, blue eyes, an upturned nose, and (by now) a scar on her*



*left forearm where she has cut herself on something. And lots of freckles. She is your niece.*

*The facts are these: Her brothers are under enchantment, and she has agreed to undo it—a task involving the mending of spirits over a period of five years. She needs your protection until the five years are spent. Please refrain from asking questions. She will not be able to answer them. She must remain in complete anonymity for her safety, and should be kept from the sight of all but the immediate household. Also, if she must venture out, don't try to stop her.*

I sighed, wishing Tem or Mordan were here. Then I walked into the sunlight and boldly asked a number of strangers for Ederach's address.

'The Gates of Hell' said some, and 'The Queen's Nightgown', said others, and finally I got a proper answer from a cooper with a kind face. In the summer, he said, the prince lived in a walled house on Skyfane Street, on the north side.

The cooper gave me directions from his shop and shook his head sadly as I went on my way, as though he wondered what a savage little girl could possibly want from the dead king's brother.

I spent half the day picking my way around a canal swollen with floodwater, before I found a bridge crossing it, of old rope and clapboards. Then I came upon a large square full of locust trees and stood befuddled under a tall white belltower until Floy found the right streets, which had been mapped out in no discernible pattern.

We continued on, and the streets widened into avenues. The shops shed their lime daub for clean white stone and morphed into residences, which grew in size as I walked north.

Even then, some darkness settled over my mind, some foreboding. I wonder now if I should have quickened my pace, or not gone at all. But for good or ill, the sun kept shining, and I pushed the dread away, thinking it nerves.

At last I reached Skyfane Street, where a row of big houses faced the sea. It was late afternoon. I eyed the wall enclosing my uncle's house, gnawing on a hunk of old bread and wondering how best to get inside.

The front gate was out of the question—after one look the porter would run me off.

So I hid my saddlebag behind a loose stone, threw my boots under a shrub, and climbed up the wall. I jumped down, and landed on a lawn dappled with tree shade and fading light.

Candlelight flickered from a pavilion. I peered through the stone columns—it looked as though someone had just been there; sheets of vellum curled and skipped over the floor stones.

The candle was on a table, washing the place with light. I took Father's ring from my pocket, dripped wax over the letter, and

sealed it. The wind picked up, and the candle went out. I could barely see in the pavilion, and I put the ring on my finger.

My ear caught a faint murmur—I couldn't tell where from. I left the pavilion and walked into a recess gloomed by firs. There was wall close to the firs, and an arch opening into another garden. The voices came from a bench to one side of this.

"Reyna," called Floy, "exercise caution." I stayed where I was, needles pricking my feet, and studied the two people: a man and woman, both of them hooded and cloaked. She held a goblet against the swell of her stomach.

The man bowed in a spasm of coughs, and the lady said, "See? It's become worse in this horrible damp, and I shall make you do something about it." She spoke in the trader's tongue with the same clipped accent I'd heard Calragen use.

The man laughed, and I saw his face better: skinny, with light eyes. Mordan. But it wasn't Mordan—this man was older. "My dear lady, you have a worse effect on me than ever the weather has."

The lady shrugged off her hood. I tried to smash the letter into my pocket. It didn't fit. The seal broke off and went into the pocket, and the parchment dropped to the ground. She slipped the goblet into his hand.

"Faiorsa," he said, staring at it, "you've made enough people miserable. Why can't you let me be?" He brought it to his mouth.

I knew who Faiorsa was. "Don't drink," I whispered. The woman's head lifted; her eyes darted around. I swept aside the boughs and said louder, "Don't drink it."

"Reyna," said Floy, "you idiot."

"What's this?" The woman stood up. The man, too.

"Take it away," he said, giving it back to her.

"Why? You've gone all pale—has she frightened you?"

"Yes." He smiled. "Perhaps she saw you slipping in a bit of laburnum or bandorscroll."

She laughed. "Why should I bother with poison?"

"For in case the knife doesn't stick."

"This little scrap—is she yours?"

He eyed me musingly. "Not unless her mother didn't say." He said to me, "Why shan't I drink, little scrap?"

"She wants to do you in." I took a step backwards. "You're the last. Look at her—she wants you dead."

"Yes," said the woman. "Look at me, do. Watch me take a sip for myself, as you, and you, little ghastr, are so convinced of my evil intent. But first," she said, touching Ederach on the chest, "I must catch for myself something to remedy." She gave him a kiss.

I stood and watched, waited for him to pull away. But though he never moved with her, he never separated.

"Now," she said, when she was done, "let us move into the light,

to better witness my sip.”

I followed them beneath the arch, into the next garden. She touched the goblet to her lips.

The air darkened. The wind strummed my sore heartstrings, and I took a shallow breath. Gasping, searching, I knocked the goblet from the lady’s hands and the tonic darkened her cloak as two arrows, one from the front and the other from behind, met my uncle in the back and chest.

“Oh.” I watched him collapse. “Not this.” I saw my father all over again, the dark on his shirt, the failure on his face. I knelt next to him.

“Closer,” he said. I got so close his voice was muffled in my neck: “I thought I could out-step it a while.” My shoulder grew warm with his blood. He stared at the ring on my finger.

“Change the address,” he said. “White Ship Tavern. They’ll help you—” He took a breath and blood trickled from his mouth.

The woman bent over us, and her hair brushed my cheek. It felt like a bee sting. “Poor little girl.” She wiped her stained front with a kerchief. “Half-crazed. Covered with his blood.” She lifted my chin with a finger, and her eyes turned thoughtful. “There’s something familiar about you.” I didn’t move, lest something worse happen. “Ederach.” She shook her head, stood up.

I buried my hand in the grass, hiding the ring, and counted four men behind her in green and grey surcoats, quivers on their backs. “Sirs,” she said, “this little mad varlet has murdered the city’s champion. Turn her over to its people. They can deal with her as they see fit.”

\*\*\*

She must have thought me pathetic past threat—it was a wonder she didn’t kill me. Instead, the soldiers tied me to a post at the end of a pier.

I forgot the letter beneath the pines, and gave my captors little trouble on our way to the quay, but I woke enough, as they led me down the pier, to wrench my arm from one man’s grip. Twisting round, I slipped my fist into my pocket to cast the ring off.

A tall officer put his paw round my neck. I stood choking at the edge of the pier, and he caught my wrist, looked at my hand.

Shining yellow in the lamplight, plastered to my palm with blood, was the wax seal that, two seconds before, had been somewhere in my pocket.

I gave my wrist a yank. He held it fast. I pressed my fingers down hard, crushed the thing, and flicked it from my hand into the harbor. The black water made scarcely a ripple. All this happened in such quick succession that no one but the officer noticed.

He looked into the water, said something to his men in their own

language. Then he strode towards the lantern, dragging me by the wrist.

They tied me by my waist and ankles, and used my right hand to make a bloody print on a piece of parchment. This was then scribbled on with charcoal and nailed above my head so I couldn't see what they had written. And my arms were wrapped around the post and tied, and they left me alone.

In the dim glow, my scrawny body tight against the post, I must have seemed a strange warp in the wood. No one came near for a long time. I slouched lower and lower, and the bonds cut into my ankles and slid up my torso. My back ached, and Floy burrowed into my hair and told me gay stories.

The water lapped below us. A fiddle sang a forlorn ballad from somewhere ashore, and I slipped in and out of bad dreams. A girl in a grassy cloak came closer, pouring water from a bucket over the wood to wash feathers and dung into the harbor.

She peered out my direction a couple times before noticing anything strange. Then she frowned and walked forward.

She read the parchment, biting her lip. She glanced at me just once, dropped her bucket, and fled with the news, dark hair streaming behind.

Floy went temporarily insane, clawing my hair, banging against my cheek, and then they were there. She took flight. Dung crumbled against my shoulder.

"Little bitch," said a man. "Did the Queen promise you a good man?"

"This is how she pays her servants," said another.

"See her bloody hands?" More dung pelted my neck, and I twisted my head away.

"Was it so easy to kill the last of them?" A stone opened my foot. Sweat and blood dripped down my legs. "The last of our family," and the voice broke, a woman's voice. She wept, and I wept too.

A stone hit my cheek. I closed my eyes, expecting more, but a group of folk cut through my ropes and pulled me down.

"Set her hair alight."

"No, bring her to Ackerly."

"Tie her hands—" They sank their fingers into my hair and twisted my arms, but there was a lull when hands trying to get at my flesh pulled other hands back. I slipped like butter through the bodies, and ran into an old man with a fiddle.

## Fourteen

The fiddle clattered over the wood. The man grabbed my shoulder, and said, “Is this your wicked murderess?” They seemed to hold him in some regard, for they stilled themselves and grew quiet. I fought with his hand and he caught me by the chin. “Can’t be more than ten—”

He took a step backwards. My head grew heavy. I wondered if I’d finally done it—gone mad.

He would play *White and Tan Brachet* and *Corpse Gives a Rattle* on his red fiddle; and I would dance and Arin would kick my shins.

It was Hal, our old groundskeeper.

He parted his lips, and I collected my wits and shook my head. He was quick enough to notice. “This girl wouldn’t have done it. Not this one.” About ten folk responded at once:

“The blood’s all over her.”

“His blood?”

“Finally lost his wits.”

“Shut it, Gwat.”

“He’s a more sensible head than what you’re banging around.”

“What’s she done, then? Who strung her up there?”

“Let’s hear what she has to say,” declared a tall hooded man.

“Come on, girl. Out with it,” snapped a woman in a blue shawl.

“Out with what?” said a familiar voice, and Wille tackled his way through the mob. “I don’t think much of your new friends, Lally.”

Padlimaird stumbled through the crowd, and Nefer pushed through at a mad pace right behind him, knocking him two feet forward.

“What sort of mess you in, girl?” Nefer placed himself between the crowd and me. He was awfully big and had a face on him like a mother bear, and the people backed away. I found I could breathe slowly again.

“Lally?” Hal’s brow wrinkled up.

“She looks like she’s had a rough night of it,” said Padlimaird.

“Rough night, or not.” The woman pulled the blue shawl together and made her face pop. “Who killed him? Who was it killed Ederach, if it weren’t you? I see his blood all over you, child.”

“Give her time, Goody,” said the hooded man.

“The Queen.” I fell to my knees, and just in time, leaned over the pier and heaved the contents of my stomach into the water. I came up, and Wille and Padlimaird gawped.

“You saw the Queen murder Ederach?” Paddy said, twisting his

face with such a frown that his ears wiggled. I sat, rubbing life into my legs, and Floy scratched at my hair.

“Let’s get you cleaned up, Al.” Nefer lifted me with his one good arm and slung me over his back. Hal picked up his fiddle and insisted that we follow him. He led a group of us along the wharf and down a side street.

We stopped at a low building with a grimy front and harbor water swilling at the back. The sign shone in the streetlight, spotless, as though the name were all the owner cared about. *Six White Ships* it said, and we went inside.

Lamps cast leaping shadows around a room full of laughing folk deep in their cups. Hal weaved his way through, and Nefer tightened his hold on my legs.

Hal stopped in the back of the tavern at a wooden door without a handle. He performed a complicated knock with all five of his knuckles. The door opened a crack. “*Aibelde twy eaor cair,*” he whispered inside.

A small girl with a head of wild black hair opened the door and ushered us through into a dark and cavernous room—a boathouse of some sort. A water gate winked at the back, and the harbor crept through, and lapped at a wooden landing spread with tables. At these sat a number of people, who stopped in mid discussion to eye us suspiciously.

“Is it true?” said a stout man with a full, black beard. “Ederach’s dead? Mother Chaos and her frozen tits! How’re we to do without his letters? That’s the on’y reason we know they’re aiming to hang Nat at first light to—”

“Hold your gob.” The black-haired girl pounded a tankard on the table.

“Bequen,” said the hooded man to the girl, “this one saw it.” He pointed to me. “So she said.” He threw off his cowl; he’d a Rielde head of curling blond. All the eyes in the room locked onto my face.

Hal jabbed him with his bow. “And I will do the interrogating, if there must be any.” He gave his fiddle to the Rielde, and said to Nefer, “I won’t hurt her, and it will only be me.”

I pulled at Nefer’s shirt, and he set me down. Hal called for a bucket of water and bar of soap. Someone went and fetched them, and Hal led me down a little stone arm of the jetty. He pulled me into a side room, and shut the door.

He looked me up and down. Then he turned away, because he had begun to cry.

“My poor girl,” he said. Looking at my reflection in the window I thought ‘poor’ was a bit terse of him. Then I remembered what Mordan had thought, that this man had given us up to the Queen.

“How’re you still alive?” I said. “She gets rid of everyone she uses, don’t she?” My limbs jerked, and to top off the night’s events,

I burst into tears.

“Reyna, look, you think—” He frowned and ran his hands through his grey hair. He knelt in front of me. “I never thought bitterly about what happened. In fact, I needed a well-earned break. Your father thought so, too.

“But you must believe—I’d never have done anything to harm you and your brothers, and if Mordan has come to some mooncalf conclusion, I beg you rethink it. You will remain my secret, if you wish. But what has befallen the others?” He looked me straight in the eye as he spoke, and I stopped trembling. “You won’t say anything.”

“People are dumb,” I said. “And mean.”

He dipped his kerchief in the water and blotted blood from the gash on my cheek. I pulled away, and he drew me back. “Sure. But the folk who threw stones are already regretting it, I bet.”

“Should’ve thrown stones at the right people. All them in charge. They’re dumber and meaner than a sack of eels.”

“They’d throw back worse than stones.”

“So?” I thought of the sign: *Six White Ships*. “You’re the White Ship rebels, ain’t you? You get the letters.”

He looked up quickly, so I must have been correct. “You know about the letters,” he said. “There haven’t been many lately. Will there be more?” His eyes were very bright.

“Yes,” I said stubbornly.

I opened the door and left him standing with his old musician’s hands wound round a bloody kerchief.

I had it in my mind to quit the boathouse before being spotted, and was halfway to the door we’d entered through when a girl pulled me back by my shoulder strap. She looked about fifteen, with pretty grey eyes and red hair bound up in a tatty cloth. “Shouldn’t be going that way by yourself, lass. I suggest that bright portal.” She pointed to a door at the west end of the landing. “That’s the leeward way. Elements don’t batter on so and your ship’ll better listen to her rudder.”

“You should know, Sal,” said Wille, who took the opportunity to sit down next to her. “Tell Lally what to do, and she’ll go out of her way to do exactly the opposite and get herself whopped.”

Sal took the pipe from his mouth and snapped it in half. His eyes bugged.

“I’ll say as I please, you elf-locked lout.” She gave him the pieces. “I don’t go with smokers, smackers or smarmers, but you’re welcome to share in this fine poteen.” She dragged a jar across to him. “Don’t go blind.”

Wille must have been really taken with her, because he took a big swallow.

He began to cry, and blew his nose on his coat sleeve. “I’ve never tasted anythin so good in me life.” He ducked under the table

with a mug of water.

Nefer, sliding up the bench to elope with the whiskey jar, saw me heading toward Sal's bright portal. "Al, where're yer feet carryin you?"

Everyone turned and looked, and I slid my hand around the doorknob.

"Going to witness another murder?" said Padlimaird.

"Nefer's leased a little place," said Wille, wiping his eyes. "And we're gonna turn it into a silver smithy. You probably won't be much help in any kind of a smithy, but yer welcome to join in."

"I'll take care of you," said Nefer.

"Take—what?" I tried to remember what this had felt like. My cheek throbbed. "What do that mean?"

"Keeping you out of trouble," said Padlimaird. "Damn near impossible, I should say."

Against Floy's wishes, against my wishes, I fumbled behind my back with the doorknob. "Don't bother."

"Now, wait just a minute," said the Rielde man. "We haven't done with you, yet."

But I slipped through the door.

A few people ran out after me, and I hid beneath some steps until they went away.

It began to drizzle, and I walked west along the quay. Floy broke into my thoughts: "Where are we going?" I stopped on the edge of a long square that opened onto the estuary, and she nipped my neck.

"Take *care* of me?" I brushed her away and walked into the square's dark center so I could avoid looking at myself in shop windows. I was an offensive sight—filthy, crawling with fleas, hair matted into webs.

"From now on," I growled, scraping up some gravel, "I'll take care of meself." And something else spoke out to the dark. *Don't get too close*, my spirit cried. *You'll cut yourselves*. I blocked her out. "Alone." I ran toward the river and threw the gravel over the balustrade.

"And what about me?" Floy said. We began right away with a bad night's sleep on a door stoop.

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I woke with sun pooling into my mouth.

A little boy trickled dirt into my nostrils, and I jumped up spitting. He ran off into a great throng of people, and I sat back down on the step, caught between curiosity and wariness.

The curiosity won out, and I wandered nearer the crowd of Elde, and Elde they mostly were, of a truculent variety. They surrounded a gallows built on the western side of the square, near the estuary. I



hadn't noticed the thing in the dark, and I shuddered, thinking of my spending the night so near to it.

I pushed my way forward and was shunted around the crowd, and after trying to resist it for a while, drifted towards a line of old, flowering fruit trees. The gallows loomed on the platform, contrasting strangely with the bright trees. Upon the scaffold, shouting something I couldn't hear, an old, blindfolded Galde man stood between four guards in green and grey.

"See that?" said a boy into my ear. "That's where you'll end up if ye don't learn at making a livin'."

I reached over my shoulder and grabbed Padlimaird's red hair. "What about him?" I pointed at a bailiff. "He earns a handsome livin, and he ends up at a gibbet every day."

"Oh shoot," howled Padlimaird.

Wille appeared then and took us each by an ear. "Why, if it in't a big mean dog pickin on a little flea." Padlimaird pushed Wille away and rubbed the back of his head.

"Why are you *always* here?" I said to them, and trod on the shoe of a big, red-faced woman.

"Why am I here?" She bore down on me, scowling.

"She didn't mean it, ma'am." He shoved Paddy and me out of her way. "Be careful of these folks, Alore. It's crazy old Nat Brelidin up there. He's getting hanged for the third time now, and they're going to make sure he's around for a fourth, or they'll revolt in all sincerity, an' the garrison in't ready for that."

"You should climb a tree," said Padlimaird, "before you get squashed. They're going to storm at some point." He jumped away when a brawl broke out behind him. "Just look at em!" He ducked an airborne whiskey jug.

"Such nobility and sacrifice," said Wille. "Come on, Paddy, let's see if we can't get closer." They bungled their way through the mob.

I shook my head and took a step, and my chemise swung forward as though the pockets were filled with stones.

"Oh," I said to Floy, "they didn't."

I reached into my pockets and dug through the coins. I wondered how they had managed it. And of course they could've, and quite effortlessly, because it was that much easier to slip something in a pocket than take it out, and they were both skilled pickpockets.

My ears grew hot. I ripped the coins from my pockets, and flung them at a tree, scattering blossoms.

"Reyna!" Floy flew round my head. "What in all the wide world and welkin are you doing?"

"I can't stand it." I hurled another handful and pain shot through my shoulder. "I can't stand it."

"So you'll throw it all away? Stupid."

“But—” I shut my mouth, refusing to argue, because she always won.

I knelt and scraped some celms into my skirt, dribbling the silver between my knees, and noticed that a group of folk next to me had become very still.

I stopped, and glanced up at their red faces. The back of my neck pricked, and I took up one more coin. I stood up and hurried away.

“They’re following us,” Floy said.

“Damn.” I dove through someone’s legs, left a pile of silver, and started running.

“Thief,” someone called. I tripped over feet and knocked bodies aside, and a stream of coins fell through a hole in my skirts, attracting more attention.

I broke into a sprint, neared the river, and thought of jumping the wall, into the place where the water lapped close. Then Floy noticed the next tree growing from its stone plinth.

“The tree,” she said. “Like Padlimaird said.”

I turned my head and rammed into the balustrade. The coins popped over the river, flashing like jumping carp.

“Don’t jump after them. The tree—it’s in blossom—”

I swept her out of my hair, and dashed around the plinth; folk were sitting on every stone of it. A few boys jumped from their places to tussle on the ground.

I bounded onto the stone and scrambled up the trunk. No one noticed; the branches were laden with white and my chemise kept me hidden, and I climbed to a comfortable fork.

The wood smelled of green apples. The sun glowed through the blossoms and wore on my eyelids. I sat still for a long time, pinching myself to keep awake.

The hanging never happened—the mob locked with the soldiers in another stalemate, and the action wound down to a steady seethe, and I stayed put, anxious still over the folk who’d chased me.

I grew antsy and began knotting together a chain of apple blossoms. The chain soon reached a handsome length, and I absently spooled it around the head of one of the boys, who had fallen asleep against the trunk. The crowd had cleared from around the tree, leaving space on the plinth; and the other two boys were merrily playing dice.

One of them glanced over at the sleeper’s head. “Hark at her ladyship,” he said to his friend, “the duchess of the daisies.” The smaller boy doubled over with laughter; his cloak swept chips and silver from the stone. “Max!” said the taller. “How shall I be compensated for all my hard work?”

“You were losing, anyway.”

“Wasn’t.”

Max threw a chip at him; it struck the third boy instead, and he

woke. “Throwing stuff?”

“Forgive me, milady,” said Max. “Almost got your bonnet.”

“What bonnet—” said the third boy, and a loop of the flowers fell over his eyes. He pushed them from his head and saw me. “Look at that thing. More munge than person. Stay there.” He stood up. “Don’t want it spreading.”

This struck a chord in me painful and funny all at once. Like hell I was staying there. I swung from my branch and dropped in front of him. He was a head taller than me, with tawny eyes. A human.

He put his arm over his nose. “Filthy Eldine rat.”

I put my fist in his mouth.

His head hit the trunk with a great crack, and he crumpled over the plinth. The smaller boy gasped and the other began to laugh. I whirled on them, “Funny, is it?”

The smaller boy whispered, “Let’s go find Mir.” They left, the smaller dragging the bigger by the wrist.

The third boy lay quite still. Between his feet a dandelion had slumped over. “Floy.” I squatted and touched it: the first thing I’d ever wilted. “Floy, I’m a woman.”

“That’s likely,” Floy said, and I began walking away. “Where’re you going?”

“Away,” I said.

“You can’t just leave him there. Go and drop him in the river.”

“No.”

“They’ll rob him and trample him into a pulp.”

“I hope they castrate him, too,” I said.

But something niggled in the back of my mind. So I stumped back and took him up, one long leg under each arm, and dragged him down a ramp to the river. No one noticed, the crowd having moved away. The boy’s feet stuck out in front of me, strapped into good leather sandals. His tunic darkened with muck, and his hair, too.

I dragged him across a strip of silt and pulled him into the water until it swilled over his face.

He gurgled and sat upright.

“Look at you in the mud,” I said.

He wiped his face with his arm. “What are you doing? Did the garbage pickers send you to piss all over me?”

“Aye.” I watched him shake his elbows free of muck. “They picked too deep and came across your god-awful, stinking arse.”

He stood up, towering over me, and I marveled that I had leveled him with one punch. I decided then was a good time to leave.

He ran after me, tripping over his sandals, and I bounded up the ramp.

Old Nat Breldin had been taken away to molder for another two months in the palace oubliettes, and most of the mob had dispersed. So I ran towards the bustling quay.

The boy proved remarkably nimble, squeezing through chests of tea and heaps of coal with a determination that made me nervous.

Floy was beside herself: “Cut through those gamblers; slip into that sawyer’s yard, there’s an outhouse you can hide in; that hut has an upper story, try the doorknob; look, a sewer-pipe.”

“Ain’t crawling around the sewers, Floy.” I pushed through a narrow quayside street and stopped in front of another way: an alley with a collection of stinking garbage, deep potholes, empty doorways, and walls scribbled over with coarse words, all slowly disappearing under a layer of soot. It looked familiar.

“Keep going.” Floy knocked against my head. “He’d have to be really thick to follow you into there.”

There was a dilapidated stone arch over the entrance. I hid in the corner just behind it. The boy burst through, tunic still dripping, and sprinted down the street.

“Well,” Floy remarked as my breathing slowed, “that proves he’s thick.”

I sucked on my teeth, taking a few steps after him, wondering when I had come this way before. I saw a sign hanging above a door, green in the daylight. It’d looked black last night. “It’s the tavern that gets hold of me letters.”

“Then we oughtn’t go any further.”

“I just knocked a boy off his head.”

“Luck,” said the sparrow. “And you’re apt to run out.”

“You think me *lucky*?” I said. And I walked on, with big, brave strides.

Turning a corner, I stumbled upon little, black-haired Bequen from last night.

She was agitated and didn’t glance at my face as she steadied me with her hand. Once in the alley she broke into a run, and I stared after. She went down a side street. I continued down the way she’d come—a darker road that ended with the gleaming harbor.

Walking along the gutter I heard a shout: “*There* you are.” The human boy ran full-tilt toward me.

I started into a stumbling run, looking about for a hiding place. Right before the harbor a small door stood open in a high wall.

I ran through it. It was suddenly dark, and I stood rooted to the ground, waiting for my eyes to adjust. I heard boiling water and tinkling metal, and the air stank so strongly of spirits my eyes watered.

The room was built like the tavern boathouse, with a gate at the back for the water to come in. On two stone docks stood a number of pear-shaped pots, much taller than me, with glowing ovens in the bottom. They looked like giant lamps.

Half-sunk in the harbor water were three wooden tubs filled with a dark liquid—I couldn’t tell how deep. The stink came so obviously from the liquid that I backed away, hand to my nose.

Letters on the side glimmered in the light of a single lantern: *Grennandew 100 proof.*

“Whiskey?” I said.

“Hide,” said Floy, and the boy’s feet thumped behind me. I reacted too slowly. He caught me by the front of my chemise, and dragged me back over to the tubs.

He lifted me over the first; the fabric started ripping. “Don’t look so frightened,” he said, face ghastly in the lantern light. “When I’ve dropped you in I’ll throw the candle in after, so you can see your way out.”

But he must have been inexperienced in these kinds of situations; his feet were planted squarely, his groin unguarded.

I slammed my knee up. He howled, and I thumped onto the wood and swung him around by the tunic. He lost his balance and fell backwards into the tub.

He stood up with a great gasp, and whiskey sloshed over the sides.

Boots galloped on wood. I turned and saw a tall woman running down a flight of stairs. She jumped the last three steps and reached for the lantern. “Someone’s robbing us, Martly.”

I sprang towards the street door. The woman threw herself in front of me, and I slipped and fell on my knees. She dropped the lantern, catching me under the arms, and the lantern rolled over the stone towards the tub. It was still lit.

“You’d better get out,” I told the boy. He obliged very quickly, putting his arms on the stone and hauling himself up. The lantern fell in with a soft *ploosh*, and an orange light flashed. A low, blue flame spread over the whiskey, making the tub glow green.

A man in a leather apron came down the stairs. “There’s a nice batch,” he said. “Smoked, triple distilled and burned off.” And he laughed and laughed.

“You might laugh, Martly,” grumbled a bigger man who’d come down after him. “That wash was two weeks in the make.”

A girl poked her head through the door at the top of the stairs. “Smelled like a flower, too.”

“It was her done it, I think.” The woman shook me by the arm. “Stay up there,” she called to the girl at the top of the stairs.

“That little mouse?” Martly looked incuriously at me. “Did she come in to get warm? Sometimes they do that.”

“And there’s that one.” The woman pointed at the boy, who was inching toward the door.

The boy began to run. “Grab him, Shadd,” said Martly. The other man ran and grabbed the boy by the collar. The boy jabbed his elbows about, and Martly walked over and twisted his arms up behind him so he was caught between the two men.

“Whoof.” Shadd turned his head away. “He’s all over whiskey.”

“He was in one of the tanks,” said the woman. “I saw him crawl out.”

“She pushed me in,” said the boy. He spoke in the trader’s tongue, and I wondered if he understood a word of what the others were saying.

“He’s a big lad, for a squeaker,” said Martly. “Let’s bring them out to the street. I can hardly see in here, I’m sweating rivers into me eyes.”

The men dragged the boy outside, and the woman marched me after.

Floy flew up my skirt.

“Good lord.” Shadd pushed the boy against the wall and blinked in the sun. “An owl. No wonder he was such a big bouncer.”

“They probably got in a scrap,” said the woman.

“She pushed me in.” The boy shoved against the men’s hands. “And rolled the lantern at me. Tried to *kill* me.”

“Good lass.” Shadd spat on the ground. “The on’y way to kill a roach is by burning it.”

“Nasty talk,” said the woman. “Thrash them and let them go. Chelda,” she called into the door, “Chelda, bring me my stick.” I heard shoes on the stairs, and the girl came out the door with a switch. She was tall as the woman and had the same face, only younger. The woman took the switch. “Hold her,” she said to Chelda. The girl sniffed at me.

“I’ve got to touch her?”

“Just do it, you’ve touched worse.” Chelda turned me round and pressed me against the wall, keeping as far from me as she could. Her mother thrashed the back of my legs, and I closed my eyes and bore it. It hurt, but it wasn’t as bad as the things Fillegal did.

Chelda loosened her hands and her mother said, “No, keep her there. I’d like to find out her father.”

“You think she has a father?” Shadd shook his head.

He took the switch from the woman and made to use it on the human boy, when a man called, “Shadd!” He ran up the street towards us. “Shadd, Martly—my wife said there was trouble.” I saw the glint of his gold hair in the sun. The Rielde from the tavern. Another man came huffing after him.

“What’re you doing here, Ackerly?” said the woman. “They’ll catch you and string you up.”

“Like they did to Nat?” Ackerly said. He looked at the boy. “What’s this?”

“Look at his feet,” said the other man. He was the stout, black-bearded man from last night. “He’ll make a nice ransom for poor Nat.”

“And after that”—Shadd swatted the boy with the stick—“his lordly parents can pay for my ruined whiskey.”

“If you don’t let me go,” said the boy, “I’ll have your ugly,

knacker heads on a pike, and I'll make them sing—" Martly turned the boy's head so his lips were pressed against the wall. The boy kicked his backward and got Martly in the knee. He moaned and bent, and the boy would have wiggled free if the stout man hadn't moved in and locked him in place.

"Let him go," said Ackerly.

"You off yer head?" said the stout man. "An opportunity like this?"

"Is bound to go sour," said Ackerly.

"But, look—"

"Go on, Haberclad. Or my wife'll kill me. And you."

"She don't need to know," said Haberclad.

"She knows more than any of us, and that boy will be the start of an ugly scour."

"Better do as he says," said Martly, shrugging.

"Without even a beating?" said Shadd.

Haberclad frowned and threw the boy into the street. I was surprised he was able to get up so swiftly. He didn't glance back, but ran toward the harbor, still dripping whiskey.

"This one, though." The woman grabbed my arm. "She'll do for a week of cleaning."

"How will you keep her?" said Shadd. "Lock her in the shed? She'll be drunker 'n Martly on Midsummer's eve."

"God, she smells," said the woman. "What's this?" She pulled a fish scale off my shoulder.

"The wasting sickness," I said.

"Gah!" She let go of me, fingers splayed, and Floy and I ran for it. They ran after, and I darted from their hands and hid under a wagon until they went away. I crawled out, and scratching the rest of the scales from my shoulder, looked up. The human boy must've lost his way: he was walking along the quayside.

I chewed my nails, twisted on my heels, and did something even more stupid than usual.

"You're going to follow him?" said Floy. "Reyna—" I swatted at her, and she flew out of my reach. "Reyna, he could have you hanged." I doubted it, and anyway, I didn't much care. He'd done me a world of ill-turns. My legs stung from the thrashing, and I was going to bleed him for it.

I just didn't know how, yet.

I hid behind corners and in doorways, and followed him across the Llenad canal—over the rickety bridge—and all the way to the belltower terrace, which must have been a meeting place. The other two boys were there, scrawling dirty pictures on the steps with hunks of limestone. They laughed, backs facing the street and glaring with the noon sun.

The third stopped and stood behind them. "What true, brave friends I have."

I made a wide circle around the terrace, and ran behind one of the far pillars.

“We couldn’t find you anywhere. But look at this one of Herist,” said the tall, dark-haired one without turning round. “It’s absolutely masterful. Max has a hand for it.”

“His chin’s not long enough. And he’s gone all woody.”

“Because he’s looking at Natty. I drew Natty.”

“Why would anyone go woody over something *you’ve* drawn?”

The dark-haired boy looked over his shoulder. His eyes widened. “What happened to you?” He wrinkled his nose and grinned. “You stink.”

“I had a row with some Elden.”

“And?”

“Took care of myself.”

“And then you jumped into a tub of whiskey?”

“Don’t believe me?” The two boys started laughing. “That clout,” said the third boy, squeezing whiskey out of his hair, “was lucky.”

“It *was* lucky.” The dark boy climbed to his feet and flung away his chalk. “Lucky you ended up with just a bloody lip.”

“How d’ye explain that, Floy?” I said. “Luck must be a doxy. A mistress of many men.”

“Not very dependable, you mean?” she said.

“You think I’m *lucky*?” cried the boy to the other two.

“Come on, Andrei,” said Max. “Let’s go find some roaches. There’re always some beneath the paving stones at the end of Clabber.”

“You’d better wash up a bit, first,” said the dark boy. “Before Mir catches you and thinks you’ve crawled through ten pubs. Your mother’d give you such a thwack it’d break your nose.” He looked up at the trees. “Let’s meet back here at sunset. Max can show us the place while it’s still light.”

They separated, the first two chatting, and the third walking eastward with a morose look, and I suddenly realized how hungry I was. It was about midday.

A man was selling clams next to a deserted building. This in mind, I walked along the quay and found a wooden bucket in a lugger.

I filled the bucket with water and dragged it back to the clam-seller. I entered the building and poured the water from an upper-story window until the clam-seller’s awning collapsed. In the following confusion I ran outside and filled my skirt with clams. Prying the shells open with a nail and eating them raw, I walked back to Skyfane Street to collect my saddlebag, and Floy yelled into my ear the whole way there.



## Fifteen

My boots were gone. I pried the stone loose, nervous about my saddlebag, but it was tucked away where I'd left it.

I ran back to the belltower. The sun was low in the sky, and the boys, Max and Andrei, were leaning against a pillar, talking. I hid in a corner, behind a huckster and his chestnuts. The sun crept down the tower and the dark-haired boy kept the others waiting.

Andrei said, "Where the bloody hell is Trid?" right as Trid walked up the steps behind him. Andrei turned around. "Waxing the carrot?"

"Where's your bonnet of lilies gone?"

"My head aches. I'm not in a happy mood."

"Can you believe that, Max? He's not in a happy mood."

The three of them walked down a wide street beneath a canopy of elms.

"This is really incredibly stupid, Reyna," Floy said. I laughed at her and kept a safe distance behind them.

The boys passed through an arch set in a high, stone wall carved with rowan trees. Beyond this was a big building of halls, wings, and round towers that stretched down a steep hill towards the sea.

"The rowan-gate," I said, and I stopped. "It's the palace, Floy." I turned away, two fingers propping my mouth open.

I couldn't very well walk past the gatehouse, so I climbed a thick, gnarled wisteria and dropped over the wall. I crept alongside buildings, sprinted across lawns, ducked below windows, and chased the boys into a shady garden. I slithered through the whips of a forsythia to listen.

"Not that one," whispered Max to Trid, waving away the ground window in front of them. "That's old Lady Grete. She'll skin you alive if she catches you digging through her panties."

"Don't ask him how he knows," said Andrei.

"It's the second story," said Max. "You climb up that tree." He pointed to a maple growing close to the wall.

"Really?" said Trid. "How'll we manage that with a jar full of roaches?"

"By pretending we're monkeys," said Andrei. "Max does it all the time—he can go first."

"Let's get on." Trid started walking away. "Take a half-hour to get back here."

The other two boys walked after him, arguing and shoving at each other.

*A half-hour*, I thought to myself.

I found a stable just behind a thrust of the building. The saddlery

was locked, so I pulled my needle and chisel from the saddlebag and set them to work. After a few seconds the door swung open.

I unhooked a thick rope from the rafters, and looked for pitch or glue. I found a pot of hide-paste behind the hoof salve, but Floy, who decided to put her anxiety to use, found a tin of glue made from the karaya shrubs of Virnraya. It wouldn't hurt to mix the two together, I thought, taking that as well. Two sandbags came along, and a lighted lantern, and nervous about my time constraints, I lugged it all beneath the maple tree.

I figured a twitch-up snare wasn't going to work for a boy, so I tried something else.

I tied a noose in the rope, tossed it through a fork high in a sturdy limb, and tied the sandbags to the other end of the rope. Then I huffed, growled and pulled on the noose until the sandbags were resting in the fork of the tree.

The bags together weighed about ten stone, and the job would've been impossible but for the tree's help. She obviously felt, in her rotten heart, that my cause was a worthy one, because her roots snaked through the ground and fed me with a burst of strength when I asked.

I climbed up the tree and wound the rope once around a big branch. Then I dropped down and hid the noose beneath the loam, and dirtied the rope so that it blended in the dark with the trunk.

The lantern had been sitting over the glue mixture, and I pinched some between my fingers. Pleased with its quick-setting properties I painted Lady Grete's windowsill thick with the stuff. I attached the lantern to a string, climbed up to the fork with the sandbags, dangled the lantern over the glue to keep it from setting, and waited for the boys to return.

They came soon after, very silently for three humans. Andrei was holding a whiskey jar. I yanked the lantern up and snuffed it out.

Trid stopped. "Did you see a light leap from the window?"

"Light only leaps from the fire," said Andrei. "Go on, Max, she could walk in any minute."

Max jumped into the middle of the buried snare and scurried up the trunk. He disappeared into the dark of the upper window.

"Brilliant," said Trid. He climbed up next, and I thanked my stars for it. He grabbed the jar from Andrei and gave it into Max's arms. He passed so close beneath me I caught the clean smell of his sweat. "There's a rope up here." I caught my breath. "Is there supposed to be a rope?"

"Keep going," said Andrei. "She's got an absurd number of nightgowns."

"How d'you know?"

"Move," he said, and Trid crawled through the window.

Now Andrei stood beneath the first limb, and I kicked the

sandbags from the fork.

They hit the ground with a dry thump. The rope tore up, and a shriek caught in Andrei's throat. The noose grabbed him around the knees, flipped him over, and he jumped upside down in the air, right next to the first-story windowsill. He gripped it.

"Ugh." He tried to pull away, but the glue thickened between his fingers.

More than a little pleased with myself, I swung from the tree into the forsythia. "Quick wit, ain't ye?" I said.

He twisted to face me. "You—"

I pressed my finger to his mouth. "Can't have your friends hearing. Or Lady Grete."

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Apologize."

"Why?"

"Do it."

"No."

"You could say thank you," I said, "if sorry's a bit much."

"Why do you smell so bad?" He eyed my saddlebag. "Do you shit in that and carry it around?"

I ground the bag into his face. "Apologize."

"I wouldn't lower myself so, you rancid little fart."

"You couldn't lower your stupid, fat arse iffen y'tried, human."

I shouldered my saddlebag and turned to the window, and he said, "You stop this at once, or I'll flay your hide to bits and cut off your sneaking feet and break your knees and—"

"Lady Grete," I yelled. "Lady Grete, there's a thief breakin in through your window, ma'am! A big'n. And damn ugly. He may mean ye harm, ma'am."

I heard a commotion inside the building. Eager to be elsewhere when they cut him down, I ran away.

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The first half of summer passed quickly. I danced for meals, and when I grew tired of that, stole, until I grew frightened of the guard and went back to dancing, though both activities resulted in running from someone, whether a vexed soldier or jealous piper.

Nefer, Wille, and Padlimaird had opened shop in the smiths' quarter of the quay. It wasn't easy for Nefer to let go of bad habits. He split and sandwiched coins, fashioned fake seals, and stole the emblems of the more famous artisans, warming all the more to dishonesty when he found his left arm wasn't going to help with the casting of his buckles, goblets and tureens. Despite, or because of, Calragen's administrations, the break hadn't joined smoothly.

I steered clear of the workshop at first, but became lonely, and crept closer and closer until I was running into the boys on purpose.

They walked around with new purpose in their eyes and shiny burns spattered up their forearms. Their arms and shoulders became big and hard, and I burned with envy—I could've been hammering at the forge every day but wouldn't have grown bigger for it.

I mulled over ways to surmount this. For a while I tried to be cunning, slitting purses and selling scarves and hairpins to the folk I had stolen them from, until Floy told me I was being even less cunning than usual.

I always went back to dancing. It was easy money: Fiddle music was always pouring from some public house, and I would spread out my horse blanket for coins, and caper around it only as exuberantly as I felt my stomach growling, and people crowded round—until the tavern owner ran outside to beat me away with a broom or poker.

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The maples were sprouting seedpods, and I was dancing a galliard, when Wille gave me a peculiar assignment. It was early evening. The square opened from the back of a pub called Tuley's, known for its cream whiskey; and tucked into a corner beneath a beech tree was a jumble of wooden tables filled with people. The fiddlers looked well fed, their clothes clean and intact; they were obviously playing the square for gratification, and I set up a couple of feet to the side and was left alone.

The onlookers smoked and laughed, flicking coins at me. My feet bounced up and reached backwards, *touch-kick-tap, touch-kick-tap, snap-kick-and-spin-kick-tap...*

"Let's have her dance on a table," shouted someone. I stopped my legs, wrapped the coins up in the blanket, and heard Wille's voice calling through the talk:

"Oy, Aloren. I found some players who really missed ye."

I threw the saddlebag over my shoulder and crawled beneath the tables until I reached his. He sat pipeless next to Sal (from the tavern), and looked longingly at the other side of the table where ex-brigands Begley, Tom, and Peach were smoking.

"Here's our girl." Begley gave me a clap on the back. "Surprised her feet hain't fallen off."

"Kind of you to leave like that." But I smiled and sat down next to Wille, because I had got along with harmless, morbid Begley tolerably enough. "Where'd all them fiddles go? Need firewood?"

"Down, girlie," he said. "Me singer's snug at home—I prefers me whistle. Tom has his own, though, and we're goin to play a snatch when these feller's are done. We hain't had no drummer since Miggon went to sea, and Peach can't harbor a beat any more than she can a baby, but she's a right good fiddler."

"Miggon took up sailin?" said Wille. "Well, blow me diddle all—

—” Sal grabbed his ear and joggled his head.

“Blow you inter next week, keep up with that kind of talk.”

“Me mam’s come up out of the grave. Anyways, Al”—Wille lowered his voice and pulled me aside—“I got a favor to ask. Been lookin fer ye all over the bloody map, and I’m glad I found you because, you see, this fellow and I got into a little quarrel about rabble-nabbing.”

I became uneasy. Rabble nabbing was a nasty game that had been forcibly introduced to me by the brigands. “You told him you knew a girl could beat him at a rabble-nab?”

“Weren’t like that. He got to talking about how unbeatable he were at it, boasting, really, and I felt he needed a knock at his ego, so I goes and mentions you.”

“Why?” I said angrily.

“And I placed a bet on you.”

“You—what?” I knocked my elbow on the table.

“A bet,” he said miserably. “When I tried takin me word back, he said he’d just as soon take me life when you lost and I didn’t pay up.”

“How much?”

“I don’t want to say. Give ye the jitters.”

“Wille!”

“Hush—I know. He wants to do it tonight,” he said, and I rubbed my elbow. “He’s the skinny one in the corner beneath the tree. See his legs? Looks a bit like a salamander. Please, Lally, please do it for yer old friend Wille. I don’t like the prospect of death any more’n I like the prospect of givin the dirty rascal fifty celms.”

“Wille!”

“I know,” he wailed. “Ain’t I wretched? But you can help an old friend, right? You can help the less-fortunate?”

“You ain’t the only less-fortunate person in these parts.”

I crawled away and dropped my saddlebag beneath an empty table.

Begley and his troop climbed atop their table to play a lively rendition of a song called The Firebird’s Hearts, and Wille, already cured of anxiety, got up to dance with Sal, while Begley sang in his bright, grainy voice.

*“My fearless lass, when off abroad,  
Was bringing me back an egg of gold,  
When upon the slip of a horse ill-shod,  
She dropped and cracked its shining mould.*

*From the pieces flew a flaming bird  
With silver eyes and a frowning beak.  
Quoth he to her: ‘I’ll grant one wish  
In exchange for the heart of the lad you seek.”*

I made for the man sitting alone beneath the beech tree. He was young and thin with a grey face ravaged by the pox, and a grey wool tunic pulled together with a grey leather belt. He polished a small iron dagger with a grey handkerchief, and I stood watching him a while before he looked up.

“What do you want, ducky?” He spat to the side.

“What’s the rules, grease-nose?” I watched his dagger. He stood up, wiping his nose with the kerchief.

*“And take care, he said. ‘If you choose no wish,  
But your lad instead, your heart I’ll steal  
In place of his, for I hunger with  
A hatchling’s greed for a good first meal.”*

“Gorn.” He blew his nose. “She’s as big around as me thumb.”

“What earthly good are you doing as a thief with a thumb that size?”

“Alright, ducky.” He bit his cheek. “We’ll give it until the excitement dies down to a couple flying benches.” He stuck his dagger into his belt. “Not challenging enough? Should we tie our hands and use our teeth?”

I sneered at him, and turned to a big man behind me.

He was inebriated and jabbing his elbows through the air, for he was trying to rid himself of his vest and had got his thumb stuck in a buttonhole.

*“She laughed to herself, ‘I’ll wish my lad  
Straight inter me arms, heart and the rest.’  
No sooner than when she’d wished aloud  
Did I appear clenched cheek to breast.”*

I rammed palms into the big man’s back, pushing him into a crowded table. Then I stuck my foot under the next table over and kicked someone hard enough in the calves that he jumped from his seat and wheeled round. But I had crawled beneath the table.

The first man picked himself up, tore his vest free, and clobbered the ears of the man whose shins I had kicked. They locked in a hug, grunting like bears.

*“But he took both hearts, the firebird did,  
For now both chests were close enough  
To sweep aside with his iron claws  
And rip the rubies from the rough.*

*The wish for which my lass had faith  
Was the wish that every lover spake,*

*And the clever firebird used the wish  
To procure two folk and two hearts to take.”*

The grey thief and I snuck about the drunks, and soon we'd banged up a magnificent brawl complete with exploding pottery, stools breaking over heads, and Wille, dancing wildly with Sal and nicking drinks from abandoned mugs.

*“But cunning as the firebird was,  
My lass and I had flown the test,  
For heartless folk are lawless, too,  
And rules don't hold with an empty chest.*

*Cutting feet free of earth-bound laws,  
We trapped him in his Enna Tree.  
We made him cry, the bloody bird;  
He'd about two thousand more hearts than we.”*

Fists and boots smashed around me. I held my knife ready in my hand to cut purses from strings, and I slipped wallets from pockets before the pockets jumped away. In and out went my arms and feet—a bit like dancing a very fast jig. Poor Floy, whom I'd been ignoring, sped past my head shrieking all manner of useless advice.

*“And when he shook with livid tears,  
His perfect breast was too, too slow  
To keep the trembling hill of hearts  
From slipping t'ward the rocks below.*

*He'd too much pain and hurt to catch  
One thousand eight hundred dimming lights,  
And dripping in shade from his starry roost,  
They broke to a cold five years of nights.*

*As the crimson firebird turned to blue  
We took our broken hearts from him.  
We held them close and kept them warm  
Until their light had ceased to dim.”*

Folk were slowing now, lying about, and nursing their bruises. I crept up to my competitor. He was busy with two fellows wrestling on the ground. As he stole a wallet off one of them, I lifted a good amount of his earnings from his pockets and slipped them into my own to ensure my victory for Wille's sorry sake. Then I stood to the side until the rest of the brawlers had worn themselves out, knocked themselves silly, or grown bored.

*“The hearts burst into glorious day  
And shone through links of starless chain,  
And loath was I to let my lass  
Ride an ill-shod horse abroad again.”*

I led the man over to Begley’s table, to lessen, in the presence of five witnesses, his desire to slit my throat when we counted our coins. We spread them on the table. Begley whistled and the man left with nothing but a sour look.

Wille gave me his winnings. “You’re a lucky fool,” I said, putting coins into my pockets, after giving most of them to Begley’s troop, who hadn’t got many of their own because of the brawl.

“For certain.” Sal gave Wille a nudge. “But if he was convinced all the way to fifty silvers you’d beat the man out, he must’ve been fair confident about your worth, miss.”

“Probably cause he don’t got none to compare it to.”

Wille leaned back, looking obscenely satisfied. “Thank you, little sister.”

“Brothers don’t act like that.” But I flicked him a coin and thought longingly of Tem. And Mordan and Leode. And even Arin.

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I sat still until the blood had stopped thumping in my head, then I went to dump the coins into the saddlebag. I crawled near the table, and the blood come back hot and heavy. Someone was crouched beneath it. The saddlebag was gone and the bottom of my stomach dropped out.

The human boy, the one I’d snared two months before, smiled and said, “You oughtn’t attract so much attention to yourself.”

“Where is it? Where’d you put it, you fire-breathing worm—” I dove beneath the table.

“Trid!” He pummeled me away. “Trid, get her off me—she’ll tear off my face.”

Trid appeared from wherever he’d been hiding, grabbed my legs and pulled me off.

I jerked my limbs every which way, but I was no match for two big boys. They carried me across the street by an arm and a leg, and pushed me into a corner behind some crates.

Floy tore out of nowhere. She agitated their eyes and hair; they tossed her aside, and worried they would hurt her, I yelled at her to stop. Their shoulders reached far above me, and I slumped against the wall, thinking of my father’s signet ring. The boys were highborn; they would find it, know what it was. I would be handed over to the Queen—

“What have y’done with the fool bag?” I shouted.



Their eyes shone gold in the dark, like cats'. "It's found a new home. Bit cleaner than its last." Andrei blotted blood from his nose with a sleeve.

"You needn't worry," Trid said, a hint of wonder in his voice. "It's perfectly safe."

"I've hidden it," Andrei said.

"You had no right," I said.

"Yes I did. You've got the brains of a sausage and I'm bigger than you."

"You wart-bitten son of a castrated mule."

Trid laughed. "This one's got a mouth."

"What d'ye want?" I said.

"A slave," Andrei said. Trid frowned at him.

"We want you to pick a lock for us." He pushed dark hair from his eyes. "We found your supplies hidden in the bushes. Can't imagine a stable hand giving you a key."

"Aloren, they call you?" said Andrei. "Pretty. More like a banging bit of slime mold." I spat in his eye. He raised his hand to strike me, but Trid caught his wrist.

"Was Lady Grete disgusted when she found ye?" I said. "Or'd she make room in her bed?"

"Do you ever want to touch your horrible bag again?"

I turned to Trid. "What lock?"

"It's a matter of locks," Andrei said, "and years. I shall delight in making you miserable for as long as possible."

"Andrei—" Trid stepped between us. "You're not going to strut around being as cruel as you like—"

"You'd *argue* over the sparrowshit? Come on, Trid, when we've exhausted the tool, we'll drop it."

Trid seemed troubled by this, but he decided to clean his hands of it.

"It's your feud."

\*\*\*

They designed for me to meet them at the corner of Perry and Crewald Streets at sunset the next day, as Andrei thought the belltower too public a place to be seen with me hanging about them.

I paced back and forth after they left, and tripped over a broken crock from the brawl. My foot bled. I picked up the crock and smashed it against the wall. "Floy!" I pulled the strings on my chemise. "What do I do, Floy? He has me father's ring, the cocksucking pickled cod."

"You'll do as he says" said Floy angrily. "You won't draw attention to it."

I sank to the curb, head cradled in my hands. "No, I can't. I can't."

“There are more important things at stake,” she said, “than your freedom, or pride, or whatever it is you’re moaning about.”

## Sixteen

Crewald Street ran next to the river in a run-down quarter of the city. Perry slid through the ramshackle houses at an angle, and ended at the river. I sat atop the boardwalk railing, rolling a stolen chisel and needle across my lap, rubbing the part of my neck where the saddlebag strap should have been, watching the poplars across the water change to gold in the sunset.

I heard a clacking and turned round; Trid rode towards me on a brown horse. She sidled when a buckskin squeezed past her, so that Trid had to curb her sharply and wheel her round. The buckskin carried Max and Andrei.

“Can’t you just once,” said Trid, “control your stupid animal?”

“It’s Max who’s stupid,” said Andrei. “Wiggles like an eel. Makes him nervous.”

“Mother has people watching my horse,” said Max. He spotted me and slithered off Andrei’s horse. “That stunt you pulled was absolutely splendid,” he said, walking up to me. “Are you a boy or a girl?”

“A boy wouldn’t run about in a slip.” Andrei led his horse over to the rail to tie his leads next to Trid’s mare. I bit angrily at my nails. “See that hole, lugworm?” He pointed to an opening in the ground with steps looking as though they led toward the river. “You’re going to unlock the little room at the bottom that controls the floodgate.”

“The floodgate?” I was vaguely aware of how the sluice system worked. In the early spring, when the river reached too high for just the canal and threatened to spill into the streets, the sluices were opened to drain water through conduits beneath the city and into the sea. But there were two gates involved, and if the sea gates weren’t opened as well, the water had no place to go, and swamped the lower quarters with sewage. It had happened before. “Why? You want to open it?”

“The whole bottom of the hill turns into a lake,” said Max. “No good for swimming, though, as the water’s nasty. It bubbles up through the paving stones like a fountain.” Max had a cap of close, red-brown curls and a face like a fox’s. I wanted to smash it with my fist.

Trid said, “It started with my coat.” He looked embarrassed. “I’ve got a bunch of coats. It really didn’t matter.”

“Yes, it did.” Andrei swatted a fly away from his face. “Trid left it on a horse-post outside a house, thinking no one’d touch it—he’d lived a sheltered life in Lorila. We found it a week later in a woman pawnbroker’s shop on Dewing, and she said we’d have to

buy it. Damned if we were going to do that.”

“It even had Trid’s family’s sigil on it,” said Max. “A big wolf. And a ‘C’. But she was stupid and didn’t listen, so we decided we’d better ruin her.”

“I didn’t want to ruin her,” said Trid. “Max just wanted a fun time. It was only a coat.”

“Lined with mink,” Andrei said. “Had silver buttons.”

“She was willing to sell it back for ten celms, a third its worth. It would’ve been easy—”

“For you, Trid,” said Andrei. “You let people walk all over you. But Max and I stole hairpins and those huge earrings from Max’s mam, and sent your boy—”

“Wasn’t mine. It was Max’s.”

“Whatever, and he went to sell them to her—”

“Halio didn’t sell them,” said Max. “He left them on the counter and scarpered. Yellow like a canary, that one. Sings like one, too. My mother fancies him. He tipped her off about the pawnbroker, said she had stolen the earrings, and my mother lapped it up. So the old woman was brought in for questioning and she was questioned all right. So was I. Guess who my mother believed?” Max shook his head sadly. “My own mother.”

Andrei snorted. “We should’ve stolen my mother’s earrings. She’d have chopped off the hag’s arms. Instead we had to scrub the larder floor.”

“So we’re going to flood her out,” said Max. “She’s the reason Mother watches my horse.”

“On the contrary.” Andrei looked over at him. “Without those bells hanging from her ears she can better hear you talk. But let’s get on with it before dark. I shouldn’t want to miss all the Elden shrieking.”

I took a deep breath, to calm myself. “You’re all great idiots, you know. The biggest bunch of idiots ever.”

Max laughed. “Now, you shouldn’t—” Andrei stepped hard on Max’s foot. “Shithead.”

“Let her talk—should be funny.”

“First of all,” I said, “about that old woman, that weren’t her fault at all, she didn’t steal the cloak. She took it from someone as collateral. That’s what pawnbrokers *do*.” I wondered if they’d been walking around with sacks over their heads. “And there’s more folk than her livin down there. A whole lot of em. Ye can’t do something like this without thinkin about their swamped-out homes. What’ll become of them?”

Andrei shrugged. “A few Elden swimming through the wetter streets might make the dryer ones stink less.”

Max sneezed. Trid had the decency to look uncomfortable. “About that. She’s got a point—”

“Gods, Trid,” said Andrei. “Your balls are looking more

shriveled every minute. If you want to stay a girl forever—”

“You think you’re a man?” I said to Andrei. “You’re a weasel.”

“And you,” he said in measured tones, “are in no position to call me names other than ‘my good lord’ or ‘my worshipful master’ or ‘my most gracious sovereign’, and perhaps somewhere far, far down the road I shall let you graduate to ‘Andrei’, but we’ve quite a-ways before we reach that point.”

Sick with fury, I bit my tongue.

“Dying to say it, aren’t you?” He smiled horribly. “Well, go on. I promise I shan’t do anything except laugh.”

My tongue bled all throughout my work. The taste became unbearable, and I spit pink gobs onto the pavement.

Afterwards I stood on the edge of the great wet mess I had made. People shouted in the distance, voices echoing over the water, and big, greasy bubbles rose to the surface, popping and releasing a foul stench. I was alone except for Floy.

“I hate you.” The black water stirred. “I hate you I hate you I hate you.”

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About midway through the summer I noticed Padlimaird was drawing water for the smithy from the soldier’s fountain. He and Wille thought the walk to the closest community well too arduous and pointless a trip at a half-mile and with the barracks courtyard boasting such a fine, clean alternative just north of their workshop.

I didn’t fear for Wille, who was almost grown and able to talk his way out of anything. But Padlimaird was only fourteen and small for his age. Occasionally I spied him carrying the bucket to and from the fountain, and I balked at the idea of the soldiers catching him at it.

Most of them were human, tall and strange, because the commander of the city garrison had put his faith into brawn, and humans supplied that at short order. I didn’t believe in the goodwill of humans anymore. Upon catching Padlimaird moseying back with his water one rainy morning, I felt compelled to tell him he shouldn’t, either.

He set down the bucket and said, “Wille does it, too. Why ain’t y’ dickerin after him?”

“Wille’s older than you, and his head’s always been too thick for sense—”

“Wille don’t care, and neither do I.”

“Oh, aye,” I said. “And someday he’ll find that not caring was the worst choice he ever made, when all the trouble he never noticed’ll creep up and trounce him, where he thought it was a load o’ nothing. And it’ll happen to you, too—”

“Trouble *is* nothing.” Padlimaird picked up his bucket and tried

to push past me, but I stepped in his way. “Remember old Raggy? A-feared of everything in the world, but it was all nothing in the end.”

“The end’s not here, Padlimaird.” I yanked him down by his shirtfront so I could look at him directly. “Y’can’t know it’s nothing. Calragen was mostly scared by the end. The end is right when he dies and leaves the world a shambles for everyone younger than he is. No wonder old folks is always so frightened—nobody else is scared enough. The next mornin you filch water from the barracks might well be the last mornin ye spend on your idiot legs.”

“I’ll be damned if I go about shakin in me boots because of a bunch of humans.”

“Fine,” I yelled. “It’s your head.”

Padlimaird changed subjects. “Wille says ye look worn out as a wrung hankie. Are you worn out, Alorean? Cause it seems like someone’s been wringing ye of every shred o’ common sense ye used to have.”

Our definitions of common sense differing so, I wasn’t going to make more progress. So I turned on my heel and stormed off, making a mental note to avoid Wille.

\*\*\*

Padlimaird’s obstinacy very nearly cost him his toes about a month after we had our argument, because two of the guard caught him at it, both human, and both in need of a diversion from guarding the east armory.

Lucky for Paddy, Andrei, Trid and Max had planned to pick the lock on the east armory that very morning. (Max, whose mother didn’t allow him a sword in his belt, was especially keen.) I followed the human boys across the barracks bridge, through the brick arcade, and into the courtyard.

Max walked over to the drowsing sentries. “My, but it’s muggy today.” He waved air into his tunic, and the men immediately snapped awake and stood up straighter.

“And it’s only going to get hotter. Look at that sun.” Andrei stepped into the shade.

“I’d keel over and die out here if the fountain weren’t right there,” said Max, pointing. “Especially cold for some reason, that water was just now.” He slipped a tin pannikin off his belt and offered it to the first sentry, a man with a curly beard. “You look like you could do with some water, sir.”

“Go on.” Trid wiped his forearm (after he had spit on it) across his brow. “It’s a blister out here.”

“Gracious, do my sandals stink in this heat,” said Andrei. “But not as much as Max’s armpits. If you fellows feel faint you’d better leave before the fumes get to your heads.”

Curly-beard eyed the pannikin nervously. “Best we don’t leave our watch.”

“If the both of you don’t clear out,” said Andrei, “I’ll tell Herist how you’re all set for the night watch because of the nap you were just taking at your post.”

The soldier took the cup from Max with a suspicious look, and in a great clinking of hauberts, pulled his fellow after him towards the fountain.

“Aloren.” Andrei looked around for me. “Aloren, hurry up.”

I shuddered, and stumped over to the double-bolted door, and Floy threw herself into my hands, chipping and trilling. The chisel dropped from my teeth.

Trid said to Andrei, “Have you ever seen a sparrow do that?”

“The fire-headed feck,” I said to Floy. “Did he have to choose now?” I picked up the chisel, pushed through the gawking boys and ran towards the fountain.

Beside it Curly-beard held Padlimaird by one of his protruding ears. The other raised his hand and bowled Padlimaird over, and Curly-beard sat on Padlimaird’s legs to stop their kicking, and grabbed Padlimaird’s hair to keep Padlimaird’s teeth from sinking into his arm.

“Get off me, you bear in a dress,” Padlimaird shrieked.

“We’ll teach you not to hit, scab.” The second soldier unsheathed his short sword. “Won’t be kicking, neither, when I lop your toes off.”

“When you could’ve got off with just a quick shave of the head,” said Curly-beard.

I added to the taunting: “Think you’re brave, now?” And I leapt forward to stick a soldier through the heart with my chisel.

Andrei grabbed a handful of my chemise and I fell on my butt.

“First they’ll rape you blind,” he said matter-of-factly, “then they’ll beat you into a pulp.”

“Let go.” I rolled onto my stomach, and pulled away from him. “They’ll cut him.”

“Mercy me,” he said.

Trid walked after us, saw the bucket, the wet seeping through the flagstones.

“Water?” he said, and laughed. He leaned over Andrei, who’d fallen behind me, and unpinned a broach from Andrei’s right shoulder. “So much for keeping the peace.” And he strode towards the soldiers, pinning the thing onto his tunic.

I picked myself up to better watch.

Trid stuck out a hand at the soldiers. “Let him go,” he said. “You’ve taught him his lesson. This isn’t Lorila.”

Both men stared at him for the minute it took their eyes to move from his face to Andrei’s broach. “My lord.” The soldier on top of Padlimaird loosened his legs, and Padlimaird slid out from beneath

him.

He flattened his shirt, trying to look cavalier. He said to me: “Why’re ye hanging round a bunch of owls?”

“Hasn’t much of a choice.” Andrei walked up beside us and pushed me out of the way. “The next time you disrupt such a brilliant idea, I’ll—”

“Toss off stupid death threats,” I said. He gave me a high look and spoke to Trid.

“You should go back to Lorila. All those oppressed Rilelden you can save.”

“But then you’d be short a friend.” Trid handed back the broach. “And you’re not doing much to win new ones.”

“Sweet blessed earth.” Padlimaird shook Trid’s hand. “Thank ye kindly, sir.”

“Wear boots,” Trid said, looking at the boy’s feet. “And don’t get water here—that was stupid.”

“Aye, m’lord.” Padlimaird tramped away with his empty bucket.

I scowled after him, certain Wille and Nefer would know all about my unlikely acquaintances by the next half-hour.

“Aye, m’lord,” crowed Andrei into Trid’s ear. Trid shoved him through the arcade, and Max joined us from where he had watched the whole thing.

I thought of all the *m’lord’s* and *sir’s* the humans seemed to inspire in everyone, and had a sudden notion—one of those that haunt the mind until they’re cleared and settled. So I ran and caught up with the boys.

“D’you ever see the Queen’s son?” I asked them. Andrei stopped for a beat, and his face took on a queer expression.

“Too much.” He strode ahead of Trid and me.

Max took Andrei’s place. “The prince gets in the way of Andy’s fun. He doesn’t like the prince.”

“He’s not a prince,” said Andrei.

“He’s a nasty little bastard,” I said.

The boys on either side of me began to laugh, softly at first, but it soon became an impediment, and they had to stop and calm themselves. “Aloren,” said Max, “you’re a lark. Careful you’re not a dead one.”

\*\*\*

After Trid took the initiative to help Padlimaird, I grew a grudging affection for him: for his fairness, never quite beaten into submission by his peers, and for the unexpected dexterity of his long fingers.

He badgered and goaded me until I’d taught him how to pick a lock, care for a beaten dog, mend a broken finger.

Lord or no, Trid wanted to be a doctor. This puzzled me, as



healing was a woman's profession among the Gralde. But Trid was human, as well as from Lorila.

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Autumn came, sweeping in with cold rain, and the locust trees spread naked limbs under the bell tower. The ground shone, paved with their gold leaves.

I sat on the top step waiting for Andrei, who'd exhausted his supply of discreet meeting-places, to tell me what I was to do next. I expected an angry shout from him. I'd sprained my ankle dancing the day before and my steps were slow and laborious.

He bounded up the steps, face steely with excitement. Max walked behind him with a more glum expression. Andrei stopped to take a great bite of something wrapped in a cloth napkin, allowing Max to speak first: "*I* wanted to break into Luka's cabinet tomorrow night—see if he had leaf in there, but *I* was ruled out."

"Stop wingeing," Andrei said. "It's Herist's records, and I'm going to slug you if you don't shut up."

I jumped up, rolled on my bad ankle, and fell down. "Herist?" Perchevor Herist, commander of the city garrison and owner of two-thirds of the vessels in the harbor, was not known for his leniency toward thieves. Or Gralde. "Are you mad?" I rubbed my ankle.

"Barking," said Max.

"She's gone and hurt herself." Andrei stared at the ankle. It was swollen into an angry red ring. "A great deal of help you're going to be tomorrow, you dancing monkey." My mouth twisted down. "Don't give me that—I see you doing it everywhere. Gods know why. You've precious little to be so happy about."

I stood up again, two steps above him, swaying. "What d'ye know about happiness, you stinkin maggoty canker?"

He bent real close. "Shake the sand out of your cunny before tomorrow. We don't want a problem."

"You should talk—got a pike so far up your arse it's scrambling your brains. Get everyone killed, you will."

"I ought to smack you." Our exchanges were becoming boringly rote. "I'm thirsty," he complained to Max. "Let's go find a fountain."

## Seventeen

Andrei chose an afternoon Commander Herist planned to spend far away from the palace—occupied with inspecting his warehouses. Andrei was certain there was something subversive buried in Herist’s mercantile and military books. I got the impression Andrei didn’t much like Herist.

It was at this point I first knew Max to have a twin brother, Luka: exactly the same in looks, but more spastic in temperament. It was interesting that Andrei had invited him along, as he didn’t like Luka any more than he liked Herist. Perhaps he wanted more bodies for rifling through Herist’s things, because the boys cornered Luka into taking the first watch.

We met at the eastern wall, under the hill, to sneak through a little postern I was made to unlock.

The door swung open—just inside was a flight of steps cut into the hill. Andrei sighed. “Haven’t been this way in three years,” he said. “Since he set up shop in this part of the building.” He was the first to go through, at a gallop.

I stood at the bottom with Luka, wondering how to coax my lame ankle up the stairs, until Trid walked back down. He put his arm around me and half-carried me up, through a garden where yellow roses had climbed over everything, and into the building.

The chest took a time to find. It was in the farthest room, hidden under a wolf-skin with a snarling snout that made everyone wary of drawing near.

“Have at it.” Andrei swept the skin off by its tail and draped it over the bed. The chest was big and bound at the corners with hammered iron, and the lock was built in. I put my wrench into the keyhole, slid my needle inside, and felt the breaking of the first tumbler as far back as the needle could reach.

It began to rain outside. The air grew colder, numbing my fingers. I was moving carefully to the third pin when Luka burst through the door, his hair soaked.

Max was snooping through the wardrobe. “Dark too frightening for you?”

“They’re coming—I saw them walking this way—”

“We’ve still got time.” Andrei crossed the room in three bounds. “I’m going to do something—”

Luka blocked the doorway. “If you’re caught,” he said to Andrei, “you’ll cause a stupendous rift between the military and the peerage.”

“And you’re a stupendous idiot if you think I care,” said Andrei. He shoved Luka out of the way. “Aloren, when you finish all of

you are to carry as many as you—”

“Leave.” Trid prodded him out the door. “Before he finds us inside his rooms instead of out.”

Andrei left, still yelling instructions, and Trid grumbled in the doorway for a bit, and then walked after him.

I went back to work. Luka squatted beside me, yelling at my fingers. “How d’you make the tick work faster?” he said to Max. “Does she even understand me?”

“I expect not.” Max snapped his arms from the wardrobe. “You talk like a drunk squirrel.”

“Oh, no.” Luka had thrust his head outside the room. “I hear them. They’re inside. Oh, no—”

Max walked over and stuffed his brother’s head under his arm. “Shut up, idiot.” Luka struggled frantically, and Max backed him into the bed and pushed his face into the bedclothes. “Aloren, hurry your fingers along for light’s sake.”

“There’re *nine* pins,” I said.

“Where’ve Trid and Andy got to?” Max released Luka, who had become quiet. I raised my last pin, shifted positions, and broke into a sweat when the keyway wouldn’t rotate.

The pin had gone past its breaking point. I slowly released tension from the chisel handle, felt the pin click into place, and turned the key. I let my exhausted hand slide to the ground.

Luka thought I had given up. “Lazy little shit.”

He ground his boot into my fingers just as Andrei barreled through the door with Trid right behind.

I howled and snatched my hand to my chest. Andrei sank his fist into Luka’s stomach, and Luka collapsed, squealing.

“Don’t touch things that aren’t yours.” Andrei knelt beside me and flung open the trunk. Inside were books, ledgers, and bundles of old letters, meticulously sorted.

I shrank away, but Andrei pulled me back by the arm. “You’re helping too.” He pushed my hand into the chest.

I ignored the pain and gathered an armful of the parchment. I scrambled up and moved away so the others could reach in.

Digging, Andrei said, “Tried to talk with him about Evelers—all his knee splitters and other nasties where he could just have it off with the man’s wife, but he guessed. Right away he guessed, so I left, and he’s probably marching up with the whole garrison.”

He growled at me to leave. But as I picked my way toward the door, my ankle turned and the parchment spilled onto the floor.

The other boys pushed past and I knelt to retrieve it. I’d got half of it up when I noticed the letter poking out from the bottom.

I went still. Andrei had lingered behind to close the lid and throw the wolf-skin over it. His hands reached before mine could, and snatched up Tem’s letter and all the rest. I squatted, staring, turning over in my mind a vision of Herist picking the thing off the

ground after he'd shot my uncle through the back with an arrow. And then tossing it into his chest when he failed to understand the Galde.

"Well?" Andrei paused at the door. "Come on." He caught my wrist and swung me to my feet. I was dragged down a corridor, handed to Trid, and neglected when Trid paid more attention to the letters he was holding. Max prodded Luka ahead with his elbows, arms full of parchment. Andrei ran ahead, shuffling through the parchment in his hands.

"Yes," he called, stopping in mid jump so that Luka ran into him. "I knew it. I knew he was double-dealing. With Duke Caveira of Dirlan."

Trid stopped with me ten feet behind everyone else, and the blood drained from his face. Trid was Caveira's nephew, and suffered for it whenever the man did something stupid. He'd been reading a letter, and he stared over my head at Andrei, who said:

"He's building up an army. Been growing the military—you've seen it—there're more soldiers in Ellyned now than there used to be, and it's driving the Girelden mad. He's going to threaten Caveira with war."

"Threaten Caveira with war?" said Max. "How is that double-dealing?"

"Caveira needs troops. The Ravyir will give him troops if he thinks Norembry's going to invade eastern Lorila. Caveira wants to beat his cousins out and become the next Ravyir—he's promised Herist a province in return, he's promised him Garada. Ugh! Imagine—but there'll be worse, I'll stake my life on it. Herist'll double cross him in the end. He's looking for a short trip to power—this must be it! It's brilliant—"

"Mad, are you?" said Max. "Herist couldn't find his arse with both hands. And Caveira wants to give him *Garada*?"

"Worse than that, probably," said Andrei. "As soon's they've both got enough men, they'll go after the whole of Lorila and Norembry in a combined effort."

"Andy—" Max looked back at Trid. "I know Herist is a giant fuck, but you're crazy."

"Always was," muttered Luka.

"Caveira's been collecting soldiers, anyway," said Andrei. "He wants most desperately to be king of Lorila—been doing everything he can to squeeze funds out of the current king. Probably to the point of encouraging the outlaws in his province. Maybe he has his soldiers dress as brigands, makes them go raiding."

Max gave a snort, and Andrei said to him, "I'm serious. Daonac Lauriad must've known. He was absurdly concerned about the western wildmen. Too concerned for Caveira's comfort. They'll tell you it was because his children were living out there, but I still wonder how a crew of wild boors could've killed Daonac Lauriad."

Trid said, "You're half right, you know." He spoke as though he wasn't sure he ought to go further. "It wasn't a crew of wild boors. They were soldiers disguised as bandits. Not Lorilan ones. Noremes."

I dropped my letters a second time. No one noticed.

Trid kept on: "They had the face paint, the gaudery, everything. Herist was in charge of it, apparently. See this?" He held up his letter, his hand trembling a very little. "A letter of instruction, from three years back, when Herist was out west. Gods know why he still has it. Good for blackmail, I suppose. The letter has the Queen's seal, see?" He was looking at Andrei.

"Go on." Andrei's voice was strange, detached, as if he didn't really care. "Go on and say all of it."

Trid shrugged, scanning the letter. "She planned it for the littlest one's birthday, when she was sure the King would visit. She went herself, even, to make sure the thing was done—to her satisfaction." He looked sick. "She bribed their cook, she wrote, after the cook let slip. Or it wasn't the cook; a scullion, rather, a little girl at a market up in Gaelhead. That's how she found them."

"So the Queen killed him?" said Andrei. "And his children? Does the letter say why?" The corridor lacked a cresset at that end, and his face was hidden in shadow.

But no light was necessary to feel the terror coming from Floy's little breast. I looked into the corner; she gaped at Trid with slate-black eyes in a girl's face.

"Trid," said Andrei. Trid took a long breath. "Why would the Queen do that? Kill the King, all his children, *and* Ederach? Of course Herist killed Ederach. We all know Herist killed Ederach, but it must've been under her orders. Why all of them?" His voice became higher and more forced. "Let me read it. Give it here."

I turned back to Floy, but she had resumed her usual form and was flinging herself through the garret.

"Not now." Trid shoved it behind his back. "They're coming. Can't you hear them?"

Faint voices echoed down the walls. Andrei leapt at Trid's hand and ripped the letter free.

"Nobody knew anything? No wonder." Max's eyes were round as coins. "All this, if it's true, it'll be *perfect* for getting whatever we want. Just think. Think what we could do...blackmailing the Queen!" He burst into laughter. I put Floy out of my head.

"Do?" I said. "The only decent thing ye could do is nark on her to the rest, and right away. And Herist's meddling with Caveira, too."

"We'll do no such thing," said Andrei on top of my voice, and after taking two crazy steps forward, he turned around. "And if I hear one word's got out I'll have your tongue slit."

Max stopped laughing. A clash of habergeons sounded at the far

end of the hall. Andrei turned and fled round a corner, the other boys running in his wake, except for Trid, who had me to look after.

He turned toward the noise and must have seen its makers. He slammed me onto the floor, shoved me beneath a trestle table, and squeezed beside me.

He grabbed a candleholder from the table, and made as if to throw it toward a far window, but I pinned down his arms.

A carpet covered the length of the corridor floor, reaching almost to our table. I remembered that a stool with a porcelain jar stood on this carpet. The stool was set before the door to an adjoining corridor.

I reached my hands out, and clenching my teeth to keep in the shout of pain, gave the carpet a yank. There came a crash of wood and pottery, a shout of voices, and a fading thud of boots. Trid helped me out from under the table.

“Move,” he said. “Hallway’s a dead end.”

Immediately after he spoke the boots came running back. We turned the corner; hanging on the wall before us was a richly colored tapestry of a blooming peach tree.

I’d stood here before...

“Hold it.” I pulled Trid behind the tapestry. Sneezing, I found a door handle. It was unlocked, and easing it open, I slipped through.

I brushed cobwebs away from my face and looked round. Trid, who’d come through behind me, stared at me, stared at the room.

Leaves dusted the corners and littered the bed. They’d never closed the window, apparently, and the ivy had crept in with the sun, rain and snow. The black rocking chair still sat in the corner, grown faded with laps of sun every evening, and the rain poured in with an accustomed hiss.

I stepped in a puddle, drew my foot back. Though she kept hidden, Floy had followed me in. I looked at the soiled bed, remembering the red of the sunset and Leode’s wet hair.

“It would’ve happened somehow,” I said to her. “With or without you.”

Her claws scratched about in the leaves, and careful not to step on her, I limped over to Trid, who had moved to the other side of the room.

“Here’s the proper door.” He joggled it and it opened with a bang.

We went along a corridor and came into a long hall with a pitched roof. Thin piers branched upwards like tree trunks. The windows were laced with leaf and branch tracery, and a gallery high on one side opened into the raining night. The room moved with wings, and row upon row of cages swinging in a light wind.

A fear filled me, that hadn’t come from within me. “What’s this place?”

“Sounds like an aviary.” Trid looked around and scratched his

neck. “Lady Dariond’s.”

We heard a clang of soldiers on the other side of the hall. Trid jumped. “I thought we had lost them. This is the last time I’m going on a treasure hunt with leave-them-to-rot-Andrei—”

“Why anyway? Why’ve you befriended that gigantic git?”

We squeezed through cages, looking for an exit.

“Don’t know,” said Trid. “Inexplicable.”

“Kalka,” shouted a man’s voice. “Run up the center and we’ll corner them.”

Trid pulled me west below the gallery, and the wind stirred us into a fast walk.

I slipped on bird scat and hit the flagstones. Trid fell on top of me.

“They heard that,” he said, and pulled me up. “Let’s run.” And holding my arm, he ran so vigorously my feet left the ground, twisted beneath me, and knocked over a cage on a stand.

He let go of my wrist, and I looked at the cage: my chin had put a dent in the wire. “There it is—the door,” he said.

But I only saw the bird in the cage: a dove, black as the rain-washed night.

I temporarily lost my mind. I picked myself up and ran, heeding neither the pain in my ankle, nor Trid’s yelling. I ran in the wrong direction, right into a window, so fast I picked up scarcely a cut when I shattered the glass and fell through.

I landed on my side in a patch of mud. My ankle throbbed in giant beats.

I gritted my teeth and dragged myself around a corner of the building, cutting my knees on broken glass. There was an evergreen shrub growing against the wall. I crawled beneath it and curled up, thinking hard.

“That could’ve been Leode,” I said to Floy. “We have to go back and check. There’s nothing else for it.”

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I sat beneath the bush for a long time. The lights dimmed, the curtain of rain never broke, and two pairs of boots slogged past. And knowing tonight was going to turn into tomorrow-morning, I climbed up and picked my way back to the broken window.

I swung my leg over the sill and lowered myself to the floor, listening for voices. Nothing but the rain came, so I inched forward, hands gripping the wall. I forgot where I had knocked into the cage and someone had repaired my damage.

The lamps were lit. The place was full of cages, wood and wire, square, round, octagonal, some hanging, some standing—and their inhabitants crowded my mind, tangling fear and bewilderment into nonsense: “Iron, sky, wind, iron, iron, iron. Stretch, stretch, look at

her slow legs, wrapped in air, her reaching hands, but no stretching for us. We are heavy, like water under the rocks.” They grew more agitated as I went along.

“I’m caged, too,” I said. “Can’t you see it? And a million keys growing up the river, so far from here. Spring passes so quick and them flowers is so far away, I should have wished for my own wings.” I leaned against the cold stones, breathing heavily.

“Keys,” they said, as if they understood. “Keys! Keys! Keys!” So I let them out.

I hobbled up and down the room, throwing open the cage doors, and where locks hung I picked them or pried apart the wire until the birds were able to slip through.

Goshawks and grey ravens flew around the pitched ceiling. Greenfinches and bluebirds flitted between my legs, and my satisfaction grew with every wing I set free, so that I didn’t think once how the canaries would survive the winter.

Floy caught their attention, and soon had a flock following her: jewel-bright, glinting in the oil lamps, echoing through the gallery, swallowed by the cold rain.

Behind a cabinet of doves I found the black one sitting in his cage, nipping at his tail. The cage was round with turreted top, and the door had a lock. I put my face close to steady my utensils.

“Craven crows,” said the dove, and he latched onto the other side of the cage. “Who the hell are you?”

“Your sister.” I turned the lock. “And don’t go cussing.”

His neck feathers puffed. “I can’t believe this.” It was Leode. “I can’t believe this. You look like a street boy. The kind that eats pigeons. You look awful, did you know? We didn’t dare say it, but we thought you were dead.”

I opened the door for him, and he hopped onto my arm. His claws dug into my skin, and it felt so good my eyes teared up. I found it hard to speak.

Floy landed beside him and spoke for me: “What sort of harebrained, stupid thing were you doing that you got shut up like this? The others’re probably out of their minds.”

“A human caught and sold me.” He tilted his head. “A soldier, with orange galligaskins. I was hanging about near a horse trough with Mordan, and he left for a while, and I got thirsty. It’s awful when you’re a black bird—all the wind and dust and sunlight baking you up, and so I—”

Scratching my wrist, Leode backed down my arm. He stared above my head. Floy took flight.

“Did you set them all loose?” The voice was deep and clipped. “Little thief. How did you get in?”

It was the human who had swallowed my neck in his huge hand, the soldier who had seen my seal on the pier.

I threw Leode off my wrist. The man cracked me in the face and



pushed me against the wall. He dug beneath his cuirass and drew out a wicked-looking, curved knife.

He pinned my left hand to the wall and dragged the tip of the blade across my wrist. "Tell me, thiefling. Were you lurking around my rooms? Did some bad man pay you to sift through my possessions?"

He made a slit across my wrist. The crease welled with blood.

But the man dropped the blade and lurched forward; Leode, gone Elde, had jumped onto his back. The boy flashed immediately back into a dove. "There're more?" The man called for aid.

Two soldiers came running into the hall. Floy flew over their heads, and my knees turned to wood.

"Leode, Floy—" I bit at the officer's hands. "Get out, they'll kill you."

I attempted to run and my ankle flopped. I went down, tripping over someone's boots. He pushed forward and grabbed me up under my arm and leg just as his fellow dived from the opposite direction and caught hold of me around the other leg.

They slipped, skidded, and pulled me vigorously in two directions. My thigh snapped. I screamed, fighting my arms free, and one of them put his hands around my neck.

He lifted my feet from the ground. I choked, kicking and scratching, and Floy attacked his nose and Leode scraped at his eyes. The man dropped my neck, agile Floy leapt away, and Leode received a great whack from the back of a hand.

He hit the wall. The boy shimmered on for a moment, and a dove fell to the ground.

I pulled myself toward him. The man backed away.

"It's a demon," he said. "Wild eyes, hair—melted clean into the air—"

Leode shrugged his left wing. I scooped him up and turned into the corner. "I told you to leave." I bit my chemise and shook. "Idiot."

"A demon?" said the officer. "This is a breed worse. Get back to your watches. There might be more of them."

Floy picked around my knees and the footsteps faded. I felt the eyes of the officer on me.

"Bit of filth couldn't slink fast enough." He dug his boot into my back and abruptly pulled it out.

"Herist?" The voice was rough with tiredness. "What's squealing? Have you stuck a pig?"

"Children should be a-bed at this hour."

"It's hard to sleep next to a boar hunt." I bit my knuckles. "What happened to all the birds?"

"On your way, boy," said Herist.

"Is that a person?" The boy laughed.

"A thief. We broke her leg. Get you back to bed."

But his feet padded over the stone, coming closer. I gathered Leode into my arm, thinking disjointedly. A hand touched my shoulder; I grabbed his nightshirt, pulled myself up.

He swung forward and his head hit the wall. It was Andrei. I froze in chagrin.

He rubbed his head, and I lunged under his arm. My leg collapsed. I scrambled forward on my knees, not knowing what else to do, pushing the dove ahead of my chest, and Herist walked two steps after. He took up my ankle and twisted it. A throb shot through my thigh; I shrieked and the room spun.

“Wait, you pig.” Andrei was squatting in front of me, his mouth open, and I thought he was going to yell at me, but he spoke to Herist instead: “Let her be.” I had never seen such hatred in a face.

Herist dropped my leg. “Why do you care?”

I shoved Leode between my knees and Andrei unclenched my hands. “What’s she stolen? I don’t see anything.”

“Fifty birds, damage to property—” Herist gestured at the room’s wreckage.

Andrei rubbed blood between his fingers, stared at my hands. He’d exhausted his tool. I thought of being dropped at Herist’s feet.

I caught his eye. *Make him stop. Please, make him stop.*

Andrei looked away, and Herist smiled at me, smiled at my thin, tattered shift. “Try to put a contrite face on, little worm. Those who confess get off with less—”

“Confess, Aloren,” Andrei interrupted. “He’ll give you a pardon and a fucking and a bloody stump. Don’t confess and he’ll kill you.”

Herist opened his mouth: “For gods’ sake.”

“Shut up,” said Andrei. “I’ll decide the punishment. Your punishment will end badly for me.”

Herist gave a bark of laughter. “How so?”

I put Leode in my lap and pushed with my elbows away from them. Andrei said, “You were going to cut her hand off. Her hand is quite dear to me. Without her hand I wouldn’t know what a child-killing, king-slaying whore you are.”

Herist grew very stiff. “If I were to tell the Queen—”

“She’d break my fingers,” said Andrei. “Right after she fed you to your dogs. I know about you and that rat, Caveira. Let the girl go, I want both her hands.”

Herist’s eyelid twitched. “Why?”

“To strangle you with.”

“How clever. I’ve deduced you know something else. About a deed done under another’s discretion.” Herist bent down, so close to Andrei’s nose that I barely heard his words. “Blackmail can go very much awry. So awry, in fact, that it can be flipped completely onto its head.”

Andrei looked toward me. “Get out.”

Leode clung to my arm. My head was swimming with pain, and Floy told me where to go.

I passed through the door at the back: a flight of stairs spiraled down. Floy was silent, so I moved forward with the wall. My skin grew clammy beneath my chemise, and my mouth was dry, so dry.

The first step was excruciating, and the second washed into a tumult by the ringing in my ears. I don't remember a third.

## Eighteen

I sneezed. Something—a great, big something—moved to my left, and I pushed back into a heap of straw. Pain swelled through my leg, and tears started in my eyes.

The horse looked at me over her hindquarters. I knew her grizzled face. It was Liskara, Father's mare, well traveled enough that she had stolidly and successfully made her way back home.

"Liskara makes for the dullest company." Trid leaned close and peered into my face. "So we thought you'd be especially good for each other."

We were in a stable stall. He sat on an overturned crate. There was a small jug of water at his feet, and I stared at it until he shoved it into my arms. I drank all of it, spilling it down my front.

"It's mid-morning." Max was squeezed on the crate next to him. He'd a hunk of bread and an apple, and he put them both into my lap. I almost smiled. "I wouldn't have treated you to a lie-in."

Andrei pushed Max off the crate.

"Right clever of you," he said, taking Max's spot, "draping yourself across my only path back to bed. I was tired enough."

Trid snorted. "I thought she weighed less than a dead fly."

"Where's the dove?" I'd finished the bread, and I propped myself up on my elbows. "Where is he?"

Trid pushed me back into the straw. "Roosting on the windowsill above your head. Don't get up, you haven't got to stand to see it."

"Don't listen to him." Andrei pulled Trid back. "Jump up and run around—better our chances at winning."

"Winning?" I said. "At what?"

"Max and I are wagering twenty celms that Trid won't be able to fix it. So poor Trid's going to have to pay back double that amount, as well as carry you around."

I stared at them. "You're bettin on a leg?"

"Yours." Max leaned against the doorpost and fiddled with his belt.

"Not really," said Andrei, "as I rescued it."

"I fed it," Max said.

"And I'm going to mend it." Trid knelt down and straightened it. I cried out and broke into a cold sweat.

"I don't know." Andrei looked doubtful. "Maybe we should get Gadfrem. He does dogs."

Trid leered at Andrei. "Arguing over the sparrowshit?"

Andrei thumped Trid in the chest, Trid fell on top of me, and I blacked out briefly and saw starbursts. I came to and gave a much

louder shout than before.

“Maxim Garvad,” came a woman’s voice in the corridor. “If I catch you torturing a cat, I’ll wallop you black.”

Max’s ears grew red. “Didn’t have anything to do with it, did I? Why’s it always my name that pops into people’s heads?”

“A pointless question.” She looked round the door. It was Bequen from the tavern, Ackerly’s black-haired wife.

A muscle throbbed in her jaw. She said quietly, dangerously, “Who’re you sitting on? Is that the girl you were yammering about?”

Trid didn’t reply. He was trying to make himself small as possible.

”Off her, please,” said Bequen. Small though she was, she hauled Trid off my legs by his hair. “A minute ago I could’ve sworn you had at least a scrap of Elde sense.” She gave his head a fierce jerk.

“They were brawling over her,” said Max.

She gave Trid another shake. “Locked her in with the breakdown, have you? Was that supposed to be funny?”

“Yes,” said Andrei.

“Get yourselves gone, you’ve damaged her plenty.”

“Not before I’ve spoken with her alone,” said Andrei. Bequen ushered Trid and Max out, but Andrei stood obstinately by.

She looked back at him. “If I hear anything—”

“I shan’t lay a finger on her! Are you done?”

She went through the gate, and Andrei stuck half his body after to make sure she’d gone.

He turned back to me. “I read a letter last night. It had a near-perfect description of you.”

I thought of how lucky I was. After all, Herist had seen the seal and Andrei had read the letter, and they might’ve put two and two together if they’d hated each other any less.

“And although my Gireldine is atrocious,” Andrei said, “and I couldn’t make out more than half, it sounds like someone cares about you. Fantastic job they’ve done.” He smiled grimly. “And I think I know now why you refuse to hate me. It’s not that I—It’s because you refuse to *say* you hate me. Funny.”

He went out the gate. I was awestruck for a few seconds.

I called his name and he reappeared in the doorway. “Have you any idea how many lives you make miserable every damning day?” I said.

“Yes. Thank you,” he said nastily, “for giving me an opportunity to make Herist’s life a little more miserable. Oh!” He looked above my head into the rafters. “Fancy us putting you in here.”

He jumped and caught a beam with his arms. His shoes dangled in front of my face. “As you won’t be running anywhere for a

while..." I looked up and something fell between my knees. My saddlebag. He dropped next to it. "Didn't check for contraband. I was afraid something might bite my hand off." He laughed. "I hope nothing too horrible comes of it. Don't try Bequen's patience. She sings nicely, but she's a tongue more acid than yours."

He left me alone with Liskara.

I'd gathered some ill-founded ideas about the nature of Bequen Celdior, and when she reappeared in my stall I struggled so fiercely to get my point across that she understood me quickly, and refused me even quicker.

"Lords," she said. "You with the courage of a wolverine and the skin of a mudskipper."

Then she sang a verse about the seasons:

*Evening thins to water  
As the nights grow longer,  
And slips from blushing hauteur  
To kiss the cheek of cold,  
For he's diligently sought her  
From the month she fled his hold.*

Then Floy flew in at the window and told me I should stay the winter. But I was resolved.

Before Trid had the chance to do anything unnatural to my leg, I stacked the crates beneath the window and climbed over the sill. It was sunset and too dark to see how steep the hill that fell away from the stable. I climbed down, Leode and my saddlebag underarm. I took one step, tripped, and rolled down the hill, yelling all the way.

Andrei was at the bottom, loosening the cinch at his horse's belly.

He put the crates somewhere else, and brought Trid with him early the next morning to set my leg.

Trid, who'd lost even his scrap of Elde sense, chose to do the splinting in the stable. I screamed and the horses did, too, enough that Andrei had to take Liskara out and quiet her. He came back in a foul mood. "If you Elden didn't wear your ridiculous, stupid hearts on your sleeves—"

I socked him in the armpit. "Better than not havin one at all."

Trid leaned on my shin. "I'm running out of patience," he said. "You're like two crabapples, trying to out-bitter each other."

Trid was handier than I'd dared hope. Once he'd bound my leg between two sturdy sticks, the pain diminished. It didn't go completely, though, and Liskara was moved to another stall.

The longer of the splints stretched up to my right armpit, making movement nearly impossible. Trid promised a crutch, to be given after I behaved myself, and Andrei promised another broken leg, to be given upon my next escape attempt.

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When I was left alone I sewed a pocket for Father's ring inside the front of my chemise. I had to be quick, because I wasn't alone very often. Two small stable boys ran always underfoot, yelling at each other, the stallions, and me, until Bequen appeared to jog their ears with stirrup irons.

Becky the barn-sour broodmare, as they called her, kept me fed on bread, apples, beans, and porridge, but mostly porridge, and I grew wan and red-eyed. She felt sorry enough that she gave me a cart so I could propel myself around by one foot. She kept me busy cleaning tack, picking hooves, filling feedbags, and mucking out stalls. Sometimes she sat me on a tower of crates so I could groom a horse.

Trid refused the crutch for a long time, explaining I'd better not risk anything for a while. But he gave me yarn and twigs for setting Leode's broken wing.

As the days grew colder Max often came by in the afternoon to amuse me (and himself) with short, excitable games of blind-the-traitor, dice, cards, and a book, where he would write down everything I could tell him about the niceties of Gralde tavern-life.

Meanwhile Andrei was always nearby, awfully concerned over his horse. And when we were all together in my stall he couldn't stand for anyone to torment me save himself.

As the troughs outside grew a thin layer of ice, Andrei's behavior got queerer and queerer. I owed him my hand. I expected, even wanted, him to bring this up, if only for the maintenance of my comfortable hatred. But Andrei kept quiet about it. So quiet I wondered how I could make him angry enough to give Herist a mention.

My ridiculous, stupid Eldine heart gave me the idea. I tangled Max into it; Max was most likely to settle an argument with his fists, and he was also closer to my size than the other two.

"Why've ye got a face like a weasel?" I asked him one evening, after I'd unlatched all the stall gates in the corridor. "Is it cause you weasel yer way out of every steaming pile you drop?" I itched my leg under its bonds. "Or is it you just like coats, an' ye're sure to grow one for the winter if you snivel enough?"

"You shouldn't talk, squirrel," Max shot back. "Lost your nuts, you have, and got nothing to nibble on except Trid's neck." I jabbed his knee with a splint when I tried to kick him, and he fell on top of me. We wrestled on the ground, stirring up straw and dust. I thought of the Queen's horrible, white face, and howled my rage and frustration; and the horses went wild.

They rammed at the walls, laughing in fear, and at least a few found the gates unlatched. The ground shook: two charged past. I

climbed over Max's shoulders, and grabbed the withers of a buckskin.

"You can't be serious, Reyna," Floy shouted as my splints jabbed dangerously about. I clung to the horse's side like a leech, and we passed shouting stable hands and barking hounds in an uncomfortable blur until we halted beneath the icy stars at the shout of his master.

"Sandal, you halfwit. You great, stupid heifer. You crazy, fly-bitten vagrant. Sandal!"

Sandal turned around. I dropped from the horse's side. Andrei took my splints in one hand and Sandal's halter in the other, and dragged us back to the stable.

My back burned, and my leg ached, and I was pleased to see he was angry. When he finally managed to speak, his voice was shrill as a boiling lobster's. "Why am I bothering? Go, if you must, but it'd be less trouble if you just drowned in the trough or hanged yourself." He ran a hand through his hair until it stood on end. "You want to know why you're here? It's because Bequen keeps her nose out of my business, and because Herist's horses are on the opposite side of the grounds."

"Herist—"

"Herist! I *won't* talk about Herist, I can't even think about him without getting a cramp in my stomach. That's all the explanation you're getting."

I wanted another. "Sandal?"

"He ate one of mine when he was a yearling," said Andrei. "It was canvas."

I struggled for civil words and came up with, "Ah."

"Goodnight," he said, and when he turned towards the door he couldn't keep from saying, "If I'd broken your other leg, Trid would've tried to fix that one, too, demanded more silver, and raised the stakes too high for me to stomach, the nice, upstanding boy that I am."

Bequen came in the next morning with my porridge. She reached up to fill Liskara's feedbag, and the hem of her skirts lifted. Her legs were bruised black above her boots. I refused the porridge, so she touched me gently on the head and left the bowl at my feet. My heart sat heavy in my chest.

"Reyna," cooed Leode in the corner, "you're upsetting the horses."

"She didn't deserve it. I'druther he had yelled and cussed and called me names, and hit me, even."

I wouldn't speak to Andrei for two weeks. After these passed I became more compliant, because Trid gave me with an oak crutch as a new-year's gift. The fork was whittled into the shape of a squirrel. I suspected Max had something to do with it, as he had a talent for that sort of thing.



“Does it hurt?” Max had asked after my first go.

“The ears *dig*.”

“Good.”

“Weasel.”

He grabbed a broom for a stave and we began fencing, and then Andrei swung himself into my stall and shut the gate.

“Quit your noise,” he said. “I’m hiding.”

“Andrei,” called a girl. “Mother said you’d go riding with me.”

Max held his stomach and made retching noises. “Natalya,” said Trid. “What’s she doing outdoors? We’d better hide him under the straw.” He glanced worriedly at me. “Let’s hide both of them.”

He and Max got as far as our knees before Natalya looked over the gate. She’d an exquisite knot of chestnut curls pinned to her head, and a face that looked about my age.

“Ooh, what’s that?” she said.

“None of your business,” said Andrei.

“A saebel? Let me in. I’ve never seen one.”

“Go play with your dolls.”

“I haven’t got any *dolls*, Andrei.”

“Go away.”

“I’ll tell Mother about the roaches.”

“Just wait out there, Natty—the world doesn’t stop when you say so, and nor do I.”

I gawped at him. “Why ain’t you that polite to everyone?”

Andrei got up and threw a handful of straw into my face. “She’s my sister.”

Trid looked frustrated, and Max burst into laughter and sang in a Galde lilt:

*“If only the stars hung as low as my trews;  
If only my wife grew the nose of a harse,  
I’d send her to Tinop, ignore me mam’s views  
And give you a star before fecking your—”*

Andrei reached and pulled at Max’s hair. “Did you teach him that?” he asked me, and he stumped out, slamming the gate behind him.

\*\*\*

The next time he came to the stable his cheeks were flushed with cold and he had a woolen tunic and stockings rolled around his arm. The horse blanket in my saddlebag was eaten away in pieces, but I didn’t care. I refused to wear his tunic and stockings.

“So be it,” he cried. “You can sleep in the dung when the trees start popping.”

But he left them there, and I drew the tunic over my chemise

after he had gone.

The weather grew bleak and I had great stretches of time with nothing to do but watch for the boys out my window. I gathered a pile of snowballs on the windowsill to hurl down the hill when I saw one. Max hurled back boulders of ice, occasionally with enough precision to knock me off my feet and bloody my nose.

I had other company besides the boys. The little Lady Natalya was curious and didn't stay herself paying me more visits than what was comfortable.

When Trid was tightening my splints one day, she said, "If we were to poke those in the ground like stakes, I wouldn't wonder when she sprouted roots and became a tree."

Max lifted his eyes toward the rafters. "And I wouldn't wonder when she strangled you with her branches."

"She's not a saebel," said Andrei, sitting next to my ankle. "And if she were, she'd still have more brains than you."

"But look at her eyes." She crouched so low I caught the scent of honeysuckles. "So strange and empty."

Andrei pulled her back and held her there by her cloak. "All I've ever seen is hatred, and you're not helping. And, gods, Aloren, why don't you defend yourself? I know you're capable of it—you defend every other Gireldine in the world."

I realized I was capable of it, in a way.

"Do y'know why saebels don't have souls?" I asked Natty.

"No."

"It's cause they're pure hedonists. They seek passing pleasures like havin their hair done up all the time, and wearing pretty dresses and fur cloaks."

Natty wrenched her cloak free and walked out.

She didn't come back for a long time. The sun inched closer to the earth, the snowdrops dangled their bells, and I pulled off the stockings, because though the cold lingered, my toes missed the air. Trid re-bound my right leg, but the splints were shorter. I could bend my knee a little. The knee felt gouty and grated when I moved it, like a hinge without grease, but I was so pleased I freed Leode of his bandages; and he stretched his wings.

My brother had been feeling irritable, and Floy diagnosed it as lack of exercise. So he flitted around the stable, and then outside, and kept absent for longer and longer periods. I hid my worry, and when the new moon drew near he flew off toward the tower in the north Daynens to reunite with his elder brothers. He'd promised to bring one back before they lost me again, and I stood at the window, watching as he blended into a star-shot sky.

I didn't realize I was crying until my chest began to heave and my nose to drip. Bequen's voice bloomed in song somewhere within. Her husband had gone west, as he was wanted in the city, and her songs had lately become sad.

*When the earth lies still  
I can hear a thrill of singing.  
Strumming through the boughs,  
Piping o'er the rushes, ringing  
With ouzel's cry low on the mountain,  
Cutting through the mist and rock.  
He hovers mellow on my doorstep,  
Knuckles ready, poised to knock.  
Before the blow has time to bite,  
I answer with my tongue alight  
And rip the door free of its hinge—  
To nothing but the night.*

*But I catch his laugh  
On the alder path in autumn,  
Blown amid the leaves,  
Carried soft to river's bottom,  
Where memories lie thick and muddy,  
Sodden with forgotten joy:  
Startled sorrel, breath of sage  
Fermenting in his hateful ploy.  
I fly from all the laughing scorn,  
Bruising hyssop, crushing thorn  
Until the sun wraps round my head  
And ushers in the morn.*

*Come the moon in flight  
I can feel him fight the terror,  
Sweeping corners  
For my dreams to shine the fairer;  
Of hills beyond the heaving waters,  
Seas above the glancing sun  
Where light-moored ships of heaven-bound  
Float lashed for when my life is done.  
I wake with brine rubbed in my wrists,  
Searching for his weary fists  
That, pushing shadows from the night,  
Prove somewhere he exists.*

The week after Leode flew away I found two crocuses blooming beneath a hedge. I decided I had waited long enough, and cut the splints off my thigh.

Max stopped in with a question about his old pony's wheezes, and after prescribing for her a diet of warm gruel I challenged him to a chicken fight.

We hung from the rafters in the middle of the corridor where the

beams bowed low enough to reach from a stool. His longer legs couldn't wrap around my waist, and I knocked him down twice, kicking him in the shoulders and head—but he didn't detect anything unusual.

Trid and Andrei caught us in the third round. I jumped and landed on my feet. "You and I," said Trid, "are going to kick off the season with benefits. Afraid I can't say the same for the other two."

"But we helped!" Max dropped behind me. "Me and Andrei helped."

"How can you tell it's healed the right way?" There was a red welt on Andrei's cheek, and he was in a vicious temper. "We've yet to see her run. And dance." He folded his arms and stood there, as though he expected Max and me to leap into a two-handed reel.

"Look at her," said Trid, turning round. "She could walk out right now if she wanted—"

"Is she leaving?" Natty took a couple steps in from the door. "Is the nasty thing leaving?"

Andrei turned and blocked my view. His left ear was bloody. "Was it you?"

"She's lucky I didn't tell all of it," said Natty.

"Is she?" he said. "I don't think she is, as I'm going to keep her here just to spite you, you horrible, brainless—"

"Do you think she'll let you lock her up?" Natty marched up just short of treading on his feet. "She'd gouge your eyes out first. She's savage, flies into fits oftener than Celdior's insurgents. You'd do better to lock up a starved leopard."

"A starved leopard's less a bitch than you are."

Natty burst into tears and switched to a different tactic: "You used to spend time with *me*. Then Trid came from Dirlan and you got all caught up with this lock-picking *Eldine* for pity's sake, and now you're just being mean."

"What about me?" demanded Max. "You forgot me."

"If you all could shut up for just a moment." Trid put his hands up. "Hear me out," he said to Andrei. "I'll call off the bet if you let her go. No fussing."

"Good luck with that." Natty fought to see over Andrei's shoulder. "He'll *pay* for her, for his watchdog, to bark at me if I get too close." Andrei looked as though he'd been slapped on the other cheek as well. I expect I looked like a starved leopard.

"Run," I said, and pulled my tunic from the boys' hands.

I chased her outside on clumsy legs, bludgeoned her to the ground with my saddlebag, and ground her pretty face into a heap of horse-apples.

I got up and ran towards the palace walls, saddlebag thumping at my side.

"Hey," Max yelled after me. "Where're you going with our leg?"



## Nineteen

My arms did a tremendous amount of lifting on the way up the wall, but on the other side they hadn't the strength they thought they had, and I fell into a juniper bush.

I picked the needles from my skin and took off down the elm way.

The afternoon sunlight flickered over my feet, making it seem as though they were dancing rather than walking. I threw them into a half-skip, half-run, so perfectly in time with Nefer's river shanty that I belted it out as I went along.

"That's the wrong way, Reyna," called Floy. I hadn't noticed her back in the stable; she must have just flown up.

"Wrong?" I said, and danced around in a circle. "See? There in't no wrong direction, I'm free as a bird."

"There're some birds who aren't as free as you, and you must take their limitations into account."

"What?" Was she saying what I thought she was saying?

"The night's going to be moonless and they were going to smuggle you out. But now you've done it yourself we'd best get there early."

Heat rushed into my breast and I stopped. "Leode went away to change."

"And so he did, and together they decided they'd better not wait." She landed on my shoulder. "So they came back here to do it, and told me to tell you they were going to—"

"Why?" I was angry for some reason. "It was dangerous."

"So you might as well go the right direction."

"How long've you been conspiring?"

"The right direction's eastward," she said. "The cliffs where the cormorants nest."

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It took the rest of the day to reach the cliffs. My feet had grown soft and I hobbled through the city, stubbornly refusing to believe I was tired.

The sun sank, and I followed Floy past the last great house and on to limestone crags that plummeted into the ocean. The cliffs were scattered sparsely with yew and slick with surf and the scat of seabirds, and I had to be careful not to slip.

I walked down through a water-worn, ferny crack, and the purple ring of sea disappeared. The chasm led to a pool sheltered in a cove.

Before the pool a beach of shingle stretched in a silver crescent. Floy became a girl, limbs flashing with starlight. I looked beyond her and saw four boys, one crouching at the pool's edge. He exclaimed in Gralde, "The water's fresh."

"It's from a freshet," said a younger voice. "I saw it from above. Good thing the tide's out, Arin. Can't have you heaving brine all over the place on a lovely night like this."

"You see everything from above." Arin jumped to his feet. "Like some bloody, great ghost—" He had caught sight of me. "Look, Leode. Another ghost. Hey, don't come any nearer me—"

I shot across the stones and knocked him over, and he wrestled me off, throwing me into the water.

I accepted the reprisal as it provided an excuse for a wet face. Tem fished me out. I clung to him, wondering at how tall he had grown.

"So, tell us—" said Mordan.

"She doesn't have to," said Tem. But I wanted to do just that so I broke free and told them everything from Fillegal and the bandorescroll to Natty and the dung. But I didn't mention how Andrei had exploited my skills. Nor did I mention what Floy had done, in the beginning.

"Nilsa," said Mordan. "Fancy it being old Nilsa. I always thought there was something funny about her."

Arin gave a loud snort. "*It was Hal. He was given the boot, after all.*"

"Let's be civil," said Tem. "Could have been anyone."

I stepped back to better look at them. Their shoes and sandals were gone and their hair had overtaken mine. Limbs were white as the shingle, and the tunics still clean, but they clung tightly, hanging higher than they used to, and the seams broke at Tem's shoulders.

Mordan had climbed a couple of inches past Tem, but his clothes fit over him as well as ever. Arin had grown taller, too, and he carried himself more gracefully, giving his alternate form a shade of competition. He had so little freckles he seemed a different person. "Look at that thing she's wearing," he said. "Did you steal that off a troll?"

Tem touched the wool. "It has the rosette on it."

"It would fit a human better than a troll, I think," said Mordan. "It has no business being on you."

"She has little else to wear. Turn it inside-out," Tem told me in not so much a command as a suggestion.

"Speaking of tunics," said Floy, tying back her hair with a string, "I've got to show you something. See, Reyna"—she held her skirts up and stepped into the water—"after all that whining you did last autumn—something about a million keys and wishing for wings—those birds took you seriously. But serious as they were, they needed a person's brain, so I helped."

I splashed after her. “You are a conspirator.” I turned to the boys. “What’s she talking about?”

“No idea.” Tem stepped in and Arin and Mordan followed. “But she told us very specifically this should be our meeting-place. Where are we going?”

“Around a corner and through a door,” Floy said.

“This place reminds me of a palace,” said Leode. “Like the ones in Omben after the oceans rose.”

“Stay in the starlight.” Tem hauled his little brother up to his side.

“Shh,” whispered Mordan behind me. “I hear saebeline.” Water lapped at our waists, casting shades across the walls, and I heard a humming through an arch at our left.

Floy sighed. “It’s not saebeline. Only wings.” She told me to go through first. “But you’re probably not going to like it. Just more work.”

I stumbled over to the door. The boys piled behind me and the current pushed us through, and I saw a spread of green before Mordan knocked me into the water. The rest tumbled after, and a wave swelled over my head.

“Oh,” said Leode, the only one on his feet. “Our Marione.” I lifted my head above the water. Mordan, lost for words, pulled me up.

A carpet of green and white stretched over a second pool enclosed again by cliff, except for a little niche where water cascaded over stone into the sea.

Bits of stuff fell from the air, where birds circled. “No wonder I was ill last month,” said Leode. “These are mine, mostly.”

Tem wiped his hair back from his eyes. “Floy, you never said a thing?”

“I wasn’t sure it would work.” Her cheeks darkened. I moved to her side, feeling for her hand beneath the water. “Anyway, it isn’t enough,” she said simply, holding onto my fingers.

“Not yet,” said Mordan.

Leaning over the flowers, Arin commenced, as usual, with pointing out the problems. “Saxifrage shouldn’t have thorns.” He grabbed a handful and screwed up his mouth at them.

Mordan lifted one from the water. His face blanched. Below the tiny white flowers the stems were thick with spines. “What happened?” he said.

“Maybe it’s part of growing up,” said Arin.

“Is it hate?” Mordan glanced at me.

“I don’t feel so good.” Leode doubled over and held his mouth.

“Put them down,” said Tem.

“Is it protection, maybe?” Mordan dipped his palm in the water and gently shed them. “Something they go through so beasts won’t dig them up and eat them?”



“Weaving these is going to be horrible.” Arin didn’t look at me.

“They’ll become softer by soaking,” said Tem. “But she’ll have to—I don’t know—break them some, to weave into tunics.”

I felt the old pain, the fist that crumpled my gut and squeezed the air from my lungs. I thought of Leode, ill with only a touch. “Break them?” I squeezed Floy’s hand, making her wince. “Over and over again?”

Arin backed away from the green and white.

“We’ll have to agree on a time. When we’re all on the ground, just in case,” said Tem.

The hour after sunrise, we decided. An hour a day, and with two years left I brooded on my time constraints.

The sun came up, pouring through holes in the cliffs, and the boys flew away. Tem insisted that Leode and Mordan be far out of my hearing during the weaving of their flowers. So with Floy for company I sat in the water and plotted out a design. Leode’s tunic was first on my list as most of the flowers were his, but the saxifrage could only provide a sort of framework, because the other Marione had to be added in their seasons.

The plants were small and I felt queasy as I knotted a first chain, and a second, and a third. I twisted them together. After I’d made enough of these I laid them over a rock to weave with. The tips of my fingers glowed and I collected tallies of scratches up my arms as I worked, but I scarcely noticed.

When I lifted my head, the sun had climbed a thumb’s height above the sea and Floy reminded me to stop.

The pool seemed safe enough, stowed away at the bottom of the eastern cliffs, and I left the work there.

## Twenty

A month passed. I wove Leode's shirt steadily and tired too quickly to do much dancing, and Wille Illinla caught me stealing plums.

Without bothering to look at my face he snatched my hand away and instructed I steal a whole basket to make a profit instead of taking just enough to fill my stomach. I began laughing. His face turned white, purple and red.

"First you consort with humans," he said, "then you disappear, and now you show up in a gale of laughs. Least *I* wasn't the one nicking like a crippled sparrow."

"Have your nicks graduated to new heights?"

"To be honest," he said, still shaken up, "I ain't nicking much."

"Because of Sal? Are you polishing shoes and giving the proceeds to the poor?"

"Something like that, being as I'm the poorest." Then he said, "Where ye been? Abducted by roving folk and dancing all over Eastern Estralony, was you? Did you dance up to another dimension where the people laugh at poor boys tryin to give advice to young rogues? While you was up there did the emperor crown you as his queen, so now you feel you got to bring them awful foreign habits here?"

"A vein's like to pop in your forehead." I took a bite of my plum.

"Ain't going to tell me?"

He was wearing a shirt I hadn't seen before, brown and clean. "What's this shiny thing?" I gave it a tug.

"Georrh!"

"What?"

"Nothin." He kept his back well away from my hands.

I moved behind him and saw the dark bleeding through the cloth. I reached up to press it—it was wet. "Have you just been flogged?"

"It didn't hurt, until you poked around with your fishhooks."

"Have you even bothered to clean it?"

"I didn't want Sal to see," he said stupidly.

I stole a soapy rag from a window-washer, pushed him into a recess, and took off his stained shirt.

His back was a cobweb of welts. Every time I touched them he tensed in pain. My hands trembled until I couldn't steady them, and I dropped the bloody rag on the stone. "What did you do, Wille?"

"Stole a handful of fruit from that boy you was after," he said, inching away from me. "I spat grape pips at two soldiers. You saw them, probably—fat ones at the corner didn't look like they was having much fun. So I gave them a bit of fun, but they ain't

accustomed to it, I guess. Foreigners. Yellow, nasty and big, and more and more're come up from Omben-beyond-the-Sea. I've been told the humans are horrible in Omben-beyond-the-Sea."

"They did it?" I said. "The maggots."

"Sort of. One of them got me by the neck and I grabbed his wallet—don't tell Sal—and I tucked it up me sleeve. But he still had a-hold of me neck so I belted him in the gob, and the three of us got in a pretty knot, until this other human walks by and tells them they've no business knocking around a Noreme, as Noremes ain't subject to Ombenelvan humans. Now I says to this misinformed booby that Noremes ain't subject to any humans. And I called him an imposter and a whoreson and a gooch, and he got unreasonably angry. Two more soldiers came and the owl tied me up and wished me well. Didn't stick around to watch. The bigger owl was happy to take charge."

I grew uneasy. "What'd he look like, Wille?"

"Round and fat with a pasty face and a nasty grin. Won't be grinning when he finds his wallet missing, though."

"No—the one you called a gooch."

"He had great big golden eyes."

"Helpful, that."

"Tall. Young. Big hands and feet."

"And?" My stomach sank.

"Skinny face, brown hair, charming smile." I began walking away. "Where're you going? Don't leave the rest of these for Sal!"

\*\*\*

I didn't expect to accomplish much, but I was eager for an argument. Eager enough to climb the wall that very evening and have a talk with Andrei's horse.

After I gathered loose bricks from the path to stand on, I stuck my head through the stall window and clicked my tongue. Sandal looked at me with a brown eye.

"Is your master cruel?"

*What master?* the horse said, and farted. I rolled my eyes and went to look for Trid

I knew where his room was. I'd seen him climb through his window and slither down the roof—and where there was Trid there was usually Andrei.

I climbed up a lattice and over a steep roof, then stepped onto a string line where the mouths of copper serpents poured rainwater from a gutter. I shimmied up between the gutter and the wall, and pulled myself over a cornice.

I walked toward Trid's casement, flung wide to the cool night air.

His desk was pushed up against the sill, and he was sitting at it,

putting together a set of tiny bones that looked like the skeleton of a bat. He looked up, scattered the bones with his forearm, and swore. "Works that well, does it?" He pointed to my leg.

"Where's Andrei?" I didn't move to climb through.

"Why? You're well shut of him." Trid picked bones off the rug. "He's grown cross since the Ombenelva showed up, and the mere thought of you two squabbling gives me a headache."

"Go get him."

"I'm not moving." But he turned his back to me and shrieked Andrei's name a few times.

Andrei poked his head round the door. He was wearing a nightshirt, and his hair was mussed. "Is someone murdering you?"

"She wants a lovers' spat. Not in here, though—I'm working."

Andrei saw me and tugged his shirt down. Then he climbed out the window and bumped his head on the lintel, and I started right off: "Wille's got thirty scores on his back because he called you an imposter?"

"I can hear you," called Trid.

Andrei picked a route down to the ledge with the copper serpents.

"That tall Gireldine?" he said, looking over his shoulder. "Called me more than that. A whoreson, and other things too coarse for your feminine ears, and you want to know what he made with his fingers? Why've you turned my tunic inside-out?"

"You left." I sat on the ledge a good five feet away from him. "Like you were shamed, or something." I took a breath and said quickly, "You're not that bad, you're not so cruel as you'd like people to believe."

He stared at me as though I were about to run him over with a cart.

"What's the act for?" I said.

"What act?"

"Why d'ye act so cruel?" I looked at the ground, which was a very long way down, and grabbed hold of a copper serpent.

"I don't know. Self preservation?"

"What d'ye mean?"

"I don't know." He sounded frustrated. "Right, here's what I think—" He scratched both sides of his head, and his hair stuck up everywhere. "Humans have to repress their feelings." He spoke like it was a lesson he'd memorized. "You let them out they're likely to kill you. Kindness, compassion, empathy: Good as poison."

"God and the Lady."

"People are nasty," he said. "And they don't change. You've got to be cruel to live past childhood."

"Deep wisdom," I said. "Did yer nurse tell you that, or'd you pull it from her breast with the milk?"

“You’re disgusting.”

“Nobody’s here to be nasty,” I said, and then remembered something our old nurse had told us. “Humans are supposed to make doors.”

“Doors? Why *Doors?*”

“That’s what you’re supposed to know. *Simargh say mores, Elde build shores, humans make doors.*”

“A nursery rhyme?”

I slid back and put both hands on the serpent, and he eyed them and said, “Do you think I’m going to push you off the roof?”

I shrugged. “You enjoy watchin it, don’t you? All them floggings?”

“Yes, very nice, a flogging.”

“Is it?” I was growing warm, and I let go the serpent to roll up my sleeves. “D’you get a rush when the skin gets so ripe with blood it can’t hold no more, and the stuff spills down the back in red ribbons, when the bone shines through—”

“Shut up.” He stared at my arms.

“Or you’ll have a poor girl trussed up and whipped?”

“Who did that?”

I’d forgotten about the welts crisscrossed up and down my arms. I rolled my sleeves back down. “You’re supposed to be repressing that feeling.”

The concern left his face. “Duly noted.”

“Your argument’s a goner.”

“How, exactly?”

“It’s broken its knees, Andrei. Your argument’s a sour, sick old man.”

“My argument’s made my life as uncomplicated as humanly possible.”

I laughed. “Got it down to a couple rules?”

“One. With no one to stop me I’ll do as I please.” He grabbed the gutter above his head and swung himself to his feet. He walked along the edge and disappeared around a corner.

“He forgot the other half,” I said quietly to the serpent. “Folk’ll react however they please to whatever he does. And if people don’t change, how the hell did I change from the King’s daughter to this?”

The stars glinted around a thumbnail moon. I made to leave and checked myself. I walked up the roof to talk to Trid, thinking he would leave me less sick to my stomach.

The slates were still warm under my feet. But a chill went through me when I saw Trid sitting on his windowsill, feet on the slate, eyes staring at the copper trough of a gutter. I knew at once. He’d heard me. My voice had sounded up through the gutter.

“You were the old King’s daughter?” he said. “I heard he had a bunch of sons.”

I dropped to my knees and fled. My legs tangled, and suddenly I

could find no grip with my hands, and I started rolling; and Trid sprang up, ran in a crouch, and leapt over my body just as it was about to slide over the cornice.

He blew the air from my lungs, bruising my elbows. “Were you wanting to fall to your death?” he said, and I struggled, pummeling and scratching at him. He pulled me away from the edge. “What’ve you been doing to your hands?” He pinned them down. “I don’t know if you’re crazy or telling the truth, Alore, but I suppose it would explain the tapestry, wouldn’t it?” I freed a hand and slapped him over the mouth. “And if it were false you wouldn’t be clawing like this.”

“This in’t good,” I said. “Let go. This in’t good.” He released me, and watched as I crawled three feet from him and sat down again.

“You needn’t act so frightened,” he said, and I put another foot between us. “I won’t repeat what I heard, if you don’t want me to.”

“Yes you will.” I pressed my palms against my eyeballs. “How could you keep something like that to yourself, and watch the dancing, or the—”

“I *won’t*. You can trust me. When have I ever lied to you?”

I kneaded my feet and snorted. “You were just eavesdropping.”

“By accident. Look where my desk is. And why should I tell? No one would believe me.”

“A human couldn’t do that. A human would”—I rocked and choked back sobs—“try to pull as much misery, as much torture, out of a situation, because he don’t hold with something as dangerous as goodness.”

“Gracious gods.” Trid sat back on his hands. “Why do you hate us so much?”

I stopped rocking. “Three guesses.”

“We’re not all like Andrei. Have you never met a decent human? And it’s not completely his fault. He’s in a trouble spot.”

“What?” I said hysterically. “What’s *he* got to be troubled about?”

“I’m not allowed to tell you,” he said. I stopped to think. Trid kept his friendships guarded. I failed to remember any ugly or alarming things coming from Trid’s mouth, and my heart slowed.

“Swear on your silence?” I slid farther from him and rose to my knees.

“Yes.” But he frowned, remaining seated. “I haven’t much to go on, anyway. And you won’t tell me more, will you?” He looked down at the slates, and then up, scowling a little. “I don’t like this,” he said, “and you’re right. I won’t be able to watch the dancing. This hurts my stomach enough right here. Listen—and clean the pride out of your ears—can’t I have someone take you in? You’re a very small girl, and even if you weren’t—whoever you said you were, I should like to think you’re fed regularly and warm in the

winter.”

I began to cry. “No, don’t, Aly.” He climbed to his feet, and I followed suit, backing away. “Don’t make me feel worse,” said Trid miserably. “I could help you, if you’d stop refusing it.”

Ashamed of my tears, I scrambled over the slates, keeping in the shadows.

## Twenty-One

I wasn't sure what to do with myself afterwards, and I jumped at small noises and kept out of direct sunlight. I visited none of my regular haunts, making it very difficult for anyone, including Floy and Mordan, and Trid, to track me down.

Padlimaird and I were catching up one day, sharing a smoke. We'd stolen Wille's old pipe and a bit of Nefer's leaf to 'calm my nerves', as Padlimaird put it. He'd seen me slide beneath an overturned boat to hide from what looked like Trid's brown horse; and he pulled me out, saying I was like to grow a shell like a turtle.

So we sat beneath a magnolia on the harbor's eastern bulwark, and I was drawing the sweet smoke from the wood when Trid and Max crept up behind Padlimaird.

Max held a fish above Padlimaird's head. He squeezed, and muck snaked out from a hole below the tail and dribbled all over Padlimaird's orange hair. The pipe fell out of my mouth.

Paddy felt the goop on his neck and jumped to his feet. He turned white as the spring sun on the water. Max collapsed into laughter, and before I had the chance to smile I clenched both sides of my head and scowled.

"Explain yerself," I said.

Max wiped his eyes and sat up. "A bet."

"Do you ever stop betting?" I said.

"Do you ever stop wilting things?" He glanced at the tree.

"Hasn't wilted," I said. "There, you won."

"No, I bet Trid I'd be the first to make you bloom something."

"You tom-fool," said Padlimaird. His hair was sopping, as he'd just dunked his head in the water. "Why would *that*'ve made her happy? What ye really need to do is give her a swollen ass, or anyone, really, to yell at. She loves yellin. Or y'should make an idiot out of yerself instead of me."

"By now," said Trid, "she should've bloomed every tree in the city."

"Don't work like that, m'lord." Padlimaird wiped his face on his shirt. "You gotta be touchin them, and it'd be a mighty wondrous thing to see Alore touchin every tree in the city. She probably can't get her arms all the way around this one."

"But I *did* give her someone to yell at," said Max. "That tree didn't move."

"This little tree?" said Padlimaird. "Too small. Don't work with trees like this. Give her time to make up an insult for everyone she knows and she'll unfurl an avenue of oaks."

"I thought she had to be touching them," said Trid.



“That’s a fine looking thing you got there.” Max nodded at the pipe.

“Have a drag,” said Padlimaird brightly. “Wille won’t mind human slobber all over it. Not like he uses it anymore.”

Max picked it up and took a big draw. He coughed and buckled over with a green face, and soon everyone was laughing except him.

\*\*\*

“What’d it taste like?” said Max’s twin brother. “Poxy rat arse?” The swallows played tag, zipping in and out of cracks between the stones set where the river poured into the harbor. The boys had found me swimming in my old chemise, diving for mussels. It was hot, and Luka insisted the harbor was off-limits for swimming and threatened to tell the nearby guardsmen.

At this Andrei ripped off his shirt and ran out on the nearest pier. But he stopped and came back when Max began describing his handsome smoke rings. I climbed out and dropped my mussels on a rock.

“Everyone has the same saliva,” said Trid testily. I cracked a mussel and ate it.

“Not really.” Pulling his shirt back over his head, Andrei sat next to Trid. He scrunched his nose at me. “Depends what the person’s been eating.”

“Not exactly a person, is she?” Luka watched me crack another.

Trid stared at him. “What’s your mother been teaching you?”

“I don’t know,” said Luka to Trid. “What’s your uncle been teaching you?”

“Nothing. My uncle’s in Dirlan.”

“Yes. How convenient for him that you’re here.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re reporting back to him, aren’t you?”

“What in the seven hells are you talking about?” Andrei frowned at Luka.

Max flicked his brother’s ear. “One of his ‘Trid’s a spy from the enemy state’ theories.”

I sucked on my third mussel and wondered when it was that Lorila had become an enemy state.

“Natridom’s almost old enough to be investigated,” said Luka, shrugging. “Old enough to be an informer for Caveira, anyway. I’ll bet he’s writing *mountains* of letters about these soldiers from Omben.”

Trid rolled his eyes, but his ears went red.

“Luka,” said Andrei, “go fling your shit around with the other monkeys.”

“A couple more months, Natridom, until you’re sixteen. Can’t wait to see what they find. Herist isn’t very happy about Caveira’s

military. I can't see him any happier with you, if it turns out—”

“*If* he's questioned at all”— Andrei was standing up now—“it won't be by Herist. He'll be questioned by me.”

“That's unlikely,” said Luka, smirking up at him. “How are you going to turn sixteen before he does?”

I looked up. “How could Herist be any more likely? Interrogating Trid about Caveira, his old accomplice?”

“Aloren, be quiet,” said Trid.

“It'd be so easy to shut him up, why are you still—?” I glanced at Andrei and threw my last mussel into the harbor.

“We need to talk,” Andrei said to Trid.

“About what? How silver is more grey than white?”

“Maybe.”

Without another word the two boys walked down a side street, leaving their horses roped to a poplar and grazing on the grassy levee. Max stretched his neck after them.

“Poxy rat arse?” He turned to his twin. “*You* taste like poxy rat arse.”

“Me?” Luka idly cracked a snail under his boot. “Andrei's the poxy rat arse.”

The boys laughed and the laughs sounded identical.

“A perfect monster.”

“I say we leave before they come back in horrible moods.”

I shivered, even though the sun was out and baking the stones. One of them said something to me, but I turned my back and they walked away, voices fading.

The chips of the swallows filled the silence. Then a great shrieking and howling came from beneath the boulders to my left.

I jumped up and clambered over the stones, where a pool of silt collected before the water found the harbor. A crew of older boys, workmen's sons by the clean look of their shabby clothes, most of them Galde, crowded round the strip of muck. They were torturing a saebel.

She was made of mud and river, slimy, squirming, shimmering like an eel. Algae hung from her fishbone teeth. The boys, stupid as they were, knew at least not to touch her, and they held her in place with sticks.

I wormed through the group and kicked at the sticks. “Stop it! She'll give you a lifetime of bad luck, you dolts.” I pushed them back, and the saebel fixed her green eyes on me.

Before I could leap away, she slipped her weedy hand into mine and pulled me through the water and into her eyes.

My hair waved about my chin, green-black. My hands reached for a surface that wasn't there, swirling the murk. I panicked, struggling, but it was no use: she held me by the broken strings of my spirit, unhurt by the flame, grinning with her bony teeth.

*Helping, you who ask no help?  
You shan't allow us the return of favors?  
Half acts weaken earthly balance;  
Bargain is the language with which  
We soothe our skins.*

“You can't help,” I said. “Let go.” Instead, she yanked at my spirit threads. The pain slammed up and down my body, and she seemed to delight in it.

*Tell me, daughter of clay, who is alone?  
We are alone.  
You are caught in a circle.  
We are alone, standing  
Like trees in a wood, rushes in a pond.  
The balance can tip no further.  
The river runs the wrong way,  
Taking us from this side  
To weigh heavy on the other.  
We haven't a circle, or a net,  
But gifts we have,  
So the spheres  
Don't roll from their foundations.*

“I don't want your gifts.” The gifts of the saebelen were double-edged swords. “Leave me alone.” But she didn't like being refused; it hurt like a needle through the eyeball.

*No gifts, warm heart?  
A lesson, then.  
The roots groan  
And the green fades,  
But the earth musn't roll away.  
A lesson, flowing through seasons,  
With heartbreak beneath,  
For spiritbreak  
Dappled on the surface,  
Isn't enough for us who are alone and fading,  
Daughter of clay.*

She let go of my fire and disappeared.

I stood in the sunlight, shaking from the pain, ankle-deep in mud.

“A lifetime of bad luck?” said one of the boys. He was almost grown, his chin patchy. “You wouldn't give us the same, would you?”

“She's an angel,” said another boy. He took a pull from a jug. “And almost naked in that thing.” He smiled. “A sweet little angel,

wet as a snat.” He gave my hair a yank. His breath stank of whiskey.

“She wants it. Look at her, so eager,” said one. His face was pointy, like a rat’s. They crowded round me, heads knocking together.

I stepped back and felt rock against my shoulders. I wondered at my stupidity—I wondered where Floy was. Bile burned in my throat.

I jumped at Rat-face and ripped his shirt. Laughing, the others caught my arms and pushed me into the rock.

“Look at those forearms on her,” said one. “Taming lions, sweetheart?”

Rat-face fished for a handful of mud. “She’ll do for a bit of taming.” He squeezed my jaw open and pushed the stuff into my mouth. I jerked back and bit his fingers. He howled and the boys laughed appreciatively.

“Now he should be made to kiss her.”

“Graic had a fine idea. Let’s mark her up,” said another one, shoving Graic away and dipping his hand in the mud.

“No,” I said, wrestling with their hands. “Let go.”

“Shush.” He drew something big and lewd on my chemise. “Looks pretty.”

“What’re you doing?” Andrei’s voice came from the back. “I’ll call the greys.”

“The greys?” drawled the boy in front of me, turning round, taking his hand back. “What are you, Herist’s arse fuck?”

Andrei laughed, and it made me positively sick. “He’d prefer your mother over me, I’m sure.”

The boys in front of me stiffened—caught sight of his broach, probably. I was shaking in huge, wet jerks, sick with disgust and so angry I felt I must scream or melt. The boys gaped like fish.

“Move,” he said, and they went right enough, and I pushed after them, eager to be gone.

I slapped into his front, imprinting the lewd picture on his stomach. I collected my limbs and wiped the stomach with an arm.

This did nothing for it. He pushed through the water with leaping strides. I dived and grabbed his ankles, and we both fell into the mud.

“Where’re you going?” I shouted. He tried to get up but I pushed him down. “Take all ten o’ em single handed, would ye, you great, stupid fuck?” I lost my senses, and began pounding on him, kicking, punching and slapping.

He dragged himself to his feet, covered in mud, and I drummed fists on his chest and ripped at his hair. My rage was a fire in the head. He caught me by the waist, and all I could see was a monster, Herist, the Queen.

I bent over to bite his arm; he flung me away. My back slammed

against the rock, and I fell in the mud, legs sticking out. He turned at the noise I made, and my mouth was already open, so I said, "Go after em, then."

"Are you sane?" Big drops fell into the water around him. "I'll have bruises over every inch of me, I expect." He wiped mud from his upper lip. "I wanted to make certain they knew my face."

"Ugliest face in the city."

"Well it is now," he said angrily. "I'm sorry." He took my arm and pulled me up.

"You're a brute, that's what y'are."

When we climbed up to the horses Trid was sitting on the grass. "You were frightened," said Andrei to him, "that when all was said and done she would've called you a brute."

Trid looked up, and tossed me an embroidered bit of red wool. "Wear your tunic."

It was scarcely my fault. But I didn't tell Floy. And the mere thought of my brothers finding out made me sick.

\*\*\*

A row of old peach trees hung over the road by the sea cliffs. I passed them every day at dawn. They were noisy—singing, gossiping, laughing; they helped me endure the weaving. I hummed their songs as I wrapped stems around my bleeding hands and twisted ropes of saxifrage, columbine and sorrel.

Leode's framework was finished: it looked more a pile of compost than a tunic; and I was almost done with Arin's, which practice and honed skill had rendered a little more shirt-like.

The morning after the trouble with the boys I walked past the peach trees. I was musing over the saebel's groaning roots and rolling spheres, and when I'd gone downward a-ways I found I had no tree song to hum.

I retraced my steps and wasted half my hour digging around the roots, climbing the branches, and kicking the trunks. But I didn't hear a single word or note.

They were dead in spirit, and I sat down on the path and cried. My hair stuck to my face. Floy sat on a bough above my head and sang so anxiously that Mordan heard her song all the way from the pool.

"They're dead," I said when he flew into my lap. "All of em. I was too late to lay me hands."

"You'd have been too young, too." My tunic knocked his feathers around and he looked at my chest with a rolling eye. "You'll get into trouble, with that rose showing."

"I'll get in trouble either way." I thought of the Gralde who had started the trouble yesterday and the human who had stopped it. "What's the difference, anyways? Between humans and Elde?"

“Arrogance,” my brother said immediately, and he stepped off my ankle. “Arrogance is the difference.”

He started pacing, and my eyelids lowered and my mind wandered—thinking of Andrei’s face, which yesterday, dripping with mud and red from my slaps, hadn’t looked so much ugly as bewildered. I felt a bit guilty and shifted my legs. My brother kept on: “A tree isn’t self-sustaining. A tree needs the sun. We need it, too. But humans, they think they can generate their own sunlight.”

“Like a fungus?”

“Reyna—”

“Sure wish I could.” I threw a rock at a dead tree. “Maybe it would’ve helped them trees, too.”

“Those trees didn’t fall asleep for lack of sun.”

“They were always thirsty.” I made a circle in the sand with my finger. “All of them are thirsty. And it rains plenty here.”

“It’s the river. Be happy you haven’t got to see.”

“What’s happened to the Cheldony?” I looked up. “A saebel sang she was running the wrong way. A very old saebel. Do the old ones tell the truth? Is the river running backwards, Mordan?” But he wouldn’t answer, and the peach trees were just a tick in a big tally.

Since my visit to the Cheldony two years back I’d begun to notice. The trees were tired, without energy, like old folk who stop drinking water, and dry up. But I never heard tree-song as dead as what was in those peaches along the road, and I started making visits to other trees I knew in the city.

One by one they fell silent: the magnolia on the bulwark, the locusts beneath the belltower, the apple trees in the riverside square, the maple beneath Natty’s window. *Tired*, they said, *tired, tired, tired*. And then a hard silence, like bare rock in winter. Folk talked about it in brief, or not at all, as though it were too grave to take seriously.

On the day the maple fell silent I wandered along the river. A group of men were fortifying the banks with sand and stone, hidden by the steep hill, singing heaving songs. A clump of mountain laurel grew here, and whenever I waxed morose I would creep under them to hear the air-tales the trees traded of rain, earth, and nesting weavers.

The buds hadn’t opened yet, as though the sleepiness had spread to the outer bushes. I crawled beneath them; their voices were faint and I tried to sing them awake:

*Wake from your slumbering, hold off your sleep,  
Shake off your blanket of sluggishy whorls.  
Hear ye the thundering, seek ye the deep  
Of other damn rivers, ye confounded laurels.*

They replied:

*Only from one river may we quench thirst.  
All other rivers flow bitter as tears.  
Shut ye your screeching mouth, stay ye the burst  
Of song from a daughter so wanting in years.*

And so the arguing went, growing softer and softer, until other voices broke in:

“Is that Gireldine?”

“No. It’s all wispy. Like wind through the trees or water over rocks.”

“A doctor? You should become a poet, rather. I’m going all teary.”

I sat up, blinking and bleary-eyed. “You should become common, and the tears’ll be believable, at least.”

“Funny,” said Andrei. “Very funny. What are you doing?” He pushed his head through the leaves.

“The trees ain’t singing anymore.”

“Did they ever?” he said.

“Not around you, no.”

“Does she speak only in insults?” said Andrei to Trid.

Trid picked a bud from a bush, and popped it open. “It’s a beautiful day,” he said, stepping between us. “Too beautiful for a headache.”

Andrei skirted Trid. “Your nose looks like a cherry. Was someone messing with you again?” He pushed branches aside. “What’s wrong with you, anyway? You’ve looked terrible for weeks, and your arms are always bleeding, and you go out of your way to find trouble.” His hair snagged on a branch. He tugged his head away and the bush shook. “Insult me as much as you like, but it won’t make you any bigger. Or uglier.”

His face was flecked with sunlight. I ripped up the dirt and scoured my cheeks with it. “Ugly enough?” I said.

“No.”

“Trid,” I shouted, standing up, “tell him to stick his damn pecker somewhere else.”

“I’ll stick it wherever I damn well please.”

“Then don’t come running to me when it gets bitten off,” said Trid wearily. “It’s better left alone, probably.”

“Right. There’s something very wrong with you,” Andrei said to me. “Who did it?”

“*Who did it?*” I sneered. I felt fragile and hollow, like an egg with the inside blown out. “The whole land’s dying, from the river to the sea, and it’s the river’s fault.”

“You’re making a catastrophe of nothing,” said Andrei. “The Cheldony’s drying up. Rivers do that. The land’s alive as ever.”

He looked at Trid. “She’s hiding something.”

“They’ve a different notion of death.” Then Trid pulled Andrei toward him out of the bush, and he started whispering, but not softly enough: “You think she’s going to tell you anything?”

“Why not?”

“You’ve got some big claws need trimming.”

“No point—no file’s big enough,” I said, and wrapped my fingers around a branch.

Andrei glowered at me. I glowered back and saw, behind him, a tiny girl running down the hill with a bucket.

She had a red dress and a long, black braid spinning behind her, and a white face that scrunched in panic when she lost control of her legs. Her feet fairly flew in an effort keep her upright, faster and faster.

She slammed into Andrei’s back, bucket splatting brown goop all over his tunic. The goop came almost to my feet. I smelled shellfish—lunch for her father, I thought. The little Galde looked up at Andrei, shuddered, and began to wail.

“Lord of Light,” said Andrei. “Get up.” He pulled her up, gathered up the bucket, and put it in her arms. “World doesn’t need to be any sadder.” She went on her way, giving us three backward glances.

Andrei mopped his legs with his sleeve. When I let go of the branch my palms were full of divots. I smelled grapes, now.

“Good luck siphoning money out of Max,” said Trid to Andrei.

Andrei’s eyes were so round he looked like a hooked haddock fresh out of the water. I thrust myself away from the laurels I had bloomed. A bough flung itself back into place, belting Trid in the stomach and throwing petals into the air. My hands were burning. I tripped over a root, scrambled to my feet, and ran.



## Twenty-Two

The metal warmed to Nefer's Virnrayan fingers and would've done what he wanted if his left arm hadn't got in the way.

It was high summer. The hearth glowed in the smithy, and the silver swirled in the crucible. It looked a bit like Trid's eyes, which were watering with embarrassment.

"Nefer," I shouted over his hammer, "Don't turn a blind ear—"

"Turn a deaf ear, idiot," said Padlimaird. He banged a pliers on the counter. There was a silver ingot stuck to it.

"Deaf's the only kind of ear he's got." I punched Nefer in the side.

"What, now?" Nefer looked down. "And me stake boomin like a ripe old tower bell—" He saw Palimaird. "Ghast, Paddy! Hold 'er over the fire like the sensible boy you ain't, but don't use yer foot to pull—"

The silver burned through the bottom of Padlimaird's shoe. He broke the pliers free and knocked over his brazier. Charcoal dust choked the air and blackened Trid's feet, and Wille chose that moment to haul two sandbags through the doorway. The dust cleared. The sandbags dropped to the stone. Wille looked down at Trid's sandals.

"A human boy with dirty feet, sir? Stepped right out of protocol with them feet, m'boy. They'll be after you with soap, scourges, and clean linen, but don't worry—we've plenty of hiding places. How bout in them acid vats?"

"Wille," I said, "leave off chopping down the tree before he's had a chance to provide shade."

"Why, then," he switched to Gralde, "what kind of seed would grow into a tree like that?"

I spoke in the common tongue. "That concerns Nefer and not you."

"Oh?" said Nefer. "Let's hear it then." He lit his pipe and sat down on his old stool in the space of three seconds.

After the success of my leg I'd decided Trid was a worthy medic, and I persuaded him to re-set Nefer's left arm. I forgot about persuading Nefer.

"A doctor?" Nefer said. "In't healing a woman's job?"

"If people were less stupid"—Trid suddenly found his voice—"they'd find caring for people is something everyone ought to be interested in and anyone can do."

Nefer scratched his neck and looked my way.

"Trid's successful at whatever he tries." Trid's ears glowed like the tongs around the crucible.

“Alright,” Nefer said. “I’ll give it a go.” He looked over at Wille and Paddy. “Can ye look after the shop while I’m incapacitated?”

“Can I take a step up, Nefer?” cried Wille in Gralde. “I need a staunch income to support me family. They’re multiplying like rabbits.”

Nefer choked on pipe smoke. “Got yerself into a problem?”

“Not just me.”

In an expression of ‘utmost admiration’, Wille had landed Sal with an unborn child, and they’d decided to wed. I didn’t know what to think. Anyway, by the time late summer arrived I had other things to think about, like the growing contingent of soldiers from Omben.

\*\*\*

“The Queen’s become nervous. They say she’s ill with it,” said my brother Tem.

We were sitting on the shore in the shade of an overturned schooner. The afternoon sun was so fierce I’d ripped the tunic off and gone for a swim; and when Tem found me he’d dropped a pair of knickers on my head. They were red canvas and much too big, and I tied them around my waist with a piece of string. Now they were covered with damp sand I’d scraped from a hole.

“Of course the Queen’s become nervous,” I said. “I’d be nervous too, tryin to feed ten thousand bloodthirsty foreigners.”

“She invited them here, Reyna. She’s nervous about Lorila, especially Dirlan. The millitary keeps growing over there, because the Lorilan Ravyir keeps giving that idiot, Caveira, troops, because Herist keeps recruiting more over here, and I fear it will end in war.” Tem plucked at a sand creeper. It shriveled beneath his talons. “I don’t know what to do. Situations like this don’t spring up on their own. Someone’s plotting something. And more frustrating, Caveira started it, but Lorila can’t afford a war—”

“I don’t know if *Caveira* started it.”

“What?”

“I dunno.” My hair fell over my eyes. “What do you want me to write for you?”

“You’re hiding something.”

“I’m not.”

I could’ve explained how Herist and Caveira were in collusion, but there was much I didn’t understand about all this. And Andrei still commanded my loyalty for a reason I couldn’t place.

“How did Faiorsa get hold of all them big Ombenelvan men?” My mouth tightened with self-loathing.

“She’s promised them something. Something they really want. If she doesn’t give it to them I don’t know what they’ll do.”

“What do you mean?” I drew my legs up to my chest, which had suddenly become cold. “Tem, what’s she promised? What if she doesn’t give it? What’ll happen?”

He stepped back and shook sand off himself, and the ship groaned behind him in the wind.

“Either she’ll give it to them and we’ll have to support them and folk’ll starve this winter, or she won’t give them anything and the troops may leave. But more likely they’ll stay, still after what she promised, and we can forget about rule by Evenalehn, because Evenalehn shan’t risk the ill will of the Southern Confederation, particularly Miachamel and Omben, and Norembry will be sucked under Southern rule via the Ombenelva.”

“God, Tem. What are they after? What’s she promised? Our souls?” I piled sand onto my knees.

“Oh, no. She has something far more valuable.”

“Tem!”

“Have you heard the rumors? About the weapon, the *Aebelavadar*?”

I had, on dimly lit streets and in the backs of taverns. *Aebelavadar* was a Simargh word; it meant an incomplete soul lacking a predetermined end. A human. But *Aebelavadars* weren’t strictly humans, and through history there had been many *Aebelavadars*.

The *Aebelavadar* that Tem was talking about was rumored to be a beautiful and powerful weapon. And apparently it belonged to the Queen.

“It’s true?” I said. “She has it here? How’d she get hold of it?”

“I’ve no idea. But the Ombenelvan government wants it. To placate a god, I’ve heard.”

“Great. So she’ll use it to pay for the Ombenelvan soldiers?”

“Maybe.”

“But then they’ll stay and we’ll go to war with Lorila? What’s Lorila ever done?”

Tem snorted, insofar as an egret can. “Besides flattened their Elde for centuries? Nothing that calls for invasion.”

“We’re in a pretty pickle.”

“Yes.”

“Why—” I picked sand out of my hair. “D’you suppose she wants to go to war with Lorila?”

“Seems like it.” He said this in so light a manner I suspected he was especially anxious about it. “Lorila is weak, ideal for invasion—but it was a duke of Lorila that started the troops race, and am I watching the wrong men, do you think? Should I be over in Lorila, rather than here?”

I suddenly felt very alone. “Stay here. You’re needed here.”

“For now. The letter—It’s about a hanging next week. But you won’t want to hear it, and neither will the White-Ships. It’s to do

with the Ombenelvan men, and it's only the beginning of worse. The garrison has it in for Nat Breldin and two others at dawn a week from today, did you know? It's their third attempt for Breldin, but this time they have to let them go through with it.

"Wait," he cried as I leapt up, slinging sand from my lap. "Hold it."

"What's got into ye?" I cast the parchment away. "I can't tell them to do that."

"There's a reason. Listen to me, please, before you start crying. Now sit down—there's a good girl—and let me tell you why. The Ombenelvan military hold an annual—sacrificial ceremony, if you will, to satisfy one of their deities. Orshinq, it's called. The god they hold responsible for their military victories. The sacrifice must be a criminal guilty of treason, desertion, and the like: all threats to a martial system believed to be divinely ordained. Are you still with me?"

"No. Must they bring their nasty ceremony over here? Nat Breldin and them are Noremes. They ain't fit to be Ombenelvan sacrifices."

"Reyna, I wish the whole world thought so sensibly. But what matters to the Ombenelva is that they get traitors, no need to worry which government scratched the mark of treason into their arms. The mercenaries were intended as security, but the Queen hasn't surrendered the weapon, and it's touch-and-go with unpaid soldiers. Do you understand what might happen if the city rises against the ceremony of your ten thousand bloodthirsty foreigners next week? I fear a massacre over the death of three. Please write what I have to tell you."

Mordan delivered the letter the next day, and afterwards I steered clear of the quay and its streets. I didn't fancy an encounter with Wille, whose belligerence had probably multiplied threefold at Tem's letter, or Hal, who knew something about where the letter had come from.

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On the day of the executions, my curiosity overwhelmed my good sense and I wandered toward the square with the apple trees. My nettles had been gathering in the lough, and every few minutes I had to stop and fight the ache from my fingers and nausea from my stomach.

The light shone dim through a thin drizzle, and the lamps hissed. The estuary was hidden behind a wall of fog. Ombenelvan soldiers gathered in the middle of the square, their black cuirasses and red cloaks dim in the half-light. Normal folk walked quickly by with a drawn hood or wooden face.

The fog crept closer, stifling, horrible, and I looked at the

gallows and stopped. There were no gallows. Stakes, rather, three of them, with faggots bundled round so they looked like three besom brooms. The stakes were empty, yet.

I turned away. “A burning.” My stomach squeezed—not with the usual nausea. “Did he know?”

“He didn’t,” said Floy. “He couldn’t have.”

A few Elde, half-hidden in the gloom, were writing on the shop windows with muddy rags. I ventured close to them, but not so close as Floy.

She flew back to my shoulder. “They’ll get themselves into trouble,” she said. “Think now’s a good time to *threaten* them. Padlimaird’s over there. Maybe you can talk sense into him.”

I wasn’t optimistic. Even so, I walked over and stood behind Padlimaird and another boy with a tightly drawn cowl, and watched as they painted a window with mud. ‘Break the bastards,’ read the caption above a skillfully drawn caricature of an Ombenelvan officer, and then the human’s name: ‘Magira Quyporel’. The other windows were similar, except the names were, ‘Gratra Chureal’, ‘Perchevor Herist’, and someone else I couldn’t make out.

Magira Quyporel’s stomach wasn’t quite vast enough for Padlimaird, who reached forward and painted a loopier line into the glass.

“Look what you’ve done, mongrel.” The boy in the cowl shoved Padlimaird aside. “Destroyed perfectly expressed sentiment and demolished a priceless work of art.”

“No, just weighed it down a bit.” Padlimaird snapped the boy’s stomach with his kerchief. “Gonna be smashed to pieces, anyway.”

“But folk’ll have to look at it till then—”

“Max Garvad,” I said, “what in the seven hells are you doin?” Both boys jumped and turned round.

“Just having a bit of fun.” His eyes shone gold through the hood.

“Fun?”

He must have seen my face, really seen it, because he looked down at his shoes, properly abashed; I saw that he was fingering a smooth, green stone.

“What he means is he wants to be useful to the side in the right,” said Padlimaird. “And if he’s lookin fer fun, too, where’s the harm?”

“Right there, Paddy—” I began, but just then Wille tore round the corner with a bucket of water. Sal came close behind with another. Wille’s slopped over the sides as he poked at Padlimaird’s chest.

“Quebbits told me you had a head full of suet. Turning the death of liberty into a carnival.”

“We wasn’t looking fer fun,” yelled Padlimaird. “We’re risking our heads.”

“You’re risking a lot more heads than just your’n,” Wille said.

Sal set her bucket down. “Come help us draw water, Padlimaird.” She took Wille’s hand. “Some excitable fellow’s set the ice house alight. Thought he was gonna flood the city.”

Wille addressed Padlimaird more kindly: “I won’t thrash you if you mop this window up and come help us.” Padlimaird scowled. Wille continued, “And this job in’t half so stinky as when some coward flooded the city long Crewald and them canal ways. But we put things to rights with lots of willing folk. More folk is less labor. You should come too, Lally. Nobody will see you. It’s foggy.”

I scowled with Padlimaird.

“And what about the other scoundrel?” asked Sal, wringing her soaked skirts and taking up her bucket. But Max had disappeared.

Sal and Wille left Padlimaird with a bucket of water and a few shreds of Sal’s petticoat.

Padlimaird scraped away an M and threw his rag into the bucket. “Hasn’t even said his vows and he’s already acting like an old wet fart.” He walked jerkily away, and I doubled over in a bout of nausea.

When I righted myself he’d disappeared around a corner, and the dizziness traveled to my head so that all was confusion for the next few seconds. A low horn sounded far off, muffled in the fog, or maybe it was a moan; and I jumped a foot in the air. All four windows had shattered behind me. Heart leaping, I glanced through the window, saw the smooth, green stone.

I stepped away from the glass. “Aloren,” Max called, “get out of there, idiot.” I should have taken his advice, but my head was ringing and I looked around for him—and a big grey dog jumped onto my shoulders. I pushed him away, and Floy was there, picking at the dog’s nose and eyes.

He snapped at her. Scared, I batted her behind me, and the dog pushed me into the shop door. Someone called something, some foreign word, and the beast stood guard before me with hot breath and raised hackles.

A thick man in a black cuirass grabbed my hair, pulled me against him.

“*Obid*,” he snapped at the dog, who in turn snapped at my legs. I stopped kicking. Omben soldiers made a dark circle around us, and I ground my heel into the human’s boot. His grip tightened painfully. “Anger ill becomes you, little dove.” He pushed me towards the shards on the pavement as if to grind me against them; but Floy got at his nose, and the dog turned from me to leap at something else. I twisted away.

“Call off your dog,” said a man. I knuckled sweat from my eyes and made out Max fending off the dog with his cloak, and Andrei behind him, struggling with his horse’s leads. Max fell over backwards. Sandal jolted the leads from Andrei’s hand, and Andrei pulled a dagger. “Call him off or I’ll rip out his throat.”

The man barked at his dog, and the dog shrank and crawled to his side. He kept tight hold of my hair, and Floy hid in the collar of my tunic.

“He’s a hangnail,” she said, “with perfect timing.” I told her to shut up.

The man eyed Andrei’s broach; his posture tightened, looked almost resentful “She was breaking windows.”

Andrei wiped rain out of his eyes, looking at the glass. “You broke these?”

I forced my face into a blank. Max climbed to his feet. “No, she didn’t,” he said loudly, half to Andrei and half to the soldiers. “I saw the ones who did.”

My captor coughed, and shoved me forward. “Nonsense. Look at her hands.”

“What?” Andrei took one up and dangled it in front of him. It was ragged and oozing, as usual. “Give her here,” he said. “This one’s wanted specially, and you’re not familiar with the system.” The officer gave me a lecherous look, as though he were indeed familiar with the system, and Andrei took my hair from his fist. “If you’d excuse us—Max,” he yelled over his shoulder

“Yes?”

“There’re little insurrections popping up all over the square, probably. Would you take the horse and put them down before more people die?”

“Aye, m’lord,” said Max cheerfully, and he prodded Sandal before him out of the crowd of soldiers. They scattered at the officer’s word, and Andrei shoved past him and dragged me down a side street by my hair.

“Max broke that window, didn’t he?” he said. “This is strike three.” He trapped me in a corner. “So we’ll stand here until you give me a explanation for this—this silently reaping the consequences of other people’s idiocy.” He crossed his arms. “We’ve got all day.”

I turned around and studied the threads of water darkening the wall. Floy’s claws ran over my feet.

“What should I tell him?” I asked her.

“Damned if I know.”

I bent over to retch, turned to face him, wiped my mouth, and said, “Piss off.”

But he just stood there, his jaw ticking. “You think I had a say in it,” he said, “pleasing the Southerners. That’s impossible, though, because I’m not sixteen yet.” His voice cracked. “I know nothing. And it’s driving me to distraction, see, because I’m on the outside of everything, losing sleep, because of you, mostly. You’re so dumb you cause me indigestion—and this!” He held up and looked at my forearms, and his face took on a color that roiled my stomach. “What is this *from*?”

I looked past him—at Wille Illinla, who was lugging his bucket from the harbor. Water sloshed over his pants. He marched over and poured the water over Andrei's head.

It crashed on the pavement, ran down the gutter, and there was a short silence.

"Thought I wasn't wet enough?" said Andrei.

"It did put a damper on things." Wille clobbered Andrei in the left eye. The street corner was ill lit, and I don't believe the boys recognized each other even after Andrei recovered enough to punch Wille in the stomach. Wille staggered into the wall.

"Thank you," Andrei said, "for doing your utmost to keep me clean and fit." He blinked rapidly with his left eye. "Now do let me finish my conversation with this block of wood."

He walked back to me, hair dripping over his face, and continued right where he had left off: "You never tell me anything. You never tell anyone, and you never—It's as if you think it's horrible or wrong coming to your own defense, talking about yourself, even. But you're stubborn as a bad smell and very loud, so I don't get it—why do you act like half a person?" He turned to Wille, who had sat down against the wall and was watching interestedly. "You know her, obviously. Have *you* ever heard her do it?"

"Do what?"

"Defend herself."

"She can't." Wille rubbed his jaw.

"Why?"

"I dunno. In't allowed to say that either, I suppose."

Andrei chewed on his tongue. I stepped out, but he held me against the wall.

"Then say this, Alore." His eyelid looked very swollen. "Do you really want me to piss off? Did you want to be smeared into the pavement back there? Raped by a bunch of drunk rubes? Your hand cut off? If that's so, you'd better make yourself scarce, because I can't, I can't, I can't, stand by and watch you be tormented."

His hand fell to his side and hung there. I thought I might laugh at him.

Instead my face crumpled. I turned into the dark of the corner and sat. Neither of them looked away, so I pressed my head into my knees, and felt the tears come. Big tears, running down my nose and into my mouth. I took gulps of air, and to my great shame, wept heartbrokenly, harder than I had in three years.

I smeared my tears with the back of a hand, and when Wille couldn't find it in himself to watch anymore he climbed to his feet, I thought, to leave.

Instead, he walked over between us, knelt down, and lifted my chin.

"I'll always come to your defense," he said. "Until you can."



And even then I'll still do it, cause you'll be so out o' practice you'll be telling folk you're the one strangled the big owl with my bootlaces, when it'll really've been me did it." He grabbed my wrists and swung me to my feet. And then, clicking his tongue at Andrei, he walked back the direction he had come with his empty bucket.

Andrei had resolved not to look me in the eye. He moved his hand very slowly, until it disappeared inside his cloak. He pulled out a handkerchief and gave it to me. It was wetter than my face.

"I've been looking for you," he said. "I wanted to ask you—" He broke off with an ironic look. "I need your help stealing something."

"Ghast, Andrei," I said immediately. "This is an awfully one-sided relationship." He shoved me, and must have miscalculated his strength because I went running backwards. "Stealin'?"

"Stealing something back."

"From who?" I ran a hand over my sticky face.

"Daifen."

"Who's he?"

"The former Chancellor."

"Oh." I remembered now. "He tampered with laws about weapons. Folks' right to carry weapons." I remembered writing that letter to Ederach. "And the garrison confiscated em." I put my hair out of my eyes, and said sharply, "Which led to organized resistance."

"If you'd call Celdior's raid on the armory organized."

"It was stealing something *back*. And they hain't been re-confiscated."

"You strike fear in me," said Andrei, smiling. "But isn't that more because Ederach questioned the law?"

"Ederach's dead." I sighed, wiping my runny nose. "No one's left to question anythin. Opens the way for more organized resistance."

"There're quieter ways of getting what you want."

Rain slid down my back, and I moved under an eave.

"That's what Daifen thought, and the Queen, and Herist and Caveira. All you courtiers think alike."

He shrugged. "Then there's little difference between a courtier and a thief."

I couldn't decide if he was lowering himself to my level or raising me to his.

"What's Daifen stolen?"

"You'll help?"

Neither of us answered the other's question, and after setting a later date to meet up and connive, we parted in the rain, which had begun to pour.

## Twenty-Three

Floy was uneasy for the rest of the day, and even I felt oddly agitated as I went about my business of finding a meal. Because the dark was less friendly than the light, I went to sleep at sundown at the foot of the old Llenad Bridge, where the grass grew tall and thick. It wasn't raining when Floy woke me in the morning for weaving.

I could line up the tunics in the water from smallest to largest. They seemed more netting than weave: Leode's lacking gentians, Tem's in even more need of saxifrage and columbine, and the rest just as bony. But that they could hold through to another season I didn't doubt, so long as I remained exhausted. Energy poured through my fingers when I touched the shirts. The plants sapped my strength and ran with it, broken stems never growing grey or brittle, budding and flowering into new growth when the old fell away.

Floy became an excellent storyteller. She'd made it her task to recount the history of Eastern Estralony. She began with the second long night, when people ran over the waves and wove crowns of starlight. Then she brought sunlight into it, and progressed all the way to the Calabren djain's capture and ravishing of the Twilen Simargh, which caused the earth to roll northward and give birth to the Southern Confederation, the countries of which were growing more irksome.

This morning Floy talked about Lorila's old ports, bellicose city-states before they had been swallowed by land, and I felt as though I might be swallowed by sea as I pickled my knickers in the brackish water. I knotted my tongue into a ball, and wound a nettle stem through Arin's collar, and all at once Floy stopped her mincing detail. I looked up and went still.

Andrei stood in front of me, horror on his face, and the water lapping at his legs.

I saw it all: saw him shadowing my steps all day, and saw him watching me go to sleep beneath the bridge. I climbed to my feet, holding the shirt.

"Is this your secret torture?" he said. His lips barely moved. "You've lost your mind—you're tearing your hands to shreds. This"—he looked around him. "It's sick's what it is."

*Sick?* "Leave," I said.

Instead he walked up and tore the shirt from my hands. I collapsed and vomited. He backed away, still holding the thing, and it felt as though his hands were on me, in me. I heaved with every step he made, and he noticed, or else felt the wrongness, the profanity of it.

He dropped the shirt into the water.

“Marionin—” His hands shook. “Is that your Marionin?”

He was right on that count, and the other—I’d quite lost my mind. “Get out!” I fought to my feet and gouged at his chest; and wonders never ceasing, he allowed me to shove him through the archway and clear across the beach. “Get out!”

I turned around and sat astride a hollow log fallen over the strip of pebbles, head in hands, concentrating on my breathing for the five minutes it took Andrei to walk stubbornly back down the hill.

He straddled the log across from me, and the light grew above his head. I stared at him with such loathing I was surprised he didn’t melt into a puddle of innards.

“I’ve been told a story before,” he blurted. “It was disturbing, so very disturbing, but I was made to study the—the spiritual things. It was about a year ago, I think. I couldn’t get it out of my head. I don’t know if you’ve heard it, but it went something like this.”

And bold as the noon sun he began talking. I considered running off, but in a short while he’d hooked me better than Floy ever had.

“A Gireldine mother of three did a terrible thing to her two eldest sons—can’t remember what—and for fear of being mistreated in her old age, she designed for the birthright to fall to her youngest. Knowing where her children’s Marione were growing, she traveled to the place and pulled up her eldest sons’ flowers. She was crazy, I think.

“Anyway, The two boys survived. This was because, rather than dying as she hoped they would, they’d become sort of beast-like—not quite people anymore.

“Now it happened that one of the two boys had followed the mother. He saw the breaking of his spirit, and went straight to his older brother and told him what he’d seen and where the mother had cast aside the flowers. But as soon as he said this he went mad. Because he’d acted too much like a person just then, and his crippled spirit snapped completely off him.” He shook his head, looking as though he were about to laugh. “Least, that’s what they say happened.

“The older boy, at a loss for what to do, went to the place, collected the seeds of his dead Marionin, and sowed them. When this did nothing for his broken spirit, he sought the advice of a saebel. She said that in order to mend his spirit he must ‘weave shrouds for the murderers with the victims’ choices.’ Saebels know something, so he decided to follow her direction, but he misinterpreted somewhere: He thought one of the murderers was his mother, though she hadn’t killed anyone; he thought he and his brother were the victims, and that ‘choices’ were the same thing as ‘Marione’; and he also thought that a shroud was for the use of a corpse. So he grew a crop and wove a shroud of his and his mad brother’s Marione, and supposed he needed his mother’s dead body

to put the shroud over. Not wanting to kill her himself, he ripped his youngest brother's flowers from the ground, and promised the youngest he should have his seeds if he killed their mother. I warned you, it's a horrible story.

"So the youngest murdered the mother and the oldest covered her corpse with the shroud. But all this did absolutely nothing, and five years after the original breaking the oldest boy went as mad as his brother. And the youngest eventually went mad, too, after trying to commit suicide.

"This story, *The Oredh Brothers*, it's supposed to be pretty old, and the Girelden—they say the youngest and oldest were the murderers, and that they, all three of the brothers, were victims. So there should've been two shrouds made up of all three of the brothers' Marione, and the shrouds should've been cast over the two sane brothers. And about the word 'shroud'—if the saebel'd been speaking in Gireldine, she probably used a word I've forgotten. A tunic woven from the family flowers. I've seen people wearing them at weddings. And they definitely weren't dead." He looked at me straight in the face. "You were weaving one of those, weren't you?"

The sun blinked over the cliffs. I remembered the *baridarm* my brothers and I had failed to weave for our dead father. I remembered Father mentioning the Oredh brothers. But most of all I was astounded, almost angry, that Andrei, of all people, should know the story, and I shouldn't.

"I don't know who broke your spirit," said Andrei. "For the best, probably. Otherwise I'd have to find him and kill him, which is an awful lot of work." I studied the shingle. "You remind me of a bird," he said. "A wren, with those rings under your eyes."

"Sweet blessed earth," I said.

"You do this at dawn every day? No wonder you're so tetchy. Need a proper sleep." This merited argument, of course, but I was groggy, and fed up with arguing, and instead I thought how his hands had trembled after holding my spirit. And I dropped my head on his shoulder and went to sleep.

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I came to at midday, curled on the ground, and saw that Andrei had scrawled, with giant characters of chalk on the cliff-face, the date and time of our next meeting. There was a question mark next to it, denoting humility, so I followed through.

He never mentioned my spirit. He explained how his mother had been gravely ill, and how Daifen had come in for a last visit. She died right then, and Daifen stole the family heirloom off her neck. The culprit must have been Daifen; the necklace was gone after he'd left.

I was a bit amazed. “Did Daifen kill her?” I said. “Maybe he just up and strangled her with it.”

Andrei started laughing, and then he got red and turned his head, and I could tell he was crying because his laughs got slobbery.

I waited for a while. Then I told him he was being awfully cold, jumping right from his mother’s death to his mother’s jewel.

“You didn’t know my mother,” he said, “and she would have rather I mourned the jewel.”

“D’you *have* to thieve it back? You could start an inquiry—”

He said no, absolutely not, he didn’t want to draw other people into it.

“Not sure they’ll take you serious?” I said.

He gave a terse nod. He was being very close-lipped.

“What about your sister? Does she know?”

Natty was aware that her social status was at stake. “That’s all she knows,” Andrei said. “And believe me, it’s enough.”

“That must be some feck-all great heirloom,” I said. “To ruin a girl’s status.”

“Enough about Natty. Natty’s better off not knowing.”

But it turned out Natty would need to know something. Because a secret search for hidden valuables at Daifen’s house was best undertaken if one were invited there under an innocent pretext, a pretext that would occur that year at the Daifen residence only for one night—the gala on the eve of the new year; and in order to mingle with the nobles invited, I had to pass for a one. A challenging job, Andrei agreed, and one that fell naturally to Natty.

Besides that, I had research to do.

I pleaded with Floy to spy on Daifen, but she refused for a week.

“Tell me, Reyna, why, by the green goats of Gaverdeen and all the necessary things you haven’t yet accomplished, did you agree to do this?”

“All those times he’s saved my arse,” I said. “It’s embarrassing. Please, Floy, don’t make my lot any harder.”

“Trying to make it easier’s what I’m doing.” But she consented when my whining became unbearable, and it took her but a day to root out the significant parts of the problem.

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“Daifen’s hall,” said Floy, “is famous for sitting directly above an ancient well. Ocling’s Well.”

“It’s sacred,” I said, skipping shards of stone across the grey surf. I tried to recall why. “They say it goes far below the bottom of the sea, where the sweetwater collects. But wouldn’t it take days to draw water?”

“Don’t know.” Floy nestled in a chink in the sea wall, twisted her neck, and preened. “Daifen’s in control of it, though. I went

inside. The well comes up in a cave, and a very important person must have built the house—the cave opens right into the master chambers like it's part of the house.”

“I know. Some idiot Lauriad thought the well was running dry and hid it beneath his house.” I shrugged, glancing up at a silent birch reaching over the wall. “And now I bet Daifen has the only sweetwater well left in the country. The only one that in't dry.”

“He doesn't use the well for water so much as he uses the cave for a safe-deposit. So I'll warrant your weasel's heirloom is tucked away in the cave somewhere. But the cave has a locked door, and it's a strange lock, right enough. Saw it. It's *square*, and you'll be able to rotate a square within a square as soon as break down the door with your head.”

“I'll find out when I see it.”

“I've a better proposition,” said Floy, alighting on a long pile sticking from the water. “How about using the key?”

“Saw that too, did you?”

“Beneath the flagstones under the man's wash-stand.”

“How do I get into his rooms?”

“You don't—it's heavily guarded. And he only lets his closest lackeys anywhere near, unless you're Grulla the chambermaid or one of the two pageboys who carry him his bathwater.”

“Ugh.” I wrinkled my nose. “How much did you see, Floy?”

“I flew a perilous mission. Do I get a thank-you?”

She hardly needed one; missions were a thank-you in themselves for Rielde.

“Thank you most graciously,” I said anyway, throwing water at her.

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I reached up and took a cannister from the self. It was an odd looking one: iron glazed with enamel so that the acid wouldn't burn through the metal.

“Ain't going to drown yer troubles with that?” Nefer said. I looked sheepishly over at him. “That don't work half so well as Tuley's whiskey. Help me build this fire up so's I can anneal this.”

I slipped the can into my pocket, took up the bellows, and pumped until the flames leapt in the furnace. My trousers felt crispy, and I stepped back. Nefer hung a chalice bowl over the anvil horn and plannished it smooth. He sang boisterously as he did it.

Padlimaird was at his brazier, shaking his head, fitting together the chalice's stem. It was fashioned like a tree, boughs cupped to receive the bowl.

I walked closer, saw the snakes creeping through the roots and the raptors roosting around the top—kestrel, osprey, eagle, kite—and noticed a familiar hallmark near the foot: a fish eating its tail.

I burst into laughter. Padlimaird flipped the thing over with his pliers. “Were the roots supposed to go on top?”

“You’re paying Dick Dagerleon a high compliment,” I said to Nefer. “Why’re you giving him the credit?”

Nefer smiled. “Habit.”

“He wants to see the look on Dick’s face when he’s asked to make another one,” said Padlimaird. Trid had done a fine job with Nefer’s arm, breaking the old fracture and splinting it. Now it was late in the fall and Nefer had the uninhibited use of both his arms.

“Send Paddy over to give poor Dick a couple of pointers.” I moved toward the door.

“Bring that canister back when ye’re through with it,” said Nefer.

## Twenty-Four

The weeks spent themselves quickly; and soon it was the afternoon of winter solstice, and in trepidation I climbed the maple through Natalya's window.

Natty, dressed in green silk, kept her excitement hidden until Andrei left the room.

"Find her something with long sleeves," he said on his way out. "And don't kill each other."

Natty slammed the door, flipped the latch and grinned at me. It made my hair stand on end.

"The soap might send you into shock," she said, "but don't worry—the bath water's cold."

Natty walked over to her bed and held up a dress. "I wore this when I was twelve. I think it will do."

There was a girdle, silver, fashioned like an ivy wreath, and a blue velvet smock that hung over the creamy silk; and as soon as I saw it I wanted to stab it in the heart. But I wasn't allowed to touch it until I had taken a bath.

"And don't shed your trousers and tunic." She pushed me towards a tub full of her used bathwater. "We might as well wash everything."

When she was through my skin felt as though it'd been scoured with a currycomb. I was surprised my hair hadn't fallen out. I believe Natty would've preferred it had, judging by the way she sighed over it's length, which wasn't so bad—I'd not cut it in a while.

She rolled the hair toward the nape of my neck and secured it there with all her pins. Then she batted my hands away and dressed me. The fine, clean fabric felt stiff and strange against my skin.

She finished it with a silver headband and couldn't hide her pleasure. "Lucky for us that Gireldine girls hide beneath rags and buckets, my mother always said."

She turned me out into the hall. The bench at the end was occupied by Andrei and Max, and though Andrei was asleep (a fit that often possessed him during bouts of boredom), Max watched as Natty and I approached.

"Who're you?" said Max to me. Then he slammed the bench against the wall and woke Andrei. "She looks like a *girl*."

"Max," said Andrei, "one of these days I'll pee my trousers." He recognized me and the red spread up his neck all the way to his ears. I'd never seen him blush before.

"You'd smell better," said Max.

Andrei stood up. "You've redeemed yourself, Natty."



“So you’ll be nice to me?” said Natty.

“You’ve a little more to redeem yet.”

And we found a cloak for me, sought out Trid, and to Natty’s dismay left on horseback for the ferry across the estuary; and Natty hissed about my straddled legs and terrible poise until I turned in my saddle and rode backwards.

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Daifen’s house hugged a sea bluff with its old stone arms, and the place would have seemed wild and lonely but for the number of people that showed up that night, all of them dressed in the same high fashion with cloaks drawn tight against the chapping wind.

A groom took our horses, and we stole inside with me hidden in the middle. Floy flew in before us, looking like a stray leaf.

The entrance hall was fragrant with winter greenery and potted orange trees. Max (who’d grown taller that autumn) reached and picked a few oranges. “They’ll probably read poetry for a couple of hours while we slowly starve,” he said, handing some to Andrei, who put them in his jerkin pockets next to my canister of acid.

A number of people were already in the big hall, talking and laughing. The tables, colorful with food and drink, had been pushed aside to make room for dancing and entertainment.

Trid sat on a bench in a corner as far from the center of the room as possible. I made to sit beside him, but Andrei laughed and pulled him up. “We’ve got to sit closer to Daifen, Triddy. Don’t fret—I’ll protect you.”

I looked about the room. My heart slowed considerably when I failed to see the Queen. Andrei nudged me and pointed at Daifen. A woman stood at his right, old as he was—probably his sister, as he’d taken no wife. The other Galde were easy to spot, dressed brightly, acting raffishly, talking loudly in their own tongue. I kept my eyes averted when we passed them.

Andrei chose a couch near the food, close enough so that he could hear what Daifen was saying, and I sat in his shadow. Trid, head down, dropped onto a bench directly opposite us.

Max sat beside Trid. “And now,” he said, almost drooling, “to start a fight.”

“A fight?” said Trid. “*That’s* the plan?”

“Don’t sound so cynical. Andy’s here.”

“Not yet,” said Andrei, looking round. “We need a reason—Ah.” Luka had just come in, arm in arm with his mother.

Mulled drinks were offered in liberation, loosening tongues. Music commenced. I had a cider I thought was just cider, but soon my words crammed together and I catcalled with the boys when Natty was called to play a little harp that had been arranged on a stool. She sat on the stool and refused to play for lack of a singer.

A Gralde girl was cajoled out of serving drink and shoved, giggling, to the spot beside Natty.

“The Bean, the Bean,” cried another Gralde. “Ocling’s Bean.”

“That piece of nonsense?” Natty said.

“It’s all Jennet knows.”

The Gralde girl blushed, and more folk took up the call; so Natty plucked grumpily at her harp and the girl sang along in her kitten’s voice:

*“O half sunk in sea stood a doorstep of yew  
That had once borne the stamping of old Ocling’s shoe;  
A squall had provided the rest of his house  
With a taste of the sky, then a sea-salty douse,*

*And Ocling was left with a bean to his name,  
And a thirst that could put a fried flounder to shame,  
So he walked the north shore with a rattling groan  
Till he’d come to a well in a grotto of stone.*

*But ’twas high in a sea bluff secured by a sprite  
And the grotto was guarded by day and by night,  
And this saebel with teeth all of sea-foam and salt  
Bid Ocling good day, and then ‘Drink not thou shalt.*

*‘For the water is mine after many a brave  
Hath attempted to take this, my rightful enclave.’  
Though stern spoke the saebel, old Ocling’s retort  
Held that lack of a drink equaled pleasures cut short*

*By the curse of the mortal, by death’s dark estate,  
And the Elde found fit to steer clear of this fate.  
So he jumped on the saebel—and throttled a mist,  
For the neck of the sprite is like water in fist.*

*Then the sprite drew a cutlass—the famed Eel’s Claw,  
And he thrust the misnomer at old Ocling’s jaw,  
But Ocling was skilled at the Lobster’s Gavotte  
And deflected the blow with that curious knot*

*That one makes when the pelvis is placed in the mouth,  
When toe plugs the west ear, and knee plugs the south.  
But Death’s dire scythe would have still reached its mark  
Had not old Ocling’s secreted bean stopped the arc*

*Of the cutlass thrust toward that intrepid face.  
Then the bean and the sword locked in rigid embrace,  
Were flung in the air, and thrown down to the source*

*Of the water and bigotry, greed and remorse.*

*The saebel was fond of his sword to a fault,  
And the worst of the battling drew to a halt  
When the saebel leapt after his cutlass of bone,  
Grabbed Ocling's ear, and dropped like a stone.*

*For three frightful days down the shaft of the well,  
Past limestone and granite and iron they fell  
Until sea-salty sprite upon cutlass was flung  
And Ocling's suspenders from tendril were hung;*

*Tendril that curled from a branch of a stalk  
That had grown from the bean in a watery shock,  
When the bean had encountered a crystalline lake  
Filled with water disdainful of ordin'ry make.*

*For a full thousand years Ocling worked for his means  
In the deep of the well, cultivating his beans,  
And growing more youthful with each sip he downed  
Of that water unknown to the rest of the round.*

*And when young Ocling found that he'd grown enough twine  
For twisting together and lashing a line  
That could climb to the rim of the sweetwater well,  
He began right away with escaping his cell.*

*He worked his way up with his rope and the claw  
That was ripped from the sword that had threatened his maw,  
Till at last he climbed over and slid down the scree,  
And found himself amidst the grand jubilee*

*That the locals threw yearly to honor the man  
Who had freed from the clutches of saebeline hand  
Their marvelous well full of radiant dew,  
Though the stuff was redolent of beans to a few."*

Natty ended with a miserable glissando. Before the notes had whispered away Max was up and slicing for himself a slab of partridge.

Luka had, at Max's offhand request, joined us on the couch with a platter of food. "That was utterly ridiculous," he said, tugging the honey cruet away from Max.

"Excuse me?" Natty sat down next to Trid.

"He wasn't talking about just you," said Andrei. "Of course he'd find it ridiculous. Hasn't yet mastered an Eldine language."

"And Andrei"—Luka slathered honey over his ham—"hasn't yet

mastered basic etiquette, what with his inviting that scrawny rat to a court function.”

“So,” said Natty, her eyes dangerously bright, “I haven’t the wits to make your scrawny rat look good enough for a drunken, loutish—”

“He wasn’t disparaging your wits,” said Andrei. “He’s trying desperately to hide his attraction.”

“And what is it you’re hiding, Andrei?” said Luka. “Something a bit more severe than attraction. Can’t be healthy. I’m not half as important as you and I’m growing unwell just looking at her.”

Andrei jammed his elbows into the upholstery. I poked him in the side.

“Hit a soft spot, haven’t I?” said Luka. “Look at him, Max. Unhappy as a lion in a monsoon.”

“Shut your gob,” said Max, still chewing.

“Why? I’m a strict believer in openness and honesty.”

“How’s this?” said Andrei. “One more word and I’ll boil your head in its own spit.”

“No, none from me. I’m trying to keep from retching, anyway.” He set his plate on the floor.

Trid, who had been hunched silently over his drink, stood up. He walked to the sideboard, grabbed the red rump of a hind, and swung it into Luka’s chest.

Luka keeled over and took the couch with him.

There was a rush of wind, and Andrei, Luka, and I fell in a jumble on the floor. “Here’s our chance,” said Andrei. He grabbed a turkey leg from Natty’s plate, and clobbered Luka around the ears.

“That’s my brother!” said Max, and he threw gobs of mashed turnip at Andrei. He miscalculated some and smothered Natty’s hair.

This was unforgivable. She pelted him with things from her plate, harder than I would’ve thought her capable.

“What’s this? What’s this?” said a fat old man with no hair, and he got up from his chair. “This is no way to—” Max slammed a tart into his face before I could make out if he was human or Elde.

Max threw the next tart at Andrei and I, and using the couch as a barricade we lobbed handfuls of pudding and flan towards the Garvad boys. Daifen got caught in the barrage.

Max cackled maniacally when a woman (probably his mother) called his name, and he took plates of fruit, and candied orchids, and sugar lace, and toffee-brittle, and apple custard from the table and hurled it around without reserve. Trid, shaking his head, attempted to walk toward the exit while ladies pushed, prodded, and shrieked around him. It looked almost like a riverside riot.

Shaking nuts out of my skirts, I nervously eyed the crowd.

Their silks and velvets were dripping and patched, and they had very ugly looks on their faces. One of them had Max by the ear.

Floy chose that moment to fly down from the rafters. “It’s time to leave,” I said, and heaved Andrei up by the collar. “You saw Daifen, didn’t you? Having a bad time. Wiping his doublet and screaming at you.” We left, slipping on gravy, onions, scallops, and finally, through a side door.

Floy led us down a spiral stair. We stopped next to a laundry, and hid behind a hamper of sheets while grinning servants ran up and down the stairs. Daifen must have been stuck apologizing for some time, because a good hour passed, and several steaming tubs of water, before two boys emerged from the laundry with the right tub.

They were grey-eyed Gralde, eleven or twelve, dressed in Daifen’s russet livery with hoods drawn up against the drafts. “That one’s for him,” said Floy. The tub was wood, very big, with wheels rolling beneath it.

The boys stopped when they saw Andrei and me. They smiled. “M’lady,” said the smaller one. “You look like you could use a damp towel.”

“For Daifen, is this?” said Andrei. I ran a sleeve over my turnipy face.

“Aye,” said the smaller.

“He said the lady might use it instead.”

“We weren’t told of this,” said the taller of the boys.

“Oh, but he did say so, he felt so badly about it.” Andrei glanced at me. “She had a terrible meal. Got her face stuck in a whiskey jug, and started dancing on the table soon as she was drunk enough. People started throwing food—”

The boys giggled. “I don’t think that’s what happened, sir.”

“But look at her tears,” said Andrei. I scraped turnip from my eyes.

“All right then. Where shall we put the lady’s bath?”

“Is there a room nearby?”

The boys rolled the bath into what looked like a broom closet and ran off with the two oranges Max had given Andrei. “We’d better hurry,” Andrei said. “They’ll come to their senses soon enough and draw him another.” We hauled the tub back into the laundry and emptied it some, and I uncorked the acid.

“This won’t hurt him,” I said, pouring it into the water. “It’s too diluted. But it’ll give him a rash. And it’ll sting like a hundred hornets.”

“If that doesn’t hurt I’ll boil my own head in spit.” Andrei dug through a basket and pulled out a large house tunic with a hood.

We dressed ourselves in russet tunics and rolled the tub, with much maneuvering, repositioning, and slopping, along the corridors. Six guardsmen were seated outside Daifen’s chambers, drinking their new year’s gifts and playing dice. One of them got shakily to his feet and opened the door for us. We had to stand to the side,

though, because a human man about near tumbled out.

“Fine Murig leather, completely ruined,” he called back into the room. “I want compensation—”

“A new jacket?” came Daifen’s voice. “Strip the hide off those Garvad boys.”

“You staged it, I’ll stake five hundred sheep on it—”

“And you’d lose every one, you gangling human weed. Out, out, I’ll have no more of your stupidity.”

The man left, muttering, and we pulled our hoods tighter and wrestled the tub into the rooms within. I almost felt sorry for everything, until Daifen turned in his chair. “Took your time, didn’t you? You can expect gruel and saltwater for the rest of the week.”

Andrei gave me a keep-quiet look, and we dragged the tub over the hearth. We draped dressing linens over the rim and slipped out to wait in the corridor with the sentries.

“Saltwater?” one of them said. I nodded. “He’ll forget by tomorrow.” The others laughed and invited us to join in the game.

One of our dice was a soft wood. Out of habit, I rolled it down the stairs (as if by accident), and at the bottom hammered one of my lock-picking needles into it. Then I brought it back up to play with. And Andrei and I sat winning a ridiculous amount of coins until the die was actually thrown down the stairs by a soldier who leaped up and watched all of its one-sided progress, at the end of which he howled about swindlers and cheats. But a much louder howl came from behind Daifen’s door.

“For a mercy,” cried a sentry, “he’s being murdered in his bath!” He grabbed an axe from his fellow and hacked at the door, making a sizable hole.

The four soldiers tumbled through it, weapons at the ready, and disappeared into the bedchamber. Andrei and I followed, but no farther than the anteroom. I crawled beneath the washstand, swept Floy from the flagstone, heaved it up with Andrei’s help, and found an ant colony.

“I can’t believe this,” said Floy. I shook ants from my fingers. “He must’ve had more than one hiding—”

“Aly! Aly,” said Andrei, concentration crossing his eyes. We stopped our breathing, listening to Daifen calling for talc and soap. “He needs water. The closest water.”

“Why can’t you—”

“He’ll recognize my voice.”

I scrambled to my feet, slid towards the noise and shouted, “M’lord, clean water’d put you to rights. Where’s the well key?”

There was a great splash and the drops irritated my face. “Boy,” Daifen yelled, “I’ll tan you red as a lobster’s arse.”

“Can’t do much tannin when yer dead, m’lord,” I said. “Could be shark lye got in the laundry cistern, and that stuff melts bone.”

I’d never heard of shark lye, but he must’ve. “The arch! Above

the—” His words became unintelligible, and one of the guards shouted something about a keystone.

The only arch in the room was above the entrance. Andrei looked at the stone in the top. “The door will collapse,” he said stupidly.

“Try above it.” I pushed him next to the doorway. He couldn’t reach that far, and dropped to his knees. I seated myself on his shoulders, and he shot upward. I felt feverishly for the loose stone, wrenched it from its place, and dropped it to catch the key in my palms. The stone landed on Andrei’s foot. He collapsed and cried on oath when I fell on him; and I jumped up with the key and dragged him over to the small door of iron sunk into the wall.

Andrei grabbed a lantern and striker tipped against the wall and set about lighting it with fumbling hands.

“Oh, come on,” I said when the key wouldn’t rotate.

“I’ve seen those before.” Andrei blew on his burned fingers. A flame flickered in the lantern. “You’ve got to push before turning. Hard.”

I did so. It shoved the keyway back into a place too muffled for the finger-joint language of the lock-pick, and the key turned. The heavy door opened a crack. We squeezed ourselves inside, and a wind sucked the thing closed with a gong-like sound. Floy was on the other side.

It was absolutely silent.

Andrei tried the door. “Well.” His voice echoed. “Doesn’t open from the inside.” A cold damp raised the hair on my legs, and the lantern cast strange shapes around us. “Did you hear it lock?”

“The wind came from this room,” I said bravely. “There’s another exit somewhere. Goes outside, probably. And Daifen can’t get in—the key’s in here.”

“How very reassuring.”

“Get looking, the wick’ll burn down.”

“Help me, then. It’s a chain with a silver pendant.”

So I crept into the circle of lantern light, and we rifled through boxes of jewelry, stacks of books and maps, and purses of silver. Sharp stalagmites grew like needles on either side of the path, and we jumped from stone to stone to explore the deeper recesses. We found buttons and clasps, and broaches and rings, but no pendant.

I inched up the path, shoving fingers into crannies. Andrei jerked me back. The well opened right before us—a large black hole that gaped through ceiling as well as floor.

An ancient iron contraption stood to one side, its barrel wound with a single coil of rope. A lever stuck from the middle.

“I wonder.” Andrei raised his lantern over the hole. “Could it be down there?” Groaning, he loosened the lever. It began to spin, slowly at first, and then accelerating, winding the rope around the barrel faster than my eyes could see. “It must be clockwork,” he

said, staring. "Or powered by water."

The machine droned for a time and finally came to a clanking halt. Andrei pulled on the rope and hauled a bucket over the edge. His sleeve sloshed as he felt around. His face shone triumphant, and he pulled a silver chain from the bucket. The pendant was hidden in his fist.

I peeled an orchid off my neck. "Why'd he hide it down there?"

"Water won't give it away," he said. "You put something in water and it's as though it disappears off the earth."

"Must've been a right annoying necklace." Andrei squatted and dropped the thing between his feet. He cupped his hands in the water and drank.

"Mmm." He took another drink. "Come and have some. This stuff's special."

"Does it taste like beans?"

"That's why it's special." He flicked some at me, and I knelt beside him. The water was like sunlight; it made us giddy. We hopped up, playing with each other's limbs. Andrei kicked the empty bucket down the hole and pulled the front of my tunic in a wide arc around the well. I made a face at the silver chain that had snagged on his sandal strap.

I bent down and took it, and ran down the path into the darkness, where I kicked off Natty's shoes so I could feel my way. The air chilled, the closeness fell away, and the ceiling was alight with stars rolling over the sea, and a wide moon. Spray wet my feet. I kept the stone at my back, shivering and waiting for Andrei and the lantern.

The pendant was silver, skinny, curved like a claw. When the lantern cast light around my fingers I saw it was a miniscule bottle, cap fastened to the chain.

"I was taught something terrible would happen if I opened it," said Andrei, looking over my shoulder.

"Like what?"

He shrugged. "Maybe the oceans would flood the South."

"Or the sun would go out."

"Or we'd all go crazy."

"Or the earth would be squeezed inside-out."

"Or we'd disappear."

"Open it," I said. The wind whipped my hair loose. He set the gasping lantern at our feet, took the pendant, and screwed the cap loose.

He dropped it and reeled back. He slammed against the stone, and then crouched, arm over his face.

I picked the pendant up and held the opening to my eye. I couldn't see anything. I picked the chain off the ground, screwed the cap on, and crouched next to him. "Are you going to die?" I whispered.



“There was a light. You couldn’t see it? A blinding light.” He fingered his eyes. “I can’t see.”

“Joker.” But his face remained perfectly serious. I waved my hand in front of him. “Anything?”

He shook his head. “No—just dark. There’s a stream of dust over my head.”

“Stars, aren’t they?”

He stared at the sky, then at me. “I see you, now.”

“You sound happy about it.”

He grabbed the lantern from me. “You really didn’t see it? It was so bright, like lightning striking right in front of me.”

“It must be a human thing.” I passed him his necklace. “Happy Yule.”

## Twenty-Five

We did a few things more I can't quite remember—we were still giddy—but after the stuff wore off, the wind bit at our faces and the surf froze our feet. We walked close together down a steep path until we reached the hall and the horses, and finally, my old tunic.

The acid canister lacked a stopper but Nefer had wanted me to return it.

It was snowing outside the smithy: the wind blew the white through the door in giant feathers. Wille, whose little girl had come into the world sometime last month, wasn't there, but Paddy was, and Nefer, who flicked his hammer and shattered a clay mould. The silver tumbled from the shards and rang on the counter.

I walked over and stared at it. "Where'd ye get that?" I remembered the weight in my palm and the invisible light that had stricken Andrei with blindness.

"I made it," he said. "It's the bit missing from the middle." He tossed it into a tub of acid with four other pieces: two dragonfly wings and the hollow parts of an abdomen. "The whole thing's guesswork. Won't have no diamonds to sparkle it up, nor magic. But we'll fold it together anyways, won't we Paddy?"

"Nefer." I was flabbergasted, hanging onto the counter. "How long did it take? You even got the circles in the wings?"

"So a Simargh could understand em," said Padlimaird, looking up from his billet.

"Why," I said, "did you become a brigand?"

"Was piracy, first." Nefer dipped a rag in powdered rottenstone and polished a doorknob. "Around Noldecelah and the Gulf."

"Couldn't take his master's knocks." Padlimaird tapped the metal with his hammer. "Fellow doin the knocking must've had some right big old arms."

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I stumbled out the door, sat on a slagheap, and wondered about Nefer. And Andrei. Was he the boy Calragen was looking for, the lost prince? But he had a sister. But perhaps she wasn't, really. And God help Lorila.

Just then Mordan and Floy flew down to me, stark against the white.

"We have a year left, come this spring," said Mordan. I knew what he meant—we had spoken about it before. Tears froze on my lashes.

"Must you go?" I said. "Couldn't one of you stay?"

“Floy’s staying—she’s the best for spy work. We need those asters. Our hearts are growing brittle. We can feel the end. We need those asters.” This wasn’t the Mordan of three years ago. This Mordan flickered like a small, cold flame. “There’s a letter we want you to write, after we’ve gone searching,” he said more briskly. “Floy can give you the details. She’ll meet us a year from today at the usual tower. And give yourself time enough to fly there,” he told her as they huddled into my cloak against the wind.

I met my brothers at the pool to wish them well. They flew away, and I paced and pulled at my hair, feeling so miserable that I asked Floy to distract me. She told me about the letter.

“It was kept quiet,” she said, “but about a year back an Elde went to Lorlen, where the Simargh are, to ask for help. Remember Ackerly? Was him. Hasn’t come back yet, and you know how the Simargh are about clay people’s business. So Tem said a letter written about help that mayn’t come is best sent when all other help has failed. To stay a rebellion, he said.”

“Stay a rebellion?” I said. “With a *letter*?”

“You did it once before,” said Floy. “Remember the hanging?”

“No wonder they didn’t want to tell me in person.” And then I stared at the ground in sudden thought. “Do you suppose,” I said, “if I wrote a letter to Calragen he’d come across the sea with an army?” She laughed at me. “He’s forgotten us,” I said.

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Andrei went missing. All winter I did not see him, and when the thaw came with a new crop of saxifrage, I decided to ask Trid and Max about him. But Max was no help at all, and Trid proved as hard to find as Andrei. He might have been on some sort of probation—Lorila and Norembry were still head to head, Caveira and Herist still pulling the strings behind it for all I could tell, and then there was the matter of the Queen.

Faiorsa was dead, poisoned, it was rumored. The authorities had hidden it from the country for half a year. I couldn’t believe it, almost didn’t want to. What I wanted was for her to be tortured horribly, in public. But if she wasn’t dead, she had vanished. The tension didn’t ease; Herist just took her place.

It was mid-spring when I finally found Trid on the old Llenad Bridge.

“He’s in Even-Alehn, maybe,” he said. “There was an emissary from Benmarum, and they both left. Didn’t speak a word to me.”

“Max said he went on a hunt.”

“Someone else’s doing the hunting, then. Andrei’s the fox.”

“Has it something to do with the Queen disappearing?”

A piece of the bridge fell from beneath his foot into the canal, and he looked nervously down at the rushing water. “I’m not telling

you what I think.” And then he blushed, and another board swung loose and splashed beneath us. “We’d better get off this bridge.”

I stepped in his way. “Scared Herist’ll see you in one spot for a long time?”

His mouth drew as close to a sneer as I’d ever seen it. “Keeps getting worse. He controls the Ombenelva, and nobody sees but us. All the rest just let him get on with it, slip him the reins. Because we’re keeping the letter about him and Caveira hidden so Andrei needn’t worry.”

“About what?”

“The other story getting out. About the King’s children. Like some sort of sick stalemate.”

“You’re not making any sense, Trid.”

Trid shoved past me and began walking away. “When Andrei comes back,” he said in an irritable voice, “You should probably stay away, princess.”

I ran after him off the bridge and whacked him hard over the back. He was so much bigger than me it made no difference.

“Fine,” I said, “go on back to your hiding hole.” We left each other alone after that.

Summer came early. When Herist the merchant made an ally of Herist the commander and blockaded the harbor against competing ships, levied a tax on the goods from his own vessels for the maintenance of the bloated military, and fed most of these goods to his soldiers, I contemplated writing the letter. But the riots swelled with little planning and were quelled with little injury. I ripped up a signpost and took part in a couple myself, until Sal caught me during my third and threw me in the river.

I watched nervously as the Noremes became gaunt and the foreigners grew fat, as close-cloaked Max, encouraged by Padlimaird, joined the unrest, as Herist grew bolder.

Autumn came late. No one was shocked when Herist ordered a citywide weapon confiscation and a weekly inspection of the city’s smithies. Bequen called for active measures, the Elde responded with fervor, and I wrote the letter. I added to the bottom that they ought to send a message to Calragen Eligarda of Evenalehn, hoping to stop certain insurgency. I was fifteen.

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I wanted Floy’s leg for the letter. She was foraging for seeds along the riverbank. As I rustled through the dead weeds, I found Andrei first, asleep beneath a yellow willow.

I slipped the letter into my pocket and roughed up his hair with a willow wand. He leapt up, tripped over his own feet, and fell back down.

“Friendly thing to do.” He put his knife away.

“You deserved it.”

“Learned my lesson, then.” His voice was rough and dark, like walnut bark. I had missed it. “I about had a conniption.”

“Trid said you were taken away by an emissary.”

“Gagged and chained.”

“Really?” I sat beside him and wrapped a willow branch around and around my arm, wondering how to broach the question. *So Andrei, about that pendant...*

“I went over the sea to Even-Alehn and talked to a firebird.”

“Did she give you a wish?”

“No, a choice. But it was a my-heart-or-yours choice, like in the song.”

“Not much of a choice.”

“No. I think I chose wrong, but I would have left a big mess, and been unhappy, and it made little sense.”

He wasn’t bantering anymore. “What was it? The choice?”

His eyes were shaded and looked brown. “Either I use the thing now, or hide it away for a thousand years, where it can wait until it’s ready.”

“What?”

“And I asked where I’d hide it for a thousand years.” Had he gone mad while he was away? “Not in this world, she said. I’d have to find a guide to take me to another world.”

“You got yerself a mad firebird.”

He nodded. “So I asked her where I’d find this guide. She laughed, and said I was running backwards like the Pirnon Mireir.”

I took a breath. The air went down and didn’t come back up.

“What is it?”

“What?” I shook my head. Floy hopped from a branch to my shoulder. “Did she know what it was?”

“Said something about his—”

“The Pirnon Mireir. What’s the Pirnon Mireir?”

Andrei laughed. I saw nothing funny about it.

“Your river. In Simargh. Not like you Girelden are the only ones in love with it.”

I rubbed the back of my head. The boy was an ass, no question, but he was also some sort of genius.

“Andrei,” called a girl. Natty peered beneath the willow, and Floy and I went over it: the brow of the Pirnon Mireir; the headwaters of the Cheldony; Avila; the northeast.

“You’re with *her*?” said Natty. “I’m to remind you you’ve a letter needs writing. And your horse is eating the zinnias up the road.” I stood up, ready to set out in search of the ice asters that minute, when she rounded on me. “You silly girl. If he were seen just *once* in your company what do you suppose the mercenaries would think? Don’t you know it’s essential that they listen to him instead of Herist?”

“Natty,” said Andrei, “shut up and leave.”

“Not until you do.”

“All right, I’m going,” he said. “Come on.” He crept out from under the tree, but Natty stayed put.

“Aloren,” she said to me, “you’ve got to keep away from him. He won’t listen to me, but maybe you will. There’s a lot at stake—”

“If you mean your family’s reputation,” I told her, still thinking of the river, “it’s already fresh as a turd, and he didn’t need any help with that.”

“What about my family?” Natty drew herself up. “I still have my maidenhead.”

The old suspicion grew in my mind. “He’s not your brother.”

“Course not—” Her eyes widened. She looked into my face. “You still don’t know? What a nasty, dirty trick.”

My ears grew hot. I immediately thought the worst. “He’d have to be younger than Leode,” I said to Floy.

“He *acts* younger than Leode.”

“Floy—”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Reyna.”

“That broach, Floy. And the pendant—”

In any case, one thing was made clear.

“Aloren,” said Natty, “he’s told you lie after lie, and I don’t care what he says about it, he’s the late Queen’s son, and he’s got all that pile of her trouble on his head.”

Somewhere in the back of my head I resolved to never let Floy forget this. Natty, ducking beneath the branches, said, “You haven’t given back my old gown, did you know?”

“It sold for twenty-three silvers,” I said. She noted my murderous tone and walked away without saying more.

“Floy,” I said, and sat back down.

“He’s not her son,” Floy said stubbornly. “They looked nothing alike.”

But I didn’t want to argue over the finer points of Andrei’s multiple identities—I’d thought of something worse. “That pendant, the little bottle Daifen hid down the well. How’d I not see it? It’s the *Aebelavadar*.” My body went numb.

“The what?” said Floy.

“It *was*.” I closed my eyes, and thought it through straight to the bottom. “Andrei’s mother? Daifen stole it off the sick Queen—right off her neck, and Andrei’s desperate to get it back, and then he sees a light that I can’t, then goes across the sea to a council, and talks to—God knows what a firebird is—about some *thing* he can use now. And I just gave it into his hands.”

I squeezed my temples between my palms, and stood up. I was so angry I was shaking.

I walked to where he sat on the wall next to the zinnias, scratching away at his letter. Sandal was still chewing on the

flowers, and I thought of Max.

“The prince gets in the way of Andy’s fun?” I said.

He stood up, yawning. “What?”

“Slipped yer mind, did it?” I said. “Who you was.”

He stared, suddenly awake. “I’m a bastard.” He put down the parchment and got ink all over his fingers. “Not a prince. And I suppose you told me a whole lot more?”

I wanted to take his stupid, long neck, and throttle it. “Why’d you hide it? Why’d you lie?”

“Natty told you?”

“What are you going to do? Throw her into the sea chained to a rock?”

“Is that what princes do?”

“You couldn’t have kept it hidden. Why’d ye even try?”

He wiped the ink on his trousers. “Why do you think? Any other girl as clever could figure it out.”

“Go on,” I said.

“It was such a pleasure,” he said sarcastically, “being insulted, told-off, slapped and kicked—”

“There weren’t Galde enough?”

“Most of them are too craven to do it to my face.”

“That in’t it,” I said. “Any other girl as clever would figure you’d been hiding your pile of horseshit. That’s what she’d figure. But you’ll always be standin up to your neck in shit, Andrei, no matter whose head you decide to screw onto your neck in the morning.”

“Lord of Light, you are a hot-head. Calm down, think a little—your life could be a lot easier.”

“It in’t so easy,” I said, “when you think about it.”

“Oh.” I couldn’t look at him. “Is that why you’ve stopped thinking?” I began walking away. “Did I say you could leave?” It was the old, sour Andrei behind me, and I ran. My legs were no match for his, and he caught me by the arm.

I shook him off. “Don’t dirty yerself.”

“Aly—”

“You oughtn’t be touching a filthy Eldine rat.”

He stopped, and I didn’t look behind, but I knew he stood there without moving because Sandal’s halter rang when the horse jostled his shoulder.

\*\*\*

His thin face, the eyes—I walked and walked, faster and faster, but still they burned before me. Though he wouldn’t go, I struck the *Aebelavadar* from my thoughts—after all, what could I do about it?—and tried to think only of the ice asters.

I walked all the way to the weaving pool. I had one tunic to

complete: my own. So I gathered armfuls of the flowers from the pool, and stuffed the flowers and shirts into my saddlebag for weaving during my journey north. But before I could begin this I had a last errand to run. I decided to deliver the letter to the tavern myself to ensure that it was opened by Hal. The other insurgents were too hysterical to respond with sense.

\*\*\*

I hid the saddlebag in the hollow log on the beach—it could wait there until I was ready to go north—and I came to the tavern around midday.

The sun poured into the boathouse when I opened the door, and the lamps guttered. No one noticed. There was no sign of Hal or his fiddle, but Wille, Padlimaird, Sal, Bequen, and at least twenty others I knew among the throng, were deep in argument.

“We starve this coming winter or we raise hell,” said a small man with a blue cap. Wille stole the cap.

“What sort of hell?” He held the cap over a candle and smiled as a hole burned through. He was in his cups. “Fiery or rainy, Gwat? How about both—if we torch their ships they’ll have no place to run when we corner them with our brollies.”

Gwat slugged him in the stomach and took back his cap. “Have a care, Illinla, or yer lass’ll get etted by the Ombens.” Wille made to rise, but Sal forced him down.

“Are you all so hard by?” Bequen said. I inched into a corner and looked around for Hal.

“The same hambone can yield up lots of meals,” said a man philosophically.

“My hambone’s white as a pickled haddock,” said Sal. “Good for clobbering noggins. And Daira’s at Goody’s house, screaming for food—we came to do something, not talk of waiting.”

“Let’s raid a storehouse,” said Wille.

“Not you, clobber-face,” said Padlimaird.

“How do we get rid of em?” called a boy from the back.

“I don’t know,” said Bequen. “No one likes them here, not even the court. Except for Herist.”

“As he’s got the thing they want,” said Gwat.

“No, he doesn’t,” said Bequen, “and thank Machenan for it. Herist would get the whole black horde to go to war with.”

“Oh,” said Gwat, grinning, biting on his pipe stem, “is Snakey letting you in on his war councils?”

“She’s right.” I felt compelled to say it, hidden in my corner.

“A puppet!” said Gwat.

“It’s the bastard’s pet Gralde,” someone said.

Chairs clattered, and Gwat stood up, and about five others, too.

“Eager to dance off with news about us,” he said.



“He’ll put a ribbon in her hair for it, I’ll warrant,” said someone else.

“Or a coronet.”

This was all too much. “That’s right,” I said. “You can all bow and go hang.” Wille studied me as he would’ve an old ewer, newly buffed.

“Don’t wind yourself in a trawl,” said Bequen to me. “You’re no nark, we’re not stupid. But he chases after you the same. And as I was saying—if any of you would listen—now his mother’s gone the *Aebelavadar*’s his to give, not Herist’s.”

Folk started squawking at this, and she yelled over them, “He’s reached his majority. I can hardly see him giving Herist control over the troops, they hate each other so. Maybe—”

“If he wasn’t to give it to them?” said an old sailor named Gabe.

“They want it real bad,” said Gwat sourly, “so they’ll stay, and take it by force, and take Norembry too, to shit on, as they like it so much here.”

“Aye,” said another man. “They like it so much here, there’s nothing left for us to like.”

“It’s lose-lose.”

“Listen,” said Padlimaird. No one did, but he must have thought it important, because he began shouting. “Listen! If the weapon left—on a ship, say—the Ombens might follow it.”

Gwat laughed. “Like women after Laerty Lace-Pants?”

“Get it out of the country?” said Bequen.

“And they’ll follow like a swarm of bees,” said Wille. He nodded at me. “Sweeten the bastard’s bed, Lally, or sting him if he likes, and maybe he’ll ship the thing to Noldecelah, or Miachamel, or Evenalehn.”

I clutched a stool, preparing to throw it at him, and Gabe said, “It’s true, he’s smitten with her. It’s a running joke at Old Stolker’s.”

“Aloren,” said Bequen in a voice both firm and fraught, “you’re in a rare position to help. He’ll listen to you. Tell him to send the *Aebelavadar* someplace else, or sell it to the Ombenelva, even, so long as he makes them leave the country. We need for you to at least *try*. Otherwise we’ll have to shed blood to survive the winter.”

I kicked over a tool bench on my way out the door.

## Twenty-Six

As I walked I brooded over Andrei, trying to undo the knots. They only seemed to wind into new ones.

“That bottle thing, the *Aebelavadar*, it belonged to the Queen,” I said to Floy. “And it fits into that broach. Faiorsa was the one. From the journal, the woman who stole the baby. And Andrei’s the—like I thought—” I groaned like a ship in a storm.

“Mordan would be proud,” said Floy.

“Who is he, then?” I walked so fast I was almost running. I was confused as I’d ever been—the baby in the journal was supposed to solve problems, not make new ones. “What was she doing,” I said, “making him prince of two countries? Getting hold of that weapon and inviting all the Ombenelva in the world to squat over Norembry. Was that what she *wanted*?”

“Yes,” Floy said sarcastically, “considering all the work she put in.”

“Well she left a big pile, right enough.”

“But there—I doubt she intended to die before sorting it out.”

“Herist poisoned her,” I said. “That’s what happened, and now *he’ll* sort it out.”

My feet had steered me to the belltower. I climbed the terrace and threw myself down in the shade at the base of a pillar. My legs grew cold and I stuck them in the sun. The wind chased locust leaves and cloud shades through the square, and a shadow grew firm and stayed in place over my knees.

I’d half-expected it—the belltower was a sort of lodestone for him. “Well met, your High Royalness.” My blood boiled and I drew my legs back into the shade.

“And you, sparrowshit.”

“You listen,” I said. He didn’t move, so I tried to get it over with in one breath: “Ellyned needs for them Omben troops to leave straightaway, and the *Aebelavadar* belongs to you, don’t it? And they want it real bad. So send the weapon off somewhere and they’ll go after it. Or you can give it to them. But either way you’ve got to send em away. Norembry can’t support an army.”

“What are you blabbering about?” He wiped sweat off his face. “Believe me, I hate them as much as everyone else. But I can’t send them away.”

“Why?” I hugged my knees.

“They’re the only thing keeping Herist at bay. And with Lorila like it is—”

“The *Queen* was the only thing keeping Herist at bay, and now she’s dead. Poisoned by him, no doubt. Now he’s got rid of her,

he'll get rid of you next and use your Ombenelva to overthrow the government."

"Overthrow the government?" His brows knotted together. "You think he has the wits?"

"You," I said, "are vastly underestimating his wits."

"Alright." He spoke as if trying to calm a nervous horse. "I'll have him killed—then they'll have to take orders from me."

"A sixteen-year-old boy?" I scratched my hair furiously. "And if you manage that, what then? Why keep them here? To march against Caveira? And after ye've plowed over Dirlan, were you gonna send a letter to the Lorilan Ravy-whatsit asking him to tea in his desecrated duchy?"

"If he accepts the invitation," said Andrei, who was working up a temper, "I'll be happy to arrange with him his terms of defeat." He took a good look at my expression, and said quickly, "Both countries only want stability and he's on his sickbed with his cousins squabbling—"

I stood up. "You're going to invade Lorila?" The irony was too much. "D'you mean to be an emperor? Andrei the Terrible, Scourge of the West?"

He didn't say anything. I nocked the arrow on my heartstring, drew it back, and took aim. "Or are you too cowardly to send them troops away, too frightened Herist'll resent it and let slip about those children he murdered? They probably thought it was their father coming. What a shock it must've been." He still said nothing, and it made me cruel. "You're nothing but a usurper."

He went very white. "I didn't give those orders."

"Maybe." I shouldn't have said it—he definitely wasn't going to listen now, and to hell with the whole country if it meant I had to get on my knees. "So why are you so scared of a letter? So scared of it you're getting caught up in a fake war? You've got to get rid of the *Aebelavadar*, it in't good. And the Ombenelva—get em out while they're still obeying you, and send a message to Lorila about Caveira and Herist's warmongering. And if Herist strikes back, who cares? Folk'll know what he's done by then. They'll think it's nothing more than slander. If you to go to war instead, Ellyned ain't gonna sit by."

"Ellyned won't sit by for much, will they?" he burst out. "Ellyned can't understand the quickest way to pull us out of the mud is an army and a war."

I couldn't believe him. "Out of the mud?" I put a hand behind my back—the rock was damp. "Norembry don't want to be *important*. Don't you know what happens to important places?" I was yelling now. "Lorila, Virnraya, Evenalehn that used to be Eurlaire—they all rise with tricks, tyranny, war, and fall with the same shit again and over again in a hurtful, miserable cycle while everyone in this muddy nowhere goes about their slow, backwards

business of being happy.”

He was silent for a moment. Then he said, “I suppose you have to be human enough.”

“For what? Destroying everything?”

“Forgive me, Aloren.” His voice shook. ”But I must compensate you for all your work.” He reached into his cloak. I thought of the handkerchief, but instead he pulled out a small sack of burlap. He slammed it into my hand. “It’s gold. Enough to buy a ship. Now get out of here. If I see you again I don’t know what I’ll do.”

I dropped the sack. Coins clinked. He walked away and the void in my chest filled with the old hate.

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I left the gold beneath the belltower, and the hate stopped the flow of sense to my brain, so that by the time I’d retraced my steps to the tavern on the quay, the letter in my pocket, the one intended to stop the rebellion, was given not a thought when I burst in and upset the tool bench again. Hal was there this time, his back to the door, and he played a tune with Halfwit Tom.

Bequen saw me first. She didn’t even have to ask, just took one look and threw herself out the door, probably to rally the west side.

The room got quiet. “They’re staying,” I explained.

Then one of them began shouting for building barricades around the warehouses, and another for igniting the Daldera ships and raiding the armories, and the room turned clamorous. Begley Turnip climbed up from the bench where he’d been lying with a bottle and leaped towards the tools I’d knocked over. But Sal and her table were there first, grabbing up wrenches and crowbars and hammers; and they began ripping crates apart in search of other things.

The breath caught in my chest. “There’s too many of em,” I shouted. “Ye can’t fight em. There’s too many.” But the din swallowed my voice. Tears began to roll down Tom’s cheeks; and I stole his fiddle and whacked it against people’s backs, but no one noticed. Haberclad snapped a lantern from the ceiling and swung it from the chain like a flail; and Hal pulled me under a table, where it was near black. He yelled that I could do no more about it, that I had best get myself hidden somewhere. I pulled away and saw Wille and Padlimaird headed towards the door, pokers bristling in their arms. I knew immediately where they were going: the forge, to hammer the metal into weaponry. I made after them.

Bequen had burnt trails through the streets. The lampposts along the quay were decapitated and folk had tossed the lanterns into warehouses, where fire sneaked about the wood and flowered. The sun sank and people ran amok, cramming their pockets with bread,

and swinging chickens by their feet. Others were upturning carts, ripping up docks, and piling crates into the bones of a barricade. I narrowly avoided a few rolling kegs, and pushed through the crowds down a side street.

Smoke curled out of the smithy, and sure as the sun had gone, I could hear Wille and Padlimaird pounding and singing.

“These useless things ain’t for flattening iron, are they?” Wille threw a hammer handle into a corner.

“We’ve got enough to last the night.” Padlimaird reached for the tool rack.

“Where’s Nefer?” They turned to look at me and Wille tongued his cheek.

“You were a sight back there. Looked like you had a row with Fillegal or Paddy.”

“Where’s Nefer?”

“What d’you want with him?”

“He’d bring you to your senses. Ye’ve a daughter to look after, and Sal.”

“Don’t stick your nose in,” said Padlimaird. Wille had an ugly look on his face.

“What d’ye suppose she’ll look like in ten years, my little Daira?”

“Chains?” said Padlimaird.

“Shackles?”

“A collar?”

Frustrated, I turned and ran into Nefer, who was holding an empty coal scuttle.

“Not sure they need yer craftsmanship.” He slowly eyed the three of us. “The White-Ships’re gettin ready to tackle the armories.”

The boys whooped and ran past Nefer, and he shoveled hot coal into the pail. “Don’t know about you followin em, Al. Ye’re a bit smaller, after all. Good for stealth, but I don’t know about fightin—” He walked toward the door with his smoking scuttle.

“Where’re you going?” I said.

“To help them along.”

“You can’t.” I moved in front of the doorway.

“Can’t I?” Nefer picked me up and set me behind him. “Who’re you, then? One o’ them lost Lauriad princes?” And chuckling, he stepped out the door.

I watched him leave and my eyes fell on the shoe-bench. I stared at the silver dragonfly that had alighted there, wrenched at my hair for several minutes, and then slipped the broach into my pocket for safekeeping. And ignoring Nefer’s advice, I took up a big slag shovel and walked out the door toward the east armory.

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The sky was thick with the smell of fire. I chose the darkest streets and came to a halt east of the barracks, at the edge of the old canal, and gaped across at the smoke. It was billowing from one of the northwestern towers of the palace.

Soldiers fled from the barracks by the dozens, across the bridge, and I had a keen idea about what Nefer had done with his scuttle of coal.

Movement below drew my eye—a few people weaving through the debris at the bottom of the canal.

They reached the side and I recognized a voice. Someone scrambled for handholds. Catching sight of Padlimaird's white face, I walked over and gave him a hand. He pulled himself up, and grabbed his poker from a man I didn't know.

"We'll have better weapons than these soon enough," the man said, hauling himself after. "I'll go get more folk should the garrison come back overly quick. We'll have at the both of them tonight." He ran down an alley toward the quay. Nefer jumped over the edge of the canal like a great black cat, and dangled his leg down for the last of them, a boy too short for Wille.

"Go an' hide yerself, girl." Nefer's forearms were grey with coal dust. "There's wickeder men than I out tonight. You go with her, Paddy."

"But it was my idea," said Padlimaird in a furious whisper.

"You thought to light the palace afire?" I asked.

"Max's bedchamber."

"Gave you special permission, did he?"

"Yes." Max threw back his hood and rubbed his nose, and before Nefer could spin more warnings Max grabbed Padlimaird by the shoulder, and they ran toward the armory. Nefer growled, waved me against a building, and walked after the boys, whistling like a happy thrush.

"That one'll get his neck split for treason," sang Floy from the eves.

"Which one?" My heart skipped and I walked after them.

\*\*\*

The soldiers' fountain murmured in the courtyard. Two sentries slouched unconscious against the wall, almost indistinguishable from each other. The lights had been blacked. I rubbed my sore eyes: it was a hive of silent activity, people handing off bows, pikes, swords and staves.

Nefer and the boys got lost in the crowd and I hung behind for a bit. I heard a voice calling through the arcade: "They're here! Overtaking the bridge."

"Those not in line," said someone else, "move up. We'll hold

them off till Drebbald comes with men from the quay—”

The voice was cut off with a gruesome noise. I saw a big man—Nefer—hurdle through the arches, followed by a swarm of other folk. I fought to look, and Max stood abandoned in the center, hood shrugged from his head.

Finally he threw his hood up and ran after the others, and likewise abandoning my senses I walked through the arches, slag shovel swinging.

The bridge writhed; everything was a muddle. A cudgel swung down. The breeze ruffled my hair, and seeing the uniform, I kicked the man in the knees and slammed his face with the flat of my shovel.

Head buzzing, I whacked my way past a silver-black cuirass and one more of the grey garrison, and then the shovel slipped from my sweaty hands.

Wood smashed against my mouth. I tasted blood, and the soldier swung back his club; and Sal appeared behind him, looking wild with her hair unwrapped and her arms bare. She clapped him on the side of the head with a skillet.

He fell over me, and Sal leaned forward. She got hold of my ear to make certain it was me. “Nefer’s sent me with a message and a safety procedure.”

“Where’s Wille?” I wiped my bloody mouth.

“The other armory, or maybe the quay by now, but don’t you fret. Drebbald’ll bring him back with the others, and we’ll have this sorted by the time you’ve woken.”

“Woken?”

The last thing I saw was the back of the skillet.

Though it was a sleep of Nefer’s craftsmanship the corners corroded some.

After someone knocked down some of the arcade to block the barracks bridge, I was thrust beneath the collapsed roof, where the sound echoed: Many boots walking, unnoticed, over the old Llenad Bridge. The snap and rip of a knife under the dark lamps into the neck of a man named Drebbald. Soldiers moving through the arches, a hard voice in the courtyard, the whine of the bows. Nefer’s laugh; Max’s small protest when his hood slipped from his head. Bequen singing.

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My clothes were wet when light came, and my hair caught on a rafter. I ripped my head loose and slipped on my belly under the fallen eave. Fog curled over the pavement. There was a notched cutlass on the ground. I looked up and saw a man hanging from a lamppost. The fog cleared some, driven into the corners by a few needles of rain, and I knew him by his skin: dark as harbor water.

Bequen was there, too, spread out on another lamppost. And Sal, eyes wild, arms out and ready to fly. I couldn't see Padlimaird. Somewhere Floy was chipping.

The streets loomed and thickened, blurred by water, water creeping through the paving stones and swilling round my ankles, filling my ears with slapping and dripping and wailing. The ground felt as though it were crumbling under my feet, and I fled.

The lower streets flowed with water, just as they had three summers back when Andrei opened the sluice. I ran south along the rushing canal to the old Llenad Bridge, where the rotten planks were certain to fall away beneath my feet. I had failed. I had failed everyone; everyone was dead, and I wanted nothing more than to join them.

Trid was already on the bridge, sitting where I'd last seen him.

He stood up. "You're not dead?" He walked off the bridge and stopped a few steps from me. His eyes were red-rimmed. "Max is. His brother didn't know who he was. Had his hood up, the idiot."

"Who cares?" I was scarcely aware of talking. "Everyone's dead."

"What?" He seemed to come to himself.

I scratched blood from my shoulder. "Move."

He stepped in front of me. "Aloren, you're not right in the head—"

"Get out of the way. Go on, *move*." I tried to push past him, but he stood like a wall. I knocked him aside and ran for the canal's edge.

But before I could reach it, something sliced through my brain, burned down my spine and neck so that I felt half-gone.

I collapsed, head between my knees, feeling as miserable as when I'd first pulled the Marione. I wanted so badly to die. Trid raised me up; he was warm under my face, and I shook with sobs and dirtied his shirtfront. He dragged me from the edge, scraping my feet on the pavement.

"You are without a doubt the craziest piece of work I've ever—" He looked past me and pried me loose. His hands were hot and sticky.

Five of the garrison stood behind us, and Herist.

"My lord Natridom has proven hard to find this past week," Herist said. "And the gutter rat. She was playing in the streets last night." His voice was dangerously gentle. "She gave Kalka quite a bruise. Is she fraternizing with a fellow insurgent? A member of Caveira's espionage outfit? Surely the Elden didn't organize this all by themselves. As I recall, my lord Natridom, your father, before his untimely death, fostered you out to a foreign court because his brother had become very interested in Lorila's line of succession, and your safety was in some jeopardy. Do you suppose Caveira has forgotten about his nephew? Would a hostage of your name fail to



slip past his thick skull? Gershom, assist me—!”

This because I had run up and bitten his arm.

Gershom grabbed me from behind, and Herist took my arm and slashed it four times with his knife. The pitchfork figure that stood for treason.

I snarled, scraping at skin where I could find it; and Herist, spent in patience, grabbed hold of my ankle, pulled me from Gershom’s grip, and swung me out over the canal.

The man was a godsend, eager to do what I couldn’t. The wind caught my hair and slapped it across my face.

“Pointless savagery has resulted in your death a full day ahead of schedule, you stupid girl.” He sounded bored. “Think your last thoughts quickly.” My whole body pounded, screamed for him to end it. I was certain my thigh would tear from my hip.

Trid, upside-down, said, “Put her down. Andrei won’t like it.”

Herist loosened his grip on my ankle. “Andrei’s opinion has no place here. Valiant though he is, he hasn’t the experience to deal with a crisis of this magnitude.”

“Where’ve you put him?” said Trid, and rain streamed down my nostrils, making the pain in my head nigh unbearable. “I haven’t seen him.”

“He would’ve done something desperate.”

“And so would you. Don’t drop her.” His voice became suddenly conciliatory. “Put her down. There’s something you should know.”

I knew right away what it was. “Just let it be.” The blood thumped in my head. “Trid—”

“You want to die?” he said. “I don’t give a whit for what you want.” He said to Herist, “Her father was Daonac Lauriad. I’m sure there’re people can vouch for it, and she’ll come in useful. The Girelden would do anything for their last Lauriad.”

Trid waited until Herist had set me on my feet. Keeping his eyes down, he turned and walked up the canal, shirttails dripping.

Herist scarcely noticed. “The waif with the thing in her fist.” He stared at me, twisting a button on his jacket. The movement of his fingers near drove me mad. “The thing lost in the harbor. Gershom, search her.” He pushed me amid his soldiers. “And not a word of this to anyone.”

I squeezed myself tight as they shoved hands under my tunic. A man found Father’s ring when he pushed it against my breast, and in their excitement they never found the broach and letter alongside my knee. Someone yanked the ring from its patch of cloth, and they tied my wrists and ankles. Then they threw me over a shoulder and traveled a minute, or an hour.

## Twenty-Seven

It looked as though I'd been dumped into a ship's hold. But I felt stone at my back, and looking up, saw it was an oubliette. The grate in the ceiling dropped a shaft of light across my legs. Herist must have thought me precious. There was new straw at my back and a wooden bowl of water.

I was obviously in the barracks or palace prison; I didn't know which and I didn't much care. But I must have cared some, because my eyes ticked with weeping, and Floy, who had followed me in, was heavy with my sadness. Her cheek warmed mine, and my head fit into the curve of her neck.

Finding me awake, she blinked back into a bird.

"We must get you out! This is terrible—If only Mordan were here. I'm too small to lift a keychain, and Reyna, what the hell were you thinking?"

I shifted my feet—my ankles were shackled. The chain stretched to a bolt high in the wall. "Wasn't thinking. Thinking don't do anything. Let me be. You get out."

"Are you mad?" She tore into the skin on my wrist. "We know where they are, where the asters are."

"So go get them."

"You *are* mad."

"Is this country worth a damn, really?" I asked myself.

Floy didn't hear me. "Think of your country, Reyna."

"Why should I think of them? Never gave thought a chance, did they? Killing's cleaner than talking, I guess. Smarter to keep your mouth shut. We've got only ourselves to look after—leastways, that's the only person the smart ones are looking after."

Floy grew round with indignation. "If you want a big, bloody mess—"

"Why're you lecturing *me* about bloody messes?" I threw her off my arm. "I tried." I tasted blood on my lip. "They didn't listen. I hate them, every one! I'm not thinking about them no more, nor talking to them neither—it's no use. I'm keeping my mouth shut."

"You're going to stop talking?" she said. "For five seconds?"

But I was pigheaded, and Galde too, and just like my mother I sang my last words:

*"No ear does she have nor a mouth that can scream to fill suffering's silent appeal."*

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When I woke next the light was blocked. Someone was bending

quite close, golden eyes staring full at my face. Andrei. Springing up, I ripped at his cheek.

He leapt away, and I leapt after, but the chain prevented it, yanking my legs beneath me. I fell on my stomach.

“They shackled your ankles?” he said. “Were your wrists too small?”

He bent and I spat on the front of his shirt. He’d come to torment me, I was certain.

But he pinned my arms down, and proceeded to explain I’d better not wear myself out before climbing the ladder, because he couldn’t haul us up both at the same time.

“Trid let me out,” he said. My breathing slowed. “He heard me thrashing around the solar. Didn’t come with, obviously. Some men stopped him, said Herist had business with him, and I told them Herist was going to burn for this. But they aren’t listening to me, and he’s probably bought all of them, but even so, they daren’t touch me.”

His breath was very hot. “And you. I told you to get out. I bet you tried especially hard to get locked up, just to spite me. But here? Gods, Alore—you must have done something incredibly stupid to end up down here.”

I bared my teeth, and he changed subjects. “I don’t know all of what happened last night, but judging by your welcome, I deserve death. Before you kill me, though,” he said, sounding more arrogant than ever, “I have to hide it.” He moved closer, and the chain slipped out from under his shirt and the dragonfly’s middle swung next to my mouth.

“I may have made a mistake, but Herist made one, too. I have yet to give the thing up.” He sat upright, and I did too, watching him warily. “But I don’t know what to do. Nothing I do’ll be able to keep them in check. You were right—it’s too large a mess. You were completely right, and I hope you’re happy about it, because I’m sure as fuck not. I’m so stupid—” He took the thing in his hand. “A light in a silver cup. I won’t give it up, not like you want me to, not to the Ombenelva, nor to some other country, even, because it’ll end up in the South’s clutches some way or another, and it’s not supposed to end up there. Clearly it’s not supposed to, clearly—” He rolled it back and forth between his hands. Then he flung it away, and looked toward the grate in the ceiling, and yelled, “I wish it was clear!” I jumped.

He scrubbed his face with his cloak. “Sorry. The firebird was a Simargh. A halo of light on the wall and a thought in my head, and I didn’t take her seriously.

“She told me I should hide it so it was safe. I don’t know what from. And she said—I’ll tell you the rest—she said my guide was to be a person. She said”—he wrinkled up his forehead—“his feet were to have been cut from the earth’s trammels for long enough to

lead me along some sort of path. And at the end I was to find my hiding place, my other world.

“It was the stuff of lunatics. Saebels. I thought it was nonsense. And what’s ridiculous is”—he swallowed—“what’s ridiculous is you’ve been floating right under my nose for three years. With a broken spirit.”

Andrei stuffed his hand deep into his pocket, and pulled out a circle of keys. “Cut from the earth’s trammels, right? I got rid of the jail-men. Sent them some specially made caudle. They’ll be sleeping it off somewhere.” He scowled. “They wouldn’t have stopped me, they’re still scared of my mother, but Trid—” He glanced at me and switched words. “I can’t help what’s gone before.” He found a small key, and I crouched, heart thumping, while he folded the iron from my ankles. “This is your choice.” He stood, dropping the keychain back into his pocket. “I’m certain it’s what she—the Simargh would’ve wanted. So please come with, but don’t ask me where we’re going. I’m following you.”

For a moment I thought I had made a mistake.

Then the River Cheldony stretched before me, shining like moon through a fog. I would find the ice asters at her head. I could save my brothers and Floy, at least. Whether Andrei would find his other world—I didn’t know, didn’t care. What Herist would do, whether the Ombenelva would leave or stay and work mischief if Andrei and I ran away with the *Aebelavadar*—I didn’t know, didn’t care. I got up and climbed out just above him.

\*\*\*

After we’d slid the grate back across the hole, Floy gave a significant chirp, and I put my hand into Andrei’s pocket. Ignoring his frantic signals, clasping the keychain in both hands to muffle the noise, I ran along a corridor, peering through the half-moons in the doors. Floy led me farther along, until I saw smoke wafting between the bars in a door. It had a cedar smell.

It came from Begley’s pipe. There were about thirty other folk locked in with him—those, I was to learn later, who’d knelt before the executioners in the courtyard last night. Begley looked up at me. “Have ye brought me whistle?”

A man sitting beside him said, “Already got his weed, hasn’t he? What about the Tuley’s I asked for?”

“She’s brought you the *keys*,” said Andrei, who had come up behind me.

“Oh.” Begley puffed sadly away. “I was dearly hopin for one more snatch on me whistle.”

“It’s Aloren.” Padlimaird looked through the bars. “Come to let us out.” His face collapsed and he pulled away. “It was good of you to come but I wish you hadn’t.”

"You gone mad?" said someone behind him.

"No," said Padlimaird. "I'd rather've been hanged tomorrow."

"You're all sentenced to hang?" said Andrei.

"Yes," said someone at the back. "They lied to us. Said we'd be granted clemency."

"Clemency from a lifetime of shame," said a woman, and she laughed. I put the first key in the lock to try it out, but Andrei pried the keychain away.

"Not yet." He dropped the keys through the bars in the door, and a lanky boy took them. He found a likely key and made to use it, and Andrei pushed his arm back into the cell.

"Wait," he called, "hear me out. You all must've given Herist a nasty shock, because he's put a big troop of guardsmen just outside this place. If you attempt a jailbreak now it'll mean tremendous bloodletting. Look to the window and wait until dawn to let yourselves out. By that point I've a feeling he'll need most of them for something else."

"He's lyin," said the boy with the keys. "Making fun for hisself. He'll tell and rake up some profit. We'll just be hanged earlier." Andrei didn't say anything. Begley rapped his pipe on the boy's head, took the keys, and sat on them in his spot against the wall.

"If he's wrong it'll be just as bad now as later," he said. "And Alore's wid'im."

"Maybe her tongue's been cut out," said a young girl.

"We're waitin till later." Begley folded his arms and sucked at his pipe.

"But perhaps we're needed out there now," said an old man. "What about the gang at the west armory? Did the same happen to them? I haven't heard them in here—Haberclad, or Gwat, or young Illinla? Should've heard *him*."

"You're not needed anywhere," said Andrei. "Elden hold the harbor and the warehouses—they're armed. They got weapons from the other armory. The garrison had just finished with you, my friend told me, but they came up the bottom of Dewing, and got flushed out by an opened sluice. The lake's just beginning to sink."

I stared at him. He looked puzzled. "I thought you'd opened it. Maybe Trid—"

"Lally." Padlimaird had stuck his nose through the bars. "Sal stood back there in the courtyard." Sweat rolled away from his temples. "And I don't know about Wille—I fear he's dead. Is he dead? Why don't you talk? Do you think I'm a coward?"

A chill crept over me. Sal's old friend Goody kept her home on Dewing. Goody Mabble the pawnbroker.

I thought of Trid sitting on the bridge above a roaring canal—I had taught him to pick locks. I thought of Sal clobbering noggins with her hambone, her baby screaming at Goody's house.

I turned and walked away. I climbed a stair, and Andrei grabbed

my arm. He explained frankly that we had no other alternative than that he carry me out.

So he picked me up, hid me beneath his cloak, and walked straight through the forty-some guards gathered around the doorway. His shirt was damp under me and I held my breath. Finally the cloak pulled back, and he put me on the ground.

It was cold and the sky was full of stars. My breath swam before me. I held my arms close under my tunic, and walked toward the stables. When we reached the one I'd lived in for a winter, my heart grew heavy and I stopped. Andrei by now knew what we were about. He pushed me inside, asking that I calm myself for the horses' sakes.

Once inside, we filled two nosebags with grain. Andrei ran for coins and I oiled the tack. He came back with a sagging belt, found me outfitting Liskara, and questioned her suitability. He questioned little more after my grimace, and we led the horses from the stable and set off through a back gate.

The questions began anew when I turned Liskara down Crewald Street. I slipped from her back at the edge of Trid's lake. Andrei made to copy my motions, but I threw him my leads, gesturing for him to remain with the horses.

I waded through the inky water to a wall. I pulled myself up the thatch and picked my way over the roofs till I'd reached the half-submerged houses at the bottom of the street. It was dead silent; the water hardly stirred, and there was little light except what came from the moon.

I stepped onto the pawnbroker's steep roof. The water lapped through the attic window. There was a mattress floating just inside, and I lowered my feet to the windowsill and waited for my eyes to adjust. Then I stepped onto the mattress. The bundle of bedclothes moved and began to squall. I heaved a sigh of relief, and wondered when anything had ever been that easy.

"Who's there?" Wille called, his voice rough.

The bed hangings moved, and I pulled the mattress and baby toward the voice, using the wall to steer. Floy pleaded with me, but I held my tongue and my oath. I couldn't see much of him—he was on the bed, head barely raised above the water.

"Sal?" He touched my face, the scar on my cheek. "Aloren. Has it been raining?" A slip of moonlight fell across his face.

There was something wrong. He didn't look at me even when I touched his eyelid.

"They threw lye in my eyes," he said. "They was crashing through the houses like a herd of—what d'ye call em?—elephants, looking for us with the weapons. The ones who broke in here stuck Goody through like a dry ham, and I killed one or two—don't tell Sal—but not before they did what they wanted with me. The lye was for good measure. Goody'd been scrubbing the floor. But they

left when the water came, and I looked and looked and finally found her in a drawer. It was all I could do to carry her up here, and I lay down for a while, and lost her. I couldn't see—thought she'd floated out the window. Thank God for her gusty lungs. Just like her dad's." He laughed once more, and shook.

"What's wrong?" he said. "Why ain't you yelling? What's happening? The pigs been run out of our streets, hain't they?"

I kept silent.

"Don't this beat all?" said Willie. "If I'm blind and you're mute, how're you going to show me if there's any hope?"

The girl kicked against me, asleep again.

Wille's breathing was ragged. I wished I could push his head where I wouldn't hear it. Then I tore the letter from my pocket, took his wrist in my hand, and placed his fingers over the wild rose seal. He made a closer connection than I expected. His eyes went round. He laughed and said, "I knew you weren't a saebel." And then he grew quiet and all I heard was the lapping of the water.

\*\*\*

I put the letter back in my pocket. I pushed the mattress toward the window, to rejoin the rest of the blind and mute. Little Daira slept on, unaware, and I paddled us between the dark houses and into the shallows. Andrei cast a shadow like a tower between the two horses. He took the girl and gave her to me once I had mounted. She still slept as we rode toward the tavern on the quay, where I thought Hal might be.

Because of the skirmishing at the barricades the quayside was nearly inaccessible—the main streets were stopped up with soldiers. But Floy and I together made a canny partnership, and we rode down smaller, lesser-known streets and had little trouble. Ellyned was quieter than I had ever heard it. Windows were shuttered and doors boarded up, and we went along like ghosts in a ruined city.

Finally we reached the dirty little alley and the tavern. The door had been torn from its hinges and tipped across the stoop, and the entrance obstructed by a massive table, except for a small hole at the top, from which, I guessed, a man might make inquiry or point an arrow.

As we led the horses into a recess, I thought of the window in the little room where Hal and I had talked three years back. The baby hot in my arms, I pulled Andrei clear of the lamplight, and we crept between buildings, roughing ourselves against the walls.

The window had a board nailed across the frame. No light shone from it. Andrei said nothing as I transferred the child to his shoulder and climbed through the window. He was bewildered, probably, but I felt no sympathy for him and I was glad his face was hidden in the dark. Once within I reached for the baby—she was awake now,

staring quizzically at me—and edged her through. I felt in the blackness for the door and slid us into the boathouse, leaving Andrei waiting outside.

Candles cast light over a few tables. Hal's fiddle played, and many voices sang with it.

The child began to wail. I tugged my arms from the folk holding me back, and walked up to Hal, who was sitting on a bench. I placed the girl on his lap and took away his violin.

"Good to see you alive and bossing folk about, Lady Renegade," he said. Gwat cleared his throat, and Hal said sharply to him, "You're better off silent. Now this"—he looked at the baby—"this is Sal's girl." His voice was sad, and he bounced her on his shoulder. Her cries turned to gurgles.

But she balled her fists and screamed when a rumpus walked in from the tavern. Everyone jumped to surround it, and I saw that half of it was Andrei, face swollen beyond recognition and buried in Haberclad's black whiskers. "Found the owl loiterin by the tavern door," Haberclad growled, stumbling forward. He'd clearly been comforting himself with a whiskey jar. "Tryin to listen in, I'll warrant! And full of tripe. Herist this, and Herist that—"

"Perhaps he's come to tell us something," said Hal over the noise. But no one listened, and beating down my panic, I thought quickly. I took the baby from Hal's shoulder and propped her on Gwat's lap. Then I returned Hal his fiddle and began drumming my feet on the wooden landing. My fists found the bench, and the clatter was deafening, but Hal recognized it.

"I don't think," he said, "this is the time for Golly Stooner." But I refused to cease my pounding. Finally he got wise and, lifting his fiddle, launched into the old reel.

As I began to dance the shouting faded to silence. Wille's rendition of the chorus came unbidden to my mind along with such a glut of emotion that I had no trouble forcing it between my toes and the wood. I kicked and pummeled at the air, and my shadow guttered. The dust settled where my feet had been.

Loosening his grip on Andrei, Haberclad said to the man next to him, "Hain't never seen *that* before." They all watched me, only me, and Andrei frowned behind them, hair ruffled.

Rather than slink away, he edged to the front of the crowd. I sank when his lips moved: "Herist's come."

With scarcely a thought I hit the ground and grabbed Andrei's shirtfront. I pulled him through Hal's legs and beneath the table.

Haberclad had neglected his watch. Having breached the tavern entrance, Herist, Gershom, and Kalka strode into the boathouse.

Gershom had his crossbow cocked and everyone scrambled for weapons, and readied them. "No blood, I hope," said Herist. "We have news for the resistance. About the Lauriad princess."

A mystified murmur filled the room. "Eh?" yelled Gwat. Daira



was still screaming in his lap. “Princess?”

“Oh, come,” Herist said. “Come, come, you must know someone’s been providing you with information. You’ve been acting on it for years.”

“Commander Snake’s gone nutty,” said Gwat. “Breathin in his own stink, probably.”

“I’ve captured her,” said Herist. “And I have a proposal for you.”

“Proposal? Her? Who the hell is *her*?”

“I have proof,” said Herist.

“Hear that?” said someone else. “Poor fellow’s got proof.”

“Tell us a better tale and we’ll give you some Tuley’s,” said Gabe.

“Wait a bit—this here’s a right happy little band, Herist, but before you join we’ll have to give you the paddle.”

“She had this on her,” said Herist. “The King’s signet ring.” The silver glinted in his hand. Silence fell around Daira’s whimpers.

“The letter writer,” said someone in a low voice.

I suddenly remembered; I could have bit off my hand for my forgetfulness.

Andrei’s chin was high above my hand, his eyes focused ahead; and Hal’s leg stiffened as I slid my last letter, the letter about Calragen, Ackerly, and the Simargh, into his boot.

“She’s a lass?” Haberclad whispered. “A poor, brave lass?”

“The King’s daughter,” said Herist. “She said so herself—you see, she can still talk. For now. And if you want her alive and well you’ll stop this nonsense and support the war effort like men. I’ll wait here until you’ve evacuated the harbor. My troops are stationed outside.”

The Elde shifted uncertainly on their feet, a few bows still stretched. Hal took back the girl from Gwat and remained seated in front of Andrei and me. Andrei turned his head towards mine, and I pointed towards Gwat, who stood near Andrei. Gwat hadn’t lowered his bow.

I gave Andrei’s arm a fierce, endorsing pinch. He shot his leg out and kicked Gwat in the back of the ankle.

Gwat let fly his arrow straight into Kalka’s chest. Haberclad, drunk and hollering about the princess, missed Gwat with his fist and leveled Gershom’s face instead. Gershom’s quarrel sank into Gabe’s shoulder. The landing erupted, folk spilled into the water, and Hal slid the babe beneath the table and crawled after her.

I looked at him, wondering if he meant to hide with us. But he crawled under the benches to the edge of the dock, babe in one arm, beckoning us after.

We came alongside him, and without so much as a by-your-leave he pushed Andrei and me into the water.

I was too shocked to feel the cold. I stared dumbly as Hal dropped a candle in after us. "To oil the gate," he said. And then I watched as he walked quite calmly down the jetty and locked the squalling babe and himself into the little side room.

The candle bobbed beside me. I grabbed it, gasping, and Andrei nodded toward the watergate.

We crept beneath the surface to the gate. My hand reached up and rubbed the candle around the iron hook, and the rust made barely a complaint when Andrei unlatched it. We opened the gate a crack, and slipped through.

Leaving a wet trail, we ran down a back alley. By the time we came to the horses Andrei was blowing with fury. "He pried that ring from the dead King's finger," he said, dripping all over his white-eyed gelding. "To unveil when the time was ripe."

Hiding my face, I dug my heels into Liskara's sides. The wind whipped water from my hair, and I huddled against the horse. We raced down the silent streets and turned north toward the far city gates, pitting our horses against the dawn.

## Twenty-Eight

As I pulled the saddlebag from the log, Floy landed on my shoulder. “I can stay with you only a little while longer. I need time to find that tower. I’ve never been there.” I refused to look at her. “Reyna, when will you give this up? You’re driving the human boy crazy, and—Reyna, will you *ever* listen to me?”

I shook my head.

“I’m leaving to find your brothers as soon as you reach the river,” she said. I looked about but she had hidden herself. “And don’t dawdle. We only have a season left.”

I shuddered, feeling as though winter were already blowing past.

We acted quickly, Andrei and I, and we’d already come to Sharesdury, in the middle hills, when a press gang marched into the town. In the space of a morning they’d combed it clean of young men with the aid of a formal notice proclaiming the incarceration of the Lauriad princess.

Hal must not have convinced anyone otherwise, I thought. Soon enough I was thinking about other things.

As it had got steadily colder Andrei and I had just bought parkas, which made us look oddly similar. Andrei looked older than he was and I looked positively boyish; but as Herist had lowered the age of conscription from sixteen to fourteen, we were mistaken, right outside the furrier’s, for a young man and an exceptionally young man. Not exceptional enough for the commanding officer, I was pried away from Liskara after Andrei (and Floy) told me I oughtn’t bring attention our way by biting and kicking. So Sandal did all the biting and kicking, but they took the horses, too.

I remembered too late that my Marione shirts were tucked in Liskara’s baggage.

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We were two of about forty conscripts—just one camp in a line moving north. Only officers and soldiers rode mounts, and Andrei, his hood drawn always around his face, cursed nonstop under his breath as we marched through the first day. Soldiers wielded their spear butts liberally, and most of us collected welts to tally how many times we’d slowed or tripped. We hardly ever stopped, and only to relieve ourselves (me in ditches and behind bushes), and though I thought myself tough as cat gut, the pace was grueling.

Around midday an officer rode past us on Andrei’s horse. Sandal was skittish, shaking his head. They’d got rid of Andrei’s bags.

My stomach dropped to my feet, and I started stumbling. The conscripts on either side pushed me forward, and a soldier knocked his pole against my shoulders, yelling. I didn't hear a word.

Andrei half-carried, half-dragged me back into line. I shoved angrily at him. "I saw Liskara," he said, and tightened his arm around me until I was almost riding on his hip. "And she's so old and beat-up and useless they're using her as a packhorse. They haven't touched your bags."

I didn't believe him until I saw her myself, loaded with burlap sacks. My own precious bags were flattened, forgotten, at the bottom.

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By the third day the autumn rains were pelting down, making our misery three times what it had been. Andrei's constant cursing had changed to calls for mutiny muttered into the ears of those around us. But for a few restless boys who stewed with anger, the men slogged on, giving us a wide berth. I doubted anything would come of it.

But on the fourth day word about the malcontent conscript had got round. A tall man with a hood drawn over his face stepped in line beside us.

"Who are you," said the man to Andrei, "that you fear to walk about with your cowl off? I know it's raining, and you might ask the same of me. But it wasn't raining yesterday, so answer me truthfully and I may take your caterwauling seriously. If I take it seriously many others will."

The wind pulled a blond curl from his hood, and I knew the voice. Bequen's husband. Had he been pressed into service? I caught Andrei's eye and nodded.

"A human noble," Andrei said sullenly.

"I see," said Ackerly, glancing at his eyes. "And this tale you're spreading? That Herist has captured no Lauriad, and we trip on like kine to the slaughterhouse? Give me sweeter cud to chew, boy, and my teeth'll fall out."

"Obviously you don't believe me," Andrei said. I suspected he was too tired to sneer. "But I scoured the prisons looking for this girl"—he pointed at me—"and unless the princess was hiding in her shit bucket, we could both swear to you there isn't one."

"That's your proof?" Ackerly sounded skeptical.

"It's not less proof than Herist has."

"His ring." Ackerly nodded. "Which is scant evidence, yes, but we'll get to that later. The thing is, you're human. It's likely you're a plant come to sound us out. Or just a nasty little fry with an overblown ego."

A noise rose in Andrei's throat. For a nasty little fry he was

quite a bit taller than Ackerly, and I rolled up my sleeve and thrust my arm between them.

Herist's mark of treason shone in the rain. Andrei sucked in his breath, and his hood fell to his shoulders.

The men walked on. Ackerly pulled the hood back over the Andrei's head.

"I recognize you, boy," he said. "What in the high hells are you doing here?" He turned to me. "You're convicted of treason?" He shook with silent laughter. "If the man had got hold of *me!*"

Andrei's steps grew progressively stiffer, and my breath came out in short gasps. "Don't worry," said Ackerly. "I won't tell. I have no idea what you're playing at, but I've suspected for a while, you see. Herist can't have stolen the ring as well as the writer, seeing as Hal got a letter, sealed and all, *after* Herist spread the news. And the letter was about my business, or so some of the fellows from the city tell me. And Simargh, or no Simargh," he continued, growling more to himself now. "We'll oust the fool. We'll drag ourselves out of this mess, starting tomorrow." He stopped for a split second, jerking Andrei back to face him. "And if you're double crossing me, I'll find you and I'll kill you. That's a promise." Andrei nodded.

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The soldiers were short of horses and Captain Lauderay, the commanding officer, was expecting a consignment of these in three days' time. Because the conscripts needed the horses more than the soldiers did, Ackerly decided to hold off the desertion until the night following their arrival.

He didn't want a full-scale revolt. There'd be a lot less bloodshed, he told us, if we silenced the soldiers on watch and took off on horseback before the alarm sounded.

We were camped near the country's northern border when the horses came: twenty-five rough-bred rounseys. And what we had plotted beforehand was rendered very flimsy when Herist came with them.

He'd journeyed north with trackers to drive a band of outlaws from the woods above Feladol and Cwdro—they'd been stealing food and rustling horses from the northern camps.

Herist took his time about the business, though, and he wandered around inquiring after the work of his subordinates. Andrei and I kept to the middle of the recruits, noses to the ground. We heard his temper all the way across camp. He was considerably more frazzled than when we'd last seen him.

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During the evening meal the recruits ate an unusually small amount of their gruel and boiled tubers.

Ackerly calmed us some, going about his business like a stalking cat. A group of us surrounded him, looking as though we were trading and passing around bits of carrot and turnip. When we split apart he'd already bedded down for the night, a big crock full of leftover slop hidden under his thin blanket.

He'd chosen a bit of ground close to the watch fire. The human soldier eyed him uneasily from where he ate an apple, wrote a letter on his knee, and shielded the parchment from the drizzle with his elbow.

Back against a tree and heart pounding, I thought how we might've waited a few days for Herist to leave. But it was too late. I feigned sleep, watching through my lashes as Ackerly, motionless beneath his blanket, began chanting a popular ditty:

*“Captain Lauderay squeaks like a rope  
On account of his nose and his love for soap,  
For he lathers his nose, then rarin to lead,  
Plays upon his nostrils for lack of a reed.”*

The munching of the apple ceased, and the soldier's quill stopped moving. “Shaddup, you grimy little feck,” he said. Undaunted, Ackerly sang the second verse:

*“We fall into march at his squeaking snout,  
As his musical skills cause us to doubt  
Our talent for song and our freedom of will,  
So we'll jump like puppets o'er field and hill.”*

The soldier walked over to Ackerly and bent down. He paused to finger the dirk at his belt.

Ackerly popped the crock from the blanket and slammed it over the man's head. The mess inside muffled his cries, and Ackerly wrestled him to the ground.

Three other conscripts leapt up to help, and one of them pulled the dirk from the soldier's hand. He sheathed the dirk in the soldier's back and twisted. The soldier shuddered under the crock and became still, and stuff dripped onto the ground. My stomach turned, and I pulled my tunic over my nose.

While other soldiers on watch were being gagged or dispatched, Ackerly walked around whispering, “Two to a horse.”

We got silently up, a few at a time, and crept down the hill to where the horses were hobbled.

Stupidly, no one touched the horses belonging to Herist and his entourage, but the others were calmed and made ready, all except for Liskara. I frantically looked around the hill for her, nearer and

nearer the tents.

I finally found her, lashed, as a testament to her tranquil disposition, to one of Captain Lauderay's tent poles. She had a few bags slung over her back, as though Lauderay's man hadn't got round to unloading her. It made me nervous.

She blew into my hair, and I eyed her ropes. To the side of her was a bucket, and I stepped gingerly onto it so I might reach the knot at Liskara's neck. I took a tiny step forward.

The bucket tipped. I fell over it, and a habergeon jangled loudly beneath me.

"Cavid," said a voice from inside the tent, "are you finally greasing my mail? Or are you greasing the silver out of my luggage?"

Another voice, slurred, came right behind me: "Right you are, Captain." It grew exponentially louder: "Halloo! Look what they done to Gamberlan. They gone and done him—Hey! They're making off!"

"Go, go, *go*." I heard Ackerly yelling faintly. "Separately!"

Too panicked to feel properly guilty, I rummaged through Liskara's baggage and came across my own saddlebag. I leaned against the horse's flank, weak-kneed.

Andrei chose that moment to lurch around the corner of the tent, dragging Sandal behind. His hood had fallen, and his hair stuck every which way. But not across his eyes, and two Elde boys, my age or younger, stopped at the sight of him. They had no horse.

Andrei picked up the first boy, and earned himself a kick in the groin. Roaring, he threw the boy across Sandal's back. He lifted the other with less trouble, told them to lie flat, and pushed the gelding on his way.

Knot undone or no, I was lifted next, and Andrei sat behind me, fishing through the baggage for a knife. Before he could find one, Liskara shied.

She jerked forward, ripping the stakes from the ground, and pulled the canvas down. I turned to look at the wreckage, and Captain Lauderay, bright in his nightshirt, jumped from his cot.

Andrei twisted sideways with a knife and cut Liskara loose. The horse darted south, bags heaving. Bracing ourselves, we caught up with the others, who, despite Ackerly's advice, hadn't separated.

"Oh," Andrei breathed down my neck. I turned my head to see where he was looking. Herist and his ten men were in pursuit, tearing over the rocky ground, and I saw with dread the longbows rise from the backs of the horses.

And perhaps because he felt obligated as initiator of the desertion, Andrei leaned over me, wrested my hands away from the horse's neck, and steered Liskara towards Herist and the north.

"What is he doing?" cried Floy, who was flying behind us. I lowered my head and sucked in my breath, fighting against a holler.

Andrei didn't bother. "Come and get us, Commander," he yelled. We ran parallel to them now, at a full gallop. "Come and thief my carcass."

At once Herist recognized him. He wheeled his horse toward us, and his men followed. The bowmen loosed their arrows. Liskara tacked round them as best she could, though she was old and tired and any minute I expected to be hit in the back. But she pushed on as though blown by a heavenly wind, through shale outcrops and long grasses, and into a fir wood.

The air was suddenly close, the wind less sharp. We were clear of the arrows. But we had to slow our pace to navigate the trees, and a shadow came at us through the shaggy trunks. More shadows sprang forward, snapping at Liskara's tail. The horse screamed and bolted every which way.

I feared we were being chased by a pack of djain, until I heard the yapping and snarling. My whole body ached, my molars ground together, and the wolves followed us through a brook. The water splashed all the way to my hands. It rushed over a stair of shale and into a canyon, and Liskara trundled wildly at the edge, knocking loose stones over. *Fight, fight, fight*, she rang out. *They are winter-hungry.*

But I thought differently. In a second of stillness I swung my legs over the horse and landed on my knees in a bush.

Andrei shouted, and I stood up, saw the yellow eyes of a wolf.

Hackles bristled around his washboard frame. When the others moved closer, he snapped them away. I felt his hot breath on my face. I thought of how dogs never could abide ghosts. And filled with fear and rage and twenty other emotions I'd never felt before in my life, I emptied my soul between us.

Icy fire licked from her wound, and she opened her frozen, dark mouth and howled. The wolf shuddered and backed away.

I commanded that they beat off the other pack, the people who hid from themselves and acted like wolves.

He and his comrades melted through the trees to assault Herist. I couldn't move; it felt as though an ice storm had roared through my body.

Andrei was off the horse, telling me what a headache, and a fool, and a brave, stupid girl I was. His pinched face whitened with the sunrise, and I got my numb feet to moving.

Water from the brook pooled in a gully at the bottom of the canyon. We led Liskara down a stair of scree to the pool, and knelt at the edge. The early sun turned the pool to diamonds. It looked as though the canyon had flowed with water once: the slate was smooth, worn into waves and hollows.

As I rubbed down the shining horse with a rag, Floy hopped to my shoulder. "I'll be leaving now," she said. Liskara gave a start beneath my touch. We'd come to the Cheldony. I sat on the water-



worn bedrock and wept.

Floy nestled into my neck until I was done. She promised that she and the others would be waiting in that exact spot for me to come back with the ice asters. She left with the scurrying leaves.

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These fell in drifts, and Andrei and I followed what was left of the Cheldony northeast. We filled our stomachs with nuts, roots, rowan fruit and rose hips, and though we occasionally caught and ate small game, I left the wild birds alone.

Accustomed to rising early, I worked on my Marione shirt in the dawn, and stuffed it back in the bag when Andrei made signs of waking. He saw it once or twice. I suspected him of spying. But I soon finished and laid the work aside, relieved.

One day there was a fork and a great dark shelf in the bed where the river should have poured into the Grennan, another border water. Without wetting our feet we forded it at an abandoned ferry landing. Then we walked into a stony flatland separating Avila from Pemrenia, and left Norembry behind us, shimmering and green in the rain.

The days dragged by, and the riverbed pushed through a backbone of shale. The wild edibles grew scarce and we ate frugal portions of Liskara's packed food. She had been burdened by the officer for a long winter in the north of the country, and Andrei and I would be tolerably well off for a while, at least.

The rain stopped with the new year, and snow whipped through the air, hard and thin. We kept our fires burning long and spread blankets over our cloaks when the sun went down.

An oppressive silence filled the night. As we traveled farther into the wild, it leaked into the day: stones shot from beneath our feet of their own accord, and the mellow pines and birches were replaced with bent thorns and junipers, grown fractious with wind.

But something ahead of us kept the mischief at bay. At a spot where the river bottom dropped between walls of slate, she stopped to have a word.

I'd found a chipping sparrow in the snow that evening, half frozen, and as Andrei kindled the fire and stirred nuts into it, I put the bird near the flames.

I heard a creak, like snapping ice. A saebel, a river-daughter foggy with ice, walked over to the fire and smothered the flames with a hand. Andrei sat down on a stone and watched in disbelief.

Her eyes were green as the Swisa. I recognized her stringy hair and fishbone teeth: I'd rescued her from torment in the city.

*We've cleared your path of unkind things, she said. Walk it longer and you'll burn your toes. Your choice.* She took a chestnut and ate it, hull and all. *That was our choice.*

She scraped up some earth, squashed a grub, and ate it. *Our choice.*

She shoved her hand down a hole and yanked up a mouse. *Our choice*, she said, and ate it. The creature slid, still wiggling, down her throat. I could see it through her skin.

She reached for the sparrow huddled near the fire, *Our choice*—But I scooped the bird into my hands and backed away.

Her neck bubbled and cracked. She bared her teeth. *You stole our choice, Gralde. You smashed it, mangled, crushed it like an egg.*

She made a multitude of horrible faces and pulled shards of ice from her eyes, and moved so close to me I thought she meant to stab me with one. *We'll take our choice back, Gralde.* Her breath reeked of rotting fish. She turned toward Liskara. The horse picked up her feet and flattened her ears.

*A snake in the horse's stomach*, the saebel said, and pointed at the horse; her arm cracked and grew stiff.

Something long and sinuous pushed out from Liskara's belly. The horse dropped with a scream.

The ground jumped. She writhed on her back, biting at the worm in her stomach, foam flying from her mouth. She rolled and rolled, shaking the stones from their beds, and edged close to the drop, the escarpment that fell in steep pleats to the river bottom.

Andrei, fool that he was, went and stood between the horse and the edge of the cliff, and yelled at Liskara as though she were a person.

I felt the sparrow's heart humming in my hands. The saebel stared at it hungrily. *Crush him, warm heart. Make the little bones snap and crack, or the boy will tumble.*

Liskara's hind legs kicked out. Andrei looked over his shoulder and crouched, hands scrambling forward, boots pushing shale over the edge. The stones shattered far below. My fist tightened, and the sparrow's bones squeezed together and broke.

Liskara lay on her side, flank heaving. The sparrow's head flopped in my fist, and trying not to think of Floy, I knelt to scrape for the poor creature a hole in the ground.

The saebel stroked her arms, and water dripped off her long fingers and froze there.

"Nasty girl." She spoke Gralde, smashing through the vowels. "Those ugly hands took the poor birdie and squeezed her life out—"

"You did it," said Andrei, who'd made it past the horse. "And you put out our fire as well, you wicked block of ice."

She smiled with her fishbone teeth. "Ass breath, human. You make ass breath." She spoke to me in saebeline, which Andrei couldn't understand: *You drop blame like a burning stone, because you are broken. You can't use our help, you are broken.*

She spat at Andrei again. *But not so broken as ass breath. He's Enelden. He throws blame so hard it makes cataclysm.*

She cracked her knuckles. *You don't know them. Back when the world was ripped asunder they only wanted to help sew the world back together. So they jumped the black crack with needle and thread, jumped too far, and broke their spirit bonds, broke from us. They dropped the needle and thread real quick, we can tell you.*

*Their spirits bonds are broken, and they're alone and proud and can't carry anything. So they throw blame as far from their broken spirits as they can and make cataclysm.*

She spat at Andrei one last time, and dug in the ground for the sparrow. She ate the dead thing and picked the feathers from her teeth.

*We were disappointed you chose ass breath. Human flesh is delicious.*

I reached out to grab her, to ring her neck. She dissolved, leaving my fist lacy with frost. I squatted and pressed my hands between my knees.

Andrei had already forgotten, as humans will. He brushed ice from his face and watched as it melted on his fingers. His breath sailed into the air. "Has winter been here in person?" he said. "We'd better sleep under the same blanket."

I looked up, but he hadn't meant anything by it, and was already scraping flint with steel.

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When the fire had burned low, I lay awake, teeth rattling in my head, feet vibrating in my boots. My whole body shook beneath the blanket and I began to cry.

The hurt ran on daggers up my arms and legs, and not able to stand it anymore, I sat up. I walked over to where Andrei slept, and crawled under the blanket next to him.

## Twenty-Nine

We walked a hard road, over chasms and hills and plateaus, and it would require another story to detail its progress here. An uneventful story—our wicked saebel cleared the path ahead so that we were troubled only by passing shadows.

The worst of the shadows was the wind. It bore into my head, mocking me with voices from the past until I was lulled to sleep each night with my mother's singing and woken in the morning by my father's laugh.

As we ventured farther north the nights stretched longer and longer. The sun barely scraped past the horizon and the dark was thick and even as water. The riverbed was shallow here, growing ever more so, and the slate shimmered with veins of strange, beautiful minerals, smoothing, and then luffing, like sails in a capricious wind.

The wind threw the snow into frenzy when we came among the ice people. They were all sorts, dotting the path like an infantry. We looked down and saw we were stepping on faces, arms, legs. They lay beneath the ice, layers and layers of them, wind-worn and smooth.

As we walked, we saw ice trees, too, and castles, cities, and mountains, all in miniature, all perfect, all ice. Like colorless dreams. Further on, the faces of the people grew grave and sad. The palaces and cities took on a haunted, hollow look; they became mammoth, some almost life-size, and the people grew slim and tall, reaching up on either side of the riverbed, faces obscured by the blowing snow.

I looked along the Cheldony until her bed ran out, and kept looking, eyes smarting with the wind. A pale light poured from a thinning in the snow ahead, and a twilight sea of ice stretched endlessly, blurring with the snow and then coming into view. Before this, just ahead, the great banks of the Cheldony came together.

There was water there. The river's head: a deeply sunken pool with its edges iced over. The black center stirred in the wind.

Liskara's breath steamed through my mitt, warming my hand. The world rolled on to evening, and the wind steepened, hiding the pool behind a curtain of snow. My mother sang, low and loose, and so true to memory that I looked to my right and saw her standing before me. Her song was strange:

*The door opens beneath the water,  
But he won't help you.*

And my father stood beside her:

*The door opens beneath the water,  
But the key is a light too vivid for him to look at.*

*You're not real,* I thought back at them.

*The door won't open,* my mother sang.

"You're not real," I whispered. They were the first words I'd spoken in over a month.

*The door won't open.*

"What door? What the hell door are you talking about?" This rang through the wind and startled me. Andrei stared. "They don't like you at all." My voice was rusty, sticking like an old key.

The color in my mother and father's faces had faded to white. I took off my mitt and touched my mother's cheek. Ice-cold. The ice infantry had grown by two.

"Not real," Andrei said. He avoided looking at them, as though they were private. I suppose they were. "The *Tolrenaimon*." He rubbed snow out of his eyes. "A gate. Right out of our old tales. Before going on you have to leave memories, dreams, other things—" He stopped.

To his right, behind the wind and snow, stood a tall woman. The wind took the snow another direction, and her gilt eyes lit on Andrei. As if compelled, he drew his arm back and cracked Faiorsa across the face. His hand struck flesh.

I reached for the knife in my boot, paused. Her eyes were utterly flat, without glint. She opened her mouth and there was no wet there.

"You're not Faiorsa," I said to her. "You're a djain."

Andrei stepped back, bewildered. The djain-Faiorsa slowly turned her head; I wondered if she were mute, and Andrei followed her gaze, looked past her, looked at my ice father, at his broad shoulders and curly hair. He turned as ashen as my father.

"Princess," said the djain-Faiorsa. She unfortunately *wasn't* mute. "You have been a terrific nuisance."

"And you," she said to Andrei. "Why do you ignore me?"

Andrei stared at me, at my hands. Hatred froze his face. "Where'd you come from?" he said to the djain.

"You," she said. "You've been chipping away at yourself. Didn't you know what you would find down in the deepest pit?" She grinned.

"You're lying," he said. "You're lying, you always lie."

He turned to me, “Did you bring me up here to kill me?” Sweat was running down his temples, freezing into beads. “Why haven’t you yet? My mother murdered your whole family, every last one, for my sake. Where’s your rage?” I turned into the wind but his voice was like thunder: “Is your spirit too ruined to feel anything?”

“Yes,” said the djain. “Kill her and have done.”

Andrei turned away, began to walk, was forced to stop. Because the city of Ellyned stood in his way: chin-high, glittering—every tower and shack made of ice.

“You can’t mess with water.” He looked back at the djain. “It’ll break you.”

“That’s not mine,” said the djain. “It’s your dream. You’re a prophet.” She had his attention now and her smile deepened. “Look at your city.” She pointed at the tiny harbor, the delicate ice ships and cloud spray. “Do you see the sails? They’re a new sort: the stars of Even-Alehn, promised, sent for, and finally come to restore the natural order. But your words have spread and the city believes no Lauriad exists. So the Even-Alehn troops will assist the one who comes next.” She ran her dry tongue over her lips. “You.”

“Herist has joined forces with Caveira to bully the Lorilan Ravyir, and he controls the Ombenelvan contingent with only his word. But these mercenaries are treacherous. And backed by Even-Alehn and your silver pendant, you can persuade them to switch to your side, and then you can do whatever you like with Herist and Caveira. Something ghastly, I hope, and when you’re through, by all means, continue bullying Lorila. But first you must get past me.” The snow blowing round her head darkened to violet. Her eyes turned to holes; she smiled and her tongue was black. “You’ve spoken ill of Norembry before, but I know you love her and want only to improve her standing.”

“Yes.” It came out as a bark. He was caught, heart hooked.

“You may yet prove your love, given a few concessions.”

“Go on and say them.”

“Your pendant. You can keep it for negotiating—I only want what’s inside it, and then I’ll leave you alone.”

My eyes widened. This thing had followed us all the way up here for that? “You’re the Ombenelvan god,” I said. “The one who wants the *Aebelavadar*.”

“I have many names,” she said.

She turned back to Andrei. “The other concession is the girl. If she were more tractable you might have taken her back and wedded her, strengthening your claim. But she’s wild and she hates you. Best not leave the weed uncut and spilling seed.”

She slid her hand under Andrei’s cloak and placed his dagger into his mitt.

Panic welled in me. My hands made ready to draw the knife, to tear at him.

“Master Djain,” he said, and turned the blade over in his hand, as though wondering how it had got there.

“What?”

“My pardons to Norembry, but I care rather more for the girl.” He looked up at her. “And you’re not getting my pendant. Not any of it.”

The wind blew hard and fast, and the lady’s eyes glowed like firebrands. Her figure went rigid, sucking the last light from the sky. “Aloren—” Andrei looked sick, now, like he had purged himself and there was nothing left inside him.

He raised his hand as if to thrust the dagger into the djain’s breast, but I pulled his arms behind him. “Are you stupid?” I yelled. “You can’t kill it. You’ll drop dead.”

He pushed me away. “Which should be some consolation to both of us.”

“You bastard.” I pounded on his back. “You selfish, selfish bastard.”

He pushed me away again, and plunged the dagger into the djain.

The darkness spread, blotted out the snow and the wild sky, swallowed Andrei and Liskara and the ground I stood on, until I could see and feel nothing.

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A hole opened right before me, pinching off my thoughts, my emotions. I looked away from it, trying to clear my mind, looked to the side and saw Andrei’s pendant.

The light burned white through its silver urn, white as chalk on a slate. My eyes adjusted—Andrei had had fallen against me. The hole crouched before us like a great cat.

I took the pendant, the *Aebelavadar*, in my hands. “What is this thing?” I said to the hole, which must be the djain. I felt calm, almost incomplete, as though all my fear had been eaten away by the hole. “You went through an awful lot to get this close.”

“Give it to me.” It tore words into the air.

“What is it?”

“A light.”

“Obviously.”

“A strong light,” said the djain, “to shine so next to me.”

“You’re just a hole,” I said, “you ain’t even there.”

“I am. I am being realized as we speak. I am growing stronger and stronger.” It sucked at my skin.

“I, I, I,” I said, still oddly fearless. “It’s all your kind think of. You think so hard and so deep about I that you scrape it away until nothing’s left.”

“Give it to me.”

It blew its ragged breath on me, and the light in my hand burned

against the cold. “Why?” My fingers glowed around it, looking transparent, insubstantial. I was reminded of little Daira, the way she burned in my arms. “It’s a soul, in’t it?”

“Give it here.”

“Whose is it?”

“I followed it from Lorlen.”

I stared at my bright hands, wondering that I hadn’t been stricken dead. “A Simargh soul?”

“Yes.”

I remembered the stolen Simargh baby—the one from long ago, whose soul was stamped out. The Simargh that became a djain.

“What do you want with it?” I said.

“Give it here.”

“Funny how you haven’t just taken it. You can’t, can you? Cause it don’t belong to you. It belongs to him.” I pointed to Andrei. “I don’t know why or how he got it, but you can’t use it without his permission.”

“He’s dead.”

Something trickled down my neck. Fear, giving me weight, a shadow. Everyone knew the djain told half-truths.

“If that’s so,” I said, forcing it down, “it belongs to me now, and I ain’t givin it to a nasty hole.”

And I thought about what Andrei had said, that at the end of the path there was a hiding place, a portal to another world, some sort of door.

I said silently to myself, “The door opens beneath the water.” That’s what my ice mother had said. I didn’t know how much my ice mother knew, but she’d sounded fairly certain about the door. The door must be there somewhere. In the water.

The djain couldn’t do any mischief in any sort of water. But I didn’t know where the water was, so I put Andrei’s arms over my shoulders and stood to find it. His head lolled next to mine, and the Simargh soul dangled from his neck. My feet were suspended in the air; there was nothing beneath me, nothing around me.

“Let us alone,” I said. The hole’s black breath made cracks in my thoughts. “You can’t have it.”

A searching wind blew at my back, confusing me: who was this dead boy, why was I so cold? I wanted so badly to lie down and sleep.

But I held onto one thought—the water—and walked through the air, dragging the dead boy behind me. The light cast a path, and finally ice crunched under my boots. The cat-shaped hole followed on big paws. The ice groaned, and water pressed up against it; the dark of the pool spread beyond my feet. There was a door somewhere beneath it.

“He will drown,” said the cat-hole. When it lay down between us and the open water, a great crack spread through the ice. I



stepped across it.

“But he’s dead,” I muttered. I slid the knife from my boot with a free hand and wedged it in the crack. My boot stamped hard on the handle. The ice screamed and buckled under my weight. The cat leaped, and the boy and I fell through into the pool.

Water jammed into my nostrils, ears, throat, whole body. Silence thumped around me. I couldn’t feel anything for the cold, and I hung onto the boy.

His light cast an orb of blue around us. Outside the blue a wall of blindness spread: the cat opened its maw, forced us between its jaws. It moved us back in its mouth and tried to swallow. I saw the pit of its throat, a sickening void. I closed my eyes, trying not to vomit.

But we might as well have been encased in a diamond. All the sudden the tortured water shrank back with a terrific thrust. A snap filled the universe, and a fissure appeared in my vision. The fissure widened, swallowing the djain.

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What happened next is almost impossible to describe. I remember it as an illogical dream: a tangle of color, like a burst of sun through deep water.

I was standing on a terrace of stone at the bottom of the pool, and I could breathe as well as if the water had been air. The dead boy wasn’t in my arms. He was standing with his back to me, holding something that glowed brighter than his pendant, so bright I could see all the sides of the pool and the surface shimmering high above.

It shifted in his hand, lengthened, changed into a flaming bird that spread great wings. A spray like molten metal came off his hands and hair. He glowed and stretched like a burning leaf.

I stared. “You’re supposed to be dead. What are you doing?”

“Making a door.” He reached and took a skein of something—a fabric that tugged on my hair, and the light, and the silken feel of water on my skin, and my very thoughts—and he wound it up with another. I was thinking and feeling in double.

“Isn’t that what humans do?” I said, and marveled at how rich my voice sounded.

The air right in front of him was a more vivid blue than I had ever seen. “I know why the river stopped flowing,” he said, reminding me unpleasantly of one of my brothers—Mordan. “The djain clawed the old door up. So the water couldn’t get through.”

“Why?”

“Made the Girelden angry and stupid, didn’t it?”

“Jackass.”

He ignored me, just kept winding together the same strange stuff. I could see it now: the door he was making. It looked like a circle

of daylight growing brighter and brighter through layers of glass. I couldn't fathom how he had learned to do it.

At last he finished and stepped away, and the golden bird shrank, become a key in his hand. It was made of flame, like the bird. "Where did you get that?" I was inexplicably jealous, as though the thing should have been mine.

He looked at me like I was crazy. "You gave it to me." He stuck the key into the middle of the door. It melted and fire spread over the blue glass, turned the door a blinding white.

The pendant glowed at his chest. He slipped the chain off. Then he pushed aside the blue glass and threads and skeins until there was nothing. The door was open. Shapes and colors shone through, but my eyes were too dazzled to really see them and my head too stupid to make sense of them.

He pondered the pendant for a moment, then tossed the thing through the door. Chain, bottle, and soul.

The door puckered and bulged, as though under the weight of some great force on the other side. There was a second of stillness. The blinding light dimmed.

I heard a roar like the sea, and the boy pulled together enough sense to move out of the way. Water came through the door, a green flood of it, pushing the old, stale water back. It slammed into me, warm, as though it had just come from high summer.

It tore me from the bottom, ripped ice people from the shore, and cast us about like leaves in a whirlwind. The current dragged me back to the bottom, and I grabbed a knob in the bedrock. The pressure pounded in my ears. I looked up. A huge, winged thing of ice came down over me, just missing my head. It slammed into the rock, knocking shards of ice away.

I felt a faraway pain and looked down—my finger was caught beneath it.

It ground over my hand, crushing it against the bedrock, and I screamed, I'm sure, but the sound was lost. The current swept the thing away. I went with it, then was suddenly yanked back: my little finger was jammed in a crack in the bedrock.

I couldn't pull it out.

I looked around. The boy was standing out of the way of the current, just to the side of his door, looking in. His head was black against the green, his hair a wild sunburst.

"You're not going through that door," I said.

Somehow he heard me. He looked at me and his face was full of longing.

I jerked and jerked, but couldn't pull my finger from the crack. "You're not going through," I yelled. That door would be the end of him, and I couldn't bear it. I didn't know why, but I couldn't bear it. He dragged himself over the threshold, and the water tore around him.

“Ah, shit,” I said, looking up.

I saw a glint: a knife sliding down the stone; the one that had broken the ice. With never a thought I stopped its progress and cut through my finger.

Blood curled around me. I made my way wildly forward and grabbed his shirt. He didn't struggle and I pulled us into the upsurge.

A swell carried us to the eastern side of the pool. I grabbed hold of an ice woman standing secure in the shallows, and lodged us between her spread arms. The boy was comatose, or dead, as he should have been. I didn't wonder at it, but dragged myself into the shallows and pulled him after.

I lay for a while on a shelf of shale, back warmed by the water. The boy drew breath beside me. Not dead, then. I remembered his name.

The sky had cleared above the thundering water and shone with a million stars. I crouched over him. “You're a crazy idiot,” I told him, in case he could hear me. Frozen hair snapped from my cheek and lips. “The djain's gone.” I glanced around to make sure of it, and stared.

The hilt of Andrei's dagger stood out from my ice-mother's breast. Before this, the banks of the pool glistened—not with snow.

Asters. They were growing alongside us, waving beneath the water. White, big as a man's palm, lacy like the frost. They sang like harp strings when I plucked them.

Liskara found me there. She sneezed around Andrei's face, and I pulled the cloth away from his chest. The wound was ghastly—grey and star-shaped, the tip of its longest arm reaching beneath his chin. Won by planting the dagger into the wrong woman.

“God. Look at you.” I screwed up my face and made it wet again. “Ruined. Good for nothing. I hope you never wake up.” The tears came faster, freezing on my face.

Finally I rubbed the ice off my arms and gathered more asters. Asters that looked as though they could heal anything. On a whim I pressed one into his wound and pulled his shirt over it. Then I stood up and rummaged through Liskara's bags for dry clothes, kindling and the tinderbox, singing aloud to keep my stiff fingers moving.

Fire colored the bank and I dragged Andrei from the warm water. Before his wet wrappings froze I stripped him perilously close to the flames. Then I gave him a new aster and wrapped him in a dry cloak.

I took a stone from the fire, rolled it in a blanket and placed it beside him under the cloak. I broke the clothes from my own body, rubbed savagely at my chest, and wrapped my aching left hand, which had begun to ooze clear and red. Then I put a blanket over Liskara. I slipped under the wool and pressed myself into her flank.

The horse's side moved against my naked skin, in and out with

loud blows; and I thought and thought, and couldn't think the feeling out of my head.

## Thirty

Liskara knelt so that I might drag Andrei across her back and secure him there with several lengths of rope.

In this way we rushed south with the river, and when sandy Pemrenia swallowed the horizon, the thaw came, and the thrushes, too, with their throaty warbles. I did with Andrei what I could—put rags full of stock and mash in his mouth and forced him to swallow—and curious little balls of palendry sprouts appeared in the oddest places: high atop stone cairns, suspended by thread from trees. I suspected it had something to do with the river saebel.

If palendries were an antidote to as fierce a poison as bandorescroll I figured it couldn't hurt to put them in Andrei. So I boiled them, and spooned the tea into his mouth, and then poured the rest across his chest.

It must have worked some, because the grey star on his chest began to fade. Or maybe it was the asters. For fear he would stop his breathing and according to some dictate of my subconscious mind, I replaced the ice aster over his wound with a fresh one from my pocket after each time I bathed him. I wasn't worried about running out—they took up less space than eider down and I'd packed as many as I could into my pockets.

On a mild day I heard the thunder of falls. It drew nearer and nearer, and then Liskara and I were standing over the foamy beginnings of the Grennan, looking across to Norembry. She was clothed grey with early spring.

We came to the old ferry landing—busily operating now—and I threw a blanket over Andrei so he looked part of the horse's baggage, and paid the fee to cross.

The other side rang with the clamor of a farrier. When Liskara was re-shod, we walked along the river, and the spirits of cottonwood, willow, and birch woke and sang where the water shone.

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The time drew near, perilously near, to my five-year limit. Andrei began to stir—quick little twitches in his fingers and under his eyelids. This didn't do much to make me feel better; I was nervous and grew more so as the days ran out. I tried coaxing Liskara faster, but she was old and carrying a load, and plodded like a lame donkey.

Whenever I saw folk walking toward us on the road I put blankets over Andrei so I looked like a girl bringing goods to

market. I would ask the date, and they would reply with a sidelong glance I was too harried to care about.

And then no one came for a long stretch of time. I lost track of the days. I'd been scraping marks on a piece of bark, but one day it slipped from my fingers and under Liskara's hoof in the rain; and I tried in vain to make out what I'd written on the tatters. Now and then a tree or stone or bluff looked familiar, and I hoped I was drawing near. But the river was so completely different now I couldn't trust my judgment.

There came a colder, blowing day, and the feeling in my gut was of ends and beginnings. Anxious almost to tears, I called for my brothers every hour, wondering what it might feel like to go mad, tugging Liskara along.

It was by chance that Floy found me a half-mile upriver from the meeting place.

It was twilight, and raining. I heard her chips and took no notice, assuming she was just another bird filling herself full of thistle seeds along the banks. But she burst into song unnatural for a sparrow when she caught sight of Liskara clopping up the path. I dropped the leads and ran, and she slammed into my head.

"I've got them," I cried before she could ask. "I've got them—like giant snowflakes! They're a marvel." For a moment she held me in her arms and her hair flooded my mouth. Then she was sitting on my shoulder, congratulating me on learning to speak again. "Where are the boys?" I asked. "What d'ye suppose would happen if you touched one?"

"It's the last day," she said. My knees near gave out. "Didn't you know it? Probably not, the way you were *walking*. We looked for you, but we gave up—we thought you'd never come."

A gust of wind blew into my back. The skin on my neck prickled. "Try an aster," I said.

"Not until your brothers have a chance. You have the tunics?"

"In the saddlebag."

"Let's go find the boys," she said. "They're hanging about where I said I'd meet you, and God and the Lady, Reyna, when that river started flowing again—Oh, and the funniest thing happened in Cwdro last month. You'll be interested to know, I'm sure, because it's to do with Fillegal's brigands—What happened to your finger?"

She stopped talking and looked over my shoulder. I was reminded of Leode just out of his birdcage.

Neither of the two patrolmen riding over the crest of the hill was Herist. Nevertheless, I jumped and swung a leg over the horse's back. I shoved Andrei's head to the side, and kicked her into a run. The men reacted quickly—one disappearing back the way he had come and the other following us, his green and grey surcoat rippling past the new foliage.

"Why'd you run?" called Floy from the air. "You're suspect,

now.”

I spurred Liskara faster, flattening myself against her back. “You didn’t say he was here.”

“Why should I have to?” She sped next to my head, batting wings against my ear. “This is where he saw you last. The Ombenelva are giving him the squeeze.”

“Oh God, Floy.”

“He’s already slowing,” said Floy. I didn’t look behind to see. “Knows he oughtn’t to risk a false alarm.”

I hugged tighter with my calves. “Why?”

She struggled to keep within earshot, clawing at my hair. And then she was swept away behind me, and I heard faintly: “Oh, Machenan. Oh sweet Machenan.”

I looked over my aching shoulders and saw the troop of cavalry spreading over the crest, casting long shadows in the late sun.

I kicked harder at Liskara. She pulled her neck forward and flattened her ears, jibbed when the path tangled and broke around rocks and roots. I heard metal clank against a stone, and I felt the slight imbalance in her strides. My heart skipped a beat. She’d thrown a shoe.

I thought to ride her down the bank, but they were certain to follow us across the river, and Liskara had to carry us both.

As if reading my thoughts, she slowed to a walk, blowing, lifting her feet resentfully. “Force her, Reyna,” said Floy. “We must keep on.” We had reached the top of a steep incline and the horse trembled under my legs. “You must force her.”

“They would’ve caught up!” Liskara balked under my legs. “They would’ve pried me off her corpse.” My hope fell apart where it had taken such effort to piece together, and tears wet my cheeks.

“Get off,” said Floy. “Run, you idiot.”

Dust billowed around me when the first soldier brought his horse to a stop beside us. He grabbed Liskara’s leads.

I jumped from the horse, saddlebag underarm, and scrambled toward the underbrush. I felt a hand around my calf, a knife at my neck. The others came swiftly, over the path and around Liskara, and the horse backed into the trees. Men stood at her shoulder and neck, and the slate scarp dropped to the river just behind us. Two of them cut Andrei from his bonds; and as they tied my wrists I saw no black cuirasses or foreign faces. I wondered where Herist was.

And then his long face was up against mine, and his shaking hands tightened around my neck. “Where is it, you bleeding pustule? Have you got it on you somewhere?” He’d a month’s growth of hair on his chin, and the wind blew the stench of liquor across my face.

He ripped away my outer wraps and pulled the knickers off my legs. I watched from another man’s grip as his hand found the pockets, and I cried out, and a gust of wind pushed into my back.

He ripped out the asters and they blew away like bits of spider silk. The broach's silver wings flashed and I sank to my knees.

I knelt in the wet grass for some time and would say nothing. He forced three of my fingers out of joint. "Gone," I screamed. "Gone, gone, gone, gone."

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The sun sank and everything moved in a dark blur, and next I knew we were in a low, octagonal tent with rows of cots.

The soldiers dumped Andrei across one of them, and Herist grabbed Andrei's hair and juggled his head. Then he ordered the men out, all except the medic.

This was a skinny, jumpy man who bent over Andrei, examining him. He looked up after a while, rubbing his whiskers.

"Well?" said Herist.

"He's dead. May as well be."

"He's sleeping," I said, and Herist pushed a thumb into my neck.

"Comatose," said the medic.

"Dead," said Herist. "Bitten by a poisonous little spider." He dropped me into a chair. "And we'll pull her legs off one by one until she tells us where she hid her little sac."

"It's *gone*." My crooked fingers shook.

He rammed my head back, and the chair fell over. The dirt stuck to my wet face. I wondered how my blood could be so hot and my sweat so cold.

A wind blew in and Gershom ducked through the door flap. Herist's voice was like a whip-crack. "I said no interruptions."

He fell silent when he saw the Ombenelvan soldier behind Gershom, face glowing gold in the lamplight.

"Sir," said Gershom, "they're discontent with the brigands."

Herist said to the Ombenelvan man: "Kill all of them if you like."

The man ran a hand over his mustache. "A month ago my commander requested that you provide him with an oblation." He spoke slowly, with patience. "That is all my commander requested. You have failed."

"I have provided eighteen of them, convicted in a martial court."

"They speak a strange language. They don't belong to you, nor to your country, nor your army. They belong to no one. Outlanders, rubbish. They answer to nothing but rocks and trees." His accent cut through the tent. "We want a criminal."

"If you think," said Herist, stepping close to the man, "that I would keep and feed a criminal all through the winter for the sake of your pigshit god—"

"You speak blasphemy." The man showed all his white teeth. "The scent of your burning flesh will please Orshinq."



“You daren’t.” Sweat shone on Herist’s forehead. Big as he was, the Ombenelvan man was much bigger. “Your government sold you to me.”

The Ombenelvan man laughed. “I do not think the transaction was completed, Master Herist. Here we outnumber you five to one—” He stopped abruptly, and I followed the line of his eyes all the way down to my arm. I was propped half-up on my elbow.

“A traitor’s mark,” said the Ombenelvan man. I hid my forearm, my scar, under my stomach.

“You can’t use her.” Herist ripped his overcoat off, threw it on a chair.

“She is a traitor, you say it again and again, ‘Watch for the traitor gone north.’”

“She’s killed the heir apparent. Her business is with me.”

“A murderess now, you say, killer of the heir apparent?” The Ombenelvan man walked over, grabbed my arm, and pulled me to my knees. He turned my arm over and traced a finger along the old scar. His breath was rank. I gagged and he smiled at me. “What crime is more monstrous? Give her to us, Master Herist, and maybe we won’t burn your flesh for Orshinq and take your men from you.”

He released my arm and I slid back down to the floor. He turned and left, his breath still stinking the air. Gershom stayed by the door, wringing his hands like a woman. Herist stared at me.

“What use is she?” he said. “Could I flame her tongue into wagging?” He sneered, but his hands shook. I took no comfort in his terror. “Gershom,” he said to his man, “take her to the pen to wait well I think what to do. Have Esperow prepare a pyre. We’ll burn the boy.”

“And if he should wake?”

“What better way to make sure he doesn’t?”

“Commander,” Gershom kept on bravely, “he took off with the thing—”

Herist gave a hysterical bark of laughter. “You think he’ll be more forthcoming than the girl? He’s too much trouble. I want him dead.”

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“We haven’t enough wood,” said Esperow to Gershom, who dragged me behind him.

The green and grey of Herist’s garrison spread over the side of a hill overlooking the river. Beyond this a dark sea of Ombenelvan tents disappeared into the twilight. The Ombenelvan man had spoken truly: his fellows vastly outnumbered Herist’s. A few points of fire twinkled here and there in the purple—not many, though, because of the damp. The ground under my feet was mud; spurts of rain blew against my face.

“There were to have been three people burned for that ceremony,” said Gershom. “Now there’s only one. That would leave us enough wood, I should think.”

“It’s wet.” Esperow was small, old, with a couple strings of hair still on his head. “Some shitbrain set it out too early, and it rained all yesterday. All last week. And it’s raining now.”

We walked over another large hill, half-covered in yew. The Cheldony was below us, murmuring sweetly. There was a large rock jutting from the side of the hill, and we came directly under it. Upright logs had been jammed into a cave-like recess, right next to each other, like a palisade wall.

Gershom walked me to a door in the wall. Two sentries unbolted it. One of them prodded his torch inside, as though to scare something away. In the glow of the torch I saw dim shapes moving, and smelled the stink of excrement and unwashed bodies.

“Everything’s sodden,” Esperow continued to complain, “and a pyre needs a mountain of wood. Why don’t we just dump the boy in the river?”

“Take your light away,” came a voice from inside the pen. “Blinding my eyes out.”

“A pyre?” called another voice from the pen. “Who’s dead?”

“Keep quiet, or I’ll stick this in your neck.” The other guard thumped his spear against the side of the door.

The first guard didn’t take his torch away. “Against the wall, you.”

“Who needs a pyre?” said the guard with the spear.

Esperow spat to the side. “The Queen’s bastard, shitbrain.”

There was a brief silence. Then the soldiers started laughing, and someone called out of the pen, “I can’t imagine he’d’ve wanted to go that way. Did he die of some sort of contagion, that Herist would burn him?”

“No,” said Esperow. “Murdered.”

“He’s really dead?” said the guard with the torch. “How did he come to be dead? Did they catch the girl?”

“Who killed the royal bastard? Did you kill ’im, rat?” came another voice from the pen. It spoke a mangled Rielde. “Should we raise a toast to you? Or did the snake kill him? Snakey wanted him dead.”

“Who killed him?” echoed the guard with the spear.

Gershom thrust me into the dark doorway. “Her.” He stuck his head in after me and said, “You three that were to burn, you’re off. They’re using her.” He laughed. “A *proper* insurgent.”

A collective breath of relief blew out from the dark. Faces, dim in the torchlight, stared wonderingly at me. They seemed familiar, as if from some half-forgotten nightmare.

“The Mother’s frozen teats,” said one.

“No, no, look—” A hand dragged me in further and twisted my

face toward the light.

“Lally?” said a girl. “You bumped off the prince?” Her dirty face moved closer to the light. It was scrunched in laughter, but I recognized it. It belonged to a taller, knobbier Emry Nydderwaic. “I allus knew it would end badly with ye.”

I reached into my battered head and pulled out words. “He in’t dead.” My knees buckled and I sat in the straw.

“And I also allus knew,” said Emry, sitting down in front of me, “ye was never mim-mouthed when it came to lyin. But don’t expect those nitwits ter believe you.” She pointed at the four soldiers who were still arguing in the door. “And who cares if you killed him? Were a good thing you done, so far’s I know. Especially as they wanted to burn me the most and now you’re takin me place! They was gonna burn Toad and Gorky, too, cause they fought like baited bears, but it was me they wanted to burn specially. Cause I’m Chief.”

“Oh,” I said. Though she was right in front of me I could only see the outline of her. She was taller than me. “Are you Chief now?”

“Yup.” I put my face in my hands and rolled onto my stomach. “Don’t believe me, Aloren? Ask Seacho. I’m Chief, ain’t I, Seacho?”

“Emry’s Chief,” said the man who must be Seacho. “She hain’t had much chance to prove her mettle, though.” This was greeted by laughter from those who’d heard.

“Weren’t by choice,” she said. “Back about the time we was rustlin horses”—*prattle away, Emry*, I thought, *prattle me into oblivion*—“we was sittin by the town well in Cwdro, selling haul an’ actin like townfolk. Guess it didn’t work, cause we was surrounded suddenly by Snakey’s soldiers, and we all backed up against the well till we couldn’t back up no farther. And some of us drew our steel but them soldiers didn’t want a fight—they wanted our Chief. So Fillegal says the Chief weren’t around, he was off takin a piss, and then the old goat grabs me and says, ‘but this one’ll please ye far more than any old Chief.’ And then I turns round and pushes Fillegal down the well. He screamed like a cat, but there were no splash. Anyway, the soldiers was still askin who our Chief was, and all the boys pointed at me, the shitheads.”

“That in’t no way for a lady Chief to talk,” said a man in the back. Laughter again. I closed my eyes and saw the asters, sparkling like ice. I wished I could go mad now, get it over with.

“Shut up, Maradilly,” said Emry. “I’ll boil yer balls into puddin and feed em to you, ye so fancy singing like a girl.”

“Stop your jabber,” said one of the soldiers through the doorway, and pointed his torch at us. “Makes me nervous.”

“Is it true you haven’t any dry wood?” called a man among us to the guard. “Is Herist making the Ombenelva put it off?” He spoke

in clean Rielde. Too clean for a brigand. “Again?”

Someone whistled. “Again? They won’t like that.”

“Remember when they took little Drobo out o’ the pen?” said another brigand. “I reckon they ate him. They’ll probably eat you poor sods next.”

“We’ll find wood,” snapped the soldier with the torch.

“Why not use the wood here, from the wall?” said the man who spoke first. “It’s dry enough under this rock.”

“Aye, the nob’s put his finger on it. Dry as a hag’s cunt, this stuff.” The brigand named Maradilly slapped the wooden walls.

“Take down the walls and use them like Nobber says,” said another brigand. “Then the Yellows will save eating you for another day.”

I realized what they were doing. The soldiers realized it, too.

“Maybe,” said Esperow, “but Snakey wants you snug in your pen.”

“Who cares what Snakey wants,” said a brigand. “The Ombens want him boned and boiled. And they’ll boil you fellers, too, if you don’t keep em happy.”

“Snakey,” said Esperow to Gershom, “might like the idea better if we pass it off as our own.”

They muttered amongst themselves some more, and the door thunked shut. Darkness fell down. I heard boots tromping off through the mud.

“Let me see your hand.”

The man who spoke clean Rielde crawled from his corner. In the scant torchlight that fell through the logs I could see his shirt had an embroidered collar. The very same shirt Trid had been wearing at the canal’s edge.

“Trid.” I sat up. His voice had gone deeper. “What the hell?”

“Shh,” he said, “they’ll hear you.” Maybe I was already mad, going through in my mind all the people I had known. Maybe my brothers would be next.

“You know the nob?” Emry leaned forward. “Not a bad sort. He even speaks Rielde. Y’ever hear of an owl speaking Ri—”

“Be quiet,” said Trid. “We ought to sew your mouth shut. I’m a hostage.” He took my right hand tightly in his own—he smelled as ripe as the brigands—and lifted my little finger. He snapped the joint back in place. That was real enough. The pain flashed through my head like a light and I screamed.

“Sorry.”

I screamed two more times, for my other fingers. A guard drummed on the walls and shouted for the brigands to stop using me, and the brigands yelled back in their incomprehensible argot (how had I ever understood it?), and Trid said, “Herist and my uncle are no longer friends.”

“Pity for you.” I bent, trying not to vomit. The pain still coursed

through my hand and I put it before me in the straw.

“Herist keeps me alive and close so long as Caveira does as he’s told with the troops of Dirlan. Apparently my uncle treasures me. How did Andrei die?” The dark hid his face and I couldn’t guess at his expression. “Did you kill him?”

“In’t dead,” I said.

“Why’re they burnin him?” said Emry.

Trid’s breath quickened. “What happened to him? What’ve you two done with the *Aebelavadar*?”

“It’s gone,” I said exasperatedly.

“Gone? That’s bad. Really, really bad. The Ombenelva’ll—”

“Enslave everyone? Want to hear worse?” I rubbed my aching fingers. “Andrei stabbed a djain with a dagger. That’s why he looks dead.”

Trid made a sort of humming noise, and began to laugh.

“Ain’t funny. He’s asleep, been that way for a half a month.”

“And you think he’s not dead?” said Emry, who couldn’t keep from listening.

“I’m sure she knows how to check a pulse,” said Trid. “He’ll live, I think, if Herist doesn’t kill him. Humans—” He hesitated. “Humans have natural defenses against the djain. Something to do with our eyes.”

There were millions of things I didn’t know about humans. “Eyes?”

“I’ve been told. We’ve got to think how to rescue him. And you. We’ve been making weapons”—he dropped his voice even more—“Bows, staves, mostly. They’re buried in the ground. The palisade’s yew.” He laughed again. It sounded like a sob. “We managed to slip a hatchet off a sentry’s belt—it was dark and he was taking out the piss bucket, and he’s probably no idea where it went—and we rip the logs out and split the wood when it rains hard, and the river gets noisy. And the soldiers sometimes give us viols and things. They like to hear these fellows play. They’re uncommonly good.”

“Why, thankee, Nobber,” said Maradilly. “You ought to invite us to court, and we’ll sing ye a ballad of love—*The Nob and his Lady Chief*—” Emry reached over and smacked him.

Trid ignored them. “We just take the strings off them, say, ‘Aw, they broke.’”

“That stuff we make’s rubbish,” said Seacho. “Once we break out we’ll find better.”

“Once we break out we’ll be eaten by the Ombens,” said a little boy.

“No,” said Emry. “We’ll escape inter the woods. Where we belong.”

“I heard on the way here,” said Trid, talking to all of them now, “I heard Even-Alehn troops’ve landed in Ellyned. And they’re

moving this way.”

“So?” said Maradilly.

“My meaning is, if we break out some of us should ride to find them.”

“Ain’t that somethin? Nobber’s aimin to make good folks of us.”

“You really want the Ombenelva here?”

“Don’t see how it concerns us,” said Seacho.

“You owe me,” said Trid. “I came up with the idea, remember.”

They argued in this vein for some time. I didn’t listen but stared into the dark and thought of ice asters, thousands of them, running like sea foam through my hands. I lay down in the stinking straw and tried to think of other things. My mother, putting down a bowl of water for a big, black dog. Floy, the freckles on her high forehead, her hair bouncing on her back. Mordan’s eyes, like two moons. Arin in the bath, rolling my wet hair into spikes. A boy with curly hair—Wille—rubbing the cold out of my arms and telling me about windragons. Another boy, his shoulder still as stone under my head, as if he were scared I would fly away. His face was so sad I stopped thinking on it and fell into a doze.

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Some time later light flooded the place, so bright I put my hands over my face. “I’ve come to collect the girl,” someone said. He was silhouetted in the door.

No one said anything. Hands reached out and pushed me towards the door. My stomach churned, and my blood beat angrily—I didn’t want to burn.

I grabbed the hands and pulled myself back, biting and scratching. They howled and slapped me away, and I started screaming. “You whoresons, hiding in the dark.”

The soldier got me from behind, and Trid’s eyes glinted in the light. Then the door closed and I was on the outside of it.

## Thirty-One

The night was black and the torches sputtering. The soldier pulled me sharply by the arm, and I slipped on the wet grass and fell. He looked at me, scratching an eyebrow. "Wasn't my idea, this." His hand loosened on my arm.

I jerked myself loose and ran, mud squelching under my feet. Before I had gone three strides he grabbed me from behind. "No trouble, now," he said. "It'll be over quicker if you don't squirm. Poor little mouse." He put me over his shoulder and held me there with such ease I thought it pointless to struggle.

He carried me up the hill half covered in its yew wood, and then we were pushing through black cuirasses and wet, glinting mail.

About the brow of the hill a crowd had already gathered: black and grey, like a sooty fog. I looked behind me; the Ombenelvan soldiers spread down into the fields below. There was hardly a light to be seen anywhere in the black countryside.

Faces turned to look at me, hungry eyes shining in the few torches. I concentrated on the soldier's jerkin and only looked up when he slowed—we'd reached the top. Three stakes stood out like fingers from the ground. There was a little rowan tree just behind them, the white of its blossoms twinkling obscenely in the torchlight.

A few of Herist's men had gathered near the stakes, preparing for the burning. The Ombenelva weren't helping. They looked on, contemptuous spectators of the terrified garrison.

A little way behind the rowan, right against the eve of the forest, more of the garrison were stacking Andrei's pyre.

My soldier set me down before Herist. I stared at him unflinching, determined to hold my head high no matter what he did.

He ignored me; he was measuring the length of rope in his hand.

"Commander," said Gershom, holding a torch over the center stake, touching it with a palm. Herist dropped the rope.

"What?"

"The wood is unfit, and all the stakes. Completely waterlogged. We should wait to burn the boy."

"We'll burn him now," said Herist sharply. "I want no corpse coming back to haunt me." The garrison soldiers around him muttered under their breath.

"The Commander is scared of a corpse," said an Ombenelvan officer. "Pity. I would have my sausage cooked." His fellows laughed.

Gershom whispered to my captor, "I expect they know, they've known all along they ain't getting that weapon."

"I expect they're looking to torture a snake," my captor said.

"The snake's shaking in his skin," Gershom said, and jumped when

Herist addressed him.

“We’ll use the tree as a stake.” He pointed at the rowan. “It’s not so wet beneath the tree.” He picked up the rope and tossed it at the foot of the rowan.

“But the wood, sir,” said a soldier with a hissing torch.

“Gershom,” said Herist, ignoring the soldier, “collect wood from the prison.” He made a gesture at my soldier. “You, Kalk—Meladrau, bind her to the trunk.”

Gershom crept down the hill, right against the forest, as far away from the Ombenelva as he could manage. As Meladrau bound me to the rowan I turned my head over my shoulder and watched a group of Herist’s soldiers lay Andrei on the pyre. He was glistening with oil. An axe knocked somewhere below, the torches guttered, and it drizzled steadily.

“Set the boy alight now, before the night gets wetter,” said Herist to the soldier with the hissing torch, and he nodded his head toward Andrei.

The soldier walked toward the pyre. Rain pattered on the leaves overhead. It dripped into my hair and I willed it to rain harder, down on the pyre, down on the tree.

The soldier stood over the pyre now, and glancing with the light of his torch, he made a strange, stiff movement—and fell to the ground. The torch tumbled from his hand and went out in the wet grass. He lay twitching on the ground, two arrows sticking from his neck and back.

The garrison soldiers stopped what they were doing and the Ombenelva muttered in their own language. “What’s this?” Herist’s breath caught. “Who shot him?”

“They came from the wood,” said one of the garrison. He backed away from the yew wood, pulling one of his fellows back with him. “Over there.”

“Did they?” Herist walked over and heaved the soldier headlong toward the pyre. The soldier collapsed at the base of it, and got to his knees, shaking.

But nothing happened; nothing struck him down. He rose all the way and stepped cautiously away from the pyre. “Another torch,” said Herist. A torch was given him, and he placed it in the hands of the soldier and again shoved him toward the pyre.

There came a whistling noise. And the man was down, an arrow in his groin, his torch in the grass, extinguished.

I strained to see, wondering.

“Lady Slut,” said Herist to me. “Are these friends of yours?” He raised his hand and I shrank from it. But he lowered it, listening, his nostrils flaring. I heard it, too. A distant shouting, coming nearer.

There came a string of muffled words. Three of the garrison pushed through the wall of Ombenelva, and one shouted, “Gershom’s dead—axe. Rerle got it in the stomach. And I only just got away with my life—”

“What?” said Herist.



“Them that were in the—” the man stopped to catch his breath. He was one of the guards from the pen. My face flushed; I remembered the axe knocking. I thought it had been chopping wood. The soldier continued in a strangled voice, “Gershom opened the door and they got him in the head. The wall’s half gone—they stormed us, took our weapons—”

Herist strode up to the man and struck him in the face.

“Commander,” someone shouted, and soldiers pointed at the pyre. There was nothing on it. At the edge of the wood the undergrowth stirred—two figures dragging a third into the yews.

Herist ran a hand over his chin. “The young Caveira.”

He turned around and cried to Meladrau, “In, in, after them.” But Meladrau didn’t move, and neither did the other soldiers; and when Herist shoved them forward they wheeled away with sheepish, miserable looks on their faces. “Dogs! After them. They’ll work some devilry with the boy.”

“Commander,” said an old Ombenelvan man, and Herist turned. “Mind your duty.” His voice was gross with phlegm, and he stepped close enough that I could see his face. They all looked similar in that light, but this man—and then I knew. He had set his dog on me in the city. “Let them be. Finish the work.”

“If you want the work finished,” Herist snarled into the man’s face, “finish it yourself. You find the wood, you burn the girl.”

“Show some respect.” The man made a gravelly noise in his throat. “Our traditions are of the utmost importance.”

Herist flung his arms out. “Fool! She’s the one ran off with your *Aebelavadar*.”

“You lie,” said the man, and thumped his fist on his cuirass. “Mind your forked tongue. We will tolerate no disrespect. If you do not respect our traditions, we will not respect yours.”

“This isn’t your land.” Herist’s hand crept toward his knife. “Why should I give a damn for your traditions?”

“Not our land?” said the man. Water dripped from the trunk and trickled down my back. “Land belongs to the iron fisted. You haven’t even a fist of flesh, we think. First the heir apparent slips through your fist, than a bevy of prisoners. You are unfit to lead.” He coughed again, and smiled, his fat face wrinkling up. “Perhaps if you give Orshinq his due he will take pity and give you a fist of straw.”

Herist looked as though he’d like to yank his knife out and plunge it into the man’s eye. But he said in a low voice, “So be it.” He turned to Meladrau, and said he might take men and go and collect the rest of the wood from the prison, as there was no other use for it now.

So Meladrau and a few more of the garrison went down the hill. The rain fell, and Herist grumbled, his hands clutching at his lank hair, until the men came back up with armfuls of kindling and filthy straw. They worked silently, furiously, stacking the wood around my feet and bundling the straw into bunches under the wood; and the Ombenelvan

officer, Chureal I thought he must be, blended back into the mob of his countrymen, the front line of which looked on mockingly.

“Light it.” Herist gave a torch to Meladrau. Meladrau passed the torch to one of his fellows, and he in turn passed it to someone else, and for some time not one of Herist’s soldiers would step forward to light my kindling.

“What’s this about?” said Herist. “Are we waiting for daylight?”

“They’re scared of the arrows,” said Meladrau quietly.

“You’re out of reach here.” Herist took back the torch and gave it to Meladrau. “Stop trembling and get to it.” Herist stepped back, and Meladrau didn’t move. The Commander pulled his knife and forced him forward. “Light it.” Meladrau put his torch to the first bundle of straw.

“Go on,” Herist told me, the knife shaking in his hand, the bones in his fist standing out. “Curse and sob. Tell me the details. What’s this? You aren’t of the mind?.” But drizzle had already come through the branches and dampened every surface, and only smoke curled around my feet.

A shape flitted through the smoke and landed on my shoulder. “I’d wondered where they put you,” she said. “The camp’s a mess. Where’re the tunics? Is Liskara still packed with your things? I saw her outside a tent but didn’t look closer.”

“Floy,” I breathed. I drooped in my bonds. “What’s the use? The asters are gone.”

“We can try half the business, can’t we? Before sunrise? I’ve brought them all, and we’re going to find the tunics. And the asters.” I lifted my head. The air darkened and grew heavy.

“You shouldn’t have come. It’s no use, Floy. Tell them to leave.”

“Sure, right away I’ll tell them,” said Floy. “Boys, it’s your sister! But don’t look—she’s being burned at the stake and wants you to leave. They’ll respect your last wishes, oh, *certainly* they will.”

“Floy,” I gasped, coughing. But she had gone. A flame trickled through the straw, and the men blew life into it. It ate at the wood under my feet, snapping it up, growing fat. The tree woke and whispered at my back. Smoke coated the inside of my mouth, and I closed my throat and held my head up. A thousand spinning eyes bored into me. I savaged my lips and tongue with my teeth.

Hot air billowed under my skirt, hounding the moisture away. Pain clouded my senses and someone started screaming so loudly it rang in my ears.

A black shadow flew through the smoke. A long neck arched, and black wings beat against my feet, stinking of burnt feathers. “Get away,” I cried. “Get away. They’ll kill you. Get away!”

Arin said nothing, but kept beating and beating.

Herist hung back for a moment. Then he reached out and crumpled the swan against his chest. Arin screamed, tore at him with a webbed foot, and Herist caught his neck and twisted it. “You don’t know what you’re doing,” I whispered. The neck snapped, and Arin the boy

struggled, his face blanched, and Herist, in surprise, let fall the wings from his arms.

The surprise changed on his face. Gasping, he dropped to his knees—the grip of a knife stuck out between his shoulders. A man stood behind him, lacquered with oil. Herist hit the ground and his mouth darkened the dirt.

“I hate waking up,” said Andrei. He pulled his knife from Herist’s back, and I thought vaguely to myself, he must have slipped from the wood and come up from behind.

I looked at the swan fanned over the straw and closed my eyes. It felt as though there were a rock in my throat.

“My lord, you daren’t do that,” said Meladrau. Andrei was cutting through my ropes. “The other prisoners are gone.”

“My lord,” said another soldier, “she’s guilty. Her scar—”

“Of what?” Andrei hacked away at the ropes, freeing my arms. “Killing me?” His hands were shaking, his eyes bruised, his skin waxen. No wonder they’d thought him dead. “Which should give me sufficient license to pardon her.”

Someone—Trid—put a hand on Andrei’s shoulder, and Andrei wrenched it away, twisting it. Trid squawked.

“You’ve lost your mind,” he said. I looked over my shoulder, but nothing stirred. The brigands had the sense to stay hidden. Andrei stumbled and fell to his knees, and Trid squatted next to him. “You’re weaker than an infant. You’ve only got a couple spoonfuls of mash in you; I’m surprised you can even *move*. You don’t understand what’s going on, the Ombenelva could squash us with one boot, we don’t know if the other troops are anywhere near, you’re going to have to negotiate—”

“Your Grace.” Chureal stepped from his horde of Ombenelva, and Trid looked up, words caught in his throat. Both the boys became still. “It’s a delight to see you alive.” He didn’t look delighted. “Perhaps we should find you a cot.”

Andrei’s hand tightened around his knife. “She’s coming with me.”

Chureal stopped an arm’s length away. “You would grant her pardon?” he said, smiling at Andrei. “Very magnanimous. She must confess, of course.”

Trid stood up. “To what?”

Chureal flicked rainwater from his lump of a nose. “I don’t know. She has yet to speak.” He still smiled at Andrei.

“You know,” said Andrei. He got unsteadily to his feet. “You know she can’t confess.”

“What?” said Chureal. “How could I, Your Grace?”

“Got hordes of djain telling you, probably.”

“Pardons can only be issued to those who confess.” Another Ombenelvan officer stepped up beside Chureal. “We must respect the law.”

Andrei said, “Herist—”

“Is dead,” said Chureal. “Our thanks.” Andrei shook like a tree stricken by an axe.

He sat on the ground and dug his hands into his long, matted hair.

“My lord,” said a garrison soldier, and he knelt before Andrei and spoke in a whisper, “They’re a bunch of mad dogs. They’d murder us, enslave the people. You know what they do in the South. Think of the Girelden.”

“Give them what they want,” muttered another of the garrison.

“Be reasonable, boy—”

“She’s a far cry from mute,” said Meladrau, who’d heard me yelling at the prisoners. “Yes or no. She could say either.”

“One word,” said Trid. “Just once, Aly. It doesn’t have to mean anything.”

“Look at me,” Andrei said, hauling himself up to my level. “You want your people enslaved? They think I’m going to torch you.” He laughed. “They don’t get it. I won’t. You stopped weaving—I thought you’d finished. For gods’ sake, Aly, it’s spring, why don’t you just say no? Is the sun out? No. Are we having a garden party? No. Am I the man you love best? No--” His head knocked against the trunk, and he saw my left hand. He grabbed it and held it to the torchlight. “What happened to your finger? Smells like a—”

He threw it away and looked at Trid. “You said it was palendries.”

He turned back to me. “Did you stop weaving to keep me alive? You left your shirts alone so you could stuff me full of weeds?”

My feet ached. The sky was lightening. I was going to go mad soon. I turned my head away, to watch for morning. “Ah,” he said bitterly, “I destroy every life I touch. Can’t be helped.”

The rain thinned, and he sat down again. “I can’t do this. They can’t make me do this.”

He fell silent at a noise. The whinny of a horse and a great crash, both far off and muffled in the wet.

Something barreled through the sea of soldiers, leaving a path in its wake. A sparrow’s song rang out in the dark:

A monster burst onto the hilltop, bristling with black wings and yellow eyes.

“By the blood of the earth,” said Meladrau.

An Ombenelvan officer sank to his knees. “Orshinq,” he said, and cried out in his own language. His countrymen shouted and fell around him, and the hillside began to writhe.

“*Aguna nu*,” yelled Chureal. The men from Omben stilled and watched silently as the beast came toward me. Its many wings spread, and a pair separated and flew off when a great load dropped to the ground.

“How’d you do it?” called the beast.

“A switchblade,” it answered itself. Then the wings fell off entirely, and I saw it was a horse—Liskara. She bolted into the wood.

“Where’s the bag?” An egret picked at the pile of fallen baggage.

“What’s become of Arin?”

“A sign.” Chureal looked after the horse, his face wan beneath black whiskers. “We have time yet.” He started forward with a torch.

Andrei thrust himself from the ground, wrested the torch from Chureal’s hands, and pushed him away.

“Get back,” he snarled. He almost set himself alight, and his convulsive, wasted limbs flailed the torch about with so genuine an aspect of lunacy that he cleared a great circle of ground before the tree. “Get back,” he called, pointing with the fire. “All of you. If you want to burn her, you’ll have to tie me to the tree as well.”

He ground the torch into the dirt and scrambled around the baggage, scattering the birds. They watched with cocked heads.

“Cracked?” said Mordan.

“I believe he’s trying to help,” said Tem.

Floy alighted on a bag. Andrei took the hint and took the old saddlebag from under her. He somehow dragged himself and the bag over to the rowan, where he demanded I hold my hands out.

I did so, and he dumped the Marione shirts across my arms. And he would have stood there in the way of my brothers, knocking Herist’s head around with his boots and waiting for justice to hew the earth into halves, had Trid not pulled him aside and sat on his legs.

The birds stood before me, blending together in the half-light. “Go on,” said Tem. “The sun won’t wait.”

It was light enough to see the wind ruffling Floy’s feathers. I had no idea what would happen to her when the sun rose. But I wouldn’t think on that. I must make our spirits whole again.

My aching fingers could scarce open the garments. The first drowned Leode completely, Tem received the next, and then Mordan, and finally, uncertainly, I bent from the waist and pulled the second-to-last over the swan as best I could. But I kept my own draped over my palms, frowning at it.

“Quickly, Reyna. They won’t be held in suspense for long, these men.”

“Why are you waiting?” said Mordan. They held their heads erect, awkward in the thorny garments. No asters. I knew what they intended.

“Put it on,” said Tem. “Forget about us.”

“No,” I said.

“Do as I say. I’m eldest.”

“You’ll die,” I said.

“Better than going mad.”

“We want you to live,” said Mordan.

I didn’t need for them to explain. I knew what would happen: we would forget each other. They would pass away—shot in the breast, frozen in a cold lake, old and sad in the corner of a mew—and melt back into the mud as simple beasts, while an empty pocket of earth who used to be Reyna lived on.

Madness would be rest of a sort. But it was cowardly. My father

stood in front of me. *Be brave.* He was smiling, holding out his hand.

I shook my head. I couldn't do it.

*Be brave.*

I took a painful breath and slipped the tunic over my head.

Sunlight caught in the branches above me, and the wind changed. The tunic whipped against me, just strings and knots, for the blossoms had torn loose and formed a funnel in the wind.

The point pierced my chest. My soul thawed and sang.

"Yes," I said, and I didn't care who heard it. "Yes. See what I did?" I pointed toward Arin. "He should've had strong arms to fight with, and legs for kicking, and teeth for biting. But he didn't, and because of me. I would I'd never wished them useless wings on him, and all the rest of them, too."

Andrei took this as a confession, and pulled away from Trid to saw through the rest of my ropes. I hardly noticed for the beating in my ears.

I saw wings, an albatross beating its great, white wings. For an instant the yew wood seemed to grow, to circle round us, a sea of ancient trees stretching from horizon to horizon. A second wind came up, cold as the moon, and a thousand black feathers blew past.

Then they were gone, birds and feathers.

The wood dwindled to its normal size. A boy was sprawled over the logs at my feet, his black hair blowing across his face. He was crumbling. Behind him the others stood in a line. They crumbled too, and the sun burst through them, setting the dust sparkling. Mordan said, "You did it? You wished us into birds?" He laughed, voice rusting through. "And you've renounced it. Goodbye."

Andrei stumbled under me. I reached to steady myself, and pulled him down by the shirtfront.

An ice aster blew out of his shirt—the last one I'd tucked next to his wound. It caught, a warm, spidery, white thing, in the hollow below my collarbone.

Tem knew what it was. "Give it to Leode," he said. He was so good.

"Wait." Mordan's voice was very faint, as though it came from deep underground. "Composites. Composites!" I couldn't guess what he was talking about. "Don't you remember, any of you?"

Then I remembered. The scent of meadowsweet, like almonds. *They're composites. Got lots of little flowers on each head.*

"Maybe he's right," Leode said, and as if this were the final word, they held out their arms. Their hands were gone, so I tore the magnificent white flower to bits and pressed the pulp against their arms, sides, legs, wherever there was flesh—until I felt nothing.

I reached out, searching the air for Arin, who should have been right here. And the ground here was hot, like a palm. I placed in it the last bit of aster.

The air warmed and became a real palm, and I yanked my hand away.

"Reyna?" said Tem. I shook my head, too distraught to believe it.

"I saw him, Tem," said Mordan, "right after the man snapped his

neck.”

“Reyna, look.”

I put my head between my knees and vomited.

“She’s in shock.”

“He was alive and kicking, Tem.”

“One last push?”

“Quite a push if his neck had already been broken,” said Mordan. “Reyna.” I looked up, and he crouched and put his ear to his little brother’s mouth. His hands moved over Arin’s body, feeling for something. “Arin may be high-tempered. His head may be in the clouds. But he hasn’t got a foot of vertebrae in his neck anymore.”

Tem knelt beside us.

Mordan placed my fingers onto Arin’s neck, and I could feel a pulse. Like wings flying away.

Tem began to laugh—it was the most wonderful sound I’d ever heard. Floy drew her hands around her knees, and wept.

“The sun,” Leode whispered, watching it fall over his skin.

## Thirty-Two

I touched them again and again, wouldn't stop, until Leode laughed and pushed me away, and Mordan grabbed my hands.

"You're gross," he said. "If you fell in the river it'd go brown."

"Djain." Chureal's voice was sibilant with horror. "The girl's a witch. She summons djain—"

Tem stood up, and so did Mordan.

"Why should that worry you?" said Mordan.

"Touch my sister," said Tem, "and you'll see a demon, right enough."

Leode climbed to his feet, too. "We can make the trees squeeze your ugly heads off."

Chureal disregarded this and looked over Leode's head. His hand touched his scabbard and he muttered something to the soldiers alongside him.

"Boy," said a man's voice behind us, "I hope you don't mean to threaten us with that nonsense."

He spoke in the trader's tongue. We turned and watched as he strode toward us. He had a dented breastplate with a strange insignia—a bounding hare—and a sopping wool cloak. He was short for a human, middle-aged, with dark skin.

The undergrowth stirred behind him; branches whipped water about, and twenty youngish men walked out of the wood. Dew shone on their mail. Their surcoats were rain-blue, and they had golden six-pointed stars on their breasts.

"Commander Chureal?" The man stopped in front of the Ombenelvan officer, and there was a loud scraping of metal as Chureal drew his saber. The other man put up a hand. "You're surrounded by my men. We have fire artillery, and it's horrible, grim stuff. Aclunese."

"By Ayezur's light," said Trid..

"We are seven thousand," the man said. "More are coming."

Trid wiped wet grass off his breeches. "They found you. They really found you."

The man eyed Trid curiously.

"Behind you," called one of the blue soldiers as Chureal raised his saber. The Evenalehn man turned, drew his own sword, and made a neat flick; the saber flashed in the sun and landed on the ground. There was a hiss like steam escaping from a pot as all the Evenalehn soldiers (there were more than a hundred by now) drew their short swords. A dozen stood behind their officer and the rest walked briskly down the line of Ombenelva, who fingered their sword belts, looking at Chureal.

"Sit," said the Evenalehn man, and he pricked Chureal's neck with his sword. "Command your men to sit."

Looking thoroughly annoyed, Chureal barked an order. The



Ombenelva sat as one. It looked like a vast fortress falling in on itself. I could just make out, beyond the dark of the Ombenelvan contingent, a crescent of blue, like the sun pulling out of eclipse.

"This whole region's got the blight of a standing army," the Evenalehn officer said to Trid. "We didn't know where the army was, though, until those"—he looked Trid over again—"They must have been friends of yours. Not sure who you are. A human, obviously, raggedy as a pot boy, but you speak like a gentleman." He shrugged. "The consul's better at formalities, but he's got to heave himself up here. I'm Officer Detrador of the twenty-second Benmar regiment."

The man gave a little bow. And then he saw, really saw, the rest of us. "You look like hell. Have you all been ill?"

Trid looked at my brothers. He cleared his throat. "A bit more complicated—"

"A very long illness," said Tem. He was an odd sight: icicle-white in the sun and smiling like it was his birthday.

"A stranger night I've never lived through," said Meladrau, relief wilting his shoulders. "It's a fact, sir, a fact."

"We're thrilled you're here, Officer." Mordan took the man's hands and kissed his cheeks.

"And who are you, my good young Gireldine?" said Detrador.

"Mordan Lauriad, who was a very unhappy bird."

"A—a bird?" Detrador scratched his beard.

"What's this?" An older man came clear of the trees with the help of a young soldier. "What's going on?" He pushed the boy's arms away. "I'm not *that* old, Prini."

His white hair was closely clipped in the patrician style of Evenalehn, and his robes were heavy with mud at the hem. He surveyed us, twisting a finger in his ear. "Detrador," he said, "I've never seen a sorrier looking bunch of people."

"Consul. This one thinks he's a Lauriad." Detrador pointed at Mordan. "And a bird. Must've been put through extreme torture."

"You've no idea." Mordan was bouncing on his toes.

"I thought this might happen," said Tem, stepping forward. "Consul, you must believe us. We are Lauriads, the King's own children. We were presumed dead but we'd only hidden ourselves." He frowned. "After a fashion."

"Poor boy." The Consul's old voice wavered. He took out a handkerchief and touched it to his eyes. "Poor boy. We'll find you a bed—"

"It's true, you bag of bones." I looked behind me. Andrei still sat against the rowan trunk. His head drooped, as though he didn't have the strength to keep it up.

The Consul walked under the tree and said, "You might mind your manners." And then more gently, "You look the worst of the lot." He stood up straighter, digging in his pocket for something--an eyeglass. "I know you. You're—"

“The Queen’s bastard. Let’s not waste time.”

The Consul walked back to my eldest brother, studying him through the eyeglass. “And I suppose you’re Temmaic?” he said, watching my brother closely.

“Yes.”

“How many siblings have you?”

“Four.”

“All brothers, right?” He eyed Tem keenly.

“My sister is right behind you, sir, and will you grill her, too?”

“Ha!” The Consul turned round. “I believe he’s telling the truth. Is he telling the truth?” he said to me. “Are you Lauriad’s little girl that got her head smashed in by a brigand?”

“I don’t know about Lauriad’s little girl.” My feet were stinging and it made me sharp. “But I’m about ready to deck you in the face.” I stopped then, and looked more closely at the face. I imagined a beard on it.

“By God!” I said. “Don’t you know me?”

Confusion passed over Calragen’s face. “I’ve known a lot of people. Tend to get them confused.”

“We went down the river together.” I thought I might cry. “You called me Aloren.”

“Aloren...” He took my face in his hand and wiped the mud away with his sleeve. “There they are. The freckles.” He laughed and shook his head. “Aloren! A princess with four brothers.”

“If you don’t mind,” said Floy, who sat next to me, stroking my hair, “there are people here who need to be looked to.” I smiled at her and went to sleep.

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“Where’s Andrei?” I asked upon waking. My blanket slipped from the cot onto the floor. Afternoon sun poured into the tent through the tied flap, bathing my legs. I was wearing a clean nightshirt, and my feet were wrapped in a cloth wet with carron oil.

“I couldn’t have asked for a merrier greeting.” Arin was on the cot next to mine. “Not a word for me, her own kin, and here I lie on the verge of death.”

“I’ll give you the verge of death,” I said.

“It’d be too easy,” Arin said lazily. “Half my body’s already jumped over it.”

“What?” I sat up. “What’s happened?”

“Doesn’t hurt. Better than being a swan.” He sat up against his pillow. I could see it took a tremendous effort. “It’s my left half. Won’t do what I want.” He changed the subject. “Andrei?”

“The boy who looks like shit.”

“The Queen’s brat?”

“How is he?”

“Very much an enigma. His mouth’s been too busy to tell us anything. He’s done little but eat since this morning. Now he’s sleeping, see?” He pointed to the other side of the tent. There was someone bundled in the cot there. “And you, out like a candle, wouldn’t tell us much, either. Mordan, though, he told the whole damn story. And now you’re awake we’d better get--”

The door flap fluttered and Calragen stuck his head through.

“Little else can be done, boy, very little.” This was said to Trid, who came in after him. Once inside his voice dropped to a whisper: “Ten thousand? Without that amulet, there is very little I can do—”

“I’m afraid it’s gone, sir,” Trid said. “Gone. You’ll get no more out of him. He needs bed rest, not an old man badgering—”

“*You’re* afraid it’s gone? They won’t leave with good grace. And there’re two thousand up here alone. They might demand another victim.”

“I should think,” whispered Trid furiously, “Herist would make a fitting sacrifice. We could just set him alight. He’s more unlikely to complain than even she was.”

The two of them looked over at me. “She’s awake.” Calragen bent over my bed with a great creak. “My Lady. You’ve proven exceptional at keeping secrets. Surely you can help?”

“Look in the coat pockets,” I said.

“What?” He looked at me charily, scared I’d finally cracked, probably.

“There.” I pointed to a grey coat draped over a chair. Herist’s coat. “Check the pocket. He took it when he searched me.” Trid reached for the coat, and shook it over the floor. The broach—the dragonfly that I had taken from the smithy during the insurrection and carried all the long way north—clapped on the dirt. Calragen snatched it up and turned to me in stupefaction.

“You found it.”

“No,” I said. “Nefer made it from your sketch. Open it—he made the other piece without looking at a design. He was amazing. It’s in there. It’s almost exactly the same as the other. If you thought it was the original, they will, too.”

“But what’s this to do with—?”

“Open it!”

“How?”

“Give it here.” He did so, and I folded back the silver legs and dropped the tiny urn into my lap. “Use this to get the Ombenelva out. It’s not really a bottle. But they’ll never find out. They wouldn’t dare try to unscrew the cap. They’d—I expect they’d be too yellow. They’ll never know there in’t nothing inside.”

“But this? What is it?”

“The *Aebelavadar*. A fake one.”

Calragen’s jaw worked, his eyes moved from the broach to the lump in the bed across from me.

“There it is,” I said. “There’s no way around it. That’s the boy you want. It’d be funny if it weren’t such a mess of blood.”

“The Queen’s bastard?” said Calragen.

“What?” Trid moved his head from me to Calragen. “What?”

“He’s the Ravyir’s missing son,” I said.

“Really?” said Trid crossly. “I can tell there’s some big story needs telling. But leave him alone for now.” And so we did.

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Later that day the boys carried Arin outside, and we ate a supper of last autumn’s beans and potatoes on the grass outside the tent. Calragen ate with us, and so did Trid, who was getting on splendidly with Tem. The late sun cast its honey light between the trees, and the evening birds started twittering. I could no longer understand them, not directly. What grace had been given me was gone. It made me a little sad.

We told tales, and after a small, initial struggle I slipped back into the normal way of speaking, and wondered how I had ever got by without it. And just to make sure I knocked Mordan’s bowl of hash into his lap, and said, “It was me did that.”

The sun sank low, and Mordan was smearing hash on me, and Trid looked up and said, “What are you doing up?”

Andrei stood in the entrance of the tent. “I’m hungry.” He looked better after a day of sleep, but his eyes were still strange.

Trid got up and spooned hash from from the pan into a bowl, and gave it to him.

He stared so fixedly into the bowl I thought there might be a mouse in it. “I’ll go somewhere else.”

“Why are your eyes brown?” I didn’t know what else to say.

“Stay here,” said Tem. “The Consul wants to tell a story.”

“About Faiorsa,” said Arin. “She wasn’t your mother.”

“Which ought to cure you quicker than food ever could,” said Leode through his mouthful of hash.

“You rogue,” said Calragen. “Sit down,” he said to Andrei, “and let me work it out.” He picked a bean off his shirt, and Andrei sat next to Trid.

“Funny thing is, I thought I *had* worked it out. Too weeks ago Caveira just as good as told me the Ravyir’s son was dead. But the story starts fifteen years back. As you know, a woman named Yelse murdered the Ravinya of Lorila and stole the baby prince. Caveira caught Yelse on the border. Though he knew the baby, he didn’t turn the woman in, because she was beautiful, and a witch. Caveira—oh, the rascal was very desperate two weeks ago and could hold it in no longer—but I shall get to that later.

“Caveira let her go, thinking she would repay him by performing the happy dispatch on the Ravyir’s son. His family was next in line for the throne, you see. So Ravyir Gavorian of Lorila, thinking his son was dead,

turned to Caveira, who was childless, and it was tenuously decided that he would be heir presumptive to the kingdom, and his nephew Natridom after him, in lieu of, you know—”

Trid stared at the man and slowly shook his head. “I never heard.”

“Well, you wouldn’t have. It was kept quiet. And years passed and Lorila’s other peers grew...unhappy. Natridom was sent to train at Norembry’s court for his safety, and Caveira became nervous when he learned Yelse had got hold of the *Aebelavadar* and all its baggage. His nephew was over there and he suspected her of designs against his family—and I see why, now. It was because she had failed to kill the baby prince. Caveira was nervous already, for the other Lorilan nobles were plotting against him, and the Ravyir would listen to no counsel. You know what they say about him—surrounded by thieves and murderers and can’t bear to think ill of any of them. And so Caveira thought he would have to win Lorila by force. He was only thinking of the country’s stability, he said to me.

“So he began to collect men. He already had an accomplice in Herist, whom he had entrusted with Natridom’s safety. He promised Herist land, a whole province, if you can believe it. And when Yelse, who was calling herself Faiorsa, invited the Ombenelvan mercenaries into Norembry, Caveira thought to collect more men by frightening the Ravyir with rumors of invasion. Herist did his part on the other side of the border, threatening Lorila with war. Whether that was what Yelse had intended for the mercenaries, I don’t know. But she was very ill by that time (poisoned, folk say) and Herist was free to go forward with his warmongering, and of course the Ravyir gave Caveira more troops.

“Caveira only ever wanted Lorila. But Herist, it seems, was more ambitious. He had control over the Ombenelvan mercenaries, as well as Caveira’s nephew. Caveira should have expected it. If Herist had guile enough to pry power away from Yelse, then certainly Herist had the wits to carve his own agenda from this tangle of scheming.

“But Caveira never guessed, and he had no choice but to turn to the city of Even-Alehn when Herist betrayed him. And the city sent *me*, whom Caveira thought dead by his own hands! When he saw that it was I, Calragen Eligarda, he knew he had better tell me the whole of it. Herist had his *balls in a twist*, as he said. So he told me, thinking I might have a way out for him, and he must have been keen on a particular way out, for he failed to mention that Yelse had never fulfilled her promise to him, had never done away with the Ravyir’s son. Andrei, that’s you.”

Andrei put his bowl down in front of him.

“Demyan Eliav,” said Calragen. “That’s your name, if he is in fact you. But there is story here I do not know.”

“So that’s Lorila sorted out,” said Arin. He took a big bite of hash. “Remind me, though, how many countries are we dealing with, and whose is which?” Forgetting he was disabled, I smacked him over the head.

“Lorila sorted out?” said Calragen. “An amusing theory, my good

young Gireldine, but haven't you heard? The Ravyir's under siege. Been cornered at Akurya."

"By whom?" said Trid.

"Keldanst of Olefel. And I've just been told an army of Goyinki is marching on Dirlan, and there's no one to defend it because Caveira's troops have mutinied, and Caveira was caught in the brunt and killed. The land's a mess." He wiped his mouth with a sleeve.

"It's about time someone mutinied," said Trid. "Leadership's gone to shit in these parts. I want nothing to do with it."

"Born into it, weren't you?" said Arin.

"Over in Benmarum people aren't born into anything except the world," said Trid.

We didn't move for a long time; and the sun slid off the grass, and the evening chill moved in.

## Thirty-Three

A few days went by. I did little except sleep, eat, and suffer tonics and treatments from the medic. Arin lay beside me, and we talked and fought. Sometimes Andrei was in the bed opposite mine, asleep, or pretending. He didn't speak, didn't look at me, but I liked having him there; and when everyone else was gone or sleeping I would slip from my bed and make sure it was him.

Sometimes all my brothers would come, and Floy, and they would crowd around my bed. We would talk about Norembry, and the wide world outside, and I was scared it was all a good dream.

One day I knew it for a dream, because a Simargh came into the tent after my brother Tem. "Ackerly spoke with her people," Tem said. He opened the door flap, and sun poured in a stream to where Calragen and Trid were standing and talking to Andrei.

The sunlight condensed at the foot of the cot and took the figure of a woman. She rendered everything else so unreal that lines and edges faded before and behind her.

I sat up and rubbed my eyes, thinking perhaps the sunlight had dazzled them. "This is a dream," I said to Arin, who was sitting up in his bed beside mine.

"A dream?" Arin blinked fuzzily. "Maybe."

What seemed layers of wings, translucent, veined, feathered, were wrapped around her bright body like robes. "I gave you a choice," she said to Andrei. "You didn't much like it."

He sat forward on his cot, looking ready to bolt. She said to a dazed-looking Calragen, "You asked after the whole story? I'll tell my part."

Her voice shook my insides like a great bell. At the sound of it memories came into my mind: the tiered bottom of the pool; the bright door behind the blue glass; the glowing soul.

"He was used as a tool, and it was partly our fault. You're familiar with the legend of Calabren? This is similar. It begins with a djain that tricked a Simargh and got her with child.

"The Simargh carried her child to term—a boy—and we did our best to protect him. But the djain are cunning and we feel always their malice, and as a precaution we took the boy's soul and hid it. And not too soon, because the boy was stolen by his djain father.

"We searched for the child but the djain guarded him too well. We kept watch over the soul because we knew the djain was also searching—without the soul it could not turn the child.

"Only later, when it was too late, did we learn what happened. In devising a way to steal the soul the djain conspired with a human woman. Yelse, as she used to be called, was the Ravyir's lover. The man took a wife more suitable, and she rankled with hate and was bent

on revenge. She had saebeline blood and some small magic, and was the more irrational for it.

“For the djain’s work Yelse needed a soulless child. Not the Simargh—the djain couldn’t risk it.

“So she murdered the Ravinya, took her boy, and did not suffer him to know any kindness. She had an urn crafted, the kind Virnrayan artisans use to bottle power. She thought to put the Simargh soul, when she had got it, in the urn, and hide the urn in a secret-keeping broach.

“She and the child journeyed to Lorlen, where we live. The tortured boy had hidden his soul away, much the same as we had hidden ours. With the djain’s help, Yelse cast a shroud of illusion about him. We though he was our souless Simargh babe, stolen back.

“Even the Simargh are vulnerable to djain craft. We, who think ourselves wise. We should have hidden the soul in a safer place, should have waited a thousand more years for the Simargh boy to mature.

“Instead we gave the soul to the wrong boy. Right away we knew our mistake. But a soul given is a soul kept until she is given by the keeper. The keeper grew, and there was nothing we could do except watch. The djain began to fulfill it’s half of the bargain: Yelse gained control of Norembry, and promised the soul, the *Aebelavadar*, to a country controlled by the djain. She was given troops by this country, and planned to move against Lorila by means of Norembry and the Ombenelva. I believe her objective was revenge—to end her bitter score when the bastard prince of Norembry conquered Lorila and killed the Ravyir, his real father. In her madness she overlooked several details. Norembry wasn’t so anxious to go to war, and she and her djain forgot that the soul couldn’t be taken without the boy’s permission. We shed light on the courses. He didn’t give permission.”

It was all silence for a while. I opened my mouth. “Shed light on the courses?” It was just a dream, after all. Cruelly absurd in the way of dreams. I could say what I wanted. “Oh, that’ll make up for it, sure.” Tem’s face had a terrible expression; he looked toward my hands and I buried them in my lap.

“I don’t understand,” said the Simargh.

Of course she didn’t understand. “Partly your fault, you said. So where were you when my father died?”

Arin hissed my name. I ignored him.

“Where were you when they grabbed up them flowers like a bunch of idiots and I had to rip my spirit out? When I spent years sunk in dirt and nastiness? And *him*.” I pointed at Andrei. “The hateful monster. Where were you? Did you see Nefer die? Wille’s eyes? You’re as bad as a djain, watching your mess spread like a plague.”

My face was wet—I had never cried in a dream before.

“We’re not so powerful as you want us to be,” she said. “We can only give help to those who see us.”

Having nothing more to say, she dissolved, and the light from outside brightened and fell across my legs. Everyone else trickled through the



door, except for Arin, who lay back down without looking in my direction.

And Andrei, who'd got up from his cot. He was holding his head as though it ached. I asked him, "What happened to your eyes?"

"What?" He looked down at me.

"Your eyes are brown. Why are they brown?"

"Why do you care?" He walked out the tent.

I slipped from my cot and shambled after him. I watched him throw together a bedroll and biscuits.

Suddenly, instinctively, I knew I wasn't dreaming. My mouth went dry.

"Where're you going?" I said.

"Hell if I know."

"You can't leave."

"Watch me," he said.

He began to walk toward the river.

"How did Trid wake you?" I called after him. "When I was tied up, how did he wake you?"

"He hasn't said."

"Well, now you're awake, you've an obligation."

He laughed at me. "To do what?"

I should have run after him. Instead I said softly, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I thought it was a dream."

\*\*\*

Floy found me stuffing salt pork into my old knickers.

"Where are you bound?" she said. "With burns like that?"

Emry, Chief of the brigands, was standing beside her with a cloth full of green stuff. She grew red in the face. She was very young; too young to have been sentenced to death.

"Have you ever," said Floy, "seen a palendry bloom?" It was an odd question.

"No," I said. "I don't think they do."

"I fancy they would look something like that aster."

"If they bloomed."

"Maybe they do, though. We ignore them most of the time. And they do sprout by water—"

"Ye're following him?" Emry said. "Here." She held out the cloth. I smelled palendries. "Give him these. I don't want to. He frightens me and he's dumb. After I woke him I said to his friend, 'Don't let him out o' bed for a week,' and there he goes! Like he's made all of wood and bolts. Maybe he is. Idiot."

"You were the one who woke him?" I said, taking the cloth.

"Yes. Should I have?"

"How'd you do it?"

"Palendries. And that big, warm flower was up his sleeve, so I put it

back where I thought it ought to go. And I and the nob got it all across because,” she said, bearing herself proudly, “Seacho and them got to do what I say now cause I’m Chief—” Emry stopped in astonishment when I gathered her to my chest.

“Thank you,” I said, and cried all over her neck.

“Look at that,” said Floy. “They’re both blubbing.”

“Shut up,” I said.

“Sending *you* after *him*,” replied Floy, “is like rescuing a sinking ship with a sunken one.”

But Floy was just a pot girl, and I walked toward the river with my salt pork and palendries.

\*\*\*

Andrei blundered along like a human, and though my feet hindered me I soon caught up with him. I hid behind trees and banks, and near the day’s end, watched him fall asleep beneath an apple tree. It was raining again. He looked ill, almost as bad as before he’d woken, and I decided to replace his poultice.

I mashed the palendries between my hands and pulled down his shirt. He grabbed my wrist—I almost wet my trousers. A blade glinted, I dropped the stuff, and he sighed.

“Thought you were Max.” He lay on his back, staring up at me.

“You can’t cut a ghost.”

“Been changing my poultices?”

“Obviously.”

He turned on his side. “Why’d you bring me back?”

I got off my knees and squatted in front of him. I was scared he was going to make a run for it.

“Answer.”

“I like to dance,” I said, and wiped my sticky hands on my shirt.

“Yes. You like to dance so much you brought me back.”

“Did I ever hate you.”

He sat upright. “I know. Why’d you bring me back?”

I took a couple deep breaths. “What sort of imbecile would run a djain through with a dagger?”

“Me.” He was angry now. “Why the hell did you bring me back? How did it feel? Being tortured and tied to a stake half-naked?” He stared stonily at the tree trunk. “Let me try to reason it out for you,” he said. “I thought my life was hell—so horrible I was proud of it. But you took even that away from me with your sadness and your damn hands. You should have killed me. I have nothing to stand on now, and I want to hurt you for it.”

His face was wild. I made to rise, but he shook his head. “No. Are you so dumb? It must be obvious. Why are you doing this?” He started to cry. “I know why you’re doing this.” I felt my ears burning up.

“Andrei—”

“Leave.” He turned his back to me.

I closed my eyes. I would go back to camp, back to my brothers. They would ask me why I was so sad, tell me I had no business crying—

“No,” I said stubbornly. “No.” I put my hand in his muddy hair—his head was burning—and I kissed him on the mouth. I pulled away a little, and his eyes didn’t look so dark as his face, for his blood was rushing something awful.

“What are you doing?” he said.

“It’s been done before.”

“You’re playing a trick.”

“I’m not.”

“And imagine what your brothers—”

“They’ll bear it well enough. They owe me a country.”

“Oh gods—” He was laughing now. “You *are* dumb.” He wiped his wrist across his eyes. “The saddest princess I ever laid eyes on. Your hands!” He took my hands and kissed the fingertips. “What happened to your finger?” He moved to my face, and before he could poke me in the eye I pulled his hands down between mine.

“Go on about my hands.” I was so hot I thought of taking off my shirt. “You look like a three-year-old corpse. But I’d say”—just like a girl I couldn’t stop talking—“we’re the prettiest couple in the country, cause of what the drabs say—in better worlds than this, beauty is measured by the scars you’ve managed to collect rather than avoid—”

“Bunch of shit.” He kissed me again, and I pushed him away.

“So’s most things. And that woman who ruined our lives? Fuck her. Fuck her backwards and forwards.” I looked up at the branches, and the rain fell into my eyes and made them run. “Can you hear us?” I yelled. I pressed his hand into the mud. He pulled back, but my grip was tight, and laughing at his face, I poured it through his hand and into the tree until she bloomed and rained white.

\*\*\*

Andrei’s strength came back, and as my feet were causing me trouble he carried me on his shoulders back to camp. I gave Nefer’s dragonfly brooch to Emry (as the whole thing had started with her mother) before she disappeared back into the wild with Seacho and the others.

But the silver urn was put to use, and the Evenahlen contingent preceded the Ombenelvan one back to Ellyned, where Calragen stood brazenly on the quayside and waited until each black cuirass had boarded a ship bound for the Aclun and the South. How long they would remain satisfied with the decoy was anyone’s guess.

We kept out of sight for a time, across the estuary at Daifen’s place, and learned firsthand why Daifen had acted as he did. He wasn’t the villain we’d made him out to be.

“The pendant?” he stammered. “You understand, stealing—that is to say, *requisitioning*, the thing was my only means—you understand—my

only means of suppressing the rebellion. That is to say, my good lords, with the thing gone they might've left—

“Left, I’m sure,” said Mordan. “Or done something much worse.”

“I could think of no other way. No other way—”

“You do realize what those mercenaries would’ve done had they found out?”

“Let him alone,” I said.

“Stop sticking your oar in, Mordan,” said Tem. “And you needn’t cry, Reyna, you’re not a little girl.” (Relief was making me ridiculous.) “But there’s something else I want to address.”

“Rewritten laws,” said Mordan helpfully. “About weapons.”

“Just another matter of suppressing—without weapons, you understand, suppressing—”

“And had you been successful, our budding Ravyir wouldn’t have got his kick in the arse, would he?”

“Perhaps you ought to read a book on logic, Mordan,” said Tem.

\*\*\*

After two weeks my feet had healed and Tem allowed for a short trip into the city, provided that he and Mordan accompanied me. Arin would’ve come too, but he couldn’t run fast enough in a brace.

“Run fast enough?” said Mordan.

“All those girls you spied on,” said Arin. “They’ll have told their brothers.”

Brace or no, Mordan went and sat on Arin’s head for half an hour.

We paid a visit to Hal first, who kept two rooms above a shop. It was midday, and a faint wail hung in the stairwell. It poured out full-force when I opened the door.

Padlimaird stood at a table, making an ill-tempered racket with a milk jug and a bottle. Strapped in a chair next to him was a little girl. She was red in the face, twisting back and forth, screaming. “Here, here, here,” Padlimaird said, giving the bottle to her. “Domineering as your mam, ain’t you?” She sucked noisily and laughed when he spread himself into a supine position on the floor.

“Between you two I don’t know which is the baby,” I said.

He sat up. “Damned if you know anything. Where you been, Lally?” Mordan cleared his throat. “Who are them? Ghostly, ain’t they?” Padlimaird stood up. “All got the same eyes.”

“We’re her brothers,” said Mordan. “You don’t know where Hal is, do you?”

“Out. Brothers?” Padlimaird scratched his head. “Where was you this whole time?”

“Somewhere else,” said Tem.

“Oh,” said Padlimaird. “What shall I call you?”

“Tem.” Tem looked at the garret across the way.

“I’d thought it’d be Fleabane or Zinnia.” Padlimaird chuckled.

“Why are you drawing it out?” I said. “He’s just going to embarrass himself and get cranky.”

“What do you want me to do?” said Tem exasperatedly. “Hand him a calling card? Temmaic Lauriad, pleased to meet you?”

“What’s this?” came Hal’s voice behind us. “Padlimaird, you in trouble?” Tem and Mordan turned round. Hal dropped his fiddle on the floor, and Daira laughed.

Tea was poured (there was little else), and it was late in the night when all our tales were told.

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In the late spring, when Liskara had finally picked her way back to the palace stables, Tem was crowned King. There was dancing along the riverfront, bright gowns, dark hair woven with blossoms, and Andrei with his merry brown eyes; and somewhere a voice sang low and loose:

*Dara lun, dara lun diorlinga adebry.  
Loan, ginder leo, loan gaefed wghl adhe.  
Wldhfen sun ginder orchel dur lin aeghl eaor hold  
Derreld aeo mass eldha chel llorwy.*

*Norembryn, lairaded down da ramh elded.  
Norembryn, breldaded glain daelded dreid,  
Derry breldaded e’ercruin dyd darn enge morda,  
Dem mreï ealsa plun twy chelonin dem braid.*

*Norembryn, graichelded ederidh blwn langad.  
Lorena elded ederidh rei ad sor.  
Adhe corn elded brinbodh ederent oidey ade,  
Wghl bry edidh brin adh e’erdaimh na wot gor.*

\*\*\*

When the country’s affairs were in order, Calragen sent his contingent across the Daynens to Lorila. Then he set sail for Evenalehn to appeal for more aid.

Trid and Andrei went with him, and Floy and I, too. I wanted out. Our schooner was named *Aloren*, Starflower, that is, in Gralde, and small breakers split across her keel as we pulled out of the harbor. Terns circled above. It was a cold morning but I wasn’t wearing shoes; and presently sun broke through the fog and warmed the deck, where we were sitting.

“Funny,” said Trid, leaning his head against the railing, “how this turned out.”

“Even funnier how Aly looks in a dress,” said Andrei, and I threw my apple core at him.

“Come on.” I stood up. “Come on, let’s see who’s really wearing the dress.”

Andrei made as if to rise but Trid grabbed his shirt. “Let her honk.”

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Years later, a man from the north told me that somewhere, on a hill overgrown with yews, beneath a small, fruitless rowan, a circle of flowers grew year round. No one had ever seen them. But it was a pretty tale.

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