
'MASTERFUL'
Samantha Shannon
'BREATHTAKING'
Saara El-Arifi
A SNAKE AMONG SWANS
The No.1 Sunday Times bestseller
HANNAH KANER

A SNAKE AMONG SWANS

HANNAH KANER



HARPER
Voyager

BookSharekh.com

Copyright

Harper*Voyager*
An imprint of
HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

First published by HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd 2026

Copyright © Hannah Kaner 2026

Map, part title and chapter heading illustrations © Tom Roberts 2026

Cover design and art direction Sean Garrehy/HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd
Cover illustrations © Tom Roberts

Godkiller extract copyright © Hannah Kaner 2023
Godkiller internal illustrations © Tom Roberts
Godkiller, *Sunbringer*, *Faithbreaker* cover illustrations © Tom Roberts

Hannah Kaner asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

A catalogue copy of this book is available from the British Library.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author’s imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins.

Without limiting the exclusive rights of any author, contributor or the publisher of this publication, any unauthorized use of this publication to train generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies is expressly prohibited. HarperCollins also exercise their rights under Article 4(3) of the Digital Single Market Directive 2019/790 and expressly reserve this publication from the text and data mining exception.

Source ISBN: 9780008727291
eBook Edition © July 2026 ISBN: 9780008727314
Version: 2026-06-18

BookSharekh.com

PRAISE FOR *A SNAKE AMONG SWANS*

‘Hannah Kaner has woven one of my favourite epics of all time: dark and lyrical, thick with intrigue, told by women who rattle and rage against the cage of patriarchy. A hymn to female endurance, a battle cry for the oppressed, and a scream of defiance in the face of tyranny’
Samantha Shannon, No.1 *Sunday Times* bestselling author of *The Priory of the Orange Tree*

‘Had me absolutely glued to the pages from the very start. Complicated political machinations, twists that made me audibly gasp, and forbidden sapphic longing came together for a story that has me chomping at the bit for the next instalment’
Hannah Whitten, *Sunday Times* bestselling author of *For The Wolf*

‘An addictive, cunning, political fantasy whose scheming courtly factions and cutthroat star-crossed lovers are as beguiling and unpredictable as the lethal magic wilds that surround them’
Shannon Chakraborty, *Sunday Times* bestselling author of *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*

‘As a lover of *Godkiller*, I knew this book would be good, but it is more than just good, it is exquisite. Every word has been written with intention, every character carved with deft skill’
Saara El-Arifi, No.1 *Sunday Times* bestselling author of The Faebound trilogy

‘Hannah Kaner weaves together a compelling tale of blood, tyranny and magic, where every choice demands sacrifice, and every move risks death’
Antonia Hodgson, *Sunday Times* bestselling author of *The Raven Scholar*

‘Vicious, brutal, intricate and utterly incredible. Hannah Kaner is a queen of epic fantasy’
Tasha Suri, *Sunday Times* bestselling author of *The Isle in the Silver Sea*

‘An astonishing portrait of a fierce young queen, whose quest to save the remnants of her people – no matter the cost to herself or those she dares to love – will threaten her own humanity’
Sunyi Dean, *Sunday Times* bestselling author of *The Book Eaters*

‘A fairy tale reimagining with teeth. Filled with the perfect mix of courtly politics, sapphic yearning, and feminine rage, this book is a triumphant start to Kaner’s sophomore trilogy’
Kate Dylan, *Sunday Times* bestselling author of *Until We Shatter*

BookSharekh.com

Dedication

To my nana and my mother, and every woman who leaves her home to build a future. You carry the world in you. Your roots are in our bones.

BookSharekh.com

Epigraph

Highest is the Wing, the great guidance of our god
Second is the king, who in faith holds tight our land
Third the faithful keepers, the good and great synod
And, at the last, our fathers, those that hold the rod.

Each has a purpose glorious
A state, a place, a home
And our souls will go all flocking
Once from our flesh they have flown.

So our meek and faithful women
You will ever wondrous be
If you hold up the Wing's great power
And bear the fruit to seed his need.

A hymn to the faith of the Wing

BookSharekh.com

Thyme we grow in the north of the woods
It keeps your broth fair green
Though rue we grow west of the roots
Should nothing good be seen
Thorn of haw is a poison cure
From east where blinks the sun
Though forget thee not the red berry true
And the memory you give for one.

Old folk rhyme

BookSharekh.com

Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright
Praise for *A Snake Among Swans*
Dedication
Epigraph
Map
Dramatis personae
Content Warning

Prologue

Part One: Marriage
- Chapter One: Tilde
- Chapter Two: Tilde
- Chapter Three: Elise
- Chapter Four: Elise
- Chapter Five: Tilde
- Chapter Six: Tilde
- Chapter Seven: Elise
- Chapter Eight: Tilde
- Chapter Nine: Elise
- Chapter Ten: Tilde
- Chapter Eleven: Tilde
- Chapter Twelve: Elise
- Chapter Thirteen: Tilde
- Chapter Fourteen: Tilde

Part Two: Learning
- Chapter Fifteen: Elise
- Chapter Sixteen: Tilde
- Chapter Seventeen: Elise
- Chapter Eighteen: Tilde
- Chapter Nineteen: Elise
- Chapter Twenty: Tilde

Chapter Twenty-one: Tilde
Chapter Twenty-two: Elise
Chapter Twenty-three: Tilde
Chapter Twenty-four: Tilde
Chapter Twenty-five: Elise
Chapter Twenty-six: Tilde
Chapter Twenty-seven: Tilde
Chapter Twenty-eight: Elise

Part Three: Danger
Chapter Twenty-nine: Tilde
Chapter Thirty: Elise
Chapter Thirty-one: Tilde
Chapter Thirty-two: Tilde
Chapter Thirty-three: Elise

Part Four: Blood
Chapter Thirty-four: Tilde
Chapter Thirty-five: Elise
Chapter Thirty-six: Tilde
Chapter Thirty-seven: Elise
Chapter Thirty-eight: Tilde
Chapter Thirty-nine: Elise
Chapter Forty: Tilde
Chapter Forty-one: Elise

Part Five: Transformation
Chapter Forty-two: Tilde
Chapter Forty-three: Tilde
Chapter Forty-four: Tilde
Chapter Forty-five: Elise
Chapter Forty-six: Tilde
Chapter Forty-seven: Elise
Chapter Forty-eight: Tilde
Chapter Forty-nine: Elise
Chapter Fifty: Tilde
Chapter Fifty-one: Tilde

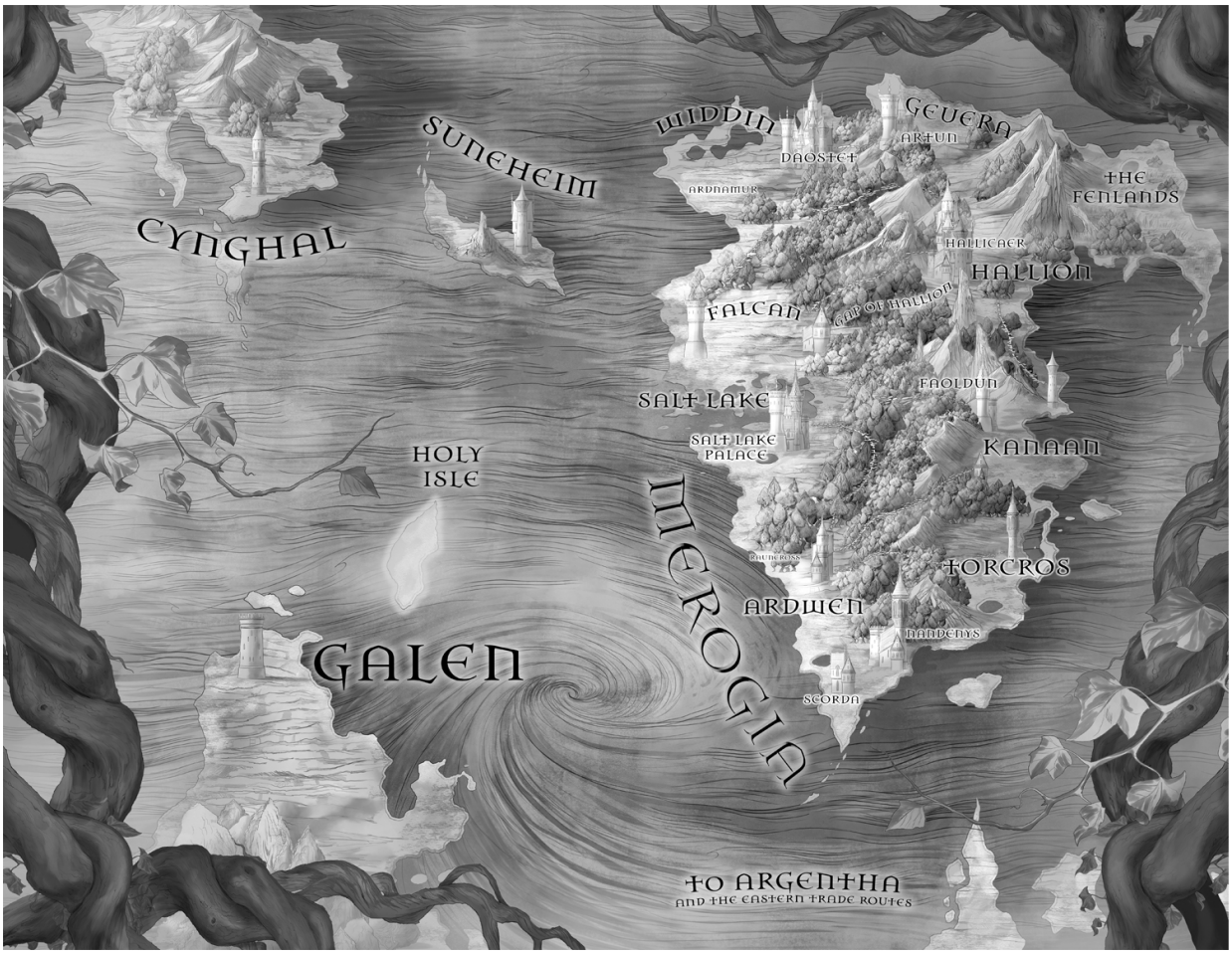
Chapter Fifty-two: Elise
Chapter Fifty-three: Tilde
Chapter Fifty-four: Elise
Chapter Fifty-five: Tilde
Chapter Fifty-six: Elise

Epilogue

Acknowledgements
Discover more …
Also by Hannah Kaner
About the Publisher

BookSharekh.com

Map



BookSharekh.com

Dramatis personae

Merogian

- ✧ **Tilde:** Tuathilde, meaning ‘the people’s battle’, daughter of King Rivani of Ardwen, the land of the snake
- ✧ **Hadiah:** Cousin of Tilde, Lady’s maid and daughter of Ardwen and Manir
- ✧ **Marolyn:** Lady’s maid to Tilde, common born to a warrior and a physik
- ✧ **Merovin:** Ducal of Gevera, originally a prince of Gevera, previously a hostage
- ✧ **Cynefel:** Princess of Falcan, married to a Cynghal noble
- ✧ **Daegmar:** Noblewoman of Widdin, married to a Galenish noble
- ✧ **Colfinn:** Deceased prince-warrior of Ardwen
- ✧ **Ebba:** Deceased princess-warrior of Ardwen
- ✧ **Guwetha:** Kanaanite rebel
- ✧ **Ladbh:** Hallion rebel

Cynghals

- ✧ **Liran:** High King of great Cynghal, the swan messenger of god; a warrior who led his raiders from the north, defeating Suneheim, gaining the allegiance of Galen, and conquering most of Merogia
- ✧ **Odon:** A Palati or lesser noble of Cynghal, but Liran’s right hand
- ✧ **Alar:** Exiled eldest son of Liran, Low King of conquered Suneheim, previously known as the red prince
- ✧ **Isen:** The black prince, commander of Liran’s armies, his second son still living
- ✧ **Conrin:** The grey prince, third son of Liran
- ✧ **Gaisa:** The green prince, fourth son of Liran
- ✧ **Egil:** The yellow prince, fifth son of Liran
- ✧ **Hein:** The youngest son of Liran, banners undeclared

✧ **Erelle:** Eldest daughter of Liran, married to a Soffian prince, now living in exile
✧ **Isuire:** Second daughter of Liran, deceased
✧ **Elise:** Third daughter of Liran, her mother's lady's maid
✧ **Uhtren:** Cynghal noble and commander of ships, appointed Ducal of Falcan, married to Cynefel of Falcan
✧ **Ysel:** Cynghal noble and wife of the Ducal of Widdin, Ademar
✧ **Kerrin:** Cynghal Ducal of Kanaan

Galenish

✧ **Isabella:** The deceased first wife of Liran and mother to his sons, daughter of the last king of Galen
✧ **Dagobert:** High priest of the Wing and advisor to the Cynghal court, the king's right hand appointed by the Synod
✧ **Ademar:** Ducal of Widdin, husband to Ysel of Cynghal, and cousin to Isabella
✧ **Thedemer:** Markal of Widdin, and husband to Daegmar
✧ **Amalle:** Lady of Galen, betrothed to Prince Conrin
✧ **Perin:** A captain of Ademar of Widdin's guard

Soffia

✧ **Miras:** A troubador employed as a court bard

Argentha

✧ **Ziyan:** A physik from Argentha who was recommended by its Silver Queen to work within the court
✧ **The silver queen:** Cousin to King Rivani of Ardwen and ruler of Argentha

BookSharekh.com

Content Warning

War
Trauma
Violence
Self-harm
Mild body horror
Sexual violence

BookSharekh.com

Prologue

I was born in war. I was born as our kings were dying, our clans scattered, our cities burned. As our ancestors screamed from the branches of the wood, and only infants could hear them. So, when the last kingsmoot raised its banners in the kithwood's shadow, I did not know then that it would be the end of us.

Traitors, traitors, blood-claws in the dark.

The mutterings of the kithwood, where the bones of our dead were buried, threaded into my fitful dreams of glory and vengeance. I was not yet an adult, so I had not confessed I could still hear its murmurings, nor did I think I would. There were more important things to fear.

Finally, we had gathered a force worth mustering from those fallen in the north: Gevera, Hallion, Falcan and Widdin. All had come fleeing south, through the secret forest ways, through the fens, through the dark. We took them to our shores in Ardwen, gave them shelter, led them east to Kanaan. There, from the burned dredges of our nobility, I saw the glory of the Merogian nations united against Liran, King of the Cynghals, and his dynasty of the swan.

Blood in the earth, blood in the cut.

Wake little one.

Wake.

I stirred. But we were taught from a young age not to obey any cries or commands from the trees. Too readily did children stray from the paths into the forest's deep dark, where the ancestors took their due. It would not be from me. Not yet.

TREACHERY.

My eyes snapped open and I leapt up. The tent cloth flapped above me in a faint breeze that scented of spring rain, the straw of our bedding poked into my feet.

'Ugh, Tuathilde, go back to sleep,' mumbled my maid, Marolyn. She was fifteen, and a year my senior, which meant she still felt the right to use my

full name when annoyed. She was often annoyed, and earlier in the night I had already aggravated her by returning late and flushed with wine.

‘I thought I heard something,’ I said, not entirely a lie. Hadiah, my cousin, was sleeping soundly, and my older brother and sister were still snoring in a heap: Colfinn the bright, Ebba the brave, they had already earned their names in skirmishes with the Cynghals. Both Marolyn and I hoped to do the same, one day soon.

‘Listen,’ I said.

‘Tilde, for kith’s sake—’

‘*Please*.’

Marolyn paused.

Blood in the earth, tainting the water, blood in our souls, tainting our teeth, our gums, our tongues—

Those were the voices in my mind, my kith and my kin, but it was what followed that turned my blood to ice.

A cry in the night. It could have been a fox, or a wildcat, but I was certain it did not come from the trees, but from the camp that huddled up beside them. Marolyn tensed. Such a scream could mean many things: someone had fallen in the gong pits, someone had stubbed their toe on a helmet. But then a horn sounded for the barest breath of a second, before being cut out.

Ebba sprang up, already half wakened, as we kicked the others out of sleep. But as I grabbed my scramasax knife and my short blade, I only had one person on my mind.

Sanafin. I called her my beloved then, with all the intensity of a first infatuation.

My siblings pounded past me, and I raced them into the night.

‘Stay here, Tilde!’ shouted Ebba, dragging on her helmet.

‘But—’

‘Ardweni!’ Colfinn was already bellowing to the dark and the sprawling bodies of our warriors. ‘Gather to my sword!’

There was light further down the treeline, brighter than bonfires: a line of the tents from the tiny Widdish camp were aflame.

The fighting was closer: under the silver-sickle moon I could see men in Geveran colours but Cynghal formation. They had formed a column of howling sea-wolves and were now charging through the sleeping clans.

Treachery.

Gevera was the first Merogian nation to fall, their royals hostaged and slaughtered. But still they had come to the kingsmoot, speaking our tongues in that sharp, sing-song way of theirs, and still carrying their bear banner. We had held a feasting night for their bravery. Now, above them the swan's pennants floated, white wings on dark blue, neck twisted in a knot, flying like a spectre against the green of our trees. They had reached the Kanaanite camp.

'Sanafin,' I gasped, and ran.

'Get back here, Tilde!' cried Marolyn, following me. 'Obey your sister!'

I did not acknowledge her. Sanafin was the heir of Kanaan. We had met only twice before the kingsmoot, but she was so bright and beautiful. Her hair was red-brown, rare for a southern Merogian, who tended to black locks, like mine, from the mingling of our bloods with the warm east. The camp had brought us together for the third time, and we had cleaved to each other, making childish plans, sharing apples not yet ripe enough for autumn.

We had also shared a kiss, sour, and sweet and blushing. The first time I had been kissed.

I ran along the edge of the trees, their shadows my cloak as the war cries began in earnest, the other clans gathering to attack the rigid formation that the Cynghals had taken from their western allies, the unrelenting column of death.

'Tilde, stop!' Marolyn was quick behind me, but I was quicker. 'You're not ready to fight, we need to go to the mustering …'

'Your sister is there!' I yelled back, hoping that would bring her on side.

'My sister does her duty!'

I was too small to join the ranks, but I was not too small to find Sanafin, to save her. My name was Tuathilde, 'the fight for the people'. But everyone called me Tilde. *Battle*.

I was born for this war.

I ran with the darkness of the kithwood in me. I could feel the pulsing of the trees, our ancient forest. It beat in my blood, like the rush of water in root, the breath of wind in the branches, bending as I ran beneath them, as if urging me on.

Go, child, run.

Run into the shadow.

And, there, I saw a figure, ashen with panic, racing towards me as if we had each been called by the other. Then, I thought, perhaps it might be love,

everlasting. It was a silly thing to think at fourteen, under threat of annihilation. But I swear then I loved as fiercely as I thought I ever could, and I believed we were saved.

‘Sanafin!’

‘Tilde!’

There was ash on her face, blood on her knuckles, one braid shorn and the end loosening, as if someone had grabbed it and she had cut herself free. We flung ourselves into each other’s arms, clinging like vines, our words spilling over each other.

‘Are you—’

‘I am. What—’

‘They came in the—’

Sanafin shook her head, holding on to me, she kissed my face, my head, and I thought of sour apples and hope.

‘I came to warn you,’ she said. ‘The Geverans hid Cynghals amongst them, and obey their every squawk. You must take the Ardweni into the woods before they come. They are burning, raping, slaughtering, anything to break us for good.’

‘Come with us,’ I hissed, holding onto her.

‘I have to go back.’

‘Then we will fight with you.’

Marolyn had caught up to us, panting, her hands on her knees. She looked for a moment like she would protest, but then she bore herself up taller. ‘Ardweni will not flee like rats from a fire,’ she said.

‘You must!’ said Sanafin. ‘The Torcros are already fled, Widdin is gone, and we are surrounded.’ The screams of battle were closing in. She tightened her hand around mine. ‘Cynghal have never lost a pitched battle, and we have every time, Tilde. We must go where they dare not follow. The kithwood. Tame it to us and use its power.

‘There is no power in the wood,’ I said, for that was what I had been told. ‘It can’t be tamed.’

She looked at me, silent a moment. ‘We both know that is a lie,’ she whispered, then she let me go. ‘You can feel it. Even now.’ I swallowed, my mouth dry, my heart drumming a lurching beat against my throat. She nodded, confirming something. ‘We cannot hide from history any more, Tilde. We will need you. Meet me in the kithwood—’

I felt first a hot spray across my face, and saw the widening of Sanafin's eyes, then felt a thud as Marolyn threw me to the ground.

Arrows thudded into the trees above us. Bark bled sap, thick and red. *Outrage,* cried a tangle of whispered forest voices, but I tore my mind away from them.

'Sanafin!' I whispered, reaching for her. 'Sanaf—'

An arrow had taken her through the throat. Her blood mingled with her red hair, but she was still breathing, barely. Bitter terror filled my bones. What could I do? I couldn't move. The Cynghal archers were watching. If we moved, they would strike again. Below, the fighting was vicious. And we Merogians were worn down, beaten, heartbroken, scared and starved. We did not stand a chance.

I held Sanafin's gaze, her eyes were full of tears, her hand flung out, our fingers not quite close enough to touch, as her breaths grew shorter, blood surging from her throat.

At last, the men turned and left. I scrabbled towards her on the ground like the snake of our banner, so close to the earth that I could taste it. I grasped her hand, but her fingers were cold, and I knew it was the end, the end of sour apples, the end of love, the end of us. It still did not prepare me for when her breath stopped, and her mouth went slack, and she saw me no more.

My blood turned thick, like sap, my heart swelling like a ripe fruit, its skin breaking. I had not protected her, I had not fought for her. What could the future have held for us, had we been allowed to grow older? What could she have been? A friend, a lover, a wife? We could have united our clans, we could have founded a new future.

Yes, little one, the trees murmured, and for the first time I could recognise discernible voices in the echoes. My father's, dead in Falcan, the old master of hawks, who we had laid on iron earth and roots only the winter before. *Protect her, bury her. We will take her.*

I was aware of a deepening of the roots, a bending of the branches.

Pain you give us, pain we feel.

The warlord Liran had taken her from me. He and his Cynghals, his courtly Galenish, his grim priests, they wanted it all, our land, our forest, our people, our future.

Rage brimmed up in me, cracking my edges. My mind went cold and dark with fury, and the forest came in.

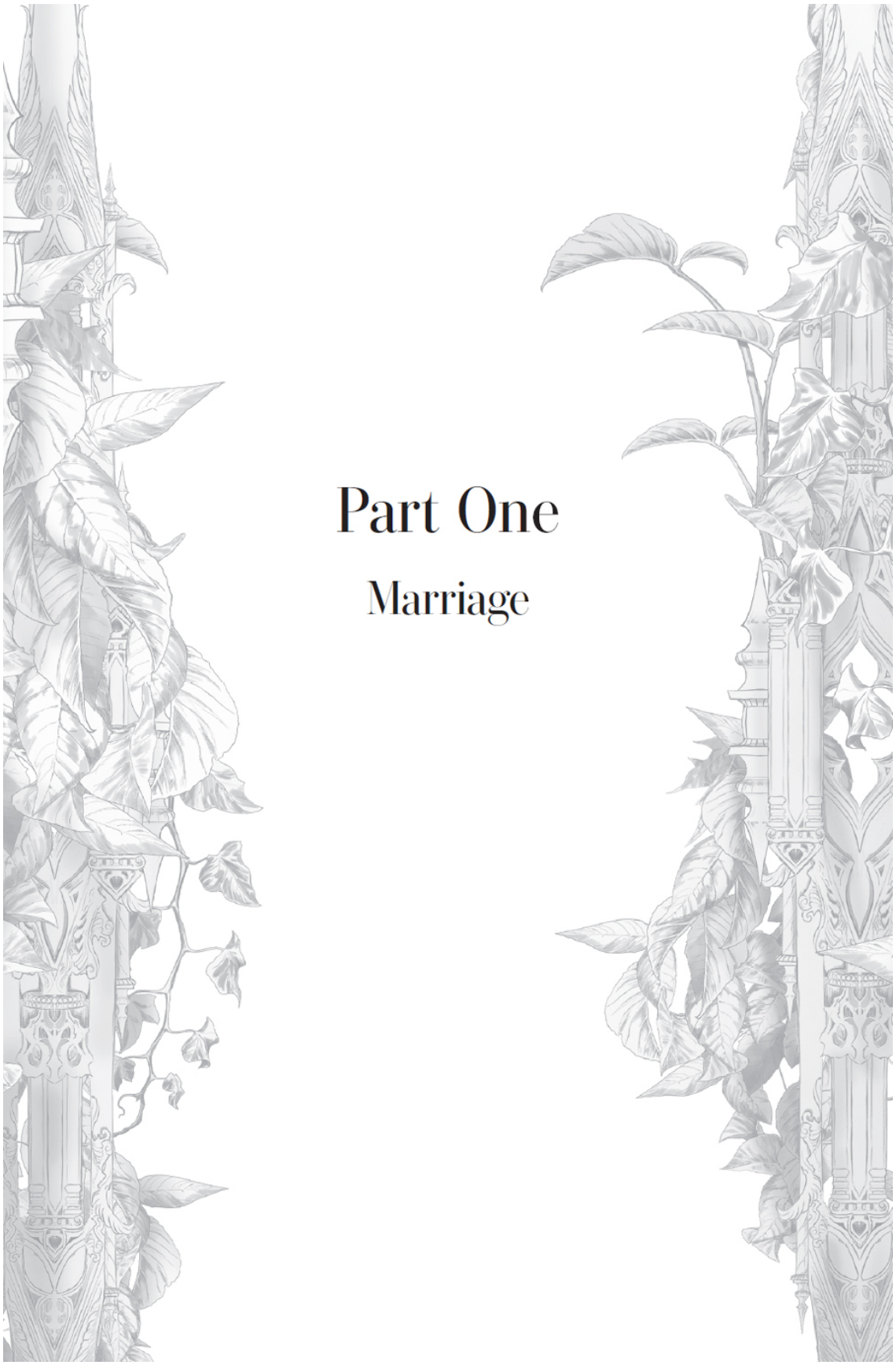
I could feel it all. The roots from the trees spreading beneath me, pulsing with their power, their voice, blood in the earth, the cries of our warriors, the screams of my siblings, the weeping of my ancestors.

Sanafin. Sanafin turning cold.

Then the ground around me burst, thick thorny branches rising from its maw. Black hawthorn, bursting with white flowers and red berries. Sanafin's hand changed in mine, turning hard as bone, then softening like petals. From her throat, a red flower bloomed where the blood had been, then another, and more burst open along the thorns that covered her, her skin breaking into wild roses, the branches bursting with red.

And then her body collapsed, the thorns covering her over like the shield of a warrior, and took her from me into the earth.

BookSharekh.com



Part One

Marriage

BookSharekh.com

The Wing is a god of order. There are birds that fly above the clouds, and those that never leave the ground. Those that bring food to the nest, and those that guard the young till they are ready to soar.

In our persecution, those of Wing's faith have been hounded from unholy lands that never learned place and order, and instead live in chaos, unmoored from the natural good. It is by god's grace that we were saved, and given haven on our Holy Isle.

Here, we have worked to found the world's order in the faith, and show that all creatures must be true to their nature. With these laws of succession and inheritance, we determine that there will always be the bird that soars, and the bird that guards.

The god is the Wing, is the king, is the father is the lord.

Writ from the Synod, removing daughters from the line of succession, 1031



There is no writing of the hannerast roads before the darkest days of the clan wars. All record of that time has been lost, cut through with the same blade that made those great forest passes. Some fragments survive in lullabies or feasting music, songs of a time of darkness. One old mining tune speaks of the driving out of the druidim and those whose minds are turned by the trees.

Some folk, it is rumoured, still possess the power to hear the forest. They call it the old Ways. Or just 'the Ways'. Some speak with reverence, some with fear. It is true at least that those who stray from the forest paths do not always return as they once were. Screeching like birds or snuffling like boar. Some stories tell of lost ones stumbling out of the bark decades after disappearing, their family dead and gone, with no memory of where they have been.

I understand the fear of what we chose to lose. But we are in darkness once more, and we have no magic left.

Coded writing of a Geveran hostage, 1041

BookSharekh.com



Chapter One

Tilde

My mother sold me to the warlord at dinner.

Six years after the kingsmoot and our last great rebellion I, born for battle, came of age already conquered. Now, I offered to our enemies everything I had left to fight with: myself.

We knew Liran's messengers would come seeking as soon as his last queen died in childbed. Isabella the Wise, Isabella the Weak, was from Galen, and her union with the raiding sea-wolf had sealed the Galenish and Cynghal courts into one under the faith of the Wing, uniting them against us and turning the upstart into an emperor. The match had made the bastard rich, had made his swan banner a symbol of religious faith, but he needed another to make him glorious: me.

A second wife to confirm his rule over our captured Merogian kingdoms, and a half-Merogian son to inherit it from him. I took some grim satisfaction in it, because it meant that he had found even in defeat that some Merogian knees were still tree-strong and not easily bent. We heard whispers in defeated Ardwen of scattered rebels still harrying traders and foreign nobles before hiding in the forest ways. Some stories came of small revolutions led by clan elders and castle-keepers, and we knew also that in six years Torcros's borders had not been breached.

The same could not be said for us.

But marrying a kingdom had worked for King Liran before. Women cost less than endless grappling. Thus, when his proposals arrived within a fortnight of Isabella's death, I told my mother, King Rivani, to accept them.

'The king has his pick of Merogian brides,' said the Cynghal emissary. Gundobar, his name, of Galenish origin, and insultingly not a prince, or a ducal, but a mere milk-faced palati with no more than some holding to his name. There was no man here for him to negotiate with: by lack of alternative he had to deal directly with my mother. Still a king in title, if not in the respect she was due. I watched in secret from the gallery above our great and empty hall, cloaked in the vapours of the cedar pine burning on

the fire at its centre. ‘She is but one womb,’ the emissary continued, ‘in a crop of many.’

‘Prick,’ muttered Marolyn behind me, acerbic as ever. ‘Squabbles more than a goat.’

I stifled a laugh that turned into a splutter. It was too hot up there, and the smoke, though it hid us, filled my throat and stung my eyes. We didn’t need a fire; it was a few weeks from midsummer, and our castle baked in the heat. But we needed the show. We pretended we could still burn fine wood from our orchards, just as we could cook a whole pig for our Cynghal visitor and his warriors, let them dip their fingers in our precious salt and the last of our spices, and pull our servants from other work to attend to them. We pretended that we did not desperately need the return of our two mining towns in the east as part of my bride price, nor the lifting of the heavy fines we had been forced to pay since the disaster of the kingsmoot, so our people would not starve next winter.

And this Gundobar, all teeth and no bite, pretended that his king had not sent him to collect me, and instead might consider a Wing-loving girl from Cynghal, a fine princess of Galen, or some other Merogian woman with a bloodline and a womb. He pretended that none of Liran’s children would be a better match for me in age and prospect, at least three full grown boys who were still unmarried. Clearly, their father did not trust them to inherit.

We all had pretences. My pretence was that I didn’t want it. Desperately. That I had not begged my mother to trade me like a jewelled snake, bright and shining, to adorn the wrist of our conqueror. Close enough to bite.

I was not raised to be docile, but through negotiations I had been a picture of pretty obedience, picking at the smallest, whitest pieces of meat as if I had never eaten spleen and mouldy bread. When I excused myself, I had bowed just enough for my silk gown of red mezereon to open at the neck.

‘Tell me then, Palati Gundobar,’ my mother said, ‘about these other women you think better suited.’ She wore an old robe: russet cloth, once the finest in our nation. It was sewn with shimmering circlets of seashell to look like scales. ‘Maela of Hallion, perhaps? She is nine years of age, and cannot bear children till she has her bloods.’

The palati frowned. He sported the deep-cut tunic fashionable to the Galenish, low at the neck, split on the chest and cinched at the waist to show whatever fine silk they were wearing underneath. Cynghal dress was

instead padded at the shoulders, square cut, to broaden the size of the body and look enough like armour to keep the respect of their own folk.

‘She’s losing her calm,’ Cousin Hadiah pointed out from where she sat back in the gallery, listening but not looking.

‘She should notch his tongue for his insolence,’ growled Marolyn.

Hadiah sighed. ‘She should guard hers if she wants this to go well,’ she said softly, and looked at me. ‘If *you* still want this to go well, Tilde.’

I did not respond to that, instead watching my mother. She was right: Rivani’s hands were tightening on the table, a faint echo of her once-fearsome temper. Our sovereignty did not survive long past the kingsmoot, and since her capitulation we had been confined to our castle, under guard and forced to take the salt and repent in the Nest, begging for the grace of the Wing, their god. In the absence of fighting, Rivani waged war on her own fingers, picking at the skin around her nails till they bled and scarred, like the dreams of battle wounds.

Today, she did not assault them: instead she twisted her silver rings. Today, she had an enemy that was not herself, and an objective.

‘She can hold her nerve,’ I said, holding on to the littlest faith I still had in my mother.

‘I still don’t understand *why*, Tilde,’ muttered Hadiah. ‘Nor does she.’

‘It is not our place to question,’ said Marolyn, digging her fingers into her own pale, freckled hands. Hadiah looked at her: the daughter of a prince of Manir and King Rivani’s sister, she had every right to question me. Marolyn knew that.

‘I said you do not have to come,’ I told her. In fact, I would rather she stayed.

‘I go where my king goes,’ said my cousin, folding her arms.

‘I will not be a king there,’ I said. ‘Cynghals do not have women-kings.’

‘You will still be mine,’ said Hadiah.

Now that Ebba and Colfinn were gone.

‘Perhaps,’ Rivani said, and we turned our attention back to her, ‘you would rather Oanna of Gevera. I hear the Galenish marry girls off at fourteen. Then again, she is a second cousin at best to a clan of cowards, little loved by the rest of us. Merogia would rather burn itself to the ground.’

Gundobar scoffed. ‘You people and your warnings,’ he said. ‘We have heard the mutterings that your blasted woods will dig in its roots and tear

the land apart if it is not ruled by a Merogian-born. Yet no such tearing has occurred this last twenty years of settling. Still, it is enough to convince half the court to get a son on one of you.'

Rivani lay her fingers flat on the table, pressing her bones into the wood to keep her hand from leaping to her sword. Gundobar swallowed, his smile dropping as any boy's might when he remembers that a snake in a cage is still a snake.

Don't mother, I willed to her. *Do not rise to his bait.*

'Gevera broke the law of the kith,' said Rivani at last. 'They turned on their own six years ago. It will not be forgotten.'

I shivered. The thorns of memory put their teeth in me, and I felt again her hand growing cold in mine. Smelled again the blood and the smoke, heard the screams of our dying kin. Sanafin.

She had not been the last to die. Our warriors held back the Cynghals and Geverans so the rest could flee the massacre. We risked the narrow roads, the forest paths we permitted ourselves to walk on, to escape the Cynghals, and returned to our walls bruised of body and broken of spirit. Without Colfinn. Without Ebba. Without Hadiah's mother or Marolyn's sister. Without the royal line of Kanaan, or the allyship of other Merogian nations, both now irrevocably broken.

'You were joined in rebellion,' snapped Gundobar. 'Gevera was loyal to the king.'

'And yet even the Book of the Wing says "No man will spill blood beneath the roof that shelters him",' snapped Rivani. The Cynghal priest, Cnul, who was supposedly there to mediate the discussion, nodded slightly, but stopped when Gundobar threw him a filthy look. 'Are a god's covenants so easily broken?'

'The Book of the Wing tells us that there is no higher loyalty than to the king.'

'*I* am the king,' said Rivani.

'Women are not kings,' said Gundobar. 'You hold your seat by the good grace of the Wing's messenger, the swan king Liran. Who also let you keep the head of your only surviving child.'

Marolyn moved her hand closer to mine, touching my fingers with reassurance. I loved her rough hands, but despite one determined attempt at kissing, she had grumbled to find she was not attracted to women. Not like me, not like Sanafin.

I saw my mother's hands flex again, and tightened my grip on the gallery's banister. Rivani the Quick, my mother had been called. She had once put her sword through the fingerbones of a boy who pinched my cheek too hard and made me cry.

'Merogia was weak,' Gundobar pressed. 'Your land failed itself, tripping over its own roots, the worship of false gods and women. Our king has brought certainty, stability, money, and the true faith. The true god.'

'Women carry not the spear of the leader,' agreed Cnul, trying to regain the palati's favour. 'They are the shield of the hearth, the sheath for the sword, and the anvil upon which warriors are forged. That is the teaching of the Wing.'

'Was it the Wing who paid for your mangonels, your archers, your ships and your traitors?' Rivani snapped, smiling dangerously. 'Or was it the priests who decided they wanted more than their wet little island and decided to point the warlord at ours?'

'You will hold your insolent tongue!' said Gundobar. 'Or I will report you to King Liran, and this deal will be burned.'

'Perhaps King Liran would like to visit Ardwen,' smiled Rivani, 'and I will tell him so to his face.'

'You would not survive the insult.'

'Perhaps.'

My pulse was quickening. Despite it all, it was good to see my mother still with some venom in her, some fight. But it was not a fight I needed. I *wanted* her capitulation. For I was not an offering to be borne to their altar, I was a snake in the grass, ready with venom and white fangs. I had long been dreaming of the opportunity to bite the hand that tried to take me. For when is an old man more vulnerable than in his marriage bed?

How would I do it? In my dreams I found a way to summon the old magics, the secrets of the kithwood, that I had felt once in that moment of terror and grief but never again. If I could, I would choke Liran with its greenery, I would turn him into a deer to be hunted, a starling to be torn apart, still chattering, by the snakes of Ardwen.

But the power had eluded me. Instead, I just needed to get close, with a knife, when he slept.

No more failed rebellions. No more fights of blades and castles. We had lost and kept losing to this swan king of the north. We had to be smarter this time.

‘King Liran is the messenger of the Wing,’ said Cnul soothingly, though his face was pale. ‘You yourself have taken the salt, Queen Rivani. The breath of the Wing blew away your demons, and you have prayed with me in the Nest.’

And she had hated every minute of it. She had done it to protect me, to protect her people, to find a way to survive through shame.

And perhaps that reminded her. Rivani grimaced and sat back. ‘I apologise, Palati,’ she said, putting her fingers to her beads, touching on a shining, gilt feather that hung heavy on her breast. A sign of someone who had taken on the mantle of the new faith. ‘You are right, Tilde is my last child, precious to me. But the Ardwen clan is one of the oldest in Merogia. Descendants of centuries, since these lands were all trees. The tarns will surely be appeased with the glory of the king’s line mingling with the stock of ours.’

‘Your stock is heathen,’ snapped Gundobar. ‘Of wasted land and lacklustre faith. Your brat is sister to slaughtered siblings and daughter to a weak queen. She is violent, and needs to be controlled. Do not think we have forgotten what she did to the priest.’

Silence fell heavy, like a hawk descending on to its prey, all feathers, claws and death. How he hated us, so much he rebelled against his own king’s desire to claim me. I wondered if he would speak so in his own court. I put my mouth to the wood before me, sinking in my teeth, sweating into the plaits that hurt my skull. It tasted bitter.

‘He deserved it,’ muttered Hadiah, and Marolyn grunted her agreement.

They had sent a priest to check my cleanness with his cold, hard fingers, and I had broken his teeth into his face with the sole of my foot. I had almost undone myself there and then. My temper was quick and fierce, like my mother’s, and I was not raised to hide it. But Marolyn had worked quick while he groaned, taking poison nightwort from her herbal pouch and placing it in his offending fingers before the guards came in. How we had wailed that he had tried to kill me, and he was not arrested, simply helped from the room for tending. Priests had their own laws, separate from the king’s. Rivani’s demand for his hands to be nailed on her hearth went unheeded.

They needn’t have worried. No man had breached me. A tumble or two with some women, but nothing precious. Nothing of sour apples and hope.

No more priests came, and we bribed ours instead to say he had checked me. Even the holiest can be tempted by the glitter of gold and silk.

‘What else, then, is there to say, Palati Gundobar?’ said Rivani. ‘If you do not accept her, then go back to your king and tell him that you refused her hand. We will live out the last years of our clan in silence, and we will pray for Liran’s long health.’

Gundobar understood her. Pray for his long health, so what the Cynghals and Galenish and their priests feared didn’t come to pass: a king’s death, emboldened rebels and civil war. God or no, the Wing did not make money rain from the sky, and what use was an empire if there was no wealth in it? The Synod’s coffers would eventually run out.

He considered his options and I knew, despite all his insults, that Gundobar had very little power. ‘We will agree to your terms,’ he said at last.

I released the banister, my heart throbbing in my chest. Of course, if I had a better choice, I would have spat on the messengers who came offering the tyrant’s hand, and sent them back to his halls to grovel without their slick and silver tongues. I would have gathered my banners in the old ways of my people, and died on the battlefield screaming for Liran’s head. I would have run into the kithwood and cast away all our laws, strayed from the safe paths and let it take me. Perhaps it would have turned me into a wolf, a snake, a birch tree. Perhaps I would have wandered for ever among our ancestors, never seen again.

But there were no more choices. I would let the swans take me into their nest, and I would be the snake in their midst.

No more failed rebellions. One way, or another, I would kill the king.

I ask you now, what would you have done?

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Two

Tilde

We were packing before the ink was dry on the engagement contract.

Hadiah oversaw the collecting of my things, my jewels, my ointments, carefully conserved over the bitter grind of the years since our loss. I let her, though I had no real need of them; if I enacted my revenge with the swiftness I hoped for, I knew I would not survive. I was ready to meet my fate.

All that was left was to say goodbye.

I went to the rose garden that grew on the slope beneath our keep over the ruins of an older tower. The air hung thick with their summer scent and the sound of bees. The blooms were so huge they bore their stems down to lie amongst the fallen petals and the crumbled stones, and I felt a tug in my chest. Roses always reminded me of Sanafin.

But I did not come for the roses alone. From here, high on our castle hill, I looked away from our capital Nandenys and the blue sliver of the south sea, and instead over the Uhalite mountains, where the sun rose.

Over them spilled the dark cloak of green, shifting and stirring with the breath of a distant wind that did not reach me. Mist rose from the shadows like scraps of fur from a grey wolf, torn by battle, to greet the circling of a hawk, looking into the leaves for prey.

The kithwood.

Merogians were barred now from entering our ancient woods. Not to give thanks to our ancestors, not to gather the fruits and fallen branches, not to hunt. It was punishable by death or flogging for the tarns and kings, mutilation for the poor. Was it fear of the rebels recruiting from the shadows of the ancient branches that made them sever our ancient faiths, or a desire to stamp out any worship that was not their blasted Wing? Or was it fear of the magic that we ourselves did not know and could not control?

The kithwood. Tame it to us and use its power.

I had tried. I had found no evidence in our library of this power Sanafin had spoken of, and my mother had steadfastly refused to speak with me of anything but food, harvest and weather since the Cynghal guards had

replaced our own. I once mentioned the kingsmoot and she left the room, refusing to see me for days.

Marolyn, who had seen the magic, shared scraps of what she could find herself. Just fragments of old folk songs, and the traces of paintings on the palace walls where the whitewash beneath the tapestries had begun to fade.

Powerless, and kept apart from its source, I could only sit where I could see the wood. It was halfway to praying. And, if I let my mind become still, and the wind blew softly, I could still hear it, the faintest susurration, like the sea on a hidden shore.

Cool of the night then the heat of the sun. Stretch to the light and the loam and be done.

You are known little sapling.

Come to us. Come reach for fur and claw.

Come taste the berries, pain in your belly.

Meet me in the kithwood.

The last voice, I swear, was Sanafin's.

I had forgotten the colour of her eyes. Not a fading over time, but in the day after her death I realised that the memory was gone. I knew our love had been shallow-rooted, barely beginning to green. Perhaps it never would have lasted, kith knew that alliances between kingdoms had been made and broken a thousand times, but how could I have forgotten something so simple, so swiftly? I remembered other things, the way she laughed with a shriek, her hair the colour of autumn leaves and red-clay pools, the taste of our kiss. But her eyes were gone, as if some hand had reached inside me and plucked them out.

'I finally understand you, daughter.'

I startled to find my mother had come to me, and sat beside me on my stone bench while I was lost in memory. She rarely came outside, and her soft brown skin had turned sallow and fragile, like the egg of a western quail.

'But,' she continued, her gaze on the ancient forest beyond our wall, 'I do not think it wise.'

'It isn't wise to sit with me,' I pointed out, wondering what she was speaking about exactly as I glanced up at the dark, narrow windows of our keep. 'They might think us plotting.'

'Cannot a mother say goodbye?' she said with a tight smile that faded quickly. She was playing with her rings again, turning them on her fingers.

Did she know of the kithwood's power? Walls had to be whitewashed every year, and only since we could no longer afford it had Marolyn traced images beneath the paleness: figures in robes with staring eyes, wolves with human hands, lions with snakes for heads, birds with teeth. Even the bench we sat on, cool old marble weathered by the wind, had eyes peeking out between tangles of vines.

No. She like all mothers had warned me from childhood of the dangers of entering the wood and straying from the paths.

We both know that is a lie, Sanafin had said.

Quiet stretched between us, mother and daughter, thick with the scent of roses. At last, she filled it.

'You cannot kill the swan king.'

I stiffened. 'Why not?' I whispered.

'You will be tortured,' she said quietly, 'executed. Marolyn and Hadiah with you. If you will not think of your own life, think of theirs.'

'Warriors have died on the battlefield,' I replied. 'Is this not the same?'

'Warriors choose their fate; have you given Hadiah that choice?'

I bit my lip.

'She came to me asking why you kept insisting she stay behind,' Rivani continued. 'Then I realised why you wanted this marriage. If I had known you planned for death, I would have stopped this long ago.'

I stared at her. 'What else did you imagine?' I said. 'That I wanted to be bedded by our usurper? Three times my age?' I shook my head incredulously, and she didn't meet my eyes. 'I thought you knew, that we understood each other without having to speak.'

My mother sighed. 'I thought it was to escape this place, and my failures. And through it gain some succour for our people. I thought you a better ruler than I.'

I clenched my fists in rage. She thought I would prefer the enemy court to our own? 'Do you think so little of me?' I said.

She didn't answer me, just closed her eyes and shook her head. I hated the person my mother had become, diminished by grief and shame. This was a woman who could raise armies to her call, could spin a story by firelight, weave crowns of flowers with her hands; now she looked down at the picked skin around her nails, the motheaten corners of her linen tunic, and could not think of what to say to her own daughter.

'It is not too late,' she whispered at last. 'I will refuse.'

Refuse and start another war, with our people again in the hazard. Refuse and finally give the Wing and the swan reason to burn us from our land, and set up their Nests in the shells we left behind. She did not mean it.

‘I have made my decision,’ I said. ‘I will not let doubt in now. Hadiah is royal of two bloods and when questioned can say she knows nothing. Marolyn will find a way to save her.’

‘And if she cannot?’ said Rivani.

Guilt squirmed in me. ‘It will be worth it for vengeance,’ I said. ‘They will die proudly knowing our usurper is gone, and I will meet them in the kithwood with Colfinn and Ebba …’

My mother held up her hand to quiet me, her face a cold mask of stone at the mention of our dead. It hurt her, not to be able to walk among the trees that held their souls.

For they did not die at the kingsmoot. Instead, a week later, they were marched over our weakened borders by the invaders from Kanaan and Falcan.

King Liran did not even come himself to claim our lands for his throne. I had never seen the myth of the man. Instead, there had been a boy at the head of their legions, in armour too big for him, flying a black flag stitched with a charging swan. By him rode a thick-set general, Nefka, the beak of the king. I had stood with my mother and our remaining warriors and tarns as the siege came to our capital’s walls.

And with them, their captives.

I would have known my siblings anywhere, though to anyone else they might have been unrecognisable: Colfinn’s face was swollen and bruised, his bones hanging loose in their sockets, a crown of nettle wrapped around his brow. Ebba was worse. She had been forced into a dress she would never have worn, her lips burst and bloody, her tongue cut out, her hair shorn and matted with blood. The two hung in pillory on stakes bolted to the back of carts.

My mother did not weep as they pushed their tortured bodies to the gates and left them there in the hot sun and mountain wind. Sometimes Cynghals came and struck them with whips and sticks while a priest stood in clean, grey robes and chanted blessings. Sometimes, Nefka forced our own captive warriors to shout insults at their helpless royals, and then made Colfinn and Ebba watch as they were beheaded.

I spent five days wishing for their deaths. We tried to reach them with arrows, but they were beyond our sharpest archers; we tried to send assassins in the night, but they were caught and killed. Still, they faded, and I thought it was over, till Nefka came and forced bread soaked in wine into their mouths, preserving their cursed lives.

It was then that my mother broke. She ordered the gates be opened, my siblings returned, so they could die in our arms. Our flag of the wheeled snake, she lowered herself, and the last king of Ardwen bent her knee to the raider's armies.

My mother I knew was living the same memory, her expression grim as she gripped her ring with two hounds' heads. Ebba and Colfinn. As a last insult, we could not even bury them. Their bodies were burned by priests, salt dropped in their mouths as if it were a blessing. Fools. Smoke goes to the sky, ash to the earth. We all go back to the wood one day.

'His death will make it right,' I said. 'The swan king will fall, and our people will win at last.'

'They will not, Tuathilde,' she said, her voice rough with tempered anger. 'The swan king's death will not save us. Not yet.'

'What—'

'The blades of the Cynghals have gone deep into our soil,' she interrupted. 'They have torn up our roots and replaced them with bird bones. Our bloodlines have been shattered, our wealth depleted, our elders and tarns made grovelling subjects to Galenish ducals and Cynghal erls, afraid of the swan's shadow. If you kill him now, his arrogant sons will take his place and tear us apart in their warring.'

Heat prickled up my neck, yet my heart felt cold, exposed and small in my mother's sight. 'The tarns will rise up when he is dead,' I told her.

'With what army?' my mother insisted. 'What alliances? Think beyond your vengeance, little serpent, for it takes strength to see beyond the aching of your own heart. To think like a king. Justice is not justice unless the one who wields the sword knows who will wash the blood from the stones.'

'Did you think like a king, when you opened our gates?' I snapped. 'Or like a mother?'

That hurt her, and I felt ashamed. But I had thought myself brave, to do what my mother could not, to use whatever made me useful to them – my youth, my womb – and turn it in our favour like a warrior would. I had thought she would be *proud*.

‘I know you think I opened the gates to save them,’ she said, twirling her rings. ‘But you were just a girl, Tilde. Between famine and a scattered army, we could not have held them off for long, and if we did not surrender, then they would have burned us both as witches, or worse. Nandenys would have been razed to the ground like Ardnamur.’

The lost capital of Widdin in the west, once a busy port trading in fine leather and tile, reduced to ash. There, the last king of Widdin had been swanned; hung from the walls of his fortress, his back cracked open and his lungs hung up like wings beside him.

Think like a king.

No. As chided as I felt, she was not speaking to me like the priests did. As if my value could be judged by the weight of my breasts and the size of my smile, not the reach and strength of my arm, nor the sharpness of my mind. She was speaking to me as a ruler.

‘Torcros will come to our aid when the king falls,’ I said at last. ‘And the silver queen will send ships from the east.’

I remembered the silver queen of Argentha, the circlets she wore bright and shimmering around the black braids of her hair. She had brought two husbands and three wives with her to Nandenys when I was still a child and the war was far to the north. The entire town below had been filled with coloured flags, and my siblings and I had danced to the strange sounds of their pipes.

‘Clever,’ said my mother, and, despite myself, I felt a firefly glow in me. ‘But Torcros have dug up their trade roads, rolled chains and boulders into their harbours. Their defences also make them inaccessible. Even if they had the will, it would be a long call to muster. As for the silver queen,’ she sighed. ‘We have not heard from our cousin in six years. Last I heard they had emissaries in the swan’s court.’

Thwarted. ‘What would you have me do?’ I said, furious in my shame. I had not thought further than my intent, singular and terrifying: kill the king. ‘Refuse him, and run? Let them pick apart our roots with their bones, and die knowing I could have had some blood for it? Tell me another way. Tell me we have worked for this for something.’

I put my hand over hers, stilling the movement of her twirling fingers.

‘If I could choose a fate,’ she said after a long moment, ‘I would choose any other for you. I did not think you would be the last of my children, or that these might be the last of our days.’

That was when I knew.

‘You want me to bear his child,’ I gasped, letting go. ‘You want me to do exactly what they desire.’

I thought she might flinch, but she did not.

‘I want you to bind their court to you,’ she said. ‘Make them love you, praise you, honour you. Show yourself to our Merogian kith who have survived by kissing their enemy’s feet, and in them plant a different future. One we can reclaim as our own, rising from the ashes they have made of us.’ She turned to me, a light in her eyes I had not seen in years. ‘Yes, wield a knife, Tilde, but wield it so with one strike you might slit all of their throats, not just the tyrant.’

Now that sounded like my mother.

‘You know what he will expect of me,’ I bit back.

Rivani took my hands now, and I realised they were trembling.

‘I know,’ she said.

I would not be able to exist at court and avoid his bed. I would be forced to make this child of swans and snakes to figurehead Liran’s empire. My child. His warlord.

‘It is the harder path to travel, Tilde,’ said my mother tightly. ‘A baby will not save us, but it might protect you.’ I did not take my hands from her again.

‘How can you ask this?’ I said to her, beseeching. ‘Ask me to lie with a man whose hands are soaked with our blood? There is no victory in subjugation.’

‘There is victory in survival, sapling. The Cynghals are all but bankrupt. They have overextended, and now for the sake of stability five grown sons have been shunted aside for a prince unborn. The Synod want holy war to the east, and Liran has resisted, afraid of further rebellion, afraid of conceding that they own him.’ I shook my head.

‘It is one thing to kill a king,’ my mother pressed. ‘Another to undo an empire.’

She had planted a seed of doubt in me, and she finally met my eyes. ‘Do not cut off the swan’s head and call it vengeance while its poison seeps out,’ she said, holding me so hard it almost hurt. ‘Pluck out its feathers, silence its beak, destroy its nest and set a snake on its young. This is not a hunt, Tilde. This must be a massacre.’

This was not what I wanted. I wanted a knife in a neck, blood on my hands. I wanted to paint my brow with it and run into the wilds screaming of what I had done. I wanted to laugh and curse them all, shrieking as they burned me as a barbarian witch.

This time, I squeezed her hands, gentle. They felt fine and delicate, but warm beneath my touch. And when I looked up at her face, I saw tears were filling her eyes.

‘Whatever you choose, daughter, my heart goes with you,’ she said. I did not want that. I wanted her to shake me and refuse me, I wanted her to raise her armies and fight for me, I wanted her to turn back to the palace and take back all she had said to me. I wanted her to hold me and give me her blessing to die for her. A warrior.

We were disturbed by the creak of a door opening in the palace wall. Our moment of privacy was over.

She dashed her tears away, and sat up straighter. ‘Play your strengths lightly,’ she whispered. ‘If you play them at all. Trust no one, even those who are good to you. The princes will want you gone, for you are a threat to everything they are born for, and others would rather see you cowed than see you powerful, even Merogians, for in you they will sense what they lack.’

I understood. She was saying goodbye. She ran her fingers over her hounds-head ring, but they alighted on another, which she worked from her finger and placed in my palm, then folded my fingers over it.

‘Raise those you understand, not those you love,’ she said, gripping my hand so tight I could feel the metal, cool from her hand, digging into my skin. ‘And dash those who seek to change you to their ends. Their desires will never cease.’

Rage, fear and grief warred within my body and left my heart a battleground, ripe for her doubts, allowing their fine roots to sink into my bones. If I told her I was afraid, would she let me go? Is this why she had held so much silence, for so many years, because nothing painless could be said?

‘Queen Rivani!’ a guard was calling her, coming over. ‘Palati Gundobar has some questions for you on the route they will take.’

I gripped the ring. Her dark eyes held mine, and I almost flung myself onto her lap like a child. She touched the bottom of my chin, a rare show of affection, then tucked my hair behind my ear.

‘Do not forget to pray,’ she said at last.

She stood as the guard approached. ‘Yes, yes, I come,’ she said, dusting off her skirts.

As she led him away, I opened my palm to see her gift: a ring of silver and aquamarine, the band coiled like a snake around a bright blue stone, the eye of the morning sky. If touched to poison, it would discolour. A mother’s protection from a den of knives.

I frowned. There was a murmur there, in the ring. A thread of sound that stirred my senses. I held the stone up closer to my eye, and saw at the root of it a strange thing. A flaw, perhaps?

But then, I heard the softest whisper. The sound of the kithwood.

Blood in blood, dark hawthorn, with my touch is poison drawn.

It was a thorn, set in the ring, at the base of the stone. Kithwood magic, that I would bring with me to the tyrant’s court.

That was all my mother could give me. Secrets, power, and doubt.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Three

Elise

Princess Elise, daughter of the great swan, princess of the Cynghal empire, daughter to a dead queen, was exactly where she should be.

She knew retreating to her chambers was suitable after dawnsong, to contemplate those morning prayers. She knew also that no one would check to ensure she was indeed in thought or at her loom, and not leaning out of the window to watch the summer games in all their raucous glory.

Women were not supposed to watch. It was a sin of the eyes and the body, for the Synod had declared not a decade earlier that the brutality might damage a woman's health. But … if she folded back the waxed linen of the window, just so. If she sat on the ledge, and leaned out to take the air, she could still catch a glimpse.

There, she held herself, breathless, unaware the cloth of her grey silk cote was fraying against the stone of the sill.

The last day of fighting was always the great melee, where teams of Galenish knights, Cynghal warriors, and the odd Merogian foot-fighter, would scrabble to drag down their opponents, their horses, their armour, and ransom them for victory. When she was a child, she had been allowed to sit with her younger brothers, Conrin and Gaisa, to watch in the Galenish stands. There, she remembered the feel of hoofbeats in her bones, the gasp and flash of swinging blades. She remembered the taste of the hot energy on her tongue, like the afterglow of lightning.

Now, those same brothers had cemented the Galenish traditions of their youth in conquered Merogia, a testament to the combined power of Galen and Cynghal over the green lands of the east.

Elise, however, was no longer permitted to join them.

She had not been surprised when the Synod declared it too disruptive for women's health; *You can tell a sin*, her mother would say, *by how delicious it feels.*

But she couldn't help a little sinning still when she heard the horns. They drew her out, like a fox to the hunt. Perhaps she was just … looking for birds as she leaned out of the window. Still, she clutched the gold amulet of

the Wing that she wore at her neck, as if that would make the sin of the eyes not so great.

Conrin's flag rippled in the summer sun; a deep, shining grey embroidered with a swan behind folded white wings. Only the royal family could bear the swan sigil of their lineage, the most glorious of the Wing's messengers. Their rise had been the will of the new god, and Liran's princes ensured everyone knew it. Conrin most of all, for the grey he had chosen was the same solemn shade as High Priests' robes, and Elise's mourning dress. At twenty-one, he led his selected host onto the field all in shades of silver: the grey guard.

Gaisa, at seventeen, was always Conrin's shadow. He had joined his older brother's jousters, though behind him he had a page carrying his own smaller, brighter banner of two swans swooping crossways on a green field. A nod to his fealty to his brother, and his love of the games.

Egil, however, just now old enough to ride in the joust at fourteen, had his own troupe. It was his third melee, and he rode under a yellow flag bearing the swan with rising wings. The light caught on his plate armour, bending slightly where the damage he had taken in his last clash with his brothers had been hammered out.

If she had her own banner, Elise thought that she would choose blue. Like her father, and the sea that had borne them to the lands they had claimed. On it, she imagined three swans for her and her sisters, Erelle and Isuire.

What would it be like, to march on the field of battle and sense the echo of her father's blood in her? It must be good, she thought, the purpose, the power. To not only *know* the greatness of the Cynghal empire, but to feel it in your body. The closest she got was in the great courtly hunts of winter.

She felt it a little as the teams circled the field in the steaming morning heat, the blue of Salt Lake glinting behind them. They were surrounded by a bright-clad camp of smiths and ostlers, tumblers, merchants and travelling priests who had built little Nests for those not noble enough for the inner keep, nor plain enough for the servants' prayers. Strange, how Elise felt such shame for sinning for even wanting to watch the fighting, but for men the priests of the Wing handed out blessings at the arena's side.

The blast of horns in unison chased such thoughts from her mind as the gathered teams charged for each other. It was easy to tell the fighters apart: Galenish knights wore platework and fine tabards, Cynghals kept to their

sea-salted mail, both on horseback, and Merogian foot-fighters sported only leather and knotted cloth for protection.

Still, they slammed together on the playing field, chasing flags and striking riders from horses with blunted pikes, who were then set upon in a brawl of smashing fists and steel. Men were dragged howling from the green, their steeds led, bucking, close behind. Both would be forfeit, their armour and their honour too. The first could be bought back, the ransom paid, but the latter was harder to scrabble for.

Conrin's team turned immediately for Egil. Of course. The leader of the winning team gained not only riches, but a coveted moment with the king, their father, who would crown them in feathers and flowers before all the court. Whether they would admit it or not, all of Elise's brothers craved that moment with a hunger she knew only too well. To stand before god's chosen messenger, who had forged an empire from salt and grit and blood, and have him see you, even for a moment. Conrin didn't want Egil to have that chance.

The grey guard separated into a pincer formation, and Conrin charged young Egil into retreat, his yellow guard folding in behind them.

But then, as he did, a third team, some Cynghal nobles, cut towards Conrin and Gaisa's from the side, smashing through the grey ranks and splitting them. Elise caught her breath: Egil's retreat had been false; knowing his brothers would run him down first, he must have allied with another troupe who wanted to drink from the cup of glory. Red flew up into the air as, with a roar of approval, someone's helmet crushed another man's mouth. Bones crunched, flesh ruptured with a cry, bodies slammed together and men screamed out every feeling they had known in their short lives.

How Elise wished she could scream.

Gaisa and Conrin retreated now, their horses catapulting to the very edges of the arena, harried by Egil and his allies. As they closed in, Conrin kicked his horse up into rearing, an illegal move, using its legs to strike dangerously at his opponents.

'Don't lose your head, you fool,' said Elise. Men died when tempers frayed, and she knew that when Conrin lost his, he was no longer Conrin the Pious, but Conrin the Spiteful, and all sorts of chaos would come.

A cry of alarm went up as two men fell hard to the ground, one in Cynghal mail, the other Merogian. Elise winced as Conrin's horse kicked and bolted for the arena's edge, still carrying him, crashing through the

barrier of flags and sticks and into the crowd. Conrin threw himself from its back as the steed rolled.

Elise leaned further out, her heart beating in her throat as she tried to see …

‘Elise-hyem? What—’

Elise froze. She did not leap, nor startle. Partly because she was so far out of the window that she might fall, partly because, in their family, seeming guilty was far worse than being so. Feeling guilty, well, that was another matter.

She heard a step on the reeds behind her, and found herself being dragged bodily back into the room.

‘I’m sorry!’ she cried, her mouth dry. ‘I’m sorry, I just—’

She stopped as she was released, and saw the expression on the face of her favourite brother. Isen, the second-eldest. He had paled with a panic she had never seen before, his eyes wide in shock and fear.

‘I thought …’ he stuttered. ‘I thought you were—’ He looked at the window. ‘I thought you wanted to fall.’

‘I didn’t,’ said Elise, tugging her sleeves downwards to cover her hands. ‘I wouldn’t, Isen-hyem.’

Hyem. The epithet their father insisted on, to remind them that wherever they were, their blood was their binding, their safety, their home. She and Isen both did not look at the tapestry that always hung on Elise’s wall, but they both felt the eyes of knotted thread staring from the stone: four women, the wife and daughters of the swan king. One in distant exile, two dead. Elise was the youngest, and the last.

‘I’m not her,’ added Elise, gently, not saying their sister’s name. Isuire.

Isen put his hand over his eyes. Like all of her brothers, he had a strong Cynghal name, while Elise and her sisters were named by Isabella in the Galenish fashion. ‘What the piss were you doing then?’ he half-laughed. ‘Catching flies?’

Elise wrestled with her answer, and Isen understood before she could think of a lie.

‘You know you shouldn’t watch it,’ he said, though his expression softened with relief as he pushed his black hair from his heavy brow. He was the spit of the swan king, short and stocky, with a crooked nose. Gaisa liked to mock him for having all of the brawn of Cynghal but none of the beauty of Galen, but Isen cared little for prettiness.

‘I know,’ said Elise.

‘What will the other women think?’

‘I’m sure they will think the same as our tutors, that I am dull-witted and slow to learn.’ She said it with a laugh, to show she was joking, but Isen didn’t smile.

‘Do not jest, hyem, they look up to you. They are all playing games in their apartments. You should make better friends with them, now mother is gone.’

Elise laughed, willing her shoulders to loosen, her frame to soften, so they did not feel so heavy with the ghosts of their mother and sister. ‘Do you really think all the other women sit behind shaded curtains when they can hear *that* outside?’ she said, just as the horns blasted again and a roar came up from the crowd, excitement or disapproval, she could not tell.

‘They should,’ said Isen. ‘They might faint at the blood.’

Elise snorted. ‘Women bleed every moon, brother,’ she said. ‘If we fainted at blood you would see one of us falling every day.’

Isen smirked at last, then his eyes caught on the gleaming threads of Elise’s loom. ‘You’re making good progress,’ he said approvingly. ‘I have never seen a work so fine.’

He knew how to turn her away from her failings. Elise’s loom hung with a tapestry two years in the making: a tangle of silk-threaded swans, rising from an open window.

‘It will be finished by midwinter,’ she said, sliding her hand into her pocket to feel the sharpness of her fine bone-shuttle, which she used to slide the silken threads through the warp. ‘Do you think it will work?’

‘I think as I always have: if you want to please the monastics enough to take you, you should weave Holy Isle or some piece of scripture.’

‘But it is Father who will decide where I go, not the Synod,’ said Elise, turning the shuttle so it pressed against the heel of her palm, where there were tiny little scars, some red and fresh, some old and pink against her fair skin. There were thirteen swans on her blue canvas. All of King Liran’s children, living and dead, rising into a blue sky. On the stitched window were real feathers, that she had sewn in place with thread so fine it had kept breaking in her hands. ‘This is the story of our line, the one that bound us to the Synod and the Wing when they settled on the isle, and why they knew father was the Wing’s messenger.’

Isen said nothing for a moment, wrestling with something inwardly. At last, he grunted. ‘Well, if you use pretty words like that you’re sure to appease them both,’ he said, then looked at her sideways. ‘A shame to lose you to the monasteries. You could be a fine queen for someone.’

‘I was never meant to be a queen,’ said Elise softly, rubbing the stone dust from the side of her skirts. ‘And father knows it. It’s been eight years, Isen, and he still has not forgiven me.’ She smiled wryly, thinking of feathered garlands and dreams of glory. ‘He barely remembers I exist.’

‘He remembers,’ said her brother softly. ‘He wants to see you.’

Elise stiffened, looking up at him as her heart swooped into her belly. ‘Now?’

‘Why do you think I’m here in the women’s apartments, Elise?’ said Isen. ‘He sent for you.’

Elise did not know whether to feel joy or terror. ‘Sent for me?’ she echoed. She was not prepared. This was not how she wanted to be greeted by him. Her fair hair, her mother’s gift, was only in a single braid, her clothes were wrinkled and frayed on stone.

But there was no denying a father, let alone a king.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Four

Elise

Elise held herself as proudly as she knew how, following Isen out of the new towers and toward the keep's old inner bailey. Even during the games, the palace grounds were full of movement: the stableboys walked training horses beneath the rippling banners of Ducal Uhtren, guardian of Falcan, and her father's flying swan; coopers fixing barrels for refills as the kitchen folk rolled new deliveries towards the cellars; Isen's black guard trained their strikes, parries, and tumbles in full armour. Most of them were Cynghal, and like their prince cared little for the mock-war of the joust.

Elise wondered what the great keep of Falcan was like outside the weeks of the summer that Liran held sway. Was it like a hive emptied of bees, waiting to be filled again? Or was there always some buzzing? Elise only knew the gay parade of the inner court, moving from Gevera to Widdin, Widdin to Falcan, Falcan to Hallion to keep the new laws, prove the roads safe and remind the highborn and lowborn alike of the king's glory.

That king himself was standing in the centre of the riding green, considering a hawk that had been placed on his arm by an eager-looking merchant with coins sewn all around his cap. With them was the High Priest Dagobert, his shining robes of silken grey ruffling in the slight breeze, and Palati Odon, ever her father's keeper.

'It is a fine bird,' the merchant was saying in a thick Merogian accent, back half bent and his eyes wide, as if afraid a blink might make the king and his advisors disappear along with their silver. 'A good catcher of the forest crows. They'd be bad omens to have hanging over a wedding day.'

Elise's heart squeezed at the mention of a wedding, and she glanced askance at Isen. Surely he would have told her if this summons was to pledge her hand? He avoided her eye.

'Such nonsense,' Dagobert scoffed before Liran could respond, and the merchant cringed low. 'Every bird is a messenger from the Wing. If a bad omen is sent, then it is a gift from god.'

The priest was tall in the way of most Galenish, and spoke with the fine, clipped tones of born nobility. He bore himself so rigidly that Elise stiffened

her own spine.

But beside the swan king he was but a quibbling reed. Black-haired and thick set, the king entered a place like a hurricane making land, reeking of salt and war, and followed by songs of victory. He was not beautiful: shorter than Elise, he was also bow-legged from his years at sea and on campaign, and his belly was softening inevitably from muscle to paunch. Still, it was the way he stood that sucked the breath from her, as if the world should bend around him or it would break. Even her earliest memories, when he still wore his beard, were laced through with an awe so great it was almost fearful.

Now, she still felt it, more so even than when she was a child. He was clean-shaven now, in the style of the Galenish courts since they united with Cynghal, and his scars shone on his bared flesh: a long strike on his neck, silver now with age, and a puckered knot in his right cheek where an arrow had almost struck him through to his throat, leaving him with a voice like an iron rasp. He had joked once at a feasting night that he had been kissed by death and she had left the scar, freeing him from fear of her.

He no longer joked about such things, for the Synod had told him it was blasphemy to suggest any power other than the Wing could take life away.

‘We are returned Father-hyem,’ said Isen, and Liran turned to greet them, shrugging off the bird to Palati Odon, who received it smoothly on his free hand, his other holding his cane. Elise bent to her knee in a bow. Here she could still hear the melee beyond the bailey walls, slightly muffled by the stone.

‘You are still in mourning, Elise-hyem,’ said the king by way of greeting.

Elise opened her mouth, but found her well of words had turned dry. Around her heart, she felt a fluttering, a beating like that of a wing, flapping against her ribs. She had felt it before, and took it as a sign from their god. The Wing was near, of course, because her father was.

‘It has not been a year,’ Dagobert put in curtly. ‘She observes the proper mourning due to Queen Isabella. It is as I have been saying: it is too soon to take a bride.’

Elise swallowed. A bride. Not her marriage then, it seemed. Isen’s face revealed nothing; he had taken on the cool, closed expression he so often presented to their father when he became not brother-Isen but warrior-Isen, the black prince.

She followed his lead, thinking of obedience. Some change was here, she could feel its shape, but she could not yet grasp it.

‘The decision is made, Priest Dagobert,’ said Liran, sounding bored, ‘the bargain signed, and most of the inner council are in agreement.’

‘Because most of them are Cynghal, not priests, and not Galenish,’ said Dagobert dismissively.

‘She is already on her way,’ Odon pointed out, slipping the merchant the bird and the coin and sending him running back to the keep.

‘Then send her back,’ snapped Dagobert without looking at him.

Elise winced as her father turned a searing blue eye on the high priest, who did not seem to realise how close he was to a predator’s claw. Low priests were ten a tin coin, but high priests like Dagobert were only a step below the Synod. They were sent out to advise kings, lords and princes on the Wing and the holy laws.

But the Synod had declared Liran god’s messenger, the glorious swan, and no one spoke to him like that without blood staining the ground.

‘High Priest,’ Isen said quickly from where he still knelt with Elise, ‘was it not our mother’s marriage alliance that brought Cynghal and Galen together, and united them in the Wing’s shade? The Synod itself brokered that peace. This marriage is in keeping with it.’

‘Your mother was a princess, boy,’ said Dagobert, though Isen was a man grown. ‘Unimpeachable, meek and good.’

The bards and poems sung Isabella so. Since her death, each feasting night carried some tune of her praises. But they sang little of the mother that Elise knew. Her long years of hard pregnancies and harder births, her grief at the younglings who did not survive childhood. Such things were not fit for music-making.

Only Elise knew the dark extent of her mother’s misery. The rhythms of her days had been set by the aches of Isabella’s body, the little comforts she craved, the long silences. Now, where her mother had been was only a gaping, purposeless grief, and songs did not touch its edges.

‘Prince Isen is right,’ Odon pointed out. ‘Marriage is a peacemaker, and peace is what we need. One Merogian kingdom stands against us still, and the others turn coat at the slightest gripe, raising flags and armies and raiding their neighbours, or harbouring rebels.’

‘Then we must remind them what it means to fear the swan king, and the Wing,’ said Dagobert.

‘Fear,’ said Liran softly. ‘I know the use of fear, for it is a warrior’s weapon. But it blunts, High Priest, the more heavily you use it. Blood never wanes, blood is a binding. And I mean to bind this land to me.’

Then Elise understood: her father intended to marry again. And this time, he meant to marry a heathen from Merogia.

‘To the Wing,’ said Dagobert pointedly. And Liran inclined his head.

‘To the Wing,’ he agreed. ‘Is that not what the Synod desires?’

‘The Synod desires your son to obey its call for Holy War. There are other heathen lands beyond Merogia that should be brought into the Wing’s shade.’ He scowled at Isen, whose expression did not twitch. This, Elise knew. It had been the chatter of the servants shortly before Isabella’s labour and passing; Isen had been called on to lead an army east, and he had refused.

‘Obey I will,’ said Isen. ‘When the time is right.’

‘Prince Conrin would take on the Synod’s will without second thought,’ said Dagobert, and Isen sniffed.

‘Perhaps then you should ask my younger brother to lead a war,’ he replied. ‘Of course, he has yet to fight in any battle that has not been staged for his entertainment.’

Though Isen spoke with his characteristic seriousness, Liran chuckled, and Odon cleared his throat and pressed his cane into the ground to cover his own smirk. Dagobert’s brows flew up towards his thinning hair, his mouth opening for an admonishment, and Elise steeled herself to speak before her brother got himself in trouble.

‘My apologies, great king, for still wearing mourning colours,’ she said. If he was to wed again, of course he did not want her wearing grey for his last wife, even if she was their mother. ‘I intended to leave them at midsummer.’

Of course, she hadn’t known until then that it was something to apologise for. It was safer to be always sorry, just in case. She never spoke out of turn. Never. But to protect Isen, even from a priest, she dared be a little bold.

‘It does not serve us to linger, Isuire-hyem,’ said Liran.

Isuire. Her dead sister’s name. She felt Isen step close to her as she felt a flutter of panic, feeling rather than seeing the glance between her brother and Odon.

‘Yes, father,’ she said. All she wanted was to bask for a moment in his golden approval, proud and at peace, but if did not remember her name,

how was she to prove she was worthy of his love?

Was she? In her hopes she existed lightly, harbouring not a single thought of sin, of pain, of discontent. It was an act, a shell-shape that she fitted herself into, trying to squeeze inside without cracking the brittle facade. It did not work, for in moments of weakness she leaned out of windows, she dreamed of songs being sung of her glories, of being her father's equal, not her mother's successor. The act was just an act, and the actor was a fraud of tangled thoughts and fearful dreams.

'Up then,' said Liran. 'Let's look at you.'

Isen helped Elise to her feet and she stood, taut as a bowstring, a loom-string, as Liran considered her.

'To settle your concerns, Priest Dagobert,' he said at last, 'Elise will ensure the Ardweni woman knows the ways of the court and the Nest, and act as her companion.'

Elise found, not for the first time, that she was still able to stand up straight and smile while, internally, she crumpled. A companion? To another queen? No. She had chosen her path, had woven it painstakingly together: a monastic life was all she wanted, away from the court that thought her slow-witted, unwed and pitiful, to celebrate her father from a distance, and pledge herself to the Wing.

'Father—' she tried, but Isen's hand tightened in warning on her arm.

Do not be too bold Elise, her mother would tell her. *A woman's words are feathers, only rarely meant to touch the earth.* Elise thrust a hand into her pocket, grasping at her bone shuttle, feeling again its edge against her palm.

Dagobert did not even glance at her. 'The point is not that a wild wife can be tamed,' he said. 'It is that the risk need not be taken at all. Declare a single successor, my king, in the Galenish way, from the children you have, not one you hope for. It is high time your younger princes received the due you have afforded to your eldest.'

Alar. Elise clenched her teeth together. Her older brother was king of Suneheim now, and she wished he would die on the barren rock he had been banished to. Even Isen cracked a little at the mention of his name, and drew in a breath of frustration.

But he was Isen, her father's favourite. Elise should not presume to have such sins of the mind.

She turned the shuttle in her fingers, just so, feeling it bite her skin, hard, harder. Then: the puncture.

The dull pain, the swoop of her belly, the sharp of the feeling, was familiar, attested to by the red-scarred palms that she hid beneath her sleeves. Hot blood dribbled out, and inside she felt a pale, clean kind of coolness, a relief.

She should have learned by now not to question, and so as her hand bled she took a breath, and recited the prayer of fealty in her head. *God is the Wing, the Wing is the swan, the swan is the king, the king is the father, the father is my lord.*

'In Cynghal it is considered treason to speak of the king's passing,' said Odon blithely, looking at the sky as if the words had dropped from there. The swan king was the bringer of the faith, to imagine his death was to imagine the centre of the world dropping out.

'Cynghal had countless wars because it split its lands endlessly between children,' sneered Dagobert.

'Hold yourself,' snapped Liran, his anger sudden, quick and hot. He turned to the priest. 'And cease your quibbling, man.'

Dagobert paled, at last perhaps remembering to whom he spoke. Certainly, he remembered the fear of Liran's sudden temper, worsening of late. Elise had heard whispers that he bellowed behind closed doors, and only Odon and Isen seemed able to calm him.

Into the long silence that followed his snap, a cheer came up from behind the wall.

'*Conrin! Conrin! Conrin!*'

At last a cold look came into the priest's eyes, and he bowed. 'As you wish,' he said. 'Great king.'

His robes flapped out as he strode towards the Nest of Salt Lake palace, where low priests were raising green summer branches against its fine stonework in the manner that gave the temple its name.

Elise found her father's eyes boring once more into her face, and quailed to think his temper might find her a more satisfying outlet.

'Will you take on this duty, Elise-hyem?' he said, and she blinked. He was calm again, and used her name. 'There is a future we must hold to. Will you hold it fast with us?'

The cheers continued outside, *Conrin, Conrin.*

There was some play of power here, between the king and his priest, between Isen and the Synod, something she was not privy to. The fluttering at her heart intensified, and she knew it was god's warning, that she was

close to danger. What would happen if she refused him, if she begged to be sent to the monasteries, if she threw herself to his feet and kissed them?

But he said her name. He had called for her, and asked for her help. It had been eight years since he had deigned to give her more than a breath of his time. Eight years since he had spoken to her with no flavour of bitterness.

‘Yes Father,’ she said.

What other answer could there be?

When the king and Odon left to crown Conrin as victor, it was as if the summer sun had been taken behind a cloud, its intense heat, its glare of attention, turned suddenly away.

‘That was well done,’ said Isen still at her side. ‘I am proud of you, Sister-hyem.’

Elise turned to look at him. ‘Don’t you have the decency to be ashamed?’ she said at last.

Shame did not come naturally to Isen, but he did manage a sigh. ‘I thought, perhaps, it would be better to hear from the king,’ he said.

‘I never thought you to be a coward, Brother-hyem,’ she replied, though she added a smile to cool the burn of her annoyance. She did not want to lose Isen’s gruff kindnesses, he was one of the few that still seemed to like talking to her. But did he think it was some small ask to take the dream she had long cherished, that was just beginning to blossom, and shove it back down into the dark? Did he think that just because she did not weep, and beg, that she did not want to? If she had been another woman he would not have expected her obedience.

But then, Isen only expected of her what he gave himself. That mask of calm he bore for their father, that she so admired, she had seen many times. But the first time was seared in her memory.

It was after one of the early Geveran rebellions, after Isabella, Conrin and Gaisa had joined the armies in Merogia. In the recaptured capital, Elise had been pulled by her mother to a gathering of the court. There, a man bleeding from his shaven scalp, his broken hands and fingernails, and the soles of his feet, had grovelled on the reed matting before Liran’s throne.

‘Please, swan king, I admit my failings.’ He was Galenish, once a noble of high birth, now disgraced in the Cynghal way, for failing to protect his keep. The court shifted uncomfortably, split into factions of faces, some

keen, some horrified. Odon stood close behind the failed ducal, his soft boots soaked through with blood. ‘Please, grant me the release of death.’

Isen had stood at Liran’s right hand, visibly shaking, small against the bulk of the Cynghal warriors and Galenish knights that surrounded them.

Liran had nodded at his second son, and Isen’s still youthful face had stilled into that now familiar stone. He had stepped towards the kneeling man, held his shoulder, and slid the knife, slowly, into his throat, so all could hear the scream and bubble of the king’s justice in his son’s hand.

The Cynghals of court had roared in vicious triumph, and Liran had bellowed with the rest of them. Happier days, then. Isabella had wept, but Elise had learned then how approval sounded when it struck the sky.

‘It will only be for a few months,’ said Isen at last. ‘Till she is pregnant and settled. The tapestry will be ready then anyway, and perhaps she as well as I will help you make your request. Nothing changes.’

Elise vaguely considered shoving him, but it would be like pushing a stone wall. ‘But why?’ she insisted. ‘Why me?’

‘Because not everyone agrees that this is the right choice. Conrin least of all. You know his temperament, and whatever he does, Gaisa will follow in.’

Elise laughed, but Isen did not. ‘So, I am to be her guardian against my own brothers?’ she said. Isen’s silence was as much confirmation as she needed.

‘I don’t understand,’ she said, her forced smile fading. ‘After all Mama did to give him heirs, to give him *us*, are we not enough?’

Isen shook his head. ‘It is not about us,’ he said. ‘It is Cynghal. It is to ensure the nation our father built has a future.’

‘But five of the Merogian kingdoms have bent the knee. They acknowledge him as their king.’

‘Kneeling does not pay for the warriors,’ said Isen. ‘Or the land gifts, the Synod’s tithes, the watchtowers and gatehouses over the tree roads. Kneeling does not pay for Conrin’s games.’ He nodded at the wall where the chanting had died down. ‘Just ask Egil, you know he keeps the books. It was the Synod who funded our eastern campaigns, and now they think we can endlessly war wherever they point, like hounds set on the hunt for their master. But they have *no idea* what it takes to rule and keep ruling, they would rather not dirty their ink stained hands.’

‘It is a sin of the tongue to speak ill of the Synod,’ Elise pointed out. ‘And a sin of the body to refuse a call to holy war.’

Isen looked at her like a stranger and took her by the arm, leading her away from his training guard and back towards the palace. Servants and serfs gave them a wide berth, not daring to come close enough to hear an utterance they said. As they reached the palace well, the women chattering there scattered, picking up their tunics and water buckets and hurrying to find other work.

‘You should pay closer attention to the world, Sister-hyem,’ said Isen, paying no notice. ‘Did Mother coddle you this much?’

Coddle? A flush of anger crept over Elise’s chest. Isen had never stood with rags to staunch the screaming of childbed, Isen had never wrapped a babe’s body for a pyre. Isen had never found her dead just as she was recovering from her last lying in. Elise said none of these things, thinking of the boy putting a knife in a man’s throat, but she did remind him of another oversight: ‘Father never lifted the ban on my letters, Isen.’

Isen’s face hardened again, just slightly. ‘He did that to protect you.’

He did it to punish her for being too stupid and too bold. ‘Nevertheless,’ she said. ‘I only know what I am told. Mother is gone, the women have other matters to attend to; if you will not tell me what I need to know, who will?’

That silenced him, and at last he nodded seriously, understanding her chastisement.

‘Then you need to know that if Merogia does not settle, the Synod will bankrupt us,’ he said. ‘They will send us on another holy war to reclaim the land their people came from, and expose us to rebellion in the empire we leave behind. God does not hold Merogia, Elise, we do.’

He looked so like their father, down to the black hair and the salted ice in his eyes. Even sounded like him, in the way he spoke, the turn of his phrasing. No wonder he was Liran’s favoured son. No wonder Conrin hated him.

‘True fealty to the Synod, and the Wing, will serve us better than dependence and debt,’ he continued. ‘If the tarns of Merogia will accept a prince of their own from the king they fear, this land will be truly ours. Their cursed forest is the key to their rebellions and superstitions; we would cut it back further, unlock its bounty and the rich earth, dig mines, ports, foundations for cities and palaces. We will be a great empire of the west, a

legacy that spreads its wings around the world. Then, we can fight wherever the Synod points.' He took her shoulder and squeezed it gently. 'Is that not worth some sacrifices?'

Elise returned to her rooms, pacing as the sun began to sink and the sky softened to faded blue, then towards violet and peach. She held her bone shuttle in her hand, but did not go to the loom. Instead she pressed the point of it into the fresh wound in her palm. The pain helped. It reminded her to be patient, to pray for what she wanted.

God is the Wing is the swan is the king is my father is my lord.

Outside, she knew celebrations were underway in the stands of the tournament, summer garlands streaming from the poles, a warm breeze laced with the scents of honey-mead and salted meat.

But beyond the tents was the forest. The key, Isen had said, to Merogia, waiting to be unlocked. Swathes of it they had already cut back, but had barely made headway into the snarling, knotted green. It grew still, heavy as an anchor, weighing against their ship, pulling them down from the sky.

Elise shivered, and pressed the sharp edge of her shuttle deeper into her hand.

Sometimes, at night, when the air was still, she dreamed she could hear the trees speak.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Five

Tilde

My mother did not weep as I stepped out of our home for the last time and into the long light of evening, gold and silken-soft. Nor did I. I breathed in the last scents of Nandenys: the smelting smoke from the valley's sides, the distant salt of the sea, roses from the garden, green pine and sweet-bay. Swift-running summer clouds streaked over the kithwood and the Uhal mountains, shading us from the glaring eye of the sun.

Some folk of the palace did weep. I heard the quiet sob of our old cook as my mother held my hands and pressed her head to mine. King Rivani wore her dark curls loose in the style of Merogian celebration, but her expression was one of mourning.

'Be sweet as honey, sapling,' she said. I knew what she meant. *Be sharp as the sting.* 'Green as a fresh rose.' *Hiding the serpent.*

Gundobar was already in his Galenish carriage with its pointed roof. I had my own of blackened oak, the doors and shutters hammered with a bronze relief of gleaming vines and trees tangling with the wheeling snake of our clan.

Hadiah stood at the door in her travelling clothes, her tightly coiled hair finely locked in the style of her father's country, and twisted with velvet in a crown around her head. She gave me an encouraging smile, and I almost broke then and ordered her back into the castle. Still, I had not told her, and still she had ignored my entreaties to leave her duties as my lady-in-waiting and return to her brother in the Port of Scorda. I hoped my naïve wish would hold true, and when I enacted my vengeance that her innocence and noble blood would save her.

Marolyn, I knew, would die fighting, as she had been raised to. Like her sister.

Unlike Hadiah, Marolyn was not noble: her fathers were a warrior and a physik, but when I understood I would only be allowed a guard of five, selected by the king's emissary from my mother's ranks, I knew I would need a loyal knife at my back. I would not have her treated as lesser. I ensured she had clothes as fine as my own, most of them Ebba's old tunics

and cotes adjusted to fit. She wore her gold-brown plaits braided from her temples to her shoulders, coloured with silk thread, and I knew Hadiah had a hand in her presentation.

I took their hands as I reached the carriage, and as I put one foot on the stool to enter it, a breeze uncovered the sun again. Light spilled across us, burnishing the upper walls of our palace, where the snake flag of our clan and our kingdom still hung beneath the banner of the swan.

And I hesitated.

Last chance. I could run back to the tower and bar the gates, cry havoc from the walls and refuse to let them take me alive.

All of them saw it, the pause, the fear in me. I could hear their breaths drawn in, sense my mother waiting for my choice.

Have you ever known it? That feeling as every thread that binds you to your life unpicks, stitch by stitch? Undone, you are hanging loose, vulnerable. Alone.

If I stepped into the shadow of the carriage now, then horses and wheels and the pricking thorns of fate would drag me away from the ground where my ancestors' bones were laid, where the trees whispered with their souls, where generations of my family had been born, and ruled, and died. Before Nandenys was a city and palace, it was a town and keep. Before a keep, a longhouse with a great fire; and before that it was a shelter of twigs and branches and a warm hearth of riverstones.

Our blood had been there since the first flame, now I was the last, and I was leaving it all behind.

'Ways, give me strength,' I murmured, so quietly that only Hadiah would hear my blasphemy. I stepped inside the carriage. I cut the stitch myself. Hadiah and Marolyn joined me in the shade, and we shut the door behind us. It felt a little like betrayal.

But then, as the carriage lurched into movement, I heard my mother sing.

> '*Deep into the forest dark you go*
> *Do not look down,*
> *Do not lose hope.*'

She had not sung since the kingsmoot. And it was an old tune in our own ancient tongue, a song of the kithwood. Such music was outlawed by the

tyrant and his Synod; parents only dared murmur it to their children in the dark of night, with no one to listen.

> ‘*Daughter of the green wood wild*
> *Follow you the pathway mild …*’

Despite the risks, our people joined her. They raised their voices as their ancestors taught them, beaten, reduced, invaded, and still unashamed. Hadiah put her hand to her mouth, tears misting her eyes, as Marolyn threw the window open and let the light spill in.

My mother was still standing, her hands outstretched as if to beckon me back, her voice raised loud. Priest Cnul stood behind her, his head bowed and grave, but he did not dare try to stop it.

We passed through the gate, over the moat, and outside waited farmhands from the fields, the gong farmers, the palace brewers, the smiths. They had come to wave me away like an adventurer on a journey, and when they heard my mother, the last king of Ardwen, they carried her song.

> *‘Give not memory, blood nor bone*
> *Come back to me,*
> *Come back home.*’

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Six

Tilde

Long after the song had stopped, I could still hear it. It carried the three of us away from Nandenys, through the shadowed valleys of the hills. Gundobar bypassed Ardwen's trading towns entirely, and we slept instead in our carriage, doors locked against the summer wind that swirled around us, and hatches open to feel the cool relief of the heavy rain it carried.

At last, we came to the forest gate.

The gates guarded the hannerast: the ancient trading ways. The old wide roads cut through the kithwood, connecting the clanlands together with their cord. This was one of the older, winding ones, drifting half into the mountains before wheeling around to Falcan. Others cut like a knife through the thick of the forest and hills.

They were guarded by the gates. Once, simple checkpoints with a few guards, a wooden standing tower and the odd pedlar selling luck-coins, but as soon as Liran claimed a clanland his first act was to build fortresses of iron and stone, a dam against the flow of people, bristling with archers and captained by brutes.

Ardwen was no different. Rivani had relinquished hold over the roads when she had bent the knee. Now, two towers of fresh cut limestone stood before the wall of the muttering forest, hanging with the tyrant's knot-necked swan. Between them hung a portcullis of oakwood and iron bolts, and behind that two gate doors, one closed, the other open to the queue of folk going in. Across the parapet above them stood Galenish warriors in plate armour, sweating in the misty heat.

Through the gap in my carriage's curtains, I watched the line of folk who were departing, not allowed to pass onto the road with their goods. Their carts had been ransacked, their clothes torn; one man's barley grain was still spilling from a cut sack, and several were clutching ruined travel papers. They were all Merogian, most of them Ardweni, judging by the copper luck-coins they had sewn into their hats and tunics, fresh polished in the hope of their journey. Those that were not turned back were Cynghal, Galenish, and one or two eastern traders.

‘Why even bother issuing travel permits if they refuse and destroy them?’ whispered Marolyn, who was pressed close behind me and looking through the same crack. ‘Half just want to visit their family. It’s cruel.’

‘That is why,’ said Hadiah glumly, her finger marking her place in her book on Galenish court manners. ‘Cruelty reminds them who holds the power.’

‘And to cut off rebellion at its root,’ I murmured. ‘The last thing they want is us talking to each other.’

The carriage ground to a halt, and I saw Gundobar jumping from his own seat and hurry to the gate, holding onto the heavy furred cap he insisted on wearing despite the sweat dripping down his nose. He disappeared beneath the portcullis, scattering the waiting trading folk.

‘Is that old King Rivani?’ whispered someone near us. I turned to see two merchants staring at the carriage, one of them in a green sash glinting with copper over a Cynghal-style tunic with broad shoulders, the other wearing the round-toed red boots of Hallion, though they were so old now the colour had run to purple brown.

‘No,’ said green sash. ‘She’s long gone. That’ll be her daughter gone to whore herself to the swans.’

‘Mind your fucking tongue,’ snapped Marolyn, throwing open the curtain. ‘Or I’ll mind it out of your mouth.’ The merchant saw me looking, and smirked, but then a Galenish guard in plate pauldrons walked past and spat in the dirt at our wheels.

‘Get back inside,’ he said.

Marolyn looked like she was about to say ‘make me’, but Hadiah yanked her back. The guard moved on. I looked back for the merchant through the sliver of cloth, but he had disappeared.

‘Pick your battles better,’ Hadiah was saying.

‘I didn’t pick it,’ hissed Marolyn. ‘And I am sick to the back teeth of letting them win each strike without a parry.’

‘Do you think those traders care for our hurt feelings?’ The carriage rattled into movement again. ‘Do you think that will help them?’

‘It might remind them what pride is.’

‘Pride won’t feed them, Marolyn.’

‘Even we common folk need pride, *Lady* Hadiah, and don’t take kindly to the lecturing of nobles.’

‘Stop it,’ I snapped, as we passed through the gates into an open courtyard, surrounded by watchful eyes and shouting men. One of them stood by a pile of confiscated items: a crockery pot; a coin necklace; papers carefully wrapped in leather. Two more were in an old woman’s cart, throwing out her cages of shrieking birds as she watched in silent horror. One broke open, and three prize red starlings spirited out.

Hadiah was right, what would my rage do now save jeopardise my mission? This was power, and they were drunk on it. She was watching me, and after a moment she softly said, ‘Perhaps we can petition King Liran on their behalf.’

‘Perhaps,’ I murmured, and the seed of my mother’s doubt put up a fine shoot.

I breathed in pine-scent, leaf-rot and wet earth as we entered the kithwood.

So close. The trees crowded to the edge of the three-carriage road, but they came no further. Instead, they stood like sentinels, out of my reach. The kithwood did not dare breach the hannerast; not a branch bent over the road dust, nor a root lift up the soil. Even leaves did not fall on the great ways, and the murmuring I had always known was muted.

At least it was easier to pretend I didn’t hear it.

Steady steady the hoofbeats thrum, where do you go? Why do you come?

Come into the trees.

Meet me.

‘I would give my left eye to get out and walk,’ Marolyn groaned, slumping down on the old furs of her bench and twirling a scramasax blade in her hand. ‘My arse is rubbed raw.’ She sighed, and touched her hand to the carriage walls. ‘It hurts to be this near, after so long, and not be able to walk in the green wild.’

‘I know,’ I said, feelingly. ‘But Cynghal noble women don’t walk.’

‘Cynghal women have too many rules,’ Marolyn grumbled.

Hadiah had, over and over, gone through the rituals of court, the marriage ceremony, the roles of women. I had chosen to ignore it all, instead picturing a knife going through an old man’s ribs.

‘Most of the rules came from Galen and the Synod,’ she said, thumbing the boards of her book. ‘They became … fashionable, when the courts merged and Liran took the faith of the Wing.’

‘Fashionable?’ Marolyn laughed. ‘Women hunt, but don’t fight, ride, but don’t walk. Do their pissing knees get removed at birth?’

‘They also don’t swear,’ Hadiah grinned.

‘And they don’t carry weapons,’ I pointed out, nodding at her knife.

Marolyn sat up. ‘They don’t *what*?’

Hadiah rolled her eyes as Marolyn held her scramasax to her chest as if someone had already tried to take it from her. It was the only blade Merogians were still permitted, and was more a cutting knife than a killing blade, for brambles and hard meat. We had been carrying them on our person since we could understand which end to hold.

‘The priests say a woman who carries a weapon shows she does not trust her protector,’ I explained. ‘Her lord, her king, or her father. That is a sin of the heart.’

Marolyn frowned at me. ‘How am *I* supposed to protect you if I don’t have a weapon, Tilde?’

‘You’ll have to keep them hidden,’ I said.

‘My papa taught me to use a knife.’

‘Your papa is Merogian.’

‘Thank the kith for that,’ she said, though her voice tapered away a little. Her papa had lost his husband in the same battle for Falcan that had taken my own father’s soul to the kithwood. His other daughter was killed at the kingsmoot. He told Marolyn that if she chose to join me in the swan’s court, he would consider her as dead as the rest.

Then at least this time it will mean something, she had told him. They had not spoken since.

‘You can bear weapons openly in the hunt,’ I said, tugging on one of her fair braids. ‘The only Cynghal tradition their women would not relinquish.’ Marolyn smiled, tightly.

‘Yes, I did notice the heavy bundle of spears you had me carry to the roof,’ she said, swiping me off. Gently.

‘And I did enjoy seeing you suffer,’ I smiled.

‘That would be funnier if I didn’t know it to be true.’

A cry flew up ahead, and we ground to a halt.

Marolyn was already on her feet. Not wasting time with the window, she unbolted the heavy door.

‘Marolyn, don’t!’ said Hadiah, half laughing as my friend pulled herself up on the roof to see ahead. ‘Get down!’

Marolyn did, dropping all the way to the road and brushing off her kirtle. She looked at me, frowning.

‘A tree has fallen on the road.’

‘Fallen?’

‘Trees never fall on the hannerast,’ said Hadiah.

Of course, the wood of the kith could be cut, but only if the tree was dead wood standing, or had felled itself. It was done with prayers, buried coin and blood letting. Our building work was done with orchard trees, grown separate from the souls of our ancestors. I had long suspected that the magic that held back the might of the wood from the trade roads was the same I had tapped into in my grief and rage, but I had never heard of it failing.

I jumped down beside Marolyn, and as soon as my feet landed I felt not an ease, but a deepness. I breathed in the cool, green air, tasting its mellow-sweet on my tongue. A band of restriction around my lungs, my body, loosened, and I could once again sense the beating heart of the world.

I forgot about the fallen tree. The kithwood. The song of the Ways was in my blood. It called to my bones.

Merogians do not pray like the Cynghals, for the Cynghals do not pray at all: they bargain. They ask for full bellies and victory, kind winds and easy battles. The green wild could never be tamed with wishes like the Cynghals’ prohibitive little god; Merogians do not ask of the wood.

Keep to the paths, and do not stray. Listen to the trees, but do not obey.

That was our prayer, our ritual, our recognition: the woods were dangerous. Folk, particularly children, were drawn into the forest by a ripe apple, a snatch of song, or the sudden call of a loved one, and some never returned. Or, if they did, they came back changed.

Meet me in the kithwood.

Did I hear Sanafin’s voice, or did I imagine it? I could feel the shape of her lost eyes, weight of her, blooming and falling through my hands, the petals red as wounds, thorns binding her young body to the earth.

What was I missing? What had our history hidden from me? And how could I grasp that power again?

No one was watching me. The guard train were moving to the front to see what was going on, our driver was busy stuffing his pipe with green leaf, Hadiah and Marolyn had their heads bent together, whispering of bad omens.

I took a step towards the treeline. Another. Shade slid over my head like a mother's hand. I saw movement, the red flash of a fox, the gem green flick of a greensnake. The bark and branches smelled fleshy-thick with the steam of the day's heat, and I could hear the distant whooping of forest birds.

Closer. There were herbs growing in the dappled light between nettle-green and tangled roots: faded yarrow, lady's mantle, wood sorrel.

The heat of the sun, rich and warm, the crack of skin, the burst of root.

The hiss of overlapping voices was becoming clearer, the confusing whispers of a thousand thousand souls rustled around me like so many leaves.

Steps, steps on the needles—

—hot on the head, then the kiss, oh the kiss.

I could pick out a few strands from the tangle. Sometimes they washed by like wind in the branches, the rush of blood, then a voice came so sudden, so close, like a loved one whispering in your ear.

Pick pick pick, yellow beak, green leaves.

This was as close as I'd been since fleeing the kingsmoot. I closed my eyes, trying to open myself to the voices.

King for a day, death for eternity, bound to bark and root and bone.

Scrabble of claws and flash of wings and spray of blood

Who comes with knife and death and hate?

Was that a question for me? The voice was old and creaking. I dared not reply aloud. Instead, I spoke back in my mind, trying to fling my thoughts into the trees.

I am Tilde of Ardwen, I told them.

Ardwen, the trees replied. *Daughter of the forest.*

Ardweni bastards, chipping at my teeth.

Sister?

Through the rustle of animals and the sighing of the leaves, I heard a voice like Ebba's that spoke more to my bones and my heart than my ear and my mind.

Ebba? I asked.

Come into the shade, sister, come to the winding dark …

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the distant glimmer of purple plums on a tree, far and ripe. Tantalising. The current of the voices was drawing me in, taking the sounds of my beloved ones, and I made myself remember the prayer: *Do not obey.*

If I went to the tree, it would disappear, and shine out deeper in the forest, far off the narrow paths that Merogians knew. It was a test. Who could blame the ancestors for their temptations? They would do anything for a taste at life again.

I stood still and breathed out as I had been taught: my fear, my anger, my pride, the aches of my body, the prickling heat of my back. I breathed out the shame, the fear, the longing to belong to nothing and no one but myself.

Then I breathed in. First the light, and the swaying of the leaves. Then the pollen, the bracken, the rustling, the birdsong, the pulses of sun-warmth in the cool air.

Know me, I said, commending myself to the soil.

You are known. The kithwood spoke back, more clearly. *And you hear us.*

I shook with excitement. *I hear you. I fear you.*

Are you weak? The wood spoke to me. *Are you doubting?*

I am not weak, I replied, and was certain I heard an ancestor's shaking chuckle. *Tell me how to use your strength, tell me what to do.*

What to do, the voices echoed, *what to do what—*

'What are you doing?'

I opened my eyes, heart pounding, and swayed with the weight of my body as my mind took root in it once more. Gundobar was standing on the road behind me. I was two trunks deep into the kithwood, its roots curling at my feet, thorns catching at my skirts. I could feel its power, thrumming around me deep, ancient, and furious. But it had no direction or purpose.

I had failed. And I had broken Cynghal law in front of one of its keepers.

'Palati Gundobar,' I said. 'I … saw some herbs I thought would be good for fertility.'

The lie was not slick. I could feel Gundobar turning his options over. He had power enough to punish me, but to arrive at court with a maimed bride would show he had failed in his watch. What did he want more, my suffering, or the king's approval?

'What herb?' he said, with a slow, superior smile. Ah, so he chose to toy with me instead. I considered saying they were further into the forest, so I could lead him into the thick dark, where no one would hear him screaming.

No. My purpose was not to kill a petty lord. I stepped aside, and pointed to the lady's mantle that I had noticed when I entered; the soft flat plates of leaves waving in the slight breeze.

Sister, I thought I heard Colfinn's voice murmuring through the trees. *Danger.*

I knew I was in danger, he did not have to tell me, and the desire to point that out to him struck me suddenly with grief. Colfinn might have been a cheat at cards, but he was a good brother, lifting me onto his shoulders so I could pluck apricots from our orchards.

I tried to remember him that way, and not the voiceless, broken man who had died for nothing.

'I have books on this,' I said, though my throat was tight. 'It regulates a woman's bloods, prepares the womb for a boy-child.' Gundobar wrinkled his nose with disgust as I bent to pluck a leaf.

'Sounds like witchcraft,' he said.

The crack of the fine stem in my fingers felt somehow loud. I realised then that the singing of the birds had stopped.

'It is only herblore,' I smiled tightly. 'Any physik would agree. It would be a shame not to use the knowledge of centuries just because you are afraid of a few trees.'

He was right to be afraid, but I didn't say that. Nevertheless, he scowled, stung, and stepped from the sunlight into the shade, closer to me.

'You must think me a fool, woman,' he growled, and I realised my error. I was at this man's mercy, alone and weaponless, far from home. 'I know you and your rebellious mother think this marriage might sway our great swan to your own desires. So did Isabella's father, when he married her to him, and she was a noble princess of Galen, not some barbarian's last she-whelp.'

He hated me. His loathing radiated off him.

'I have heard nothing but songs of praise for the late queen Isabella,' I replied, a little loudly, hoping Marolyn would hear.

Gundobar narrowed the distance between us, and I willed myself not to shrink back.

'The bards tell of her beauty, her children, and her grace,' he said. 'If you are lucky, which I doubt, perhaps you will merit the same. But, little girl, those are the only songs they will sing, for Isabella learned her place, and so will you.'

I bit back all the things I would like to say to him. He was close enough now to smell the ale and cheese on his breath, and he stood as tall as he could, stretching his shoulders, like a bear did before it attacked.

I wished he was a bear. Then I would know what to do. I could run, I could call for help, and no one would ask me why. Could he feel even a mote of what I could in the forest? The heartbeat of the kith? The whispers of their souls?

Danger.

Gundobar smiled, knowing he had unnerved me. ‘Eventually,’ he said, ‘the Cynghals will realise their folly, and the king will strip you of all, then you will burn like your siblings.’

Fury burst through my veins. I could dig my fingers into his face, tear through his beardless chin, his flat and stinking mouth. I do not know what angered me more, that he had disturbed my longed-for moment with the wood, or that I was afraid of him.

‘Palati Gundobar?’ came Hadiah’s voice. She and Marolyn stood just beyond the edge of the trees. Marolyn looked murderous, as she often did, but Hadiah’s restraining hand was on her arm. ‘We’d best come out of the forest. It is dangerous away from the road.’

She risked a step into the trees, reaching for me, and I went to her, letting her take me by the hand.

‘I’ll not be commanded by you,’ said Gundobar. Hadiah only smiled, as sweet as honey.

‘As you wish, my lord.’

Danger. I paused. Why had the birds stopped singing? Ebba and Colfinn sang together, their voices mingling. *Danger.*

We will need you, I heard Sanafin murmur, just as she had moments before she died. *Meet me in the—*

I grabbed Hadiah’s hand and dragged her to the ground just as arrows hissed overhead, thudding into the bark about us. I shuddered, remembering a Cynghal shaft in a beloved throat, a spray of blood. Not this time. But Gundobar screamed, one cutting the edge of his cloak, another slicing his arm before he made it to the root-bound earth.

‘Up, Hadi!’ I used my cousin’s nickname, pulling her to her feet and out of the woods, back onto the hannerast where Marolyn had drawn her dagger. The voices of the trees fell away, and were replaced by a Merogian war cry.

Folk in ragged tunics and berry-smudged faces ran out of the forest depths, eyes bright and teeth shining. There were not many of them, perhaps fifteen men and women wielding scythes, scramasaxes, wooden

spears and axes, harrying the trained guards who had drawn their hard blades of iron and steel.

‘Inside the carriage!’ said Marolyn, struggling to hide her excitement. I understood it. Merogians. Rebels. Bandits. We had heard of their deeds, hoped for their victories.

But they had tried to kill us. My siblings’ souls had reached for me, and told me there was danger.

Brave Hadiah pushed me ahead of her into the shelter of our carriage, as Marolyn ducked from two more arrows that slammed into the wood.

‘I knew that tree didn’t fall on its own,’ she said, clambering inside. Her hand flexed around her scramasax, wanting to use it on Cynghals and Galenish. But she would not leave me.

‘What kind of power tears a tree from its roots?’ hissed Hadiah. ‘It is sacrilege.’

Thudding footsteps reached us before Marolyn could close the door, and a hand thrust inside. Dirty-nailed, thick knuckled.

‘Peace, King Tilde!’ His Merogian accent held the easten burr of Kanaaan. Like Sanafin’s.

The rebel took the chance to scrabble inside, shutting the door behind him. He stank of blood, fur and leather; in the closeness of the carriage it was overpowering. His eyes below his cap – sewn with goat horns – were grey as flint. There was no spark in them, no softness.

‘We have only moments,’ he said. I could feel Hadiah trembling, and I put myself in front of her. Outside the war cries were twisting into screams of pain. ‘Come with us.’

‘Where?’ said Marolyn, half crouched, breathing fast.

‘Into the kithwood,’ he said. ‘Now.’

‘They’ll follow us!’ gasped Hadiah. ‘We’re outnumbered.’

‘Off the paths, where they cannot follow, and they’ll go mad in the dark.’

‘Will we not go mad?’ She was thinking of all the tales, of loved ones twisted, lost, broken by the forest.

‘Not if you know the Ways,’ he said, looking at me. ‘The true Ways. The old Ways.’ The Ways were nought but the practices of our faiths, our celebrations of the seasons, the method of our prayers. But he said it differently. Strangely. As if there was something living beneath the surface of the word. ‘They have been hidden from us too long, but deep roots still drink, and the druidim rise.’

I took a step towards him. Druidim? I had never heard of them. Marolyn relaxed a little, she would do as I did. She had seen Sanafin's body shrouded by my thorns. 'You know the Ways?' I whispered to him, and those lightless eyes smiled.

'You are known,' he told me. 'We will fight back against the swan.'

You are known, the woods had said. He knew this magic, the power to uproot trees, to turn a corpse into flowers. Oh, how I wanted to go with him.

Danger.

No. Whether I allowed my mother's advice to grow or my own thirst for vengeance to choke it, if I went with him I would be going into an unknown future, in the hands of others. Few of them, it seemed, if they only sent fifteen fighters to try and steal a princess.

No more failed rebellions.

'We don't need saving,' I said at last, and I felt Hadiah's sigh of relief as she held on to my shoulder. 'Leave us, while you can.'

His body tensed, his chapped lips turning down. 'You chose this?' he said. 'To marry the invader?'

'I chose this,' I said. 'Trust that I act only in the best interest of Mero—'

I did not finish before he slapped me, hard, with the back of his hand. Hadiah screamed as I fell back, tasting blood. Marolyn cried in outrage as she leapt for him, but he was ready, he grabbed her arm and shoved her by the head into the bench.

The look in his eyes was the cold aggression of a wolf. And I understood why the arrows had shot towards us.

'You royals gave our lands away like midwinter gifts,' he growled, drawing a sickle from his belt, the bronze-blade already bloody.

My head spun as I fumbled towards Marolyn's cloak, knowing she'd hidden a sword in it. As the sickle came down I flung it up, the assassin's blade slamming into the sheath.

'I knew this was a fool's errand,' he snarled, pressing down, 'to rescue the blood that destroyed the true power of the Ways, that made us weak, then bent the knee to tyrants. The kith will curse you for your frailty, and so do I.'

He lifted his sickle again, unaware that Marolyn had found her feet, and this time her loyalty to me drove her hand. No more hesitation: she slammed her knife into the soft crook of his neck. As he stumbled, she wrenched it out clean, and red blood followed it in a vicious spray. The

rebel clasped the wound, mouth gaping as blood stained his teeth and tongue, then he fell just as the door wrenched open.

Marolyn turned, trembling, her dagger still bared and bloody, but it was a Cynghal warrior in armour plates, his face red with the work of killing.

'What the—'

The taste of red copper in my own mouth, I shoved past him into the light of the road. My people were fighting for failure. There were six still brawling, the rest dead or dying on Cynghal blades. These folk knew the Ways, had walked the kithwood's paths. They had come for me, and I had refused them.

I could not tell them what I intended, that I wished to be their martyr. Someone they would sing better songs of than Isabella. But I could show them they had lost, that they must run.

I let out a cry, a keening, deep and loud. The sound of mourning, the song of wordless grief, hard and fierce as I could manage. There were words I could sing with the keening, but I did not need them. Marolyn and Hadiah's voices joined my own. They knew this sound, like the beat of their own heart, and so did the surviving rebels.

They turned and ran, ghosting into the shadows of the trees.

'Follow them!' yelled Gundobar, who had crawled out of the wood, clutching his bleeding arm. 'Hunt them down!'

The guards hesitated, one took three steps towards the trunks and turned grey with fear, touching the horn-carved amulet of the Wing at his neck.

'Hold!' I said. I had to distract them enough to let the Merogians flee. One day, when they heard the tales of my deeds, I hoped they would know why. 'The Wing protects us on this road,' I told the warriors, 'shading us under the clear sky.' I pointed upwards, my fingers spread. 'As you brave warriors protected me for your king. Let us not forsake god's grace.'

One of the younger Cynghals lifted his hand with me, fingers spread and grinning. 'For Cynghal!' he cried. 'And the Wing!'

'Cynghal!'

'For the new queen!'

I wanted to spit to hear the swan's guard cheer for me. How wild it was. How cruel.

How powerful.

My mother's doubt put out a tiny root, burrowing into my heart.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Seven

Elise

This would no longer be her mother's room.

Though the court was a moving body, shifting between city, country and castle, Elise knew this was her mother's favourite sanctuary: the tower chamber in Falcan's palace, facing west, over Salt Lake, towards Galen.

Falcan buildings, even the older ones, had a Galenishness to them with their pointed windows and notched beams, so her mother's rippling furniture with mother-of-pearl inlay did not look out of place. She had hung Galenish tapestries on the wall, covering up the old whitewash: courtly tales of women in love, and scenes showing the creation of Holy Isle, priests greeting a Galenish king under a sky full of birds. Isabella could not go home, so she built it wherever she could. And, in her grace, Ducal Uhtren's wife, Lady Cynefel, had not moved a single thing since her death.

In these rooms, Elise had known a different mother than the serene face of court. Here, Isabella had laughed, ached, grieved and raged. Here she had taught Elise and her sisters to dance, to weave, to sing, had bade them stand and read epic romance poems in Galenish. Mostly Erelle and Isuire, for she could not bear Elise's tripping over the letters. Elise had not minded; as the littlest, she was the fetcher, going for new threads, little tarts, fine wine, a physik, a midwife, seeing how fast she could race to the kitchen and back to this nest of firelight and sweetness.

There was sourness too. This was the bed her mother chose for her lyings in. These were the walls where her shrieks had echoed. This was the bed in which she had died.

The good was trapped between the bad, like flowers pressed between pages.

'Do it, Elise-hyem!'

The whisper was from her youngest brother, Hein, who stood at the door, too afraid to come inside and step over the reeds, scented with orange blossom and dried lavender, as she had done.

'This is not the behaviour of royalty, Hein-hyem,' Elise chided, biting back her smile. In her hands she held a silver fish. Her brother had brought

it to her with the pride of a cat with a face full of cream. Not that he liked cats, for he had a pet mouse he kept in his pockets. He called it Mog.

‘Oh *please*! No one will know.’ He was eight, and she twenty-two. She should not be swayed by him and his stolen fish. ‘It’s not fair that a Merogian gets Mama’s room,’ he pushed. ‘Lady Cynefel should have said no.’

‘Lady Cynefel is a Merogian,’ Elise reminded him. Ducal Uhtren had married the Falcan girl at their father’s behest, sealing the peace with the mid-western Merogian kingdom. Elise did not know her well, for it seemed her mother had occupied every moment of her days.

‘She’s not like the rest of them,’ said Hein pertly and with a confidence Elise could never understand.

Elise sighed and took her tiny threadknife from her pocket, weighing it in her free hand. Oh, how she longed to be wicked. Conrin could do any foul thing and not fear the act would unravel him. He often did. She had seen his horse strike illegally in the arena, but had heard nothing else of it, not even a servant’s grumble, and he had worn his winner’s crown for three days.

‘Ugh, Elise, come on have some fun for once.’

Elise smiled in resignation and bent to the mattress. Using her fine blade, she slit apart the threads at the seam, holding it up so the feathers and straw would not spill out. It was only a childish jape, and Elise was delighted that at least one of her brothers still needed her for something. They rarely came to her now, even though she had swaddled them when they were fresh and sticky with life, brought them to their wetnurses, soothed them when they cried.

Once, even she and Conrin had run together with their training blades, clashing, bruising, drawing blood and excited yells from each other under the booming cheer of their father. Those golden moments now felt so far away.

Inside went the fish as Hein chuckled, and with quick, fine stitches she sewed the mattress up and pulled the quilts back over it, hiding all evidence.

She stepped back, then turned, lifting her skirts so as not to disturb the petals strewn across the matting. As the smallest reward, she walked past the shelf with the books and allowed herself the slightest trail of her fingers over their spines. There was not a trace of dust on her mother’s precious collection, and Elise wished she could take just one away with her, where the intruding Merogian could not touch them.

No. Not now. Not ever. Her father's fury still echoed in her mind, cracking at her edges: *The pain we have taken to tutor her, despite her failings, and this is the slander she puts it to? Take her books! Burn them! She is not to read another word till she has earned our forgiveness.*

She swallowed and dragged her eyes away. She would never again disobey her father. She would never again see the colours on the parchment, the dancing little letters with magic inside. As a small comfort, her mother had still read aloud as Elise tended to her.

Now, even her mother's voice was gone. As she took her hand from the books, grief set its claws into her heart. She gasped with the pain of it, her breath tight, her chest fluttering.

Come sit with me.

What fine weaving, Elise.

Hold little Hamlin, do you think he will die?

Motherhood is pain, daughter.

You are too old to be innocent now.

Elise had never felt innocent. Not since she had seen her first childbirth, since she had watched her brother kill a man, since she had seen her sister's empty eyes.

And now there was pain where innocence should be.

'Elise-hyem?' Hein was frowning at her, concerned. He took a step inside, though he had been too afraid before, and put his little hand in hers. His hair, as fair as her own, and their mother's, shone in the sunlight.

Elise breathed through the pain, and smiled.

'I am well,' she lied. Hein reached into his pocket, and pulled out the mouse, who sat blinking with rumpled fur.

'Mog is proud of you,' he told her. The mouse twitched his nose.

Then the gate horns blasted, loud through the window, and they all jumped, Mog included. Hein stuffed him back into his pocket.

The new queen had come.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Eight

Tilde

A fortnight since the hannerast, and the rebel's death was still a presence, in the wood, in the cloth, like sour metal and stinking meat. His blood, despite sand and water scrubbing, had sunk into the grains of the boards.

Marolyn kept running her thumbs over her palms, looking at a particular stain on the ceiling. Every so often she let out a quiet murmur of Merogian song, a keen so faint it could barely be heard. But I felt it.

It sat with us on our journey, the knowledge: we had killed a Merogian, one who spoke of the power of the kithwood, the power I longed for. A chance had come for us, and we had cut it loose.

Better, I told myself, a knife in a hand than a sword still heating in the forge. This magic, this power of the Ways, was as lost to me as Sanafin. And, according to the rebel, our bloodlines were to blame for it.

'We've left the trade road,' said Hadiah, picking through some walnuts that Marolyn had bought the day before from a merchant travelling north with her own band of surly guards. Passing traders made good business with royal trains, selling titbits and treats to anyone from cobbler to queen.

'We must be getting close,' said Marolyn, and my heart throbbed with a sudden terror. I clenched my teeth against it. 'My body aches inside this infernal, stinking box.'

'And my head with your infernal, stinking temper,' I nudged her. She smiled weakly.

'My temper is just fine,' she said. 'It's quick, but sure footed. Like a fox.'

'It's quick as a toad's tongue,' I said, 'and just as ugly.'

She was smirking now. 'Slick as lightning, and just as bright.'

'Bitter as lemon, and as tough to chew.'

Hadiah snorted in a manner most unladylike, and that set us all to laughing as noise rose around us. Hooves then wheels on cobblestone rattled our ears and teeth, but beyond it I could hear the lowing of cattle, the shrieking of children. The sounds of the living, the settled, a city, after so long on the road.

'I thought we were going to Anailmor,' I muttered.

‘They call it Salt Lake now,’ said Hadiah.

‘Salt Lake?’ scoffed Marolyn.

But she fell silent as I drew back the curtain and opened the shutter only to be greeted by a crowd of moving bodies, shifting handcarts, children chasing rats from tiny crooked stalls and the fronts of fine houses built from fresh wood.

Anailmor had been a small village. It kept fed the fortress guarded by the kings of Falcan and the saltmakers’ homes. Its name had meant ‘the breath of the sea’, for its silver lake of brackish water that came inland from the western coast. The trading towns were to the north, south and east, between the hannerest ways, so the salt, pearls and famed ironwork of Falcan country could be bartered with the rest of Merogia.

‘Clear the way for the ambassador! Clear!’ came the calls ahead, and the press of bodies around us softened only slightly. There were a mixture of voices, even languages, mainly Cynghal and Galenish, Merogian, perhaps a glittering of more distant tongues from the west and east. A whip cracked near us as a cattle driver shifting a number of pigs hallooed at the carters and oyster sellers to move aside or be crushed by the heavy beasts.

We slowed to a crawl as the road became busier. This was not a village. This was a city, fresh built and smelling of woodsap and a thousand cookfires. Small crofters sold bundles of spring greens, sour plums and preserves, while merchants with large stalls had servants calling patrons forth in bellowing voices and the ringing of bells. Folk wore mixed clothing, the broad shoulders of Cynghal combined with the deep slashes and dangling sleeves of Galen or the coloured stitching and beading of Merogians.

‘I thought the games were over?’ said a woman who was gossiping by the road as we inched past while balancing a half-woven fish basket between her knees. She had the hard, clipped tone of a native Cynghal speaker.

‘Thank the Wing for that,’ said the old man next to her, with a Merogian burr, an unlit clay pipe hanging from his lip. He was at the same task, expertly threading waving willow-twigs through harder bones of birch. ‘Every time those damned princes throw a joust or a party someone gets hurt.’

‘I hear you. But it’s a fine carriage that, no?’

The man glanced up, then his eyes went round and the pipe dropped out.

‘That’s an Ardweni carriage,’ he said. Beside him two more folk paused mid barter. ‘I haven’t seen the like in …’

He met my gaze. ‘Princess Ardweni!’ he said, standing. ‘It’s … the new queen!’

A brief hush fell around us, filled with craning necks and gawping mouths, and then a racket sprang up from the street as the crowd turned from their business to attend to me.

‘The Merogian queen!’

‘Peace at last!’

‘Queen Tilde!’

‘Blessed be the Wing!’

Acting on instinct, I unbolted the door and let in the noise. Then, with Marolyn’s grin and Hadiah’s headshake of acquiescence, we descended without a step, landing on the stone and dung and straw to be met with a roar of approval.

Marolyn walked by me like a shield as I smiled and waved, while Hadiah adjusted my cloak.

‘You are a menace,’ she laughed in my ear. But if this was to be my last journey to my death, I wanted to show I was not afraid. I was proud. That was what their songs would sing of.

‘Palati!’ shouted the carriage driver, summoning Gundobar as we passed him. ‘She’s … she’s got down!’

‘What are you doing?’ cried Gundobar, who I saw was mounted at the front of our train, too far forward to turn back against the crush of the mainstreet. ‘Get back in your carriage!’

I pretended not to hear him. I was on Merogian soil, and would not let him command me. Folk crowded towards us as we made our way up the road, our carriage following behind.

‘May you bear the seed to plant our future,’ a Falcan woman blessed me, tiny mother-of-pearl earrings shining against her red hair.

‘Make us a true prince of the swan,’ said a man who I noted was kind-faced before I saw he was Cynghal, old and missing three fingers. I let his hand touch mine, then ruffled the hair of three children who ran past, carrying poppets shaped like knights and racing them together.

But even in the excitement, I heard foul words.

‘Ardweni whore,’ muttered a merchant woman in the deep-waisted cote of Galen as the children ran back and around our feet, shouting ‘hello’ in

three languages. I ignored her, but her companion shouted after us.

‘Barbarian witch!’

Hadiah glanced back, afraid, and I took her hand. ‘Marolyn will help if we need it,’ I reassured her.

‘I do not fear words,’ said Hadiah. ‘I fear a riot.’

But we continued without incident down what opened into a wide central avenue between garlands on buildings, bundles of flowers and green leaves that were dropping, the remains of this festival.

‘We came here, with my father,’ I murmured to Hadiah. ‘To see off my father before he fell in the north.’ Things were still hopeful then, Gevera and Widdin had fallen, Hallion had knelt, but Falcan, Ardwen, Kanaan and Torcros still stood proud against the onslaught from the north and west. ‘How could it have changed so much in ten years?’

We were interrupted by a woman standing in the crowd, a smith judging by her leather apron. ‘Make the swan princes pay!’ she yelled to be heard over the rest. ‘Make them pay for Rhiannor!’

The guards of the train turned as a girl came running out beside the woman. ‘Hush,’ she said, pulling her away. ‘It’s not worth your life!’

One of the Gundobar’s Galenish knights pointed two Cynghals in their direction, and they broke off, shoving two traders aside. Someone cried out in alarm, and Hadiah tightened her hand on me. What could I do? I could try to call them back, but they did not obey me, they were not mine. Marolyn, the beautiful fool, was tensing beside me, ready to dive straight into the crowd, like the hero I wished I was.

Instead, I feigned a fall, stumbling over my knees, hitting the ground hard, my skirt dipping in the muck and straw of the road. I yelped as I landed, as loud as I could. ‘Oh!’

‘Ah!’ Hadiah dropped me and looked around for the guards. ‘Please! Help the princess!’ she cried loudly, as Marolyn looked at me in bafflement.

‘Can’t you stay upright?’ she scowled, glancing back. But the knights who had started to push into the crowd had paused, seeing their charge was apparently felled.

‘Oh, Wing bless me that this long journey is over,’ I said, raising my hands. The knights turned back. ‘Blessed be the shade of the god that has brought us to the safety of the Cynghal court.’

‘Laying it a little thick,’ said Hadiah, and Marolyn understood as she helped me up, shaking her head.

‘It worked,’ she muttered. When the warriors looked back for the shouting woman, she and the girl had melted away into the shadows, taking their anger with them.

It took us an age to peel away from the town, followed by a little train of people until common sense and work pulled them back within their new city walls.

The road around the lake was surrounded by fields of barley and flax, rippling and shifting in the summer wind. The only noise now was from the children running scarum through the barley, clapping sticks and ribbons to chase away the eager birds as the local folk worked with scythes to draw in the first crop of the year.

It was not enough to scare the white bird from the walls of the old Merogian keep: Liran’s swan, crowned in gold, flew out from the repointed curtain wall. With it shone the colours of the Galenish ducal, Uhtren, who had been handed the ancestral Merogian seat as a fat little prize for his work in landing ships and killing our folk. He had been given a Falcan princess too, as a wife or a hostage, or both, and I saw none of the fish of her banner’s sigil from the walls.

Cynefel. I met her once, and thought her too old and grand for the friendship of a ten year old, and she cared more for the company of Colfinn than I. Those days were hazy with the gathering of armies and mutterings of raids in the north.

Still, I remembered what was missing from the landscape: forest.

‘What is it, Tilde?’ said Hadiah, who had been turning her face up to the sun while Marolyn stared down the walls as if they might come to face and fight her.

I didn’t know how to tell her that the earth thrummed around me, like a cry in the dark, cut off. That I saw our future in Cynghal hands. Liran would have us bare of woodland, our strongholds infested like empty trunks, the ancient places split open and carved out while the towns and cities in Ardwen fell apart, like Sanafin, into dying blooms and darkness.

What cruelty was this, that those who turned to Cynghal thrived for it? Did they not remember their royal bloodlines killed in their market squares, their organs drawn through their flesh, their children sold like chattel? Did they not remember their ancestors, their fates? It was not right that life went

on oblivious to our pain. Nor that all the world turned their back on us and pretended we had never been.

‘Tilde?’ said Marolyn.

I had not forseen this. I had expected my people to be waiting for me in anguish, to come, to strike, to fall, so they could rise.

May you bear the seed to plant our future.

They were not waiting. Falcan was so defeated that these folk had forgotten they were fighting. Even the woman who had shouted her protest against the princes had disappeared at the first chance, and the crowd had faltered at the step of a single knight.

I was willing to die for them, but were they willing to live for me?

Instead of saying such things, all I told them was: ‘This all used to be kithwood.’ Then I nodded to the green and gold fields.

Hadiah drew a breath in through her teeth, and Marolyn covered her eyes with both hands then muttered a faint prayer.

The keep rose above us, most of it rebuilt, for between the digging of sappers and the strikes of mangonels, the walls and much of the inner hall had crumbled. Now, Galenish style had taken over construction, and blue-pointed roofs of new slate sat over rounded walls and buildings enough to house a town.

‘They must have gutted the hills as deeply as the forest to build all this,’ said Marolyn.

‘My brother says they pressure him to build new walls and gatehouses in Scorda,’ said Hadiah. ‘They want it to look different, feel different.’

‘And to give people work,’ said Marolyn. ‘Tired folk don’t fight.’

‘Nor rich ones,’ I muttered.

My mother’s doubt was growing in me, eating at my resolve. I tried to picture the old king, weak and doddering, battle scarred and ready to die. My singular purpose had given me focus this last year, something to hope for. I had dreamed of my death so often it felt like it had grown inside me, and was only waiting to fruit.

But was I ready to die for a world so changed?

Do not cut off the swan’s head and call it vengeance while its poison seeps out. Pluck out its feathers, silence its beak, destroy its nest and set a snake on its young.

If this was Falcan, the last to fall before the kingsmoot, what of Widdin, Gevera and Hallion? The lands of the fox, the bear, the horse? Did they

welcome the Wing and its priests now with open hands, as long as they were paid in silver and fine silk? How changed had they become? How dependent on the invaders' coin?

What if Liran's death would not unify Merogia, but finally and utterly split it apart?

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Nine

Elise

‘Come on.’ Hein pulled Elise back through the keep, skirting around servants, nobles and priests. ‘Isen says we should look our enemies in the eye.’

Elise let herself be led, but to hear an eight-year-old boy say ‘enemy’ … it flapped that wing of god’s warning in her chest.

Will you take on this duty, Elise-hyem? Her father had called her name, had asked for her help. *Will you hold it fast with us?*

‘Be gentle with your words, Hein,’ she said reluctantly. ‘She has not hurt us yet.’

‘Well Egil says it is better to cut off a snake’s head before it strikes,’ said Hein stoutly. ‘Not after.’

The wing flapped harder.

‘What have I told you about listening too much to your brothers?’ said Elise.

‘Nothing interesting.’

Elise laughed, carefully light. It would happen soon, as it had before: Hein would change from curious and innocent to hard and superior. He would forget to spare her a glance, let alone a kind word. It was the way of things; her brothers were princes, and higher in the Wing’s grace. Birds did not look down unless they were hunting.

They came up to the balcony terrace that had been built on the second floor over the great gate of the keep. Here, wooden pillars held up a shingle roof, carved to look as if birds were flying up to roost beneath the red-painted arches.

The court’s women sat there in the summer months to hear the court sessions echoing in the receiving hall below, and observe the view over Salt Lake. Today, it shone vivid blue then dim grey beneath the bright and blustering sky. Beyond, smoke rose from the sprawling town—a testament to the greatness Cynghal had brought to Merogia—and steam from the salterns in the marshes.

Elise was surprised to find the space occupied by her younger brothers.

Conrin turned as he heard their footsteps, his fair hair swept back behind his ears and standing as straight-backed as he could so he looked of a height with Gaisa. He wore his usual shining grey tabard, edged in silver wire and bearing the cross-winged swan over his heart. Gaisa stood near him, dark-haired like their father but tall like their mother. He wore his tunic belted with silver links, the neck open, and he had turned his pretty smile on a serving girl who was being shown the nicked edge of his blade. His shirt beneath was a darker grey than Conrin's, but it showed where his loyalty belonged.

'What are you doing here?' said Conrin.

'We live here,' said Elise, drily.

The second youngest, Egil, chuckled where he sat in the shade. He was pale and freckled, his hair a mousy shade of brown, though perhaps if he spent more time in the sun rather than at his books it might have lightened. Even now he scribbled notes as he copied items from a bound ledger to a scroll of vellum.

'We heard the horns, Conrin-hyem,' said Hein, bowing.

'Yes the bitch is come,' muttered Conrin, waving his hand out towards the town. On the road between the palace and Salt Lake were two carriages and several riders and footguards, their bodies all tangling together from this distance. 'I understand Lady Cynefel has made her chambers *quite* welcoming. I suppose all their kind likes to lick each other's boots when they're not stabbing each other in the back.'

They were not alone for such talk. Other than serfs serving sweetmeats, bread and cheese, Lady Amalle of Galen, Conrin's long-betrothed, sat on a cushioned bench beneath the shelter. Like Conrin, she always kept a shadow, and her choice of the season was Lady Daegmar, a daughter of Widdin, so a Merogian, who was married to one of Conrin's joust-mates. She reddened and lowered her head at the prince's words, but said nothing. Amalle reached over to squeeze her hand.

'Do not blame Lady Cynefel for doing as she should,' said Elise, despite herself. 'Remember she is lady here, and our host.'

'I thought Mother taught you to sheathe your sharp tongue, Elise,' Conrin rebuffed her.

'I thought she taught you manners, Brother-hyem,' said Elise, folding her arms.

‘Please,’ said Amalle with appeasing grace. ‘Tempers run too hot under bright sun.’

Elise bit her tongue. Perhaps, in playing Hein’s small prank on the queen, she had taken too strong a sip from the cup of rebellion, and had not quenched her thirst, but wanted more.

She schooled herself into a smile and went to sit with the Galenish woman, who was dressed in a belted tabard of soft pink over silk-lined sleeves, carefully matched to Conrin’s grey. Daegmar wore slightly plainer cloth of yellow, which looked poor against her creamy skin, and it was edged with minever fur at its sleeves and waist, which was split over her swelling pregnant belly.

Her homeland was famous for fur and tile, and her husband, Markal Thedemer took a rich tax on either of those exports that passed through the great forest road over which he governed. Elise suspected he dressed the girl to show off such wares to the court and, being barely fifteen, she let him.

‘What are you all doing here anyway?’ said Hein, distracted from the slow approach of the carriages. ‘You said this was a gossip pot for women who wished they were at court.’

Conrin cleared his throat with a glance at Amalle, and cuffed him, none-too lightly. Hein scowled, putting his hand protectively over Mog in his pocket.

‘Conrin has been summoned to answer to court,’ said Egil, then added pointedly: ‘Which explains his foul mood.’

‘All of us have been summoned,’ corrected Gaisa, putting the point of his blade back to his sheath with a quickness that made the serving girl jump. He pushed back his dark hair and smiled at her, but she knew her cue, and retreated to the shade of the balcony.

Elise glanced to the door that led down to the hall. The rumblings of court echoed up the steps, rising into stern debate, foaming into shouts, then falling again into steady, rippling murmurs of men.

‘And whose fault is that?’ Egil countered. He had ink on the russet sleeve of his shirt, but Egil had little mind for fine fashion, instead practising their father’s eye for the value of hard laws and good records. Ink bound their empire as strongly as blood.

‘Prince Hein,’ said Amalle, trying again to soften them, ‘would little Mog like a treat?’

Hein, whose prankish mood had been dampened by his brothers' bickering, brightened again, and went to her.

'It is much too hot in the gardens at this time of year,' Amalle smiled at him as she held out a plate of marzipan, which he quickly offered to his rumpled pet.

'I can't bear it,' said Daegmar piteously, her hand over her belly. 'The sun is too hot and the wind is too cold.'

Amalle laughed, now proffering the plate to Elise. 'It is good to see you in colour again, Princess,' she said. 'Blue brings out your bright eyes.'

Elise flushed. Amalle was the picture of courtly grace, her chestnut hair braided back from her temples and nape in the fashion that blended Cynghal plaiting and Galenish coifs.

'It does not fit well,' Elise demurred, refusing the expensive sweets, though her mouth watered for them. The only cloth she could find that was close enough to mourning—without being Conrin's grey—was a light blue gown of Isabella's, who had been almost as tall as Elise, but not so broad, and so it was tight at the thighs, belly, breasts and shoulders, even though she had let it out.

'It shows your fine shape,' said Amalle, and Elise looked sharply at her, expecting some jest at her expense, but found none. Instead, her eyes caught on the freckles that marked the lady's pink upper lip, breaking the perfect point of her cupid's bow. Elise wondered what it would be like to press that blemish, and feel the softness there.

She bit her cheek, hard. She was just a moth, caught in the warmth of Amalle's lantern glow. Such tender thoughts, Elise knew, were close to sinning. That was what her mother had taught her. Her bone shuttle was deep in her pocket, she couldn't fiddle for it without drawing attention, and instead turned to Egil, who had paused with his writing and was watching her.

'Why have you been summoned?' she asked, hoping that the heat she felt in her face could be passed as summer flush. Amalle's mouth twitched in disappointment that Elise had fumbled her politesse, and turned back to the more difficult topics.

'A misunderstanding,' said Conrin, scowling where he had turned to face back over the balustrade.

'He lost his temper on the jousting field,' Egil explained.

The rearing horse, the kick of the stallion, a man falling. Elise could not admit she had seen it.

‘Jousting is so often dangerous,’ said Daegmar.

‘I am sure the court will find you innocent,’ Amalle agreed.

‘There is nothing to be found,’ snapped Conrin, pacing now. ‘One idiot man and one stupider commoner who does not even count.’ He closed his eyes and breathed out through his nose with frustration. ‘Apologies, Lady Amalle, for my curtness.’

‘I understand,’ said Amalle with her unerring smile, though the current of reprimand lay beneath. Amalle was the perfect match for a prince, her father a ducal in her homeland, her uncle the king’s own high priest, but still they were not permitted to marry till the prince had won more than a joust, one of their father’s only rules for his sons. She was not here for love, she had invested her time into this betrothal, and it would be wasted if Conrin’s reputation were to tumble.

‘Count for what?’ said Elise.

‘Eh?’ said Conrin, half listening.

‘You said a commoner doesn’t count,’ Hein reminded him. Mog was chewing through a large almond. Conrin clicked his tongue.

‘Always picking at threads, Elise,’ he said.

‘What do you think this queen will be like?’ said Amalle, still trying to wean them all from their aggravation.

‘She’s not a queen yet,’ said Gaisa.

‘I hear she has warts,’ said Daegmar. Gaisa laughed, and two bright spots of pink rose in her cheeks. She looked at him like a cup she wanted to drink from.

‘Gaisa told me that she eats with her bare hands,’ added Hein.

‘We all eat with our hands,’ said Egil, tipping his head in bafflement.

‘We eat with spoons and knives,’ said Gaisa, adjusting the open neck of his shirt. ‘Like civilised folk.’

‘Next time you pick up your bread with a spoon, I’ll remind you of that.’

Hein giggled, but stopped quickly when Gaisa glared at him. ‘Go back to your book keeping and sheathe your sword-tongue, snoutband,’ he growled at Egil, who was unperturbed.

‘Well, you’d know all about sheathing swords, Gaisa,’ he said, his tone dripping with implication, and he sat back. ‘And at least I can read more than the Lists.’

‘I can read. I’m not Elise.’

Elise’s blood ran hot, and a hum of pain strung between them, a vibration in the air. Amalle and Daegmar very carefully did not look at her.

‘How gallant,’ she said, raising an eyebrow at Gaisa.

She was perfectly capable of reading, it had just taken her longer than her brothers to learn, much to the ire of their parents. But they knew why she had been banned from practice. At least some of it.

Gaisa had the decency to look a little sheepish. ‘Sorry, Elise-hyem.’

‘Is she *walking*?’ said Hein suddenly, still peering out at the carriages. Elise frowned, and turned. He was right, three women were on their feet, walking on the road between the horses. ‘Doesn’t she ride?’

‘Merogians don’t ride,’ said Conrin.

‘What? At all?’ Hein was baffled. ‘Don’t they hunt?’

‘Merogians hunt by foot,’ said a familiar voice behind them.

They all turned. Isen stood in the shadow of the stairwell, dressed in his clean, customary black. ‘Their native beasts are ponies and oxen,’ he added. ‘For labour, not for war. One of our many advantages.’

Amalle recovered first from the sudden intrusion, standing up to bow to Prince Isen. The others followed suit. All except Conrin.

‘I see father sent his prized hound to fetch me,’ he said.

‘I see you still have the petulance of a child,’ said Isen. ‘Come.’

‘I would like to come too,’ said Amalle quickly, dusting off her skirts and, for the first time Elise had seen, reddening. ‘To see my betrothed at court.’

Isen’s expression did not twitch, and he looked at Elise. ‘She will need an escort,’ he said.

Amalle looked at Elise, her pink mouth pert and pleading. Elise had not been to the main court, her father’s court, since Isabella had all but retired from it. Women were only permitted to enter if they had a higher-ranking noblewoman as their chaperone. The queen.

Or the king’s daughter, Elise realised with a jolt.

‘Of course,’ she said, and Amalle smiled.

Elise’s brothers filed out, even Hein, but before she followed them with Amalle, she found her eyes pulled back to the carriages that were drawing in through the gates of the keep, and the women walking with them. Two, one tall, one short, one dark, one fair, flanking a third.

Her.

The Ardweni’s hair was long and black, hanging to her waist in two braids wrapped in red silk around an angular face. Like many southern Merogians, her skin was gold-brown, and her strong brow and proud nose spoke as much of her land’s ancient alliances with the eastern traders as the silver that shone from her fingers.

As if drawn by a call, her eyes slid up, finding Elise where she stood on the balcony.

That gaze was dark, as dark as the forest shadows that whispered to her dreams. This was the new queen, her father’s wife, her charge, and she was barely more than a girl.

Elise slid a hand into her inner pocket, fingering her bone-shuttle, but though she pressed it to her palm for that outer point of pain, a fluttering, twisting in her belly’s pit would not cease. It felt like a warning. It felt like fear.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Ten

Tilde

We entered a court in uproar. Ushered ahead by an insistent Gundobar, we found ourselves squeezed through the great open door of the palace. It seemed odd, but he made it clear our refusal would be an insult. I had not the sense to protest, my mind was still snared by the blue-grey gaze of the tall woman on the balcony. So directly she had pierced me, as if she were a hunter, and I her prey.

Such dull stories we had heard of the gentle and meek women of the Cynghal court. I had predicted they would all be small as saplings, but she had the stance, height and body of a fighter, though the bent neck of a Galenish woman who was ashamed of it.

Between a grey eye and Anailmor's new and riotous shape, and the forest clearances, I was not ready for the baying of men out for blood, their voices rising like wind on the flagstones.

'Even princes should take the justice of the king's law.'

'You mean to try a man before he has spoken!'

'I mean to believe the evidence of my eyes!'

Clear factions clustered among great pillars as large as tree trunks, carved in twisting, writhing bird-bodies, feathers, beaks, tangling together. Eyes bulged from the stone, some of them leafed in gold so they stared, shining in the light from the upper windows. Galenish nobles were marked by their cropped hair and slashed silk tunics in luxuriant reds, purples, blues. They mostly stayed together, the higher ranked wore jewels of gold and sapphire, the lesser bronze and garnet.

Cynghal cloth was more neutral, occasionally augmented with more eclectic linked chains and beads, as well as leather bracers and decorative chestplates. These factions were in tighter grumbling clusters amongst the sunbeams and their hair they wore longer, loose around the shoulders or tied in hunters' queues. Many had been given Galenish titles: palatis, markals or even ducals, while some retained their old title of erl. It was hard to distinguish them from each other.

Like the Merogian tarns. These were the third faction, their dress, like the townspeople's, a strange mixture of our own and their overlords'. Galenish tunics belted with Cynghal-style leather, the Wing pendants worn by the flock that followed the priests, some fancy threadwork on the brooches of their homelands.

As far as I could tell over the heads of shifting servants and haranguing nobles, these tarns were doing the most shouting, utterly drowning out the poor dark-haired bard who was plucking at his lyre strings and trying to soothe them. Their ire targeted specifically at a knot of Galenish who were surrounding two youths protectively. One had fair hair, one so dark brown it was almost black, and they both wore the same expression of haughty disdain on their pale faces. Most of their companions sported sashes or shirts in shades of priestly grey, and the fair-haired youth a tunic in the silver cloth.

'You spit and fight like dogs,' said a young man beside them, wearing the silver brooch of a markal.

'Better to bark like a dog than whimper like a pup,' snarled a tarn.

'Please,' came a voice from the far end of the hall, at the foot of a marble dais. A man with a Manirish look about him, with tight coiled hair and dark skin, but he wore the colours I had seen on the flags outside the palace. Ducal Uhtren. 'Peace in the king's presence.'

The king. My enemy.

He sat on a dais, shadowed away from the bright shafts of sunlight, and wreathed in the smoke of fragrant braziers. I had been expecting a grim and ancient creature, haggard and frail, eaten by his own evil like a vine wrinkling and narrowing with the onslaught of parasites.

I was wrong.

He was old, yes, his dark hair was turning to silver, his shaven chin frosted with it, but he dominated the throne on which he sat. His shoulders seemed to cast shade upon the high wooden back of his seat, its points above his head echoing the shapes of the Nests they built on our shores to house their god. The seat itself was bronze, and the armrests curving like swans' necks beneath the thick knuckles of his hands. In grim silence, he watched the scrapping of his combined nations, his knees apart, his eyes glinting in his scarred and wrinkled face like chips of ice formed in Cynghal.

My betrothed. My victim. He did not look like a victim. Could I put a knife in that thick neck, through that narrow eye?

At the foot of the marble steps that held his throne stood an echo of him, a stout young man with a closed expression. The same black hair, the same blue eyes. The black prince. Isen, they called him. It had to be. The boy who had brought his father's army to our gates, allowed the torture of Colfinn and Ebba, and the execution of our warriors. Bile and bitterness rose in my throat, and it tasted like burning flesh.

The swan king had further echoes. Their colouring was different, but the two in the Galenish crowd had the same chin in different faces. The Grey Prince Conrin, and the Green, Gaisa. Another youth in a yellow jerkin had ink on his sleeves and his father in his eyes. Rumours rippled from every place their court stopped. A winter parade in Hallion turned into a violent havoc, the king's sons joining the guises then starting a riot, their guards painting houses in pigs' blood and loosing cattle onto the streets. A man who had spat on their shoes in Widdin, drawn and flogged with his children, their feet ripped raw in payment for the fine leather.

Near them stood a little child who was clutching his pocket to prevent the escape of a tiny, sniffling mouse, and the tall, fair woman I had seen on the balcony, standing quietly between the pillars with a bonny companion at her side. Now with the others, I spied her father and her brothers in her features, and I felt sick that I had for a moment thought her beautiful, the princess of the swan.

'Keep calm,' Hadiah murmured to Marolyn and I. 'We may yet survive this.'

If I had a knife in my hand then, a spear, anything, I do not know what I would have done. But I had nothing, not even power, I held only fists of air.

'Ducal Uhtren,' said a tarn, stepping forward from his fellows. I now noted a young boy amongst them. 'You are duty bound to protect the folk of your land. All of them, Merogian or Cynghal, prince or pauper, yet two are dead with no justice sought!'

A rumble of agreement, to my surprise, came from the Cynghals.

'This is not justice, this is a manhunt!' cried Prince Gaisa, to cries of approval and dismissal.

I noted a slight movement from the tyrant. Barely anything, he simply sat up straighter in his chair, and silence fell. As if he were a bird of prey, opening his wings overhead.

Into the quiet spoke a priest, his grey robes stitched with pale wings across his shoulders, marking him as high in the order.

‘Prince Conrin,’ he said with an expression of weary beneficence. ‘I, High Priest Dagobert, will speak on behalf of the case brought to high court.’ He glanced at the king, who gave no sign of approval or disapproval, so he ploughed on as a scribe hastily scratched the proceedings into one of many wax tablets arrayed beside him. ‘You have been accused of causing the death of a Cynghal yeoman during the summer melee.’

‘And a Merogian horsewife,’ said the tarn in the cluster of his men, who hushed him with frightened glances at the priest. So, this Dagobert was powerful. The boy with them clutched his cap and looked very much as if he wanted to disappear. Gundobar, still near us, gave a derisive scoff.

‘How do you plead?’ said Dagobert, opening his hand encouragingly to the prince, who offered him a slight smile.

‘I did not kill them,’ said Conrin. ‘They were taken into the grace of the Wing through no fault of mine.’

‘You charged straight through them when you fell off in the field!’ cried the young boy. ‘You rolled on to—’

A roil of discontent stirred the dust in the sunbeams and the ash from the unlit fire in the hall’s centre, and the eyes in the stone columns flashed gold with reflected sunlight from jewellery and armour. The air sang like a bowstring, and they were all aiming at each other. It eased the burning fear in my chest. All the terrors I had heard of the Cynghals and Galenish and their united might, and here they were ready to tear out each other’s throats.

‘Quiet!’ snapped Dagobert, flapping his long sleeves. He had a wan complexion, and were it not for his brown hair I think he would have faded into his robes. ‘You will speak when asked, and the prince is your lord.’

‘I hold that it was the horse that killed them!’ stated Conrin over the noise. ‘Not I. A kick should not be enough to kill a man, the yeoman must have had a weak heart. And the woman, well, she was Merogian; they do not know how to act around horses.’

‘That woman has been rearing stallions for longer than you’ve been alive, lad,’ said the tarn, putting his hand on the boy’s shoulder.

‘If Egil’s team had not fumbled at me so—’

‘Don’t blame me, you fop,’ scowled the yellow prince. ‘You should have accepted the fall.’

‘A man is not unhorsed until he is down,’ argued Gaisa. ‘He was right to —’ There was a groan of annoyance from a couple of Cynghals near me, and a glare from Liran cut the prince short, and he frowned at his feet.

‘They dragged me away from my comrades,’ continued Conrin, pink with the strain of raising his voice, and the hall quieted some to hear. ‘To the edge of the ring, and as I fought back a man stumbled out behind me. It was a glancing blow, but my steed was panicked. I guided him away—’

‘Does he think he can pretend we weren’t there to see it?’ muttered the annoyed Cynghal.

‘Of course he does,’ said his companion, then caught sight of me, and nudged his comrade, nodding in our direction. The two of them gawped, and I tried to ignore it.

‘My horse fell over the stand, and I leapt free.’ He made a gesture of panache, and was rewarded by a slight cheer from his allies. ‘When I calmed her I remounted, returning to the field, and this …’ he waved his hand with a dismissiveness that ground my teeth, ‘horsewife, you say. She practically ran in front of me. It is for this kind of reason the Synod advises women not to go to the games at all. Luckily our noblewomen set a better example.’

He nodded at the blonde princess and her companion, who bowed her head in gracious agreement. The princess stood rigid, perhaps not knowing what was expected of her. Her expression was unreadable, the same as the black prince. They were angry, I guessed, though I did not know if it was with their malignant brother, or the tarns who stood against him. I suspected the latter.

‘Prince Gaisa,’ said Dagobert, ‘you were on Conrin’s team, does this ring true to you?’

‘Of course,’ said Gaisa with a shrug. ‘It is as he says.’

I suspected how this would go. This prince could probably have drowned a man in front of a crowd and said it was the water that did it.

‘Then are we to believe commoners and Merogians over our princes?’ said the priest, not even looking at the young boy but addressing the court. He was met with cheers from the Galenish, and stifled outrage from the tarns.

‘But that wasn’t what happened!’ The boy spoke up, bravely; he was pale with terror.

‘Another prince was there,’ Dagobert spoke over him, turning to young Egil. ‘Do you deny your brother’s version of events?’

Despite his earlier protest, the yellow prince glanced at Conrin, then shrugged, backing down. He would not stand against his brother. Birds of a feather, flocking together.

‘Then what use has a boy?’ said Dagobert. ‘There are rules on whose voice holds sway at court.’

‘Perhaps in Galen,’ said Ducal Uhtren, to my surprise. ‘But in a Cynghal court, Priest Dagobert, all voices must be heard. Is that not right, King Liran?’

He turned back to the king, who did not look at Dagobert, but nodded.

Dagobert’s eye twitched, but then he waved for the boy to continue. I found my eye drawn again to the princess, who was biting her lip, one hand deep in her pocket. She was staring at the boy, a strange fearfulness passing over her face.

‘The horse kicked the yeoman front on,’ said the lad, finding his courage in the flagstones. ‘Not his hinds. After the prince reared her up. We was watching from the edge, my auntie and I, as we take care of the tarn’s horses and they’d been rented for the younger prince’s team. But he came charging to the edge and the beast was panicky. He hit the stands and rolled on to my aunt, falling her down.’ He sniffed. ‘She tried to get up, out of the way, but the prince got on his horse and charged back into the ring.’ He began to cry. ‘Didn’t even look back as he went over her.’

‘This is nonsense,’ said Dagobert.

‘That boy clearly just wants a payout for his aunt’s death,’ said Gaisa with a threatening look that the lad didn’t see. This wasn’t about the truth to the princes, it was about their pride.

‘I can vouch for my tenant,’ said the Merogian tarn who had taken the lead. ‘The honesty of the boy and his aunt has never been in question.’

‘If it is a matter of vouching,’ said Conrin smoothly, ‘I would be happy to settle for a trial of advocacy.’

Advocacy. Twelve noblemen or priests had only to stand with him, and swear to his character, and he would be cleared of charges. He could point at twelve Galenish or Cynghals in this room and tell them the sky was green and they would all swear on their lives that it had just changed colour.

‘Would anyone care to step forward for the ostler boy?’ said Dagobert. ‘Or the Cynghal yeoman?’

Silence drew out among the assembly. Those who were willing to bellow when others shouted were not willing to speak up as a voice alone.

‘Perhaps the new queen-to-be can settle the matter.’

I startled, staring at Gundobar, who had spoken with a special, cruel kind of flourish to his tone. It was too late to be discreet, a number had turned to us now, and the swan king’s blue eyes found mine.

If he was surprised, he did not show it. Instead, he pinned me in place with his baleful eye, a snake pierced and writhing on the edge of a warrior’s blade, unable to shed its skin and flee. I met his gaze, for if I had nothing in my hands, at least I had the pride of my heart, my blood and my name.

And then the muttering began.

‘She looks like a servant—’

‘Don’t they bathe in Merogia?’

‘The presumption to come to court without even requesting a presence.’

‘So disdainful looking, half a witch indeed—’

‘Her hem is dust-thick, and is that *blood*—’

The king’s face set in a scowl of disapproval as I heard a snigger of laughter. The priest looked triumphant, and the princes positively gleeful.

‘Shit,’ muttered Hadiah, and Marolyn reached inside her pocket for the scramasax she had tied to her hidden inner-belt.

And I understood. I was dirty, rancid with carriage air and the filth of days. My cloak, I had not changed since the attack, and blood had soaked into the shoulder. He wanted me to be a show of his strength, a binding of his newly conquered nations, like gold stitching to his flag, and instead I had come to be a stain.

Shamed as I was, I felt some satisfaction. I had come to the court of my usurper, and found it riddled with frailty. I drank in the conflict like wine in my cup.

‘This is why Merogians should not dare set foot in court.’

‘How *dare* you, salt-thick sea rat—’

The king stood and let out a cry in old Cynghal: ‘HEEG VALAMOR.’ Its meaning was clear: *Attend, warriors!*

Caught as if by the snap of a whip, every man in the room, every Galenish fop and Cynghal upstart, every Merogian traitor and rebellious prince slammed their fists to their chests and went to their knee at the king’s command. Even the princess and her woman, and the boy who had spoken. Only the priest did not kneel; instead he stood, looking disgruntled.

The silence that gripped the hall was so profound that I could hear the rush of my own blood in my ears, the throb of my beating heart.

Liran looked at me again, and the satisfaction dropped away. Such was his command that not one man looked up, and when he glared at the priest he, too, went to his knee. This was control, utter and complete, faith, fealty and fear. This man could snap me with a hand, he could tell any one of these men to put a blade in my belly, and they would.

Hadiah tugged at me, surreptitiously, and I knelt as well, bringing them both to the floor to bow. This was the mouth of the beast, I do not think I understood what it would be like when we teetered in the maw.

'King Liran of the Cynghals,' I said, willing my voice not to shake. 'I am here at your calling, and at your service.'

'You come before you are called,' said Liran, stepping down from the dais. Did he notice that his own daughter shrank a little as he went by her? 'And speak before you are asked.'

Mistake. I vaguely remembered Hadiah's lessons on decorum. I was not supposed to speak first, if at all.

The men shifted back on their knees as he came towards me with a sure, loping stride. I looked up, fixing my eyes on the knotted scar in his right cheek. It made him a fraction more human, more vulnerable.

'Get up,' he said, as he stopped before me. I did not know if my legs would hold me, but I did. For Colfinn, for Ebba, for Sanafin. For my father, my mother. For my own damn pride. 'Speak then,' he added, 'seeing as you are so eager to make yourself known.'

I did not look at Gundobar; he clearly intended to humiliate me and we, like dithering lambs, had let him lead us into this mire. Nor did I glance at Hadiah, whom I could practically feel thinking *don't do it, cousin,* with every fibre of her being. Marolyn did not need to think anything, I knew what she wanted. *Stab him.*

'I wonder,' I said at last, 'if the prince's blade struck through the heart of a man, whether he would consider that his doing? Or would he blame the knife?'

For a moment, I thought the swan king would hit me, but instead, he barked out a laugh. 'Hah!' The sound was not kind, but it was followed by a ripple of smirks and snorts from his court. 'What say you to that, boy?'

He turned towards Conrin, who looked up.

‘I say she is a Merogian like the rest,’ he replied. ‘And should keep her dirty tongue in her dirty head.’

His companions laughed again, and I longed for my mother of old to take his fingers from his bones for the insolence.

‘Please, King Liran,’ said the pompous priest, ‘this woman arrives wagging her ignorant tongue, hair unkempt, her face rough like some common harlot, not the wife of a king. This—’

‘You have not been given leave to speak, High Priest,’ said the black prince, unmoving from his knee.

‘I speak only for the Wing’s law, as is my right,’ Daogobert scowled back, a nerve pressed.

‘My liege bade me speak,’ I said to him directly, instinctively pressing it harder, ‘and so I spoke. For the king’s law is highest under the Wing, is it not?’

‘The Wing’s law is higher still.’ Dagobert stood now, and I saw Liran’s mouth harden with annoyance, and it was not completely at me. ‘And the swan upholds it. The swan has long been a symbol of glory, a feather to the Wing, since before great Cynghal united with us in god’s shade. This is what Prince Conrin sought, as King Liran did in war, and bloodshed is a natural consequence.’

This was a different version of the tale I had heard from priests. That Liran’s banner and the Wing’s faith was an inevitable meeting, god’s messenger come to light in the moment he was needed. If anyone else noticed, they dared not speak it. The king had not bade them speak.

He had permitted me instead.

‘But this was not a war,’ I said. ‘This was a game.’

At last, one of the tarns looked up at me, only one, with a shade of approval in his tone. A few others murmured.

‘Even in war,’ I continued, ‘are there not other feathers to the Wing?’ I remembered my bird books and teachings from Hadiah and our corrupt priest as he tried to wean us from the kithwood and the Ways. ‘The cockerel, for discipline, and the hawk, for honour?’

As the priest turned purple with anger, I saw that some others had shifted. The princess was staring at me, her expression twisted between pity and jealousy, though the woman beside her was all bent with horror at my presumption. The black prince had not looked up, but an old Cynghal man

beside him was contemplating me thoughtfully, his fingers tapping against his cane.

‘The writs are not for you to interpret, woman,’ said Dagobert, ‘or be tainted with your sinful eye.’

‘Quite right,’ said Conrin. ‘The matter was settled.’

I felt a grip on my elbow, and found myself almost falling as the swan king took hold of me and dragged me forward, through the nobles, through the strange and twisting pillars and the beams of light.

‘Up!’ he said as he moved, and in a wave behind us the court stood while I was hauled to the front, to the grey prince, who also stood, his expression guarded and afraid. I could not tell by the tyrant’s expression whether he was furious or excited. He did not seem to know himself.

‘Explain,’ he said, shaking me a little. His grip was iron-strong, and I was angry now, exhausted and embarrassed. The tarns did not meet my eye, ashamed perhaps that they were so weak that they came to protest in a court clearly rigged against them.

I could speak of my own justice. That the young swan prince, for his thoughtless slaughter, should be dragged behind his stupid horse till the skin was flayed from his back and his skull was shattered bone. The priest, for his impudence, would be tied by his feet to a kithwood branch, his mouth filled with nettles, till the crows came to pick his eyes from his skull.

And, if justice could be had, this king himself would be taken back to the sea he had came from, his hands, tongue and nose removed, as Cynghals so often punished their hostages. I would tie his feet with stones, and sink him in the waves that had dared carry him here.

Do not cut off the swan’s head and call it vengeance while the poison seeps out.

What would Rivani do? What would Hadiah advise?

I caught the green eye of another man within Conrin’s Galenish crowd. I had mistaken him for Galenish. He was pale-faced like many northern Merogians, but ethnicity was no perfect indicator of nationhood; his deep-waisted tunic and trailing sleeves he wore as if native to the grand courts of the west. However, at his neck glinted a golden bear with a ruby eye, etched with fine patterns not in the rigid, Cynghal knotwork, but the curling Merogian style.

Geveran. *Traitor.* I was surrounded by my worst enemies. My mother’s ring weighed heavy on my hand, and her seed of doubt grew in my heart,

twisting me into strange contortions.

‘Whether by intent or not,’ I said, my arm aching, ‘two people have lost their lives. Their families have lost their income. Ducal Uhtren,’ I bowed my head in his direction, and he returned the gesture, ‘has lost two vassals in his land, a Cynghal fighter and a Merogian horsewife, both valuable positions. And the boy has lost a guardian and an apprenticeship. The truth is one thing, justice is another.’

‘Are you calling me a liar?’ said Conrin dangerously.

He was a liar.

‘I do not,’ I said, hoping Hadiah would be proud of me. ‘I say only that, whether harm was intended or accidental, the damage is done, and recompense is due.’ I could not help myself. ‘If not discipline and contrition.’

The prince had drawn himself to his fullest height, a little taller than his father, but one of his companions whispered in his ear, and he glanced at the high priest. This was a way out of the mess he was in, and they knew it. He would not be a murderer, he could even paint himself gracious if he wished.

Liran grunted and released me. ‘Good,’ he said. ‘One gold will be paid to the Cynghal yeoman’s family, three silver to his erl, for he was a fighting man. Two silver will go to the horsewife’s family.’ He looked at Dagobert. ‘So goes the law of the king.’

The court scribes were hastily etching out his decree, while Prince Egil took a wax tablet from his pocket, frowning as he used a stylus to take notes.

‘Where will the compensation be drawn from, my king?’ he asked.

‘The prince’s winnings,’ said Liran. ‘And the horse will be given to Uhtren.’

‘What?’ said Conrin, startled. ‘Father-hyem, you cannot be serious. The horse is worth more than the two of them. I—’

With a quickness belied by his age, Liran struck his son, hard, across the face. Conrin stumbled back, his brother Gaisa barely quick enough to catch him.

‘You are my subject, Prince Conrin!’ snarled his father, lowering his hand. It trembled slightly, and I was shocked by so public a humiliation. Had he meant to lash out so quickly? He did not back down. ‘You will obey the laws I made to hold together our kingdom.’

‘*Your* kingdom,’ hissed Conrin, a livid mark rising on his cheek. ‘As this girl’s presence makes perfectly clear.’ He jerked his chin at me, and winced.

‘*My* kingdom,’ Liran agreed, stepping closer. ‘One I fought for, bled for, built with these aching hands.’ He held them up to his middle sons. ‘You are ungrateful, spoiled, rotten children who covet what you have not earned.’ Liran looked them up and down with disgust. ‘What have you bled for, boys, other than your own petty glories?’

This was no way for a king to behave. Vindictive, volatile. Fear of him was writ large on their faces. I had seen princes at odds with their father, a priest at odds with a king, the bonds of law and faith rotting at the edges.

I found my gaze drawn back to the princess, who had her mouth open as if she wanted to speak, but she held herself back, her muscles tensed as if clenching something. I had the impression of a bird in a cage, bigger than the bars that caught it, yet still content to sit and eat from its owner’s palm, even while it was confined.

My mother was right. There was a frailty here, cracks under the hard surface. How deep did they go? How deep could I make them? Skin deep? Bone deep? Root deep? How might a little seed find its way in to grow, expand, and shatter them apart?

This is not a hunt, my mother had said. *This must be a massacre*.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Eleven

Tilde

‘That bastard,’ Marolyn hissed as Hadiah put a cold compress on my elbow.

‘Which one?’ she said.

‘Fucking all of them. That sabotaging Gundobar, the brute of a usurper, the arrogant prince and the pissant tarns who would not even look Tuathilde in the eyes as they left.’

‘Full names, eh,’ I said, wincing. ‘You really are angry.’

‘Of course I’m fucking angry,’ she was attacking the ends of my hair with a comb, starting at the waving ends by my hips.

‘Marolyn, would you *please* hold your venom in?’ said Hadiah. We had finally been left alone in a fine chamber overlooking the lake. Honeysuckle bloomed around a glass-set window, and the rush matting had been scented with oils.

‘Where it will poison my own belly instead of their ears?’ said Marolyn giving up on the comb and instead choosing to rub rose-scented ash into my scalp. ‘I think not.’ I felt her fingers pause, and saw her glance towards the closed door, remembering, perhaps, that there was a castle full of perils behind it.

‘Sorry,’ she said, the rubbing resuming. ‘Sorry, Lady Hadiah. I just … I couldn’t … *do* anything. It kills me inside.’

‘I know,’ said Hadiah, pressing the compress harder as I closed my eyes. ‘But she shouldn’t have taken Gundobar’s bait.’

‘Without her the boy would have nothing at all.’

‘And we would not have gained several powerful enemies.’

‘As much as I enjoy being talked about as if I am not here,’ I said, ‘could you go easy on the pressure, Hadiah?’

My cousin winced her apology, taking away the cloth from my bruised arm and wringing it into the wash bowl that had been filled on our arrival. The chamber we had been led to was very fine, the adjoining room made up for my women. It seemed it was to be my own, and as private as I could have wished, but my eyes kept catching on small hints that the space had been previously occupied. A small collection of precious books were tucked

in a shelf, and my eyes kept returning to a strange decoration over the bed: a long rope, coiled and tied against the beams. Like a question, or a warning.

‘What would happen,’ I asked softly, fiddling with the silver ring my mother had given me, ‘if the swan king were to die, Hadi?’

I felt, rather than saw, Marolyn stiffen as I turned to my cousin. Hadiah glanced at the door, at the window, and back to me. She seemed strangely unsurprised by the question.

‘Before you bear the prince he wants?’ she said carefully.

It was strange how all of us, even me, spoke about this marvellous prince as if the birthing of him was the only task. We did not turn our thoughts to the act of begetting him, of lying beneath an enemy and bearing his sweat. As if that was not torture, or agony.

‘You attend to the ways of court,’ I said, ‘the rumours, the histories, what do you think?’

She gave me a long look that cut to my soul.

‘There would be war,’ she said at last. ‘The princes are half wild, as you saw, there is little faith in them, and they have little in each other. The eldest is already a low king, but of Suneheim, which is tantamount to banishment. The second, Isen, has the black guard who are loyal, and experienced, but Cynghal’s army has grown on the wealth of raids and looting, taking and selling slaves and stealing their riches. Now, their plundering has crumbled into little feuds, and there is nothing left to steal. Their money runs low, and the last of their wealth belongs to the Synod or Galen, and they hold no love for the oldest princes. They were not raised in their court like the younger.’

Marolyn was staring at Hadiah with something like the awe I felt. She was so reserved and softly spoken that it was sometimes too easy to forget she was the niece of the last king of Ardwen and the daughter of a prince of Manir. Hadiah knew how to present herself as if an empty cup, and no one could resist trying to fill it. Everything they told her, she tucked carefully away into the halls of her mind.

‘Galenish law, and the Synod, demand only one son may inherit a father’s titles,’ she continued, ‘usually the firstborn, while Cynghal law splits inheritance equally among children.’

‘So you have a first born unsatisfied with his land,’ said Marolyn, ‘a second born who hasn’t the money to pay his troops, and the ones who could pay like his little brother better.’ She scoffed. ‘That pompous ass has

never won a war. Merogian warriors would chew him up like a berry and spit out his seeds.'

'Perhaps,' said Hadiah, taking up Marolyn's discarded comb. 'Some believe that if the first has Suneheim, the second should be given Cynghal and the third Galen and Merogia together. The Synod, I imagine, would prefer if their favourite became the high king of them all.'

The grey prince, of course. He knew who would butter his bread in a pinch, so had chosen the colour of the priests. I had thought Conrin vain and violent, it worried me that he might be strategic as well.

'The grey prince,' Hadiah agreed. 'If Liran died now, his sons would go to war with each other, and drag every land into their fighting. And he knows it.'

'There is familiarity in this tale,' I said, and Hadiah nodded.

'Such a war almost destroyed Cynghal,' she said. 'Half a century ago.'

'What?' said Marolyn, and I turned to her. The afternoon sun turned her light eyes vivid green and highlighted the white scar in her chin she had taken in a fistfight with her sister.

'When he was a boy, Liran's uncles killed his father for taking the salt and converting to the Wing's faith. He survived the coup, mustered an army and came back for his crown.'

'Why the fuck did he come looking for us then?' said Marolyn.

'Because he knew with his raised armies he could crown himself in glory, and unite Cynghal and the priests under a different purpose.' I looked out of the window, at the lake that had lost its name, and the village that had burst into a city. 'Us.'

A tree once felled could not regrow as it had been. Merogia had adapted to this new life, with a king that commanded their terror, and been woven into the Cynghal tapestry. Without the king holding it together, everything would fray to pieces. After all these years of war, the destruction would only continue.

Justice is not justice unless the one who wields the sword knows who will wash the blood from the stones.

I was about to tell Hadiah what I intended. To beg her forgiveness, to ask her to run, to ask her to help, but before I could work up the courage, the door opened.

The three of us jumped as a number of women piled through in plain, unbelted tunics, carrying caskets, large and small, some wood, some bright

lacquer. None of them mine.

‘What is all this?’ I said. Two of them bowed low as they put a case on the divan and hastened for the door.

‘They don’t speak to nobility,’ replied another woman, coming in. She wore a short-sleeved kirtle of a ruddy, brownish colour, tied with a woven leather belt sporting pockets that bulged with cloth and tools. ‘It is not permitted for serfs, unless explicitly required.’

Serfs. Indentured servants captured from conquered territory then sold to other nations. As if a person could be uprooted and replanted without earth and coin to ground them. And they called us barbarians.

‘These are not my things,’ I said to the woman, who blinked and bowed. She was not a serf, but a servant, employed and paid, yet there were still rules for who could address who. I could speak to my ladies, they would speak to the servants, the servants would speak to the serfs. If such rules had held in Merogia, I would never have uttered a word to Marolyn, never kissed her or disappointed her, never laughed with her.

‘Her things have already been carried up,’ Hadiah covered for me, pointing towards our collection of holly wood boxes. They looked drab and small compared to these shining new additions.

‘These are morgengabe,’ said the servant to Hadiah. More women were coming, these carrying a brass tub and several following with lidded pans of steaming, scented water. I stood from the stool in the window. The room was not large, and it felt suddenly crowded, dangerous. ‘Gifts from the nobles of court.’

The tub hit the woven matting and cascades of water were being poured, the fire built up in advance of the evening drawing in.

‘I take it you are in charge of the women’s apartments of court?’ said Hadiah gently to the belted woman, who reddened slightly, her freckles standing out in her fair cheeks.

‘Yes, my lady, how kind of you to notice,’ she said. ‘I am Morwynna.’

‘Ah, you are Merogian,’ said Marolyn, but Morwynna’s smile dropped.

‘No,’ she said, her tone cooling. ‘I am Cynghal.’

Hadiah did not hesitate, she put her hand to her mouth in a show of contrition, though it had not been she who spoke. ‘Of course, we are all blessed in the shade of the Wing and the glory of the swan. This is a beautiful room.’

Morwynna allowed her smile to creep up again. ‘Yes, my lady Cynefel is most gracious with her apartments when the king’s court is in attendance.’

Cynefel had not come herself. I suspected, like Morwynna, that she too called herself Cynghal now. The boxes were piling up against the bed, and Hadiah took out a tablet and began asking Morwynna questions about who sent them and where they were from. The chamber was now full of bodies, some beating out the dustless curtains, watering the rush matting to increase their sheen, brushing out the empty fire grate.

‘We don’t need all of you here,’ said Marolyn, with irritation. The lids of the casks flashed, reflecting the sky outside as they were opened and closed. Even my own boxes, emptied of possessions, were being tucked away in cupboards, out of sight. I tried not to show the way my heart lurched when I saw the gowns my mother had painstakingly mended whisked into the adjoining chamber. The head maid was distracted by Hadiah’s flattery, and if any of the others heard and understood Marolyn, they pretended not to.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ I said, untying the strings of my underdress. Marolyn hummed her annoyance, but came to help me with my boots and stockings. It was a relief to peel off the layer of filth that had somehow wormed its way between the cloth and my skin so I could step, joyously naked, into the cooling water of the bath.

I sighed as the water touched my shins, and Marolyn dipped a pitcher into the scented heat, then tipped it over my head, slaking off the scented ash to run in grey rivulets down my skin. I realised then that the activity of the room had come to a halt, and that half of the women had bent their faces down and away. Morwynna was blinking, hard, looking at the edge of the bed.

‘What is it?’ I said, annoyed by their shame, as Marolyn paused to reclaim the ashes that she had been adding to my hair. ‘Do women not bathe here?’

‘They usually have the decency to cover themselves as working folk come and go,’ said a stern voice from the doorway, and the serfs and servants dropped to their knees, perhaps as they should have done for me. ‘Or they use a screen.’

Though I had never heard her voice before, I knew it was the princess. She had stood so calmly among the baying wolves of court, like a cut gem: shining and voiceless.

I had heard little about the princesses of Cynghal. As Gundobar would have pointed out, there was little enough to sing of. However, the paeon song for Isabella sung briefly of her daughters: the beauty, Isuire, the pride, Erelle, and the prudent: Elise.

The beauty had died young and suddenly, no doubt of dysentery or some other disease. The eldest, the pride, had been married far afield.

The prudent remained, little better than her mother's maid for all her twenty-two years, trailing the king's court like a doll on a string. She did not look like a swan. She looked like a sparrowhawk, sharp-clawed and tawny-gold.

She stood in my chambers like she owned the ground. Well, of course she did. She was the tyrant's daughter, raised by red hands, fed on the blood he had drawn from us. She had a dent to her brow, and a tightness to her lips, a hair's breadth away from a scowl.

Morwynna stood. 'My deep apologies, princess,' she said. 'We had not time to fetch a screen.'

'The apologies are mine,' I said to the princess. I was still standing naked in the water, not sure whether to sink into it or step out. 'I hadn't given them a chance to find one.'

Slowly, I could see a blush creeping up the back of her neck, into her cheeks. After a moment's silence, her gaze flicked to my neck, then away, my breasts, then away, as if she had never seen a naked woman before.

'What need have all of you to be here?' she said to the room at large, and clicked her tongue with annoyance. 'Go back to your other work. If you cannot find it, go to evensong; it will be early tonight for the servants as we prepare for the ceremony.'

I lowered myself into the bath as the serfs stood and the room emptied, servants dropping their tasks with an alacrity that showed how little use they had been. Only two remained kneeling, a mid-aged woman with a scar across her face, and a young girl with bright amber eyes. She had stretched up her hand, palm up, a strange gesture.

'Ah,' said Morwynna, noticing. 'Princess, Muirenn and Elwinde have been assigned to the queen's chamber. Muirenn's a bit young, but Elwinde has her under her wing. They are good workers, from Suneheim.'

'What happened to the one who helped with my mother? Plaithne, I think, was her name.'

'She died in the winter.'

Elise frowned. ‘They can stay,’ she said, without looking at them. ‘Where is the gown?’

The older remaining serf, Elwinde, went to one of the new chests and drew out a parcel wrapped in bleached hemp.

‘Muirenn,’ said Marolyn to the other. ‘Tend to the queen. The road won’t wash itself off.’

The serf shifted on her knees, and glanced at the princess.

‘She is not queen yet,’ corrected Elise, but after a moment nodded at Muirenn. The serf, eyes downcast, took my bruised arm with surprising gentleness. At least compared to Marolyn, who scrubbed hard enough to strip a snake’s fresh skin. Luckily, she was still at work on the black, tangled lengths of my hair.

‘You will attend the Nest for evensong, after the bells,’ said the princess. ‘There the high priest has agreed to marry you. The gown Elwinde has pulled out is appropriate.’

It seemed the princess had been charged with me.

‘I have my own things,’ I told her.

‘Ours are traditional,’ she said. ‘They will make up for your … indiscretion at court.’ That rankled. It had not been so long since women were kings here, since they spoke the law and held it. Yet in this world of the Wing it was as if we had never existed.

‘My mother wore it,’ Elise added, as if that would encourage me.

‘I wouldn’t dare wear your mother’s wedding dress,’ I said. ‘I am not her.’

‘Of that, I am aware,’ said the princess, meeting my gaze at last. ‘But it is expected.’ Such a curious creature. My mother had resisted being supplanted by a ducal chosen by Liran in the name of a peaceful transition to Cynghal rule. He had allowed it, but I imagined if a man or woman came, and wore her clothes, her rings, I would have wanted to put out their eyes.

‘Do you know the words for the ceremony?’ she asked.

‘I know the words.’

‘If you falter you will embarrass yourself, my father, and our glory before the Wing. Speak well.’

In a brief, vivid moment, I hated her. Of course I did. So careless and brazen in her power and security. That dress she wore was of finer cloth than my richest feasting gown, and at a shade away from mourning it was a

thinly veiled insult to me. This palace should not be hers, these serfs and servants under her command, this conqueror's child on my land.

But I wanted to know more about her. The hand she had clenched in her pocket, the dints in her fingers from archery or music-plucking, or weaving, the way she shrank in the court, but grew larger here in the women's chambers. She averted her eyes from my scrutiny. Instead, as if drawn by the tug of a spider's web, they landed on the shelf of books I had noted between the bed and the door.

I considered the dead woman's clothes, the glass windows in this room, the rope neatly coiled at the ceiling. The way the princess glanced protectively over the surfaces of the chamber.

And I understood.

These were the late Isabella's chambers. The rope was her birthing rope. It had been kept here for the new queen. For me. And Elise had been ordered to serve her mother's replacement before she was truly finished mourning.

'I will not falter,' I said. 'Is that all you want from me?' That gaze, the yearning in it when she had glanced at the spines. 'Those books, perhaps?'

Elise's eyes flashed, and glared at me with such wrath it took the breath from my lungs.

'The women will meet you outside the Nest,' she hissed. 'If you need me, send the maids.'

She swept from the room, leaving behind her the faintest scent of salt and fresh air.

I felt somehow stung by her departure, and relieved too.

'How could a gift insult her so?' said Marolyn, rinsing more water through my hair, and I caught Muirenn throwing a quick, knowing glance at Elwinde as Morwynna bowed and made her exit after the princess.

'Perhaps she doesn't think they are Tilde's to offer,' said Hadiah soothingly, finishing her notes and placing them on the bed. Beside it was the dress that Elwinde had unwrapped and laid upon it. A dead woman's marriage gown. It had an open neck, cut to show the shoulders and the chest, beaded with silver. Its sleeves were an older style, made to hang narrowly at the elbow and show the wrists, and the cut and fabric was so close and fine that it would show my whole body beneath it, every slip and curve. A presentation for my betrothed. *Look what a dish you have ordered. Look at what you are about to taste.*

I shivered, touching my cheek, still tender in places from the rebel's strike. Soon I would be rubbed down with oil of clove, watercress and galangal, my hair would be braided like a Cynghal, and adorned with the little flowers that had been plucked from the gardens of Nandenys, and dragged all the way here for their final show.

Did they know what they were preparing me for? Did I? I felt like a bramble being stripped of its thorns, its berries, its leaves, all its pieces washed and ready for the pot. Perhaps I could kill him. I should. Perhaps it would be easier to murder and to die than to face the prospect of living here. In this.

It was too much to bear.

I stood, suddenly. 'Leave us,' I said to the serfs. Muirenn hesitated.

'But—'

Elwinde stopped her with a shake of the head.

'What's wrong?' said Hadiah, but did not stop them leaving and closing the door. Marolyn gave me a troubled glance, and went to pull a cotton robe from one of my own boxes. She wrapped it around me, pulling out my hair as Hadiah helped me out of the bath. I was still trembling, icy fear putting its teeth into my neck, ready to wring me till I screamed.

Meet me in the kithwood.

This is not a hunt.

Who will wash the blood from the stones?

There would be war.

'Tilde?'

'Hadi,' I said. 'There is something I must tell you.'

'Tuathilde,' warned Marolyn as Hadiah stepped back, looking between us. I went to the window, breathing in to settle my nerves, stuff down my emotions, cut off my mother's sprouting doubt. I had spent so long confronting the knowledge that I must die, that I had never considered what would happen if I lived.

But Marolyn had also reminded me: my name. The people's battle. I could not let Hadiah be dragged blindly into my schemes. I thought I was protecting her, but I was protecting myself.

'I—'

'I know,' said Hadiah and I almost choked on my own words. She half laughed, taking my hand and putting it gently between her warm fingers.

‘I’ve known for a while now. Did you really think your mother and I would not figure it out?’

‘My mother?’

‘I did not understand why you wanted me to stay in Ardwen,’ she said, her brown eyes filling with sorrow. ‘Why you would take on this duty to your country but ask me to leave mine.’ She smiled. ‘But when I asked King Rivani why you wanted me gone, I finally saw through your obstinance.’ She pressed her lips together, and I felt her reprimand.

‘I know,’ she continued, ‘you both think I am not a fighter. But I am also not a fool. I know you. I told your mother you intended to die here, not to stop you, but so she had a chance to say goodbye.’

I tightened my hand around hers, tears rising to my eyes, then spilling over. My thoughts were in tangles, doubts and hopes and fury breaking my heart into pieces. I had not thought Hadiah strong enough to bear this, and I was wrong.

‘I’m scared,’ I admitted.

Marolyn broke then, and both of my women came into my arms. ‘I’m scared to choose. To die, or to live. What if I choose wrong?’ I was not the force of vengeance I had hoped for. I was not a weapon, not a shadow of death.

I was just a girl, uncertain of the future, and grieving for it.

‘Why?’ I whispered. ‘Why did you both come with me? Why would you stay with me, knowing I might drag you to pain and death?’

‘Because you are our king,’ said Marolyn, fiercely, and Hadiah nodded. ‘Our king by right, our king by choice. Whatever battle you choose, we choose it with you.’

‘Our king,’ Hadiah agreed. ‘To pain, or death, I will suffer them with you. I swear it.’

‘To pain or death,’ said Marolyn. ‘We are bound.’

I looked over at the pale Galenish dress, lying on the bed like a shroud, like a warning, like a wing.

I would not walk to any doom in a dead woman’s clothes. I would be what my women said I was.

If I chose to kill, if I chose to die, I would die a king.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Twelve

Elise

Elise waited outside the Nest.

She should not have left. She was supposed to see her ready, but this ‘Tilde’ had stood there so brashly naked, her skin dripping with ash and water, her dark hair loose and hanging to her waist, her sex … there had been a kind of horror in it, some unmentionable shifting in her belly.

Then she had *dared* offer her her own mother’s books. Did she mean to humiliate her?

Take her books! Burn them! She is not to read another word till she has earned our forgiveness.

Elise had known her father to have a temper, but that terrible day was the first time she had seen him lose such control of it, so quickly. Steadily, his rages had worsened, his restraint lessened. If she closed her eyes, she could still see the indignity of a king’s hand slapping his son in the face.

Conrin had deserved it. That was Elise’s secret thought. She had stood with horror in that hall, hearing her brother lying bold-facedly to his court, knowing that if he just held on long enough they would let him loose with whatever tale he wished. She could not admit it, but even she had seen him raise his charger, and she knew in her deepest heart that if he wanted victory, he did not care who tangled in his hooves. That little boy was foolish, for standing up to a swan prince, but he was not a liar.

If anything, Liran’s punishment was not enough. Conrin had been penalised more leniently for manslaughter than Elise had for taking her sister’s letter to her father.

Elise shook away those thoughts. *Your father’s word is god’s word,* Isabella would say. *It is not for you to say how a sin should be purged. You only accept the pain.*

Still, despite it all, Elise had a kernel of defiance in her. She should have stayed meekly with the queen-in-waiting and seen her dressed. But she was afraid of her own body and tongue, that she would do or say something she could not retract. Better to leave.

So, she had busied herself in gathering branches with the other women from the deadwood that one of the servants had brought up to the keep from the little thickets that grew separate from the kithwood. They stood now before the pointed roof of the Nest as the bells rang for evensong. The new queen's first introduction to court had been disastrous. This had to go well.

The branch raising was done by the women, who were always the last to enter the Nest. These, they leaned against the V-arch of the door after the ceremonies, which gave the temple the shape of its name. Then – for weddings, funerals, the taking of the salt – they sat at the back. Only the queen could sit at the front with the men, if the king welcomed her. One time, after one of Elise's younger brothers had died, Kenric his name, her mother had been seated at the back of the Nest for a whole season before Liran saw fit to forgive her.

If the Merogian woods are for witches, why do we use the branches for the Nest? Elise remembered asking her mother. Her sisters had looked at her, horrified.

Put out your hand, Elise.

That was always what Isabella said when Elise said something wrong, which seemed more often than not. She had not learned her sisters' skill of asking no questions. Elise had closed her eyes, and did as she was bid. The strike was always quick and sharp.

Now, she loved the scent of the branches. They made the Nest *feel* like the centre of ritual, the shade of the Wing. It filled her with a certainty that felt like a miracle, put there by her mother, by her tutors, by her father, and the feel of pain in her palm. The shade of the Wing brought structure, pride and simplicity. If she just did it, did it right, then she would feel it too: glory.

'My feet ache,' said Daegmar, shifting from foot to foot as she held up her branch. 'Where is she then?'

'Didn't you take time over your dress on your wedding day?' whispered Amalle, looking up at the faint stars making pinpricks through the violet of the the sky. The moon was shaped like a stone, still a way off full, weighing down the slow evening. The last streaks of pink from the sunset were touching the tips of the mountains.

Daegmar did not seem to know what to answer. She sighed.

'The air is chill off the Salt Lake,' said Lady Cynefel, touching Daegmar's arm. 'Perhaps you would like a mantle Daegmar, or I can have a

stool brought for you?’

Daegmar looked about to consider it, then remembered the Cynefel was also pregnant, with her second, and further along than she.

‘No thank you, my lady,’ she said. ‘I am sure she will be here soon.’

Elise felt she should say something, but she had never been sure of how to speak to other women. The most candid she could be was with Isen. Perhaps she had been too much so with Tilde. But she had been so *aggravating.*

Wing forgive me, she thought. *I should have done my duty by my father, and seen her dressed in time.*

Had the girl tried to escape? Would Elise soon hear the uproar of the scouts or the dogs that guarded the outer ward, and the scream of Tilde caught in their jaws? She decided the dropping of her stomach was her fear of her father’s disappointment; he had lifted her in his thoughts, asked for her help, and she had failed his first request because of her own pride.

Then she heard Amalle whisper.

‘There she is.’

‘What is she wearing?’ said the squinting girl-child of one of the erls who still remained after the joust.

‘Look at her,’ said Lady Ysel, the Cynghal wife of the ducal of Widdin, who had been one of Isabella’s favourite cousins. Isabella had despised her, though Elise never did understand why. Ysel was one of the few who said what she meant.

‘The arrogance of it,’ said Daegmar, tightly.

Elise looked back across the courtyard towards the palace, which was lit by flickering torches. There, Elise saw her. Not in the fine-woven linen of a woman of court, cut low at the neck and in at the waist, embroidered with the swans of Cynghal. Not with her hair properly bound and braided.

Queen Isabella’s dress should show her stripped of glory in the shade of the Wing, to be presented clean to her husband. She should have looked like a swan, gliding through the dark. Instead, she wore a long robe of enker green. Bound at the neck, it covered her shoulders in heavy drapery. Her arms and wrists were also covered, clung in saffron silk.

She looked like a creature of the wood, and she knew it. She had left her dark waves hanging down her back, some still damp from bathing. Elise blushed to remember that hair on her naked body, clinging and unkempt, half-wild.

Worse, through the long curls, her ladies had woven green ivy and summer wildflowers, not the dried rosebuds Elise had expected. In the dark winked tiny yellow agrimony and celandine, sweet pea, purple snake's head, and even the delicate blue blooming of flax flowers, already closing after their day's burst. They had been sewn into her tresses with seed pearls, gleaming like dewdrops.

After her appearance in court, drab and girlish, this was more the queen Elise feared, come in beauty to this holy place. Feared … and admired. But, she was a fool too, if she thought she could act so boldly.

Not too bold, Elise had been told when she asked too many questions, when her hand ached from a sharp strike. She felt the echo of the ache now, as she glanced her fingers over the scab wounds in her palm.

'Why would she even wear this?' said Amalle. 'She looks like a boy.' She glanced at Lady Cynefel, who was staring at the queen. Though her expression was aghast, her eyes were shining.

She blinked it away.

'They … are Merogian marriage robes,' the lady of Falcan said softly.

Cynefel was Merogian, one of the good ones; she wore her hair properly, her dress open at the shoulders in the modern Galenish style. Elise remembered her wedding, very distantly, she had worn pale blue, like a Cynghal, her vows sealing Falcan's submission to her father. Elise's sisters, Erelle and Isuire, had clapped with excitement as they spoke on who and how they would marry.

My dress will be made of fine silks, clasped at the shoulders with emerald and gold.

I will wear fringed slippers, so my handsome husband knows every part of me is to be loved.

In two years, Erelle was married, just as she had hoped. Isuire was dead.

Elise had not joined in their dreams. She had never been plagued by the lust that seemed to turn her sisters silly at any half-graced boy who strutted by. Elise had considered the handsome faces of lords and knights, and practised how to praise them, but had never felt the flutter that they spoke of. She was sure there was something wrong with her, some trick she had missed when growing, some sin in her heart that she had yet to find.

Elise only associated fluttering with fear. She felt it now, tapping at her heart. Flutter flutter.

‘Merogia has marriage robes?’ this was Ysel. ‘Why are they so dark?’ Elise had also not heard much of Merogian marriage. They were instead taught their more barbaric rituals, of criminals hung on tree branches, or wars begun over the height of the moon.

‘I don’t remember much,’ said Cynefel carefully. ‘But I believe the spouses …’ She hesitated. ‘I mean the husband and wife, would be led to different pathways in the w-woods. They had to find each other. The green makes it harder.’

‘I, for one,’ said Daegmar, an edge to her tone, ‘never knew any of these heathen practices.’ She tried too hard to pretend Merogia had nothing ever to do with her. Cynefel looked at her sideways, but didn’t speak.

Lady Amalle took Elise’s wrist. ‘This will not go well,’ she said. ‘You know how they like tradition.’ She paused and looked at Tilde as she approached, the torchlight starkening the shadows of her face. ‘Tell her to smile. They will like her better if she smiles.’

‘Do you want them to like her?’ whispered Elise, curious. Amalle seemed to hold none of Conrin’s loathing for the woman.

‘Does she?’

Elise considered. What would be worse, making her father wait even longer while she changed, or allowing her in the Nest dressed as she was? Would this Tilde even be willing to change out of her traditional dress? Was it right that Elise ask her to?

‘It is too late now,’ she decided at last. Tilde’s women were with her in plain tunics of silken green, tied with belts of Merogian thread, their hair braided simply back and away from their shoulders. The three of them looked so close, like Elise and her sisters had been, and she envied them that.

Tilde reached them and Elise stepped forward with the women, lifting their branches in greeting. Through the leaves of her rowan bough, Elise found herself once again pinned in the liquid dark of the Merogian’s gaze. Tilde looked at her, not through her, or around her, and her mouth tipped upwards in the tiniest of smiles.

The insolence of her; the Merogian knew this show might get her in trouble.

‘Thank you for waiting,’ she said, and the breeze from the lake stirred the pearls in her hair, like the water droplets that had trailed down the planes of her body in her chamber.

Elise's neck prickled, and she shook herself.

Wing forgive me for such foolish thoughts.

Elise bent, placing her green branch on the ground, and the others followed. In moments, Tilde had a carpet of hedge-birch, rowan and pine to walk on and reach the gate of the Nest.

Built like a longhouse of the old days, the slanting walls and pointed roof slid up from the night like a boat's prow, pointing skywards, like two wings stretched out behind a swan's back, raised high so that the tips touched. The branches of previous ceremonies formed an arch around the door.

As the twigs cracked beneath the queen's feet, Elise heard a breath of delight as Amalle watched her green train rustle over them, the silver brocade at its base shining like a mirror to the moon. A whisper followed, and a suppressed giggle. Elise understood then that not all of the women felt the fear that she did. This was simply different. Interesting. A breath of new air.

If Isabella had been here, she would have known how to hush them. She would have taught Tilde her place, what to do, how to act. Elise was simply too weak to see how.

'Are there other aspects of the Merogian ceremony?' she asked Cynefel quickly, as all the women fell in behind the queen's ladies so they could approach the Nest as one flock.

Cynefel looked mildly surprised that Elise had spoken to her; she had a hand on her lower back, supporting the weight of her belly. 'Ardweni carry a sickle and dagger in their hands,' she said quietly. 'But weapons are banned in the Nest.'

Elise looked at the queen's back, her dark unbound hair, and was not so sure.

'You do know that if she commits an atrocity in the Nest,' said Elise, lifting her voice a little so Tilde could hear her, 'every Merogian will be held accountable.'

Daegmar flashed her a panicked glance, and Cynefel tensed. 'Of course, princess,' she said tightly. 'But she is only dressed for marriage, not for war.'

It felt like both. But shame crept into Elise as she realised she had threatened Cynefel for something she had no hand in, simply because she had decided the smallest rebellion of a green robe was somehow a threat.

The Wing is the swan, is the king is the father is my lord. She turned the prayer in her head. *The wing is the swan is the king is my father—*

A god would not fall to a woman. Even if this Tilde carried a weapon, inside the Nest were all the men of the court, fighting men from wars and jousts. Her brothers, too. They would crush Tilde before any of them came to harm.

The bride had reached the door of the Nest, and there she paused. Was that a shake in her shoulders? A tremble in her fingers? If the woman turned and ran, would Elise run after her? Would she hunt her down herself, like the Merogian wives in the wood?

Unbidden, Elise could see Tilde between all the infernal muttering of the leaves, shrouded in green and laughing, her dark hair twisting on the branches as Elise searched for her.

Was that a sin of the mind?

God is the wing is the swan …

Tilde did not run. She raised her hand, and knocked.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Thirteen

Tilde

Dagobert answered my knock. ‘Who is it that comes to the Nest?’ I could almost taste the bitterness in his voice.

‘A feather of the Wing,’ I told him clearly. Without a father to speak them for me, I said my own words. ‘Come to join its shade and be a wife.’

My heart throbbed with enough force for my jaw to clench, and my mouth turn to ash. But under the weight of the marriage robes my mother had sent with me, I felt brave. Let the women whisper and snigger, let the princess make her threats. Perhaps they would remember their pride as Merogians. Perhaps they would recall a time when we shared the earth between us.

Whatever I decided this night, death or pain or both, I had the faith of my friends, and the love of my lands. I chose this.

I wished I’d had other choices.

The door opened, and I took pleasure from the way the priest’s face stiffened as he saw my ancestral robes. He collected himself quickly, dipping a hand into the silver bowl he held, pulling out a grain of salt. Around him, the censers at the door let out a steady stream of scented smoke from where they hung on their chains.

‘Are you blessed in the shade of the Wing?’ said the priest.

‘I am.’ I remembered the first time I had taken the salt. A single grain, and the new priest sent to Ardwen had dropped it into my mouth as if I might bite him if he tried to get closer.

Dagobert was not too different. He almost threw the grain at my open mouth, then blew in my face with such force that I felt his spittle on my cheeks, to banish any sins in me. It was all I could do not to raise my arms and wipe it away.

‘Do you come to your husband out of your own will?’ said Dagobert, stepping back and touching the Wing pendant on his chest. It made sense that they chose a wing as their god: a wing had no intent of its own; the Synod and these priests guided it wherever they liked. They had guided it to Liran, they had guided it to us.

‘I do,’ I said.

‘You may enter.’

My robes trailed over the threshold of stone, and I entered on to a marble set floor. All that carried me was the thought of murder, and it straightened my back as I passed through the smoke, the salt melting on my tongue.

This Nest was different to others I had seen. In Nandenys, the Nest was plain, cobbled together with waste wood from boat sides or the struts of mining shafts. Our priest, Cnul, walked on a floor compacted with mud and straw, for we did not have the flagstones to spare, its altar an ugly block of granite.

The Nest of Salt Lake had a floor of pink tile, finely polished, leading past rows of long benches facing the altar set within an apse. Marble had been carved for the altar into the shape of a bowing swan, its fine neck bent, wings wrapped around its body as if it were modest and ashamed. Behind it, feathers of worked plaster fell from the pointed ceiling to the floor, creating the illusion that the priest at the altar stood in the crook of his god’s feathers.

There stood Liran, waiting by the pulpit in a cloak of vivid blue, lined with ermine fur as if to spite summer’s height, and stitched with flying swans. His eyes widened at the sight of me. Around him stood his sons in white, their cambric tunics bearing their own colours in the corners, but otherwise ceremonially plain. Prince Conrin’s cheek was bruising. The littlest, Hein, was moving from foot to foot, bored and with aching legs.

Isen, brother-killer, sister-killer, stood gravely, his hands behind his back and his eyes fixed on the ground. But he looked up as Gaisa let out a choked gasp of surprise. The men in the benches, Merogians, Galenish and Cynghals rubbing elbows together, craned their necks around to see me, and their holy place broke out into a low hubbub of shocked gossip.

They had expected a blossom, white and pale and open to them. Instead, I showed myself a king. Though I did not wear the snake of our family’s banner, I felt it, strong and thick as a root about my heart, holding me up like Hadiah and Marolyn had, like my mother’s song. I was strong, I was emerald skinned, I was dangerous.

I smiled at the green-eyed Geveran, sitting in the aisle, and the tarns of Falcan who had not met my gaze in court. In their looks, I saw some recognition of the garb of a bride, a bride of their people. And, though it was for but a moment, I saw the briefest shine of grief in their faces.

‘What is the meaning of this, girl?’ said Liran from the altar, his low voice gravelly with threat.

The lords averted their gazes, looked down. I did not. I met his eyes, my breath catching quick as I thought of my dream, of his blood between my fingers, his kingdom at my feet.

Behind me, I almost felt the princess’s knees bend with the sound of his disapproval, and inwardly laughed.

‘Sire …’ said Dagobert, who was taking obvious glee in this, ‘it is best to be calm.’

Liran would not be calm. He dropped down from the altar like a stone and came towards me with all the force of a runaway boar. I stood still, as still as I could, holding on to that sense of strength in my heart. I had no blade, not yet, as I thought I would be searched. A mistake perhaps, but my body was my blade, and it could wound him. I did not move as his hand slammed into my throat.

‘Where is the right dress?’ he hissed. ‘This is the … the …’ He paused, frowning as the word eluded him in his anger, ‘second time. The second you have not come as you ought!’

‘King Liran,’ said the green-eyed Geveran. He wore the gold of a ducal, but still bore the bear badge of that traitorous clan. ‘Violence is not permitted in the Nest.’

‘Do not chide me!’

‘Remember yourself, great king,’ agreed the old man with a cane who had stood by Isen in the court. He wore fine, shining silks but no precious metals. A mere palati then. ‘We are in a sacred space.’

‘Take her outside then, Odon,’ suggested Gaisa, receiving an elbow from Isen for his trouble. They spoke calmly, as if tears of pain were not rising in my eyes. I knew it would be taking everything in Marolyn not to act, Hadiah not to cry out. I had asked them not to.

‘Great swan king,’ I croaked, opening my hands to him. ‘I had no intent to insult you.’

His eyes widened, holding me in place as he might an unruly dog. ‘You were given the proper clothing for the ceremony. Where is Elise? Where is she?’

I knew this would provoke him, but this volatility was almost pathetic. A brute, not a king. This was not his reputation. He was violence, yes, but he was also law. He used his god’s tenets to tell us of our wickedness. He had

set chains on every court, language for each interaction, from how much tax we must pay for our own goods, to how deeply one must bow to a superior, to what it costs to kill a man or steal a woman. Something in him had slipped, and was still slipping. Who was barbaric now?

'I-I assure you,' I wheezed, and he loosened his hand enough for me to speak. The women of court had stopped behind me. I tasted fear in the air, like the tang of copper. I thought of Sanafin and treachery, and steeled myself. 'I come as a Merogian bride. Freely. To bind our kingdoms in your power.'

He dug his fingers deeper and I choked for air as his knuckles whitened. For a pitiless second I was glad to show him as he was.

'Sire,' protested Dagobert at last. 'I must insist.' But he wouldn't stop him, none of them would. I had seen it in the hall, Liran's absolute power over them.

'King Liran, please,' said a woman behind me, I do not know who.

'Father-hyem …' It was Isen's voice that made him scowl, and loose me a little.

'My king,' said Uhtren from the pews. 'Are you quite well?'

That, more than anything, struck a nerve in the hand that held me. His fingers relaxed, and I was released. My neck throbbed, my head was hot with the lack of air, but I made myself go to my knee. He had moved so quickly, with such strength, like a wild animal brought inside, dressed in fine jewels.

'She was permitted to wear the swan,' said the king, turning to Isen, almost plaintive. 'Your mother's gown. And instead she disgraces me for the second time in one day.'

'I do not,' I insisted, hoarse. A lie.

'Maybe you should take it off her,' said Conrin. 'If she won't wear our clothes, let her be wed naked.'

'Guard your tongue in this holy place,' snapped Odon, and he closed his mouth. Strange, for a palati to cow a prince. Who was he?

'I did not dare wear the swan,' I said between coughs, 'until the Wing had seen me worthy of it. I am a Merogian. This honour of Cynghal … I did not know how to bear it. Only the royal family may wear the swan.'

'Stand up, child,' snapped the high priest, who was, if anything, further incensed by Liran's lack of care for his word, listening instead to Isen, to Uhtren, to me. 'We do not bow to anything but the Wing in the Nest.'

I took a risk. Hadiah had described a court in a fine balance of power, and I had seen it for myself in the factions that reared against each other, pausing only for Liran. There was a struggle here, between priest and king, and I wondered if I could snarl it further.

‘I will rise when the king tells me to rise,’ I said. I felt the faint intake of breath around me. I could not be the only one who noticed Dagobert’s needling at the king’s authority. Certainly, the king himself would have felt it. The swan and the Synod had fed each other for decades, but beasts turn on each other if the season is ill.

The priest looked at the king, incensed, but Liran clicked his tongue, somewhat appeased, it seemed, that I had acknowledged his authority. Perhaps he would dismiss it as naivety; *Green as a fresh rose, hiding the serpent.*

‘Rise,’ said Liran, turning his back on Dagobert. ‘I don’t have all night.’

I got to my feet. If this night was my last night, at least I could enjoy the look on a Wing-priest’s face. But it wasn’t enough: small victories, little cracks. I had not the skill of sweetness and honey, of feigning innocence and enduring insult.

All I wanted was to show my fangs, and drive them into the tyrant’s heart.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Fourteen

Tilde

The Cynghals paraded me to the king's chambers after the ceremony. They had watched my second humiliation, and now were eager for my third.

There were no celebrations this night. No dancing by firelight, no offerings of goats or stags to the leaves and the ancestors. Only the bedding.

Everything I had seen since I had arrived, since before, was churning in my head.

Meet me in the kithwood.

You cannot kill him.

The kith will curse you for your frailty, and so do I.

I did not want to face the thought of living through this. Instead, I imagined his death; I would need a long knife to hack through the thickness of his flesh. He was too strong for me to take alive and knowing, so it would need to wait till he slept. Could I drop a poison in his ear? The herbs for it were sewn into the linings of Marolyn's cloaks: nightshade, hardsleep, deathcap. Perhaps I could wrap my hair around his throat as he had put his hand on mine, and throttle him with it.

These were the thoughts that kept me calm as we entered back through the main hall, where the court had greeted me, up the stair behind the throne, and past the balcony, the shining eyes of the birds in the pillars watching as drums and muted chatter chased us through the halls into the southern side of the palace.

This way faced the forest, and through the windows I could see the silver light of the waxing moon churning up the leaves of the distant woodland, which moved and stirred like a breathing thing. I had never heard the green so quiet. I could barely feel the humming of the power.

I am known. Kithwood, give me strength.

For a moment, then, I missed my mother with such an intensity it was as if a hole opened up between my ribs. She would be locked in Nandenys, picking her fingers and waiting for death. My brother, sister, father, were dead and burned or buried, Hadiah's mother too, and I had been wed to the

man in the halls of their murderers. I cursed her too, as I missed her, for her wisdom, and how it had taken root in me.

Think like a king.

It was not over yet.

We reached an open door. On it, more birds had been carved, swans and swallows for faith and glory, beady eyes set in glass to glint in the sinuous twists of feather and claw. Before it were two guards in the king's blue livery. Cynghal, judging by their mail armour. The king's chambers.

For a moment, I thought the crowd would come in with us to watch. I had heard of such things in the west. For a moment, I almost wanted it, for I did not want to be alone with the man.

They did not. King Liran entered without a glance back, and I followed him. I suspect the Cynghals should have whooped and cheered in ribald joy, but instead there was silence.

I looked back, before Palati Odon closed us in, and I saw dear Hadiah, brave Marolyn, gazing at me with fear in their eyes. They knew that there was nothing to be done to save me, and that if I chose to try for him tonight, then their lives too might be forfeit.

Then I saw the princess, inscrutable Elise, watching me like a wolf, with hunger in her eyes.

The doors shut, and it was us two, alone.

The king's chamber was smaller than I expected, though I spied through a second door a grander apartment, with a dining table covered in papers, and narrow windows. Here, however, was a canopied bed, its heavy curtains open for the summer. A brazier had been lit in the shelter of the fireplace, burning bundles of healing herbs beneath a lintel of sandstone, and a low table was set before it, with a jug and bowl, slices of beef, and goat cheese embedded with dried fruit, quince preserves, bread, a knife.

Who will wash the blood from the stones?

Liran went by the fire and sat, pouring amber liquid from the jug into the bowl, then drinking from it. A strong spirit, for it stank. I could hear feet outside, a murmur of conversation. The people were still there. Waiting.

He drained his cup, poured again, drank again, then at last turned to look at me.

His eyes were rheumy, and though he had retained much of his physical power, silver hairs still grew out of his ears, nose and brows. Around his jaw and neck, his flesh was loosened. He was a man, not a god.

Could I do it? Should I? Take the knife and screw anger to my heart, then plunge it into his eye?

But would it happen as Hadiah predicted, my mother? Would this vengeance let loose events over which I had no control? I was caught between courage and a sticking place.

And I was married to him now. Tuathilde of the Ardweni, swan queen of the Cynghals.

‘Well?’ he said at last.

‘What do you want of me, my king?’ I replied.

‘I want you to take off that stupid robe and sit the fuck down.’

I swallowed, and it hurt. My neck was bruised, inside and out, but I undid the catches that kept my cloak clasped about it. The king did not watch, instead he took the knife and stabbed one of the slices of meat, stuffing it into his mouth.

My robe fell back, thudding to the floor with its weight. Beneath, my saffron dress and its tight sleeves felt like not enough protection.

The alternative to murder was worse. I could not leave, not from here. I would have to bear his body, his brutality, his seed, even his child.

Better to die.

Do not cut off the swan’s head and call it vengeance while its poison seeps out.

I sat on the divan with him. He grunted and picked up the bowl, pouring more liqueur into it, and I reached over for a piece of cheese where the blade rested. Perhaps I could slide it beneath my sleeve, hide it for later.

‘I wouldn’t try it with that knife,’ he said. ‘It would barely slice a fish, let alone a man.’

I tried not to freeze, I picked up a blackberry, not the cheese, and subtly tried to move my hand away from the blade. He sat back, sipping from his bowl, looking at me properly now.

‘Have you ever killed a man?’ he asked at length.

‘Of course not,’ I lied, heart pounding. I would have to admit to being at the kingsmoot, with the rebels, fighting as we fled. My mother and I had always denied it.

‘It takes some effort,’ he said. ‘A sharp blade makes it easier. This,’ he picked up the blade I had wanted, its pointed end was slightly bent with use, and the edge was blunt. He chuckled to himself as if … nostalgic. ‘Well, it would take some force.’

Quick as a breath, he took my hand, dragging it to him, and I cried out, thinking he was about to stab me. Instead, he put the handle in my palm, and pulled it closer, lifting his chin, so the knife rested against his bare throat.

'There is gristle there,' he said. 'Muscle too. Hard to slice. You do not slice a throat, if you can help it, stabbing is quicker, cleaner. Here.' He moved the blade to the dip at the side of his neck. 'It would take all of your strength, little girl. You would have to stand, and press hard. And though it bleeds heavy, it takes a man fifteen heartbeats to die.' He held me there. 'Heartbeats I would use of course, to drag you with me to the clouds. Or, I forget, is it the earth where your people go when they die?' He smiled.

'Then my boys will see to your pretty maids,' he added, 'and there will be war. Oh, such a war, and this rich land will go to the ruin you seem to wish for it.'

My hand shook. I could see the throbbing of his pulse, and I was fascinated by it.

'Why do you think I would want to kill you, husband?' I said, hardly daring to breathe. If I just *pressed.* All the doubts my mother had planted would go away; she had put the fate of her kingdom in my hands. Mine. I could choose this.

'I have seen murder in the eyes of many people,' he said. 'Did you think I would not recognise it in yours?'

'Why would you let me here if that was so?'

I did not have to wait, I did not have to find another way. I did not have to let him bed me.

'I wondered what side of you would win, the queen or the barbarian.'

Barbarian. They liked to call us that, as if it excused their violence and greed, as if it made their cruelty somehow a blessing to us.

'It would be the duty of a "barbarian" to kill you,' I said, my voice low. They had taken our thrones, our land, our faiths, cut and stripped them down and used them for barter. They had taken our rights and our power, and swallowed them up in the Wing. 'The duty of a king.'

The voices of all the warnings were stringing through my head. There were schisms here, for me to slide into, weaknesses to exploit. The court was held together by the force of this man's will, the deals he made, the fear he commanded. Without him, perhaps it would crumble, but there was no guarantee what would rise from the ashes: a bird, or the forest.

This must be a massacre.

Liran chuckled. ‘Did your kings not first take the world on the edges of their blades and feed their forests with the blood?’ he said, his hand still holding the knife to his throat. ‘Did they not strike down the weak and sacrifice thousands to their green magic to build kingdoms on their bones?’

‘What?’ I was truly surprised. ‘What do you know about magic?’

He grunted. ‘Your families have been washing their red hands clean of it for a century.’ He eyed me with amusement. ‘It seems they have done too well, if you are as ignorant of it as you look. Fools, even we keep our knowledge of the old blood magics so they cannot be used against us.’

This brute who burned witches knew more of our magic than I, who had wielded it?

‘You are worse than my fool-sons,’ he snorted with a distaste that I suspected they felt keenly. ‘Alar, Conrin, Ham …’ He paused, and missed Gaisa entirely. ‘Egil.’ And Prince Hein. ‘Only Isen has a head on him.’

Did he almost forget his own sons’ names? Or did he not mention them for the same reason he excluded his daughters? He thought them unworthy of his attention?

‘You thought you would be an inheritor of someone else’s victories,’ he said, clearly uncaring that death still hung at his throat, ‘but you are just a thwarted child in a losing game. You focus it all on taking the biggest flag and claiming it a win. But that is not the way of the world, girl. True victory does not rest on a win or a loss. True victory is to be able to play again.’

He let go of my hand, and for a moment I held the blade there.

They would sing better songs of me.

I couldn’t do it.

The king had read me like entrails, and found me lacking. But it was not cowardice that stopped me. My mother’s doubt had taken hold, the weight of my country tugging at my heart. And the lost secrets of the kithwood, putting their tendrils in my mind.

It would take terrible courage for what was next, to live and to play his games. It would take sacrifice to win.

I dropped the knife to my lap.

‘I have thought you my enemy, great King Liran,’ I admitted, trying to control my shaking voice. ‘And you might understand why. But I did not come here to fight with you’ – I wondered if he would believe me – ‘only to ally with you. Death is an end. For us, I hope for a beginning.’

‘Pretty words,’ he scoffed. ‘Know this, you will not get many chances. We will not dine together, we will not sleep together. My meals are tasted for poison, my bed checked for weapons, and I have long proven difficult to kill. You are not an Ardweni now, you are Cynghal. You will act in line with the laws of the Synod and the court, wear what you are told to wear, you drink what you are told to drink, and you will do the work of being good and meek and fucking obedient as you have sworn to be before the Wing.’

My anger flashed so hot that I almost grasped the blade again and threw it all to nothing. But no. There were different kinds of serpent. The viper that strikes, but also the tree snake that binds its prey, and tightens till it is choked of life.

‘All that you have been offered,’ I said tightly, ‘you can have. I will be your wife, and I will learn your ways. But know this: I am Ardweni as much as I am Cynghal, and that is what you bargained for. My value is in more than you can take from me. You cannot unmake who I am and have always been.’

‘Hah. You women are all the same,’ he growled. ‘Loud of mouth and dull of wit. I have known woman after woman, and it is not I who unmakes them. They unmake themselves, pulling themselves apart to please and to fawn and to gain pitiful scraps of power.’

I doubted that this man had even seen three moments of these women’s true hearts, and true faces. He was a boy who had no trust in him, and so the world was made for his disdain.

Then he turned to me again. It took everything not to quail beneath the cold and calculating gaze of his eye.

‘Whatever tale you tell yourself,’ he said, ‘the children you bear will not be yours. They will be mine. They will be Cynghals. And they will be loyal to me, or they will die.’

Perhaps I had not schooled my expression enough, for he stood, dragging me up.

‘And if you cannot bear me sons, if you refuse my bed, and your duty, I will have you strangled in your sleep, or burn you as a witch. We do not have time for silly games, and you cannot win their love enough to quell their fear of me.’

Watch me, I thought. *They will fear me too.*

I didn’t dare breathe, every part of me felt tight, tightening.

Then I regretted it. I regretted choosing to live.

I regretted it more, when he pulled me to the bed.

He did not undress me, he did not care. Pleasure he could gain from other women, from me he wanted only fortitude and a womb.

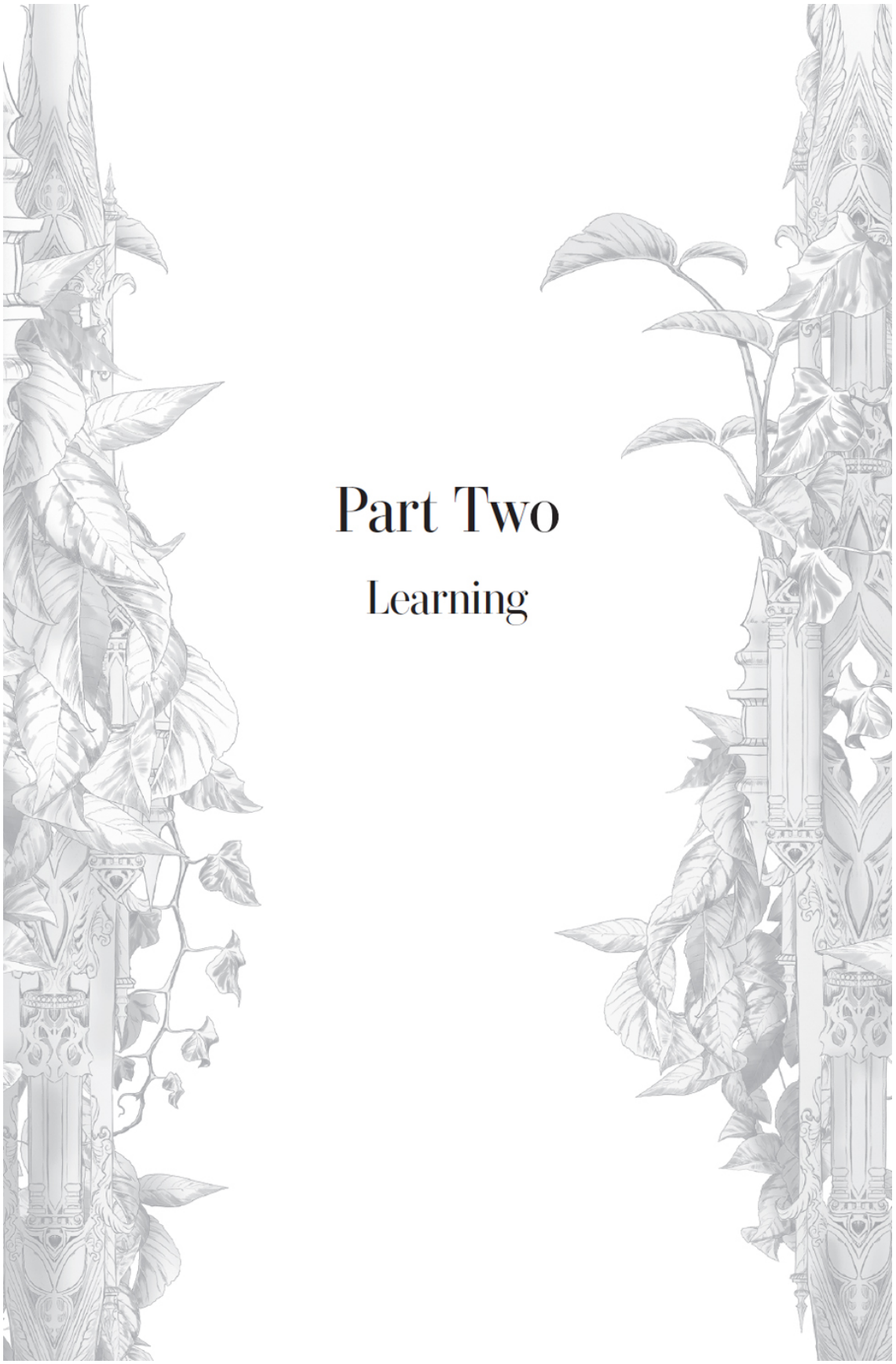
So when he laid me down, I closed my eyes. I did not want this, but I had chosen it. Oh how I hated it, and yearned instead for the dark of the wood, the comfort of my ancestors' voices, whispering through the trees.

I felt my mother's ring, warm on my finger, the blue stone for detecting poison, and the thorn buried beneath.

You are known, it whispered as my husband took what he wanted from me.

I disappeared into the whisper, the moss and the peace, the roots and thorns and nettle green, the light in branches that I stored in my heart, for I did not want to be anywhere but there. I did not want to see anywhere but home. I did not want to feel anything but power.

BookSharekh.com



Part Two

Learning

BookSharekh.com

They burned our capital, dismantled the great pillars and desecrated the tombs of our holy city. The people are kept to their homes, and may not enter the forest to pray, to trade or to bury the dead. They mean to undo us from the root, just as they pulled apart Setinis, as they dug and dug at Gevera till its foundations collapsed.

You, my dear, are another thread they will pull, a seedling they will uproot, and use at their will. It will be better for you to forget all the things that came before. Deny us, refute us, spit on us, pretend we never existed darling, and perhaps you will survive. I would better hope of you living as part of their garden, than to be lost forever to the wilderness where we go.

A letter from a rebel to his niece before she was married to a Cynghal lord, 1056



Cynghal is too much changed by this incessant greed. We were once the centre of our own world, with our gods, our traditions, our magic. Now we are just an island on the edge of a map. A place that death comes from, not a place that life goes.

A letter from a Cynghal erl to his kin, 1059

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Fifteen

Elise

After a week, the palace was still speaking of the queen's marriage, the robe, the hair. Some mentioned the feud between Prince Conrin and the king, others spoke of the priest's embarrassment.

The flame of gossip could have burned the queen too, but instead it was stoked more gently by a bard Elise had not attended to before: Miras, a troubadour, originally from southern Soffian, who had composed an epic of her entrance. He was more recently sporting a pair of silver earrings of an old Argenthan make that shone against his dark hair.

> *'In the Wing's shade, crowns forged anew*
> *Warmed by woodland beauty true*
> *Green her cloth, dark her hair*
> *Flowers blooming for new life fair*
> *Holding us all in her heart with care'*

It was not the first time a queen had bribed a bard to gild her with praise, but Elise was surprised the fierce and awkward woman had thought of something so subtle, and effective. Miras was more often employed by the men's court, but seemed relieved to be welcomed into the women's. Now Elise's maid, Torna, said all the town of Salt Lake was humming his new music.

In response, High Priest Dagobert had set himself in opposition to music, and spent most mornings preaching on the sins of pride, and lamenting song that was not for the praising of the Wing.

After the wedding night, Elise had not dared return to Tilde's rooms. She did not think she would be able to bear looking at the new queen and see a broken expression in place of the sharp scowl and quickness with which she had arrived. Elise did not think too hard about whether she was ashamed of Tilde, or ashamed for her.

But, the queen entered the Nest on Liran's arm each day, and Elise had to confess she did not look broken, only … brittle.

Still, the princess had done at least the spirit of her duty. She had made sure Queen Tilde's food was tasted by a serf and that she had good stocks of firewood and a seamstress if she needed it. She had even made sure there were guards at the base of her tower, for those few the queen had come with had been requisitioned into the local militia by Gaisa, after the young ostler boy went missing.

They say he stole the money and ran. Elise didn't know how to feel. Hundreds of young boys ran away every day. Or were taken by the Wing, through disease, or hunger. Perhaps the cut of a finger; an accident; a war. Many of Elise's siblings had not survived the truth of life: there were so many ways for little boys to die.

But Elise felt the shadow of that day at court when she thought of the lad, and her heart fluttered hard. The Wing, warning her that something was wrong. Something had crept into their lives and begun poisoning it from the inside. Was it Tilde? Or had it begun before her?

'Princess Elise?'

Lady Cynefel caught her staring out of the windows of the ladies' solar. The view from this height brushed over the fields towards the distant green branches of the forest. Without thinking about it, Elise had been listening for its whispering, like scratching an itch that wouldn't go away.

'I'm sorry my lady,' said Elise, shaking herself and turning to her. 'I was lost in thought.'

Cynefel glanced towards the window, and the wood, and back.

'It is your turn,' she said gently.

They were playing a game of fox and swans, where a single fox would eat the swan-stones before it was surrounded. Elise was the swans, but despite Cynefel acting the fox, the harder play, she was winning.

The women's gatherings were the few places Elise had to be close again to Tilde. Today, the queen sat with Amalle and Ysel in the light of an east-facing window. Daegmar kept her distance, as if Tilde's Merogianness was catching, and instead watched Cynefel and Elise's game.

'You should not let your attention stray,' she said. 'Cynefel is cunning when she wishes.'

Cynefel laughed, but succeeded in eating one of Elise's swan-stones.

'My apologies,' said Elise. She had spent little time with the women, her attention always occupied by her mother, or her weaving, but now her intended escape to the monastics of Galen had been delayed, she knew she

would be judged poorly if she did not join them. ‘I was distracted by the woodland.’

‘Oh,’ said Cynefel, carefully neutral. She had not held Elise’s threat outside the Nest against her, or at least not visibly, and Elise was grateful for her forgiveness: Isabella could hold grudges of silence for weeks. Elise found she had questions crowding up her tongue.

Too bold.

She asked anyway, moving another swan-stone to surround the fox. ‘My Lady Cynefel, you were one of the ruling family here, were you not?’ said Elise.

Daegmar stiffened, looking at Cynefel, who only showed her discomfort with a slight touch to a braid in her brown hair. A new court fashion had come in since the wedding ceremony: women had begun to loosen their hair and wear it half-down, or netted. Cynefel did not, instead keeping to the traditional Cynghal style that kept it off her neck.

‘My forebears ruled Falcan, yes,’ she said. ‘Now my husband holds the land at your father’s wise decree.’

Elise felt a bubble of discomfort burst beneath her chest bones, though Cynefel had said nothing wrong. Perhaps it was Daegmar’s determined turn back to the embroidery piece on her lap, unhappy with the direction of conversation.

‘Why did you never cut the wood back?’ Elise asked. Whatever question Cynefel expected, that was not it.

‘I’ve never understood it,’ said Daegmar quickly. ‘Look at all the land the swan king has uncovered. Before, even the little paths in the woods were dangerous, I heard horror-tales about people who strayed from them. No, much better they were cut.’

She sounded like she was parroting a script she had been delivered, though Elise did not know there were other paths in the wood besides the great roads. Cynefel was more circumspect.

‘The old superstition was that the woods held the spirits of our ancestors,’ she said. ‘And that their roots bind the Merogian lands together. To cut them down would unknit the land.’ She smiled ‘People do strange things for matters of faith. Even if it is, of course, not the true faith of the Wing.’

It was an easy explanation. ‘But, Merogia could have been wealthy,’ pressed Elise.

‘What makes you think that Merogia wasn’t wealthy?’ asked Tilde lightly from where she sat by the window, listening.

‘Well, because you were fighting each other all the time,’ laughed Amalle, as if it were obvious. This is what Elise had been taught as well. ‘Wealthy lands don’t need to scrap over cattle raids and bits of land.’

Tilde looked at her like she had told her the sun used to set in the east, but it was Ysel who spoke:

‘Have there never been wars in Galen?’ she said absently as she looked over samples of wood that Tilde had brought to her as recommendations for a new walking cane. Ysel, who dealt with pain in her hips, had a collection of near thirty. The Cynghal lady was lean as a whip, and older than the rest of them, but had the most beautiful red curling hair that hung down to her waist, streaked with silver at the temples. ‘Or forests for that matter.’

Despite her bland tone, Elise had never heard the woman say anything without an edge to it. *Sharp, unpleasant Cynghal*, Isabella would say of her. *She thinks she is smarter than everyone.*

Amalle shrugged.

‘Wars of power, not of land,’ she said. ‘If we had such a forest in Galen, it was cut to firewood long ago.’

‘Perhaps wealth should not always come at a cost,’ said Tilde. ‘Would you take down your precious Nests because we needed wood to burn?’

Amalle considered this, but Daegmar looked affronted. ‘This is hardly a lady’s conversation,’ she said.

‘Oh, what are you, a priest?’ scoffed Lady Ysel. ‘What would you prefer to talk about?’

‘Courting, marriage and children,’ said Daegmar promptly. ‘That is the Galenish way.’ She sniffed.

Ysel raised both of her brows, and smiled without humour. ‘You forget yourself, Daegmar darling,’ she said. ‘No matter how Galenish courts sniff at our common ways and idle chatter, our king is Cynghal, and so are we all.’

Daegmar shifted, and Amalle gave her warning eyes. ‘I’m sorry, Lady Ysel,’ she said. ‘I am only Merogian myself, I am still learning.’

Before, Elise would have seen this as some small pettiness, typical of bored women. But after the conflict of the courtroom, where she had witnessed Cynghal, Galenish and Merogian factions grinding against each other, she felt again the shadow of fear.

‘The apology is mine,’ said Tilde swiftly, drawing attention away from the younger woman. ‘My ladies, I have been raised with a sinning tongue, and will learn to control it better.’

She smiled, and Amalle gave her a relieved laugh.

‘You are forgiven,’ said Lady Ysel, and looked up, ‘Lady Hadiah, come join us.’

Hadiah had appeared in the doorway, but though she had been invited many times to join the noblewomen, as was her right, she refused when it was clear that the queen’s other lady’s maid, Marolyn, was not so welcome.

Hadiah demurred with a bow. ‘My queen,’ she said. ‘A physik has been sent to examine you. He waits in your chambers.’

Elise could not have been the only one to see a slight shudder pass through the queen. ‘He?’ she said.

‘It is most common for physiks at court to be men,’ said Cynefel. ‘Do not be afraid.’

‘It will be Ziyan,’ said Ysel with a nod. ‘I summoned him for myself, my queen, but it doesn’t surprise me he might seek your favour. He speaks a little bluntly, for he is Shatuan by way of Argentha, but he rarely bleeds you and he has relieved the pain in my legs better than any other bone-pedlar I have met.’

That gave Tilde some relief, for she stood, and in a rustle of silks and linens, Elise and the others stood with her.

‘Do you need assistance?’ said Elise, suddenly.

Tilde turned to her, surprised. Elise had been doing so well at keeping her interaction with Tilde only to the necessities. She did not like how she felt when she was near; heavy, as if her skin, her tongue, her throat, her lips, tilted with new weight. But that shudder … it made her feel protective.

‘No, princess,’ said the queen, turning away, following her woman from the room.

‘Did the queen like our morgengabe, Princess Elise?’ said Amalle, after the door closed. ‘Perhaps she is saving it for after her bedding-in.’

The bedding-in period was two weeks, in which no celebrations were held in case the marriage was annulled. During that time, the queen was expected to thank folk for the marriage gifts she had been given, and perhaps wear them.

But Tilde had not worn the gift that the women of court had brought together, because Eise had not given it. Amalle knew this, for the women

had already received thanks for their family gift, given earrings of brass, silver or gold, fragrance pouches for the men, herbs or Ardweni threads; for they were not famous for their weaving, but known well-enough for the dyes that came in the Port of Scorda. Amalle was wearing small brass hair combs in the shape of feathers; Daegmar even had a pouch attached to her belt, scented with Ardweni rose oil.

'Apologies my lady,' said Elise. 'It had slipped my mind.'

'I pricked my fingers making that,' Ysel pointed out.

'Don't you want to give the witch our gift?' said Daegmar, going at her embroidery with angry little stabs.

'She isn't a witch,' dismissed Ysel. 'Would a witch have cried out so at her bedding? No, she is just a woman like the rest of us.'

Amalle nodded, pushing her long, loose hair over her shoulder where it hung in chestnut waves. Strange, for her to wear a style that might antagonise Conrin. This was how change began. A small thing, a strange thing: a new song, a new fashion. A new idea. The stroke of a feather, soft as air.

Elise considered briefly warning her father, or even Isen, but cringed inwardly at how they would laugh at her for something so small as loosed braids and a bard bribed to sing a good song. In any case, Isen had left already; their father had decided their next court would be held in unrestful Kanaan. It would be the perfect opportunity for him to show his alliance with his foreign wife, and see how it settled them.

Though, Elise remembered, Tilde was not foreign. She was Merogian. They were in Merogia. To her, they were the foreigners.

No. *Too bold.* Elise plucked the thought from her head like a feather from a carcass. This was greater Cynghal, god was on their side, and they had won. Even though Elise longed for the warmth and colour of Galen, or the simplicity and welcome of Cynghal, was that not proof of their right to this land, to their trees?

But she did not know before how much of it had been sacred. She had never asked.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Sixteen

Tilde

I ached. To the very pit of me, I ached. Every step I walked from the women's apartments to my own, I could still feel my body shrinking from itself.

That first night, when the haze of pain had faded and Liran left me again to sit with his liqueur and his meat, I took my cloak, lowered my skirts, and he did not look up as I went.

Outside, the only people left were Marolyn and Hadiah. Their faces were traced with salt, glittering faintly in the torchlight held in sconces by the door.

'Oh.' Hadiah had heard the door click, the cough of one of the guards, and looked up. She had been kneeling, and she stumbled to her feet, running for me and flinging her arms about my shoulders.

'Come,' she said as Marolyn stood more slowly, her expression unreadable. 'Do not speak.'

In the dark of my chamber, they did not ask me to explain myself. They held me in bed as I wept.

The next morning, I woke to the scent of hot water and herbs – peppermint and camomile, fresh churned butter, bread, and a plate of rhubarb tarts, drizzled over in honey. Marolyn was stroking my hair, and it seemed an atrocity that there could be such simple, familiar kindnesses when my body had been ransacked of familiarity. Its flesh hung on me still, my soul somewhere in a chasm that had been opened within it.

'I didn't do it,' I whispered to her, when I was certain we were alone. 'I had a chance and I didn't.'

'I know,' she said.

'Do you think me a coward?' I asked.

Her hand paused. 'No,' she said. 'You have chosen a fight I don't understand, but that does not make you a coward. Pain or death, we said, we are bound.' Her voice trailed. 'When I heard you cry out …' Her voice cracked, and her hand paused. 'I thought we had lost you.'

I turned over, and she helped me sit my aching body against my pillows. Hadiah was preparing a compress and some whitened paste of willow bark for my bruises.

‘I don’t just want to kill him,’ I said at last. ‘I want to defeat him. I want to salt the earth he stands on. I want to win.’

‘It will take time,’ she said. Marolyn had come with me to die in glory; that had been her hope as it had been mine.

‘I know,’ I whispered.

Have you ever planted a seed?

It is a strange thing, to bury so small an offering in the dark. A plum stone, perhaps, a hazelnut. It takes an age to grow into anything green. Longer still to grow strong branches, grow leaves, grow fruit.

The swan king thought himself the planter. In the days and then weeks after that first night, he was brought up to my chamber by his guard, who waited in the solar below with my women, served sweetmeats while I endured. Those interactions were brief, bookended by curt greetings and no goodbyes. After, when I pissed into my fine gilt pot, I would see blood.

What happened between, I had no intention of remembering: I cut it out of me. I spat it out of me. And then the serfs would fetch hot water, soft clothes, undiluted wine, and leave, then Hadiah or Marolyn would hold me as I slowly, so slowly, came back into my body.

In those moments between death and rebirth, we sowed the seeds of our future. We began it small: a fine gift to a bard to sing my glories, and after I had seen Miras straining to be heard over the scrapping court, I knew he would be willing to turn a tune for a coin. Then, it was time and care spent cultivating the noblewomen and, hopefully in turn, their husbands. This was guided by Hadiah: what thanks should be given for the morning gifts I had received, or what soothing offers to return for the insults, such as the mouldy squirrel’s pelt that Markal Thedemer, Daegmar’s husband, had her send.

‘The princess is withholding a gift,’ Hadiah told me as we returned to my chambers.

‘Don’t we have enough gifts?’ I muttered, still thinking of this physik. I had enough of men touching me, permitted or not.

‘She’s the most powerful woman in court, Tilde, even if she doesn’t act like it. If she will not warm to us, the rest will cool.’

I bit at my thumb, then stopped myself immediately, thinking of my mother's foibles.

'I'll think on it,' I said.

I had hoped Cynefel would immediately come to me, if not Daegmar, Merogian women both. Daegmar, however, had drawn out any Merogian in her and burned it with pretty fires, reshaping herself into whatever Cynghal and Galen wanted. Cynefel was a stranger thing, soft of voice but uncrackable as diamond. Worse, she seemed to like her Cynghal husband.

We came to my personal solar, which was set beneath my bedchamber, where the physik was waiting under Marolyn's scrutiny. He was short, handsome, and indeed had the look of the Shatuan people who sometimes came up the caravan routes, bringing their fine silks and peppers from the distant lands to the east. But he also wore the familiar pointed shoes of the Argenthi, and had their filigree silver in his ears, gleaming against his fine, black hair.

'Physik Ziyan,' I said, and he knelt.

'Queen Tuathilde,' he said from the ground. 'It is my … ah, honour to have the pleasure of your presence.'

'Queen Tilde,' I corrected him. 'Tuathilde is my formal name.' I sat by Marolyn.

'He's been here for ages,' she said in Merogian. 'I couldn't send him away.'

'I mean no harm by it,' said Ziyan, in Merogian as well, and Marolyn stared.

'Speaking of formalities,' I said in the courtly Cynghal, turning back to him, 'is it not strange for a man to invite himself into a queen's company before he is asked?'

I was tired of tender-footing all the morning. Amalle was an exhausting conversationalist, always ready with a hundred questions. Presumably looking for a slip, or some insight to tell the grey prince.

'My apologies,' said the physik in a light, grovelling tone. 'I come, if it please you, should you need some relief from pain. To introduce myself in your gracious honour, to, at your kindness, or, no, I mean …' He stumbled to a halt, seemed to think for a moment, then looked up.

'I am not so good at these pomposities,' he said, dropping his forced accent into something more natural and Argenthi. 'I am a physik. Better than most in these parts. You might need one, so I came.'

‘I am not sick,’ I pointed out, and nodded at Muirenn, the serf, who was waiting by the door. She went to my decanter to pour wine for me and the physik. He spoke Merogian, which was interesting. A fact he could have hidden from me, and chose not to.

‘The greatest part of cure is prevention,’ Ziyan said with a shrug. ‘And new queens always need new friends who aren’t so—’ He looked at the ceiling, then at the window. ‘Bound by Cynghal mores.’

I knew what he was hinting, and that my overtures towards wives and bards had not gone unnoticed. I raised an eyebrow at Hadiah, who pursed her lips slightly. We did not speak of anything in front of the serfs, for we did not know their loyalties. We had to assume they would share any interaction with Morwynna, who would divulge it to Cynefel, Liran or Elise. Still, they made more natural allies to us than enemies; their land too had been taken by Cynghal invaders.

‘And here I was imagining you wanted to put your fingers in me,’ I said coldly, drinking from my wine and thinking of the priest who had come to test my purity, then left with fewer teeth and a broken nose. ‘You would not have them for long.’

‘Ah,’ he reddened, but laughed, holding up both of his hands. His right held the cup Muirenn had passed him, and the left was a pewter prosthesis in the shape of a man’s fingers, intricately carved with pretty vines.

‘Trust that I depend on my remaining fingers a little too much to risk them.’ His other hand was flesh and blood, with little tattoos on the top knuckles of his fingers that matched the carvings on his metal limb. ‘Though, such inspections are sometimes necessary.’

I bristled, and he covered quickly. ‘Only to judge the health of your body as it bears a child, or test its readiness for childbirth. But only with permission, and certainly not before we have established trust.’

‘Trust?’ I said, smiling, though his honesty I found refreshing. I knew the principles of childbirth, had seen the horses and the goats have their young, and my mother had never shied away from speaking of the truth and pain of it, but it was not an experience I had it in me to consider, not yet. ‘Yet you have not told me who sent you.’

‘I believe it was Lady Ysel who—’

‘Lady Ysel had no idea you were coming to me,’ I said. ‘Try again. Standing.’

He obeyed, and I studied his cloth. He wore a summer tunic of tawny brown, whipstitched with colourful threads of purple. He was well kept by someone, for a man with no nobility. He sighed, and shrugged.

‘He said you would not like it,’ he told me

‘Who?’

‘Ducal Merovin, of Gevera.’

Merovin. The green-eyed one in Conrin’s cohort. All we knew of him was that he had long been part of the Cynghal court, practically raised with Isen and then Conrin for a time. He was the only Merogian who had been raised to the title of Ducal.

Marolyn muttered a quiet curse under her tongue. ‘We do not treat with Geverans,’ she spat.

‘Marolyn, practise,’ said Hadiah, which meant ‘practise patience’. It had become a common phrase between us. Mostly because Marolyn, like I, was used to releasing each thought as it came to the tongue.

‘Apologies,’ said Marolyn with a slight mock bow. ‘I have thought about it for a nice long time, and would still like to say that we do *not* treat with Geverans.’

I bit back my snort, but Ziyan looked rather amused.

‘I understand that there is some bad blood with Gevera,’ said the physik, reaching into his satchel. Marolyn tensed, but he only pulled out a wrapped parcel. ‘But are you not all united now?’ There was a sarcastic edge to his tone that, I must confess, I liked.

‘United, yes,’ I said. ‘But Cynghals, Galenish and Merogians all would hesitate before putting a hand in a bear’s mouth.’

‘Hm,’ said Ziyan, rubbing his warm hand over his gleaming fingers. I had seen many amputations in the weeks after the kingsmoot, mostly done with a stick between the teeth to muffle the screaming. Most often, the cutting itself would still the heart with shock. Worst, was when the limb turned black and putrid, and the body took days to die. I wondered who the physik had remove his own hand, and why. ‘You speak like the silver queen.’

‘Is it the silver queen that sent you to this court?’ I remembered what my mother had said about our cousin: *we have heard almost nothing.*

I had sent Rivani a letter by messenger with no secrets inside, only the banalities. *My great husband has welcomed me most kindly to his court …* the bastard lives. *I am glad for all your kind advice …* I choose life, I will

follow your guidance. *I miss you dearly.* I miss you, with every breath I take I miss you, the woman you were and the woman you tried to be for me.

I hoped she knew.

‘I came with several vasir, I mean lords, of her court, looking to make treaties with the west. They left, I stayed to study the medicine of greater Cynghal with her letter of commendation. I know of some strange medicines of the far north made with bird livers and human blood. They call it blood magic, but I suspect there is some design beneath—’

His eyes lit up as he spoke, but I had only thought for the silver queen’s slight. Ardwen had heard nothing, but she had sent panderers to the western court? Ziyan trailed off, realising he had lost my attention.

‘If I may,’ he said, shifting uncomfortably on his feet. ‘I have some tonics that might help with conception.’

I winced, and shook my head. ‘Lady Marolyn is right,’ I said, and Marolyn smiled. ‘I can no more trust an absent ally than I can a Geveran.’ The man had probably every intent to poison me as soon as I let down my guard. Merovin had stood with Conrin’s baying gang. ‘Please leave.’

Ziyan pursed his lips, perhaps a number of arguments crowding to his tongue, but he bowed. ‘As you wish,’ he said. ‘I will leave a sample to try at your leisure. Please send for me if you change your mind.’ He placed the small parcel on the floor, as if trying to entice me like a cat to come eat from his hand.

Marolyn picked up his gift and threw it on to the low seats. ‘The queen asked you to leave,’ she said. And after a final, tight smile, he did.

‘I suppose you’re going to tell me not to be so rude,’ said Marolyn to Hadiah, sitting back next to me with a slump. Muirenn came and refilled my goblet, a slight smile on her lips, while Elwinde, who waited calmly by the door, kept her face perfectly blank.

‘He was sent by a Geveran,’ said Hadiah. ‘If he had said one wrong word I would have let you throw him out the window.’

Marolyn gave a surprised laugh, and it warmed me to hear her delighted for a moment. Hadiah was not smiling. Her thoughts I thought had been drawn back to the terrible night of the kingsmoot. I was not the only one who had lost people I loved.

‘Tell me what you think of the princess,’ I said, to pull her out of the dark. ‘The sphere of Cynghal womenhood is still strange to me.’

Hadiah chose her words carefully, aware of the presence of the serfs. ‘It is always wise to befriend a princess,’ she said. ‘But it will not be easy. Her brothers have good reason to suspect you, and she will have been courted before by people who have only interest in her parents.’

‘Why don’t we just find someone to marry her off to,’ said Marolyn. ‘Don’t most Galenish nobles have their troths pledged as children?’

‘As far as I understand Isabella was not willing to lose her,’ said Hadiah. ‘And marriages cost money in dowry, in celebration, it was likely convenient to the king that he did not have to consider that.’

‘Well Isabella isn’t here,’ said Marolyn, picking up a pestle and mortar she had been working on before we had returned, pounding valerian and spiceroot into a honey concoction that might be used for additional gifting.

‘No,’ I said, and Marolyn frowned at me. ‘No marriage.’

‘Tilde we—’ she paused, glancing at the serfs, and continued in Merogian, certain that, unlike Ziyan, they would not understand. ‘We have the serfs, guards, servants and the whole court to spy on us or wish us ill, do you really want his kithless daughter as well?’

I thought of Elise, her hard-edged beauty, her pride and the way she shrank herself. I did not wish my choice on anyone. The sweat. The grunt. The dry pain. The hatred.

‘She is still a woman,’ I said, pointedly in Cynghal. Marolyn opened her mouth, but I interrupted her. ‘My friend,’ I said, ‘I need your strength, your humour, but I need your patience too.’

‘So Lady Hadiah keeps telling me.’

‘Hadiah would like to stop telling you,’ said Hadiah. Marolyn sighed, rubbing her thumb on her brow. This went against everything she knew, the soft stepping, the delicacy. I wondered what would have happened if she had loved me like I had wanted. Would we have run? Would we have survived?

We would not. My duty was to my people first, and to my own heart second. Even if Marolyn had any attraction for women, even before the Cynghals, my marriage would have been a bond of loyalty between clans. I would have married a princess, like Sanafin. Like Elise.

Elise. I smiled, thinking of a little present that, days ago, I had found in my bed.

‘To woo a princess,’ I said, ‘we will need a gift.’

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Seventeen

Elise

Elise slipped into the secret routes of the palace. When the wars were over and the palaces of Merogia were being rebuilt, Odon had recommended her father add them in any castle that the court stayed in. They were known only to the royal family, born of an awareness that the swan's children could be targets of a knife in the night.

Their architects' tongues had been removed when they had finished. Elise knew that. She pretended she didn't, but she knew it. She thought about those tongues when she used the passages for the simple task of avoiding people as she navigated from Cynefel's solar to her own rooms.

These ways led her past an adjoining link to the keep. Morning light filtered through the panels, and from the corridors outside she heard the shifting of serfs and servants between, servicing the last of the demands of the Falcan court before they moved on.

She had neared the tutoring rooms, and as she passed by, Elise took a greedy glance in. There she saw Hein practising his letters on a low desk between an array of bookshelves and trophies of Cynghal success: a creature from a fountain in Widdin, a Merogian warrior helmet with goat horns attached to the pate.

'Oh good work,' said the low priest who was tutoring Hein. 'Nice, clean lettering. Don't rush it!'

Hein bent his little head further over the vellum on which he practised, and Elise's jealousy raised its head, a bird long since tamed, caged, wrangled. Even before her books and quills, her letters, had been taken, the ink of the written word had always seemed to dance and twist under her eyes, as if the monsters painted in the margins were real beasts crawling on the page and taking bites out of the meaning.

She sighed and moved on, continuing down the passage, but had not gone two chambers when she heard voices.

'This is madness, Conrin.'

A harsh, soft whisper. Very close. More bemused than aghast.

'*He's losing his grip and he knows it. Others think the same.*'

‘*Their heads will roll. And then so will ours.*’

‘*Come now, Gaisa, he has never touched a hair on your pretty head.*’

‘*That is because he prefers not to notice I exist.*’

Elise paused, peeking through the tapestries of an adjoining chamber. A recently emptied closet room, perhaps belonging to a set of guards who patrolled these areas in shifts.

‘*The Wing is on our side, Gaisa. Let’s show him we are worthy of our blood.*’

Elise could see her brothers, standing in the slivers of light from the arrow-slit windows, heads bent together as if they were about to wrestle.

‘*What about Egil?*’

‘*What about him?*’

‘*You know he has the instructions, and my bird is ready to deploy them.*’

‘*You did say she has a light touch,*’ Conrin grinned mockingly.

Perhaps it was the sound of Elise’s breath, or the shift of her feet. Perhaps it was some animal instinct, but Conrin looked up, frowning, his hand going for the sword at his waist. His eyes slid straight for the gap in the wall.

‘Who’s there?’ he said in a low voice. ‘Trust that I can stab through a wooden wall faster than you can blink.’

Elise knew that he could, she had seen him at the practice yard, and had mimicked his movements from the shadow of a window, remembering her brief, long-ago lessons. If she ran, he would make chase, and was the faster, the stronger. He had been permitted it: strength.

‘It is I, Brother-hyem,’ said Elise brightly. Conrin’s jaw tightened, and his hand did not leave his sword. She wondered when they had stopped being friends. She could not note a date, or a time. No mark of doom turning them from siblings into strangers.

‘Are you sneaking on us, Elise?’ snapped Gaisa. He had what looked like a note in his hand, which he balled up in his palm even though she couldn’t read it. Her heart fluttered against her breastbone, her throat swelling like a bird’s might before a shriek of alarm. There was nothing to be alarmed about. These were her brothers.

‘Sneaking on what?’ Elise said, swiftly, but not too swiftly. ‘I am on my way to my chambers and you snapped at me.’

Conrin strode forward, digging his fingers into the wood panel that hid the door and all but ripped it from the wall. Elise did not run. She knew if she did, he would suspect she had heard something she shouldn’t. Right

now, he wasn't sure. She pulled her face into an expression of mild stupidity.

'Why do you not go through the palace?' Conrin demanded, now he could see her.

'You know she hates talking to people,' said Gaisa, relaxing a little. She could feel his thoughts. *It's only Elise.*

What were they planning? He had so recently been put in his place, he should stay there for a while. Like she had.

'I don't hate talking to people,' she said. 'I just didn't want to get in the way.'

'Then don't,' said Conrin, jerking his chin down the dark passage. 'Go back where you belong.'

She would. She wanted to. Every time she set a foot outside her place, someone seemed so delighted to shove her back in. She breathed in, bowed, turned, but as she took a step he grabbed her wrist.

'Conrin!' hissed Gaisa, but did not stop him as her older brother wrenched her off balance and slammed her back into the corridor. The quick breath of air she had gained was crushed out of her in an instant, and dust showered down around them. He pushed the wrist into her chest, hard enough for it to hurt.

She let him, though she gasped in pain. She had tried fighting back before. It had worked when she was nine and he eight. But there was no mother now, no minder. This was not play, this was real.

'What did you hear?' said Conrin. The look in his eye was hard, his fading bruise stood out beneath his eye.

'Nothing,' said Elise, feeling the bones of her wrist grating together in his hand. He had learned this from their father. The sudden lash, the grind of pain, the low hiss of his voice. Assurance could be won fastest through domination.

'What did you see?'

She breathed through the pain. She had felt worse. But powerlessness always felt the same to Elise: like an egg. An egg with a bird within it, rapping at the shell, trying to get out. As if there was something trying to get out of her, while all the other women somehow contained it within.

She wanted to spit at him, strike at him, but perhaps at long last she had learned.

'I saw nothing,' she said.

‘Let her go, Conrin,’ said Gaisa.

Conrin scowled, and released her. ‘Come, Gaisa,’ he said, turning on his heel and marching to the door.

Gaisa lifted his shoulders in an apologetic shrug – *You know how he is* – but he followed him out of the quarters, leaving Elise in the dust and the silence to nurse her throbbing wrist alone.

By the time she made it to her room, her fingers felt hot, and sharp, jabbing aches ran from her hand to her elbow.

Torna, the maidservant, was laying out some repast for the midday: salted fish, oat cakes, pickled relish and cool ale. She bowed as Elise entered.

‘Leave me,’ Elise said, hiding her arm behind her, and Torna backed away to the door. She knew Elise did not like people in her chambers, in her business, and was one of the few Elise could tolerate. She’d had a pretty young maid once, a Galenish noble’s bastard with lips so red they looked like berries ripe for biting. Isabella had sent her away when Elise talked about her too often.

When Torna had slid quietly through the door and closed it behind her, Elise swore.

‘Shit,’ she hissed. She liked the word. She said it in Cynghal, Galenish, Merogian. ‘Shit upon my oath. Piss on the hatchlings and the worms they eat. Shit, shit, shit.’

She kicked a chair, barely feeling it in the twinge of her ankle as she paced and then stopped, looking up at the tapestry of her mother and sisters, feeling more alone than she ever had.

‘What would you do?’ she muttered miserably. Isabella would have said not to bother Conrin. Erelle would have gone and wept to their father, or a priest, and had her brothers chastised.

Isuire would have said nothing.

Even when Elise tried to be good, every part of her was wanting. She had a wildness in her like her brothers, but had she not learned to press it down? The things she was good at, swordplay, archery, weaving, the things she was bad at, letters, kind words, good thoughts, good faith, she pushed it all inside the shell of her heart. Sometimes, it cracked open, it moved in her. This bird in the egg, this inhabitation.

Better to be without it. Soft, like feathers, not meant to touch the earth.

Would that you had been a boy, little Elise, Liran had said once. *You would have made a good strong one.*

Would that you had been a boy, said Isuire. *You would have been happier.*

‘Arsehole,’ said Elise, to herself or to Conrin, she didn’t know. She tightened her injured hand into a fist, feeling the throb, the purity of it, clean, light, simple.

He’s losing his grip and he knows it. Conrin was still angry at their father. Of course he was. She had heard their rancour before, it had always come to nothing.

The Wing is on our side.

She held her wrist tighter, her hand prickled and throbbed with blood, and she calmed, holding on to that, putting the creature back into its shell. Whatever she felt, she was a swan, like the rest of them, she was theirs and they were hers. It was not her place to challenge, or to question.

The Wing is the swan is the king is my father is my lord.

She glanced at her own tapestry, the threads and feathers gleaming white like seafoam. Her father and family rising from history together.

She changed out of her long belted tunic into a short one over her chemise and leggings that she had idly embroidered herself, and tied a ragged length of cloth belt around her wrist to ease its aching. Then she shook off her misery and sat to stitch the blue background of the hanging more tightly to the wings of the swans as the sun was slowly blotted out by the shadow of a storm. She was still bent in position, straining against the fading light of a sputtering candle, when she heard a knock at the door. She hoped it might be Conrin, come to apologise, but instead behind it stood the handmaiden, Lady Hadiah, holding a scroll and a box.

The handmaiden bowed low, her knees bending to the ground in perfect courtly compliance, and then she stood. She wore a fine dark red gown of cotton, beaded at the breast with a crosshatch of black and white, and she cast an eye over Elise’s drab clothing, mildly surprised.

‘The queen need not send a pretty maid to wheedle me with gifts,’ said Elise irritably. The last thing she wanted now was the queen’s lady-in-waiting reminding her of her failures. ‘I am not as simple as the bard, nor as willing as the women.’

Hadiah laughed lightly, unabashed. ‘Princess Elise,’ she said, bowing her head again gracefully. Her black hair had been twisted into a long plait that trailed over her shoulder. ‘I am only a messenger. I doubt I could wheedle you into anything.’

Elise had met women like Hadiah, players of the game of court well versed in how to flatter, how to ease, like Amalle. ‘Then tell me why you come uninvited with trinkets in your hand.’

‘Paper is hardly a trinket,’ said Hadiah. ‘And the contents of the box have little value.’

Elise eyed the scroll. Over the years she had imagined what punishments might befall her if she was caught with banned letters, each more terrible than the first. She still clung to the hope that her father would one day see her forbearance, her penitence, and call her to him, give her a book if not a garland. Then she would ask for her wish – that life of piety and seclusion – and he would grant it.

But … it would be rude to refuse a gift from the queen her father had asked her to befriend. She could burn it, at least.

She saw Hadiah’s eyes flick past her to her all but barren room. Elise had often overseen the packing of Isabella’s courtly comforts as they travelled from place to place, but she had not amassed much of a collection for herself. She only needed her fine loom and her own weaving, the tapestry of her mother and sisters, her bow and arrows polished and ready for autumn hunting. That was it.

Elise closed her door further. ‘Put them on the floor and go.’

As Hadiah retreated down the corridor, Elise almost closed the door on the gifts. It would be evensong soon, and while she was gone Torna would return, take the hint, and remove them.

But the scroll caught her eye. She paused, then scooped them up.

The box was light; she set that down by her untouched lunch, and held the scroll in her hands. It was cheap paper, rough and thin-pressed. The queen had sealed it with her own Ardweni sigil: a round snake eating its own tail. In Cynghal the snake was a sly, pathetic, wormish creature. Maybe it had a different meaning in Merogia.

Perhaps it was a letter. She remembered her mother’s favourite poems and for a brief, ludicrous moment pictured a love note. But that was silly. Women didn’t send each other love notes in those stories.

She should look, ensure there were no secrets, no heresies. Perhaps Conrin would apologise to her if she found some evil on the queen.

She broke the seal with her thumb and unfurled the paper to find a painting of the letter E. Simple, but prettily done, it not just any E, but the

first illuminated letter in her mother's book of Galenish folktales and stories of the Synod.

Ever since the sky was new it has been filled with birdsong.

She could still hear the first line in her mother's voice, in Erelle's, in Isuire's. The first time they had come to Merogia and settled in the spired palace of Gevera, Isabella had gathered all her children around the fires in her chambers and had each read a page. Later, when all the children had gone, when Isuire was dead, and Elise no longer allowed to look at the pages, Isabella would still read, out loud, so Elise could hear it. Their little loophole. Elise would sit nearby, weaving a new swaddling cloth for the next babe that made it through pregnancy, or massaging the pain from her mother's swollen feet.

Elise could still picture the letter on the page, surrounded by darting starlings, kingfishers, the long-necked elegance of a swan, the bold high wings of a kestrel. The first letter of her name. E for ever, E for Elise. Now she didn't have to, it was here in her hands, a piece of her mother at her most loving, a piece of the life from which Elise had been excluded, and the queen had gifted it to her.

The claws of grief set in then, hard and fast, and Elise sat down, and found tears spilling over her eyes. This was not letters, surely she could not get in trouble for a picture of birds. Easily hidden, easily explained.

When the pain had lessened, her tears dried, she picked up the box, curious now. It was simple wood; stained ash. Elise suspected some pretty necklace would be inside, or bracelets. Tilde surely wished to lure her in with the kindness of a paper gift, then bribe her with gold or silver.

She lifted the lid. Inside were the fine bones of the silver fish, removed of skin and boiled perfectly clean, set on a bed of velvet.

And, after a moment, the princess laughed.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Eighteen

Tilde

‘I am not sure mockery was the right idea,’ said Hadiah, chewing her lip. ‘She looked … unsettled. And she did not come to evensong.’

The evening had drawn in, dark with a summer storm that blew purple over the Salt Lake and blacked out the sunset. Lightning cut through, a fine lace making monsters out of the fold of cloud. I could feel the prickle of it on my skin, and the drumbeat of thunder that followed. Dagobert had held evensong even against the rain’s scourge, though he could hardly be heard over its hammering.

‘I think she would prefer to be seen clearly, than reflected in flattery,’ I said quietly. We had taken shelter in my private solar to dry. Despite its beauty, my bedroom held little joy. That was where Liran came. So, instead, we held private conference in the below chamber after Elwinde and Muirenn had laid the table with bread, cheese and little tarts then disappeared to their own prayers and beds. They always left as silently as they came, and I misliked that they obeyed the law of serfs so readily.

‘Or is that what you prefer?’ said Hadiah.

As we spoke, I was at last opening Ziyan’s offering. I expected herbs, and as Marolyn had some skill in it, I felt whatever we found she could use for her own. But the parcel was heavier than herbs. Yes, there were some, dried willowbark of course, mugwort, slices of precious ginger, still yellow, and what looked like powdered bone.

But with them was a small book. It was decorated like a herbal and the first page declared it as such, but inside were not instructions but poems, songs, and drawings.

‘*Give not memory blood nor bone …*’ I read in Merogian. The old song of my mother’s. I flicked through the pages, softly, then with more urgency, finding pictures of places I had not seen in years, or had only heard of: the sacred crypt of Daostet, the bone temples where the ancient skulls and gold of ancestors and children were cradled in the roots of trees. I was hoping for magic, but I was overall disappointed.

‘That’s borderline illegal,’ murmured Marolyn in Merogian, so quietly I could barely hear her over the crackle of the fireplace and the rattle of rain. ‘If Dagobert found it he’d burn it and then us.’ She sounded almost enamoured with the idea.

‘Such a thing would have taken years to make,’ said Hadiah, looking over my shoulder. ‘No one writes these songs down.’

I flipped the pages back to the front, and read again the inscription: *A herbal of Merogian tradition.* No name, but an inking of a bee wrapped in a vine. ‘Merogia used to mean the land of honey,’ I said. ‘Mero, meaning honey.’ I touched the bee. ‘Mero-vine. Merovin.’

Hadiah sucked her teeth with hard annoyance, while Marolyn curled her lip. ‘*We* should burn it,’ she said.

I put it down slowly, like it was not a hot thing in my hands, then turned to the second item: a small pouch. Within it was a fine silver chain holding a disc of bone, from the bone carvers of Hallion. It had been etched with open wings and rays bursting from them to the edge of the circle, which held tiny writing in Merogian and Cynghal, but not Galenish: *We are all within the shelter of the Wing.*

‘Throw it out of the window,’ Marolyn suggested, but I was curious. Merovin could have sent me so sycophantic a gift with the rest of the morgengabe.

‘It’s a locket,’ said Hadiah, touching the delicate needle-clasp. The silver must be Kanaanite-made, and I opened it carefully to reveal a fine ceramic tile from Widdin, carefully painted with a miniature of Merogia: the green of the kithwood, the hannerast roads that cut through it. Above was the king’s swan, set in relief against the rest, its tiny crown gleaming in bronze. That was Ardweni copper. All that was missing was the iron of Falcan, or the tin of Torcros, though they had yet to be subjugated by the swan.

Was that it? A reminder that Cynghal had claimed us? Was this only an expensive insult? I almost followed Marolyn’s advice before I realised that there was a slight gap between the swan and the painting, enough for only the point of a pin to fit.

I put a nail against it, and it turned left, twirling until it was upside down.

A click. A third layer was revealed beneath the map. A tiny scroll fell out, no thicker than the band of my mother’s blue stone ring. With it, underneath the tiny painting, were two etched discs of dull metal, one on top of each

other. Iron. Falcan. The different layers were letters and numbers that, when spun, matched.

I opened the scroll and we held our breaths. It was all but gibberish Merogian, but it began with ‘The apple is the tree’.

A is T.

I spun the codex, and deciphered the rest of the note.

Wait, it said. *The swans must fall from the sky.*

My heart squeezed like a nut in a press. Wait, it said.

‘This has to be from Merovin,’ said Hadiah with distaste. ‘A physik from Argentha could not afford something so specific. So extravagant.’

‘So the Geveran wants you to trust him, a man whose clan broke bread then soaked it in blood,’ said Marolyn. ‘It cannot be done.’

Treachery.

I felt I could see the pieces Liran spoke about, moving across the board. But which were in my favour, and which were feinting only to go for my throat?

Lightning flashed, and the door to my solar was disturbed by a knock. We did not need to speak. Hadiah took the book and the scroll, hiding the first under the mantle and throwing the second on the fire as Marolyn assumed a pleasant expression and went to answer. The locket, I simply closed, and laid on the bench beside me.

‘Who is it at this hour? Marolyn demanded, her hand inside her pocket, feeling for the knife she had sewn to her inner belt.

‘It is Princess Elise, come to answer for your gifts.’

The flashes lit the high bones of Elise’s face as she entered the dimly lit solar. She had a large basket, precariously balanced on her hip with her left hand, and I gestured her to sit with me. Hadiah had described her wearing a surprisingly masculine tunic, embroidered with flowers and swifts along the hem, but she was now back in a gown of grey-green silk, trying to hide how uncomfortable she felt.

Her eyes darted around the room as if looking for enemies as she obeyed my gesture; they landed, however, on a curl of several papers that lay on a painted table by the wall.

‘I thought you would throw those away,’ she said, surprised. ‘Or Cynefel would.’

They were long bands of parchment, inked with depictions of children, wombs, swans and the Wing, and prayers in Galenish. They were big enough to fit around a woman's back and pregnant belly while she was birthing. There were thirteen of them.

'Why would we?' I said. *Sweet as honey*. 'They were important to your mother, were they not?'

'I …' said Elise, putting the basket down, still favouring her left hand. She tugged her eyes away from the papers. Her right wrist was slightly swollen, a little bruised. She did not sit down herself. 'The gifts you sent me …'

'Gift,' I corrected. 'And a return of something you sent.'

Even in the torchlight, I could see a blush creep into her cheeks and cling there. Hadiah gave me a warning look, but there were times when my cousin was too gentle.

'I did not … it was …' She cleared her throat, and shook her head at the wine Marolyn offered her. My own cup, I did not touch either, and they sat full of darkness between us. 'How did you find it?'

'You forget,' I said. 'I also had siblings.'

It had only taken me two days to find that a prank had been played on me: the faintest suggestion of salt in the air as I woke from a nightmare, senses heightened. I knew what I was looking for. Even Elwinde and Muirenn had helped us search, perhaps thinking me mad, till we found a finger's worth of stitching along the seam of the mattress in a finer thread than the rest.

'I did not know,' said Elise quietly. 'What happened to them?'

She did not know? About the crown of nettles on my brothers' head? Of the stained knees of my sister's dress? Of my mother firing arrow after arrow at their hanging bodies, broken by the breaking of her children? Too far to reach, too close to close our eyes?

'They died,' I said tightly. I saw the sympathy in Marolyn and Hadiah's gazes, and drew strength from it. Elise did not deserve this innocence, it did not wash her family's hands of the blood of mine. But Hadiah wanted my patience. *Green as a fresh rose.*

'How did you know it was me?' she asked at last, focussed only on her own small trespass.

'Boys are no longer taught to sew that finely,' I said. 'And the stitching was almost unnoticeable.' There was a compliment buried there, if she

dared to look for it.

‘It could have been another woman.’

‘I did not think any other women would hold a grudge over which room I slept in.’

That was not so tactful. Elise’s fingers flexed. ‘I apologise—’

‘What good will apologies do?’ I said, picking up a honeyed crispel from my table. It had a small sliver out of it, where it had been tested for poison, but I still put my ring to it. The stone stayed blue, pale and clear.

‘Then what do you want?’ she asked. The light from the fire turned her blue gaze luminous.

I could see a smile in her, hiding like a chestnut in its prickled shell, something bright and vital and alive. It would serve me well to coax it out of her. I *wanted* her to be the weak link I could use to break into the court. Her influence, if she chose to use it, could reveal her family’s strengths, gripes, weaknesses, which women might warm to me, hold with me, which husbands they could turn to my favour.

But a part of me just wanted to see what she would look like if she smiled.

‘I want a friend,’ I said.

She pursed her lips. ‘I am not simple, Queen Tilde,’ she said. ‘The last time I offered you clothes to wear and questions I could answer, you threw it back at me.’

‘You left,’ I pointed out.

We were at an impasse, her gaze had strayed back to the birthing prayers, and though Marolyn was smirking, Hadiah was giving me a wide-eyed warning. I had to find another way in.

‘What happened to her?’ I asked, changing the subject. ‘Your mother.’

Hadiah put her palm to her face, and Elise stared at me, open-mouthed. ‘I heard it was childbirth,’ I covered, ‘I thought you might have—’

‘It was not,’ said Elise. ‘It was days after.’ That surprised me. ‘The babe did not survive, but I had seen it before, and she was getting better, sitting up, talking, asking for things. No bleeding, no fever. On the third day, her head ached, so I went to fetch her some tincture. When I came back—’

She didn’t need to finish. I knew what she meant to say. Her mother was gone, the Wing had taken her, her soul had departed to become a bird.

‘She was getting better,’ Elise said quietly. I thought of the ring my mother had given me, and touched its stone.

‘Do you think she was poisoned?’ I asked.

Elise looked at me with such anger that I knew there was a question hidden inside. Thunder rattled the windows, and a green-scented breeze rolled in, coming from the east.

‘It would not be the first time someone tried to kill one of my family,’ she said.

I wonder why. I could almost *hear* Marolyn thinking it, but she pretended not to, instead ducking to some repairs she was making to my travelling clothes. The blood of the rebel we had cut out of the hem. But there was something else in Elise’s gaze: a question.

‘It was not me,’ I said. ‘Women in childbed are holy in Merogia.’

Elise scoffed. ‘Merogia sends women to war,’ she said, as if that refuted me. ‘And you stood the most to gain by my mother’s death.’

‘Did I?’ I said softly.

And there, I saw it, a crack, a blink, a stray feather, a rawness. I did not have the most to gain from her mother’s death, accidental or not: her father did.

‘You seem willing enough to take advantage,’ the princess covered. I could see Hadiah’s gestures, *gently, gently*, from behind Elise’s head. But I wondered how many honest conversations this woman had been permitted, where pain was not buried with velvet tongues, but shown in its dull and biting truth.

‘Our country was starving,’ I said, opting for candour. ‘Cynghal taxes reduce the profit not only of our treasury, but our people to nothing. Our trade had dwindled, excluded from the routes between the rest of the Merogian states. We have only been left with our bloodline, with me. So, to save our people, I took the opportunity I was offered.’

‘Perhaps if you did not want to suffer,’ Elise said coldly, ‘you should not have rebelled.’

I could have struck out her eye with the edge of the goblet. I imagined picking it up and throwing it at her, wine spilling down her pretty silken dress.

‘My mother and I did not join the rebellion,’ I said.

‘No one believes that.’

There was something of her true nature, sharp and quick. It disappeared just as quickly, and she touched her hand to her chest. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said, to my astonishment. ‘I did not mean that.’

‘Yes you did,’ I told her. ‘You were angry.’ She frowned, like such a thing could not be true, and I allowed the quiet to open up to her like an offering. At last, she put her mouth to it.

‘I cannot be a friend to you,’ she told me. Did I detect some reluctance, or was that wishful thinking? ‘I am a sister to brothers you have cheated out of their inheritance.’

‘Your father’s choices are not mine,’ I said. ‘Perhaps he will change his mind on your brothers, but if not they will still have wealth, and power, free to joust and play as they please.’ She almost smirked at that, her mouth twisted, just a little. ‘Some would dream of such freedom,’ I pressed.

She considered this. ‘That is not how they feel,’ she said.

‘How do you feel?’

She put her left hand to her swollen right wrist, squeezing it slightly, as if the pain calmed her. I pitied her, then, as one might pity a creature with a broken wing, fallen from the nest, abandoned and barely surviving.

No. No pity. Nest, or cage, she was a hurdle to overcome, she was my enemy’s daughter. I would use her, and then destroy all that had made her.

‘I am just a lonely woman,’ I tried. ‘Are we not the same?’

That was too far. Too blunt. ‘I am not lonely,’ she snapped. ‘I am with my family.’

A family who barely even took the time to look at her. She floated through these halls as a ghost with no consequence, as if her mother had taken her with her when she died. Perhaps, if Isabella had had a choice, she would have. The princess had served her like a maid.

‘And your family is mine,’ I replied, as gently as I could. ‘You asked what I wanted, Princess. I want to honour your father, and stabilise this land.’ The latter at least, was not a lie. ‘And I know now I need your help, and your wisdom.’

After a moment of wrestling with herself, Elise went to the basket, and bowed to me, presenting it.

‘Queen Tilde,’ she said coolly, and I knew she had withdrawn. ‘I understand I have neglected my father’s will and my duty to you. I am sorry for the prank I played on you. I should not have done it, and will repent in the Nest.’

‘It made me laugh,’ I admitted. She was close. I could see the slightest curls of her hair where they had escaped at her temples, fluttering in the candlelight and the draught of the storm.

Elise smiled at that, but with no warmth. Still, her freckles looked like dappled shadows moving across her face, like the shades of leaves in the forest. ‘This is the gift the women of the court made you.’ She placed it on the divan, and lifted the plain cedar-woven covering that kept the moths away. The bruises showed clearer on her wrist. They looked like fingerprints. ‘Your morgengabe.’

Sunlight was my first thought as my eyes caught on the basket’s contents. Like the clouds had broken and the dawn had returned to bathe us in light.

‘The dye is saffric,’ said Elise, looking at the cloth she had revealed with some satisfaction. It was orange-tinted yellow, gleaming like liquid. ‘My sister Erelle and I began the cloth on her last visit: fine cotton, mostly, but twined with silk.’

I pulled out the fabric, and Marolyn and Hadiah came to help me spread it out on the divan closest to the fire to reveal a mantle of astounding beauty. There, the dancing flames picked out fine feathers stitched across the entire piece in silver thread, some pearled with the smallest beads of quartz. The shoulders, front and hem were all gleaming with silver brocade, and beneath it the darkness of sable fur bloomed in perfect dusty shadow at the neck and hem, and the rest was lined with a red wool so dark it turned almost to shadow. Over the heart was a perfect silk appliqué of the king’s emblem, the swan with the twisted neck, wearing a crown.

‘The embroidery was done by the ladies of court,’ said Elise. ‘Each contributed at least one feather. The sable was a gift from Galen, the lining of Cynghal.’

The weaving alone must have taken months, so it draped and flowed, the stitches more moons again.

‘This was not meant for me, was it?’ I said at last. ‘You began it for your mother.’

She did not deny it. ‘It was finished for you,’ she clarified. ‘Waste is a sin of pride. Birds use old nests for new, we would not unravel a cloth for the sake of it.’

‘You are very talented,’ I assured her. ‘I can weave some nice patterns for belts or ribbons, nets too, but nothing like this.’

She nodded her thanks, and looked up with her piercing gaze, the eyes of a king in the body of a princess. I felt a deep pull in my stomach.

‘Our gift is given,’ she said. ‘The women will be glad of it.’

She stood, her wine untouched, and turned to the door. She seemed satisfied, as if she had caught some crawling spider and thrown it out of the window. But I wanted to reach for her, pull her back. Her departure felt somehow like a loss. I had seen a glimpse of a real woman, a fragile, dangerous animal with too many truths inside her that she had pressed into shadow with her will, her humour, her spite. I wondered who she would be when she let them rise back up.

'Tell me,' I said, and she paused, her hand on the handle. 'What happened to your wrist?'

She was good. She turned, her head lowered, clasping her hands.

'I twisted it,' she said. 'Practising archery.'

'You're an archer?' I took the lie as given.

'For hunting, only,' she specified.

'I have hunted,' I said, and she nodded noncommittally, keen to be gone. 'Though I didn't enjoy it as much as my sister, Ebba. She and my brother were older, and rough with me. Once they left me on the forest path, pretending they had lost me.'

They had meant to frighten me, but I had not been afraid of the voices, only the stories my nursemaid would tell me warning me not to follow them.

'But I had my ways,' I continued, 'of vengeance. I would leave nettles stuck in their shoes, or their gloves. Once in the buckles of their leather cuirasses.' It was not so funny now, as it had been then, remembering the nettle stings on my brother's brow of the crown that had been forced on him. Still, Elise's eyes met mine again, and held me, and I knew, despite it all, that we understood each other.

'They never knew it was me.'

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Nineteen

Elise

A week later, Elise was still affronted by the sheer gall of the woman, trying to entice her with words and traps and little games.

But she could not shake that quiet conversation, the closeness of the queen, the fine bones of her neck, the sound of her breath, no matter how much she tried to push it to the back of her mind where the trees murmured. She would continue to obey her father's request to the letter, and no more.

There was much to distract her anyway, with the preparations for Kanaan. Elise had never visited the new territory, though she knew its capital and castle of Faoldun by maps and paintings. She had even been assisting her mother with the keep's redecoration. There had been a number of small uprisings since the kingsmoot rebellion, but with Isen's firm hand, each fire that Elise had heard of had been quickly put out. Now Faoldun, guarded by the new Ducal Kerrin and his Galenish wife, was perfectly safe.

Their journey, as always, began as a parade. Drummers and horn-blowers led the front, Cynghal and Galenish warriors wearing their native armour and their finest livery, the swan guard of Liran, Conrin's grey guard, Gaisa's pale green and Egil's yellow in carefully separated ranks. Galenish on horseback bore the standards of the king and his swan-princes, more shining and bright in their plate armour, than the rattling stomp of the Cynghals in their mail.

Behind them, Liran led the cavalcade on horseback, his white stallion jangling with bells on his reins and a flagged skirt trailing behind. Though he still wore his weather-stained campaign cloak, he had it thrown back to show a shining blue tabard stitched with tiny fish in green and silver.

Conrin's new horse, a fine blue roan, was pranked up the same, mane and tail braided and charms of silver wings rattling from every hook and stirrup. Elise's brother looked every bit a holy prince in a travel cloak of priestly grey, his gold hair brushed back. Gaisa rode close to him, his dark locks stark against his green tunic the colour of peridot, and Egil with splashes of dandelion yellow, Hein on a smaller pony led by Odon, whose horse had additional leather straps to support his injured leg. Liran's old war mate was

sweating in his gleaming leathers under the curdling grey sky, but refused to fan himself like Markal Thedemer, who wore nonsensical cuffs of out-of-season ermine. He rode with Ducals Ademar of Widdin and Falcan's own Uhtren, close behind the king and his princes and tightly flanked by Dagobert, who jostled his piebald mare ahead of the rest of the nobles. All wanted to be seen at the side of the king.

Next came the women, with Tilde at their head and the bard at her side, singing an old Galenish song celebrating the beautiful birds of court. It was both flattering to the women and a subtle reproof against the priest, who could not protest a song both about the Wing and the women. Dagobert kept looking back with annoyance, hearing the soft song of the bard over the militant strike of drums and the jangle of decorated bridles, but each time Tilde bowed to him respectfully. This amused the women, Ysel in particular, laughing prettily from her soft-leather saddle.

Elise tried not to look at Tilde where she rode near the litter that carried pregnant Cynefel and Daegmar, but it was like trying not to find the flash of light that crossed your eye. The queen's hair was bound in plaits and contained in beaded netting, but one loose curl had escaped, and Elise's eyes were inevitably drawn to where it touched the skin between Tilde's ear and neck.

Behind the women came the great train of court. Lesser nobles, low priests, cobblers, seamsters, smiths and cooks were employed to follow them on their route through the mountains. The servants both of the royal household and individual patrons wore some of their most festive caps and jewels, and chattered amongst the sweet aroma of the recently harvested barley and recent summer rain.

Elise had hoped this would be the last time she would leave Salt Lake palace, and meant to enjoy this parade to its fullest. She always enjoyed seeing her father not only as a commander with an iron fist, but as a man beloved. It filled her with glory and rightness when they entered towns to cheers and thrown flowers, quieting the shameful flutterings and sins of the mind. But she wondered if a year from now, she would be following the same paths, surrounded by the same people growing older and wearier as her brothers drove the world ahead. A few more months, Isen had said, but she never had his skill for certainty.

She sighed, and decided she would enjoy it nonetheless.

But when they reached the town, there were no flowers or flags, no cheering or ringing bells. A few did come out waving, Galenish and Cynghal mainly, by their dress, in the swept doorways of their new-built homes, clutching their religious pendants and muttering prayers to Liran. As they reached the Merogian houses folk still bowed, and cleared away from the parade, but did not meet their eyes and kept instead to their awnings and work. The only noises were the drums and the horses and the ragged chickens shrieking as they ran between houses.

Ahead, the parade was drawing to an unplanned halt on the cobblestone, and Elise stood in her stirrups to see what had stopped them. Flowers at last, in an explosion of midsummer colour amidst the furtive grey, but it was not for them. A bier had been raised of branches and riverstones, woven with meadowsweet, yarrow and ivy, directly in the king's path.

On it, on a bed of silver birch, was the body of a young boy. The little ostler lad who had challenged Conrin in court was dead, his skin waxen and water-bloated, but recognisable. A woman was standing before the bier with a boy and a girl who looked like her children, fury and fear warring in their faces as they faced down the court of the swan king.

'His name was Falhin!' cried the woman. 'Falhin, my cousin Fuinna's son. Killed by the wild swans of Cynghal!'

She pointed a shaking hand at Conrin as the street folk muttered, and one man jeered.

'We know you killed him!' shouted the young lad. 'Everyone knows you killed him worse than his aunty.'

The other girl didn't speak. She produced an egg from her pocket, and the woman turned to stop her, the bravery dropping from her face to leave only fear. Too late, the girl had thrown it with all the force in her arm, and it flew.

Liran ducked with surprising quickness, but he was not the target. Gaisa, gaping, took it on the shoulder, where it cracked and sprayed the shining grey of Conrin's cloak.

Miras had stopped singing, the drums ceased their rhythm, and Conrin looked at the girl and slowly reached up to brush a smear of egg from his silver-clad shoulder.

'Murderer?' he sneered. 'You think I would sully my hand with a boy of no importance?'

But Gaisa was in no mood to equivocate. ‘They attacked the king,’ he yelled. ‘Guards!’

‘Gaisa, it is only an egg—’ said Egil, but the flags at the parade’s forefront were already shaking as Gaisa’s green guard and Conrin’s grey broke their ranks at their prince’s command. The woman gave an outraged cry, grabbed the other two and ran.

‘Leave her alone!’ came a shout from a building, someone watching from the shades of their home. A rotten cabbage flew out onto the guards, a crust of mouldy bread, and several doors burst open. Merogians ran onto the street, raising their arms to hold back the horses. Someone screamed as one of the creatures slammed into him, trampling his leg beneath. Hein shrieked in fright as blood flew into the air.

‘Stop!’ cried Tilde, uselessly. ‘Please!’

‘They mean to kill us!’ bellowed Dagobert, and beside Elise, Amalle cried out in fear.

‘Rally!’ bellowed Liran, startled. ‘Fire in the sails! We’re being boarded!’

They were not on a ship. Odon took Liran’s arm in a firm grip, but it was too late. The horses broke through, making after the woman, and the older princes charged with them, and people in the streets panicked, some running away from the parade and some running amongst it, separating them. Tilde spurred on her horse, charging towards the fray, rather than away.

‘Queen Tilde,’ Elise cried out a warning.

‘My king!’ called Tilde, oblivious and riding towards the men. ‘King Liran, Ducal Uhtren, stop them!’

Elise couldn’t help it, she dug her heels into her own chestnut nag and followed Tilde, her charge, before she shamed them both.

‘Princess, don’t!’ said Amalle, but Elise didn’t listen. Her hooves thundered on the stones as the town exploded in a riot. She ducked as sticks were thrown at her, handfuls of manure and straw. Townsfolk they had already passed were drawn to the noise and into the chaos, and Cynghals were soon throwing fists with Merogians, and the entire guard was drawing their swords, only stoking the brawl. A child holding a small doll stood in the street, crying in the chaos.

‘Hold!’ Elise cried; no one listened to her. She saw Tilde’s maid Marolyn running, her hand beneath her tunic. A blade, she must have a weapon. ‘Please, calm down!’

The queen had followed the guard down a long alley that carried water and refuse towards Salt Lake, and Elise followed, ahead now of her father who was still shouting nonsense while Odon tried to calm him and the nobles huddled against vegetable missiles.

The sky above was the colour of quenched steel, unpolished and heavy with heat, and as Elise reached the lake she saw it cast in the same brooding shades. The town here spilled into a market that people were already fleeing. Tables were upturned, baskets spilled open, fish flapping softly in their last throes of death. In a red puddle, Elise saw three human teeth.

Tilde was ahead, her horse trotting towards where the cavalry had corralled a number of the fisher folk into a panicked knot, their pikes lowered while Conrin pointed and shouted instructions. Elise caught up to her before Marolyn did and grabbled at her bridle.

‘Let me go!’ snapped Tilde, yanking at her reins. Her eyes were bright with anger, her face flushed. ‘I have to stop them!’

‘If you bring battle to them they will meet you the same,’ hissed Elise. ‘It will go badly, Queen Tilde.’

‘For them or for you?’ Tilde snarled. ‘Unhand me.’

Elise did not, holding the horse tightly and pulling her to a full stop. She had come up alongside Tilde, holding their beasts close, their thighs touching between the saddles.

‘For them,’ said Elise, nodding at the people being rounded up like sheep for the slaughter. Up in the town, people were watching from windows and the waterbreak. Ducal Uhtren was hurrying down on horseback, his brow creased with worry, surrounded by his personal guard. Behind him followed the king.

‘Merogians!’ cried Gaisa, driving his horse around the crowd, who shied away from the hooves. ‘This disrespect to the king will not be tolerated! Send forward the attacker!’

They did not, they knotted closer.

‘Drag one out!’ ordered Conrin, pointing at a man nearer the edge. A knight dismounted and grabbed him before he could run, pulling him before Conrin, who dismounted.

‘Please!’ said the man. ‘I don’t know what’s happening, I was just—’

‘Where is the woman who assaulted my brother?’ said Conrin, drawing his sword. He laid it on the man’s shoulder. Elise’s stomach clenched, but before she could react, Tilde had swung herself off the horse.

‘Fuck this,’ she said, landing on the pebbles with a crack and striding across the seaweed and puddles of brackish water. Elise almost threw herself down after her, anything to keep her far from the edge of Conrin’s shining blade. But the rest of the parade was arriving. Her father had made it to the edge of the market wreckage, Odon beside him whispering urgently. Elise wondered what had happened up in the town. She wished for Isen, calm Isen, he would stop Conrin and make him wait for orders; he would do *something*.

‘Prince Conrin,’ said Tilde, her voice loud. ‘Prince Gaisa. Stop this!’

Conrin ignored her. The man did not move, and murmured a plea for mercy, the crowd made no noise.

And then Conrin twisted the sword with a flourish. The innocent man’s throat gaped open, spraying blood onto the rock. The crowd screamed. Gaisa dismounted as well now, striding towards the queen with his sword out.

‘Do not come further, Merogian!’ he barked. ‘Showing your true sympathies now, are you?’

Marolyn sprinted past Elise, her brown hair falling loose from her plaits. She planted herself between the queen and the prince who strode towards her, and drew a long knife from her skirt. Elise heard a gasp from the nobility: a sin of the hand.

‘Girl, lay down your weapon before a prince!’ bellowed Odon. Marolyn gripped her blade, and her stance suggested she knew how to use it. If she swung it against Gaisa it would be an act of treason. Perhaps noting this, Tilde stopped, putting her hand on her maid’s shoulder.

‘Prince Conrin, stop it!’ she said, her voice hoarse with emotion. ‘It was an egg, nothing more.’

‘Another!’ said Conrin, steadfastly ignoring her.

Elise closed her eyes. Her stomach was twisting, she felt a grip at her throat, an inhabitation in her chest, an ache in her palm.

‘I did it!’ cried a woman, shoving herself forward. ‘It was me.’

‘Mama no—’ a protest was silenced as the older woman came through the crowd, haggard, nose bloodied. She wiped it on the back of her hand.

‘You killed an innocent woman, so-called prince,’ she said to Conrin. ‘And then you killed her nephew. We found his body after the storm, weighed down with stones, half-eaten in the salt water. You didn’t even bury him!’

‘Arrest this witch!’ said Conrin, pointing his bloody sword at the woman. ‘But there is still a rebel in their midst.’

‘Peace, Prince Conrin,’ Uhtren called, now on the shingle with the king as two guards grabbed the woman.

‘Murderer!’ she cried. ‘You pay a coin for a head then take another! He never had a chance against you vicious creatures!’ The knight grabbed her harshly, twisting her arm behind her back.

‘I have committed no sin!’ said Conrin. ‘This is said only to stain my honour!’

‘Prince Conrin, leave her to the magistrate,’ called Uhtren. ‘Please.’ He could not defy a prince of the swan, so the ducal pleaded with him. ‘She will be tried under your father’s law. That is the law that we hold to in this land. As Cynghals!’

Conrin took off his grey cloak, wiping the blade with the cloth, then he threw it into the dirt and blood of the ground. From the palace, Salt Lake was beautiful, the water pristine and shining with the sky. Up close, it was filled with murk and rot, stinking waves lapping at the shore. Elise’s brother turned towards where the nobles had gathered in the chaos of the market, the parade a mess, the music and song gone to gasps and staring shame.

There, he put his hand to his heart as he looked to Dagobert, who was on his steed by the king, watching with a gleam of delight in his eyes to see the queen stopped in her tracks, and Merogians so cowed beneath a fierce and brutal hand.

‘What say you, King Liran?’ said Conrin. Elise held her breath, hoping her father would step in. Odon looked across at Liran encouragingly, but the swan king seemed far away, his eyes glazed, his jaw working. As if his son were not standing before his wife with an open blade, as if his other had not murdered a man in cold blood. For an egg that had barely even struck him.

‘What say you, High Priest?’ said Conrin, when Liran did not answer.

Elise clenched her jaw. No, no, this was all wrong.

‘Merogians are rebellious by nature,’ said Dagobert. ‘They refuse the grace of the Wing and the rule of the swan. They must be shown no mercy.’

Conrin nodded. ‘They must know to be afraid of their king.’

He did not want them to be afraid of Liran, he wanted them to fear *him*. He wanted Tilde to be shown to have no power. He wanted to prove he was capable of terror.

The woman gasped as the knights who held her pushed her down to her knees. Someone from the crowd tried to run out, the girl. Her companions pulled her back, closing in around her so she could not be seen. Conrin didn't notice, too focussed on the woman in front of him.

'You killed him!' the woman screamed. 'You killed a poor boy who only did as the tarn told him! He had nothing and no one!'

Elise's wrist throbbed. Conrin was not capable of cold murder. He had been raised as they all had. Murder was the sin of the hand if not in the cause of justice.

But she had just watched him execute an innocent man, and twist justice on his tongue to make him right. Gaisa stepped towards Marolyn, who had murder in her eyes as Tilde whispered to her urgently, drawing her away. The maid would not move.

Elise was choking on her tongue. Women weren't supposed to fight, to speak. The last time Elise had spoken it had gone worse. For her, for everyone. Her books had been burned, her mother shamed, her sister dead, her other sold off and married. It was her fault. She was too bold, too out of line, she had disrupted the way of things, the order of the Wing, the order of the home. Of *hyem.* What forgiveness could she beg if she transgressed again?

'These are my people,' came a voice behind them, soft and strong. 'This is the land I was born on. Please, Prince Conrin, let me answer for them.'

Uhtren closed his eyes.

It was Cynefel who had spoken, holding her swollen stomach and coming through the noble crowd on foot, her face drawn and serious.

'She will answer for herself,' Conrin hissed, but it was not to him that Cynefel had spoken. She was standing by Liran's horse. She touched his foot where it hung in his stirrup, and knelt beneath it, putting her lips to the king's boot. At last, Liran seemed to return to himself, turning to look at the kneeling woman.

Tilde stared at Cynefel for a sickened moment, but took her cue. Holding tightly onto Marolyn's arm, she knelt before Gaisa, her long neck bending before the prince's blade. Gaisa was taken aback, and his blade dropped just a mote as Marolyn gazed at her with an expression of horror, but then took the knee beside her.

Elise felt sick. Angry. Disgusted. She felt the egg inside her, and within it, the wriggling, the writhing feeling trying to get out. It was a sensation

that felt like sin.

‘Great king,’ said Cynefel, ‘great prince. The punishment you wish to give her now, give it to me.’

‘No!’ said Uhtren, turning and striding towards her. ‘You are my wife, you are with my child. Recompense will not be paid. King Liran, call back your wild brood.’

Liran lifted his eyes from Cynefel to Uhtren, frowning.

‘Do not speak so about my children, Ducal,’ he said, his voice low with threat.

‘The blood of the swan is united against you,’ said Dagobert haughtily. ‘Let the prince deal his justice, Cynghal.’

Elise could not stand for this. This was wrong. She knew it was wrong down to her bones. There was no mother to caution her, no Isen to chide her.

‘Father-hyem,’ she said, her tongue bittersweet with sin and certainty, and slid down from her horse. ‘Mercy, too is a message of the Wing.’ She knelt with the others. ‘Please.’

‘Princess Elise …’ She heard Amalle whisper.

‘If the princess denies it …’

‘Isabella was a speaker for peace.’

‘Elise-hyem?’

Egil gaped at her, surprised. *Too bold too bold too bold.*

Conrin and Gaisa were staring at her as if she had appeared from between the horses with two heads, naked and screeching. But the queen was kneeling, the ducal’s wife was kneeling, and now the princess too.

‘What would you have me do, daughter?’ said Liran.

Elise’s heart clenched. The king was looking at her. *Her.* He recognised her. She didn’t know what to say. When had she ever been asked for her opinion?

‘Justice is not meted out on lakeshores but in court,’ said Elise. ‘The king’s justice is written. By the king.’ What would move him? Move Dagobert? ‘I fear the warriors in our women’s wombs would be at risk, their mothers watching another woman beheaded. Please. For the ladies of court. Let no harm be visited on this mother, or the lady of Falcan.’

‘Ladies …’ scoffed Conrin, though Dagobert at least looked uncertain, remembering Cynefel’s pregnancy. Tilde had said pregnant women were sacred in Merogia, but in Cynghal they were carriers of the future, holy in

the Wing's shade. This was what Dagobert preached at unruly wives, this was what the Synod demanded.

All was so quiet that Elise could hear the rippling water of Salt Lake, the whimpering of the folk in the knot between the horses. Her knees hurt already on the stones. Tilde was still crouched over, but Gaisa had taken a step back.

Conrin was no fool, he could sense the tide turning. And it was his own sister who had turned it.

She had spoken. She had moved. No cataclysm had occurred. The Wing had not fallen upon her and flattened her to the earth. Her father had simply … looked at her.

'The woman will be tried by the magistrate and given appropriate punishment,' said Uhtren.

Conrin tried to grasp his power back, turning now on the ducal. 'Do you not see?' he said, pointing his blade at the gathered peasants. 'They resisted us, fought against us! This is rebellion! Their heads should be raised at the posts of the lake, crowned with feathers as a warning that insolence will not be tolerated. And if you will not keep a firm hand on your populace, Uhtren, well. This land that has been given to you can be taken away just as easily.'

Uhtren's jaw flexed, looking at Liran, who grunted, impatient to be on his way. He preferred roads to castles, horses to seats, biscuits and dried meat to fat pig and bread. He was bored, Elise realised. Conrin bored him.

It was Tilde who looked up. 'We of Merogia,' she said loudly, 'pledge our fealty to the swan.'

She put her hand out, lowering it slowly. Someone understood in the cluster of peasants, they went to their knees, one after the other, then all together, sinking.

'Mercy!' they said.

'My loyalty to the king!'

At last Liran shrugged. 'Let the market go back to work,' he said. 'Dead men make no money.'

Just like that. He turned on his horse leaving Conrin, thwarted, holding his exposed blade over a corpse. He had caused chaos, delivered justice between salt water and stone. Was this the peace that Elise had been told was the gift of the Cynghals?

But she had spoken. She had stood up to her brother not with nettles and sly punishment but with words. She had made something change.

Elise felt the crack in her widen. Something stretched, raised its head. As if the true creature of her inner heart was yearning for the light.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Twenty

Tilde

Do you know the shape of grief?

Like any great disaster – an explosion of ash, a year of drought, a fire – grieving leaves an indelible mark in the body. Like a ring in a tree, long-since cut down, a dark string that binds your heart, and shows you lived through a time when everything had changed, and nothing had grown.

I had survived grief before, and felt its mark settle in my bones as I walked away from my people on the shores of Anailmor, then turned with Marolyn back into the fold of the swans who had tortured them. What use was any of my power if innocent people could still be killed, if my voice raised was no better than a mouth on the king's boot?

I had done nothing, and lost what little I had gained. I was supposed to be a guardian of the court's women, but I had abandoned them in an instant and usurped their inner regulation, allowed my maid to raise a blade to a prince, and now the tentative friendships I had begun to forge were lost.

Instead, on the long journey southeast I learned what Hadiah called the delicate and vicious art of the shun. No more parades, the women kept to their carriages and the men rode with the drums as we cut across Falcan and onto the hannerast that sliced through the mountains between Falcan and Kanaan. I did not dare make a single step towards the murmuring forest, and none visited me in my tents or in my litter. Not one of the women, not even sharp Ysel, would meet my eyes, and any fireside I joined emptied as swiftly as a cracked cup.

'I do not understand what evil we did that they are so sour about,' said Marolyn after a week of this. She had received a number of muttered insults, only some she would tell me. 'Unwomanly blasphemer' was the most common, or 'hedge witch'. She took both as compliments.

'We broke decorum,' said Hadiah, though she had broken nothing. 'Speech against the princes is a sin of the tongue, bearing a weapon against them a sin of the hand.'

'We stood up for Merogians, a sin of the mind,' I added. 'And abandoned the court in a riot, a sin of the body.'

‘I didn’t *touch* that smug little mucksprout. I want to put my teeth into his face, tear off his nose. See how smugly he can smile then.’ The prince himself had smirked at us that morning as he taught little Hein how to fletch good arrows, and said, ‘Looks like I’m not the least loved now, heathen.’

I laughed a little, but it faded. ‘It doesn’t matter,’ I said. ‘We showed we are difficult to govern, and to stand with us would be to stand against the princes.’ Battle lines that were tense beneath the surface had now been drawn into the open, and now no one would cross them. It was not safe, and I certainly could not protect them. ‘Worse, Cynefel had to save us.’

I couldn’t shake the image of my kinswoman kneeling, offering her life, her lip on the king’s leather, holding her pregnancy close. Was she so certain that the king would relieve her? Or did she trust her Cynghal husband so much that he would help her? Or did she simply see her body and her land, her pride and her bloodline, as a sacrifice for the good of her people?

Could I do that? I wanted to ask her questions, what her life was like when Falcan fell, whether she fought against the marriage, or if she wanted it. What had it taken to survive? And why wouldn’t she help me?

I knew why. I was a liability. She had worked hard for her safety, and I had threatened it.

‘She did nothing but kneel,’ dismissed Marolyn.

‘No,’ I said, thinking of my mother who bent her knee and buried her pride for her people. ‘She played their game by their rules, brought the princess onside, and won.’

As I had failed to do. Or had I? Though I had been relegated from the front of the Nest to the back as Dagobert spoke of wicked foreign women, Elise kept a space beside her for me, and in weeks of few kindnesses, it meant more to me that I liked to admit.

Was it obligation, or a kind of sympathy? Or repentance for the actions of her brothers? Despite the few words we shared, I still felt a tentative thread between us, fragile as the first sun of spring. Her rigidity was carefully constructed on shaky foundation, but I found her fragile control a mystery I wished to dig my nails into, to lick away and see what green might grow beneath the frost.

Why would she not accept a book but a painting from one? Why did she stay so long with her mother? Why did she love her father with such

zealous attention, but rankle against her brothers who had shared the same teaching, the same womb?

After two weeks, the shun was showing no sign of lifting. Muirenn and Elwinde still served me, but the food they brought from the cooks was cold, the coals for our fire unscented and half-quenched. I had sent thanks to the women for my cloak, and received no note or nod, even from their husbands, and it was wearing me thin. Each night I had nightmares about the dead boy. If I hadn't helped humiliate Conrin, if I hadn't spoken so brashly, if I hadn't …

'We will just have to wait,' said Hadiah for the thousandth time, though I could see the worry eating at her in the way she rubbed at the growth of her locked hair. She had taught Marolyn how to help with threading and twisting them at her scalp with a bone needle from her father, but still worried at their looseness. 'They will gentle with time.'

'I am sick to the back teeth of waiting,' I said, pressing at my breasts, my belly, hoping for a sign that the king's seed was taking hold. Did they feel tender? I was nauseous, but that could be the long rattling of the road and the shame that tugged at me. I longed for a child like I longed for a scab to be picked off, that would soften the bastards.

'You have the patience of a flea,' smiled Hadiah, nudging me.

'That's a disservice to fleas,' said Marolyn, forcing a grin.

'You try it,' I snapped. 'See if you would be patient, enduring what I endure.'

They fell silent, smiles fading. Grief was in them too, growing between us. They were trying to make me laugh, make me feel lighter, but they did not have to suffer the king.

Despite barely speaking to me, his visits had not slowed or ceased, only took on a cold and workmanlike intent that was almost a relief. Near the forest, I could disappear more easily, but it disgusted me that I could not grow thorns and sharp teeth and tear him when he touched me. It disgusted me that I was able to bear it.

I wished I had killed that saggy-faced boar of a man when I had the chance.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Twenty-one

Tilde

‘Siege! Faoldun is under siege!

Our line of weary travellers had been halted at the Cynghal gate where the hannerast opened into Kanaan. I was hiding in my carriage, my eyes closed, trying not to think of the kingsmoot. If I stepped out, I would see the trees our armies had camped beneath, where Sanafin had kissed me, where she had died. Where my siblings were captured and every hope we had strung together split apart.

Meet me in the kithwood.

‘Siege!’

I snapped my eyes open. The speaker was one of the ostlers who was calling excitedly to my driver, perhaps forgetting that carriages were not soundproof.

‘What are you talking about, lad?’ said Marolyn, putting her head out of the window. He blinked at her. Ahead, I could hear the distant bellowing of men’s raised voices. Liran.

‘The gate guards say rebels came from the river and went through the city,’ he said with a glance at the driver. ‘They’ve captured the bailey and half the city. The black prince holds the rest.’

Faoldun. The ancient seat of the wolf clan’s power, in Merogian hands once more.

I could not show excitement as the court was allowed off the hannerast and through the checkpoint, mainly to avoid the trees that they all feared. All the others, from the women to the serfs were whispering, and the branches echoed their terror.

Cold the break, cold the spine. Cowards, cowards.

Catch a fig, split its sides, eat its seed and pluck your eyes.

I wish I understood them, this power that even Liran knew and I could not hold.

The towers of the checkpoint were bristling with spears and men on watch, many of them in the black tunics of Isen’s guard. One Cynghal and

one Galenish knight were hanging by their necks over the gate, their eyes already gone to the crows. One of the black birds still sat on the Cynghal's soldier, chewing at his ear. A week or so dead, and Prince Isen would have arrived a week before us.

'They kill their own?' Hadiah whispered, staring upwards at the wool on their feet. The boots had likely been handed to their comrades.

'Their watch failed,' I said. 'The swan king's son does not tolerate failure.'

The hannerast and its gate were built at the high point of the river valley that fed the mills of Faoldun and kept their silver-smithies cool. As we left the shelter of the trees we were met with a bright sky and hills of green that reached up towards the forest's edge, then down in a sweep towards the river-cut valley, and again up into the rocky ridge that held the city and royal seat of Kanaan.

I was not the only one who put my head out of the carriage to look down at the fortress on the ragged outcrop above the city which spread like a cloak at its feet. Smoke was rising from the distant buildings in a great haze, obscuring the finer details, but we could see the flag from the top of the palace was still Liran's blue and white banner, but that the one from the gatehouse was a murky shade of brown.

These rebels, whoever they were, were trapped, for the black banner of Prince Isen hung on the city's outer walls.

'What do we do?' whispered Marolyn. 'What can we do to help them?'

'Nothing,' said Hadiah, a faint note of horror in her voice. 'There is nothing can be done.'

'Nothing cannot be our only option!' protested Marolyn.

I breathed in. Though we were leaving the forest, the air still felt charged with the kithwood. I could hear the whispers. *Thorn and prick and take and grow. Deep, go deep. Go wide, go tall.* I could also smell faint traces of the distant smoke. It did not hold the sweetness of campfire, but something more darkly familiar.

Sieges were a battle of steel, stone and sheer will. With ingenuity, ruthlessness and the Synod's pay, the Cynghals broke them all. They undermined walls, poisoned water or food supplies, but their greatest weapon was terror. They would pillage, desecrate, rape and torture to draw a response from their enemy's front, force them to break, open the gate,

respond, if not bend the knee. Then they would fight tooth, feather and claw to get inside.

On the battlefield, there were no sins: the Wing's laws were lifted, and the Cynghals covered their god's feathers with a veil of smoke and blood.

I understood the smell then, like pigmeat and charcoal, and I turned away from the window and emptied my small breakfast on the floor of the carriage.

'Tilde?' said Hadiah, rubbing my back. 'What is it?'

'They … don't you smell that?' I said.

Marolyn sniffed, and her eyes widened. 'Bodies.'

We went back to the window, and as we rounded the valley road we could see more of the city, and the source of the burning: three mounds of bodies were burning in the Cynghal-held part of the city. The rebel flags were still flying, and now we could see the six-spoked wheel painted on their cloth, so the bodies could only have come from the city.

'They're burning the townsfolk.'

The Cynghal battlefront was a mess of rubble and broken homes, much of the town nearer the road up to the palace had been razed to the ground, and Cynghal tents pitched over the remains. An atrocity such as the burning of innocents usually provoked a response, but I could see no fighting. The ballistas were still, though it was the middle of the day.

And it took me a moment to understand why.

The rebel-held city was encircled not by a wall of stone, but what looked like a tangle of living thorn. It stretched from the nearest patch of woodland on the other side of the silver river, shooting down the bank, across the water and up through the city to create a green and black barrier. Briars grew as thick as a man's body, leaves curled upwards like little hands. Some parts of it were scorched, but unbroken, or embedded with stone that was now tangled in green. The whole remained intact.

You are known, the rebel had said on the hannerast between Ardwen and Falcan. The words that the kithwood had spoken to me.

The magic. That we had searched for and not found, the magic that shrouded and guarded my lover's body in briars and thorns. The trapped rebels could wield it.

We were summoned, the princess and I.

We had spent two days watching sallies back and forth between the two camps, the occasional attempt at the siege weapons, ladders and burning. The men and most of the servants were requisitioned for the army below, which was growing by the day, but the impasse remained unbroken.

It was a reprieve, once the fires stopped burning. Liran had gone down to join his favourite son and had not returned, and I enjoyed living without the threat of his presence. I could step out in the evening and see the tips of the trees where they pierced the vivid sky, and hear the birdsong laced with the singing of my ancestors and the humming power of the wall that split the city. Though the women still did not approach me, the food we were served was still hot when Elwinde delivered it, and she and Muirenn seemed lighter of step than they had been for days. Despite their refusal to speak on it, I suspected that any ill manners we received went doubly hard on them.

But then the threat returned. The waiting was over.

‘It is a good sign,’ said Hadiah as she dressed me in simple lilac cloth, for of course we would not be allowed armour. ‘That he is ready to welcome you back.’

‘Or perhaps wants to burn me with the rest to break the siege,’ I said.

‘Then why would he invite the princess?’ said Hadiah.

Why indeed?

I met Elise and our honour guard on the road as the afternoon stretched late. They were not the king’s men, but Ducal Ademar’s of Widdin, perhaps easier to spare. The princess was tapping her fingers with nervous energy, her hair drawn back from her neck a little too tightly, and dressed in a tawny brown Cynghal tunic that went only to her shins, a shade more nobleman than noblewoman, and comfortable with it. To my surprise, she also bore a bow across her back, with a quiver of arrows.

‘It’s a battlefield, isn’t it?’ she said with a shrug when she saw me looking.

‘My maid has been subject to some abuse for carrying a weapon,’ I pointed out.

‘She pointed that weapon at my brother.’

‘And he, what, waved a stick at me?’

To my surprise, Elise smirked, but hid it quickly. Still, she met my eyes.

‘You know it is your sharp tongue that gets you in trouble,’ she pointed out.

‘So Lady Hadiah tells me. But it would be a shame to let a fine blade dull.’

She smiled again, and that tugging thread between us tightened; I knew I had not been imagining her small kindnesses. A tiny blossom of warmth unfurled in me, for her, and despite the evils of her family I felt some ember of sympathy too. I did not think she leaned to me because she saw herself above the other women, but because she had less to lose. No love of her father, no care from her brothers, no mother now to look after, and no lover that I knew of to place her high in their heart.

I knew myself well enough to acknowledge the woman was beautiful, but to pity her? My enemy’s daughter? How stupid. She would think it stupid too.

We walked together down to the city, soldiers ahead and behind, and I was glad for Elise’s calm company; Marolyn and Hadiah had to walk dutifully at our heels, followed by Elwinde and Muirenn, so I felt safer with Elise and her arrows at my side, particularly as we came to the army’s edge.

It did not take long. The trampled mud began outside the town walls and we followed it within. There was some paltry trade going on: blade-whetters, cobblers, menders and women-whores plying whatever wares to factions of men in states of undress, their armour half tied, sitting with their legs apart on low barrels, sharing bread and grog as the sun sank.

When I had last walked among an army I had been a king’s daughter. Men had bowed to me and our snake banner, and I had walked like the green earth was mine to tread on.

Here, some bowed, but more spat and muttered, or ignored me entirely.

‘Merogian scum.’

‘Wing’s blessings, my queen.’

‘I’m not bowing to that.’

‘She’s prettier even than Miras’s song.’

‘Who’s the blonde?’

‘That’s the princess, you fool.’

‘Bit tall for a girl?’

Conflict rippled out around our persons, the fact of our being, our womanhood. Conflict that turned the hungry mercenaries, knights and warriors sneering or protective, leering or admiring. Was I an enemy or a friend, Cynghal or a Merogian? Was I a queen or a whore? A girl or a wife?

I did my best to meet their eyes, and nod with grace. The noise of the army filled my bones with memory of the kingsmoot. Each sight called up an echo in my head: a man shaving, the hammer of a horseshoe, the sound of whetting steel. I could feel the hope in me, then, and it opened like a wound. I wondered what Sanafin would think of me now. What Ebba and Colfinn would say, to see their sister on the enemy's side.

But the Cynghal and Galenish armies were together the most effective that ever fought on sea or land, a machine of death that tore five of the six clans to pieces. We wanted to command them. Could I do such a thing if I was afraid of them? Could I hold their respect if they disgusted me?

I understood, then, why Liran and the Wing were obsessed with boy-children. They birthed their boys for battle, and battle was their shadow, dogging their every step. The other men saw the shadow, and drew it to their own.

Would they ever welcome a woman? Perhaps. Perhaps if they feared her.

Like they feared the thorn wall.

We had followed the road inside the half-shattered town when we saw it, rising higher than the tallest building, green, black and forbidding, as if the kithwood had reached out and slammed down a hand to separate the greater city from the narrower area held by the rebels. The fighting men kept their distance, and if they looked in its direction they waved a hand over their heart or touched their Wing talismans for protection.

Before it the remains of bonfires smouldered, the bones of the burned bodies crumbling inward. I knew now that they had rounded up Merogians in the city, called them rebels and slaughtered them for burning. No mourning would ever be enough. The air felt oily, the smell of flesh, sweat and smoke permeating every hair, every scrap of cloth, but beneath there was a tenacious weaving of green.

'Have you ever seen anything like it?' said Elise, looking up at the thorny defence. Beyond it, I could see the battlements of the gatehouse, rising above us. A single body hung from them. A man lost to that shadow that dogged his steps.

'No,' I said, honestly. But it reminded me of the shroud I had built around Sanafin's body. 'I did not know such magic was possible.'

'There are old tales of magic in Cynghal too,' said Elise. 'Before we took the salt and the Wing gave us his shade.' I did not roll my eyes, but I could feel Marolyn resisting the urge. 'Blood magic. An evil tradition.'

‘Blood magic?’ I said. Liran had mentioned the same, but then I noticed Elise’s face stiffen and freeze. We had come to the inner enclosure of the war camp, where the nobles rested, far from the thorns. There were a number of banners waving in the mountain wind beneath the scudding clouds, but highest were those of her family: the knotted, crowned swan on Liran’s blue; the black flag of Isen, the butcher with the charging swan; Conrin’s grey and folding wings; Gaisa’s two birds over a field of pale green, and Egil with his yellow field beneath a white bird rising.

There was another: a red banner with a swan, wings up, neck reaching. Its chest was open in a cavity, and within was a bloody heart, bleeding through the ribs.

‘What is it?’ I asked Elise, who was staring at it. ‘Whose flag is that?’

She didn’t speak. I saw her right hand convulsively go to her pocket, and I knew the next time I saw it there would be fresh puncture wounds in her palm.

‘Princess?’

She bowed her head, and went though the banners. I caught up beside her, and found my hand reaching for hers, taking her wrist and pulling her to me.

‘What is it?’ I asked.

She turned, and I saw fear in her bright eyes. What had happened, to make the princess of Cynghal, the daughter of the great swan, so afraid? I watched the passing expressions of her face. She was a language I didn’t speak, but wanted to decipher. For our cause. Of course.

‘Low King Alar has returned to us,’ she said roughly, then dipped her voice. ‘Be careful.’

The eldest son, banished to Suneheim.

He had come back to Merogia.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Twenty-two

Elise

The wing is the swan is the—

What was Alar doing back on Merogian soil? He had no right, no *right* to be here. Elise considered turning away, she considered running, she considered screaming.

But that would mean leaving Tilde with him, and the thought was intolerable. Instead she took her desire to scream, and punctured it with her sharp shuttle in her palm. This helped her hold her nerve and her tongue, and stay at the queen's side.

In the nobles' encampment, open braziers burned crackling bundles of pine and summer sage, ripped out at the root. A sweeter fog covered the smell of mud and refuse, casting a haze over the cornflower sky. Most of sieging was waiting, Elise knew that, but she also knew her father hated waiting. She was certain Isen had fully intended to have the siege broken before they arrived, which was why they had resorted to such brutal tactics.

The bodies. Wing, she could still smell the bodies. Worse than a man's slit throat on the salted stones of a lake, worse than her mother's funeral pyre.

But this was war. This was the cost of the swan's glory.

And yet, with Tilde's gentle fingers holding her wrist, it did not feel glorious. It felt like shame.

The captain escorting them, Perin of Ademar's Widdish guard, stopped before a new-built sweating tent, a large, round construction of thick canvas and woven walls, clagged in with mud. He bowed low.

'Wait here a moment, my queen, Princess Elise,' he said, 'I will announce your arrival.'

He lifted a heavy tent flap and a waft of wet, hot warmth rolled out with a murmur of voices before he stepped inside.

Tilde's fingers tightened on her wrist, and Elise could feel her pulse through her skin, beating fast, the warm closeness of her body. All the world narrowed down to the sensation; when had she last been touched so gently?

‘Please, Princess,’ she murmured. ‘Tell me what to expect.’

She was afraid, and despite her own nauseating anxiety, Elise turned to put a hand on Tilde’s arm. She forgot, sometimes, that the queen was even younger than she, had spent her whole life on the wrong side of a war.

‘It’s a sweating tent,’ said Elise. Her throat was dry. She cleared it. ‘They are a Cynghal tradition. For washing or war meetings. Father perhaps seeks our counsel.’

Elise knew little of Cynghal, for she had only ever visited the great windswept plains. She remembered the scent of caulk and fire, the warmth of the longhouse, the distaste of her mother and Erelle. But Elise and Isuire had enjoyed the brash mothering of the women who served dripping meat on metal platters, the whispering welcome of pallet beds with their feet towards the coals of the feasting fires.

Isuire. What would she say to see Alar’s flag back among their brothers’ banners?

Nothing.

‘They have whole stone rooms in Argentha for the same,’ said Tilde anxiously, as they still held onto each other. ‘And hot springs. They have enough salt there that they sometimes rub it on their skin to clean it.’

‘Salt?’ said Elise. ‘So wasteful.’

Tilde laughed, though it faded quickly. ‘Well, only the silver queen and her favourite wives indulge in such luxuries.’

‘Wives,’ echoed Elise. ‘I thought the silver queen was a woman.’

Tilde paused for a weighted moment. ‘She is.’

Elise swallowed. ‘That is not the law of the Wing,’ she muttered, feeling foolish. A queen. With wives. Tilde’s mouth twisted, as if she was unsure whether to laugh or to take back what she said, but after a moment she shrugged.

‘Some lands have different faiths.’

‘It is not the true faith,’ said Elise quickly.

‘Who decides what’s true?’

A sin. A sin of the tongue, of the mind, and Elise was sinning too. She imagined rubbing salt onto Tilde’s skin, washing it off with water, her dark hair dripping once more over her soft breasts. And the terrible woman looked at her as if she knew exactly what she was thinking.

A blush prickled at Elise’s cheek, and the corner of the queen’s mouth twitched in a smile.

Distracted. Sinning. *Too bold.*

Elise took back her wrist, and stepped a little away. Tilde did not stop her.

Inside the sweating tent was low, cramped and dark. Under Perin's embarrassed instruction, Tilde and Elise declothed down to chemise and shirt, but even then the heat hit them like a hammer.

Liran sat on a bench, with his legs akimbo, half naked in only an open shirt, already soaked through with sweat. Elise could see the gnarled scar that ran across his chest and belly, the grey hairs there bared and shining. Before him was a dug pit filled with stones heated from an extinguished fire and covered with woven birch. Hein was sitting by it with a bucket, throwing water over the thatch to hiss and sizzle below, his little mouse probably with his tutor or his maid. The air hung heavy with moisture and men's sweat.

The rest of her brothers were in the tent, including Alar. The source of her shame and her punishment. He had a beard now bristling his chin, a nose broken and reset, his fair hair square cut, which made him look a little like Liran, but not as much as he would like. Would her father watch her reaction? His blue gaze was sharp and direct; but he was not looking at her, he was considering Tilde. She hadn't expected more, she realised. The hopes of garlands and cheers was tarnishing.

Conrin, his blond hair slicked back and cheeks pink, was fiddling with his gold pendant of the Wing and did not look over as they entered. Gaisa nodded at Elise, and so did Egil, from where they were playing a game of chess, but scowled at Tilde. Isen did not move, he was observing the steam rising from the stones as if he hoped it would choke him.

But Alar stood, and smiled like he had not ruined everything good in Elise's life, and bowed to them both.

For a brief, terrible moment, an evil sin crept into Elise's mind. She wondered what would happen if she tipped the thatch into the firepit, and burned all of them together.

'Queen Tuathilde,' said Alar. Elise clenched her fist around her shuttle. 'I have come a long, long way to celebrate your marriage to my father.'

The other nobles in the shadows and the dark stood as well. Odon was down to nothing but a tunic that showed the chunk of muscle that had been taken out of his leg by a Suneish hound. Ducal Uhtren was seated close to Markal Thedemer, who was serving him ale in a mug, likely trying to get

into his good graces for some reason. Ducal Ademar, also from Galen, was mostly dressed and sitting close with snide Palati Gundobar and Ducal Merovin of Gevera, who as usual was buttoned up in a tunic and leggings that stuck to his skin. He looked deeply uncomfortable. There were others too, and one with a long beard whom Elise could only imagine had come with Alar from Sunheim.

Elise, unacknowledged, did not think she could stand there looking at him. Instead, she bowed to her father and went quietly to sit on the bench beside Isen. His shoulders were hunched, but he finally gave her a troubled nod.

Tilde bowed politely to Alar for his greeting, glancing at Elise, and then bowed lower still to Liran before straightening.

‘Are you going to stand there all day?’ said Liran.

‘I will stand till I am invited to sit,’ said Tilde.

‘Yet to be humbled I see,’ muttered Gaisa, but Alar laughed louder.

‘Oh, she’s clever,’ he said, and came to offer Tilde his arm. He was as bare chested as Liran, and Elise found the sight disgusting. ‘They didn’t tell me you were clever. Come, take a seat by the king.’

The confidence of the man. Tilde looked at his elbow, then her eyes flicked to Elise and then Liran.

‘Come, girl,’ said Liran, ‘sit.’

Tilde took Alar’s arm delicately, as if it might burn her, and let him lead her to the king’s left hand where Conrin was sitting. Elise did not understand his games, nor why he was here. Tilde had not been at court for a month, and it would have taken longer for Alar to sail through the storms of the south coast all the way to Kanaan’s ports, longer still to come to their late summer residence. Surely it could not be only to greet a queen, when he had been banished from Merogia for a decade?

‘Gaisa, go get our stepmother a cool ale,’ said Alar, as Isen watched him with suspicion. ‘How strange to call you that when you are younger than I, and prettier too. But age is not akin to wisdom, isn’t that right, Odon?’

Isen clicked his tongue, so lightly that Elise could barely hear it.

‘Nor is youth akin to invention, Low King Alar,’ growled Odon, as Alar smiled pointedly at Conrin.

‘You stand in a lady’s presence, fledgling,’ said Alar.

‘The fuck I will,’ snapped Conrin, but it was Liran who gave him a push, shoving him down the bench. Interesting. Liran had not allowed Tilde a

place of honour in the Nest, but now it seemed he wanted something from her.

‘Gaisa,’ said Alar, turning.

‘I’ll get it,’ interrupted Odon, seeing a fight brewing and waving at Gaisa to stay down. He went outside in a gust of sweeter air, and shortly returned with a cold cup that he pressed into Tilde’s hand.

‘What about Elise,’ said Tilde. ‘Is she not a woman?’

Odon blinked at her, then turned to Elise, who blinked hard.

‘Elise isn’t a woman, she’s our sister,’ said Hein brightly, and grinned at Elise, perhaps not knowing that he had mildly insulted her.

‘What are sisters if not women?’ said Alar smoothly, and nodded at Odon, who grumbled and then left again. Elise took the cup he brought, but did not drink from it.

‘It’s better than well water,’ said Odon. ‘That physik, Ziyan, says we are one hot day away from plague.’

‘Though High Priest Dagobert thinks if we pray enough it will go away,’ said Uhtren.

Conrin frowned at the sarcasm in the Cynghal’s voice.

‘Perhaps you shouldn’t have been so keen to set a siege, little brother,’ said Alar to Isen, who glowered.

‘What was I supposed to do?’ Isen glowered. ‘Sit on my arse on the hill and watch them take the keep?’

‘You should have held your mettle, hidden in the trees, and waited,’ said Alar. ‘A week or two without attack, they would have relaxed their guard. I would have been here, and then—’ He made a point with his fingers, throwing them forward like a swan’s attacking beak, feigning a strike.

‘Perhaps he didn’t want to let the ducal and his family die,’ said Egil supportively, moving a piece as Odon sat back down.

‘Too late for that,’ said Gaisa.

‘Ducal Kerrin is dead?’ said Elise.

‘And swanned,’ said Conrin. ‘Looks like Isen is losing his touch.’

Isen’s jaw tensed. Elise had heard of ‘swanning’ from her brothers’ delighted stories of the king of Widdin. After he challenged Liran, his lungs were cracked out and laid on his shoulders as wings. They said he was still breathing, and his organs could be seen tensing as he screamed.

At the time, Elise remembered the relish of the gore, the excitement of a battle won. But it was a cruel way to die, and it sat hot and sickly with her

that the rebels had used the act themselves. That must have been the body hanging from the gatehouse battlements.

‘His wife holds the inner wall,’ said Ademar. ‘Lady Henoveva. She is a stern and strong woman, and a distant cousin of mine and Queen Isabella’s, Wing rest her.’

‘It doesn’t take much to manage an inner keep,’ said Gaisa, grinning. ‘You just have to keep your head below the parapet.’

‘You would not say that if you had ever been on the other side of one,’ said Liran. ‘Egil, how long do you think the rebels can hold?’

Egil looked up. ‘I haven’t taken a full tally,’ he said. ‘But they have most of the storehouses in the city near the bailey, a supply of water from the river, it could be months.’

‘Most of the grain is stored in the inner keep,’ said Elise. ‘If Lady Henoveva can hold, the rebels will last weeks, not months.’ Her brothers looked at her. ‘I helped mother arrange the storehouses,’ she said in explanation, her voice shrinking.

‘That is if they cannot grow their own food,’ said Isen grimly, and rubbed his chin. ‘I have never seen anything like this before from Merogians.’

Every eye in the hot, hot room turned inevitably to Tilde. Her brow was already damp with sweat, her sharp chin tilted up and proud as she took their scrutiny.

‘I fear I am of little help to you,’ she said. ‘Only folk tales and fairy stories.’ She looked at Liran. ‘The king already knows more than I about this strange, dark magic.’

It was the first time they appeared like they were married, for Liran nodded. ‘There are stories of the old wars in Merogia using magic and druids. My great-great grandfather refused to get involved in their battles, but records show that after the fighting died, they had their military roads between the clanlands, but no more magic.’ He turned to look at Merovin, who lifted his chin.

‘That is right,’ said the Geveran. ‘Most Geveran records were destroyed, the rest removed by the priests when Gevera took the salt and rejected its barbaric history.’ He sighed. ‘I only wish some had been preserved so we knew how to fight this darkness.’

Elise saw Tilde’s eyes flash for a moment so brief she could have sworn she imagined it. Liran nodded to Hein, who took his cue to add more steam to the air.

‘What *do* you know?’ said Odon to Tilde. ‘Your Wing-forsaken people are always walking in that woodland.’

‘I …’ Tilde frowned, considering her words. ‘I understand there was once magic, but the old practice of the Ways is not based on power, but honouring our ancestors. We are taught not to leave the paths of the wood, not to give anything to it, and not to listen to strange voices.’

Voices. Elise had heard voices from the forest. Was Tilde telling the truth?

‘Bullshit,’ said Conrin. ‘We know you people give children to the forest, make animal sacrifices.’

‘Do you hear “voices”?’ Alar asked, with a lopsided grin, looking up at Tilde from where he sat before her knees. Was he *flirting?* With his father’s wife? The bearded erl was staring at the queen with an intentness that made Elise pressed her nails to her palm. Tilde herself laughed lightly, a little too hard.

‘It is a children’s fancy,’ she said. ‘A hearth tale to scare them off getting lost in the trees and being eaten by wolves. If anyone claimed to hear the trees whispering, they would be considered mad and turned away from their village halls.’

‘What kind of tales?’ said Isen. ‘Anything useful? Merovin here was barely raised in Gevera, he remembers nothing.’

Tilde levelled a gaze at him, then at Merovin.

‘There is one about a man who turns into a tree to evade his responsibilities,’ she said. ‘Another about an old woman with a bear’s claw for a hand. She does weave a house of hawthorn, like the wall, but with her own fingers, and one of the flowers has a child.’ She shrugged. ‘Children are not told tales of war.’

Not Merogian children. Elise and her brothers had been raised on them. Of swanning and sieges, raids and bloody glory with the Wing’s blessing.

‘What happens then?’ Hein asked, into the silence.

‘Shut up, Hein,’ said Conrin.

‘The hawthorn child cries on her fingers,’ Tilde said, and Elise suspected it was mostly to spite the older prince. ‘And they both turn into bears.’ Hein laughed.

‘This is useless,’ said Gaisa, rolling his eyes. ‘Let’s just burn the wall.’

‘You think we haven’t tried?’ said Isen bitterly. ‘Fire barely damages it unless we get salt under the roots. It has taken us weeks to cut it back at all.’

‘Maybe you should negotiate,’ said Alar. ‘See what they want.’

‘Cynghal does not negotiate with barbarians,’ said Conrin. ‘Nor blasphemers. We should ask High Priest Dagobert, the Wing’s power is our strength, our god will beat this ugly magic.’

‘All you speak of is Dagobert,’ said Egil, exasperated. ‘Do you have a single good thought of your own in your head, or only the ones he gives you?’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ said Conrin, sitting upright. ‘He is the court’s high priest, our highest voice of the Wing.’

The room tensed, and Conrin paled. *The Wing is the swan is the king …*

He looked at Liran. ‘Is that what he tells you?’ his father said, but Conrin held his ground, defiant.

‘He isn’t even one of the Synod,’ said Isen.

‘He will be,’ said Conrin hotly.

‘And how long have you been licking his arse?’ said Alar.

‘Alar,’ warned Isen, but Conrin leapt to his feet as their eldest brother chuckled.

‘How dare you besmirch his reputation and mine?’

‘And do you close your eyes when he fucks you,’ said Alar, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. ‘Or do you keep them open so you can see if he’s smiling?’

Conrin grabbed at his brother’s hair, but Alar laughed in his face, like he had been bitten by a puppy. ‘Such poison from *your* mouth, of all people,’ Conrin snarled. Alar’s smile dropped.

‘Call me king, boy.’

‘King of a barren rock.’

Alar’s erl stood, and Merovin and Ademar moved between him and the prince before Liran picked up Hein’s bucket of water and threw the cold liquid over the two of them. ‘Act like dogs and you will be treated like dogs,’ he snarled, as Alar wiped the water from his face, still laughing. ‘You are born swans, but half of you are chicks, barely hatched.’

He threw down the bucket and Hein winced, so Elise reached out to draw him back. He let her. This temper was closer to the Liran Elise remembered from childhood, focussed and sharp, humiliating, but not brutal. Not to them.

‘Gaisa wants a burning,’ Liran continued, ‘Alar wants negotiation, Conrin wants prayers and destruction. I want this to be over. I did not march

our summer court along these blasted roads to turn them all back in a heartbeat. It makes us look weak.'

Conrin was breathing heavily.

'Nor can I have them sit here while we take potshots over a wall that should not exist.'

It was a good day for him, a sharp day, and it was in the difference that Elise recognised how different he had become over the previous ten years. He turned back to Tilde and put his hand on her shoulder, heavy enough for it to bear the weight of threat. To her credit, she did not flinch. Elise did. 'You swear you know nothing of this?' he said in a low voice.

'You already know I do not,' she replied. 'If we had known of such things you would have heard of them before now.'

'You have never heard of a druidim?'

'A what?'

He stared at her, harder, looking for some flaw. 'Do you know all the ways a body can be tortured, woman?'

She met his eyes, her expression cold. 'I do,' she said.

Elise swallowed. There was no sound other than Conrin's breath and the cracking of the stones. Liran loomed over her, putting his hand to the back of her dark head.

Stop it. Stop it, Elise wanted to say. She had stood up to Conrin, but this was her father, this was *god.*

'Not yet,' he said.

'Torture will extract either what she has told you, or what she thinks you want to know,' said Alar sharply, 'and you will be less one queen.'

Liran released her, and looked at him. 'What would you suggest, *Low King.*' He said it with contempt.

Alar shrugged. 'I've made my suggestion. Gold and negotiation.'

'Yes let's give money to the rebels who want to kill us,' said Ademar dryly.

'What about her,' said Merovin, considering Tilde. Elise's heart pattered in surprise.

'Her?' said Gaisa.

'They might listen to a Merogian,' said the Geveran. 'Isn't that the point of her, to settle rebellions?'

He was serious. Liran and Odon shared a glance.

‘They might kill her,’ said Elise, not looking at Conrin, who was contemplating this with a smile. ‘They already tried.’

They had all heard the reports of the ragged band of rebels who had attacked the Cynghal train from the woods and entered Tilde’s carriage.

‘Then we’ll just be right back to where we started a few weeks ago,’ said Gaisa, trying again for a laugh, which this time he received from Egil and Conrin.

‘What happened to protecting our women?’ said Ducal Uhtren. ‘I seem to remember the Wing’s teachings advising not to put our mothers at risk.’

‘Oh lose your sourness about Salt Lake,’ said Odon. ‘No harm was done.’

Elise remembered the boy’s body, the flash of blood. The opened throat.

‘I must agree with my fellow ducal,’ said Ademar. ‘Queen Isabella would never have allowed—’

‘Your favourite cousin is dead,’ snapped Liran, and Elise winced. ‘And that is the last we will hear of her. Be grateful she gave you your seat and let her go.’

‘It’s not a bad idea,’ said Odon, musingly. ‘She’s not pregnant yet. You will be risking nothing.’ They spoke of Tilde like a gaming token as if she was not present.

Liran waved his hand, annoyed. ‘Fine,’ he said at last. ‘Ducal Merovin, escort her to the camp.’ Tilde looked over at the Geveran, her whole body tensed, her hands gripping her mug of ale with enough force to crack it. ‘At dawn, we will try this parley, and see if a woman can do what all you men of my blood cannot.’ He looked at Isen as he said the last words, and the black prince did not meet his eyes, only turned and left the tent to the sound of his brothers’ laughter.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Twenty-three

Tilde

I would rather have been escorted by a wolf. I could still hear the trees screaming to the kingsmoot.

Treachery.

But we could not refuse an order directly given. I followed Merovin out into the cold air.

‘Captain Perin,’ he called to the moustachioed Galenish man as Muirenn and Elwinde came to dress me. ‘We could do with an armed guard back to the women’s camp.’

Perin bowed and went to gather some men.

‘Lady Marolyn,’ said the ducal, turning. If he noticed she was staring daggers at him, he did not show it. ‘Perhaps you could fetch some horses?’

‘Perhaps you could shove—’ Marolyn began in Merogian.

‘Marolyn,’ I said, cutting through her angered protest. She set her jaw and nodded once, and left.

At that moment, Elise came striding out of the tent. She looked like a woman half contained, her hands folded, her neck bent. Hunted.

‘Do you want an escort back to the camp?’ I asked her. Beneath, I was thinking *Don’t leave me with the Geveran.*

She looked at me, then shook her head. ‘No thank you,’ she said in a low voice, then grabbed her things and marched away, perhaps looking for her murdering elder brother.

‘It is just you and me, it seems, Queen Tilde,’ said Merovin.

My dress on, and Elwinde gently lifting my damp hair from my neck, I could still feel Liran’s fingers in it, the threat he made with only a touch. He might press my face to the hot stones, pull the nails from my fingers, crack my ribs and burn my flesh, and no sympathy for our marriage would stop him.

Yet now I was to meet with the rebels, and all I could think of was how easy it might be to join them, learn their magic. Old magic. The true Ways. The old Ways.

We rode through the men's camp in biting silence. Hadiah and Marolyn walked behind us, Muirenn and Elwinde keeping up the rear, bearing the chatter of the bored knights and warriors.

The swans must fall from the sky.

This traitor had tried to bait me, and then had offered me up for danger. As we ascended towards the upper camp beneath a sky of shredded clouds, I could see in the distance the site of the Geverans' treachery. The section of forest that had protected our camp was separated now from the main body of the kithwood, a schism rent through it that I had heard was dug with salt. I focussed on that gap as the Geveran fell in close beside me on red stallion.

'King Tuathilde—' he said, so softly in Merogian I could barely hear it. He breathed out as he spoke, as if his tongue might be scorched if it took him too long.

'I am a queen,' I told him. 'A king inherits. A king leads armies. A queen is a wife.'

'Yet the silver queen rules in her own right. We choose our own meanings.'

'And what does "treachery" mean to you, Merovin?' I still looked straight ahead, breathing in the cool mountain wind, my first taste of the autumn to come, still at least two moons away. I didn't want to look at him, I didn't want to speak to him. Had he been there? Were his hands as red with our blood as Liran's? As Isen's? 'I thought I made it clear to your physik: everything I have suffered, everything that I have lost, is your fault.'

I would not be able to kiss a girl beneath apple trees. I would not be able to sleep in a bed where I had not been wounded.

'I do not deny it,' he said. 'Your ramshackle rebellion would have fallen to slaughter at the walls of the first keep they challenged. They could no more fight the Cynghals than have one clan meet without biting at each other's throats. If you still think otherwise, you are stupider than I had hoped. You do not remember the weaknesses between us that the swan king exploited, the long resentments.'

I would not let him get a rise out of me. Captain Perin, who was walking ahead, glanced back and we both smiled blandly, looking at the sky as if we were commenting on the weather. I glanced back at Marolyn and Hadiah, who were deep in a quiet conference of their own, dappled light sliding across them. They were wisely walking far back, beyond hearing, so

Muirenn and Elwinde behind them had no chance to eavesdrop on our unexpected conversation.

When Perin turned ahead, Merovin spoke before I could. ‘Do you know why Gevera was the first to fall? Because when the Cynghals came raiding, worse and worse, we called for aid and no clan answered. When he moved towards Hallion your mother and the king of the Kanaan were busy thieving each other’s cattle.’ I frowned, my mother had said no such thing. ‘Only when Widdin burned did you realise that he would come for you next, but by then we were half lost already. Write to your mother, ask her, and she will tell you I speak truth.’

My mother had only spoken truly to me once in six years, and it was to push me towards this life that sickened me.

‘Gevera has been raided for a century, and yet your ships were poor and you were unprepared,’ I replied. ‘You blame the south for the weakness of the north, and blame the murdered for your treacherous knife.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Merovin after a while. ‘But you must understand that we all know pain. I, as much as you, but I had hopes when I sent Ziyan to you that we could grow past it, for the sake of our future.’

‘And I had hopes every Geveran would shit themselves to death.’ I looked at him. ‘Yet here you are.’

‘Here I am,’ he smiled tightly. ‘The last of my blood, the last of my line, yet still ruling my land. There is opportunity here, King Tilde, that I have spent a long time cultivating.’

‘You call this rule?’ I sniffed. ‘You’re no better than Cynefel. You can do nothing except kneel.’ That was not fair, but I would not admit it to him.

‘If you cannot hide your venom, perhaps we have chosen the wrong snake,’ he snapped under his breath. ‘Your cousin is royal too, and wiser, it seems, than you. Do you think she has it in her?’

Green as the fresh rose.

Hadiah. I stared at him. She was royal yes, wiser and better at this game than I, but I could not bear to imagine her bearing this disgust with her own body, to be haunted waking and sleeping, on the teetering edge of peril and pain. I would rather her suffer death than indignity.

Merovin saw something in my expression, and it was this, not his treachery, that made him bend his head in shame.

‘I am sorry,’ he said. ‘I did not mean that to sound like a threat. You must understand, I have endured through twenty years of this court, smiling

through my teeth, waiting and moving pieces till the field began to change.'

'Endured?' I laughed hollowly. 'I watched my siblings tortured to death, because of you. I watched my country fall apart, my mother buried in a cold tower, because of *you*. Not only have you confessed your sins to me,' I gripped the reins of my horse, leather as soft as a lover's fingers against my hands, 'but you are proud of what you did to us.'

What his men did to Sanafin, whose mouth had tasted of sour apples. What the Cynghals did to Ebba, for her knees to be so stained and her mouth to be bloody and tongueless, what I let them do to me.

'You want to compare wounds?' Merovin murmured. 'My uncle was swanned while I watched, my aunt crushed beneath beams of wood over which men danced. My sister was raped and then murdered by Galenish knights while my other brothers and I were taken as hostages. If my mother had not dressed me as a boy I would have suffered the same fate.' He laughed bitterly. 'Luckier still that it is no guise at all. To be a man suits me better than this monstrosity they call womanhood.'

Dress as a boy. The sun was out, and brighter now. Merovin *was* cleanshaven, his voice perhaps softer than most men, but he wore his masculinity with a comfort that had become as natural to him as his own skin. He was as much a man as Colfinn or Liran. I knew of such things: a hearth tale my sister Ebba had sung joyfully at an autumn feast about a boy who had entered the kithwood returned as a woman, garlanded with flowers.

'You are—'

'I am the only brother who survived,' said Merovin, struggling to maintain the conversational tone so anyone looking would not see two Merogians exposing their bitterness and hurts, but folk of court commenting on nothing of importance. 'The youngest was stuffed in a mangonel and flung at our city walls when the tarns tried to retake it. The elder they killed as well, and they strung his body from the roof that our ancestors built.' I shuddered, sickened. 'Yet still, I risked everything to keep a hold of some our histories while our libraries burned. That book I sent you, created with Ziyan over two decades, is all that is left of it.'

Behind us, the city drew further away. We had reached the wall of the forest, and I could feel it murmuring as if the breeze carried the voices to me.

Smoke in the leaves in the wriggle in the dirt …

Burrow burrow burrow burrow …

Some of the green knew nothing of the world, its hate and its pain. But then there were other voices: *Bones of my mothers and their mothers and their mothers. Bones of the new dead gone before their time.*

I could not pity. Anger was what fed me, sustained me, gave me life.

‘What has been done to you does not change your sins,’ I said. ‘You broke bread under our banners, knowing that you were going to turn on us in the night.’

‘Yes,’ said Merovin softly. ‘I did. And the Cynghals made me a ducal for it. I started the fighting in the valley so those at the top could escape. I had fires set so you would have smoke and light as a warning. I did what I could. What would you have done?’

‘I would have died!’ I trembled to speak this gently when I wanted to spit it. My body still bore the heat of the steam and I hoped that explained the angry flush of my face. ‘I would have died instead of betraying my kith and kin.’

‘Then Merogia would have lost all our chances for survival. Cynghal would fold into Galen and the Wing, and we would all be servants to the Synod. You are the hope this gave us, Tuathilde.’

‘Forgive me if I do not see the hope in watching my people be slaughtered by wild swans while I try to birth my own usurper.’ My horse stirred beneath me, sensing my restlessness. I did not speak so freely to anyone, not even Marolyn and Hadiah, because I feared if they knew every shadowed thought in my mind they would not see me as a leader, but as a victim. ‘You seem willing enough to stand at Conrin’s side, and the Wing’s too.’

‘The closer to my enemy, the better to know their rot. Now the king ails, his power wanes, and his young pick at the flesh of what he built for them.’

The slipping words, the wrong names, the sudden rages. These were the pains of age, I had heard. In recent years few Merogians had lived through war and famine to reach such age. His mind was slipping, it was clearer now, but his body, his personality, were still so strong, so frightening.

‘Dagobert sees his opportunity,’ Merovin pressed, seeing me turn thoughtful. ‘He is power-hungry, and thinks placing a sympathetic prince on the empire’s throne, as sole heir, will give him a seat in the Synod. Conrin craves it, and has many Galenish on side.’

The grey prince's supporters, wearing his colours. None of this surprised me.

'The Cynghals will not accept him,' said Merovin. 'The Merogians do not fear him. Isen would never let him take command.'

'I know all this,' I said. 'And he is not the only prince with contention.'

'Isen will follow whatever his father says,' said Merovin. 'Whatever original thought he once had, it has been burned out of him, which is why he supported your marriage.'

'What about Alar?'

What was I doing, asking a Geveran for information? But the eldest prince had looked at me like a fox at a rabbit, and Elise had looked at him like she wanted him dead.

'Alar has little standing,' said Merovin, 'but he will connive what he can. The rumour is he fathered a child he shouldn't have, with someone's sister or daughter, and he has an obscure Suneish wife no one speaks of. The only way he could become relevant is to leave her and marry relevance, which the Synod would not support.'

I bit my lip. He had made a show of gallantry, spoken in my defence. But I was his father's wife. Surely he would dare no designs on me?

For some reason, Elise's face slipped through my mind. I shook it away.

'What do you want from me, Geveran?' I said. 'You send dangerous texts in the hands of foreigners, and all I see are ropes to hang myself with.'

'I want a queen whose child will unite Merogia and Cynghal,' he said. 'There are many who believe their king reached too far, too greedily, sacrificing his homeland and its ways for power and riches. And you want allies and protection. If you bring them victory here, with some patience—'

Ways, if one more person preached patience to me.

'Those are my people,' I gasped, 'and you and I both know that death will be a relief compared to the Cynghal punishment if they surrender. I will not betray them.'

'Tilde, you are in the nest of the swan,' said Merovin. 'When it dies, its chicks will tear you apart unless you wear its wings. The rebels will not win, they will starve, and then they will break, and nothing will be gained. Use this opportunity to crown yourself in feathers. If you will listen to nothing else, listen to this. Build a reputation, and build it well, and if you wish to ally with me, wear the locket.'

I did not want to hear his dripping poison, I had a spine, I had righteousness on my side. I would no more bend to him than I would put my lip to the king’s boot. I could not unmake myself.

But this was not the first time a seed of doubt had been planted in me.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Twenty-four

Tilde

Despite the late summer, dawn rose chill in the eastern mountains, and my breath burst out before me as I woke and dressed, cloaking my face in a veil of grey.

‘You don’t have to do this Tilde,’ said Hadiah over the pottage Elwinde had brewed on the cookfires of the women’s camp.

‘She’s right,’ said the bard, Miras, whom we had summoned to escort us down from the mountain with a song. Build a reputation, Merovin had said; we did not need him for that. Though looking at my true allies, two women, two indentured serfs and a paid man, I had to admit my side was slim. ‘Say you are unwell, or pregnant, they will find another way.’

It was before dawnsong, the sun had not yet risen, the horns had not sounded. Our tent was one of the few with candles lit in the mountain mist.

‘I am an obedient wife,’ I said tightly, and nodded at Miras. ‘Write that down.’

‘Dutiful,’ he said with a sigh where he sat on his low stool, bleary in the early morning. ‘To obey makes you sound like a hound, to be dutiful makes you sound like a queen.’

Hadiah put her hand to her mouth, tears brightening her eyes, but I took her fingers away and held them. The order was that I could bring one woman with me, but the other would stay at camp, under guard. Hadiah had volunteered, knowing I might need Marolyn’s knife if these rebels turned against me.

‘They have tried to kill you before,’ she whispered. ‘Even Marolyn cannot hold off an army.’

‘If I die,’ I said, ‘you are the last of us, Hadiah.’ I thought of Merovin’s comment, and winced. ‘Go to my mother.’ *Go to safety.* ‘And tell her how I lived.’ *Tell her I tried.*

I wanted to tell Hadiah to run, and run, and find somewhere where she would be safe and beloved. My little cousin, smart and wise and too young for this. We were all of us too young. Would they let her go? If I failed? Or would they have her take my place?

‘I will wait for you,’ she said.

Red and orange light streaked through the mists as we entered the main camp, the sun a vivid yolk cracking over the horizon. There was no wind on the ground, but ahead shadowy clouds drifted over the deepening blue.

Our escort took us to the king, who was waiting on the main road of Faoldun where it sloped up towards the wall of thorn and abrubtly ended in the green.

The magic barrier grew higher even than I had imagined at a distance, a humming threading weave of thick green. It was hawthorn and bramble, rose and tangle, nettle at its root. Anything defensive, anything to keep them out. Beyond rose the higher parts of town and the walls of the keep where the hanging body of the ducal was blackened with flies. Further again, the inner ward, still flying its blue flag. I imagined the woman there, the Galenish lady, looking back and down at me.

‘They will receive you, wife,’ said Liran. We were a crossbow bolt’s flight away from the wall of living magic, so he could not be a target of any potshot from the green parapet. There, I saw the distant shifting of people. He glanced at Marolyn. ‘And your woman.’

To her credit, Marolyn maintained a neutral expression. She was learning.

High Priest Dagobert was standing with the younger princes, and a sleepy Hein was feeding pieces of oat to his mouse, while Alar and Isen, the banished king and the failed prince, stood a little apart, the ranks of their guards in red and black behind them. Isen’s were mostly Cynghal, while Alar’s looked like a band of mercenaries from every nation who would cut a man’s throat for a penny.

No Elise. I found my heart was looking for her. We were not friends, I knew that, but I also knew the feel of her skin against mine, the troubled look in her clear eyes, her smile when she knew she shouldn’t be laughing. It would have been good to see the face of someone who had not cut her blade on my peoples’ flesh. At least not directly.

What paltry things I wished for.

Merovin gave not a flicker of recognition, instead continuing a murmured conversation with Thedemer. I wondered if he had lied about his siblings, to coerce and mislead me. Was he truly working against the Cynghals, or was this all a test? A test of my faith?

The book he had made, the diligent preservation of little songs. Was that not an act of love? His admission that he had been raised a girl, and chosen his manhood, was that not a show that he could be vulnerable? Could understand my pain? He had given me weapons against him. Confirmation that Cynghal ducals in particular grated against the iron rules of the Wing.

But any predator might show their belly to lure in their prey. He had also admitted to his treachery, that his hands were stained with the blood of his own people.

‘You are dressed like a Merogian,’ said Palati Odon, forever at the king’s side. A palati owned little land, had no standing, and yet he acted as the king’s right hand and spoke brashly among nobles who outranked him. He was dangerous.

‘I am dressed like a queen,’ I said. I was wearing a robe not unlike my wedding clothes, buttoned up to my chest, with open slits for my legs and arms. I wore beadwork of seed pearls over my brow, my cheeks and lips were reddened with roses. However, over it I wore the yellow cloak I had been given by Elise and the women, bright as a flag, its threads glimmering in the dawn. I felt somehow as if it could shield my back from Cynghal arrows, while my Merogian dress may protect me from the rebels’ attack. ‘Is that not what you wanted?’

All of them wanted to mould me into their own desires. They wanted the green snake of my clan, the green wild of my blood, to be swallowed by their swan and their priests and their laws. But I did not want to disappear.

‘I will seek a strong outcome for Cynghal, my king,’ I said to Liran, hearing Miras’s faint scratching behind me. He had been paid in a bronze-worked brooch this time. ‘If you will guard my back.’

My husband shifted on his horse. He looked almost too big for it, too broad to stay balanced. His smile was quick, puckering the arrow-scar on his cheek. He knew what I was asking: if they open the way, would he charge in behind me?

‘I will obey the will of god,’ said Liran, his horse nickering beneath him. ‘If the Wing presents the opportunity, I will take it, and you will have a queen’s burial. If god is on your side, then you will succeed.’

Dagobert smirked at me. If the opportunity came, he would attack without a thought. I would be trampled into the mud, most likely, under soldiers’ boots, the wheels of ballista. I considered Miras’s suggestion then, that I tell him I am pregnant, and avoid harm to myself or the rebels.

There were hoofbeats behind us, I turned and saw Elise. Her hair was rough braided, her throat bare of adornment and her breath coming out in clouds. Despite her enmity with Alar, and her fear of her father, she had left the women without invitation and came to see me face the rebels and their magic. Egil and Isen looked at her askance, but it was my eyes that she met and I saw a reflection of myself in her gaze: a pawn in their games, that they might play or ignore, expendable.

But I was not a piece, I was a player, and I would show her how.

I knew then that I wanted her to find her own courage, and that, if she did, she might pose more danger to me than any of the wild swans who would watch me burn. I had already let the princess get close enough to plant a knife in my chest. And my body told me that I wanted to do it again.

Dagobert prayed behind me as I approached the wall of thorn.

> *'Praise be to the Wing, that raises us in peace,*
> *Praise be the eagle, who flies far seeing to the sun*
> *Praise be the swallow, who returns from journey long*
> *Praise be the owl, whose flight is wise and strong*
> *Praise be the cockerel, who stands out from the throng*
> *Then praise the high-flown swan, of greatness, strength and glory*
> *Who shows the family bond, and tells the future's story.'*

I felt Marolyn's presence behind me as the thorn wall rose thick and virulent above us, the mud of the city road sucking at our feet.

'Stay safe, Queen Tilde!' called Alar, as Miras marked our going in wax.

Closer to the wall, I could feel the digging of its roots, the power of the hawthorn and ivy, like a song in my blood.

'Can you hear anything?' Marolyn murmured to me as we closed in.

'I can hear it,' I said. 'But it's different.'

'What do you mean?'

'There's only one voice.'

The memory of my daughter's smile, brightening as it rained.

Stop the tide!

The memory of my lover's death, long and rattling.

Grow strong and tall!

The memory of my first taste of mulberry, sharp and sweet.

Grow thorns, grow deep!

The same voice, over and over, when usually all I heard were twisted mutterings, glimpses of sanity amidst a wash of purposeless power. This was the first time I had felt intent from the wood. Who was this man whose voice was so clear?

‘Can you tell them not to open the wall? That the king will attack?’

I had spoken to the trees before, just briefly.

I am known, I tried, pushing my thoughts towards the blockage. *Hear me.*

Nothing responded. I shook my head, and Marolyn sighed.

‘Well, did I not come with you to die at your side?’ she said. ‘At least if we do, it will be beautiful, and we have already paid the bard for our song.’

‘We will not die,’ I said, thinking of Colfinn, Ebba, Sanafin. ‘Death is never beautiful.’

‘It can be,’ she said determinedly. ‘A chosen death is better than a powerless life.’

‘You sound like a priest,’ I said, and she laughed, though there was some edge beneath it, and looked up at the thorns. We stopped. There was nowhere further to go.

‘We found it,’ she said at last, the first faint breeze stirring the brown curls around her brow. ‘The magic.’

I felt my mother’s ring with my thumb. Buried magic, buried histories, so close and yet untouchable.

I felt foolish where I stood before the green, for my yearning and my failure. My heart ran ragged as a fox’s in a hunt, a warning drum as the dawn finally cut through the city, turning the tips of the green wall golden.

We were not yet dead. The rebels had not fired on us. That was surely a sign in our favour. I hoped that they had a plan, that they were saving up their power, that they could rescue us and then Hadiah then tear the lot of them into nothing.

But if they could assassinate the whole court, would they not have done it already?

Use this opportunity to crown yourself in feathers.

No more failed rebellions.

Was I losing my naivety, or was I losing hope?

‘My fellow Merogians,’ I said at last, pitching my voice as my mother did, deep and loud, filling my lungs up from the belly. ‘Answer to your queen.’

‘Merogia does not recognise traitor queens of Cynghal,’ bellowed a voice from behind the thicket. ‘We are ruled by kings! Kings of the kithwood, kings of the mountains!’

A roar lifted up along the wall, and my heart swelled. But these people were trapped behind their own magic, with nowhere to go. Cynghals behind them, Cynghals before them. Green could not last for ever against metal, fire and salt.

‘Then show the way to the daughter of King Rivani,’ I said. ‘The last King of Ardwen. We are known.’

You are known. That was what the trees had said when I set foot in them for the first time in six years. That was what the rebel had told me. I hoped they knew what I meant; I hoped they understood, too, that ‘show the way’ meant ‘do not let down the wall’.

I would spite Merovin: betrayal was not the only choice.

A pause. I had expected the thorns to part, a small pathway to open, but instead, above us helmeted heads moved amongst the tangle of branches. After a few moments, ropes were thrown over, made from twisted vines, likely pulled from the wall itself. They hung on the outer branches, holding a slack net of ivy.

Marolyn and I shared a look of both relief and disappointment. We had both hoped for a display of the power of the Ways, the strength of the kithwood, a small gateway to allow us entry.

But I sensed also a clink of leather and metal behind us, a settling of swords and arms as they realised no way in had been revealed to them.

I breathed out my tension and stepped with Marolyn into the bower. The warriors on the wall spread out, hauling on the ropes to drag us to the parapet.

I turned to look back at the Cynghals. They were all waiting for us in silence, even Dagobert’s prayer-song falling away. Elise held herself apart, her bearing proud and straight. As I looked, she lifted her hand to me. A farewell? A dismissal? A beckoning back?

The creak of the ropes brought us to the top, perilously close to the scraping of the thorns, but the haulers parted, stretching out our bower to bring us to the edge.

There stood a woman with a lean, wolfish bearing, with silver hair and eyes of the same. She had bone earrings in her lip and ears, silver in her

nose. She did not look like a magic-wielder, she looked like the sharp end of a spear.

‘A murderer and a fallen king’s daughter,’ she said over her folded arms. We stayed very still. ‘You kill one of our own then come to treat with us for our enemies, and yours. That takes some boldness.’

So, she knew what we had done on the hannerast.

‘I killed a man who raised a hand to my king,’ said Marolyn, before I could speak. ‘I do not regret my duty.’

The woman smiled tightly. ‘Spoken like a warrior,’ she said. ‘And like a Merogian.’ Those grey eyes, she turned on me. ‘Cynghals do not like it when their vassals speak before them. How will you punish her?’

Marolyn snorted, and I couldn’t help it, I laughed as well. We lay in our green netting like rabbits in a sack, enemies behind and enemies ahead, wheezing.

‘What is so funny?’ said the woman crossly, which only served to make us laugh harder. There were others on the wall, lying amid the thorns on blankets and wood boards, bows and arrows in their hands, turning to stare at us as the warriors strained to hold us up at the height of the thorns.

‘I am not Cynghal,’ I told her at last.

‘You have knelt to Cynghals,’ said the woman. ‘You pray with the Cynghals, and Ways help you let one fuck you in his bed.’ I sobered. ‘The rebel who came for you was called Haralt. He was known to us, and only told to kill you if you were a traitor.’

‘I am not traitor,’ I said.

‘I agreed to let you in, not to keep you alive,’ she said, her voice cold. ‘Perhaps I should drop you and fire arrows into your still bleeding bodies.’

‘Then perhaps you shouldn’t keep wasting our time,’ I bit back.

After a moment, she sighed, then put her hand out.

I took it, taking Marolyn’s wrist at the same time, fearful that if I left her behind she would fall as a punishment or an accident. We put our boots on the vines and were dragged up on to the makeshift parapet.

‘I am Guwetha,’ said the woman. ‘Kanaan by birth, Merogia by kith ties, rebel by necessity and druidim by some strange twist of fate.’

Druidim. I made the connection: she was the magic wielder. She had the power of the Ways. Like me.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Twenty-five

Elise

Elise watched Tilde disappear over the thorn wall. They had so few conversations, desperately few, and yet her heart felt dragged with the woman into the void.

‘That woman has an instinct for survival,’ said Odon after a moment.

‘Agreed,’ said Liran. ‘Let us see if it lasts the morning.’

Elise turned her horse away. She could not bear to watch a wall in silence for Tilde’s body to be hung from it, though she did not understand why it affected her so. To never feel the probing of her sharp tongue and sharper wit, to never see those dark eyes shining in firelight, feel the warmth of her fingers or see her dark hair loose and dripping.

Nor could she bear to watch her brothers converse with Alar as if he had never done wrong.

She had chased after Isen the day before.

‘Not now, Elise,’ he said as he heard her on his heels. ‘There are provisions to manage, weapons to sharpen, messages to be sent—’

‘How could he?’ she demanded. ‘How could he let Alar back on this land? How could you *sit* with him? How could you keep another thing from me?’

Isen stiffened, his stony expression breaking for a moment into a tearing anguish Elise had never seen before. ‘It is not my choice to make, Elise-hyem,’ he said.

‘What about killing all those people?’ Elise had hissed, coming closer to him. ‘Our people, Isen, or are we not rulers in this land?’ She lowered her voice as two of Conrin’s grey guard passed in gleaming cloaks. She, like the others, had known what the mounds of burnings had meant. ‘You killed innocents.’

Isen stared at her, as if wondering who was speaking with her mouth. ‘It is the cost of war. I thought you knew that. Better a short pain than a long succumbing’

She had known that. Sacrifice was part of the glory of the swan, atrocity and outrage tools her father and brothers had wielded for their victory.

Innocence was no shield.

‘Then was Isuire the cost of war?’ said Elise. ‘Is Tilde? Am I?’

Her stoic older brother looked at her like Hein did for a moment, like his heart was an open wound and she had come with salt not to purify, but to burn.

‘It’s the only way, Elise,’ said Isen. ‘Alar is still our father’s son, these people still failed to protect their city. The swan is the king, is our father—’

‘There must be other ways,’ said Elise. ‘There have to be.’ Isen’s face closed.

‘This is all I’ve ever known,’ he said, and turned away.

It was all she had known, and yet since her mother died she felt like her world was drawing wider, and so was she. Before, thinking of her father, the Wing, the simplicity of the Nests, the fixedness of the laws, had been soothing, certain. But was it the certainty of winter ice, melting when it met the spring?

Turning over her conversation with Isen, and the sight of Tilde dragged over the muttering tangle of thorns, Elise needed something to still the churning of her thoughts. Her bone-shuttle hung in her pocket, but she couldn’t bear to be seen doing something so miserable. Her father had real scars on his body, Tilde had put her life at risk, how was she supposed to admit her greatest flesh wounds were committed by herself?

She flexed her fingers as she reached the targets of a practice range she had seen the day before, feeling the pull of her scarred skin. Archery was rarely practised by women outside of the hunt days. Too bold of course, pride was a sin of the body.

But if Alar could be forgiven for his transgressions, why not she?

Elise hefted her bow in her hand as the sunlight bathed she and the targets in liquid gold. It had once been Isen’s, and a hard draw, but she had her father’s natural strength in her arms. She drew an arrow from her quiver, knocked it and took aim from the wood and straw stands. A few soldiers were hurrying past, and turned to stare at her before their fellows nudged them away. Elise focussed on the tug of the line on her fingertips, like the warp on the loom, or the string of a harp, then brought the feathers to her mouth in a kiss.

The first time she had fired a bow was on the deck of her father’s flagship, the first time they had come to Merogia. The swan king himself

had directed her aim, standing like a great bird at her back, his wings nudging her into place.

Steady your knees on the deck. Look at the way the wind blows the flags. Harden your stance. Breathe.

Things had changed since then.

The swan is the—

Sin of the mind.

Too bold.

Her arrow hit just above centre, a gust catching its tail at the wrong moment. She tried again, and struck true.

The day brightened and she heard no horns, no proclamation of death. The ravaged city woke, the mills still turning, the survivors still sliding between houses, avoiding the warriors of Cynghal and Galen and the corpses of their neighbours. The fortress of Faoldun hung above them all, shining still in the light, like a bird of prey on a high rock, the thorns its nest. There, she imagined an army, waiting, bristling with weapons. And Tilde, there, amongst them. Her folk.

Elise struck the target again, then the other two. Her arms began to ache after the fifth draw.

‘You really are good at that, aren’t you?’

She turned. Egil was standing, watching her.

‘What do you want, Egil-hyem?’

‘I’ll be joining you.’

He had brought his own bow, a fine make of yew, its limbs carved by master artisans with a flick of wings. He wore a clean shirt and light mail, covered with a faded red tabard with yellow trim.

‘Is that a request or a command?’ Elise asked.

‘Please?’ he sighed.

Elise had looked after all of her younger brothers as children, even at four years old minding Conrin did not crawl into flames. Egil had stuck with her the longest, watching her weaving with fascination, each time excited to cut the strings from the loom when it was done.

It was Alar, first, who had laughed at him, and then Erelle. ‘You want to be a girl, Egil?’ she would say if he showed an interest in her embroidery. It was the way they said it, as if it was a laughable, terrible thing to be a girl. Maybe it was. It wasn’t long before he had stopped showing an interest in weaving.

Her brother's first arrow struck hard, but a handspan up from centre. He twisted his nose, annoyed. He had never been as adept at the martial skills as his brothers, though he had begun to prove himself wise on the gaming field.

'Your turn,' he said, nodding at her. She hesitated. She didn't want to embarrass him, her mother would tell her not to, and for a moment she was caught between her mother's voice and her own.

Isabella won, as she always had, and Elise nocked an arrow, aiming lower, and striking a hand's span down from the eye of the target.

They went on this way, in peaceful equilibrium, Egil trying to beat her, and Elise carefully ensuring that he might. He was better than he had been. *We are the same*, she was telling him. *We could be easy with each other*. Sometimes victory was not the keeper of peace, it was surrender.

'I came here to warn you, Sister-hyem,' he said at last, as they kept their calm. 'If she lives, you need to stay away from that Merogian woman.'

She looked at him, her fingers around the feathers of her next arrow, soft between her knuckles.

'Oh don't give me that wounded little glance,' he said. 'Family has to come first, Elise, you know that.'

She lifted her bow, putting herself back in her body, the strength of her arms, her muscles warming beneath her clothes, the slight ache in her shoulder, her wrist and palm where she gripped a little too hard.

'Father brought her into the family,' said Elise at last.

'Of course you still think he is the holy of holies,' he scoffed.

The man who had taught her to shoot, who had laughed loud enough to shake the sails, and the one who crushed her, punished her, not in a single blow but in years of little, painful humiliations.

'He is our father,' she said. 'The swan is the king.' The greatest prayer, the hardest tenet. 'Isen holds to him, and to the new queen, and so do I.'

'You do not look at her like a queen, Elise,' said Egil quietly. 'And if I see it, others will as well.'

'What are you talking about?'

He raised an eyebrow at her, her little brother, and she blushed. Did he know? That not three breaths went by without tasting of Tilde's name?

She had heard of attraction, nodded when women spoke of it, or when her mother sighed as she told tales of Galenish romances and courtly love,

but had never felt it, never known it. She was pious, bound for a monastery, that kind of love she never longed for.

Or had she? Had she looked at that pretty maid her mother had sent away with a gaze too hot? Had she dreaded to spy the mole on Amalle's lip because it was just kissing her pink mouth? Now she felt this sensation, this beat of her body, she could trace its echoes back.

How did Egil know? What did he see in her, and did he have that same echo in his heart? Did he also know what sin tasted like?

But that was it. A sin. Love was for marriage, marriage was for children, for men and women. Wing help her, her sins would eat her alive if she let them.

'Whatever you think you've seen,' said Elise hoarsely, 'she is our father's wife, our empire's future. We have to hold fast to that, and each other.' That was what her father asked of her, and she had ever been obedient.

Egil snorted and fired another arrow at the target, hitting it almost centre. '"Hold fast",' he mouthed, as if it was the funniest thing in the world. 'You couldn't understand. You don't know what it's like. He holds us so tight we have no choice but to crush each other or be crushed in turn.'

This was strange, coming from Egil. Liran relied on his second youngest for his penchant for record keeping of taxes, laws, debts and trade, the attention to detail that even Isen lacked.

'He raised you to be strong,' said Elise. She blinked away the image of Isen's unfeeling face, a dagger in his hand, and tried instead to think of her family tapestry, years of work to show a family rising together into the blue beyond. The future that had seemed so certain months ago was unravelling. Was it Tilde? Or had the threads of it always been fraying?

'You have done more raising of us than he,' said Egil twirling an arrow in his fingers. 'He compared us, made us stand back to back and measure our height, our muscle, our minds. But priests and tutors raised us, like the ghosts of fathers. And you.' He set and fired his next shaft. 'Like the shadow of a mother who was a shadow since before we were born.'

'She was not,' snapped Elise. 'Just because you didn't see her work or understand it doesn't mean it didn't exist. She protected us.'

But Isabella had not kept the bad things out, she had pushed them in. Any wildness, or boldness, she made her daughters swallow it whole, eggshell and all, so it could not escape except in a sharp edge and rush of blood.

Egil considered her. ‘How do you do it Elise?’ he said, half laughing. When had he become so grown? ‘You’re so good at wanting nothing.’

Want nothing? Her heart was wild with wanting. She wanted to retreat to a monastery and pray to the Wing. She wanted to be crowned before her father in glory. She wanted to kiss Tilde, where her bath water dripped.

‘You know he promised each of us rule of Merogia,’ he said. ‘Or Cynghal, or Galen, or Suneheim. Then someone else pleases him better, another son, a ducal, a tarn even, and he forgets, hands it over, makes other promises, tries to get another mongrel boy-child when he has six he ignores. We are lackland princes, all desperate for our due.’

It was Elise’s turn to laugh. ‘He speaks your name ten times before he speaks mine, and I do not whine half so much as all of you.’

Egil was staring at her; she lowered her bow.

‘That’s … just the way it is,’ he said. He seemed to recognise how pathetic that sounded, for he winced even as the words left his mouth.

‘I am not permitted to speak, to read, to rule, to war, and yet you can rage against it, and I cannot?’

Egil shrugged helplessly. ‘We want what we are born for, Elise. That birthright is not yours.’

‘Nor yours,’ Elise pointed out. ‘It is our father’s to give and to take away.’ Those words tasted foul in her mouth, and she struggled to wash out the taste with her struggling piety. *Take them from her. Burn them.* ‘This, you cannot change.’

‘He is old, Elise,’ said Egil. ‘And this woman will not save him. It is time for him to step aside, and allow us, his princes, to settle his lands. We do not need a Merogian ruler, we need a trade strategy, but he will not listen. He is sickening, and his mind is stuck in the past.’

‘It is not the past,’ said Elise, pointing her bow at the thorn monstrosity that rose beyond the houses. Could she call it a monstrosity? On the Cynghal side, houses had been reduced to rubble and used to fuel the fires of the townspeople. ‘The Merogian is here, on the other side of that wall of death.’

‘She will not last long,’ said Egil. ‘Plans are in motion, Elise, she cannot be a part of our future. And you need to stay out of the way.’

‘And if I do not?’ Elise asked. *Will you hold it fast with us?*

I am just a lonely woman. Are we not the same?

‘Then I will not be able to protect you,’ said Egil. ‘I can barely keep my wings in the sky, let alone yours. There is change coming Elise, and that woman is in our way. Do as you have always done. Go back to your weaving, keep your head down, and let us do the dirty work.’

The arrogance with which he spoke, as if he was a man of thirty years not a boy of fourteen, eight years younger than she. He had read a few books and taken a few hurts, and decided that was enough to dictate his future, and hers.

Elise glared at him, then at the target. She had been letting him win, aiming her strikes a span outside of his each time. Annoyed, she lifted her bow again, drawing an arrow, nocking it, and releasing in the space of a breath. It slammed into the centre of the target. Egil blinked, and she turned to him. She was the older, the wiser, and she would not be commanded by a whelp she had swaddled. She felt the crack in her widen, and let some of herself shine through.

‘Do not be so bold with me, little brother,’ she said. ‘Plot and wrangle as you wish, but there is more to my mind than you might imagine, and more to my strength than I have let you see. My fate is not yours to choose for me.’

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Twenty-six

Tilde

I had not seen such a motley gathering of Merogians since the kingsmoot. Though I had thought there would be more of them.

There were thirty, at most. I saw the bronze and brass adornments of Ardwen, the long red boots of Hallion, the silver earrings of Kanaan, the iron brooches of Falcan. I even saw the round shoes and woven blue threads of Gevera, brightening tunic hems and necklaces. I almost wept, for a moment transported to a world I had never known, swept away before I first drew breath.

These were the first that greeted us from near the hawthorn wall, in the city of Faoldun. While the holdings in Salt Lake were mainly wood and thatch, Faoldun homes had strong wooden beams holding up tiles of slate and red clay, giving them a patchwork look.

This was the town proper that curved up the steep slope towards the fortress, and most of the city seemed to be here. Not just Merogians, Cynghals, some of them in their square-shouldered cloth. They would have been poor folk encouraged to settle the lands east with the promise of fertile pastures and a good living.

There were Galenish too, and traders from Argentha, one or two from Manir, Shatua or Soffian. They mingled between fewer houses than could hold them with their livestock; goats, chickens, ponies and heavy pigs jostling together in the street. Several houses had fallen under the barrage of stones thrown from Isen's ballistas and mangonels, but people were still living under the sagging beams. Siege towers were being constructed out of felled wood, a long way off complete.

'Queen Tilde,' a man said, in Cynghal, bowing.

'Tuathilde. The people's battle.'

'Rivani's daughter.'

'Child of the forest.'

'Have you come to save us?'

'I am here to help,' I assured them. A woman brushed my hem.

‘We are not rebels,’ she whispered. ‘We did not help them, but when the prince came with his black flag, they started killing. And we were so afraid.’

I felt a firm grasp of my elbow, a tug on my sleeve, folk were crowding in.

‘Are they going to kill us?’

‘Queen Tilde, tell them to spare us!’

Grasping hands surrounded me, dirty, frightened faces.

Being touched was rarely pleasant for me, these days I shrank in my own skin, unpicking myself, wanting to return to the quiet place I went when Liran touched me.

‘Stop.’ Marolyn brushed some hands off, her arms coming around me as Guwetha looked back, realising she had lost us. ‘That’s enough.’

I breathed in, ashamed to be so panicked by the brush of hopeful fingers. ‘I will do my best to help you,’ I said. No, I had to be stronger, sterner. ‘I am here to free you! Be patient, and leave me to this work.’

The people fell back, some nodding, others weeping with the violent brew of relief and doubt. What would happen to them, if the siege dragged on? Would the Cynghals and Merogians turn on each other? Would they starve or break first?

We caught up to Guwetha, following her towards the seven warehouses that stood all in a row before the wall of the fortress’s outer ward and gatehouse. Here, goods were checked, weighed, stamped and taxed within sight of the palace. Kanaanite olives, silver, grain. The high arched doors still painted the bright blue of the old Kanaanite flag, and the handles of the older-looking ones were wolves’ heads, biting each other.

Three were burned, another bore scorch marks where a fire had been started but failed to catch. Guwetha took us to the fifth, one with ivy climbing up the side. It was a wine store, the barrels piled high to the ceiling, marked with the stamp of the swan and ready to go on their way.

The air inside, however, was thick with the scents of blood, fermented grape, and the acrid spin of vinegar; a strange, sickly mixture.

‘This is the infirmary,’ Guwetha told us.

As we entered through a smaller hatch in the large door, a woman was screaming. We found her on a table being held down, a stick in her mouth and her eyes rolling back as a physik went to work removing her leg at the

knee, where it was blackened and stinking from what looked like an arrow wound.

Not far from her, there was a young boy sitting on a halved wine barrel. He wore a deep-cut tunic like a child of Galen, intended to show the layers beneath, and was sobbing uncontrollably as a gash in his forearm was cleaned by an older man with cups of vinegar and honey. There were several other patients, in different states of injury or pain, as well as a merchant in a felt cap, uninjured and furious, arms folded and legs akimbo.

The screaming stopped, and the assistant let go of the now unconscious woman and ran with a bloodstained bowl to an open barrel of wine, sinking it into the red broth. The merchant cursed and pulled out a wax tablet, hastily scribbling down the amount taken, but did not stop them. The assistant ran back to the woman and poured the libation on her bleeding wound.

‘Why have you brought us here, Guwetha?’ I asked tightly.

‘I wanted you to know the cost of the kithwood’s power,’ said Guwetha, impassive. ‘And why I didn’t kill you on the wall.’

She led us to a corner lit by sunlight from a hole in the roof and green with weeds. Ivy climbed up the inside wall, and a little silver birch was growing beside a middle-aged man with dark hair, pale skin and a ragged beard.

He sat with his back against the ivy wall, staring at the motes of dust that danced in the sunbeams. His arms were bandaged thickly, and fresh blood seeped through the cloth.

‘Yoldan,’ said Guwetha. ‘Yoldan, it’s me.’

He looked through her as through a veil of shadow, then at last his eyes focussed. ‘Guwetha,’ he echoed.

Now my fear of imminent death had subsided, there was something alluring about Guwetha, like the cool shade of the forest on your skin. It made me want to breathe her in, till my lungs and belly were full of it. I had thought it a mild attraction for an older woman, nothing too surprising. But, strangely, I felt it with this man as well. A pull, or a current. Not unlike how I felt around Elise.

‘What is your name?’ Guwetha asked him.

He stared for a longer moment, frowning, then. ‘Guwetha.’

‘No, that’s my name,’ she said, and sighed, her eyes closed for a moment. ‘May we look at your arm, Yoldan?’

She said his name as if she hoped he would remember it. Yoldan understood the instructions, sticking out both of his hands, palms open, and Guwetha took one. With the awkward gentleness of a woman unused to it, she peeled back the bandages.

Beneath was raw skin, blistered in fat pustules, red twists of flesh, half melted, as yet unhealed. Marolyn swore under her breath, putting the back of her hand to her mouth. Higher up on his arm, the melted flesh greened, turning furry, mossy, crisping into lichen. Even as I watched, it seemed to bloom a little greener.

'Yoldan summoned the wall,' said Guwetha. 'He is one of two other druidim who know the Ways, and now he is lost in them.'

'I don't understand,' I said.

'The wood cannot give without taking,' Guwetha explained with waning patience. 'And it drives a hard bargain. Yoldan gave too much, and now he belongs to the kith as much as the ancestors do.' She bit her lip. 'Sometimes they find their way back,' she said. 'Sometimes … I understand that they stay like this for ever. This is still new to us.'

'What kind of offering?' Marolyn demanded.

'The wood takes what makes it feel alive,' said Guwetha, rewrapping Yoldan's arm. 'Pain and memory. One, few can suffer, the other, few can lose.'

Give not memory, blood nor bone.

'The greater the magic,' she said, 'the greater the offering.'

I understood the blisters, the damaged skin. 'He did this to himself?' I asked, recoiling.

'Yes. Put his arms in a vat of boiling oil.' She looked at me. 'He saw your stepson, the black prince, charging down the hill with half an army at his back. He did not wait to begin slaughtering, and Yoldan gave everything he could to protect us.'

'Protect,' said Yoldan. 'Protect!' he shouted, half-standing. He reminded me for a moment of Liran. 'Six lands united!'

I recognised his voice, it was the voice the thorn wall spoke with, the voice that gave it shape. Guwetha looked at him hopefully, but he fell back, his mind wandering away down paths she could not follow.

'You fool,' she said softly. 'You should have taken it from me. You should have had me share the burden with you, and we both might have been half saved.'

‘Why does it need such an offering?’ I said. ‘Why would our ancestors ask for so much?’ Too much. What use was a power that could not be used without destroying the wielder?

Guwetha lifted her shoulders. ‘The wild has never been kind,’ she said. ‘Nor our ancestors, who almost destroyed Merogia in their greed for power, or their descendants, who destroyed us further by cutting us off from our magic.’ Her eyes did not leave Yoldan, and I wondered if they were lovers. ‘They don’t care for our pain, only their own. All their souls clinging together like pieces of torn cobwebs with no purpose, no flesh, no life. They want it, desperately, and feast on what we give them to give our hopes shape in return. They can change bodies, fulfil dreams, compress time, build walls.’ Her silver eyes found mine again, and she lifted her chin. ‘Or bury a loved one where no one will ever hurt her again.’

Sanafin. I felt Marolyn’s hand find my shoulder, touch it for reassurance.

‘You were there,’ I said. ‘Six years ago.’

Guwetha nodded. ‘I was there.’

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Twenty-seven

Tilde

We passed beneath the Cynghal ducal's mutilated body to reach the rebel-claimed gatehouse. It hung, bloated and sagging, from the parapet, flies crowded against the cracked open ribs and the blackened fruit that had been lungs, like wriggling moss. Beneath him, the wall had been stained brown and red with his blood.

'He was already dead, when we did it,' said Guwetha, brushing the buzzing insects from her face as we came into the shadow of the tower.

'Pity,' said Marolyn.

I wondered that I felt a little relieved. Was it easier to think of Merogia as good, if we did no evil? It would be a better world if justice was taken with an open palm and not a closed heart. But this was not a better world, and terror was the tongue they had taught us. I had imagined it too, murdering an old man in his sleep, cackling and glorious. I had chosen a slower atrocity, but would the steady drop of human evils corrode any remaining goodness in my nature?

We followed Guwetha up the spiral stair to the gatehouse lookout, where vats of oil sat on beds of cold wood, waiting to be relit. From there, we could see up to the forest and the towers that guarded the hannerast, and I shuddered to remember Yoldan's arms, blistering and agonising, though he had barely the wit to feel it.

We could also see up to the keep through the rear arrow slits, where two rebels were watching with rough-sanded bows over the empty bailey. Much of the ground there was studded with arrows, and more than one rotting body. I could see the hot stains of oil on the walls of the inner keep where Lady Henoveva had fended off the rebels' attack. The front gate there was also a metal portcullis, bent, but not broken, a battering ram left where it had fallen.

'They have crossbows,' said Guwetha. 'After we fell back to face the black prince's guard, we have made no advances.'

'Why did you attack now?' I asked.

‘With harvest beginning, the guards at the keep were fewer,’ Guwetha explained. ‘We thought we could take the keep, gather the banners there if we could hold, rob and burn it if we couldn’t. It was Yoldan’s idea.’ She rubbed her pale hand over her grey hair, smoothing it into her tail. ‘We crept into the town at its busiest, and used the Ways to blind the gate guards.’ I noted two of her fingernails were missing, the tips swollen. Her offering to inflict that blindness: *memory and pain.*

I thought of Sanafin’s eyes, the one thing I could not remember. The kith had taken what I had not offered, using my pain to pluck the memory from me. What memory had she given for the advantage? A first taste of snow? A first kiss?

‘But years of rule haven’t softened the fuckers much,’ sniffed Guwetha, with some grudging respect. ‘One Cynghal blew the warning horn before jumping from the gate tower. The occupiers fled into the inner ward, raised their warning banners and lowered the gates. We had the outer, and the city, held them off reclaiming it. Victory was ours until the prince arrived with his black guard and came charging down from the hannerast.’

‘Those cutthroats go wherever he does,’ said Marolyn. ‘If we had known we would have warned you court was moving here.’

‘Hm,’ said Guwetha, glancing at me, but I was lost imagining the sight from here up the slope, of the black prince charging into the city, Yoldan watching from his tower. The black guard were known to be ruthless. Yoldan must have been overseeing preparations, the bubbling vat, and realised he had dragged this ragged rebellion to death.

‘And now you are trapped,’ I said. Guwetha scowled at me, but did not deny it.

‘We could follow the wall down to the forest, across the river, but it is too well watched. We have tried sending scouts, even assassins, but they are slaughtered.’

‘The forest,’ said Marolyn. ‘Does it not drive you mad?’

She was remembering our flight back to Ardwen after the kingsmoot, daily losing companions either to the woods or their wounds. We had been forced to bind ourselves together with rope to stop the kith’s madness taking hold.

‘Sometimes,’ said Guwetha. ‘Those with an ear for the voices, children, or the very old, or’ – she looked at me – ‘druidim, are more susceptible.’ I met her eyes. I was not mad. I would refuse madness. ‘But others can still

sense the enticement of the green. They fall for its tricks, and its traps. But there are places in the forest's heart where the kith fear to speak, where only druidim can find them. None of us know why. Maybe the old druidim made them, maybe some ancient creature or god of the wood. But the old records are burned.'

We had climbed the tower of the gatehouse, stopping outside a narrow door.

'How did you find out any of this?' I said, thinking of Merovin's collections of songs and poems, Sanafin's warning. My mother had told me there was no power in the wood. Did she believe that, or had she lied?

'I was taught,' said Guwetha.

'Can I be taught?' asked Marolyn, with an eagerness that made me smile.

'No.' Guwetha's bluntness made Marolyn stiffen.

'Why not?' I said in her defence. 'She is a fighter, and Merogian. The Ways are hers.'

'She is not druidim.'

'How do you know?'

'Can't you feel it?'

The current between us, a tugging, a sameness like attraction and sweet-air. She nodded once, and Marolyn looked at me. I nodded, and she closed her face quickly to hide her disappointment.

'It is not something we choose,' said Guwetha to her, a little more gently. 'Not inherited from parent to child, nor guided by nobility of birth. Perhaps it is the same chance that drops a seed onto fertile ground.' She shrugged and looked at me. 'If this one hadn't been raised by stiff-necked Rivani, perhaps she could have learned too.'

'You think I cannot?' I said. She smiled tightly, and I felt like a child to her, barely born, and it was humiliating.

'I think,' said Guwetha, who had stopped at the top of the stair, 'your dear husband would burn you at the stake before he let you walk in the Ways.'

She opened a door into a small, private chamber. Most likely for a captain and higher officers to study and meet. Two windows faced towards the sunlit town outside, where the long slope of houses down the rocky hill met the river that wound around the city's edge. From there, the green barricade of thorns that enclosed this packed in corner of the city looked as

fragile as a skein of thread. But it was the only thing standing between the rebels and annihilation.

Here, a wiry woman was sitting on the table, feet on one of the fine-carved Galenish chairs, looking out at the nobles' encampment. The Cynghal army was almost a thousand now, its banners flying. From this height, it was clear that even if the rebels took the inner keep, they would not survive long past winter. The Cynghal armies could only increase, calling reserves from the erls, tarns and markals in Ardwen and Falcan, or the ducal of Hallion.

Who could the rebels call?

'So, it's the swan-fucker,' said the new stranger, who did not turn to greet us. 'I could see that ugly yellow cloak from up here. What are you, a snake, a swan, or a duckling?'

She had dark brown skin, and her black hair was braided down to the waist of a coarse green tunic. Her eyes, amber-hued, gleamed like light shining through a deep wood pool. If the feel of Guwetha and Yoldan was a faint, cool sweetness, the sense from this woman was the maw of the forest, a chasm opening, drinking light and air deep into the waters that ran amidst the roots.

'Ladbh,' said Guwetha. No titles here. 'She came as I said she would.'

'And did she offer you her cunt as well? I hear it's all the rage these days.'

I reddened, but I refused to be shamed, and I had practice at it now. It hurt, however, that Marolyn did not leap to my defence. 'I did not expect ignorance from druidim,' I said.

'Some fools prefer ignorance,' said Ladbh with a sourness that suggested she was speaking of someone very specific, and it was not me. 'Some like pretty cloaks.'

That was about me.

'You should have cracked her skull on a stone and hung it in pieces on the thorns,' Ladbh finally turned and spat at Guwetha. 'Some people learn the hard way they cannot be on all sides at once.'

Guwetha sat down, looking tired. It was mid-morning now, and insects darted in and out of the glassless windows. 'I considered it,' she said.

'You did not,' said Marolyn, finally sharpening. She stepped a little in front of me, but I understood her consternation. This was the side she

wanted, with open feeling and unsheathed blades. Not honeyed, not *softly:* she longed for the venom and fight even more than I.

‘Oh, she brought a guard dog,’ sneered Ladbh. ‘Are you the one who killed Haralt?’ She twisted her nose. ‘I can smell the guilt on you, and the blood.’

Marolyn flinched, and my thread of patience wore thin. ‘You could just as easily have insulted us from different sides of your thorn wall,’ I said. ‘You have jeopardised everything I have been working for, and burned yourself into a hearth with no way out.’ I drew myself a seat at the short table. On the top were papers, lists, plans, likely measures of how long their supplies would last. ‘Am I to be the water you need to save you, or the kindling to burn yourselves the faster?’

There was also a bed in the corner, and on its stand was a tiny wooden poppet, half falling apart and shining with the endless rub of loving hands. Ladbh’s? Perhaps there was some tenderness in her.

‘We have all heard of your work,’ Ladbh sneered. ‘Making a fresh warlord, feathered and scaled to bind us to the swan and keep the superstitious tarns in line.’

I put my hand on the table, hoping a show of confidence would make me feel it.

‘Bearing a child into this court is the wedge needed to crack it open,’ I said. ‘Perhaps you might do better helping me than robbing merchants, assassinating women and failing at warfare.’

Marolyn came to stand behind me, Ladbh spat on the floor and turned away from me to Guwetha.

‘Such politicking has never served us common folk, Guwetha,’ she said. ‘My plan is righteous!’

‘And what would the cost be of murdering all these swans on our doorstep, Ladbh?’ said Guwetha, rubbing her fingers over her brow. This was a conversation they’d had before. I heard Marolyn draw her breath with excitement. Could they? Take down not only the king but all of his sons and half of his ducals? ‘We would lose the few druidim we have, lose the little knowledge we have regained of the Ways. You haven’t even been to see Yoldan, have you?’

‘He was already slipping. He was too weak.’

‘He’s the strongest man I’ve known,’ snapped Guwetha. ‘Reduced to a shadow. And the wall keeps living, keeps growing, keeps taking from him.

You can feel it.’ She sat back and worried at her injured fingers. ‘Even you do not understand the Ways, Ladbh. They are fickle and treacherous. If you would just let us find Owk …’

‘He cannot be found,’ said Ladbh. ‘He appears like a quake from the earth’s ass, and disappears again.’

‘Who is Owk?’ I probed. Both of them looked at me as if they had only just remembered I was there.

‘No one,’ snapped Ladbh.

‘The one who taught her,’ said Guwetha, jerking her chin at Ladbh, who scowled. ‘He remembers before the war.’

‘A lot of us remember before the war,’ I said.

‘Not this war, girl,’ said Ladbh, getting down from the table and going to the window. ‘The war your bloodline ended by killing the druidim and chasing them into the fens.’

I clenched my jaw. ‘The swan king calls me “girl”,’ I said. ‘I am not a child.’

‘You are barely a sapling, half grown and ever bending.’

At least I did not need to smile or rise above their vitriol. I could meet fire with fire.

‘And you’re a cragged old trunk that can’t feel the rot in its roots.’ I told her. ‘Druidim or no, you are stretched too thin to hold what you have taken, and too weak to strike all the swans from the sky. I am here to save you, if I can. Some of you at least. If you will help me understand how.’

Ladbh grunted, half laughing. She was staring north over the green forest and the indigo stretch of the mountains, towards Hallion, and the distant fens.

But up close, there was the wood, the wall, and the smoke from the encampments. It was strange to think of people on either side of the barricade, baking their bread. The Merogians in the rebels’ hold were going up to the thorn wall, touching it, perhaps murmuring a quick prayer. On the Cynghal side, folk gathered towards whatever makeshift Nest and grey-robed priest they could find to hear the morning song.

‘You can’t save us,’ Ladbh said, eventually. ‘We die if we stay, we die if we kill. The river is watched, the forest is watched, and we are surrounded. Better to die fighting.’

‘Better to live and build a future, than burn it at the root,’ I said.

‘What future?’ said Guwetha. She had borne a hard and guarded energy as we came to the gatehouse, in front of the other rebels, even in front of Yoldan, but here she let her weariness show in full and bitter force. I had thought her candour with me was because she had decided to trust me, or because I was druidim, but now I suspected it was because she had given up.

‘I am within the nest of our enemy,’ I said. ‘In reach of his power.’ I steeled myself, I had to believe this. ‘*I* am your future.’

Guwetha looked at me, her expression inscrutable. Ladbh’s was not.

‘Hah!’ she cackled. ‘You let that man crawl on top of you and have not put a knife in his eye. What kind of future is that?’

I did not keep those memories with me. The sound of grunting, the scraping, ugly pain of it. I did not want that. Sometimes, when I least expected it, the memory came back, like a nightmare where my mouth was choked with feathers, and I could not breathe. I felt it now, but clawed it back down, buried it in the darkness inside.

‘I wanted to,’ I said. ‘Kill him. That was my intent when I married him, to kill him and let the rest fall as it will. Marolyn too, was a sacrifice I would have made.’

Marolyn nodded, though when I looked at her, I could see her regret. She had wanted it, her beautiful death, and I had taken it from her.

‘Why didn’t you?’ said Ladbh, she turned and was silhouetted in the soft light of the east. She was missing fingernails too, and I wondered again at this price they paid. They had changed the eyes of knights, turned them blind, but how much would it cost to transform a whole body? Or several? Were there clues in the songs and poems Merovin had meticulously bound in his book? Or did they not know until they asked for the price, and offered it, even unwittingly, like the memory of a lover’s eyes?

‘I chose wisdom,’ I said.

I had made my own bargain: some tolerance for evil, some silence in the face of horror, as long as I met a distant and more certain goal. I had decided righteousness was a pyre that would burn quick, hot and useless, but was this not the argument of Merovin the traitor? Was I sympathising with a *Geveran*?

‘The Cynghals, the Galenish, the Synod, have nested in our lands,’ I said into the rebels’ silence and the monotonous buzzing of cicadas sunbathing on the eastern wall. ‘They married Merogian women, had their children by

us, made tarns and barons fat and complacent, changed our ways of trading, of speaking, of praying. Our old lines are broken, our magic, it seems, mostly forgotten, our people ground down and frightened.' I thought of the poor folk of Salt Lake, the girl who had thrown the egg. Was the mother dead now? Was the boy buried? 'They are like a fungus that has eaten through us, gnawing us hollow. Now, it is what keeps us alive.'

'Then rip them out at the root,' said Ladbh, 'cut off the dead branches, burn it deep.'

'And what of our people?' I asked. *Softly*, I tried. 'Who will fight and who will bring in the harvest?' I said. 'Who will use magic, and who will hold the memories you lose? Do not cut off the swan's head and call it vengeance while its poison seeps out.' I thought of my mother as I repeated her words. Was she waging her wars on her hands? Did she think of me? Would she be proud?

'The people are not defenceless,' protested Guwetha. 'Most of us are common born. Fighters. Warriors. Like your woman there.'

Marolyn straightened with pride.

'Then let them fight when they can win,' I said. 'I chose this life not because I am a coward, but because I mean to break them from the inside. But, for that, I will need you. Alive. Not snapping at any hand that tries to pull you free from your arrogance.'

Ladbh was pacing now, her braids tapping against her waist where they had been adorned with dried seeds, shells and bits of bone. The light bent around her anger, the air stilled. Druidim.

She was all that I could be.

'What makes you think you can save us?' Ladbh half laughed, but I knew she was serious. 'You're barely more than a child. A king's whore. A half-born druidim with no knowledge of power, of history, because your own line wiped it out. Why should we trust you?'

Half-born. Child.

That's what they would call me. That was what the songs would sing, if I lost, if I failed. That was what my voice would whisper in the branches of the kithwood, long after my death.

Whore.

They would not know what it took, how it felt. They would not know how much courage I needed each day to stand up in my own body and still claim it as my own. They would dismiss me in a blink, because it was easier

than it would be to imagine the truth of it. When I said I was not pregnant I had lost all shape in Liran's eyes, becoming just another body for him to throw at a problem.

Then again, why should they trust me? The gossamer-thin friendships I had begun to make with the women in power had melted away at the slightest heat. *Crown yourself in feathers.*

'It matters little,' I said with a sigh. 'What possible chance of success do I have? There is no way out of this mess that allows you to live and to keep playing that game of court. I have been sent to you to bring success and proof of my usefulness, or to fail and be replaced.'

I had put one step in front of the other, thinking each was brave and right, but now more than ever I felt far from my goal.

'And if you had success,' said Guwetha, 'what then?'

Ladbh looked at her. 'Don't be foolish Guwetha,' she said.

'I am simply asking, Ladbh.' She looked at me. 'The Galenish and the Wing will never take a woman ruler, even if the Cynghals might. A baby cannot rule, and every year he lives in his father's shadow is another year that would turn him into our enemy.'

'The Galenish allow mothers to rule on their children's behalf,' I said. 'There are factions ready to eat themselves, desperate for a way out. With enough time, allies, and power, they will fall into a trap they did not know they made for themselves.'

Guwetha groaned. 'Time is what we do not have,' she said. 'This doesn't help us now.'

'I know,' I said. I had been coming to a conclusion that chewed at my heart and spine, that clawed up my throat. 'You cannot all survive this, but with your help I might.'

If I succeeded at the impossible, if I felled a keep in my name, if I gained all the women back and more. Guwetha understood first, her expression didn't change, but her breath did. I heard it release, then draw in.

'You want us to surrender,' she said.

'What? No,' said Marolyn, shaking her head. 'No she doesn't. We cannot surrender. They'd kill you, torture you first for your magic, and make an example. We've seen it countless times.'

I held Guwetha's gaze, and it was all I could do not to look away in shame. I needed this. I needed to win. To win, they had to lose.

‘She does.’ Ladbh was staring at me; half furious, half impressed. ‘By the kith, she wants us to die for her.’

The air in the room was taut. I deserved Ladbh to throttle me right there with my own tongue for daring to even think it.

‘She wouldn’t ask that,’ said Marolyn, more quietly now, as she realised that perhaps I would.

I swallowed. ‘Not all of you,’ I said.

How despicable it made me, power. I had come to court carried on the wind of my own righteousness, and more and more I was tangled in weeds. This was how evil was made. In little degradations, in a hole in me, a hollow where the swan crept in and made its nest. Where I became the thing I hated.

Marolyn turned to me. ‘Tilde—’

I did not look at Marolyn. I would see hurt, betrayal, I would see the idealist I had cared for crushed under the weight of a reality I was making. But, Ways, was it not better to make it rather than sit and wait for it to make me?

‘You think because you have a smatter of magic in you that you can call upon a druidim to die?’ hissed Ladbh.

‘Did you not just ask Guwetha the same?’ I said, and the other woman smirked.

‘To kill a king and his princes,’ scowled Ladbh, ‘not gratify an upstart girl!’

‘They do not know how many druidim there are. And if that is true for the Cynghals in the towers and the people you have trapped with you, then most of you can escape while the king and his brood are distracted with few enough left behind to take the fall.’ I stood, and went to the window, pointing to a narrow point of river a good way back from the thorn wall, where the mills churned the fast-flowing water. ‘He will fear an assassination, bring the scouts in closer to the wall. With enough of a distraction, you can escape into the forest over where the water narrows.’

‘Tilde, stop it,’ said Marolyn. I turned to see her brow knotted in a frown, her hands tight on her scramasax at her waist, a knife she had taught me to use, one she had wielded for me, to protect me. ‘You cannot ask them to die.’ Her voice was tight with emotion, her eyes tearless and reproachful. Would she use the knife on me, if I lost my way too far? She had chosen to follow me, die for me, did that not mean she trusted me?

‘Did you not just say some deaths could be glorious?’ I asked her.

‘Deaths offered on a battlefield! Not sacrificed like cattle to their god.’

‘Listen to your hound, lost little king,’ said Ladbh. The air had cooled in the room, her tone full of threat. For the first time I noticed green threads creeping around her neck, like tendrils of a woodland plant. As I watched, one burst into a tiny, yellow flower. She wanted to kill me, but was holding back. Perhaps it was because of Guwetha, who said nothing but who did not reach for her power, for her defence. She was thinking.

So it was to her I turned again. I wish I had never allowed this thought to drop onto my tongue, let alone released it, but this was the game Liran said I failed to play. This was thinking like a king. He would never expect this, none of them would.

‘Think of what could be gained,’ I said to the Kanaanite. ‘No more failed rebellions, no more scrabbling in the woodland for a quiet glade where your people can live. A queen in the court of the swans. Your queen. Your king.’

They were quiet. Guwetha’s hands tightened on the table, but she did not look away.

‘You are manipulating a grieving woman,’ said Marolyn.

‘I am asking a warrior,’ I pushed, and held out my hands. ‘Tell me another way. Another plan. Tell me you are more than a few hundred, desperate, hiding in the trees, that you have people in places of power who will help you, help us, take down the swans and rebuild this land again. Tell me you can take me to the kithwood and teach me its power and that we can take every army, every fortress, without an endless exchange of death.’

Marolyn was staring at me, not shouting, nor swearing, nor scowling: her expression was slack, like Yoldan’s, as if there was some memory in her that could not be replaced.

‘Marolyn, I would not ask this if I did not think it would help,’ I tried to explain.

‘Help who?’ she hissed. ‘You?’

‘Yes!’ I said, dropping my hands. The sunlight from outside was pouring in, and reflected off my cloak, turning the walls, the ceiling, bright and yellow with the Cynghal women’s gift. I was aware of the feathers stitched in it, the swans. ‘Help me! As you bound yourself to do. Help me make this worth it! Help me carry this hope forward, not let it die the first time it gets hard. Help me win this country back.’

‘I will not wash my hands in the deaths of our own people!’

She was me, speaking to Merovin, and I was the traitor-Geveran, saying that some sacrifices were worth it.

‘Then leave with them,’ I said. ‘Run.’ She grimaced, her mouth turning down. ‘But do not say you are a warrior if you will not walk through the darkness with me.’

She and I gazed at each other for a moment of agony. She had gone pale, her hands flexing, but at last she bowed.

‘Of course,’ she said, her voice cold. ‘My deepest apologies for speaking out of turn, King Tilde.’

She meant to hurt, and she did, but I was past pain now. Guwetha and Ladbh were bound, staring at each other, teacher and student. I became slowly aware that Ladbh’s power had retreated, the air warmed again.

It was the student who spoke.

‘Let me do this, Ladbh,’ said Guwetha. ‘Let me do something strong, and good, and brave. Let me save some of you, save Yoldan. And if she is right, save us all, in the end. Let us surrender to the snake among the swans.’

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Twenty-eight

Elise

The leader of the rebels died kneeling as Miras sung to Tilde's victory:

> '*Lonely white wings, she swims into dark waters*
> *Returns at the fore with the moon on her shoulders*
> *The moon on her shoulders, a hope in her song*
> *She breaks the siege of a hundred days long*'

It had not been a hundred days, it had been barely three weeks. And there was no moon on her, only a yellow cloak that Elise had meant for her mother. But it did not matter. It was the idea of it, the dream of it, that was quickening in the court.

'A woman cannot receive a surrender,' Dagobert had protested to anyone who would hear. 'She is sinning with her pride.'

It did not stop the delighted whispers, the admiration, this boldness, so bright, so terrifying. It pulled them to the new swan queen, so the women came to watch the surrendering three days after Tilde returned. Daegmar did not want to, but joined them when she realised she would be the only one alone up at the top.

Elise watched as she had when Tilde first went over the parapet, heart in her mouth, the shell of herself cracking, and tried not to think of Egil's implications.

The Cynghal troops gathered in shining lines before the green. Others waited out of sight for it to fall, on roofs, behind houses, spears grasped, bowstrings drawn. The line of noblemen and women kept mostly to horseback, ready to flee, but Isen was on his feet, beside the swan king and ready to fight.

There was still a space of cracked road and churned mud between the line of the empire and the rebel barricade. There, Tilde stood alone, weaponless and small. Even her women hung back, Marolyn looking paler and more frightened than usual, Hadiah holding her hand, her expression drawn and serious.

If the mood turned, if someone blinked wrong, Tilde stood where destruction would fall.

‘That woman has no fear of death,’ said Ysel admiringly to the other women. ‘Like a Cynghal of old.’

‘Of course she is afraid,’ said Cynefel, holding her belly protectively.

Elise was afraid. She was afraid for Tilde, she was afraid of herself. Her longed-for life was drifting away from her, and her desire to grasp at it was dwindling. Had she truly wanted it to begin with? Did she love the Wing and its teachings enough to dedicate the rest of her years to it? Or had she simply longed to escape from this world and its whims and its men?

‘They will sing songs of this for years,’ said Amalle. ‘In Galen, in Cynghal, in Merogia.’

‘So will we,’ said Ysel, smiling. ‘I know she was rash in Salt Lake, but is she not a woman of conviction?’

The other women nodded, and Daegmar shifted nervously. ‘The princes will not like to hear you say that,’ she said. ‘And your husband is close with Prince Conrin.’

They all turned to look at the third prince, shadowed now by his two older brothers, and scowling at Tilde as if he wished to put an arrow through her from where he stood.

‘Things change,’ said Ysel at last. ‘Perhaps, Princess Elise, she needs a nudge in the right direction. She could be quite an asset to this court.’

‘Perhaps you’re right,’ said Elise, looking at the small, dark woman who bore the weight of the empire on her shoulders, and wondered why she had ever thought of her as an enemy.

‘Rebel Merogians!’ Tilde called, and the mutterings around Elise fell quiet. ‘Bow to your ruler!’

Nothing happened, though Elise felt her skin prickling, a tugging like a fishhook in her gut. The air was quiet. No insects, no birds. The tangles of the thorn wall seemed to be bending with a tipped ear, waiting.

And as Elise listened, she heard a woman’s voice.

Wither to winter, go to earth, time to rot.

The wall *shuddered.* A point of yellow bloomed amongst the summer-green leaves, then spread like a bloodstain through cloth. More colours, orange, red, rippled, flamed, turning the gleaming tangle into an inferno of colour, while the hawthorn bloomed white and then red with incredible

speed, the fruits dropping like blood from a hundred wounds. The ivy curled back, wrinkling, draining of life, and the colour crisped to brown.

‘Ready!’ cried Liran, drawing his sword.

Tilde turned to him, holding up her hands. ‘Stop!’ she cried. ‘They have surrendered!’

‘Take them alive,’ bellowed Isen, ignoring her. ‘We will have their skins for our leather! Have them—’

Elise tightened her thighs on her horse. What would she do? Would she run away? Or run to Tilde? Would she stand between her queen and death? She knew, with terrible certainty, that she could not bear to see her die.

The leaves fell at once, and the branches curled, drying, snapping, falling. Men ran forward with axes, hacking into the wall to speed up the process as light blinked through from the far side.

As the branches fell away, Elise saw two rows of seated warriors: men, women, their weapons laid before them. Barely twenty of them. Some of them were shaking, others openly weeping, and before them knelt a wild woman, her grey hair loosed, her hands open, raised to the thorn wall as it came down, faster now.

The rebel wore no armour, only a simple shirt, already stained red with blood. Bright, red, fresh, pouring from the slit she had made in her own belly with a Merogian scramasax, which tumbled from her hand to the ground as they watched.

‘Oh Wing,’ breathed Amalle, torn between horror and fascination.

‘Hold!’ cried Liran, his wits still about him, and Isen’s black guard and his blue staggered to a halt.

‘I am Druidim Guwetha,’ the kneeling woman said in accented Cynghal, her voice harsh and wild. ‘The raiser of the thorn wall, the druidim that led these rebels here. We commit ourselves to the queen’s justice: a quick death.’

That was what had been promised, Tilde’s terms for their surrender, which Elise’s father had decided to overturn. He was thwarted, for Elise could see the prostrate rebels were bound with a branch of ivy, wrapped tightly around their throats. Each and every one.

‘Take them alive!’ Liran bellowed from his seat, also seeing the danger. ‘Take them all!’

The druidim laughed. Blood was bubbling from her lips, and she bared her reddened teeth. ‘I knew you had no peace in you, swan king,’ she

hissed, and twitched her hand.

The ivy that bound her companions *twisted*, hardening at their throats.

A crack, then another, then a strangled scream. The bodies of the rebels fell, one by one, like rabbits drawn by a snare into death.

‘I am Guwetha …’ the rebel repeated, her voice dribbling with pain, tears falling from her eyes. ‘The spear of the forest.’

She moved her hand again, and Elise’s breath caught, some part of her soul being drawn by that hand, that gesture, as if she could taste its power, like pine and cold water.

Tilde ran, not away, but towards Liran, raising her hands as branches sprang from the ground where the thorn wall fell. Elise screamed, for her father, or for Tilde, she did not know as she set her heels into her horse. Too far, much too far.

‘No!’ Tilde cried as the branches twisted into a spear of teeth, aiming for the swan king. ‘To the king!’

Isen threw himself in front of his father as the druidim directed the spear of thorns, but Tilde had moved first to stand between the weapon and Liran. The thorns struck across Tilde’s shoulder, sending her flying as the Cynghals cried out.

‘Tilde!’ cried Hadiah.

The thorns collapsed as the druidim slumped over her bloody stomach. Liran, still on his horse, unharmed, was shouting, ‘Fly the sails! Light the beacons!’

Elise was gaining on the queen, who had fallen, her yellow cloak stained red, but she was not fast enough. The bastard Alar had ridden out, descending from his horse and running to her rescue.

Elise reined in her steed as Alar reached Tilde first, and looked instead towards the druidim, furious for the rebels’ treachery.

‘I am,’ Guwetha said, looking confused, as if her own name had spilled out of her with her lifeblood, sinking into the dark earth. ‘I …’

She half smiled, her warriors dead, her siege failed, but still she smiled. Then she collapsed into the dirt, grey eyes open to the sky.

‘Please, King Liran!’ said Alar, holding the queen up, to the consternation of her women. ‘Doubt her no longer! The swan queen!’

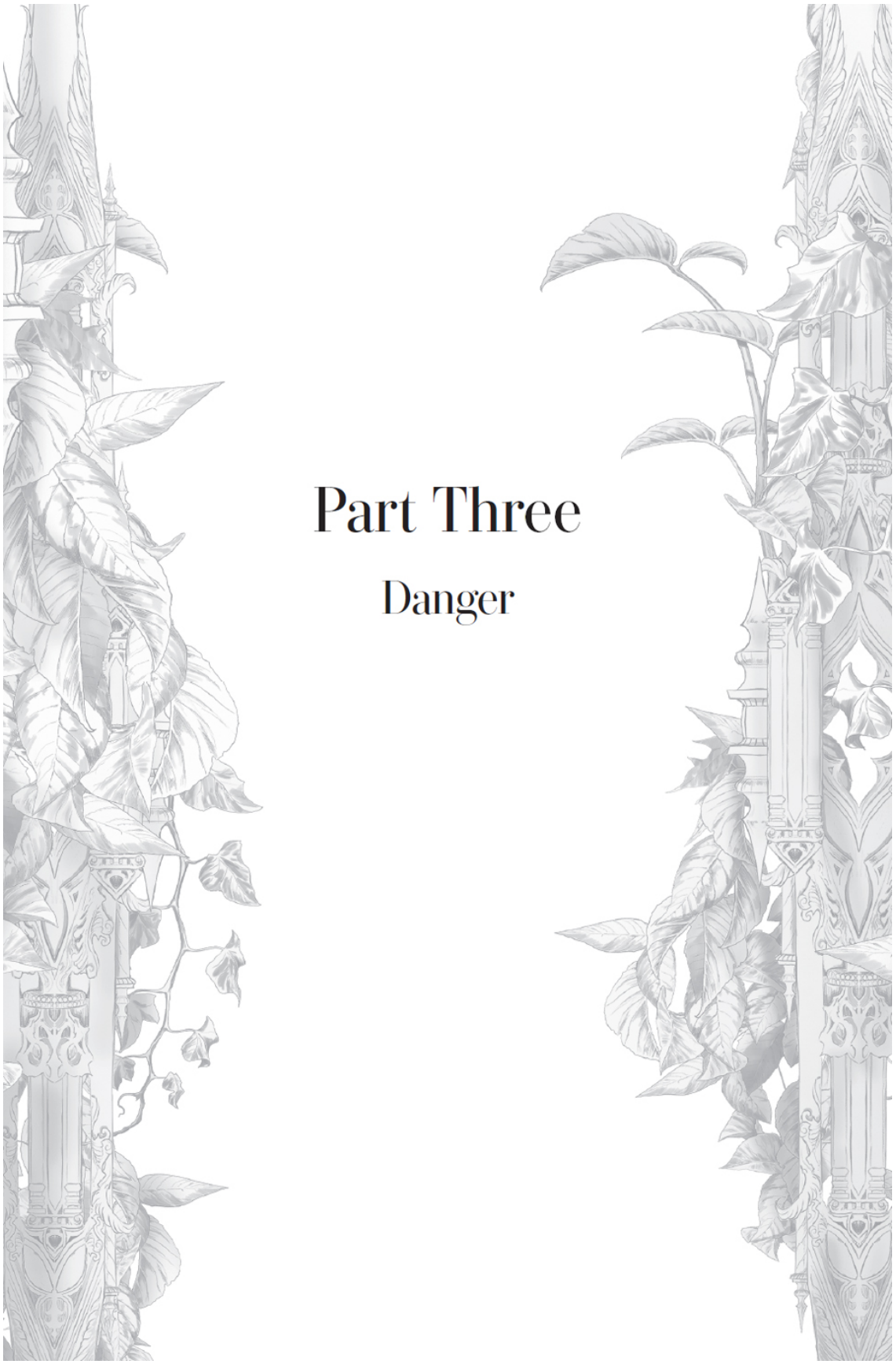
‘The swan queen!’ took up one of his erls, then Ducal Uhtren. ‘The swan queen!’

Elise sat on her horse, stupid and alone as Alar took Tilde's hand and raised it.

'Siegebreaker! Swan queen!'

And with that, the Merogian woman won their hearts.

BookSharekh.com



Part Three

Danger

BookSharekh.com

Many of the Galenish courtiers despise the Cynghals. They will accept the king because they fear him and his power, but the rest of his lot are loud and boorish, their Galenish indecipherable, and they act like conquerors where they are little better than hounds set forth by their whipping master. Even his elder sons do not publicly acknowledge that without Galenish support and the backing of the Synod, their so-called empire would have fallen at the first hard winter, for it would be un-Cynghal.

The Merogian tarns are worse. Surly and unspeaking, they are as like to turn on their other clans with a snarl and barking about ancient laws, debts and superstitions as they are to protest the cutting of a few trees or the punishment of the bandits that plague the trade roads. I wonder sometimes if I threw a gold coin between them they would fight to the death for it and rid us all of their griping and stupidity.

A letter home from a Galenish ducal, 1059

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Twenty-nine

Tilde

After the fall, was feasting.

I thought about Guwetha as little as I could during the month it took to bring Faoldun city and its keep back into repair. Ladbh was long gone into the forest, though I suspected that one day I would hear from her again.

As we had hoped, the women cleaved to me as they had not before. Lady Henoveva, who had held the castle, offered me her own chambers, which I refused. I feared her at first, but if she knew any more than Liran about my deal with the rebels, she said nothing.

The rest called on me at all hours of the day. Ysel, come to show me the staff she had designed from the Ardweni wood samples I had given her, twisted with a snake's head, she said, in my honour. Cynefel, who had birthed her child early, brought it to me to rub its head for luck, though I noted that she never tried to see me alone. Amalle had offered me her quick smile and pick of Galenish wines, and a newcomer, Lisane of Suneheim, had been sent to tell me all of Alar's good qualities.

The red prince, or king as he styled himself, was everywhere I walked, bowing with a smile, sending me books of poems, the word of the Wing, the history of Cynghal, then asking if I had read them. This was a game too, and I was a piece he was moving into place. The power balances of the court were shifting, and everyone could feel it.

If I had not seen Elise's face when she saw his flag in camp, I might not have feared his attention as much as I did, and what it meant. He scared me almost as much as Liran, who came pawing to my chamber with increasing fervour.

Daily, I felt my breasts, my belly. Was the nausea in my belly and the fluttering in my heart because his attentions bore fruit, or was it Marolyn's silence, or Elise's enduring presence?

Elise. Her every glance was a hook in me that I could name, but dared not. Not in the home of Sanafin, whom I had only kissed. These were the halls she had once walked, still Kanaanite in nature, with flat wooden beams painted with bowers of fig trees, ships and mountains. I could

imagine running through this citadel with her, finding secrets in the crypts and archives, both cleared and burned, singing memory-songs by the great fire in the hall while the hounds rested their sleepy heads on our feet. Such thoughts were a heart-tug too, a tender calling back to my nature. Elise's nature, I was certain. I had seen her run for me when Guwetha aimed her spear, just like cunning Alar had.

But it was not my business. Not my role to loose her from her confines, or from her finely laced dresses, and her rigidly braided hair. What did it matter if she sent me a little Galenish-style weaving she had made of circling birds and ivy, more exquisite than anything else I had seen? What did it matter if I sent her a banned book from her mother's shelves, and that she had not sent it back with regrets, or in pieces?

I needed her, and she came to me, so I used her to teach me Galenish femininity, which she herself wore like armour: how to address my hair, my decorum, the silver crown her father had sent to me, swift-made by the grateful merchants of Kanaan.

What did it matter that sometimes when showing Hadiah where to sew my plaits, that her fingers brushed the nape of my neck? It changed nothing that afterwards I could still feel their touch as if they were the prickling of a nettle sting. It was only that I felt so alone. While I was fraying and unravelling everything good and true I had held about myself, she was in a state of becoming. We were drawn together like moths to a light, knowing it would burn us eventually.

Finally, as the first breath of autumn came cold, fresh grain brought in and the charnel mounds were cleared, we were ready for celebration. Not the broken-barrelled chaos of the first days when the keep was reclaimed, when Odon had rolled out the wine stocks and the women had locked themselves in their chambers. No, this feast was a show of our glory, and our victory.

I stood waiting at the doors of the great hall, where the knotted wolves that had once been carved into the wood and leafed in silver had been sanded and scraped to look more like swans. The effect was imperfect, and I could still see the symbol of Sanafin's family, glaring at me with judging eyes.

The same eyes as Marolyn had as she adjusted my new crown: metal spokes rose up from it, topped with cut-silver images of flying birds – swans, swallows, eagles and magpies – that bent and waved when I moved

my head. Muirenn nodded approvingly as she pulled out the back of my long gown. Fine weights had been sewn into the brocade so the azure-blue silk would fan out along the floor. The garment had been selected by Elise, cut deep at the waist and shoulders and the front hem pleated up and sewn into a gold belt that girdled my waist, so beneath a second gown could be seen, flesh pink and shining.

'What do you think, Muirenn?' I asked the girl, who glanced quickly at me. 'Please, feel free to speak.'

'They will admire you,' she told me. Then paused, reddening. 'May I … may I serve you at the high table?'

She had never asked anything of me, as much as I prompted her. Helwinde frowned at her overstep, but it was a relief to me. 'Of course,' I said.

Hadiah smiled her approval as she helped adjust the slit at my shoulders and the layers of my beaded necklaces to ensure they exposed the thorn wound that, thanks to Ziyan the physik, had softened into a reddish scar. Her smile faltered as her eyes landed on the locket at my breast.

Merovin's locket.

I had committed to this path. Tarnished by my own evils, I knew only that I had further to sink before I could fly. With Alar's attentions, and Liran's waning grip, I knew I would need allies.

Raise those you understand, my mother had said, *not those you love*. I understood Merovin. Our hands were both stained now.

Ziyan had been the first step, and he had proved his use past the giving of gifts, showing himself adept at herbal practices I had never seen before, using fire and gold knives to create tinctures for any pain. He also corroborated the gossip I gleaned from the noblewomen and Hadiah from the servants. Not all Cynghals delighted in the direction Liran had taken their court, and did not like that he returned so rarely to the place that birthed him and his glory. Alar was little liked by the erls and ducals who had known him as a brash and arrogant youth, failing in several skirmishes before his promotion and banishment. But now some were softening to him, particularly with Isen's failure to regain the city before the court, and that made my position weaker.

It was time to create harder alliances than cloth and rumours. I needed silver, I needed steel. *The swans must fall.*

It had to be worth Guwetha's sacrifice.

‘Doesn’t she look beautiful?’ said Hadiah to Marolyn, who looked away, her mouth working.

‘She looks Galenish,’ she said.

‘Ignore her,’ sighed Hadiah. Our tension distressed my cousin, but I would not apologise, and Marolyn would not forgive.

Through the door, we could hear the chatter of the court and the voice of Miras among a collection of troubadours he had gathered for the feast. No longer straining behind the bickering of men, he had become a favourite singer of the nobility.

Behind us, in the inner courtyard of the palace, lower-ranked nobles, knights and servants who could not fit in the hall awaited their own feasting and dancing. The serfs were not given a feast; they ate as they worked. I had laid out food for the Suneish women in my chambers, but they had barely touched it.

‘Are you ready?’ said Hadiah.

No. Why did I never feel ready? I had already broken almost every promise I had made to myself. I was bruised, I was sullied, and still I was unready.

‘Yes,’ I lied.

The court roared to greet me as the doors opened, standing at each of the long tables set along the great hall of Faoldun. I had never feasted here, but Sanafin had told me of the vaulted ceiling, decorated with tessellated panels shaped like leaves, gilded so that the roof felt like an autumn canopy. This was half hidden by long banners of red, black and blue, draped to direct the smoke from the open fire towards the ceiling, and painted with huge white wings. They were flaking a little, fine cracks running between the colours, and the air still hung with smoke, not only from the fire but from clay pipes and braziers trying to scent the room with fine oils. This, mixed with cheese, oil, dripping fat, felt like a choke upon the lungs.

Miras was singing the song I had commissioned him as I entered the siege, and he wore a dark green cloth that I saw echoed in mostly the women, but also some of the men in the room. My colours. A coincidence? Or was this a show of support, like Conrin’s grey courtiers, or Isen’s black guard? Several courtiers as well wore red ribbons around their shoulders, tied in a band that looked like my scar. Even Captain Perin, of Ademar’s guard, had gleaming thread marking the cut of his Cynghal tabard.

I breathed. My crown was heavy, and my wide neckline made me feel vulnerable, exposed. Still, I walked the flagstones between the wide tables, past the two pigs that were being carved between them. Black pudding had been set in the sockets of their eyes and dribbled down their cheeks in blackened tears, mixing with the sour plum jam they had been braised in. The crackling scent of their skin reminded me of Yoldan, and bile bit at my throat.

Instead, I focussed on nodding at the nobility. I remembered some of the old celebrations in my mother's palaces, when I was very young. The roar of my father's laughter, my mother's song, the rush of noise, scents of sweat, roses, musk, and the undiluted wine spilling onto the rushes. Ebba, Colfinn and I would creep beneath the shaking tables as our people danced on them to pipes and drums, spinning in raucous circles.

This was not the same. My wrists were bare, my head aching, my legs heavy with the drag of my dress, like the weights of the bodies that were on my conscience.

I allowed Muirenn to help me to the high table, and Liran paused his conversation with Dagobert to greet me. Even the priest gave me a flat-eyed nod. But my seat was amongst his sons, one chair down from Alar, Conrin on my other side. From the high table, I could see Elise near the front of the lower benches, watching me. I gave her a smile, but she offered none in return, instead her eyes sliding to her eldest brother. Alar raised his cup to her in a manner I am sure he thought was charming, then clicked his tongue when she didn't smile.

Conrin reached over me, sticking his fork into one of the plates of green summer leaf, slathered with oil and toasted nuts from the previous autumn. He dripped flecks of oil as he took a large portion, and then jolted over again to spoon off the head of butter, shaped like a little bird sitting on a bed of dill cream.

'Such petty spite, you little snit,' said Alar. 'Please, Queen Tilde, may I offer some wine from—'

'No, thank you,' I said, covering my cup before he could fill it, and instead gesturing to Muirenn, who had brought my own cup and carafe.

'Don't you have your own wife, Alar?' said Conrin snarkily, and for once I was glad for his sharp tongue. Alar's attentions to me, his father's wife, were indecorous at best, insidious at worst.

Perhaps no more so than my draw towards my husband's daughter.

‘Where’s yours?’ said Alar easily. I turned my attention towards Dagobert and Liran; the former it seemed was trying to convince the king the lands of Kanaan should go to a Galenish noble. I wondered what they would then do with Lady Henoveva.

‘Yes, better treat the victorious queen Tilde with respect,’ said Gaisa. He wore his shirt clasped at the neck with a gold brooch set with jasper, winking through the large eye of a cockerel. ‘A warrior queen from a warrior culture.’ It did not sound like a compliment.

‘Ah yes, we have heard so many stories of your clans fighting,’ said Egil, ‘even if half of you were related. Little wonder your people are so easily defeated.’

Easily. Was the torture of children easy? Were the thousand thousand lives lost to blade and hunger easy? I was amongst them having betrayed my own people, Sanafin’s people, the druidim who held my secrets; was that easy?

‘Perhaps blood is not everything,’ I said evenly. *Do not be too bold,* Elise had told me. *If you rise to their barbs, they will come for you harder.*

‘Ah, there’s where you’re wrong,’ said Alar, pouring his own cup. ‘Blood is what binds us. The colour of our eyes, our looks, our station. Blood is past and future, and you would not be here, pretty queen, if it was not.’ He smiled, raising his cup, and Conrin lifted his. Isen, relegated from his father’s left hand to past Egil, scowled in our direction. From his gaze, he had as much hatred for Alar as Elise did.

My mouth was dry, and it was rude to refuse a toast. Muirenn refilled my cup, and I lifted then drank the wine, rich, thick and red. As I looked down the tables I saw Merovin, watching me from where he sat with other ducals. He raised his cup to me, slightly, and nodded.

He had seen the locket I wore. Pieces moved across the gaming board. Nauseated, I turned back to Alar.

‘So you are saying blood traps us endlessly, defining us by our past, never creating a new future?’

Alar considered me. ‘Perhaps,’ he said.

‘So, she’s educated,’ said Egil to Gaisa. ‘An added spice, I suppose, for Father.’

‘Are not all noble women?’ I threw towards him.

‘You would think,’ Gaisa laughed. ‘But our Elise cannot even read.’ Egil chuckled, a little sheepishly, into his wine.

‘She stumbled so in our lessons,’ said Conrin, ‘stuttering over her words even when she was just sp-sp-speaking them.’ Alar smirked too. ‘Erelle thought it was so annoying. What a relief when Father finally made her stop.’

I cleared my throat, which felt tight and thick. If Elise could hear any of the conversation, she didn’t show it. Isen reached over and smacked Gaisa’s head, whom he could reach the easiest.

‘Ow,’ snapped Gaisa. ‘What?’

‘Keep our sister’s name out of your mouths if you have nothing good to say,’ said Isen. ‘She is better and wiser than the lot of you.’

‘Careful, little brother,’ said Alar. ‘Strike a king with your failure’s hand and I might have an erl remove it.’

Isen scoffed, unafraid and, to my surprise, Conrin shook his head at Alar.

‘There are many kinds of education that have value,’ I put in. ‘You have the education of war, I of books and letters. Your sister has a number of extraordinary skills, not all of which can be found by blade or pen.’ I thought of the beauty of her cloak, her pride in her work.

‘Women don’t need skills,’ said Hein, from Isen’s other side. ‘Dagobert says that education misleads them, taxes their minds and causes them stress and ill-discipline.’

‘If women don’t need skills, Hein,’ I said, keeping my smile high and my voice low, ‘then is it only men who weave and sew your clothes, fix your room, cook your meals?’ Hein frowned. ‘No. These are skills, valuable to the kingdom, and to the Wing.’

Egil was looking at me a little more softly than I had expected, but then he turned away quickly after gazing over my shoulder. I looked to see what had troubled him.

Dagobert the priest was smiling at me with all his teeth. A complete set, picked clean.

‘You are smarter than I would have thought, for a Merogian,’ he said. I did not reply, unsure about the compliment to me or the slander to my people. ‘Be careful with that.’

‘Why?’ I asked. Liran looked at me sideways.

‘Smart women are dangerous,’ he said.

I laughed, putting my hand to my chest, feeling somehow that I wished to hide it, cover my throat, pull cloth over my shoulders. ‘Do I look dangerous to you?’

Dagobert snorted and turned back to my husband, but then Alar leaned into me. ‘Perhaps you would be less dangerous without that pretty dress.’

I stopped laughing. *If in doubt, say nothing*, Elise had schooled me. My fool tongue had got more people than I desired in trouble, so I held it, but as I did I felt a slight burn in my stomach, a twist in my brain. Something … amiss.

Liran stood, raising his cup. ‘HEEG VALAMOR.’

Heed me, warriors.

The hall fell into silence, and every man stood, slamming their chest in salute. It reminded them and me, as it had in Falcan, of Liran’s might and discipline. He had put swords in their hands, gold in their pockets and wine on their table, and it did not take much for them to recall it. I reached again for my cup, but found my fingers grasping air. I had missed it. I tried again, but my vision was swimming. The wine burned in me, settling strange, and I felt wrong, rotten in my skin, like an overripe fruit.

The swan king turned in my direction, the knotted scar on his red cheek showing bright and marbled. I focussed on that, the little sign of his humanity, so I could look at him with something other than revulsion. Part of me dazedly wanted to bore my finger into it, press the puckering wound through to his teeth and tongue, like a hook in the mouth of a fish.

‘To my queen,’ he said. ‘Siegebreaker, faithful of the Wing, and uniter of greater Cynghal.’

The burning settled into my stomach’s pit, and my ears rang with the court’s cheers.

‘It is time,’ said Liran, turning to the crowd again, ‘to dig the last scraps of resistance out of this backwards land. We will burn the rebels out of their forest, dig through to entrenched Torcros, plant mines instead of roots, corn instead of oak, and make this great empire a trading land the world will envy! This is the will of the Wing!’

I was more focussed on the blood draining down into my belly than the tyrant’s words, clutching my stomach where it churned. I heard something about the forest, my forest, but the meaning was sliding through me, tumbling out, sloshing together. I felt black inside, ichor-sticky, bad bad. It tasted like blood. Like magic. It did not feel unlike Ladbh’s magic, the power of the Ways, but dark and twisted, inside me crawling, sinking, binding.

Blood magic. Liran had said, Ziyan too. Was this their magic? It was blasphemy to them, wasn't it? Or was it one rule for them, another for the rest of the world?

'I am the High King of the Westlands,' continued Liran, 'Guardian of the Wing, Commander of the Seas. My son Alar has Suneheim, Isen will protect Cynghal, and the rest will follow the prince I have promised, a Merogian and a swan, ready to make the new heart of the world!'

Heart, heart, heart. His words echoed, and I found myself touching a hand to my chest, my own heart, feeling its pulsing beat.

'So, stand with me now!' bellowed Liran. 'Raise your cups, and stand for war again! Against the forest, against the dark magic, against these devils of the dark!'

Stand. The word ruptured me, like a lightning clap of command, and I was standing. Faintly, I heard Gaisa snigger.

Stand.

My limbs had moved of their own accord. No, I did not stand for this. I did not want this. I felt dizzy and hot, and my stomach ached harder, not the deep, radiating pain of my monthly blood, but that burning, roiling. Where was Muirenn? My vision was creeping with feathers of black, as if a dark swan was spreading its wings around my eyes.

'To the new Queen Tilde! To the swan queen!'

My ears screeched with the echo of the vassals and their cheering. Somehow I had taken hold of my goblet, and I stared at it, frowning as my vision swam, and then my mother's ring.

I had not tested it for poison.

'Sit down, Queen Tilde,' said Conrin, close to me again.

Sit.

I was on my seat with a slam, my limbs cracking downwards. I glanced behind me for Muirenn, but the girl was gone.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Thirty

Elise

Something was wrong. Tilde had stood as if in ecstatic joy at Liran's words, but Elise had taught her better than that. *Too bold*. She was now being spoken to by Gaisa, across Conrin, while Egil stared into his cup. Isen and Alar were distracted by their father's speech.

Plans are in motion, Elise, Egil had said.

'I can taste more warring in the air,' said Markal Thedemer with a smile. 'Though it shames Isabella's memory, does it not, to oust her children so?'

Ducal Ademar gave him a dark glance, but Elise was not attending to her mother's cousin. At a word from Gaisa, a grin cracked across Tilde's face, so wide Elise thought the top of her head might fall. She had never seen her smile like that, almost manic.

'I feel for the poor Merogian girl,' said Ademar quietly.

'"Poor"?' challenged Thedemer. 'She seems pretty adept at turning any situation to her advantage.'

'Does not any woman?' said Ysel, and Thedemer smirked at her, but their conversation was halted by Liran, who made a second declaration.

'To dancing!'

Tilde was lost between the scraping of chairs and benches as the parties stood, serfs and servants coming around to collect plates and chairs as quickly as they dared without stepping on hems or heels. Despite them, in tradition, the men put their hands beneath the table, and Elise joined them, heaving up the long wood all together and moving it over the mess of the floor to the edge of the room, opening up the space between. There was still hurried, whispered chatter between those who approved Liran's declaration, and those who feared it. Elise saw Aeswyth, the low priest of Faoldun who had survived the siege, engaged in fierce debate with Palati Gundobar, while Lady Amalle was flushed, holding Cynefel's hand for assurance. Of course, Liran refused Conrin's marriage till he had won a battle. If he held to that, Conrin would be expected to front his war.

Odon sidled to the singers and musicians, and Miras and his bards quelled their strings, scuffling around for their pipes, the drums, the timbrel.

Miras quaffed some mead and took up with the tune of an old favourite ballad of Liran's victories. If Liran called for music, then music must be played lest you lose your fingers. If Liran said dance, you must dance, lest you soon find coals beneath your feet. How Elise had adored it as a child, her father's power, the way people trembled when his name was spoken.

The glow of it seemed colder now.

The head table stood. Liran reached out to Tilde, who stared at his hand a moment, gathered herself, then slowly got to her feet. She clung to his fingers like a stone in the ocean, waves rising about her, her feet stumbling.

Where was Muirenn? She had come as her cupbearer, and should have pulled out her chair. Gaisa was muttering something soothing to Egil, his dark hair and Egil's like mixing like sunlight and cloud between their bowed heads.

Go back to your weaving … and let us do the dirty work.

Elise went to her youngest brother, who was staring contemplatively at his knees, Mog the mouse eating honey-whey that dripped on his shoulder. She didn't want to make it so obvious that she was concerned for Tilde, but needed to be closer to her. The queen's women, at the bottom of the hall, were fending off the attention of a number of lower-ranked nobles, clearly trying to court Merogian brides of their own.

'Come Hein,' said Elise. 'We must start the dancing.'

Hein was rubbing his face. 'I-I don't know. I can't …'

'You've danced before,' laughed Elise.

He looked at her with big, worried eyes. 'With Mother in a room doesn't count,' he said. She sometimes forgot he was only eight. Soon he would be old enough to ride before a battle, old enough to go to war, but he was too embarrassed to dance.

'It is expected, Hein-hyem,' said a familiar voice. Elise looked up to see Isen standing with his arms folded nearby. He had barely spoken to her since she had challenged him about the bonfires, but she still felt he was on her side.

'Then why don't you do it?' said Hein. Isen was ignoring the eyes of invitation from every one of the court's women.

'You're relieved of duty,' Elise said to Hein, who grinned, and she instead went to Isen, holding out her hands. He gave her a pained look, but took them and led her to the floor. Elise glimpsed her father's broad back,

saw Tilde holding him tightly. Then others twirled between them, dancing a reel.

‘Are we not friends, Isen-hyem?’ said Elise. He was not a good dancer. Perhaps he could be, but he was awkward at best, preferring the battlefield to court. Elise could see two of the favoured knights from his personal cohort of warriors, the black guard, pointing and laughing as they moved. He was sure to have some jesting from them in the hours to come.

‘I seem to have fewer friends than I thought, these days,’ Isen said gruffly. ‘And I have never liked these dances. In Cynghal there were not so many rules on how to step and where.’

He smiled, and she tried not to think of the bodies of the townspeople the black prince had slaughtered and burned. It was hard to reconcile such terror with the brother who had two left feet and was kind to her. She looked over his shoulder, trying to find Tilde.

‘She’s settling in,’ said Isen after a moment. ‘Soon you will be able to present your weaving to Father, go to the monastery, and take his gratitude with you.’ He squeezed her arm. ‘I hope you will choose one in Cynghal, not Galen, or at least near the sea. So I can visit.’

Was that still what she wanted? She did want to escape this griping, the arrogance of her brothers, the echoes of her mother full of both love and pain. But she would never see Tilde again, not the way her mouth quirked when she found something amusing, not the way she tapped her thumb on her nails when she was thinking, not how warm her fingers were when they touched her wrist.

Oh Wing, perhaps she *should* leave.

‘I am sorry,’ he said at length. I have been avoiding you, in my shame that you had to witness it. My failure.’ Elise was hot from the smoke and the bodies in the room, sweat trickling down her back. ‘I did what I must,’ he said. ‘I always do what I must.’

Elise bit her lip. The crack in her was widening, and it wasn’t only inside her, it was between her and her brothers, between her and Isen.

‘Is it?’ Elise asked. ‘What we must do?’

It is all I’ve ever known, he had said. He did not say it now. ‘For the glory of our family, yes.’

There, Tilde. Liran had passed his wife to Gundobar, who in turn had spun her to Gaisa of all people. She seemed unable to resist, her eyes glassy, movements slow.

‘May I steal our sister?’

Isen and Elise turned. Alar had stopped beside them, and her stomach clenched into a knot, terrible and sickening. She tightened her hands on Isen, who shifted slightly between her and their brother.

‘The dance is over,’ he said.

‘Oh just hand her to me, little brother,’ said Alar.

‘I am the one you’re supposed to ask, Alar,’ said Elise, as cold as she could manage. He pursed his mouth at her.

‘Elise,’ said Isen, ‘be peaceful.’

She did not want to be peaceful. ‘No,’ she said, and in her mind’s eye, she saw her mother frown, and Isuire smile. Her favourite brother hesitated one more moment, then nodded and turned to Alar.

‘She said no,’ said Isen. ‘Time you learned what that means.’

‘Well,’ said Alar. ‘I suppose we’ll just let our other brothers do whatever the fuck they want.’ He nodded to where Tilde was now held at Conrin’s side and Gundobar on her other. Gaisa was nowhere to be seen. They were leading her towards the fireplace. Her face was afraid, but she walked with them as if tugged by marionette strings. Conrin whispered something to her, commanded something and she reached out her hand to the flame.

No time to think, Elise had watched Tilde too closely not to see this wrongness.

‘Call a woman’s dance,’ she said, releasing Isen. Alar breathed with relief, clapping his hands.

‘A woman’s dance!’ he bellowed

Conrin leaned into Tilde. The flames were brushing her fingers. He put his mouth to her ear, and Elise watched the shape of his words. *Do it.*

The fire was licking at Tilde’s fingers, nudging at her draped sleeve. Elise could imagine it. A conflagration, a burning queen. Like the witch her brothers called her.

And there would be no Tilde anymore.

A flurry of women’s laughter raced around the room at Alar’s pronouncement, and Miras quickly picked up the call, delighting in his favouritism. It was too early in the night for the dance of the women, most were supposed to move with their men and partners first, but if a king demanded it …

Elise turned towards Tilde. She had worked so hard to look invulnerable, and if she was publicly humiliated now it would work against her and the

stability Liran had just claimed in her name. Cynefel was moving across the floor, a little stiff three weeks post childbirth, with Amalle on her heels. They too had noticed something was strange.

Elise reached her. ‘My queen!’ she said calmly, taking her hand away from the flame.

‘Elise!’ Conrin barked, but Gundobar grabbed him back. Elise pretended she didn’t hear, and Isen came to help her, putting his arm around Conrin and dragging him away like a brother settling a debt.

The women had come, mothers, wives, sisters. Knowing or not knowing, they gathered to the queen.

‘Great queen, do you know the dance?’ said Lisane, catching her other arm as Elise held her burned fingers gently. Tilde staggered, her eyes unfocused, like a drunk.

‘I don’t know how,’ she mumbled.

‘The women! Get them in!’ cried Liran, reaching out his empty cup so a serf ran forward to fill it. ‘Get Isabella dancing for once.’

He had spoken loud enough for all to hear that either he had forgotten Tilde’s name or he had forgotten Isabella was long dead, but Elise didn’t have time to worry about that, she needed first to take Tilde out of danger without causing a fuss, while not allowing her reputation to shrivel. She feared her brother would grab for her, push her into the flame and be damned with the consequences. She no longer knew what he was capable of.

Tilde’s gold-brown skin was all but bloodless, the glassiness of her eyes not receding, but she fell in with Elise as the other women found female partners and formed squares of four.

‘Keep step with me,’ Elise murmured. Tilde’s blistering fingers tightened obediently in Elise’s hand, despite the pain.

The opening notes of the music struck and the court women reached for each other’s elbows, spinning in wheels forward, then back, then turning outwards in pairs, stepping towards the crowd of men. They tipped their heads, to left, to right.

Like a nodding swan, who greets her mate. Isabella had taught Elise and her sisters the steps, and they had danced together. *Arms wide, we are glorious.*

Isuire was so good at the steps.

It was a presentation. When other dances were called, men would see who they liked and approach them as their partners. Tilde hung heavily on their arms, breathing shallowly, and Elise could tell it took all of her will not to break and run. But it would not do to have her cracking now, like Elise was cracking. Her vulnerability could be an opening for assassination or coercion, her indecorum a fresh reason to attack her character.

They stepped back inwards to their square, raising their hands and circling again, mingling fingers together then holding each other's wrists. Candle smoke rose thick as the tables were cleared and decanters came out with the sweet wine, but all Elise could feel was Tilde. Her heavy movements, the fear in her eyes. The edges of the room dimmed, and Elise felt they were alone.

They turned back into their pairs and Tilde dragged her eyes up to Elise's, and her lips parted. 'Please tell me,' she said, slurring slightly. 'Tell me … tell me how.'

'How what?'

'How to die.'

Elise shared a glance with Ysel. This wasn't Tilde. Tilde who had walked boldly into the Nest wearing her people's clothing, Tilde who had gone to the thorn wall and risked everything. Elise could see the fire again, licking against her fingers, the cloth of her sleeve, while Egil worried and Conrin smiled.

And Alar, he had noticed too. Like a needle to the eye, Elise knew the truth of what Tilde had been given. Blasphemy. Blood magic.

The dance came to an end, and Marolyn and Hadiah had fought their way to their charge. Marolyn gave Elise a vicious, accusing glare, but when Tilde would not let go of the princess's arm, the three of them escorted her out of the hall, bowing others away.

'Our lady queen is tired,' Lady Ysel to Odon, loudly. He watched Tilde, his lips pursed.

'A headache all day,' said Lady Cynefel, taking Uhtren's arm. Elise had not needed to ask, nor tell, nor explain; the women had simply been there when needed.

Elise led Tilde and her maids out of the door behind a curtain, which went up to a bridge that crossed the hall to the inner keep. Outside the windows, the smell of ale was thick in the air, and fireflies floated over music and laughing voices.

‘I die,’ breathed Tilde, ‘I die I die I die.’

‘The queen is unwell,’ said Elise to the half-drunk Cynghal guard at the inner keep’s door. ‘Stay on duty.’

He grinned, ‘Can’t hold her liquor eh?’ he said.

‘We were drinking rich wine from the south seas while you still had your piss ale in your gullets,’ snapped Marolyn. ‘Let us pass or I’ll have you flogged.’

The grin fell, and he stepped aside. Hadiah muttered an apology to him as they slipped through into the quiet dark, closing off the joy behind them.

‘You will not die,’ said Marolyn to Tilde now they were alone. ‘Pull yourself together.’

‘Their voices are so loud,’ said Tilde. ‘They have me … I cannot escape.’ Her crown was askew, her face slack, and Elise could see a darkness in her mouth.

‘They have my mind!’ Tilde tried to explain more urgently, holding on to Elise’s arm as if she didn’t understand. How long had it been? How much had they given her? ‘Please! I can’t. Tell me how to do it.’ She released them and went to her knees, her hands flying to her neck. She scratched her own skin as if she could peel her life away.

‘Tilde!’ said Marolyn as Tilde’s hands closed around her own throat; she pulled them off, plucking her fingers away, then started back as Tilde made a grab for the knife Elise knew she still had hidden in her skirts. Hadiah moved between them, holding back the queen.

‘What’s wrong with her?’ she said. ‘This isn’t wine drunk.’

Tilde struggled, and spoke in Merogian as Hadiah wrestled with her hand, pulling her knuckle that bore a silver and blue ring to the queen’s lips.

‘You don’t deserve to die!’ she said in Cynghal. The ring made contact, and in the torchlight, its clear stone went from blue, to grey, to black.

The claws were tightening; Elise’s breath was sharp. She remembered Egil’s warning: *stay away*. Should she? Should she run back to her brothers, let their plans take their course. It would be easier than standing against them, easier to disappear.

‘Poison,’ said Marolyn. ‘Where the fuck is Muirenn?’ Elise had thought there was a coldness between the common maid and her queen of late, but it seemed she still cared for her.

Then, they heard voices, a man and a woman, down the corridor in the keep. They were trapped between the bridge to the hall and the couple

ahead. Marolyn pulled Tilde up. Fine beads of blood were trickling down the queen's neck.

'We have to hide,' she said. 'She cannot be seen like this.'

'Please,' said Hadiah to Elise. 'Princess. Help her.'

This sickened her, that a strong woman, any woman, had been made so fragile. That she hadn't been able to protect her. Wing, she wished she had been able to protect Isuire.

'This way,' Elise hissed. She took two steps forward, reaching behind a new-hung tapestry of a couple kissing in a garden, and pressed the panel behind it. With her hand, the clip of the door fell open. Like Falcan's palace, Elise knew the secret routes, all the swan children did. Isabella herself had helped design them as Kanaan was brought to heel. Marolyn stifled a gasp.

'Come on,' said Hadiah, pulling her and Tilde into the shadow and dust as Elise joined them, and slid the door back. The murmur of the couple came closer, followed by a giggle.

'We found Muirenn,' muttered Hadiah. If an intake of breath could sound like a swear, Marolyn's did.

The serf? Elise put her eye to the sliver of light where the door closed.

It was the Suneish girl, and beside her was Gaisa. His hair was rumpled, and he bore a wide, satisfied grin as Muirenn leaned on him, her loose kirtle tied with a scarf. It might have warmed Elise to see her brother looking so happy if Tilde was not behind her barely able to stand. If the woman he was dallying with might not have her eyes put out for daring to turn them to a prince.

Tilde cried out, a voiceless utterance, and Marolyn slammed her hand over her mouth, then put her strong arms around the queen's to stop her hurting herself. Hadiah was crying, Elise could tell in the faint light that seeped through the door, but she acted as if she was not, as if it was only water.

Gaisa slowed as he got closer. They could not be going back to the hall together, he was not allowed to be seen with her.

Did he mean to use the secret corridor? Of course, he would disappear down into the hall, go out the front of the motte, and Muirenn would cross the bridge into the great hall, though she wasn't supposed to know about the ways at all. Elise cursed, feeling around for a hook, a latch, but could not

find one. At last, she plunged her fingers into the pouch she wore with her gown. A needle? No use. A loop of string? No.

Her fingers found her carved bone shuttle, sharper at one end, rubbed clean of her recent puncturing. She pulled it out and stared at it for a moment. Carved in a swan's shape, her mother had made it for her. Still, she bent and slid it beneath the door frame, pressing it in hard so Gaisa could not push it and release the latch.

'Come,' she whispered, barely more than a breath. 'Bring her.'

Hadiah and Marolyn pulled Tilde up between them. Behind them, the door rattled as Gaisa reached it, but could not enter. She wanted to reprimand him for revealing their secrets, but she had brought three Merogians into their sanctuary, not one ambitious serf.

'If you are leading us to die, Princess,' hissed Marolyn as they followed Elise down the corridor and up a rickety wooden stair, 'trust that I will haunt you.'

'I could leave you to die if you'd prefer,' Elise bit back. The stair ended at a door, leading back into one of the women's apartments, disguised by another panel in the wall. It was empty, thick with a dark only slightly softened by the embers of a dying fire that had been built to fend off the cold mountain winds.

Tilde screamed and lunged for the window. Not out of fear, more as if she could not bear the feeling inside her.

'Quiet her!' Elise said, palming for one of the sconces on the wall.

Marolyn put a hand over Tilde's mouth, then yelped as she bit it.

Elise found a torch, and thrust it into the low fire. Good, fresh oiled, it caught.

'Sweet as honey, sweet as honey. I've been stung,' Tilde spoke in a mix of Merogian and Cynghal. 'Die by fire, touch the flame, jump from the tower, just the same.'

She had been commanded, the command wouldn't leave her.

'Don't speak any more, Tilde,' said Hadiah to her, first in Cynghal, then in their own tongue. But that wouldn't work, that wasn't part of the magic.

'I cannot hear it,' said Tilde to Hadiah as she hushed her. 'I cannot hear the Ways. I cannot …'

'Please Tilde,' said Hadiah desperately, glancing at Elise.

'I cannot!' Tilde bellowed, struggling to be free. She found some strength, shoving Marolyn and standing. Elise turned and strode towards

her, holding the torch between them. She winced at this, for only blood mixed with this poison would allow a person to be controlled.

And if it was her brothers' blood, then it would work for her as well.

'Queen Tilde, you will be silent,' she commanded. 'I order you to heed me.'

Tilde fell quiet, her dark eyes staring. She looked more vulnerable in that moment than Elise had ever seen her, more than even when Liran had held her neck.

'Open your mouth,' Elise said, and Tilde did, still staring. Elise came close with the torch, and pulled down her lower lip. Stained black, her tongue too.

'What kind of poison is this,' said Hadiah, 'that makes her want to hurt herself?'

'It's not the poison, exactly,' said Elise. 'It's old magic. Blood magic. They call it the glory.' She felt a numbness creep into her veins. For a moment she saw a flash of Isuire's smile, heard her mother's cries, her father's wrath. 'Distilled from a swan's liver, mixed with blood and gold under a shaded moon. In the first hours it makes a person obey the potion's maker, who mixed their blood in it. The only voice they cannot heed is their own.'

Elise bit her lip. These were secrets, family secrets, but what else could she do? Alar was the only one who had used this potion before; raised in the Cynghal way, he cared less for blasphemy. Conrin would dirty his hands with blood, but not with a sin against the Wing, would he?

Or perhaps they had let someone else sin for them. Muirenn. The last shaded moon had been two weeks after the siege. *Plans are in motion*, Egil had said.

They had been waiting for the feast where she could be poisoned in public. *I wasn't there,* they would say. *I didn't see, could have been anyone.*

Yet Alar, the first poisoner, had asked Elise to help Tilde.

'Your fucking brothers,' hissed Marolyn. 'I thought they were supposed to be Wing worshippers, pious fuckers? Hypocrites.'

'*Will* it kill her?' asked Hadiah.

Elise stepped back. It had not killed Isuire. Not immediately. Not the poison itself. Only what it wrought. But that was then, that intent was different. Tilde's mouth was as black as if death had stained her tongue.

'It might.'

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Thirty-one

Tilde

My world was hazy and full of noises. Marolyn's murmuring stirred nothing in my ears, while my own breath felt like a roar. My throat itched, and I wanted to die. I had to die. I must. It would stop the voices.

Burn and die for your country, die rather than live with the shame of yourself. Your prince commands you. Do it.

I had not understood at first, I had tried to laugh. I, a king's daughter, a child of the kithwood, would not die when I was told. But then I realised that I had wanted to. It felt right, inevitable. No part of me protested, even the quiet of my soul where I could hear the kithwood's song, where I escaped the king, was stuffed with cloth and terror, silent to me. The Ways were shut, the kithwood had rotted, and all the world was smoke.

I could taste Conrin's order, it rattled in my teeth, stuck its feathers in me and pierced my flesh, my limbs, my mind. When they said to burn, I tried to burn, when they said to dance, I danced. And I wondered, should I survive this? Should I not relinquish? Just die before I hollow myself out in pain, bitterness and degradation. A fitting way, when I had watched my people suffer for me.

Then another voice, as certain as iron, and cut through the rest.

I order you to heed me.

I held on to it like a lifeline.

A hand touched my chin, and I saw blue eyes, the whirling of corridors, then Marolyn. My friend was pressing a cup of foul-tasting liquid to my mouth and it made me splutter up my insides into the pan they brought me. The meat, and the bread, the wine.

Poison. I remembered now. *Heed me* had replaced the command to die. I did not really want to die. I was not ready yet.

Blue eyes again, gazing at me, full of worry.

Thorn of haw is a poison cure.

'Ring,' I tried to say. I could feel the faintest murmur, stirring from my finger. The hands were on my face again, cool and dented at the fingers, from bow strings, weaving strings. Those fingers turned my mouth to a cup

held by Hadiah. Ale. I closed my mouth against it. Kind Hadiah, gentle Hadiah. Cousin Hadi. I should not have brought her to this place.

'Please Tilde,' she said, her voice shaking with fear, 'we need to wash it out.'

Marolyn had my arm, and I felt the sting of her knife as she put her dagger into my vein, holding a bowl beneath it. They were doing all they could, purging me in every way they knew: bloodletting, vomiting, drinking. But I could hear a secret, the secret my mother had given me.

'Ring,' I said, more urgently, before my mind clouded again and I could not make sense. Hadiah shook her head.

'We know you have been poisoned,' she said. 'We have to get it out.'

Muirenn. The wine goblet, her jug. I had trusted her. I was a fool.

Elise looked at my hand, and worked the ring from my finger, looking at it. 'Is it magic?' she said. The room spun, and I could feel myself losing my words again. I closed my eyes. We were in my bedchamber, fine herbs hanging from the ceiling, from the canopied bed. No rope here in the Faoldun keep, but I still did not want it to be the last thing I saw. There was a window, looking over the town, back towards the forest.

Die.

I could leap. The forest would be a blur of dark, and at least I could feel the cold breath of green as I fell.

No. I rooted myself in my chair, holding on to it. I had made a chance at my own glory, I had heard the court cheer for me, look to me. I could be the snake in the green, I could win their hearts and wrest their throne from the swans.

I ripped my hand off the seat and made a grab for Elise's wrist, the hand that held the ring. She jumped as I gripped her. I needed to make her understand. 'Thorn.'

She looked at me as if I was mad. I *was* mad. I had been made mad with poison death.

But I knew it was there, half hidden under the aquamarine my mother had given me. A hawthorn point. A murmur of power.

Blood in blood, dark hawthorn, with my touch is poison drawn.

She looked at the ring, seeing the sliver beneath. I had assumed it was a mistake, an old mystery that my mother did not know of. She said the kithwood held no magic, she would not have lied to me.

‘There’s a thorn in here,’ said Elise, and I all but howled with relief. Hadiah put down the ale and took it from her, staring into the stone.

‘She’s right.’

Darkness was crowding in at my eyes. My stomach was still churning, cramping painfully. Hadiah was trying to pry the stone out with shaking hands, but could not. Elise grabbed Marolyn’s dagger, still crusted with my blood, and thrust its point beneath the band, opening up the setting and prying the stone free to reveal the thorn beneath.

‘It’s speaking,’ said Elise, her voice strained, afraid. Its voice rang clear to me as well, released from the stifling stone. And it was not some mystery, some old ancestor who had set the ring: it was my mother’s voice. *Be safe, my daughter, be healed, be well, be whole.*

The forest could trick a person with voices that sounded like their loves, the dead who had been buried there, who had prayed once to the Ways. But my mother was still living.

My blood, my mind, my hope, my daughter, I give the memory of my husband’s hand. Its warmth, its kindness, its strength, for her.

Though the thorn was red-brown with old blood, I thought of Guwetha, and what she had said about pain. My mother had known, had always known. Had made this thing herself.

It already had a memory in it, and old dried blood, but it needed more to revive: the fresh pain of me, a bit of my life, I knew it in my bones.

I opened my mouth. Where the poison had gone in. Where death had taken root.

‘What do you want?’ said Elise.

‘You need to pierce her tongue,’ said Marolyn, understanding, still holding my bleeding arm.

I felt cool fingers on my chin. Elise, cut-gem, world-hardened, half alive.

It’s speaking.

How could the swan princess hear it?

Hadiah had not noticed, she helped tip my head up, holding my mouth open, and I pressed my tongue out as far as it could go. Elise took the thorn, bit her lip, and drove it into my flesh.

The sound changed. I tasted blood and thorn and meat, and saw for a moment my mother whispering, sitting in a hollow amongst our palace’s roses, her ring in her hand, her own blood running down her arms.

I give to you the memory of birthing bed. Sweet and hurting and full of terror. A memory I hate and love. Protect my daughter from this darkness I send her to, let her make her choices, let her be safe.

A giving and a taking. Memory and pain.

She had known. All this time. She had the power too.

In my ears, the rushing receded, I drew a breath, deep, as blood ran out and over my lip, and I realised I had not taken a full breath in an age. The voices of the boys faded, clarity ran through me, and my stomach ceased to roil. My bones were mine again, my mind. I heard the Ways, the beating hearts of the trees, and knew two things.

My mother had lied to me.

And Elise, a Cynghal, could hear the wood as well.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Thirty-two

Tilde

I lay very still in bed as the sun rose. My skin felt scrubbed, weak and thin, ready to disappear at the slightest breath. I stared at the walls of my chamber, one of the finest in the palace. From memory, Sanafin had said all the walls were whitewashed, like my mother's in Nandenys. But then in the palace's restoration, Isabella had heard about the pretty paintings underneath the white, and had had them uncovered and recoloured.

Now there were dancing folk on my wall in glades of green. From their hands spilled drops of red. Berries … or blood. Their mouths were open, as if in song or laughter, mocking my foolishness and frailty. The magic had been there the whole time. My mother had known it.

My memories of the previous night were warped like a metal thing buckling under too much heat. Some, I grasped clearly: the feeling of Elise's hand holding me up, the belly-drop of knowing I had been poisoned. Gundobar and Conrin by me, the prince laughing as he filled my ears with orders my body would not disobey.

Burn like a witch.

Do it.

Their words had felt written into my bones, endless, and unavoidable. It had taken every will in me not to throw my whole body into the flame.

And then Elise. Her strong voice, her cool hands. The way she had held my chin, and touched my lip. The strike of the pain in my tongue, and the clarity that had bled through it.

But that was not all.

What followed was my nightmare. The tearing pain in my womb, blood between my legs, a red that did not stop all through the night. Hadiah had wept, and Marolyn, despite her anger with me, had held me as I screamed.

'You have lost a child,' Ziyan agreed, almost too stoic and unruffled as he stood now beside me. 'Otherwise the damage is minimal; you will be back to yourself within a day or so. I detect no increased bile in your blood or spit.' He was swirling the samples he had taken in a bowl of bluish water.

‘But I would recommend not moving about too much as your body resets its equilibrium.’

A child. I had been pregnant. And it had been torn from me before I had known it existed.

‘The poison was magic,’ said Hadiah. ‘*Their* blood magic. Can’t we tell the priest?’

‘What do you think Dagobert would do about it?’ said Marolyn. ‘Put them in the stocks?’

I held my silence. My tongue throbbed as if the thorn was still in it, though it was now back in its place beneath the stone of my ring, the silver reset with the flat edge of a knife. I did not know if it had any power left, but I would keep this piece of my mother. My mother who had lied to me about the kithwood all my life. Who felt its magic too, and could use it. Druidim.

If I saw her again I felt I would strike her. Or embrace her. Or weep.

‘The blood magic?’ said Ziyan, interested, putting down his bowl and going to grind some herbs with a mortar and pestle.

‘The princess said it was blood and swan liver.’

‘Curious.’

‘Could you recreate it?’ I said suddenly. My voice sounded frail even to me.

Ziyan blinked at me. I wondered how much he reported to Merovin. How long had they been conspiring? Did he know Merovin had only begun to live as a man after the invasion? Did it matter? Argentha was far more relaxed in such matters than the frigid west. ‘That depends,’ he said. ‘On what goes in it and how it is made, and how much I am offered for it.’

Recreate it? Hadiah mouthed at me. I shrugged, but all I could imagine was revisiting the pain I had been given a hundredfold.

Marolyn had been by my bed, but she stood up at my question and began pacing. ‘How Cynghal it is to learn one cruelty and intend to inflict it on another,’ she said.

‘How much would you ask?’ I asked Ziyan, ignoring her.

‘Only a retainer, when you rule,’ said Ziyan mildly, as if by saying so he had not committed treason. He gave me a crudely conspiratorial wink, and handed me a scroll of parchment. ‘The ingredients in the tonic I am making you,’ he said.

I took it in my right hand, for my left was blistered, the fingertips white with willowbark paste. I unfurled it, and saw just that, a list of ingredients. However, several letters were capitalised, seemingly for emphasis, and it began with ‘This Tonic is Unequivocal.’

T was U. I took out Merovin’s cipher, twisting it to find the hidden meaning as Ziyan finished his tonic and departed with everything Hadiah had heard from Elise about the glory. By the time he was gone, I had Merovin’s message.

Accept the offer from Ademar, it said. Hadiah came to frown at it, and read it aloud to Marolyn, still pacing.

‘That Geveran fucker loves a riddle, doesn’t he?’ she said.

I closed the locket again. ‘It doesn’t matter right now,’ said Hadiah. ‘We have more urgent challenges.’ She looked at the door. ‘The sun is risen.’ Marolyn nodded.

The serfs would be coming back.

We heard their footsteps, the song of their Setinis chatter.

Marolyn was waiting by the door, Hadiah by the bed.

A soft knock.

‘Come in,’ said Hadiah.

It opened, and Muirenn stepped in, looking pale and pinched. Helwinde with her was pink-cheeked, carrying a tray of sweets to break my fast, and raw eggs in a glass for, perhaps, an imagined hangover. It seemed she at least expected a living queen.

Muirenn’s face was already falling into a practised expression of horror, when it became real, seeing me sitting up in my own chamber, entirely, painfully alive.

Marolyn shut the door as she turned to make a run for it. In a flash she had Muirenn by the shoulder and used it to throw her to her knees beside the bed as Helwinde cried out in surprise. Marolyn drew one of her long knives and pressed it to the back of Muirenn’s neck. She was friend enough to be furious with me, loyal enough to obey.

‘No!’ cried Helwinde and dropped the tray, putting forward her hands as if she could stop the blade with her flesh. She had never spoken out of turn, and only then did I realise how close the serfs had been. Did they hold secret conferences in their own language, like we did; did they talk about us, their hopes, their future? ‘Do not hurt her! Majesty, what has she done?’

Muirenn was crouched and shaking. ‘Please …’ she murmured, making herself small, bending into herself as if she could curl into nothing. ‘Please. I didn’t do anything!’

‘If you did nothing, why did you try to run?’ said Hadiah, impressing me with the steadiness of her voice. She stood by me like a statue. Muirenn fell silent, thinking of what to say.

‘I should wring your neck and hang you out of the window,’ Marolyn snarled. ‘I should cut your hair and sell it as traitors’ wards.’

‘Please, no!’ She whimpered as Marolyn put the dagger harder to her neck. ‘I had to! I had no choice!’

Helwinde went to her knees, rattling off a series of questions to Muirenn in their island’s language, Seinish, which was not unlike Merogian. The girl hissed back the same, her chest heaving in a sob. I understood the meaning. *What have you done? Nothing! I did nothing!*

‘Do you know the Merogian way of dealing with traitors, Muirenn?’ I said. My voice was hoarse and weak with screaming, my head throbbed. She shivered. ‘Answer me!’

‘No, my queen.’

‘We beat them to death,’ I said. Another degradation. ‘And whoever worked with them.’ Helwinde paled, flattening herself to the floor beside Muirenn. ‘You might say *I* had no choice. Would you agree?’

I felt choked on my own badness, as if Liran’s meaty hand was pressed again at my throat.

‘Heli did nothing,’ said Muirenn. ‘It was me! Just me! I acted alone.’ She was crying openly now, her whole body shaking. ‘I did wrong,’ she said. ‘Please. I deserve to die, but spare Helwinde. She has a family, she wants to be freed!’

‘You should have thought of that before you made a lover of a prince and conspired to kill our queen,’ said Hadiah. She could be cold, when she wanted, made the more frightening against her usual warmth.

‘He told me to. There was nothing I could do.’

‘You could have stayed your hand,’ I spat. ‘You could have pretended not to understand the blood spell they made you brew. You could have told me my life was at risk.’

Helwinde put her head in her hands where she knelt. Marolyn lifted her blade, just slightly, and pulled up Muirenn to face me. Blood was sliding

down the back of her neck, and she clenched her hands. She was not contrite. She was angry.

‘There is no use in hiding now,’ I told her.

The serf breathed in a shaking breath to calm herself, and then: ‘You have been in this court for barely a season. You know nothing about life here, nothing about how to survive.’

‘And yet survive I did,’ I said. ‘What did you expect, Muirenn, to be raised into their marriage bed? To be a queen of your own with poisoners as your servants?’ Her jaw tightened. ‘I tried to look after you,’ I pressed. ‘I was *kind* to you, and you opened your legs and my body to my enemy.’

Her eyes flashed with fury, and something in her broke.

‘If you wish me to die, just kill me!’ she cried. ‘Flog me, skin me, put out my eyes, but I will not let you think me wicked. I will not let you say you washed your soul with kindness while mine rotted in sin.’ Her accent strengthened with her anger. I had heard so little of her voice before.

‘*Ket*, Muirenn. *Nen*,’ said Helwinde in Seinish, looking up. *Stop. Don’t.*

‘I was not born a slave,’ Muirenn ploughed on, regardless. ‘I was born free, like you. But unlike you I was taken from my land when the Cynghals came. A spoil of war. Unlike you, I did not choose who I was sold to. I was passed around courts as a piece of flesh. No woman of fortune, no queen. It is but a flap of a wing that separates you from me. *You* are kind to me? Hah. You use me, like the prince does, like all the others do. You are weak here, and married to a weakening king. I would be a fool to serve you blindly.’

She looked down at the floor. Helwinde had sat up, staring at her, her own hands stuffed in her mouth as if that would stop the younger girl speaking.

She was right. It would have taken one poor negotiation, one lost capitulation, and Liran might not have granted Rivani’s continued rule as low king, but instead raided our castles, stolen our families, like he had in Setinis before he had renamed the isle for his children. That realm had been drawn of all its people, its whale fat, seal skin, barley, and become little more than a grifter’s port.

In another time, I would be kneeling and full of fury, and she would be sitting, accusing me of treachery.

But I would not die for pity. I had already pitied her, and suffered for it. She was a better rose than I, sweeter than honey.

I shifted out of my bed. Hadiah helped me as I stepped towards where Muirenn knelt, Marolyn's knife still patiently at her neck. Blood still stained my chemise, browning and accusatory.

'I should have you both flayed as a warning, your skin hung from the battlements,' I said softly.

Some part of me meant it. I wanted to hurt her, to humiliate her as I had been humiliated, because Ways forbid that I turn my ire against the boys who were its source. I was not strong enough for such a challenge. 'You acted on your survival, but not on Helwinde's. Your thoughts were only of your own victories, not how they might affect other women who are at your station.'

Helwinde let out a quiet sob. Muirenn's chin trembled, her courage diminishing.

'Is that not true?' I said, and looked at Helwinde. Tears hung down from her fair lashes, but she knew she was caught between forces over which she had no command.

'Please, my queen,' she said. 'Please … I have two sons in Setinis. They said once I worked for twenty years I could return to them. Please. I just need two more years.'

Muirenn's face crumpled at that. More than the knife, more than my anger and my blood, Helwinde's quiet plea threw her back to the floor, palms up in supplication. 'She didn't know! She did nothing. It was my choice. My mistake. I gave you the cup, I knew that poison was in it. Helwinde did nothing, spare her.'

'Who made the poison?' I said.

'No one, he … Prince Conrin just gave it to me.'

'Liar!' snarled Marolyn, pulling back her hair and putting her dagger to the girl's throat.

'I made it,' she mumbled. 'Prince Egil had instructions, he gave them to me. They were very precise.'

Conrin, Gaisa, Egil. Was it all of them? Isen and Alar?

'Who else knew of this?'

'I … do not know.'

'Who else wants me dead?'

She did not answer for a long moment, but when Marolyn shifted she showed how much she wanted to live. 'Dagobert!' she said. 'The high priest

wants to lead the Synod with Conrin as king. Conrin's allies: Thedemer, Gundobar, the rest.'

I knew Conrin was a conniving bastard, but I couldn't imagine him to be stupid enough to move on his father so openly. It was laughable. Isen would stand between them, and Isen had the trust of the black guard. Alar, too, would have something to say about it.

But then, the king was aging. His rage was hot, memory slipping, losing the thread of a sentence and discarding it. If there were fewer and fewer to defend him, the tide might turn quicker than I hoped.

The serf bit her lip, and closed her eyes, and then said. 'I would be mad to refuse him,' she said. 'You cannot refuse a swan.' She trembled. 'Kill me. I will not beg for my life. But do not make me suffer. That is all I ask.'

'I will not kill you yet, girl,' I said at last. Marolyn looked at me, disbelieving. Even Hadiah's hand tightened on my arm. 'Helwinde will go free, and you will live, if you are honest with me.'

Muirenn twisted her pretty mouth, wringing her hands in her lap. 'What are you going to do with me?' she said. If anything, she was more scared now I had offered her a future.

'I will have you flogged,' I said, sitting down on the divan. 'So you do not get put on your back so easily.' She reddened. 'And so your prince does not think me blind. And then you will stay at my side. Helwinde too. You will earn your right to live.'

It was cruel, perhaps crueller than a swift, sharp punishment. A blade always ready to fall, a knowledge that I could always use to execute.

'Th-thank you my queen,' said Helwinde at last. Marolyn was lost. She wanted me to kill her, value her life at least less than the Merogians I had asked to die for me. She wanted me to show that anyone who hurt one of us would be stripped of all they had. She wanted it clean.

It could not be clean. I had considered this well. A woman who could be a spy once could be so again, with enough care, with enough time. Did she love Gaisa? Perhaps, perhaps not; there was room between adoration and doubt, but first she should know what it means to cross me.

'Take her to the guard,' I said. 'Thirty strikes with a rod. Before the gate, where she will be seen.'

'Tilde …' said Marolyn.

'Do not question me,' I said through gritted teeth. Marolyn's face closed, and she picked up Muirenn by the arm. The serf hunched her back, letting

Marolyn drag her towards the door.

‘Wait,’ I said, and they both stopped. ‘Pain begets pain, Muirenn, and remember this: the princes knew that if they succeeded, you would be suspect. You would be flayed, your eyes put out, and Helwinde too. Even if you did not succeed, and I lived, as I have, Gaisa knew I would find you first, and you would suffer the same. Or worse.’ Muirenn looked at the floor, knowing I was right. ‘Your prince knew that no matter what accusations were laid at his feet, he would deny it all, pass it off as a jest gone wrong. He would not suffer. *They* never suffer. But you would.’

I wanted her to deny it. To say that what they had was true, loving. I wanted her to be innocent of the knot he had tied her in. Or perhaps I wanted to believe it, that not everyone was out for something, that he was kind to her, that he cared for her.

She did not.

‘He risked everything that you have Muirenn, and nothing of his own, and he would not even remember you if you died.’

She looked at me at last, her face shining with her tears, and she nodded once.

As Marolyn dragged her away, I fell back into Hadiah, my legs barely strong enough to hold me. Helwinde didn’t move, still looking at the floor. Muirenn did not protest or scream. She could not. She had nowhere to run, for she was not free.

And it sickened me. As it should. I knew it should. To beat a servant was foolish, to beat a serf was cruel. Serfs the Cynghals had taken and indentured had no right of refusal, no one to fight for their welfare. Even if I killed her by my own hand, I would need to pay no fine, only ask a blessing from a priest. What kind of law was it that could value a life so little?

What kind of woman was I that I decided that her life was worth less than mine?

I was a frightened one. I feared that if I did not punish her, anyone in the palace who caught a whisper of my poisoning would think me weak. I could not be weak.

At last, Helwinde moved to clear up the tray she had dropped, and took it away in awful silence. Hadiah only spoke when we were left alone.

‘She wasn’t wrong, Tilde,’ she said at last in Merogian, tentatively, as she went to fetch me a tunic to slide over my robe. ‘She would have felt she had no choice.’

‘We all have choices,’ I said, sitting down. I had chosen a hard life over a clean death, I had chosen a war of attrition, of little, deadly games, wedded to a man I loathed.

‘She’s not unlike us—’

‘What do you think would have happened to you, Hadiah, if I had died?’ I snapped. ‘To Marolyn? To Ardwen?’ I feared what Merovin had said, that Hadiah was just as good as I if blood was all they needed to unite their kingdoms.

Hadiah shook her head. ‘We need to keep our good hearts, Tilde, against all of this. It’s what we can hold on to. Our goodness is what they cannot touch.’

I looked at her then. I should move, I should go to the king and demand recompense from his sons. I should demand what he meant by calling for the burning of our sacred trees, our land, pleading for it. But that would lead me nowhere. For him to see me now, like this, bleeding and sick and poisoned, he would laugh.

‘Your heart is kind, Hadiah,’ I said. ‘Keep yours for me. But …’ I looked out of the window, over the lands that Sanafin might have ruled, the earth she had died on. ‘I do not think I have ever been good.’

‘Don’t say that.’

I had harboured anger in my heart for a decade, could that turn any woman good? I had bargained myself like a whore, and I had done it for power. My goal was not to be good, to be meek, to be forgiven. My goal was to be great.

Whatever goodness I had, it would be a worthy sacrifice.

My translation of Merovin’s note was long burned when I heard Lady Ysel’s knock at the door.

I knew she was coming, but I wished I had the strength to greet her anywhere but here. I was sick of the throttling walls of the keep. Outside, I could hear the shouts and chatter of the palace folk, the argument of the court as it resumed its sessions after Liran’s speech, the running of squires as they resumed their training with their hungover guardians. Did I hear the distant cry of Muirenn, suffering her punishment? Or was that my fevered imagination?

But this was where Cynghal noblewomen existed, behind closed doors they could not hold against visitors, in rooms they did not own. I greeted

her in my clean chemise and belted robe, as Hadiah helped me up. Marolyn had not yet returned.

‘Please don’t stand,’ said Ysel, dismissing her own maid and shutting the door herself. ‘Look at you: a breath of wind might knock you down. Anyway, today is a sitting day for me as well.’ She tapped her staff against her leg and limped slightly to the divan at my side.

Though she was Cynghal, I could have been friends with Ysel in another life. She was a royal, with a powerful Galenish husband who ruled Widdin, a useful ally. But I did not trust her any more than I trusted the Geveran. Ysel had been as cautious with me as the other women after the Salt Lake riots, and I had seen Ademar, like Merovin, wear Conrin’s grey in court.

‘I understand last night was …’ Ysel rubbed her hand over the engraving on her cane’s head, carved in a Cynghal pattern of repeating ocean waves. ‘Taxing for you.’

‘I understand you helped me avoid an embarrassing situation,’ I said, and managed a smile, which she returned.

‘Bad wine, I imagine,’ she said and paused. ‘Though, there are always rumours on feasting nights, of old magic and fae tales. Of course, such things are blasphemy to the Wing.’

Hadiah poured us both wine. Over the trickle of red I heard it. Another cry, and it did sound like a woman’s: Muirenn, or Helwinde. I clasped my hands together. I wanted to call it back, undo it, turn the punishment on the swan princes who had guided her hand.

But I knew what Ysel was implying.

‘To throw around accusations of blasphemy,’ I said, carefully, ‘without proof, would of course turn the entire court against me.’

Hadiah placed the goblets before us, diluted with water, and went to the window, closing the shutter and dimming the room’s light.

I was not about to storm the keep, demanding the heads of princes. Not yet. I needed greater assurances.

Despicable. Muirenn took the pain for their blasphemy, but Ysel nodded with approval. They would know, by now, I had survived. I wondered what they would do.

‘Is that all, my lady?’ I asked tightly.

The Cynghal straightened out her skirts. The light fabric gleamed with threads of blue, heather-purple, faded pink, and the gown was pinned at the throat with a Widdish brooch: round pottery painted with swallows chasing

each other around its edge. So simple a thing, but a reminder that her power, which I coveted, was not earned, but taken from an old ruling family just like mine, now burned to ashes.

‘I am come, I hope, to help you,’ she said. ‘My husband and I noted that you do not have your own guard.’

The few that had come with me, none of them trustworthy, had been assigned away. ‘I have guards,’ I said politely. ‘Princess Elise orders them to my chambers.’

‘They are not yours. They are the king’s.’

‘Aren’t they all?’

‘Not the ones we offer. A good number, thirty, headed by Captain Perin.’ *Accept Ademar’s offer.*

‘And why would you do that, my lady?’ I asked. Nor did I want to. But she was not offering a few men, thirty was the number of Gaisa’s guard.

‘Because I have watched a world change around me,’ she said. ‘Some of it good, some of it ill. But I want some say in how it will change next.’ She picked up her wine and sniffed it, then drank approvingly. ‘And,’ she added, ‘women to woman, it does not please me to see any girl at the mercy of men. Especially not foolish young swans who think they should rule the world because their daddy was a fighter.’

I did not smile, but she did not seem to mind. “Girl” she called me. Why did even allies want to think me small, manageable? I was woman enough to be their figurehead, but too much a girl to merit their respect. But Ysel reminded me of Guwetha, and that was enough for guilt to hold my retort.

‘A kind sentiment,’ I said. ‘But fighting men are not women’s to offer and give away. Why would your husband take such a risk?’

Ysel considered this a moment, likely deciding how much truth to offer me. Enough to be persuasive, not enough to hand me any edge.

‘My husband was very fond of his cousin Isabella,’ said Ysel at last, with something knowing in her smile. ‘And she him. They were betrothed once, before the Synod offered her and Galen’s crown so Liran would stop raiding their shores. She often wrote to him after her lyings in, but her last letter was full of worry.’ Ysel swirled the wine in her goblet and raised it to me. ‘I believe she was also drinking wine when she died.’

I stared at her, remembering with a sinking feeling Elise’s tale of her mother’s death.

‘Oh it was not me,’ she laughed. ‘Ademar and I did not marry for love. Love is for fools with nothing to lose. But Liran, well …’ She raised an eyebrow at her goblet. ‘He has been impulsive of late, and we must think ahead. The black prince has some sense, but not enough will to push back against his father. The grey he had some hopes for, but fears his arrogance and dislike of his homeland.’ She took a nonchalant sip. ‘Others are loyal to the king, but do not have faith in his succession. Change comes on the edge of a sword, Queen Tilde. We must decide who is holding the blade, or we will suffer it.’

I put Elise and her pain out of my mind, it would not serve me. She had so few people she trusted in her life, to tell her that her beloved father might have killed her frail mother? It would crush her soul.

‘Why now?’ I asked her. ‘Why not a year from now when I have a babe in arms?’ I felt the clenching ache of my belly, and my throat knotted in anger. ‘Or better yet, five years, when my child might sit on this throne the king seems determined to bestow upon him.’

‘Because they will keep coming for you, Queen Tilde,’ said Ysel. ‘In strange and sly ways. I cannot protect you from all of them, but Captain Perin leads a good band of Widdish fighters and Cynghals from my own guard.’ She smiled, putting her goblet down. ‘He might be Galenish, and prone to fine things and finer wine, but don’t hold that against him. Paid men do as they’re told.’

‘I can’t pay him,’ I told her, and Hadiah frowned at me. ‘Our country is poor, and my dowry is small.’

Ysel waved her hand. ‘We will pay them; consider it a wedding gift. Power is still more valuable than coin, and Cynghals have long used both to curry favour.’

‘Then what about the princess?’ I probed. ‘She has power, and yet no guards, of yours or of her own.’

Ysel shrugged. ‘Whatever she might have had has been slowly stripped from her,’ she said. ‘Her mother never taught her what to do with it, prevented every opportunity she might have had to gain some more. It is cruel, but she has nothing we can use. You do.’

I couldn’t feel my power. I was bruised, empty, poisoned and scared. A snake trying to settle into a nest of vicious birds, softening me with feathers one moment, then ripping me apart the next.

I stood. *Accept Ademar's offer.* 'Thank you, Lady Ysel,' I said, 'I am honoured.'

'Good,' said Ysel. 'They will be with you this evening, and will obey your command.'

When she left, I could not shake Elise from my mind, like that thread between us had grown stronger, tugging at my heart. Elise, my enemy. Elise the Cynghal who could hear the kithwood. Elise who put her fingers on my tongue and pierced it with heathen magic.

Elise who had saved me.

I realised then, that it was not just me in danger. It was her. And I could not wait till evening.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Thirty-three

Elise

All the world narrowed to the feel of thread between her fingers. Elise focussed on the swans, refining the shapes of their wings, breaking in beauty from the black of tar. This was her penance, two months till her father's birthday. She couldn't stay here in this tangle of feeling, knowing what she had done, what her brothers had done, knowing they would hate her for stopping it. She used her spare shuttle, small and ebony-wood, plucking her art from the strings like thrumming music from a harp, like the slow arrow from the bow.

Elise stared up at the weaving. Thirteen swans, all her siblings. She had even included Alar, though the one she imagined as his was smallest, furthest away. Another appeasement, a wish for forgiveness. Who had betrayed who? She had saved the woman her brothers had poisoned. Worse, she had facilitated some dark magic to do it. A thorn that murmured like those terrible woods.

Druidim, her father had said.

Had she sinned? Did she need to pray? Or confess? Morning song never began after a feast night, but by the evening would she kneel before Aeswyth or Dagobert and tell them of her trespass, or her brothers' crime?

She dared not. She could not bear her father's disappointment again. Not the rage and the shouting and another thing taken away. She was loyal to him, yes, that loyalty was writ into her bones. But loneliness also sat heavy in her body, curling around her heart, rifling through the crack. She longed to break the discontent with the point of her shuttle, quiet the sickness in her to a sense she could make of it.

Instead, her mind returned to Tilde's parted lips, the pleading gaze, the blood on her black tongue.

Elise's door slammed open. She stood, grabbing one of her sharp needles from the basket.

'Hold her!'

Though she stabbed the wrist of one man, another grabbed her braid and yanked it back, kicking her in the knees to press her down. Elise screamed

as her arms were wrenched back, just enough to pin her. They were wearing pale green. Gaisa's guard.

'Quiet, Elise!' came his voice.

'Gaisa?! What the fuck is this?' She had half expected Alar, but as she looked around, she saw only her younger brothers. Egil, Gaisa, Conrin. Gaisa was wielding something at her. She blinked.

'A shuttle?' she said. 'Let me go!'

She looked at Egil, but her brother glanced away, ashamed.

'I am your princess!' she snapped at the guards in Cynghal then Galenish, but their hands held her tight. 'Heed me!'

'Why was your shuttle blocking the door into our secret passages, Sister-hyem?' barked Conrin over folded arms. Of course, a swan-carved shuttle, that she carried with her always, that she used to hurt herself. They knew it.

'I wondered how that woman slipped away so easily,' said Gaisa. 'Why I couldn't use the door into the corridors, then I found this.' He waved the shuttle at Elise. 'And now we hear she still lives when she should have had poison enough to kill a boar, and the girl who helped us is being flogged in the courtyard.'

Elise didn't answer. What could she say?

'Oh don't pity the serf, it's disgusting,' said Conrin to Gaisa, whose ears reddened. 'And she must have fucked it somehow.'

'I had her follow Alar's instructions *exactly,'* said Egil with a frown. 'Perhaps the old magic isn't as strong as he and father said.' He shuddered. 'Or perhaps his old recipe was outdated. He refused to confirm the details with me.'

'That's because he wants her heathen cunt,' scowled Conrin. 'Such a pity. I hoped we'd watch her burn herself. It would have been a fitting end.'

'Alar!' Elise hissed, struggling. 'You listened to *Alar?* He killed our sister.' Egil frowned at her, but Conrin sighed.

'Isuire killed herself,' he said, as if she was stupid.

'Do you not recall why?'

Her brother unfolded his arms. 'Unfilial,' he spat. 'Impious. We do not speak of this. I thought you had learned.'

Burn them.

The Wing is the swan is the king is my father.

'What did Alar do?' said Egil. He was too young to remember – he had been younger than Hein at the time. No one spoke of it. No one dared. It

was like Isuire disappeared.

‘And you are so pathetically scared of a foreign woman,’ Elise growled, ‘that you would stoop to the poisoning hand of a serf? And turn against your sister?’

Impious? Her? Elise’s every second breath in this life had been a prayer for her seeming sins. She had sat with these boys in their mother’s bed, had cried with them over her pyre.

‘We are not scared,’ said Gaisa at last, though he had greyed somewhat at the mention of Muirenn. ‘We are fighting for our land.’

‘You are princes of the greatest kingdom the west has ever known,’ said Elise. ‘You could be generals. You could be whatever the fuck you want!’ She was held like a dog, her heart thrumming as fast as a starling’s wing in panic, and to her fury she felt tears in her eyes. Why was it she who was always humiliated? Crushed and shunted aside? How much more could her body take?

‘You know how this ends,’ she told them. ‘You will always want more, and you will eat and eat at each other till you are alone on united lands, only to have six sons and do it all again.’ They looked at each other. ‘Is this your great plan? To kill all the wives he might take and wait for his death? Is this filial piety? Is this loyalty? Is this what you were whispering about—’

Before she could finish, Conrin strode forward, his eyes wide, and grabbed the side of her head, dragging her over to her carding stool. pressing her face against its steel spikes.

‘Hold your foolishness,’ he snarled, with more venom than he had ever shown before. ‘You sit here with your threads and your little arts, Elise-hyem. You do not rule, you do not compete.’ He pressed her harder. ‘You do nothing but wag that sharp tongue of yours.’

‘Give me a sword and we’ll see what’s sharper,’ Elise retorted.

‘Release her!’

The voice at the door was low, strong without shouting, and Elise twisted to see Tilde standing there, leaning on her lady Hadiah’s arm. Tilde’s dark hair hung to her waist, her skin pale but her eyes fierce and certain. More angry than afraid, but why had they come alone?

‘For daring to touch the princess,’ Tilde said in a low voice ‘do guards not have their hands removed? I believe disobedience to a queen would take your eyes as well.’

The guards released the princess with a quickness, Conrin did not.

‘Togo!’ protested Gaisa to one of his men. They looked from Gaisa to the queen, and it was not the prince they obeyed.

‘This is a family matter,’ said Egil, trying to wrest back control. Tilde pulled her arm free from Hadiah, standing on her own.

‘But I am your family, young Egil,’ she said, and stepped further into the room. She faced her poisoners and folded her hands before her so her long purple sleeves showed the swan motif that had been sewn up their sides. ‘By the choice of your father, I am queen declared in the sight of the Wing. So bellow all you want, raise your hands to me, threaten me with your swords and your poisons and your power.’ She turned to Conrin. ‘But, as it stands in this place, in this moment …’ she smiled coldly, ‘my cock is *bigger* than yours.’

Conrin stepped back, and Elise was free. She peeled herself up from the spikes, but if anything she felt more bereft. Did they not love her at all?

‘Our father will hear of this,’ the grey prince snapped, and Tilde laughed.

‘By all means, tell him,’ she said. ‘Perhaps he will honour you with a slap.’

‘Perhaps he will honour you in his bed,’ Conrin snarled. ‘You wept the first time.’

If he thought that would shame her, he was wrong; Tilde looked at him with contempt.

‘I have more value as a woman in his bed than weak, philandering, poisonous sons.’ Elise noticed that she did not mention their use of magic. ‘Was it some nightshade you forced the girl to put in me? Dwale? Arsenic?’

Conrin smirked, but Gaisa panicked. ‘Last night was but a jest,’ he said. ‘Look at you standing here, no harm to you.’

‘Enough, Gaisa,’ said Egil. Elise could see his hands were trembling, guilt etched in every line of his young face. Good. ‘Let us leave. We should not have come.’

Conrin pushed his hair back from his face and looked at Elise like it was she who had insulted him. She refused to lower her eyes, and at last he turned and stalked out of the door, with Gaisa on his heels. The guards turned to follow them, but Tilde held her hand out, and they stopped.

‘These are my personal guard,’ protested Gaisa.

‘Your personal guard harmed a member of your family,’ said Tilde. ‘Is that an act that can go unpunished, Prince Gaisa?’

He locked eyes with her, and Elise knew then he was thinking of Muirenn. Tilde knew it too. The girl hung like bait on a hook between them, waiting for one of them to bite.

‘It is not,’ he said at last.

‘Then what will you do?’

‘We were only following the prince’s commands!’ said the one called Togo, but they were caught in the play of a prince and a queen. It did not matter what they said or did, only that they had been caught.

‘They will be punished,’ said Gaisa at last, with a glance at his older brother.

‘How?’ said Tilde, her voice still bearing the weight of command. ‘I hear flogging can beat sense back into a person.’

Fury radiated off Tilde like a heat. Elise could almost taste it.

‘Then it will be so,’ said Gaisa through gritted teeth. ‘Come!’

The soldiers followed, chasing on his heels from the door, barking out protests. Elise watched them go, heart still beating, still crouched on the floor, untrusting of her legs to move.

‘Follow at a safe distance,’ she said to Hadiah. ‘See it done; if not, let us test the mettle of this Perin to do it for us.’

Hadiah nodded, and departed, while Tilde came to Elise and held out her hands. Elise stared at them a moment. She half wanted to shout, to scream at her to get out and give her back the space and peace she had once had before her mother had died, before Tilde had come and caused this breaking in her.

Or had she?

But she put her hands in Tilde’s and allowed herself to be drawn up, cautious of putting too much weight on the smaller woman, who, despite her righteousness, was trembling with fatigue.

‘I’m all right,’ said Elise. She was not. Her face prickled with the bite of the carding stool, her scalp ached from her brother’s grip. She touched her hand to her cheek but found no blood. At least that meant no scar.

‘Sit,’ said Tilde, drawing her down to a seat. ‘Where is your maid?’

‘She comes later.’

‘I will send for her when I leave, and a guard to stand at your door.’

Elise was supposed to do that for her. She felt dizzy, the world splintered, shattered. And her breath … she couldn’t quite catch it. Instead she frowned at their clasped fingers.

‘Just focus,’ Tilde’s voice came to her. ‘Listen to your breath, pull it down to your belly. Let the world soften.’

Elise closed her eyes, doing as she was told, not letting go of the queen’s hand. After a moment, Tilde leaned forward, press her forehead to hers. Such a simple, calming gesture, skin to skin, warm. Elise could smell the fragrance of cress, rose and galangal from her hair, hear the soft rise and fall of her breath.

And as she slowed, she heard a murmuring. The whisper she feared from the forest, but clearer now.

Green and the growing and the movement and the warmth of the sun the rush rush rush of the river water the bite of the insect, the flutter of moth the deep rot, the rich rot, the song of the mushrooms the sting of the nettles.

Elise breathed in again, her hands held, her body stilled, as the voices hummed around her ears. It was beautiful.

At last, Elise opened her eyes and found herself looking into Tilde’s dark gaze. The queen had been watching her, and there was some troubled tuck in the corner of her eyes, the tugged edge of her mouth. But there was warmth too, Elise could feel it like the touch of sun on her skin.

For a moment, the princess half hoped that Tilde would lean in, and press her lips to the base of her neck. Would she sink in her teeth, shake her like a wolf, wring all the feeling from her body? Would she simply rest her lips there, and press her tongue to her throat? A feeling stirred her belly, delicious and deep, and she knew it now for desire.

‘Why did you come for me?’ Elise asked numbly. ‘They will hate you more for it.’

‘Why did you save me?’

Elise wasn’t sure she knew how to answer that. She found her eyes drawn to her tapestry, not the swans, but the sisters and mother that she carried with her, picked out in fine stitching. Tilde’s eyes followed hers, and landed on Isuire.

Elise thought of the glory, of the way Tilde had stood, had obeyed, had hurt her own skin. The scars from her nails were still red in her neck. Elise had imagined all the terrible ways Isuire had suffered, and to watch it happen to another was all her childhood nightmares become real. This terrible magic should never have been preserved, and yet she could never speak of it. Worse than failing to protect herself, Elise had failed to protect the person she had loved most in the world.

She had held onto the hope of her father's forgiveness for so long, that somehow it would save her, yet he barely knew her name. But she would never be forgiven. She would never forgive herself.

Why did she save Tilde? For Isuire, for Tilde, for herself. She took Tilde's hand in both of hers, and pressed it, not to her lips, she didn't dare, but to her forehead. Tilde drew in a breath, but didn't speak. When Elise dared to look at her, the queen was gilded in the window's light, gold drawn along her cheekbones, in her eyes, in her hair.

Tilde swallowed, pressing her lips together, then nodded at the tapestry in the window.

'Your work is beautiful,' she said lamely. Elise didn't want to look at it; the swans seemed to mock her. Those beasts she had wrought were not half embracing as they rose; they were twisted, pained, writhing to get out. But she didn't want Tilde to leave.

'It's a silly old story,' she said, lowering the queen's fingers. 'The first Cynghal king. He came over the sea to our land and saw a swan land on a lake.' Elise found herself calming, thinking of the threads she had woven. Careful, determined, that was her. Elise the prudent.

Though it was not prudent how much she wanted to press Tilde down in the light of the sun, to unravel her clothes, one by one, till she was as naked as that first day.

'She shed her wings and became a beautiful woman. She bore him children, but missed the sky, and her people. One day, she flew away.'

'Good for her,' Tilde said softly. She reached up with her free hand, and gently brushed a loose strand from Elise's temple, lingering on her skin where the carding stool had almost burst it. Elise could no longer feel the pain. If this was sin, she knew only that she wished to sin again.

'That is not the story's end,' she said, rather than saying what she felt: like her skin was breaking open, like her heart was spilling out of her and could no longer be contained.

'What happened?' Tilde whispered. She put her fingers to Elise's chin now, touching just beneath it. If she pressed, she would tip the princess's chin up. Elise knew, if she drew back, the touch would let her go.

'She still returned each moon to visit her children, through the window of the longhouse,' Elise said. 'One day, the king pasted it with tree sap, and caught her wings, trapping her. And he burned them, so she could not fly away. Instead, she joined him on his throne.'

Tilde's expression was unreadable. 'That is a sad story,' she said, taking her hand away.

'I had never thought it sad before,' said Elise. 'She must have felt so lonely without her people.'

'Are we not all alone in the end?' said Tilde.

Elise did not feel better. She felt worse. She felt the crack in her widening, her monstrous self still reaching out, tasting sunlight, tasting air.

But she did not want to put it back.

She reached up, touching Tilde's hair, and then, in a mad impulse, cupped her neck with her hand, and pulled the queen towards her.

Tilde did not resist, she leaned in, pressing her mouth to Elise's. Elise's stirring belly ran with liquid fire as their lips touched. Soft at first, then harder. Tilde's hands found her waist, and Elise drank her breath, opening her mouth to taste it, then gasped as she felt the brush of her queen's tongue, parting her lips, the thorn tongue, blood tongue.

The princess wanted it, deeper, harder. She kissed as if she was drawing poison; their teeth clacked together, her lip caught in a painful nip of canine. Delicious, her sin. More, more … she wanted more.

Too bold.

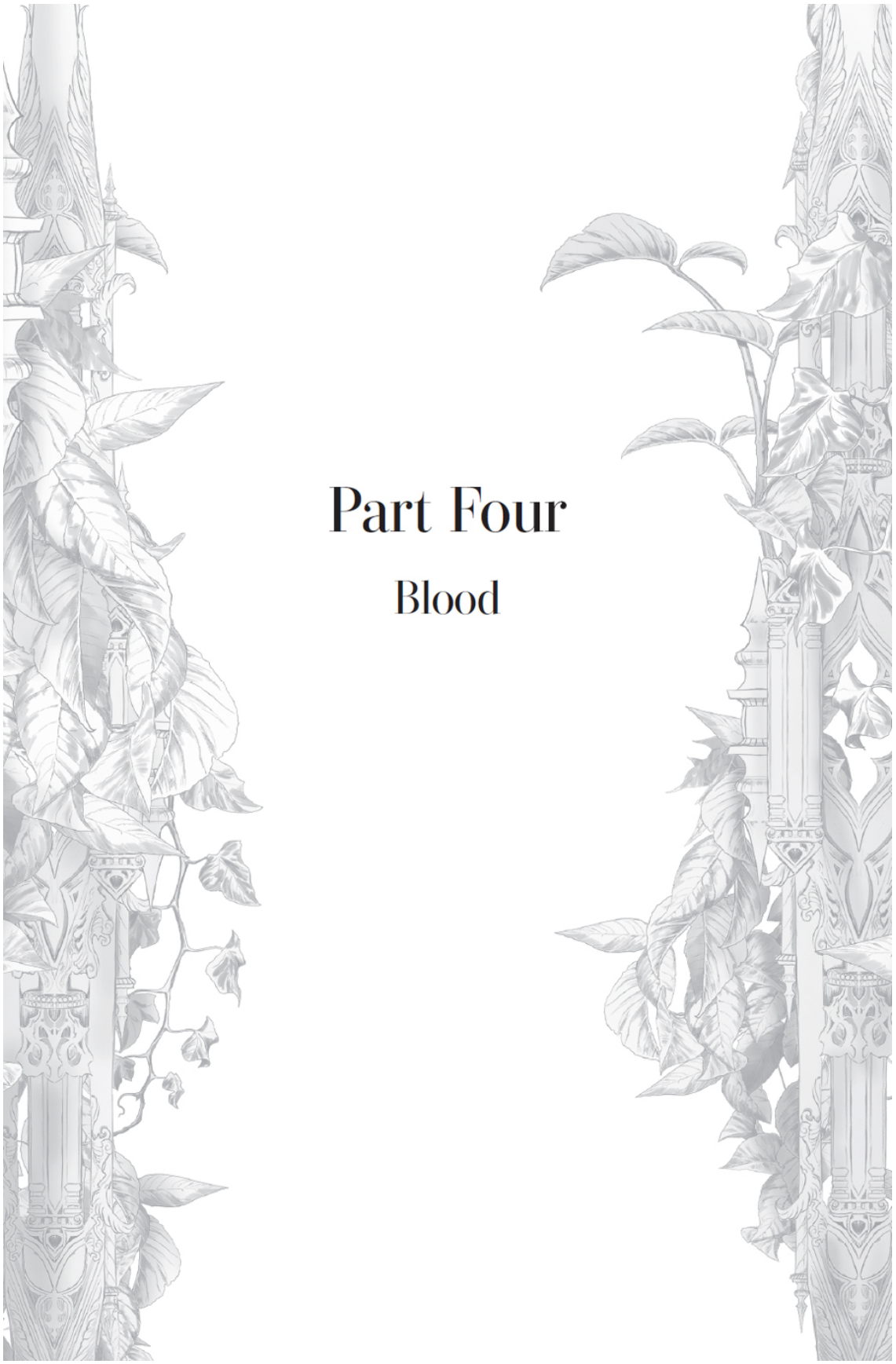
Elise pulled back. Her hands were in in Tilde's hair, her mouth tasting like Tilde tasted. The queen made a slight sound of disappointment, caught at the back of her throat, then opened her eyes, and they widened, as if just remembering where she was, who she was with.

'I must … I must go,' she murmured.

'Never speak of it,' said Elise. 'Please.'

The women beheld each other. Enemies at birth, family by marriage, and bound by sin.

BookSharekh.com



Part Four

Blood

BookSharekh.com

The prince Liran's faithless uncle committed a murderer's sin, killing King Nutan, raping his wife and sending her to the hounds, then taking the throne of his brother and nephew. It is only by the Wing's shade that I escaped with my liege, my prince, and the rightful king.

This usurper reneges on every promise of trade and loyalty King Nutan made with the Synod, Galen and the isles of the west. He loots the gold and gifts of the Wing's faith and melts them down for his riches. He herds masses of your faithful, into their Nests and sets them alight, and notches the tongue of any who dared take the salt.

We are a simple folk, and I no man of any consequence, but I write on the rightful king's behalf. The symbol of his House, as you know, is the swan, which is the finest messenger of the Wing, the symbol of glory that led your holy persons north. Perhaps this was the Wing's intent all along, that we might be united in bringing the faith to our people. They are simple folk, the Cynghals, but we now know better than to suffer the yoke of a heathen, and will fight back against the blasphemer. Liran will lead an army in the name of the faith, intent to bring our nation back into the shade of Wing, and represent that power.

With your aid, holy Synod, we can win. Perhaps this is a sign that there is a future led by the kingdom of the swan.

Letter from Odon, Hirdman of Prince Liran, 1011



Go strong my boy, into the sun. Breath deep, my boy, the breath of the sea. Bite hard, my boy, the thread of your fate. Take life in your hands, be strong.

An oar song for warrior Cynghals, 896

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Thirty-four

Tilde

The cry of the horn cracked through the very roots of the trees.

Two months, and the great heat of summer had passed, so began the autumn hunts. Two months, since I had stolen a kiss. Ways, I had tasted the mouth of my enemy, and it had been salt-sweet.

We did not speak of it. We pretended nothing had happened, just as the court pretended I had not been poisoned at a marriage feast, I pretended I had not lost a baby, and Elise pretended that her brothers had not assaulted me. No one had asked why Muirenn had been flogged out in the inner keep. Women it seemed could do whatever they wished to their serfs.

I hated Elise, of course I hated her. She had heard the Ways, the magic of our home, and she was the daughter of our invader.

But when we passed in the corridors, our hands came close to touching, and I could feel her cool presence, like water, and I was thirsty for it. I wished to drink. It had been years since Sanafin, months since any sexual contact felt anything but desperate and painful.

I wanted her. I wanted to know her secret heart, to hold her body against mine, I wanted to ask how well she had hidden from herself. How long had it been since the concept of desire had blossomed in her, taken root?

For when I had parted she had such horror in her face, as if she had only just realised that kissing women was possible, and that she longed for. Suppression had been hammered into her, masquerading as innocence.

Your true self takes shape in you, growing like a branch in the dark, surviving on any frightened thought you shove down and bury with it. One day, if you are brave enough, you give it a name, give it light, give it voice. The truth has always been in you; its roots are in your bones.

Elise rode near me now, proud and straight-backed on her silver-dapple mare, her bow in her hand. This woodland was cut off from the rest of the trees, not far from where Sanafin had died. Salt had been buried where the old roots had been, and the kith’s voices were barely a murmur, faint as the breath of southern wind on a midwinter day. It was almost as if the trees were too lonely to sing.

Merovin came up beside me. It was one of the few times that men and women could easily mingle, outside of the Nest and feasting, outside of the women's chambers and solars, our little cells.

'You ride well,' said Merovin. 'For an Ardweni.'

'Hah,' I said.

'I see you accepted the guard from the ducal of Widdin.'

I glanced back. I had dressed Ysel's offered men in green, but darker than Gaisa's guard. Some were Merogian, but most were Cynghal. 'I half expect them to slit my throat in my sleep,' I said.

Merovin smiled. 'Better bolt your door,' he said. 'I hear your serf is healing well.'

I had sent Ziyan to her with ointment, coin for her cloth and recovery. Marolyn had overseen her punishment, and she had not looked at me the same way since.

'You should not have let her back at her duties,' added Merovin quietly.

'What's another enemy to add to the tally?' I murmured, though no one could hear us against the joyful chatter of the riders, the barks of the dogs and calls of the horns. As stunted and cut off as this wood was, I felt overjoyed to be breathing in the bracken.

'Tell me,' I said. 'How many sides does a Geveran play in a game of swans and snakes?'

'I'll tell you when you have survived some more,' he said. 'Or when you have a swan in your belly.'

I gave a bland smile in response. Nothing else had taken since my first hoped-for pregnancy. Liran was ignoring me more pointedly than usual, but the women still welcomed me into their fold. Their husbands too, bowed to me, and I was brought the problems of the household, the management, the coin. Some petitions. My power was growing, even if my child was not.

The horn blew again, and the pace of the horses picked up. Cynghal hunts were pageantry and noise. A parade as much as a competition, a burst of glory over the green. Ysel on her adjusted saddle, fur at her collar with garnet drapery, Amalle sitting beautifully in a tunic of russet, her hair coiled back and pinned in a complex design. Lisane rode behind her, bells jangling from her harness, Cynefel too, but Daegmar was back at the keep for her lying in, and Hein was still too young to hunt, to his chagrin.

Leaves lay thick on the soft ground, and berries brightened on long branches between the pale and yellowing leaves that reminded me of

Guwetha and the thorn wall. Though it was still too warm for frost, the morning air had the first cling of chill in it, particularly beneath the boughs, and the horses' breath huffed out in thick clouds. At the front were the criers, the thrashers, the beaters, and the hounds, held at bay as they strained at their leashes, catching the scents of blood on the wind.

'Do not go deep into the woods!' Low Priest Aeswyth was calling. 'Keep to the main hunt. Sit low on your horses! Pray for the Wing's blessing of feast and meat!'

'We know how to hunt,' said Ysel to a smiling Cynefel, adjusting the coloured flags on her horse's bridle.

'I would prefer the Suneish plains to this tangle of nonsense,' said Lisane, tossing back her red hair. She ducked to avoid a low branch, then glared at me to prove her point, and broke into a bright laugh, glancing forward to see if any of the princes had looked at her.

I smiled. The girl had designs on Isen, I was certain, and had been ferried here by her father to tame the untameable. He rode ahead, strong on his horse, brooding, his dark hair just like Liran's. His father had slowly lessened his ire for Faoldun's siege, and taken his favourite back under his wing.

The rumours of Isen the black were wild from the women, and revealed few weaknesses or ways to discredit. One was that he had visited every whorehouse in Gevera and Galen, but then in another he had fainted from the sight of a woman's breasts; a third told that he had taken a vow of celibacy until the progeny of Cynghal and Merogia had united the kingdoms under one throne. None of them fitted. Elise had said simply that he was waiting for a Cynghal woman who would be proud, plain and true, and he had no desire for anything else.

Elise had drawn ahead, my attention inevitably catching on the strength of her shoulder, the length of her back, the curve of her ear beneath her hair.

I tore my eyes away. She was a swan, and I had let her witness my frailty, as I had witnessed hers. Neither of us had much more to hide, and everything to lose.

That frightened me more than anything.

The light in the woods was split with gold as the shell of red sky broke with sunlight, gilding the lattices of twigs and leaves, the blades of grass. Sanafin was here, in every shadow, behind every green branch, tangled in every root. The air was thick with sap, fruit and resin, and I breathed out.

Even this false-wood, broken off, felt like a prayer.

I know you, I said in my mind, and, faintly, the trees thrummed with acknowledgement, like the stirring of a beast after hibernation.

Pain and memory, Guwetha had said. I wanted to try reaching for the magic, but I dared not among the gazing eyes of the court, looking for my weaknesses.

The horns came again, blaring, loud and riotous. The front line leapt into action, and the sound of hoofbeats from the charging mounts thrummed fright into the ground. The noise shook the birds from the branches, and they rose up screeching of death.

We charged, and I gripped the spears I had bound to my steed. The horns blew harder, three triumphant strikes.

‘Deer have been sighted,’ came a voice by me.

Elise. She was close, her blue eyes stilling my breath.

‘I thought deer were off limits,’ I said.

‘Only the stags,’ said Elise. She had a short bow in her hand, and she gripped it with assurance. ‘The doe are ours.’

We shared a secret smile, tentative and frightened, then spurred our horses on, following the front line as they thundered beneath the lowest branches of the trees.

‘Loose the hounds!’ called Liran.

The beasts howled as whips drove them forward, and we followed, charging after the scents they found, the spaces they ran to, splitting into groups of three and four, but keeping close to the body of the whole.

‘How well you ride, Queen Tilde!’ cried Odon, looking to the side as I spurred on the black mare I had been given. She crushed the branches beneath her hooves; the little moss, the new berries, they spattered and broke. Thorns bit into her flank, scratching just lightly, but I felt it as a warning.

Barking ahead, another horn. A hound had caught the scent. Hadiah and Marolyn were behind me, not in the hunt, but following.

The thunder of hooves rattled the earth, and even the top branches shook as we charged, leaping, braying, neighing and howling after the dogs and the death they had tasted, and were drawing us to.

There, a run of tawny hides. We chased after their white tails and slender legs. Sweat crept up my chest and brow, up my wools and into my hair,

which was wrapped in silken knots. I steeled myself, lifting the spear. Just one, just one kill …

The hind I had in my sight darted left and away, and another group, with Ysel and Amalle, dived upon it and struck it down, leaving it wounded and twitching for the followers to finish.

The hounds rounded the rest of the deer back from their flight, charging them around towards us and certain death. Elise loosed an arrow and took a doe in the throat, then drew a second and wounded another that Liran struck down with a spear. Isen had a spear too, which he threw, striking a hind in the back legs, and blood sprayed as she kicked backwards. My breath was high, my heart beating. I threw, and missed.

But the body of the hunt was all in the clearing. Doe after doe fell, cornered by dogs, found by the hunters, while the stags were freed from the slaughter. Blood wet the leaves, the ground, our hands.

‘There’s another scent!’ cried Conrin, spurring his charger. ‘Come on you cowards! Come on you bastards!’

He set off after a trio of dogs, leaving the carnage behind. Alar and Gaisa followed first, then Egil and Isen.

‘There’s glory enough here, boys!’ cried Odon, but he went unheeded.

I had not killed. I did not want this bloody, gory glory if I could not end it with success. I went after the princes. Odon cursed and joined me, along with Gundobar, and Elise, whose cheeks were pink and eyes were bright in the dark of the wood. My body was sore with the work of keeping upright, with the thunder of muscles and ground and rock, but my breath was cold, my blood was warm, and I could feel the thrill of it.

It was a release. Even though the woodland shivered, even though I felt some inner part of me rotting, I was free and wild.

The hounds dived down into a valley, and we pulled in our horses, watching the three dogs that almost went up the other side before skirting down again towards the water that trickled along its base. Then I saw it in the green below, its spiny back rising through the bracken, its tusks vicious and sharp.

A boar.

The hounds came in behind it, surrounding the creature. It shrieked as if it had already been stuck, trying to flee up the hill. I hefted my spear, took aim, a breath, and threw before the others could. My strike slammed true

into the boar's side and it cried out, sprinting down again to the relative safety of the water.

'Good hit, Queen Tilde!' said Isen, surprised, and Alar sent up a cheer. Palati Odon caught up with us, throwing his own spear with a grunt.

'Missed, old man,' said Conrin as the beast sprinted away, my spear still sticking from its haunches, running again up the valley. It took more than one spear to fell an angry boar. Conrin aimed again as the dogs ghosted back, and his arrow struck above the animal, sending a shower of dirt and rock upon its face, and it shrieked with awful fury.

More dogs had come, three, four, diving without thought over the valley's edge to round the beast back into the green. They were brave creatures, to stand against a thing twice their size, using noise and speed to overawe him.

Fie the noise, a voice in the wood was speaking, faintly.

Fie the blood, hissed another.

As if the boar heard the anger of the green, it lashed out with its tusk, taking a dog in the side and sending it howling down into the dirt. It charged against another as an arrow from Elise glanced off the creature's head, and the next embedded in its neck.

'Arrows won't kill it,' said Isen, wincing slightly as another dog met the flail of the boar's tusks. Blood ran down its side from my spear, but I was now out of weapons. 'That's a waste of good hounds.'

'Why don't you show us how it is done, siege-maker?' said Conrin. Isen glowered at him.

'Don't,' said Elise. 'He will tire eventually.'

'Agreed,' said Odon, looking down at the cornered beast, surrounded, scared, dangerous. 'Let us wait for the others and pose a stronger challenge.'

'I told you he was too cowardly,' said Conrin to Gundobar and Gaisa, both of whom chuckled. 'Likes to play at war for Father's blessing, but needs a woman to finish the job.'

Gundobar cackled. 'Some son of Liran,' he muttered, loud enough for Isen to hear.

'Palati,' Odon snapped, 'watch your tongue.'

'It is all right, Odon,' said Alar. 'We all can start things we cannot finish, it seems.' He smiled at Elise, who turned away from him.

Isen narrowed his eyes. For a moment I thought he would climb on to his horse, and leave them to grin. Or, perhaps he would challenge Gundobar, openly, and kill him instead of the boar, for he could not kill his brother.

But he did not. He drew his sword, and began walking down into the valley.

'Prince Isen,' I said, despite myself. My thumbs pricked with a sense of danger, unknown. Isen had destroyed my siblings when only a child himself, but whatever Conrin wanted, I did not. 'I would advise against it.'

Isen ignored me, and turned down the slope.

'Isen!' Elise called out, dismounting. 'Isen don't! I'll help.'

'Don't you dare, Elise-hyem!' said Isen. Odon shifted on his horse.

'Egil,' he said, sharply, 'go bring the others.'

'I'll stay here, Nefka,' he replied tightly, glancing suspiciously at his brothers. He sensed it too, like an axe was hanging in the air above us.

Elise cursed. In a swift movement she was back on her horse. 'I'll go,' she said.

She thundered away, and Odon came up to my side, shaking his head. 'Bravado is so often just idiocy,' he muttered.

Nefka. I knew that word.

'The things men go through to strike flesh off each other,' I replied.

'Many men would pay flesh and more for a chance at glory.'

Nefka.

General Nefka. The king's beak, the hound of the sea in the early days of Cynghal expansion. Nefka, who had sat with a boy-general at the gates of Nandenys, and directed him to torture children before their mother.

No wonder he was treated so well, though he held no land. He was a common-born general raised to nobility under his name, not his title. But I had seen the princes' fear of him, his control and command.

What's another enemy to add to the tally? I had said to Merovin. Another had been beside me all this time.

'Have they been like this always?' I said, pushing through my revulsion, pretending I had not been so naïve. I had rarely spoken to the man, he had no wife, so our spheres of influence did not cross.

'They learned it,' grumbled Odon. 'Division in the blood is deepened by the court. Telling one that he is rightful, one that he is stronger, one that he is wiser, all latching on to whichever prince they think likely to win them their own gobbet of power.'

‘And the king’s favourite is gone down into danger.’

Odon’s smile fell at that, just slightly, then he coughed. ‘He can smite one boar.’

‘Go on Isen!’ cried Conrin. ‘Show your mettle!’

Isen sprang towards the boar, sword flashing out, bright with a dapple of yellow sun. The beast grunted, charging towards the new enemy with the force of a battering ram. Isen stepped aside, in the same movement taking hold of my spear and ripping it from the creature’s flank in a spray of blood.

The boar wailed, tossing his head into the black prince and sending him rolling into the dirt and the bracken.

Conrin drew his sword, lifting it slightly so it caught the light, flashing, once, twice. Odon saw, and tensed.

‘Get out of there Prince Isen!’ he barked at last, his face turning serious, his chuckle lost. He jumped down himself and started forward, but Alar slid down and stood before him.

‘Careful, old man,’ he said. ‘You might get yourself hurt.’

Odon stared at him; I tugged my horse back, to the side. I did not know whether to move or to turn back to find Elise. No. Despite it all, I would be safest here, seen, visible.

They will keep coming for you, in strange and sly ways.

Below, the loyal dogs drove forward, forcing the beast at bay before it could trample Isen where he fell. One bit the side of the great creature’s head, the other snarling for its trotter and latching on. The boar bristled and flung them about, the first slamming into a tangle of vines, the second crushed beneath a haunch.

But it had bought Isen time. He was already rolling to his feet, sword in his hand.

‘Come on then, you beauty!’ he cried.

The boar charged him again. Odon shoved Alar aside just in time to see Isen lower my spear and thrust forward, striking the beast through the snout and then, with a second blow, he drove his sword deep into its neck.

The boar ran, tearing both out of the prince’s hands, but it only made it two steps, three, before it collapsed, breath gurgling, bloody. For a moment, I could admit I admired Isen. He fought like a Merogian. On his feet. That was warrior courage.

A warrior who had killed my siblings. I despised myself for one kind thought.

Isen sank to his knees, breathing heavily, then touched his head to the ground in the direction of the beast.

‘Bravely fought,’ he said, ‘lord of the wood.’

‘Pfft, old world foolery,’ said Conrin.

Lord of the wood, the trees breathed, their voices strong again. *Thanks is taken, prince of wings.*

Mark you for death, child of the swan.

Isen would not have heard it, the forest’s acknowledgement. Two voices, two personalities, had come to the fore. Was it truth or wishful thinking that they sounded almost like Ebba and Colfinn? I had heard those more strongly in the west, telling me of danger, but souls were connected at the root, in the bark, in the soil, they ran like blood. Was there a scrap of them here, to lament and laud the prince?

Odon relaxed, but gave a dark glance to Alar. ‘Be very careful,’ he said. ‘I am not a man to cross.’

Alar smiled. ‘You have no power to threaten me with, Palati,’ he said. ‘I am a king, not a little boy you like to crush with your will.’

‘Remember who put you on that throne,’ Odon growled back, ‘when his father wanted him to fall.’

Alar did not lose his smile. ‘All fortunes change, dogface,’ he whispered.

I pretended not to hear, instead dismounting, but, as soon as I landed, I felt a faint echo of wrongness in my feet, a shifting in the ground.

It comes.

Sanafin’s voice.

‘Come down, brothers!’ Isen called, looking lighter than he had for months. ‘Let us be friends and carry the beast to Father.’

‘I’m not carrying that bloody thing,’ said Conrin, staying mounted.

‘Prince Isen,’ I said, letting some fear creep into my voice. ‘Get out of the valley.’

I should have said nothing. Conrin whipped his head around, and Isen looked up at me, perplexed.

‘What’s wrong?’ said Odon, and I saw Alar reach for a knife at his side, sharing a worried glance with Gaisa.

‘Something’s coming,’ I said, urgently. ‘Get out of the valley!’

Even the black prince must hear the disturbance, the wrongness. Was it a monster of the forest? The great creatures of the kithwood were all either sleeping or dead, diminished to shapeshifting, shadow walking.

No power has called us, the wood protested.

Nothing offered, little taken.

You could, if you liked. Walk our Ways, summon our terrors.

I ignored it. Not now. Isen was the only prince who had supported his father's match with a Merogian. He was no ally, but he was better than an enemy.

'Prince Isen,' I called. 'Please.'

Egil looked at me, then narrowed his eyes at Conrin. 'Isen-hyem,' he said. 'I think you should listen to her.'

But Isen did not climb up, he went to his kill. I'm sure he thought then of his father, of the nobles, what they would say of a man who killed a boar alone while his brothers watched.

But then he felt it too. Not in his blood, not in the Ways, but in the very shaking of the earth. He looked back into the wood, where the gorge narrowed, and we all heard it.

The squealing. The rage. We saw the shaking of the bracken.

A stampede of boars and pigs was running through the trees, a mass together of churning brown and spines and white tusks that looked like a river of mud plunging over rock and tree.

'Isen!' barked Odon. 'Get out of there!'

'Run!' I cried.

Egil screamed.

At last, Conrin dismounted, and was making a show of heading for the bank's lip. For a moment I thought he did want to rescue his brother, be seen as a hero, but then Gundobar came forward and grabbed his arms, pulling him back in a display barely fit for a village show.

'Get off me, Palati!' said Conrin. Too late. Too late and he knew it. 'That's my brother!'

'It's too dangerous my prince! Please!'

Gaisa and Alar made no sound, watching like sentinels, silent as swans gliding on the current, feet paddling swift and hard beneath. That terrified me the most.

Isen scrambled for the high bank, ripping out plants in his haste to escape the bottleneck. The coldness of it, the chill passivity of something truly untamed, truly wild. The hogs were frightened of something at their rear and, caught between the terror and the valley, they had nowhere to turn.

This was not the forest's doing, this blighted, separated, long loved strength of kith; this was something else.

But it *was* the forest that loosed the roots of the bracken beneath the prince's hands, that stuck thorns in his fingers, slid the ground beneath his feet.

'Isen!' roared Odon, running down the bank, dodging two beasts. Young Egil went with him, but the ground was soft, and the old man slid, crashing. He rolled as pigs stampeded around him, and howled as one trampled over one arm. Egil made it further, but then was forced to dive aside as a boar sprinting up the bank almost gored through him.

The noise of pigs' squealing drowned Isen's into nothing, but I saw the blood fly as the stampede hit him.

My own scream I could not hear either, but I felt the force of it tearing out of my throat. Was it horror or jubilation? I felt Alar's grip on my arm, pulling me back from Conrin and Gaisa. I must have lurched forward as if to dive into the valley, but I tore myself away from him.

'Times are moving, Merogian,' he said. 'Choose other banners for your protection, for the black prince's is twisted into a knot.'

'What do you mean? I thought you said blood was everything.'

'Hound face is always right about something,' he said, and glanced at his younger brothers. He dropped his voice lower. 'Not all swans survive.'

The boars ran on, unstopping, fear binding their minds in fire. The wood fell quiet again.

I looked not at the horror below, but back where the boars had come from. Conrin was wringing himself loose from Gundobar and racing towards the brother he had bated to his death. And, for a moment, I thought I saw him smile.

Beyond. In the dark of the trees I saw a wolf. No, not a wolf, a man in wolfskin, peeking through the branches. Around his neck, a silver charm glinted. A Wing.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Thirty-five

Elise

Elise heard the screaming before she saw the source.

She had gathered hunters, spear carriers, her father and his nobles, rallying them back to the valley where Isen had gone. It was not hard to bring them towards another kill when their blood was up. The rounding up of the deer, the splitting of their carcasses and pulling of their gizzards for the forest crows or the dogs was bloody, pitiful work when there was the prospect of further sport.

Elise was afraid. She had known many a good hunter lost to a boar's tusk, and as much as Isen had frustrated her with his ruthlessness, his stoicism to the point of callousness, he had never hurt her. Never lost sight of their family, of hyem.

But then Elise heard faintly the whispering of the wood, and the roar of a stampede.

And Tilde screaming.

She was too late. Far too late.

There was still a body, Isen's body, but it was not whole.

His left leg was twisted, mangled, his face, her father's face, and his dark hair were matted with blood, bright eyes staring at the trees above them. He was still breathing, but only just; pained, laboured gasps. One arm was gone. It lay some distance from him amongst the green, fingers pointing upwards, still. There was the embroidery of a white wing inside his sleeve, torn and somehow unstained.

'Brother-hyem!' cried Conrin, though he had not said that since he was a babe. He was at the bottom of the valley, holding Isen. 'Brother!'

The anguish in his cry felt real until Elise heard her father's.

'Isen!' bellowed Liran. There were the remains of a boar near Isen's dying body, and another, smaller one, caught in its own stampede, panting where it lay. Elise watched its little breaths. She could not bear to watch her brother's.

Liran was too old to go running down embankments. Odon tore down with him, his bloody arm clutched to his side as he tried to stop the king from falling before his court.

Odon, who had not saved his favourite son.

‘Isen!’ cried Liran. ‘My son!’ His voice cracked as he fell to his knees beside his favourite. ‘My warrior child!’

‘Prince Isen,’ Elise heard a whisper beside her, and it was Ducal Uhtren, staring at the carnage below. Tilde looked horrified, had her hand across her mouth, as Egil scrabbled up over the bank, his eyes round and dead with terror.

Elise went to him, and he reached out for her like the boy he was, all hurt between them forgotten, and held onto her, breath catching, quick and fast. They both felt the desolate howl of their father as Isen breathed his last, and Egil buried his head in her shoulder.

‘Not Isen,’ he whispered in horror, so quiet Elise could barely hear him. ‘Without him …’ He looked up at her, like he could barely understand it himself. ‘Without him everything will change.’

They bore the black prince back to the fort, without the horns and celebrations, without the jubilation and the reddening of the hunters’ brows with blood. Without the thanks to the Wing as they passed the Nest. The hunt passed through a small part of Faoldun town, homes Isen had destroyed, still being rebuilt. As the hunt had left many folk had come out singing one of Miras’s songs of praise for Tilde, that had caught like wildfire among the common people. This time, they were silent as they witnessed the incoming parade of death.

Aeswyth and Dagobert, low priest and high, sang a lament as they entered the walls of the keep, scrubbed clean of the corpse of the last dead nobleman. Alar took command, telling the women to take Isen’s body to the cold house down beside the river, telling Gaisa to inform Isen’s black guard. Elise didn’t have the heart to protest. Not now.

The boar Isen had killed, his last triumph, had been left in the woods to rot. It had been pummelled with hooves, its tusks snapped, less than a scrap now. Broken like its champion.

Tilde came with the body, sending her maids to inform the palace staff and prepare the wash bowls, the herbs. Elise wanted to talk to her, to know what she had seen. Wanted to hold her, and be held. She had not yet cried,

those claws of grief had come in hard, choking her tears, seized the gates, all but stopped her heart. She could not believe her favourite brother could be dead.

The cold house sat in a ring of empty grass, in view of the castle, a building of smooth sandstone. This was a place for sorting and skinning game, where the fur was dried out by the river, and the bones and horn separated from whatever had been split for needles or cups, or little whittled things. The offal that was not given to the dogs was often taken here by the servants for their own suppers.

Elise had not imagined a brother's body brought in with the animals, in pieces, the blood congealing, but Isen would have been too proud to be washed in his bed like a woman; instead he would have preferred a battlefield death.

He had neither.

The inside of the cold house was as chill as the forest. Their breath was fog, and Isen's skin still clinging to its warmth as they laid him on the slab amid the corpses of goats and pigs, their blood sticky on the swept-mud floor. They were lit from above and below by tiny windows, casting a pale blue light upon the frightened faces of the women.

'He must be cleaned,' Elise said, and her voice was strong in the cool light, echoing around the walls. The body before her could not be Isen's. His body was full of movement, alive. It was in the way he stood like their father, his legs akimbo, the way he looked down at the floor when thinking, the way his jaw firmed with disapproval, or opened in a laugh of surprise. In the way it froze when death became his duty.

Isen was not this corpse in pieces, this broken face and twisted leg. It was not the severed arm, still pointing at the sky.

Through the walls, they heard a roar of men's voices raised in grief. The black guard. They had been told.

Tilde met Elise's eyes, once, her gaze full of fear, but then the servants came with water, many already weeping, and she did not shy from the work of sluicing away the blood and the mud and pieces of green moss. Henoveva came down from the castle to help, Ysel guided Amalle and Lisane in placing his limbs back in coordination. Amalle's movements were stilted, awkward, perhaps in Galen the dead were cleaned by priests, but Cynghals did not leave to others what belonged by right to family and friends.

Death was no stranger to Elise. Isen was not the first brother she had washed, though the limbs of an adult man were different to little babies or young boys, or a sister. Isuire, she had washed, putting her cold limbs back into place, seeing the swell of her belly, which she had hidden from them all, arranging her hair prettily, how she liked it.

Death was a lurker, a light-thief, a devil skipping between the Wing's feathers. It came whispering into the ears of women like Isuire, it had whispered to Elise once or twice, in the most lonely, broken hours of the night. In washing a body, they washed death's hand away, preparing the skin for burning, and the soul to be released, taken to the Wing, and returned as a bird.

Would Isen return a swan with a broken wing? Elise wondered this as she took the rings from his cold fingers. When they were young, he once told her that he would prefer to be a gull, for he loved the sea.

'I had imagined a better death for him,' said Ysel, always pragmatic as she took a tanning needle and, very carefully, began to reattach the prince's arm.

This was not how Isen should have died, and even a bard of Miras's talents would be hard pressed to make it glorious. Perhaps to have been killed in a fight with a boar was honourable, powerful, but to be trampled by its snorting brethren was the end of a joke. Where had the beasts come from? As Elise saw the little one twitching, a thought had stuck its talons in her: why so many out of rutting season?

'Did you see it?' said Amalle to Tilde. 'You were with them.'

There was something in Tilde's face, some hesitation. 'He did not suffer long,' she said.

Elise couldn't bear this.

'Ladies, please continue,' she said abruptly. 'Queen Tilde, will you please speak with me?'

Tilde met Elise's eyes again, the darkness of them still startling. Elise had studied her expressions in the months since their kiss, her faintest frown, the softening of her smile. Little morsels of intimacy to fill her aching belly, enough that she would not kiss her again.

But she knew Tilde's fear when she saw it.

They went up. Tilde was ahead, her long hair bound in thick, waving ropes, her hand holding up her long tunic. Outside, the sky was so pure and blue it felt obscene. There was a high wind, and the prickling threat of a

mountain storm in the haze. Sure enough, in the distance was a dark line of cloud.

The queen stared at it, a long exhale escaping from her pursed lips as she steadied herself, knowing what Elise would ask.

‘Tell me,’ said the princess.

Tilde closed her eyes. ‘He killed the boar clean,’ she said. ‘Called his brothers down, but then I felt the shaking in the ground. They came so quick, from along the valley, deeper in the wood.’ A rush of wind blew her hair back from her neck, and Elise stood at the balcony beside her. Not close enough to touch, but she could feel the warmth of Tilde’s body, so unlike the body they were washing down below, soft and near and comforting. ‘I told him to climb up,’ said Tilde. ‘I swear, Elise, I tried to warn him.’

‘Was …’ Elise closed her eyes, and took a breath, glancing at the ring on Tilde’s finger, faded back to blue. Another sin they did not speak of. ‘Was it the wood-magic?’

Elise did not know what she would do if Tilde said yes. She had never confessed her sin of the thorn, knowing it would come back to the queen. Nor the sin of disobedience, for denying her brothers, and her father. One led to the other, for she sometimes dared to read her mother’s books. What if her sinning had angered the Wing, turned its grace away; had Isen suffer the consequences?

Tilde shook her head slowly. ‘No,’ she said. ‘The forest doesn’t have a will of its own.’

Elise clung to that. ‘Was it a human hand? Perhaps the rebels still have one of their magic weavers?’

Tilde glanced sharply at Elise, searching. ‘Rebels did not entice Isen into the gorge.’

Elise wanted the queen to say it, what she was afraid of: Alar. Conrin. Gaisa. Gundobar. All of them had goaded him into danger.

Everything changes.

Isen was the stalwart, the anchor of Liran’s armies and his shield whenever he slipped. Without him Alar and Conrin would go from the least loved of their father to the first heirs apparent to greater Cynghal, including the homeland that Isen missed so much. Elise was half surprised that her older brothers were not carousing outside, pouring wine on the ground or

libations in the Nest, crowing with Dagobert that their great rival had been killed by pigs.

No. She could not speak it. Whatever they had done, Liran always cleaved to his sons. Even when his own daughter stood against them. No one would dare suggest they had something to do with Isen's death and risk their lives and the swan king's wrath. Not when those very sons stood now to inherit, and the only one that stood in their way was Tilde.

Elise lowered her eyes, numb, and Tilde reached up to her face.

'Princess,' she murmured. 'Whatever happened, it is no failing to feel, no weakness to weep. My people believe that to feel is to listen, to be open to the world.'

Elise felt a sob tear its way up from her belly, grief wracking up her throat as Tilde brought her arms around her. Elise had never been held. She was the holder, who gathered up her mother, who made it all right.

'I'm sorry,' Elise said, trying to pull the tears back in. 'I'm sorry.'

Sorry that any of this had happened. Sorry she was powerless to stop it. Powerless to change anything about it.

'My queen,' came a voice from below. 'Princess Elise.'

Elise looked down, wiping her tears to see Palati Odon standing in the green below the balcony, looking up at them. Her heart plummeted for a moment, half afraid. No, do not show fear. She had done nothing wrong, her father's wife had held her as she wept.

'What is it, Palati?' said Tilde, her jaw tensed as the same rush of thoughts must have caught her.

'We are wanted,' he said. His injured arm was bandaged against his chest, and he was chewing on a cloth-wrapped poultice for the pain. Behind him were several guards in the king's blue. 'By the swan king.'

He gave Tilde a significant look, and Elise found herself seized by a sudden sense of desperation, hot and terrible. But Tilde straightened.

'Of course,' she said. 'We are coming.'

Tilde turned for the stairs, and Elise followed, her breath catching with her fear.

'Tilde …' This had familiarity. This bore the marks of Isuire, of Elise standing before the king and telling him what he refused to hear, and all that came after.

Tilde paused on the shaded steps below her, and looked up. It was quiet, between the open sky and the murmur of women, no one to see them. Tilde

had a gaze like Isen, of a warrior going into battle, one which she may not survive. She reached up, and caught Elise's hand, holding it for a moment, before pulling her wrist to her mouth to kiss.

Elise turned away, holding in her breath, red rushing into her cheeks. Tilde held her wrist to her warm lips, for a long, regretful moment. The flesh on flesh was a moment of reprieve, isolating them from the terror of the forest, the cooling limbs of her brother, the deep and desperate sense that something was rotting at the heart of everything Elise knew.

So she did not pull away. She rested her tearstained cheeks on her hand, felt the breath of the queen. Her father's wife. Going to face his fury.

Tilde pulled away and, with one gentle squeeze, released her and turned back down the steps.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Thirty-six

Tilde

I could still feel the beat of the princess's pulse against my lips as the king's beak led us towards the feasting hall, now the court of the bereaved swan.

'He is not in a good way,' said Odon. 'Tread carefully.'

All activity in the palace was stopped, other than the flicker of movement by the kitchens and the barracks, the serfs' halls, and folk hunkered down. No one wanted to be in the open: a prince had died of violence, they wanted to take shelter from the storm.

'Of course he is not,' said Elise, rubbing her wrist. I had kissed her above where her red scars were, her little wounds. There were no fresh ones of late. 'He has just lost his son.'

It had been stupid to bend to the call of my foolish heart, but I had seen the guards had their hands on their swords and the warning in Nefka's gaze. If I was to die, at least I could take the forbidden touch of her with me.

The first thing a human does when they lose something precious is to look for a reason, and find someone to blame.

Odon limped closer, wincing as it jostled his arm. 'I know you want to protect your father, so do I. I am loyal to him by spilled blood and broken bones, I supported his marriage to this Merogian, to give him the stability and loyalty he desires. But you must know his mind bends and cracks with the weight of age. Since before your sister's passing, his moods have grown darker, and even I fear him when he is like this and there are so many tales to twist his mind.'

They will keep coming for you, in strange and sly ways.

The swan brothers would tell their own story of Isen's death, and at least some of them would put me on trial. Liran would know some part of me would see Isen's destruction as retribution for Colfinn and Ebba. He had threatened my life for a wedding dress; what would he do if he thought I had brought about the death of his child?

And what would Nefka, my siblings' killer, do? Would he throw me to the wolves? This was a man without principle, who did not obey any rules of combat or war.

‘You are surely safe, Palati Odon,’ said Elise dismissively as I considered calling my guard. Calling Merovin, Marolyn, anyone. No, that would be seen as proof of guilt. ‘You helped him reclaim his throne.’

‘Blood is a bond deeper than friendship for our swan king,’ said Odon, with some bitterness. ‘He will not stand to lose any more children today.’

That was another hint to me. I understood he would not accuse the red prince, the grey or the green. He would not say that Conrin had goaded Isen, had made a signal before the stampede. He would try to get away without pointing fingers. And he was telling me to do the same.

Some love he had, if he had no thirst for vengeance. Liran came first, always. I pitied Isen. But I knew then that this was not something I could battle my way out of, not if I wanted to win.

In the hall, the fire had smouldered close to death. The banners of the feasting were long gone, yet the winter tapestries not yet raised, and so the light that fell inside was chill and devoid of comfort. Outside, the sky purpled with the incoming rain.

Liran sat as I had first seen him, on a raised dais, a carved throne holding his aging body up beneath him He had his greying head in one hand, his exposed sword in the other, point down on the steps. Much of the court kept a large distance from his seat, as if he might stand and start swinging.

But Alar, Conrin, Gaisa, Egil and Gundobar stood before the king. Conrin with the expression of a martyr from a tapestry, Alar looking incensed. Gaisa maintained a stoic countenance, while Egil stared at the floor. Only Gundobar looked pleased with himself. It was he who had been talking as we entered.

I maintained my poise, and we knelt.

Isen’s death caught us all in it like a held breath. The only sound was from Dagobert, Aeswyth, and two more low priests, one from the town, one from the servants, singing a lament that echoed around the Kanaanite rafters, creeping about with the smoke from the sconces. I wished I had brought Hadiah and Marolyn. The other ladies of the court must be wondering where we had fled to. Perhaps they would suspect.

I did not seek Merovin in the crowd, but I knew he was there, in Conrin’s grey I suspected. A few more coats of red could be seen in the crowd, for Alar, more than before, like bearing the banner of their favourite knight in a joust. There was still a good number in green, my darker shades, not

Gaisa's. I was surrounded by half alliances and turncoats, and could trust none of them to help me on the question of truth, let alone the hope of allegiance.

'Well?' said the king, after a long, painful silence. The word echoed, flooding the floor, rushing past my knees like a fell wind.

'I have brought the queen and princess, King Liran,' said Odon. 'The prince's body is being prepared in the cold house, by the water.'

Liran grunted, and he looked to Gundobar, who licked his lips and picked up where he had left off as we entered.

'My king,' he continued. 'There is nothing else we could have done,' he said. 'As the boars came I had to stop Conrin from flinging himself down to his brother, and also being lost to the Wing—'

Liran picked up his blade and thrust its point into the stone so forcefully that a chip flew away and skittered towards one of the gathered noblemen. They flinched, and Gundobar shrank. I saw multiple chips of the same on the floor. The king frowned as if his head ached.

'That the Wing saw fit to take my son from me I do not deny,' he growled. 'But that is not what I care to know. And on only one thing do you all agree.'

Liran's eyes skimmed over Odon, and landed at last on me. 'It is the strangest thing, Queen Tuathilde. They said you, a Merogian woman, warned Isen first, before any other man saw signs of danger.'

A few of the courtiers laughed nervously, but only a few. I swallowed. I knew I should have kept my big mouth shut.

'Stranger still,' he said. 'That we hear that Kanaanite pigs have been missing from the city, and their handlers, and their families, have disappeared.'

Dread silence fell. How many suspected that this was a play against me, rather than any fault of mine? The same number who had seen me poisoned and done nothing to help?

'All I know is what you say, great king,' I said, trying not to sound too defensive. 'I tried to protect the black prince, more than once. I told him not to go into the valley. And I was the first who told him to escape.'

Liran's hand tightened on the sword. 'How did you know they were coming?' he asked.

The singing quietened by one. Dagobert left the other priests and came forward to stand beside the seated king. The gaze he cast on me was filled

with animosity and ambition. Liran did not even glance at him, like he was a fly that had buzzed through the window.

‘Merogians hunt on foot,’ I said, my heart beating in my throat. Elise appeared to have shrunk beside me, like an animal sensing danger. ‘Not by horse. We are taught to feel the changes around us not with our eyes, but in our feet. My feet were on the ground, I felt the tremor.’

‘Yet General Odon, Princes Conrin, Gaisa and Egil, and Palati Gundobar did not?’

Odon looked at me sideways then. Ah, he had his own suspicions. Of course, the old battle-crow had a sharp eye. But he knew, too, that I had no hand in this disaster. That was the problem at hand, who to blame, who to protect, and how to escape the sword.

Poor Isen. He would have as much justice as the little ostler boy. How much were they willing to lose for this faltering image of blood’s unity? Was it for Cynghal, or for old Liran? Did he so desperately hold on to the hope of his children’s love and loyalty, though he showed them so little of both?

Gundobar tipped his head at me like a dog eyeing a bone. He hoped I would start pointing fingers, and then turn an accusation I made of them into slander against me. That was why they had not accused me directly, only implied enough for Liran to latch onto.

I tried one of Hadiah’s practised expressions on these grieving men, one I had seen on Amalle as well: put a crease in my brow, parted my lips as if in surprise. Chin down, eyes up, a picture of pleading innocence.

‘Perhaps,’ I said in my smallest voice, ‘the others were jubilant in Prince Isen’s victory against the first boar. It was a mighty feat, but I was afraid still that harm might come for him. Forgive a woman’s cowardice, but it did make me attend to what the others may not have heard.’

I felt, rather than heard Odon’s grunt of approval, and saw Alar’s relieved puff of his cheeks. Egil relaxed a mote. Elise did not move, and I felt a flash of anger. She had been trained too long to hold her tongue to know how to use it, but at least she did not confess to her beloved and feared father that I knew at least some magic.

‘She speaks true,’ said Alar. ‘She followed us to the valley. Her spear injured the boar, and gave my dear brother another weapon to fight the creature. She had no designs against him.’

‘Why?’ The sword slammed again into the floor, Liran’s voice broke. He turned to Odon. ‘Why did you not save him?’

‘I am sorry, my king,’ he said, his voice low, head bowing. ‘I am too old, and slow, did not want to steal from his valour, and then when the beasts came I moved too slowly. I am fit to be punished for my negligence. But the queen is not to blame.’

Conrin felt his chance slipping, and shook his head.

‘We did not see the beasts until they were all but upon us,’ he protested. ‘How could she have felt them first? She struck the boar, yes, but when Isen tried to climb out of the valley, it was as if the ground threw him off.’ Gundobar put his hand to his mouth. So theatrical. ‘And I have never seen such a stampede out of season. What if she learned their witchery behind the wall, Father? I knew their surrender was too convenient. Convenient, too, that she was there for Isen’s death.’

I felt the cold clutch of fear at my throat, harder and stronger than Liran’s hand. These bastards. When I had my chance, death would be too good for them.

‘Sire,’ said Dagobert, his voice low but pitched just enough to carry. ‘Was Prince Isen not the one who marched on Ardwen and executed this heathen’s siblings? Colfinn the wicked, Ebba the whore.’ I gasped, barely holding onto my fury as a mutter rippled around the hall. Was that what they thought of my bright, brave siblings? I did not look at Odon beside me.

‘What if this was vengeance?’ piped up Markal Thedemer, Conrin’s staunch ally. Merovin was silent, watching, no help at all. Nor Elise, whose fists were clenched, her nails digging into her skin. Her word against me now, about the thorn in my ring, it could end me, easily. I knew she felt for me, but if her brothers’ love, her father’s, was what she wanted, she could pluck it from them now.

I saw all these little strings, these little chances. This was bigger than only me and Isen. My eyes found Alar. He was scowling like a child who was losing its plaything.

‘Come now,’ he said with his forced charm of a laugh. ‘Why summon a stampede then try to save him from it? I had to stop her myself from running down the slope.’

I understood Alar’s game, his courting, why he wanted me alive. *Blood is everything.*

He, like Conrin, knew the king was aging, and had come back to Merogia to meet his new wife. Not to remove her, but to test her mettle and to steal her. And the throne. Isen did not like him, Isen would not bow to him. Conrin might ally with him, because he thought Alar already had what he coveted: a crown.

But of course the oldest swan child would not settle for Suneheim. He didn't just want Suneheim, or even Galen, he wanted it all. And he had returned to play his hand.

Conrin scowled at him, and Gundobar stammered. 'P-perhaps,' he said, 'she knew you would stop her.'

'As you stopped Conrin-hyem?' said Alar, lightly.

Gundobar's mouth fell open, and Conrin's eyes widened, just slightly.

'She is a witch!' said Gundobar. 'Look at her! I saw her walk in the woods on the hannerast. She treated with the rebels, brought down the thorn wall, now she has used some kind of barbarian magic to kill Prince Isen—'

An uproar of disgust and disapproval rose about me. This could not stand, such a rumour would destroy me even if it did not kill me now, but I had not thrown accusations first.

'How dare you?' I said. Elise, to her credit, did not even look at me. 'I put my life at risk of this magic, for this nation, only months ago.' Several men cheered but I felt no relief. 'The magic itself was banished from our lands by my own ancestors.'

Dagobert folded his hands inside his sleeves.

'Some old scriptures speak of such power, and its terrors,' said Dagobert. 'Green magic, blood magic.' He gave a slightly caustic glance to Conrin, who flushed. 'There are many such evils, blighting thousands with its destruction, splitting the lands into pieces before the Wing came with peace and law and plenty.' He sneered. 'Our god does not suffer witchcraft.'

I heard a murmur of approval. If the tide turned too far, Odon and Merovin would turn with it, against me, I was certain of that.

'I am a daughter of the Wing,' I said, standing. 'Or let the salt I swallowed spit out on my tongue. I had no desire to see Prince Isen harmed, for if I hurt him I know the black guard and the whole of Cynghal would wreak heavy vengeance on me and my kin.' If they cut me open, would they see my lies? I covered my fear by shaking my head, feigning a little laugh. 'Please, I am not so bold as that. If you must insult my person, my faith, and my loyalty, please do not insult my intelligence.'

Alar laughed, and so did a few others, even Merovin I thought I heard give a faint ‘true’ of approval. Liran’s thunderous expression softened slightly. I had appealed to the court’s pride, Cynghal strength, Galenish ideas of womanhood. I had also used some of my true fear: that the death of a single prince, or a single king, could not undo what the Cynghals had wrought upon us.

‘Prove it,’ said Dagobert.

‘What?’ I turned to him.

‘Prove that you did not call the beasts.’

I lied. ‘I would not have the first idea how.’

Pain and memory.

‘A blooding is what the old Geveran blasphemy says,’ said another voice. Merovin. I frowned, not expecting him to speak up. Worse, Conrin grinned when he spoke. ‘Appropriate for a dark magic.’

The Geveran raised an eyebrow at me, and I understood what he knew, somewhere hidden in his book of secrets: it could be proven that I had not used the Ways. I was in no pain, not bleeding, there was not a mark on me. Then why would Dagobert suggest something that would exonerate me?

‘Perhaps your priests could check her, Dagobert,’ said Conrin, as if he had just stumbled on the idea.

That was why. They would take me somewhere and cut me, and that would be proof enough to see me burned. That conniving little fucker. He had used his family’s own cursed magic, but he had never felt a shred of remorse in his life. Of course, people did not care about magic and sinning if they could spin its use in their favour.

Even Merovin was frowning now, unable to hide his concern. Alar looked mildly panicked. Dagobert nodded.

‘I will check her,’ he said. ‘And when we find a wound on her body, we will know what she has done.’

Elise looked up. ‘Father,’ she protested. ‘You have not heard me speak.’

‘Quiet Isuire,’ said Liran. ‘Go on then priest. Take her to be checked.’ There was no pity in him, and that chilled me more than an explosion of anger, more than the wandering of his mind. If he was convinced of my guilt, nothing I could say would save me.

‘It is Elise, Father,’ she said, her voice clear.

‘Don’t speak out of turn, Sister-hyem,’ said Gaisa.

‘We are forgetting what Odon has told you,’ Elise pressed. ‘What I will confirm. The queen told Isen not to enter the gorge, when the others goaded him in.’ She stood, and she stood for me. ‘She offered to come with me when I came to fetch you. Her actions do not match with guilt.’

She had spoken. It took all her courage but she did it. She stood against her father and brothers, and raised her voice for mine, which not one other person in this room had dared.

Perhaps it was surprise that the quiet princess spoke so well that beckoned in a warmer feeling in the room as many heads turned towards Liran.

‘We should hold a reprieve,’ said Odon. ‘Have the queen guarded. Return when things are calm.’

‘Great king, this is your wife,’ said Ducal Uhtren. ‘Would you let her stand so accused with not a word in her favour? Let her gather a defence of advocates willing to speak for her. Under the laws of the Wing that is her right.’

‘This is true,’ said the low priest Aeswyth, from where he had been quietly standing. Dagobert glared at him. ‘The queen need not bare herself to a priest if there are good men willing to speak for her.’

‘Quite.’ This was Gaisa now, stepping forward. ‘Would anyone here like to take the part of the queen against the word of a prince and a high priest?’

I could not let the silence go on too long, and let them condemn me with the court’s unwillingness to speak for me.

‘I would be checked by the women,’ I said, not looking at the priest. They had not heard Conrin and Gundobar’s version of events, they had clearer heads, and warmer hands.

‘You will be checked when you are told!’ said Liran, his voice hollow, his light eyes boring into me over the pommel of his sword. ‘Go with the priest.’

Dagobert smiled. And it was that which made up my mind.

I was permitted no reprieve, so I would give none.

‘There is no need,’ I said at last, and reached for my cloak. I untied it at the neck, and let it drop.

‘What is she doing?’ said Dagobert.

‘I am proving that I am unscathed,’ I said, unbuckling the belting of my tunic. ‘And innocent. Is that not what you suggested?’

They wanted me stripped bare? Then I would strip myself. They wanted to take my power from me? I would claim it back. Odon hissed in surprise.

‘Queen Tilde, do not shame yourself,’ he said. ‘I will … find a witness to come with you.’

Nefka. Loyal to the king, not to me. He only wanted to protect his liege’s reputation.

‘I am accused of murdering a prince,’ I said, and I looked over the court, daring any of them to deny me. Elise was giving me round blue eyes, but she had her hand over her mouth and was not removing it. Then I turned my gaze to Liran. ‘What greater shame can there be?’

My tunic hung to my knees, unbound now at the waist, and I pulled apart the straps that kept it closed and tight beneath my arms. And I did not take my eyes off my husband, my tyrant.

‘Queen Tilde!’ barked Dagobert, his voice rising in shock. ‘This is indecent! I will take you into a private chamber.’

‘If I am to be accused before my king, I will be proclaimed innocent before him too.’

‘Guards!’ snapped Conrin. ‘Someone! Take hold of the queen!’

I pulled the cloth over my head. No one moved. Conrin frowned, then looked for his at the door, and jerked his chin towards me. Two moved forward, but when Odon turned to them, they stopped in their tracks.

‘Are you to arrest her with not a shred of evidence, Prince Conrin?’ said a Cynghal erl.

My tunic was on the floor. My fine jerkin was next, its padded stripes of pink and cream. Egil was half laughing, Alar had folded his arms, looking tickled, which infuriated me. Liran still said nothing, so I untied the little green silks that went from my throat to my waist, and stripped down to the fine pleating of my shirt. I heard another chuckle then, somewhere between disbelief and awe.

‘Queen Tilde, desist or you will be punished,’ snapped Dagobert.

This obsession with what I wore or did not wear. Travel clothes to court, the wrong dress to wed in, now to be undressed was malfeasance too. Some of the nobles were leering, some gaping, some blushing at the ceiling.

‘Then I will be punished for something I have done instead of something I have not.’

I unbelted my leggings from beneath my shirt, and pulled them down to my boot to a roar of approval. I heard Conrin let out a rather unmanly

squeak as I reached for the hem of my undershirt.

Liran stood. ‘Enough, woman!’ he said.

I stopped. ‘If you must be sure, my king, I would strip myself bare and lie naked for your inspection.’

I would rather not. I would rather he never look at me naked. To this day, his peremptory attentions had been without ceremony, and with little undressing. Only Elise had seen my full nakedness. I glanced at her again, and I saw fear and hunger warring in her eyes.

I thought a terrible thought: *I could use that.*

It was only then that I stopped. It was not the flesh that shamed me, but my own mind.

‘Is this the act of an innocent woman?’ said Dagobert, seething, gesturing at me.

‘Come, High Priest,’ chuckled Ducal Ademar, to my relief. ‘Lack of shame does not make her a murderer.’ A few others laughed, and then caught themselves when Liran glared at them, remembering that a prince was dead, and the king was still out for blood.

‘I am innocent of murder,’ I said. ‘As well my accusers know. I wonder what drove them to point at me so assuredly, when they indeed seem to know nothing with any certainty at all.’

I looked, not at Conrin, who was lucky his swan blood protected him, but at Gundobar. Oh to have one small vengeance, to give the king something to sink his sword into. His smirk, to my delight, was gone already.

‘Gundobar indeed,’ echoed Merovin, ‘was the first to mention the queen’s name with a clawed tongue.’

Odon drew off his cloak with his good hand, and threw it about me to hide my modesty. It fell about my knees, and had the scent of hard liquor in it. Indeed, I felt a flask in one of the pockets hit heavily at my thigh as it landed.

Palati Gundobar swallowed, the apple bobbing in his bare throat.

‘Alar held the queen back from the stampede because she was a woman,’ said Odon, his hand paternally on my shoulder. I wished to push it off. I did not. ‘With a womb that could even now bear the king’s cub. Why did you goad your prince into danger, Palati, and then not run to save him?’

‘I did not wish two princes to die,’ said Gundobar quickly. ‘I saved Conrin.’

‘Yet you pushed Isen into entering the valley,’ I said. ‘You questioned his valour. Did you not then think that it might end in his death? When I, the princess, and Palati Odon, valued his life over his bravery, which he had already proven time after time on the battlefield?’

I saw Dagobert swallow, his eyes flick to Conrin, whose cheeks had heightened with colour.

‘I did no such thing,’ said Gundobar. ‘You see the witch turn to blame me!’

‘I am no witch, Palati Gundobar,’ I said. Not yet. ‘But from the vantage of horseback, surely a palati should have been looking for dangers, caring for his princes. I tried to warn him, but what did *you* do? I am but a woman, are you not a man?’

Gundobar’s jaw flexed, he looked again to the prince. ‘Prince Conrin,’ he said. ‘Tell them. Tell them how I saved you.’

Liran’s hand was flexing on his sword. He wanted death for a death. He would have it.

It seemed Conrin thought the same. ‘You did goad him,’ he said, turning to Gundobar. ‘He would not have faced that boar alone if it was not for you.’

Gundobar’s mouth opened, closed. He looked at Dagobert, panic-stricken, and met no warmth, then at Liran, who was standing.

He went to his knees. ‘It was not like that,’ he said. ‘I did nothing.’

‘Precisely,’ said Conrin. He needed a new scapegoat, and quickly, to settle his father’s blood lust before Liran’s confused mind turned to him. Fool, walking into a trap that showed how quick his faith would turn from even his most loyal.

‘You,’ said Liran, standing, his voice low. I ground my teeth.

‘I will be vouched for!’ said Gundobar, looking to the court only to find averted eyes. See how he liked it, the justice that had been given to the people of Salt Lake.

But though I wanted him punished, I wanted power more. ‘My king,’ I said reluctantly, ‘let him be tried for his treason.’

Liran advanced, his lip curled, his sword dragging on the floor.

‘My king,’ protested Aeswyth, stepping forward. ‘Listen to Queen Tilde.’

Others were protesting, Liran stepping forward. Alar smirked as Elise held out her hand.

‘Please, Father, stay your hand.’

‘My *son is dead*,’ he snarled. ‘And I will have bloody vengeance before the sun has set on his corpse!’

Something in Gundobar snapped. He flung out a hand of accusation, towards Conrin. ‘*He*—’

Conrin was ready. He grabbed the hand and drew his hunting knife, thrusting its point between the palati’s lips, strong enough to crack his teeth. Gundobar screamed, his tongue slicing on the blade.

‘Enough lies, man,’ said the prince. ‘Do you have no shame?’

Gundobar closed his eyes, still screaming.

Liran’s gaze was unfocussed, his lips drawn back in anger to reveal his yellow teeth. He looked half mad. I needed him sane, I needed the respect he commanded, the power and fear he held, just enough to keep the loyalty of nations.

Gundobar let out a muffled shriek as Conrin held the back of his head, blood splattering from mouth and nostrils as the prince tore his blade through and turned him towards his wrathful father.

‘Give him the Cynghal justice, Father!’

He threw him on to the ground, still bleeding, and Liran raised his great sword, bringing it down on the palati’s back, the great feat of his strength slamming the blade so hard through Gundobar’s flesh and bones that the metal bit into the stone beneath him.

And the palati’s screams were gone.

Elise had stuffed her hand into her mouth, the Galenish in the room looked horrified, scandalised. This was not the way of courts and kings, this was the way of tyrants and raiders. Barbarians. Liran had spent half his life ensuring that each land he conquered obeyed the same rules, the same reeves and magistrates, taxes and tithes. This was not the justice of the Wing, Conrin was right, this was the justice of the Cynghals.

And some of them cheered. The guard, the erls, the old men roared with their justice as Liran lifted his bloodied sword from the corpse. Odon looked as if he was resisting the urge to do the same. The differences between the courts had never been so stark.

‘You forget me,’ Liran snarled. ‘You forget with your machinations, your conniving, that I am king! I am the voice of the Wing! I am the descendent of the swan! And I will remind you of what that means.’

I held myself still, as afraid as the rest of them of that blade and the hand that held it. And Conrin the pious, the courtly, the joust winner, stood with

blood on his clothes, just like his father, having killed not only a palati, but a palati who had been his ally. Perhaps now he had earned some of their fear, but I had no doubt he was losing some of their love as well. Alar stood in his red cape, watching this play out, smiling.

It seemed my plan of playing the long, slow game of politics might be absorbed in a battle of succession sooner than I thought.

‘Let-let us calm our fury,’ Elise said at last, looking at her father. ‘Please, let us put Isen to rest.’

Liran stared at her, then he passed his hand over his face, and when he removed it he was again the king I had heard the tales of, serious, calm. It was as if he had caught on the memory of Isen and held it in his grip. He held a hand out to Elise who, after a moment, went to him, taking it with a look that disturbed me: a sickening kind of relief, an admiration almost like worship.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Thirty-seven

Elise

Elise could not bear the closeness of the halls, the whispers of the servants. She was three breaths from screaming, whether with joy or terror, she did not know. But still she led her father to his room, away from further danger, and for a moment, she felt everything she had ever dreamed of. His acknowledgement, his pride, his love. His forgiveness.

Then halfway there he called her Isabella, at the door he asked her to go find Isen.

She had gone to find Odon, who was already limping on his way.

Isen was dead. Had ceased to be. Her brothers were corrupt and ungovernable, yet she had dared not stand against them until she realised that if Dagobert took Tilde away she would never see her again.

Elise could still feel the shifting in her, the coiling, deepening. Grief, joy, desire, uncertainty, and shame. Too much shame to face Tilde.

She grabbed her sword from her chambers – she did not feel safe here – and walked into the storm despite Torna's protests. She was filled with purposeless rage, helpless again. She couldn't save Isuire, she couldn't save Isen, couldn't save Tilde. She was fit for little except sitting, weaving, and waiting.

The air was dark; the women were running back from the cold house, sheltered by their servants and serfs. Elise dared not join them, nor go back to her brother. Her whole self was tainted, the murmur of the wood and the demands of the Wing, the binding of her family and the call of the woman of the forest. She could not stand before her Isen's corpse and wash his skin knowing that she was beginning to despise everything he stood for.

No one stopped Elise as stalked towards the training green, breathing hard and quick. In the thick-falling rain, no one was there to see her.

The storm beat down in a rush of howling air, tearing her breath from her mouth and washing her face with tears. Her mother had told her once that the wind beat hard when the Wing was wrathful, but it felt as if the storm had come from her breath, her heart. As if she was the god that had made it.

There was no one in the green; some lights instead shone from inside the storehouses, in the horse barns and the coops where the animals were kept. She could hear the laughter from inside. Did they celebrate Isen's death down in Faoldun city? Where he and his black guard had killed their neighbours?

Elise shook her head, wiping the water from her face and caught sight of the warriors of wood and straw that the squires tilted against. There, she found one, stuck with arrows, and she did not hesitate. Elise wrenched off the sheath of her child's practice sword, the blade kept carefully sharp, and ran at it, screaming over the sound of the wind and the rain.

She went through the hazy memories of fighting forms. The first: the waiting swan. The second: the turning bird. The third: the rising wing. She stabbed at the straw, slashed, stepped back, around. She was rusty, her stance unfounded, the sword too short.

But she pulled on the memories of her childhood, the happiest ones. When she had practised with her brothers, her strength not so far from theirs. She had been a brave child once, a fighter. Before the rules had changed, before her sisters had left her and her mother had hidden her away. Before she had pushed down every part of her that felt true and real because she was terrified of her own unhappiness.

The straw beast before her was her enemy. Was the priests. Was Conrin, and Gaisa. Was Egil. Her mother. Was Tilde. Was Isen. The Wing. It was herself. The only one spared was Hein, innocent Hein, who was nothing more than a boy. Hein, who would grow up just like the rest of them, who would see her small, quiet and weak.

But for now she allowed the creature in her to stretch, to beat its wings, to rage and grieve. To sin. She lost her form, lost care, shouting as she hacked the straw to pieces. She did not notice her skin begin to tear, the rain and wind intensify, screeching on a wave of cold as they swung to the west, to the mountains.

'Elise!'

She barely heard her own name above her rage, wilder than the hurricane.

'Elise stop! You're bleeding.'

Her hands were caught in another's, and she turned, snarling, till she saw who it was.

Tilde. She had followed her, drawn to her through the cloaking of the storm. Her hair was plastered about her face and neck, her eyes liquid-gleaming in the darkness around them.

‘I went looking for you,’ she said, anger in her voice. ‘Your maid was worried.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Elise, gasping for breath. She was half crying, half mad with hysteria and cold.

‘Sorry for what?’ asked Tilde, dropping her hands. ‘Sorry for letting them humiliate and accuse me? Sorry for kissing me then abandoning me?’

‘No, I …’

Elise dropped the sword and put the backs of her bleeding hands to her forehead, the gesture of a penitent. Water trickled down her hair, her ears, her neck. It beaded on Tilde’s black lashes, her dark curls.

‘Then what the fuck are you sorry for?’ said Tilde.

‘I’m sorry for not speaking!’ said Elise, bringing her hands down. ‘I’m sorry! I have tried before, and it broke everything. I didn’t … want to break you!’

‘What are you talking about?’ said Tilde.

‘I did not know before she died, I did not see. I couldn’t protect her.’ Elise stepped back, shivering. ‘But she left me a letter, telling me what happened. Telling me why she was leaving me.’

Tilde understood. ‘Princess Isuire?’ she said.

‘I brought it to Father,’ she said. ‘Not even at court, in his private counsel. I read it to him and demanded justice. I did.’ She was bold, once. ‘And it was the first time I saw him snap. He struck me, choked me, kicked me. I thought he was going to kill me.’ She shuddered. *Unfilial. Impious. Stupid.*

‘Isen stopped him,’ said Elise. ‘Pulled him back. But he was so furious that I had struggled so to read, but could read him her words.’

‘*That* is why he stopped you reading?’

‘It was my penance,’ said Elise. She had repented, oh she had repented. For telling him at all. For not fighting back. For not *making* him see. For Isuire.

Tilde didn’t understand. She knew his rages, but she did not know he was not always so. He had been a man of great joys, of strong ambitions, of meticulous work, and calculated cruelty.

But then things began to slip and change, and degrade, and rot. She crumpled to remember the sound of her own sobbing as her father struck her, kicked her. She had begged for forgiveness, begged and begged as she tasted blood. Not for Isuire, for herself. But that was one punishment, what followed were humiliations.

'It's been *years*,' said Tilde, shaking her, half embracing her, half holding her up. 'What could you have spoken that would cause such violence? What happened to Isuire?'

'Alar.' Elise said it. 'Alar happened, Tilde.'

Comprehension bloomed on her face, underneath the rain, then shrivelled with horror.

'He wanted a child of the swan,' said Elise. 'Pure blooded. He asked for her hand, and Father refused. But Alar thought the marriage would make him a king, and that if she was pregnant they could not deny him. And if she had the glory in her, nor could she.'

'Blood magic,' breathed Tilde. Their family's magic, used against family.

'I didn't see the signs,' said Elise. 'The way she stopped eating, stopped washing. Stopped everything.' She laughed hollowly. 'When I found the letter, I thought … even if I couldn't save her. I could avenge her.' She found she was no longer crying, she was long past tears. She was heart-sore, soul-numb. 'And I failed her again in that. We were supposed to love each other, look after each other.'

Not just she, Isuire, and Erelle. Her brothers, Alar who had done it. Whom Isuire had accused in her refined, cautious hand, hiding her pregnancy as if it was her shame and not his.

Alar whose punishment was not death or degradation, but to be made a low king and quietly sent away.

'Your father knew,' said Tilde, putting her hand over her own heart, and then over Elise's. 'That's what made him angry, why he punished you for speaking. He knew, and tried to hide his failure, and hated that you brought it to light.'

Elise sniffed, the needles of rain slid down their skin, cold and pressing like a thousand fingers, wind tugging at their hair. 'Of course he knew,' she whispered. 'They all knew. But a disgrace of Alar's would disgrace all of us, the glory of the swan. Don't you understand, Tilde? We are hyem, we are family, we are blood. To break from our family is to break ourselves apart.'

‘Then *be* broken,’ said Tilde. There was a desperation in her face that Elise felt like a fire in her body. The same desire, the half-wildness. She reached up and grasped Elise’s shoulders, her thumbs pressing into the bone. ‘Let yourself exist as you are!’

‘I don’t know how,’ said Elise. ‘I don’t know how to be anything anymore. I thought I could protect you, but I was wrong. You don’t need me at all.’

Tilde’s lips parted slightly. ‘Need is not the same as want,’ she said. ‘And you should take what you want, Princess.’

Her hands moved to Elise’s neck, and she pulled her down into a kiss. Soft, warm, tender. Elise felt a tug in the deepest part of her, like taking flight, like falling.

She pulled back a moment; Tilde let her. If she wanted to run, she could, if she wanted to deny her, she could.

She did not want to. She put her injured hands to Tilde’s waist, pulled her closer. Their mouths met again, and Elise deepened the kiss with all her years of longing. She could feel Tilde’s breasts pressed against hers, her body, warm, delicious, willing.

Elise opened her mouth, and let in Tilde’s tongue. Tilde’s breath hitched, as Elise’s teeth parted, and she returned the offering. She tasted the Merogian’s mouth with all the hunger she had always felt, but never acknowledged. She clung to her with every fibre of longing that sang in her flesh. It was the only thing that made sense anymore.

They crept quietly to Elise’s chambers, where Torna had set a fire and some small kindnesses: flowers on the pillow, the last of the lavender, to help with sleep, hot water and herbs, waiting by a pot hanging over the flame, with some sweet bites of wafer and spiced wine.

Elise took the queen’s hands, pulling her to the fire. ‘You’re soaked through,’ she said, her own dripping clothes sticking to her body, heavy and clinging. ‘Where are your ladies?’

‘I told them to keep vigil,’ she said, shivering slightly. The flush of her lips had taken on a purplish sheen. ‘I do not think my chambers safe tonight.’

‘Then … stay here. Let me serve you.’

Tilde looked at her with a thirst that set fire to Elise’s belly, dropping down between her legs. Elise put her hands on her queen’s shoulders, traced

them to her throat, and carefully unclasped the brooch that closed it.

It slithered, damp, to the floor.

Tilde would not be still. She ran her fingers up Elise's hunting tunic, letting their tips brush her sides, just graze her breasts, then settle at the hollow of her throat as Elise found the knot of her belt. She worked at it, digging her knuckles into the tie, which tugged Tilde closer. Elise swallowed. The leather was worked to look like scales, the buckle shaped like a snake's head, but it came away in her hands. Beneath, she could feel warmth drawing her like a flame in the dark.

She stopped, drawing her hands back. Out of the corner of her eye, she had glimpsed the blue of her tapestry, the tangle of her brothers, of her life, of her line. She remembered her wish that seemed so long ago, that she could dedicate all her skill, or her life, to her father's honour, to the worship of the Wing.

And now she was here, standing with his young wife, desperate to suck all the water from her skin, desperate to hold her delicate, curved body, to kiss the pearls at her ears into water drops, until she stood as brash and bold as the moment Elise had first wanted her, naked in her bath.

Tilde gazed up at her, then at where her eyes had gone. She did not push further, but did not back away. Her hands lingered at Elise's chest, where she had somehow worked the laces of her tunic open. With her other, she reached up to brush the damp hair from Elise's brow, drawing the princess's attention back to her.

'It was a sad story in your tapestry,' she murmured. 'Of a woman who just wanted to be free.'

Elise felt the coiling muscle of the beast inside, the beast she could be, of hunger and wanting and delicious sin. The creature who had been caught on the windowsill, but wanted to fly.

She dropped the belt, and caught up instead the aglets of Tilde's gown, pulling them away, faster now, so she could push the blue silk over the queen's shoulders. There, it hung on the tips of her breasts, exposing the softness of her skin, the fineness of her bones.

Elise tangled her fingers in Tilde's hair, and gently pulled her head back so she could put her mouth to the slope of her neck. Tilde let her, gasping as Elise kissed upwards, over her throat, to the dip beneath her ear. 'Yes,' Elise breathed there, focussing only on this moment, this feeling, this delight. 'Let us pretend it never happened.'

She kissed the beating rush of her throat, starving-deep.

Elise pushed her dress down further. It rubbed against her wet skin, tugging her chemise with it, revealing the darkness of her nipple, so long since Elise had first seen it. Tilde shivered, her skin rising in gooseflesh, as Elise gently bit the softness of her neck, and put her hand to her perfect breast. Tilde moaned, and Elise's felt her body respond in turn, the fire turning liquid, her own breath catching.

Tilde wanted it too. As Elise kissed her, she fumbled swiftly for Elise's clothes, peeling them from her as Elise put her mouth back on the queen's. She was a dam breaking, a shell cracking, and all that she was could not be returned to the shape it had been.

Tilde peeled her wool tunic and shirt from her like petals from a bud as Elise, now naked to her chausses, walked the woman backwards, towards the fire where she would not shiver, pressing her against the mantle.

Sin on sin. They kissed harder, Elise's hands aching with their wounds, with the long buried heat of wanting. Tilde pulled her against the stone, and Elise threaded her leg between the queen's, half lifting her. Tilde's dress hung from her elbows now, the rest of her exposed, and Elise fumbled beneath her skirt, lifting, seeking for that quiet, hot, slick place that she could feel pulsing between her own legs.

Tilde guided her, and her fingers found her wet. Her breath quickened, her cheeks flushed as Elise slid inside her. Tilde guided her too, in pace, slow at first, soft, then faster. Their half-parted garments clung together as Tilde cried out, her body trembling in Elise's hands.

The queen, still panting, pushed Elise back and onto the bear fur before the flame. She undid the tie of Elise's wool chausses and pulled them from her feet.

'I can stop,' she said, her hand on her calf, stroking her leg. Elise's head fell back, her hair falling out, clinging to her body. She should end this, she must, but she had no heart to turn away, to pray, to deny her own, her self.

'Wing, do not stop,' she told her. Tilde smiled wickedly, and her hands moved up Elise's leg, tickling her knee, squeezing her thighs. Elise quaked with each touch of her nails, the bite of her rings. To Elise, it felt like she was seeing Tilde again for the first time. Proud, strong and dangerous, entirely possessed of her own body, her own power, vulnerable, and desperate, and sweet.

Elise reached out, daring to touch her breasts again with her fingers, then moaning softly as Tilde kissed the blade of her breastbone, the pink of her nipple, the softness of her stomach.

Lower. Tilde's tongue touched her hips, her mouth reached her thighs; all the while she reached up to stroke the pink of her breast.

And then her lips found the apex of her thighs, and Tilde pressed her mouth to the darkness between them. A thrill ran up Elise's spine, a shiver down her heels, as she felt the press of the queen's tongue. Gently stroking, first, then harder, more insistent, Elise gripped the furs in her hand, her back arching as she half-whimpered, half cried out. Her body shuddered at the queen's kisses, and then she felt her ringed fingers pressing at the place she felt hottest, sliding inside, one, two, matching the rhythm of her mouth.

Tilde looked up, her breath catching. The warmth had grown in her, her eyes were bright, her lips were red, and Elise thought she might devour her if given the moment, if given the chance. If Tilde did not devour her first.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Thirty-eight

Tilde

If I thought I had reprieve, I was mistaken.

When I returned to my rooms in the morning, Captain Perin was standing guard, a fine new gold earring in his ear, Galenish, that he had probably won in one of his gambling games. He bowed to me.

‘My queen,’ he said. ‘It is difficult to guard you if I cannot find where you are.’

‘Isn’t it your job to know?’ I said, with a smile to tell him it was a jest.

‘You should have called me to the hall. It is not right that you faced them alone.’

‘What would you have done?’ I asked. ‘Died for my honour, or started a war?’

He sighed, and I relented. ‘My apologies,’ I said. ‘This has all been very distressing, so the princess offered me comfort.’

Comfort was not far from a lie. My clothes were still damp, though we had stretched them by the fire, and I wondered if he could smell my sin on me. I felt aglow with it.

He bowed his head. ‘You high nobles fight strange battles,’ he said. ‘But someone still gets hurt.’

I frowned at his warning as he opened the door for my chamber. There, Marolyn was pacing the floor while Hadiah scribbled feverish notes in a wax tablet. Around them, the serfs were sprinkling water and oil on the reed matting Since Muirenn’s punishment, the two were almost as stiff with each other as they were with me, but at least I had Muirenn sketch out all the ingredients and instructions Egil had told her under threat of death if she breathe a word to Gaisa. Between those and Elise’s description, Ziyan was working on replicating the concoction. Another weapon for my arsenal.

‘Where the fuck have you been?’ said Marolyn as I closed the door behind me. Hadiah threw down her tablet.

‘Tilde, we were so worried,’ she said, coming to me. ‘Your clothes are wet. Helwinde, please stoke up the fire.’

‘Are you all right?’ Marolyn asked from a distance. ‘Was it the princes, did they try to hurt you?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I …’

‘Miras was beaten badly, he would not say by who. They broke his fingers. Perin saved him.’

Someone still gets hurt. The bard was known to weave fine and popular songs that made the people warm to me. Someone didn’t want him making another.

I held her hand. ‘Is he safe now?’

‘I sent Ziyan to him.’

How did I explain? How did I dare go reclaim some of my body, something for myself. ‘I … the princess was upset. She went out in the rain. I had to bring her in. I promise, I am well.’

Marolyn narrowed her eyes. That is not what my people needed. We needed my body to belong to a man, and then a boy. We needed it to be a vessel for our hopes. That was what I had promised Guwetha, that is why she gave me her death.

How dare I?

Hadiah tightened her hands in mine, drawing me to the fire.

‘A summons has come for you,’ she said. ‘To see the king in the morning. It …’ She sighed. ‘It was sealed with the sign of the Wing.’

Dagobert.

My guard escorted me to his apartments with Perin at their head. The hard-soled boots around me and the clink of mail were, for the first time, a comfort. It felt like a blade was at my back for once, not in it.

The king’s chamber doors were opened by a chamberlain, another palati who had the pretty-light eyes of most Cynghals, but who gave me a tentative and encouraging smile before he announced me to the room at large. I wondered which version of my husband I might face today. The holy warrior of the Wing? The shrewd and strategic king? The volatile keeper of no peace? The father who had lost his son?

‘Come in,’ said Dagobert’s voice, not Liran’s. ‘Your guard stays outside the door.’

I looked at Perin, and he dismissed the rest, escorted me inside himself. A fire was in the grate, barely clinging to a flickering light, and the tall, thin windows were uncurtained and open. A cold morning breeze came into the

room, tugging at the cloth that hung down from the rafters, and with it the hard stare of morning light cut in beams across the room, like the marks on a checkerboard.

All, at least, seemed at peace. A table had been set near the fire, and there sat Dagobert, his face weary but his robes neat. Many of the king's inner counsel were there too: Merovin, Odon of course, Ademar, Cynefel's husband Uhtren, Conrin's favoured Thedemer. None of the princes.

'All of them,' said Dagobert.

'I am only part of the furniture, High Priest,' said Perin with a bow, putting his hands behind him and standing back against the wall. I shot him a grateful look as Dagobert clicked his tongue but decided not to argue.

Liran had aged in the hours since I saw him last, but not in a way that diminished him. He had not shaved, and silver shone at his chin, like the frosted shavings from a weapon's whetting, and the crags of his face had deepened around his eyes and mouth, as if he had been screaming all the night through. There was a servant in the corner, picking up pieces of broken glass and scattered ash. One knelt with a rag, mopping up a splatter of blood. Whose?

'My king,' I said at last, kneeling. 'Good nobles. High Priest.'

'Sit,' said the king, as the chamberlain shut the doors, closing away the rest of my guard.

I spared Ademar a smile, and he offered me a careful nod. I went to the table, which bore a strange Cynghal mix of sweet and savoury: boiled eggs and smoked fish, hard cheese and sweet preserves. The bread was yesterday's, but fire-toasted and set by fresh butter and slices of pie. I sat in the only empty seat.

Dagobert watched me. This day, he wore a collar stitched with gilded bird bones. Mostly priests wore those, as a symbol of piety. It seemed strange, to use the dead corpse of a thing that you had faith in. The forest at least was all alive.

Before me there was a covered dish, and one of the beltless serfs came forward to lift its lid. Beneath was a plate of cold spleen, doused in vinegar, otherwise unseasoned. I had spoon and knife, and understood this was to be my breakfast, specially set.

'How kind,' I said, sliding my hand along the plate as if testing for heat, but touching the blue stone to the meal. 'May I ask why I was prepared such a dish for the early morning?' The stone stayed clear. Unpoisoned.

‘It is the dish of a penitent,’ said Dagobert. ‘Meat, pink or white, raw as the birds eat it, to show the Wing that you are not above the next life.’

He was smiling, his face set in the shape of beneficence. Liran continued to eat, picking cheese in pieces. I noted a goblet by him, silver-banded and filled with a yolky substance and the stink of herbal liqueur. Other than that, from his room, I could scent the acrid leftovers of vomit. He had been drinking, and from the look in his eyes he had not slept.

‘And for what am I repenting?’ I said.

Dagobert’s smile dropped. ‘For your sins of the body,’ he said, and then cast a glare at Uhtren, who had let out a small scoff.

‘The queen will take your penance, Dagobert,’ said Liran over his food.

He gave me a prolonged glance, full of meaning. *Eat.*

I looked down at the offal. I had eaten worse since the kingsmoot, even the roughest, most mottled skin of our beasts, while our servants made soup from the hooves. I slid my knife into the vinegared meat, and lifted it to my mouth, then looked at the priest as I chewed. He seemed dissatisfied, and that pleased me.

‘You will have meat and only meat for the fortnight,’ said Dagobert. ‘No bread, no green. Flank, bird and bone as we travel to Widdin.’

I swallowed, carefully. I had heard of such fasts, if fasts they could be called. Choosing to eat meat was hardly penitent, when most could not afford it.

‘Widdin?’ I said.

‘Isen is to be buried in the Cynghal way,’ said Thedemer. ‘It is what he always wanted, on the north sea, if not in his homeland.’

The conservative black prince didn’t strike me as one to want something so impractical, nor that he would voice such things to Thedemer, who thrived on decadence. Even now he wore an ermine collar that was fit for a king.

‘Thedemer your wife is in her confinement,’ said Uhtren. ‘She should not be dragged from city to city on a whim. Even on the hannerast, it will take weeks.’

‘Four weeks,’ said Thedemer, ‘to be precise. And my lady Daegmar would not be the first woman to give birth on the road. Her people do it all the time.’

Her people. Widdish, Merogians.

‘It is no whim,’ said Odon, and looked up at Dagobert. ‘The high priest insists it is the Wing’s desire.’

Dagobert was ignoring him, and looking at me. ‘Your expression suggests some disagreement, Queen Tilde?’ he said. I schooled my face. ‘What, nothing to say?’

‘Is the priesthood practised in reading a woman’s expressions?’ said Odon mildly. ‘Perhaps you could teach all the husbands in court what to look for?’

Liran snorted, and a couple of the others tittered.

‘You don’t like what she says, and you don’t like it when she is silent,’ Odon continued. ‘You don’t like what she wears, and you don’t like it when she’s naked.’

‘The care of the women falls to me,’ I said. ‘Ducal Uhtren is right, the lady should not be moved. And it is unwise to take more folk into the strangeness of the wood until we understand its current dangers. Boars gathering out of season is one thing, but there are wolves, bears, and dark magics that are yet to be purged.’

‘The hannerast has always been safe,’ said Thedemer. ‘And carefully guarded.’

‘The Wing is stronger than the wood,’ agreed Dagobert. ‘Than witchcraft.’

This was starting to taste like conspiracy, but I did not know exactly the dish. Why Widdin? Unless … Conrin wanted to separate Alar from the ships that had brought him to the east coast. And Thedemer wanted access to his own number of guards.

‘Our faith will guide us through,’ said the markal with a smile. I saw out of the corner of my eye, Merovin reach up and tap his chest, just where the locket hung on mine. He did not look at me, but I knew it was a signal. The pieces were moving in this game, resetting on another board. But why did Liran and Odon go along with it? Nefka himself was tapping at the table, his eye on Dagobert.

‘Tell that to Prince Isen,’ growled Uhtren.

‘Isen,’ said Thedemer ‘picked a fight with the wrong boar.’

Liran swept his hand aside, throwing his goblet and plate clattering to the floor. The first shattered, the second simply landed and spun, sending half-eaten fish flying across the rushes and wood. The serfs moved quickly, coming to clean it up. We were held in suspense for a moment as a servant

brought another goblet to Liran's trembling hand; he gripped it and took a long drink. No one protested, and Thedemer cowered into himself. They still feared him. That was something.

'Get out,' Liran said in a low voice. The others looked at each other.

'My king?' said Ademar.

'The priest has spoken, has he not?' Liran growled. 'His word, as he says, is the Wing's.' He looked at the high priest. He was an unwell man, a grieving man, but he was not entirely a fool. Perhaps he was blind to his sons' griping, but could sense the machinations of Dagobert. 'Is it not?'

Dagobert hesitated for the smallest moment, perhaps some part of him sensing the bait. Liran was not a fool, he was sitting in the water with open jaws, waiting for his enemies to invite themselves in. Dagobert doubled down, and inched himself closer to Liran's teeth.

'It is,' he said.

'And yet, great swan,' Uhtren pressed, oblivious, angry. 'Your word is the *king's.* It is high time you remembered who you are.'

Liran slammed his hand down on the table, but Uhtren did not flinch. I remembered then that the ducals Liran had set to rule Merogia were not just any nobles. Cynefel's husband would have fought with him as Odon had, and Ademar.

'Do not raise a hand to me,' said Uhtren, his voice low. The manner he usually presented was genial, doting on his reserved Merogian wife, calm at court. But here he showed a different side, an edge of threat. No, that would not do. I needed the nobility to tie themselves through Liran to me; those ties could not be severed before I was ready.

'My king is grieving,' I said, standing and turning to Uhtren. 'Please, he is weary, forgive him.'

'Don't tell me what I am, woman,' snapped Liran.

'I will tell you what you need to hear,' I replied. 'I deny you not, only ask you, as your wife, take some rest.'

He paused, and in that breath he grew smaller, as if the fury that had filled him was drawn out.

'I am sorry, Uhtren,' he said at last to everyone's surprise. He cleared his throat. 'Long have I lived through death, and yet so many children I have buried. Every time, it takes a little more from me.'

He sat back down, and I wondered if I should feel something. Sympathy, perhaps. I did not. Colfinn the wicked, they said, Ebba the whore. No

mention of Sanafin, in whose halls we sat.

Uhtren calmed himself with a breath, and bowed to the king, and to me, before turning on his heel and walking towards the door. The others hurriedly made their exit, as if afraid their own monarch would take the sword to them if they lingered too long.

‘Leave us as well, Odi,’ said Liran to the retired general, who looked at me with some combination of sympathy, admiration and fear as he left us alone. I nodded at Perin, who went with him.

I knew what was coming.

Liran picked up his goblet, and tipped its contents down his throat. How many drinks had been thrown throughout the night? How many sleepless hours had he raged at the walls?

Was his energy spent, or was his anger growing?

I sat again, knowing now to let him speak first. To show willing, I took another sliver of meat, and put it in my mouth, as my husband bit into dried fish from his newly served breakfast.

‘I seem to have underestimated you, wife,’ he said at last. ‘Better and wiser women would not have lived to see the sun rise today.’

The vinegar was a sharp tang on my tongue, and my stomach churned.

‘It is not the first attempt on my life, my king,’ I said carefully. I thought of Miras and his broken fingers, and felt a squirm of shame. He almost did not see the sun rise, and I had been bedding my husband’s daughter. I swallowed, wishing I could still taste Elise on my tongue. I wished I could tell him, I wished I could hurt him.

Still, Liran had not ordered me to his bed, as I expected, nor seemed determined to hurt me. This mood was different, troubled, and he smiled now without humour, spitting the bones in his teeth to the floor.

‘I understood something just now,’ he said. ‘When you stood to defend me. Something Odi – I mean Odon, has been telling me a long while. Isen too.’

‘What is it, my king?’ I said, treading carefully.

‘Despite this …’ he tapped his skull. ‘This bore-holing in my head the physiks cannot fix. No matter if my mind strays, or if I lose a child, or a priest, or a battle. No matter who accuses or tries to kill you. You are mine. And if you falter, I can cut you away like dead flesh from a wound, and find some other prettier, younger, more amenable and stupider face to suture it.’

He leaned back, licking his fingers. So this was the level of rage he had settled into. Cold. Calculated. Hurting. I did not speak, I did not trust myself to. Instead, I nodded. ‘Yes, my king.’

That threw him. The gentleness in my voice.

‘You will not act against High Priest Dagobert for his punishment?’ he said.

‘I will not deny the priest,’ I said. The meat sat uneasily in my gut, with the memory of a night of sinning. Poor Elise, desperate for love, I could not imagine how hurt she would be to know some of the delight in bedding her was to have something he couldn’t take from me.

But there was something I needed from him. I had no guarantees, no safety, if his sons became bold enough to strike him down. I needed my winning piece.

A child. Better still, a son. And Elise could not give it to me.

I stood, coming to him. I thought of Elise, her soft skin, her fingers, her breath, and I prepared myself. It was the worst way I could use her, but could I not just … break just a little? Bend some more, to save me pain, and give me power?

‘I will obey, my king,’ I said, and brushed my hands over his hand. ‘I would strip naked for you again, if you asked.’

I had suffered his bruising, his rage, and his disgust. But it was his lust I wanted. And I knew I had some hope of awakening it.

I undressed for him, a perfect performer, and I did it slowly, piece by piece. Hatred warred in his eyes with heat, and I felt my heart grow small.

I let him take me, pliant and willing, lustful and hard, and I pretended I enjoyed it. I allowed him to put his mouth to mine. And I thought of soft hands and storms, and of how to become with child again before this coming one broke.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Thirty-nine

Elise

It had been a long time since Elise had felt some hope, and such fear. The world had grown bigger than her chamber, and full of dangers: stolen kisses, the sweetness of sin, the warring of brothers willing to destroy each other for power.

Now they gathered as if there was no spilled blood between them, riding in pageant on the hannerast once more: the nobles, the servants, the guards. Some of Isen's black guard travelled with them, and carried the prince's casket. There was no time to make something beautiful, so the pine case was stuffed with herbs to hide the inevitable smell, then wrapped in trailing white ribbons, and draped in the black flag of the charging swan. The same flag that hung from the towers of Faoldun, the last time Isen's colours would fly from a conquered keep.

And the family wore grey. Mourning once again, and looking united, though they were the furthest they had ever been from whole.

And Elise, too, was guilty of the breaking.

Tilde. They had called it one night as they fumbled their attire back into decency. A night that never happened, a storm that had passed.

But it had not passed for Elise; it was growing in her as she watched Tilde ride with Liran, saw him spare her a bow, a nod, saw her army marching in green with the other guards of the princes. The storm grew at every glance from her dark eyes, darker in the forest's shadow as they rode on to the hannerast, the proud way she lifted her chin as the local folk came to cheer her departure.

'Queen Tilde!'

'Siege breaker!'

'Saviour of Faoldun!'

'Swan of Ardwen!'

They came to touch her cloak where it draped over her horse, some threw garlands at her, and the women that rode with her, at Elise, but she barely noticed. Her eyes were drawn to the beaded netting wrapped around Tilde's dark hair, imagining that hair draped over her own thighs. If she closed her

eyes she could still feel the sensual teasing of her tongue, the flicker of it, and desire stirred in the princess's belly.

Elise tightened her hands on her own reins. She had betrayed her own father. Tilde had betrayed her husband. A disgusted part of Elise felt foul, like they had made love on her brother's grave.

Another part of her felt free. She had been so bound up in the ties of family, the hard shell of decorum, the certainty of the Wing, that she had never considered the other ways to live a life. Beneath her stretching wings, her dream of running away to monastery and prayer faded. Instead, she held onto a small part of it: run away. With Tilde.

It was a beautiful dream. But it would mean leaving everything she had known. Her family, her god, her purpose. Her forgiveness. Would Tilde even come with her, if she asked?

The mood as they entered the hannerast through the Kanaan gates was tense and grim, despite the marching sounds of the horn and Dagobert's proud blessings as he joined the road. But the forest looked mild and unthreatening: birds flitted between the branches, singing strange music amongst the fading leaves. Between the trunks, the pale cream of fungus fanned up from the tree roots, dappled in the morning light.

Come in, it murmured.

Elise murmured a prayer, hoping the Wing would forgive her.

Bless me in your shade, and shield me from evil. I have tasted the salt and it cleansed me. I will not taste of sin again.

A sin of the mind. She knew now she was lying to her god.

The vanguard saw it first, on the second day. Elise did not hear their cry, but she saw them hurrying back on their horses, the shadows of murmuring branches passing over their padded armour jackets.

'There's another wall,' one of them said, real fright in his voice. 'And …' He came closer to Conrin to report it, who frowned as Elise spurred her horse ahead, passing Tilde where she rode between Captain Perin and Hadiah. As they were moving with speed, only Daegmar and Cynefel were allowed in the litter with Cynefel's infant and wetnurse.

'Be careful,' the queen called out, and Elise reined in her horse, looking back askance.

'The last time the way was blocked we were attacked,' she explained.

'Are you worried about me?' said Elise, with a flutter and a smile.

Tilde frowned slightly.

‘Of course.’

Marolyn came riding back, gave Elise a perfunctory nod, and looked to Tilde and Hadiah.

‘I don’t think you will want to see this,’ she said. ‘But you should.’

Another wall of thorns. Brambles, thick and heavy with summer blackberries, and gorse, blooming long out of season, a castle-wall high, cutting across the path of the hannerast. The king and princes were there already, considering its height.

‘I was wondering why the road was so quiet,’ said Gaisa, looking worriedly over the tangles of branches. There, at the centre, hung a dead swan, its belly open, stinking entrails hanging on the branches below.

‘Why has no one reported this?’ said Conrin.

‘It must be recent,’ said Egil. ‘Or there would have been a crowd waiting at the checkpoint.’

If it was recent that meant the rebels knew they were coming, or had been watching them.

It also meant there was more than one druidim in their ranks.

As it was, there was a small group of traders cooking over a campfire, their mouths red with blackberries. They had all thrown themselves on to their knees, pressing their faces to the earth, as they realised they had crossed paths with the front of a royal contingent.

‘We should turn back,’ said Ducal Ademar. ‘This bodes ill.’

‘They have another druidim,’ murmured Conrin, with a baleful glance at Tilde.

Dagobert was staring at the swan, hands clenching and unclenching. ‘We will go through the wood,’ he declared. Even the swan king’s eyebrows shot into his black and silver hair. ‘They might be trying to force us back to the city for another attack, but if so few went to siege last time then they have not the might to spare against our great array of guards. It is not far around this wall to go back to the road. A loop of a few trees at most.’

At last, Liran smiled, but it did not reach his eyes. He suffered few to order him about so.

‘Through the wood,’ he echoed. ‘You have such faith in the Wing’s love of you, Dagobert?’

Dagobert did not hesitate, he inclined his head. ‘Of course.’

That earned him a chorus of admiration, particularly from the Galenish and the guards

‘This is foolish,’ put in Ademar. ‘We should return to Faoldun.’ He cast a dark look at Thedemer. ‘Immediately.’

‘Let us fetch in some axes,’ said Egil, reasonably. ‘Cut down the path. A few more days will not make a difference to a body.’

‘I do not think that wise,’ said Odon; he was frowning at Liran, but the king had waxed thoughtful. He had a stance on him like he wanted to ride into battle.

‘Are you scared, Palati Odon?’ said Conrin. ‘Perhaps now General Nefka has grown too used to the comforts of palaces.’

‘My king, this is the will of the Wing,’ said Dagobert, nodding as if he half believed himself. ‘Trust me. We will show we have no fear of superstition and mummery; we will show that our faith is stronger than our magic, that the swan princes can lead the way.’

Conrin straightened his back, smiling like the priest had just ruffled his hair. He had put the emphasis on princes, excluding Alar.

‘It would be a mark of our future,’ Dagobert pushed, ‘proof that it is time to name an heir apparent. To turn back, a sign of our failure, our weakness.’

Liran’s smile didn’t fade or falter. Elise could see he was calculating risks.

‘What does the queen say?’ called out Uhtren, looking to Tilde. She was staring at the swan, hanging on the branches, but at Uhtren’s call turned to look at the gathered men and Elise, the women behind. Elise had never seen them lean to her mother in this way, hanging on for her word.

‘The queen says it would be wiser to turn back,’ she said. ‘Even great warriors know the wisdom of a strong retreat, and these woods are dangerous even without the threat of rebels in the trees. They have chosen to raise this wall, to punish or misdirect us, I do not know, but I would not risk the court when we could draw them back to stone walls and safety.’

‘Of course a woman would capitulate,’ said Dagobert. ‘And Merogians are ever weak kneed, easily bent.’ He sneered and turned to the king. ‘You want to tame the woods, then tame them.’

Elise wondered that Dagobert’s faith was so strong, or why he wished to make it to the north so quickly. If it was a secret care for Isen, then he had hidden it too well under a veil of hatred.

Liran gazed into Dagobert's eyes; he would not back down from an open challenge. 'Let us go then,' he said. 'Anyone who wishes to turn back may do so, and anyone who keeps my side must pray that Dagobert's faith preserves us.'

The horses did not want to go in. Their ears flattened and their hooves stamped as they were nudged off the bright, flat hannerast into the darkness of the wood. Alar looked the most scared of her brothers. Elise had never seen him look so frightened. But few of the men dared turn back and lose face, and where their husbands went the wives must follow. Cynefel alone went back at Uhtren's insistence, with a herald, some fearful servants, and a guard, to warn the town to prepare for another attack.

There were no horns this time, no blasting of hooves and barking of dogs with the heat of the chase in their bones. They entered the forest like children creeping into kitchens to make away with honeycakes, and shivered as the branches grew around them like a shroud, its shadow pulling gently over the faces of the dead.

And as they entered, Elise could feel the build of the wood's voices. Tilde's ancestors.

What is this, a step? A hoof? A breath?

What is this, prey?

'We should not be doing this,' whispered Daegmar. Blankets had been piled up on a pony for the girl, and she sat side saddle, clutching her belly. Her husband had not come to check if she was well. Cynefel had begged her to go back with her to Faoldun, with her nursemaid and babe, but Daegmar had only replied with tears in her eyes: 'Blessed is the Wing, and blessed is my husband, whom I must obey.'

It seemed those blessings faded now as she was faced with the path ahead. What did she think, that if she showed her faith and bravery that Thedemer would finally love and accept her? Perhaps. She was so young, and perhaps not as sick of the world as Elise.

'Pin your courage to your heart, Daegmar,' said Ysel, though her voice was uncertain. 'You are a true woman of greater Cynghal.'

'But he's mad, Ysel,' said Lisane. 'Haven't we all heard the horrors of folk leaving the hannerast? Didn't Alar lose half an army once trying to take a shortcut to Falcan?'

‘Most tell tales of people alone,’ said Tilde soothingly, astride her own horse. Unlike the beasts, she seemed almost more alive in the shade, dappled light glimmering over her face. ‘We are together, my lady, and we will protect each other.’ She considered a moment. ‘My mother said music was the best way to hold back the dark and steel the heart. Perhaps … you would like to join me in song?’

She looked down at Miras, who had refused to abandon her, though he kept his hands tucked tight against his chest in their slings. He looked ready for his knees to give in, but he gave her a tremulous smile. The trees seemed to flex around them as the coffin was borne in, carried on the backs of Isen’s warriors.

‘My voice can still sing,’ he said.

‘The fair march,’ said Tilde, to a murmur of approval. ‘To chase away the shadows.’

A Cynghal song, of Liran’s victories. He laughed and nodded, then raised up his sweet voice over the sounds of the birds and the whispers of the trees. Tilde joined him, and Hadiah, then the other women as well. Only Marolyn did not, her neck bent as if under the world’s weight.

The trees seemed to quieten, leaning in, listening. Elise looked back, towards the edge of the wood, expecting to see the hannerast, a bright and dusty ribbon behind them.

But the way was already dark.

They did not panic when Dagobert tried to lead them back to the road and could not find it again. The court did not stop. Food was eaten on horseback as their steeds picked their feet from the clinging of the mud. The priest said shakily they would head directly northwest, towards Falcan, where they would be able to take the straight road to Widdin. Conrin voiced his approval. Liran said nothing. It was hubris that drove the priest now; he had set his faith at his ability to navigate through the forest. It was hubris too for Liran to allow him, thinking that whatever his arrogance brought his court, they would survive it.

Instead, the troubled court drew itself to Tilde. Even Hein came to ride with the women and Elise with his tutors, holding up the cage that Gaisa had given him for his mouse, and showing Mog the trees, naming the pretty birds in the branches: blackbirds, pipits, choughs and sparrows. The air was strangely warm against the autumn, as if the trees produced their own heat.

Hein sang too, the rhymes and songs the bard and women carried forward, occasionally the men or the guards joining in against their worries. Elise felt a blossoming of hope for her youngest brother, that he had a kinder future ahead.

The dark of the trees reminded Elise of the Nest. Altar-like, they rose up, quiet thickening between them, a physical body of it, kept barely at bay by their chatter and song. They obeyed its imperative, keeping voices muted as they passed between the great heights of cedars, looking with awe at the climbing green of moss and lichen growing in creases between branches and bark. Even the hens and pigeons the servants carried with their train for eggs, meat and messages did not warble, their yellow eyes peeking out at the ivy, the thorns, the soft carpet of leaves and needles.

‘Oh,’ Hein said, pointing away from the main train. ‘Pears.’

Elise followed his hand, and after a moment saw what he saw: autumn fruit hanging down from the branches, hazels in their little bags, walnuts that should not quite yet be ready falling to the floor, the skin of their apple-flesh shells tempting a thumb to come in and break it. Ears of mushrooms stood out from the trunks, like plates and feasting cups, full of clear, delicious water.

‘Don’t touch the fruit,’ said Tilde, just as Hein almost broke towards the bounty. ‘They are temptations, little swan, and will lead you astray.’

Hein paused, and put down his hand. ‘Yes your highness,’ he said. And she nodded, then told Perin to spread the word: ‘Stay together, do not leave the train that Dagobert leads, do not touch the fruit you did not bring.’

They found the odd path, little meanders that were hard to trace. Dagobert mainly kept to these, sending scouts to follow them, but often departed them, following the straight call of the sunlight filtering through the branches. Elise noticed that on the path the muttering kith was quieter, as if a number of passing feet built a shield of safety over the ground.

Elise understood why Tilde asked for music; when the voices were raised sweetly, the tugging whisper of the woods, the leaning of the branches, the pulse of the earth, couldn’t be felt so strongly.

But, as the sun sank lower, and the skeletal shadows of branches felt grasping at their throats, the cavalcade fell quiet once more. The way was more precarious now, overgrown in places with ivy and nettle, thick and stinging. They struggled through the trees’ passage, as Dagobert guided them against the sinking light, still aiming northwest by his estimation, in

the hope that they would cut through the wood and into Falcan. The branches were twisting lower, and many of the court chose to dismount and walk beside their horses to save their necks from the grasp of the wood.

Tilde was one of them, walking steadily with Marolyn or Hadiah at her side, sometimes Muirenn or Helwinde stopping by to offer her ale or diluted wine. She ate nothing, Elise noticed, and more than once Dagobert had looked back at her with one of his smug little smiles.

Elise glanced at the sky. The wood was all twilight, but above, she could see the branches were turning red as the autumn sun sank. Then, she realised, slowly, that even the natural sounds of the wood, the beasts and the birds, the rustle of leaves and the sound of the wind, had faded, and all the sound was from their own hooves, their own breath, their own voices. The others realised the same, and the train of kings, princes, courtiers, servants, serfs and hangers-on fell into frightened silence.

It was only when it became too dark to walk safely that Dagobert called a halt.

‘Take heart,’ said Prince Conrin. ‘There’s plenty of wood for a fire, and we can sleep in our cloaks like penitents of old. But first, let us join the high priest in holy prayer.’

Alar muttered something to Egil, whom he had started walking beside, who stifled a laugh. Elise scowled and swung down from her horse, going to assist Ysel, who had chosen to continue riding.

‘Thank you princess,’ she said. ‘Your shoulder should suffice.’ She used it to climb down, then drew her staff from where she had bound it at her horse’s saddlebow.

Liran took no assistance. He landed, his feet apart, and dusted at his cloak as Dagobert held out his hands to make his prayers. Elise was not sure who would win in this wrangling, and who would lose. Dagobert’s insolence was almost impressive. Elise had never met a man who seemed so intent on turning the direction of the court, but his ambitions were for the Synod, and to keep Cynghal in check.

Still, Liran held his hand out to Tilde – a strange show of affection – who took it, and then he took the priest’s offer. Elise’s brothers came to the circle, though Alar was first, and Dagobert withheld his palm until Gaisa and Conrin took his other side. Hein pulled at Egil’s sleeve until he entered, and Elise stood beside him. The other folk of the court found their own links, making the most equal Nest Elise had ever seen. No benches, no

rows, no order of entry. The low priests were dotted about as they found themselves too tired to find connections of appropriate blood or rank, and the serfs and servants formed a circle of their own. Even the knights paused in their guards of grey, red, greens, black, the dots of Egil's yellow and the king's blue, different factions, different colours, connecting themselves together for the solemnity of evensong.

It felt almost a relief, this peace, as Dagobert began a chant of prayer. '*By the Wing, and the feathers, by the pillars and its followers, by the light and its believers, keep back the dark.*'

Elise knew it well; it was usually sung at funerals, or during famine and sickness.

'*By the faith and its fortunes. By the Nests, and their safety. Keep us from the harm of the wild, the foolish, the unruly. Let us all keep our place, let us all know our worth.*'

Tilde stood near her, head lowered as she joined in the prayer, murmuring the echo to the song, as was right. The rest repeated the words in quiet, overlapping voices, around and around in canon.

'*By the glory of the swan, the faith of the swallow, the foresight of the eaglehawk, the wisdom of the owl, and discipline of the cockerel, by the lantern and our path, by the blood of our oaths and the strength of our word, let us rest.*'

As they prayed, Elise became aware of other sounds. Faint to begin with. A distant chatter, a flicker of song, a flit of wing. A nightbird jabber came close at her left heel, then a fox cried out, cutting through.

Dagobert sang louder, but so did the animals. Elise could hear the squeaking of mice, the hiss of snakes, the call of owls, jaws, sparrowhawks, a bear's grunt and a wolf's growl, the gurgle of a wildcat and the honking of a boar.

At first, Elise thought this some new shape of her own sin, but then the prayers stopped, petering away. She heard the slip of metal in sheath, and looked up to see Ademar had drawn his sword, and several knights too, turning fearful glances about as the noise of the wood exceeded season and reason. It grew cacophonous, stalking them in terror and sound. Daegmar put her hands to her ears, Amalle was clutching so tightly to Elise's hand that she thought her fingers would break.

Then it stopped. As quickly as it had come, all the noise fell to nothing, like a youth who had been caught playing too loudly and been shamed.

Or had found somewhere to hide.

Elise tried to hear again, the whispers of the Ways, the sound of the power of this strange, root-bound land. But all was silent.

No one spoke for a long moment. Dagobert and Conrin shared a fearful glance.

‘The forest is strange at night,’ said Tilde at last, her voice clear and commanding. ‘Best we light the fires.’

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Forty

Tilde

The morning came blue, and broke golden over the tops of the trees. The silence through the night I felt like a pressure on my ears, strange and unbroken.

I could still hear it, the power of the Ways. In my blood. *Pain and memory.*

I knew the rebels were not nearby. I could not feel them. They had raised the barrier as a warning, and a reminder. What had they given for it? I did not know. Perhaps it was a last spite against me for what I had done to Guwetha, to force my hand and show my own magic.

But the fruit, the losing the way back to the hannerast, that was all the kithwood, the trickery of the ancestors and power of the Ways. I could hear the voices, laughing, skittering, chattering, calling to the court that could not hear them, but could feel them. More than once I had to warn again not to touch the hanging fruit, shining and ripe. There were some that were half illusion, others that were real, but it took practice to discern them and both were a risk.

A pounding had taken up in my skull and along my jaw. It had been days now of naught but sour meat and ale, and sweat prickled at me, making me feel feverish and light-headed. It had been an age too, of giving Liran my gentlest voice, my most pliable attitude. I had kissed his cheek and feigned blushing, I had poured his wine. He had let me seduce him. It gave him some reprieve, some ease and balm while he grieved. Sometimes, he asked me to bring Isen to him, and wept again when I told him he had died. I wondered that he did not suspect his sons, was he so determined in his slipping mind to hold onto the anchor of their love for him?

As I had held onto the anchor of my love for Sanafin?

Sister, the green called for me. *Lover. Friend. Daughter.*

I felt so lost. The distance between me and Marolyn felt unbreachable, and she gone to a dark place of worry and regret. Hadiah I feared to trouble, for she was always a peacekeeper, and I could not reach for Elise. I was a

soldier running blindly into a battle I could barely understand, while arrows rained down around me.

And now, we were in the place I had longed for all my life, the wood, and I had to hide the part of me that called to it. If I had Guwetha's power, I might drag vines from the sleeping earth, coiling around the princes and the king and snapping all their pretty necks, leaving them for dead. It must be a massacre, my mother said.

But I was closer, too, to my goals, to claim the foundations of their empire and hold them in my own hands. I just needed a little longer. A little longer, when Elise did not look at me with those hungry eyes, a little longer, when I could claim the throne as wife and mother, queen and king. Let the princes pull their rebellion together, let them try for Liran, and for me. I was readier and readier for it.

As the light rose, we all stirred from restless sleep. The dawn caught and tangled in the high branches, turning every bright remaining leaf to copper, and autumn sunbeams drifted through the air, alighting on green tuffets of clustered roots and moss. Tiny white butterflies and gleaming beetles flew up, floating like dew on the breath of the air, and rabbits skittered through the undergrowth. The woods breathed, seeming to glow from within.

'Oh!' called Amalle, her serf patting her hair away from her face. 'Look.'

I followed her finger, and saw a rabbit. It was white as snow, sitting near a rotting twist of bracken and red hawthorn. It was still, gazing straight at us in perfect temptation.

I felt, rather than saw, Elise reach for her bow.

'Don't,' I said.

She glanced at me, and nodded, drawing her hand away. My heart bloomed with affection. Perhaps she was not at fault for the sins of her father, perhaps she might come around when I took my due. Perhaps … she might understand.

But then another arrow flew, cutting through my secret wish, and struck the creature through the eye.

'Good shot, Hein!' said Egil. I turned to see the young lad beaming with pride, his own short bow in his hand. I winced, and touched my mother's ring. I had little animosity to the eight year old, desperate as he was for love and attention, but he was not the brightest little cygnet.

'Superstitious, are you Tilde?' said Gaisa, who was dusting clinging leaves from his coat. 'Are you so scared of your own woods?' He glanced

towards Muirenn with hopeful eyes, as if they might share a joke. I did not look to see if she smiled back. ‘Or so lacking in the faith of the Wing?’

‘I pray only that the Wing can take command of this wood’s power and turn it into Cynghal hands,’ I said. ‘But I am wise enough to be afraid of what I cannot control.’

‘I am a prince of Cynghal,’ said Gaisa. ‘I fear nothing.’

I wondered if that were true.

‘Because there is nothing a prince of Cynghal cannot control,’ said Liran nearby, as he was brought his horse. ‘This wood will soon burn to the ground.’

He offered his hand to me. ‘Come, my queen, let me help you.’

I took it, and for once he held me kindly, leading me to Dagobert, who was gathering again for prayer. My stomach felt empty and sour, and I longed for a crust of bread, a biscuit.

Behind us, under Elise’s worried gaze, Hein was joyfully showing Daegmar and Egil his kill. Daegmar clapped her hands for him, though her smile was tight and she was sweating over her swollen belly. I suspected that she understood more about the kithwood than she dared reveal. The rabbit was still bleeding, its blood dropping in red, thick drops on the ground.

It had been a test. I had known as soon as I saw it. The temptation, still and waiting like a patch of snow given life, like a swan transformed.

And we had failed.

Ours, ours, ours.

The Ways were hissing as we began our route again, trusting to the scouting of knights and the strength of Dagobert’s prayers.

Even if it was not magic, nothing could be taken from the wood without something offered in return. The soil was filled with gold, blood or gems at the roots of trees from those who had used the branches for firewood, bones of animals from hunts had been left in sacred places, hung on the bushes, food for the ancestors, or at least a show of grace.

Perhaps if Hein had left a little, the spleen for the wood, its heart, hanging on a branch, perhaps the kith would have forgiven his transgression. As it was, Marolyn and Hadiah kept close to me, and the court huddled in together, feeling some of the animosity around them, even if they could not hear it.

Death in the dark in the shadows in the moss.

Take them, hide them, turn them.

Release them. Daughter of the wood.

Our attempts at singing seemed to fall as if on to cloth, muffling our voices until we soon came to a stop. Even those most dull-witted must have some sense of the malignancy that surrounded us, an animal fear as the darkness closed in, and the blue sky above seemed to shatter into smaller and smaller pieces, until the canopy of green enclosed us entirely.

I distracted myself with noting some small things: the silver birches that marked old sacred groves, the thick yew that would once have been planted over the graves of kings, the dark gaps in the soil that might reveal tunnels where totems and prayers to the forest were gathered.

I, at last, child of the wood, was walking in the green.

I kept my way, and hoped we would make it through before a new punishment befell us.

I became aware that Merovin had come close to me, riding alongside as Ziyan looked ahead, taking extensive notes on every green thing that he saw. He had passed me a slip of paper a few days before. Measured against Merovin's locket, it only had two words.

Be ready.

I looked at him, his cropped hair messy from a night of sleeping amongst roots and grass. I hated him, and everything he stood for, every betrayal, every uncertainty.

But he was still Merogian. He knew the danger we were in.

A cry from ahead startled both of us. We had been keeping to a narrow track for a while that twisted then faltered, a deer track I thought, not a hunter's path.

And strangely, in the middle of it had grown a thicket of briars, branches thick as arms, leaves green and shining, roses and hips blooming at once from the thorns, red and luscious, petals thick with a distant sun, pursed like opening mouths.

Sanafin.

Meet me in the kithwood.

I was here in the wood where her soul was hung, where her whispers were bound up in the voices of so many others, an echo of a lost life.

What if the thorns on the hannerast hadn't been a threat or retribution? What if they had been a message? *We are still here. We see you. We know*

you. What if it was a test? *Do you have what it takes?*

Was Ladbh even now in the woods, waiting to see what I would do with my next breath? Or had she simply set us on a path out of anger, to let us all rot in the forest without further sacrifice? I almost wept with the hope and the uncertainty, and Marolyn came to a stop near me. After a moment, she put her hand on mine, and squeezed it.

Dagobert turned away from the roses. He had lost all orientation now, and even Liran was in silent conference with Odon, deciding what to do next. They had wanted Dagobert to trip, and them to save him. Instead he had dragged us all down. With no other option, we followed the grey priest, the knights, the women, the servants, Isen's body, wrapped in its ribbons, carried by his loyal black guard.

'I can hear it,' Hadiah murmured to me. 'Faintly, but I can hear them.'

'I think deeper in the wood, the more other folk can sense it,' I said. I had seen the servants flinching, Conrin turning as if looking to see who had asked him a question. Elise had her head bowed as though weathering a squall.

I took Hadiah's hand in mine, and felt how cold her fingers were. 'I won't let anything happen to you,' I said, and looked at Marolyn. To my surprise, she gave me a supportive nod. 'We'll make it through this.'

Marolyn didn't answer, but squeezed my fingers. 'But what about them?' Hadiah murmured. I knew what she wanted to say. *Some didn't choose this. Some are better than this. They are not all bad.*

Was it the fate of a captured animal to fall just a little in love with its captors? Or was it a human thing to leave space in the heart for sympathy?

We followed, and the air thickened with noise again: rooks screamed at each other, and magpies chattered as if deciding what to do with us. Squirrels darted between leaves in whips of red, and the little light was disturbed by the flitting of wings, flashing in the corner of my eyes.

And under the sound, the current that I was trying my best to ignore. The menace and voices of the kith.

Swan king is it?

Take them all.

Deep in the green, bury them deep.

The hands and their prayers, burn them rot them send them to water to sea.

Out from the woods we spit out their blood.

The wood had no will of its own, it was a splitting, a separation of too many voices, too many wills; a white rabbit might be one, a red fruit or rose another, but for magic it needed direction, and pain and memory were the channels.

Without direction, only chaos was left.

Behind me, Daegmar laughed suddenly, then covered her mouth, as if she had been surprised by a loved one. Ysel turned dark and serious, crouching close to her horse, muttering prayers to the Wing beneath her breath. Ademar had come back to walk beside her, his arm at her waist.

At the front, our leaders were being forced by low branches and thickets to spread out between the trees, picking the clearer paths between crumbling bracken, hillocks and stone. What light we had of day turned dimmer, darker, almost night, though I still saw glimpses of blue sky between the boughs that thickened, the deeper we went into the gloom.

‘A lantern!’ I heard Dagobert call, his voice high with fear. ‘Get us a lantern!’

I saw sparks of flint, the blaze of a torch lighting, then another, another, as the leading knights lit them and spread out. Their little glows danced and darted as they moved apart, and shortly after I heard the pained sound of sharp metal hacking green branches, followed by a yelp as hand met prickle, thistle or thorn.

‘Do not be afraid of the woodland!’ said Dagobert, his voice ranging higher. ‘It is only trees and superstition! Pray to the Wing, think of the birds, they will lead you to the light. Birds are born for a clear sky!’

I thought I heard a chuckle, perhaps from Liran, perhaps from the trees, but it was quickly covered by a growl in the forest, low and guttural.

Then Dagobert again began to chant. A prayer for the Wing, his lips moving.

But I could not hear him.

He touched his throat, mouth gaping with alarm, but if he yelled the wood stole the sound from him. He held his Wing pendant, praying furiously, but still no noise passed his lips.

‘Elise-hyem,’ whispered Hein, shifting his horse closer to his sister. ‘I’m scared.’

A colony of rabbits, white and darting, ran out of the underbrush and between the horses, all perfect copies of the creature Hein had killed. Our steeds panicked, rearing.

‘Hold!’ said Liran, still astride his and lifting his arm. ‘Stay together you fools, as the queen said. Do not leave each other’s sides.’

Though I heard him, others did not. Egil’s horse caught the madness, bucking hard and then throwing him. He shrieked, landing heavily on the roots of a tree, his cloak catching in its lower branches. He wrestled against his own cape and tore it from his neck, scrabbling to his feet. Ysel cried out, her own steed bucking, and wisely she slid herself from the saddle to the ground before it threw her too. Ademar and Amalle went to help her up.

‘I feel the wood’s anger,’ murmured Marolyn in Merogian, close at my side. ‘Is this always what it sounds like?’ The lights of the soldiers ahead were many now, and multiplying, scattering off into different directions, sometimes two appeared, then three, where one had been before.

‘Stay close, my loves,’ I whispered. ‘Do not follow any light or sound.’

Because others were. I could see Egil going off into the dark, following a shine. Alar had turned in another direction, oblivious to the rest of us, and called out the name of a woman, not Isuire, perhaps the wife he had abandoned. The trees were a swirl of twisting branches and falling leaves, dizzying with their closeness.

Someone screamed, perhaps another rabbit, perhaps someone attuned enough to hear the growl of a wolf, and the panic truly began.

The lights of the guards all went out at once. A yell from the followers’ train was cut short, and when I wheeled to look behind me I saw a shot of silver as a wolf dragged a straggler into the dark.

‘What’s happening?’ Elise called out. I didn’t answer her. Conrin was ahead, arguing with Gaisa as they shoved each other over their horses. Uhtred and Thedemer were circling each other on their mounts, hands on their weapons. ‘Tilde?’

‘Hold together!’ said Liran, afraid and not in control. What had he been expecting? That he could outwill a woodland of ancients? ‘Hold …’ His voice tapered off, and he put his hand on his sword.

The power of the Ways had his court now; he had handed them all to them. Lady Amalle had pressed her nails into her fine pink cheeks, her pretty face, digging them hard enough to draw blood.

‘Alone,’ she groaned. ‘Alone till time’s end. Unwed, unused …’

Daegmar was weeping, her face pressed into her horse’s mane, not even trying to make the creature move, for move he did not. His feet were tangled in briars. Merovin was crouched down, his head in his hand,

keening like a Merogian, while Lisane wandered, slowly, on her feet, into the forest's shadow. They saw nothing but darkness and terror. Even Odon was screaming at shadows, his hands held out, beseeching.

Death is come to take you home, death of blood and thorn and bone.

Beasts moved in the dark, closer and closer, circling for easy prey. We were too late to tie ropes between us, too late to hold the horses.

Dagobert turned, his face red, screaming something none of us could hear, and I realised that this could be the end. The kithwood meant to kill us. To drag us from the path and set us running madly into the darkness to be eaten by beast and time.

I could let it happen. Let the whole petty lot of them fall apart. Let them scatter and die. The land could do the killing for me. It could take me too. I would accept that I could be nothing more than a queen who died to kill her conqueror. Never meant to rule, never meant to unite Merogia once more in the power of the kith.

Would that be vengeance? I reached for the Ways, for the voices of the ancestors. *Is that what you want from me as well? To disappear?*

Yes. Disappear, let it all disappear. Let the world be changed and darkness fall. Let their god fade and the sun rise over green forest. The voices coalesced, and I could hear the call of my sister. *Sister, sapling, child of the Ways. Ask nothing, only give. Come back to us.*

Then my siblings, speaking as one. *Or run.*

I could run. Perhaps find my own way out. I was deep in the wood's heart, but I knew the Ways, I had learned some. I could disappear into shadow and pray none would follow, only taking Marolyn, Hadiah.

Perhaps even Elise.

We could find a way to Ardwen. Seek sanctuary. Leave the rest.

Ours for the taking.

For the blood and eating.

For the memory. For the drinking.

More screams. I did not glance behind me, though I could hear the panicked breath of Elise, who had her bow drawn. I knew I would see wolves and stags, wildcats, boars and bears taking any straggler that strayed too far from the herd. The forest did not fight wars, not out in the open. It crept, insidious. It waited.

'Do not trust your eyes, Princess,' Daegmar turned and murmured to her. 'Do not fire.'

The ground was alive, the darkness all but absolute. A knight ran between the bushes, blood pouring down his head.

‘Flee! Flee for your lives!’ he cried, sprinting blindly towards Egil.

But the yellow prince screamed. ‘Begone beast!’

Perhaps beast was what he had seen, a stag or a boar, his brother’s killer. He drew his sword, turning and striking hard.

‘Egil!’ cried Elise, as her brother’s blade went through the helm of their own guard. ‘Tilde … How do we stop this?’

Think of the future, of power. Not just these men, one lifetime strong. A fading would-be emperor, his entitled sons.

Think of how to take control.

Think like a king.

Liran charged ahead into the trees, then his horse reared back and he backed into Hein’s horse, his elbow taking his son in the neck and sending him flying to the ground. Elise leapt down, running to her brother as his own steed kicked him, sending him flying. Odon grabbed hold of Liran’s reins, holding him down, but the king drew his sword and struck at him. Odon countered with his own blade in his good hand. His cane was long gone, and his game leg bowed under the king’s strike.

‘My king! My general! It is I, your heart’s brother! Calm yourself! Think of your Isen!’

Dagobert was clutching at his throat, screaming silent obscenities or prayers, who could tell? A screech owl flew down from the trees, and dived upon his head, raking razor claws along his pate and drawing red blood, the brightest colour in the now thick dark of the kithwood, other than the briars and their red, red hips, like little lanterns.

I closed my eyes, trying to hide from the voices of the people and instead hear the will of the Ways. I breathed in, listening for the space between heartbeats, the quieting of my blood. What should I do?

Death, death, death. Death to the overleapers. Death to the takers, the cutters, the croppers. Death to all but the green.

No.

I was long past longing for death. I had chosen power.

I was no martyr.

Blood and pain.

I breathed in, and called to the green. *Let us live.*

What?

She asks.

She calls.

No.

It was Ebba's shriek the trees used, followed by the sound of barking, the weeping of a grieving man, my father, then hissing like a nest of snakes.

I will make you an offering, I told the woods in my mind. *Let us pass. I am known.*

You are known to the dark, the trees and the kith. The speech of the wood lost its familiarity, becoming many-voiced, like the rustling of curling leaves, the blinking of animal eyes, the rush of water through a thousand roots.

You wish to save these dangers? Strangers? Interlopers? Invaders? They are here to be ruined.

Do not ruin me with them! I called. *I, the child of the wood, a druidim beginning, am asking. Let us go.*

You offer nothing, yet bargain *with us. Your ancestors, your blood, the breath of your breath, the dust of your bones.*

I leaned into the current of the forest's voice, the power that ran in the darkness that had surrounded us, was choking all of us with madness till we turned on each other.

I had to make a bargain. *I will offer.*

I took hold of a branch of thorns, dragging them out of the wood. It was passable, that I might have grabbed it by accident, in a moment of fear. I would find a way to twist this later, make it an act of faith; the Synod loved sacrifice. The thorns dug into my skin, hard, pain, as I ripped the branch free and wrapped it around my arm.

It bit me deep

Druidim, a softer voice whispered, and I hoped it was Guwetha.

A magic maker?

A listener. An offerer.

A taker.

Ask again. Give us shape. Give us hold.

Stop this madness, I told the kithwood in my mind. It could hear me, my flesh felt it.

It cannot be stopped. What is in motion cannot be called to a halt. Do you stop a river? Do you cut off the winter?

I concentrated on my thought. *Then let us out.*

The pain you offer is small. Give us more, give us realer, give us bittersweet.

Give us a memory. A brightness. A warmth in the cold winter's grasp.

Make us feel alive again.

I breathed out, thinking of Guwetha, of Sanafin, that feeling as I disappeared into the forest, into the current. I was a drop of blood in water, unravelling into the power, spilling myself, every dark thought, every pain, everything I had endured. The smoke of my siblings' pyres, the agony of the king, the whispers of the court, the poisoning, the fear, the shame, the growing anger, held back, at bay.

For a moment, I could feel nothing other than the rage. My own, and the kithwood's, tangling, potent, unrelenting as an avalanche. I lost all sense of self as the voice of the forest became a roar over a whisper, running through me, consuming me, eating me alive.

And I was falling. Disappearing into the bowels of the earth. I could see the passing of time like flashes from hunting eyes, I could taste the decay of the seasons, rolling across my tongue, earthy-wet and luscious.

I clung on to the root of myself, the place to which I disappeared when Liran extracted his due, the place I held on to against every smirking courtier, against every doubt, every terror, every desire.

And then I found my will within it. A steady beat within the chaos of the wood, an anchor not just for me, but for the green. Everyone had barely moved. Elise still held Hein, Dagobert's head was fresh bleeding. Moments had passed. Marolyn was looking at me, her eyes wide.

A memory. A sweet one. What to give? So few of my memories were sweet, but one did come to mind: a kiss that tasted of sour apples, a green within the green.

Sanafin.

I had already lost the colour of her eyes; what was the taste of her mouth when I had so many lives to consider?

I offer a green kiss on a summer's day. A hopeful kiss, a lost love, a fresh desire. I offer a sunlit moment, before terror came, between griefs, between wars.

The kithwood did not consider more than a fragment of a breath.

It is good.

It is soft and warm.

It is life and full.

Give it to us.

Give it and the Ways will part for you, give it and time will crumble.

GIVE IT.

I felt the tendrils of the kith's will forcing their way through me, finding the buried knowledge, seeking the source of the memory. As they did, I felt the power come with it, rising, filling me up, travelling through me. I was one with the wood, I could feel its breath, the sounds of the people in it, the feet, skittering, hunters and hunted. I could feel their bodies, the thickness of their flesh, so changeable, so mouldable.

And I felt the kiss slipping from me, Sanafin uprooted, tugged out of my heart.

But I held on to my purpose. Escape.

'Come to me!' I called, tucking my bleeding arm in my sleeve. 'Come to me court of the Cynghals! Come into the grace of the Wing!'

Elise ran over, carrying Hein. Merovin was already at my side, dragging Ziyan from a rock he had been turning over obsessively in his hands, as if trying to crack its secrets, murmuring in Argenthan and Shatuan. Odon dragged a roaring Liran from his horse as I saw Conrin advance, his thick cloak gleaming, his sword drawn and already bloody. Coming towards his father, with murder in his eyes. He began to charge, racing forward, but then a stumbling Gaisa tripped into him, his feet tangled in stone and root and they both went tumbling to the ground.

'To me!' I called. 'Come to me if you want to live!'

I held tightly to my horse with my thighs, gripping the trailing branch of thorns harder, more forcefully. Blood dripped down my knuckles, and gave the power focus. I gasped with the pain of it, but didn't let go. It was not so great an ask, to open a way through the trees, to let us escape. I need build nothing or break nothing, only make our way through.

'To the queen!' Marolyn called, taking my reigns. Elise caught up the cry, then Ysel. The women followed first, and then the men.

I dug in my memory, some song I had heard a Wing-priest sing, something to guide them.

> '*Calm the heart, soft the feathers*
> *steady the wind, gentle the foam,*
> *Follow me home, loves, follow me home.*'

My voice was not strong, but it was clear. I sang the Cynghal rhyme that was not unlike a Merogian song. I remembered four years before, hearing our assigned priest singing it and thinking he had the words mixed up.

‘*Deep the shadow, fierce the waves,*
Keep by me, away from the grave.’

I could feel the current of the wood running through me, sliding down my arm into my blood. I could feel the power of it rushing, eating the memory of Sanafin’s lips, putting strength in its place. The air lightened around us, a path between the trees became clear.

Daegmar was following me with dogged steps, Amalle as if she had found me in a dream.

‘Alar, Conrin, Egil!’ cried Hein, carried against Elise. ‘Gaisa! Come!’

Lights and bodies appeared again out of the dark as I sang the song. The princes and the survivors of the harried court knitted themselves back together, slow but sure. I could smell green in the air again, over the blood and the sweating fear. Grasping shadows began to retreat.

‘*Follow the north wind, follow the south*
Take to the wing, come quick to my house.’

I found a slipstream in my sense of the wood, a moving part, as if a current spurred my horse forward as the others followed. As I moved, I could feel the current of the Ways, and tracked it, coming into its flow like a joining of lightning. I passed Liran and Odon, who had ceased to fight but were staring at me, past Dagobert, who was wiping the blood from his eyes. He did not protest, or if he did it could still not be heard. I was their light in the darkness, burning the madness back.

Liran gathered himself. ‘Isen!’ he bellowed. ‘We cannot leave Isen!’

He went to Isen’s wrapped body on its boards, and with one hand picked up the whole front of it, heaving it up.

‘Preserve the prince!’ Odon fell into line, pushing, shoving, cajoling others into helping the king with his son’s body. They did, fearful, terrified. But their eyes were on me.

My court. My responsibility. My power.

I am no martyr. I wanted to survive, I wanted to win, I wanted to keep playing the game.

So play I did, raising my hand unthorned.

‘Free us from this torment,’ I cried. ‘By the will of the Wing! The glory of the swan!’

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Forty-one

Elise

Light.

There was light ahead. The loosening grip of madness fell away, and Elise found her breath. Hein sobbed against her, his head buried in her neck.

They broke beyond the boughs on to a field of grass above a great grey-blue sea, the sun setting over it, to the west.

Elise knew this place. She knew the sprawl of wooden houses and their gables painted different colours. She knew the dip of the hills, the reddish tinge to the soil and the swaying yellow. She knew the scar of the clay pits, open between the hills.

Widdin. They had come out in Widdin. Before they entered the forest, the sea was a weeks-away dream. How many days had it been? Three?

She put Hein gently to the ground. Tilde was bent over her horse, its flank dripping with red.

‘Tilde!’ Hadiah was shaking her, urgently. ‘Tilde!’

Tilde didn’t seem to hear her. Elise stepped closer, every part of her wanting to run to her, to call her name, but she made herself be slow

‘Help the queen!’ said Ysel, who was holding her hip, teeth gritted against the pain. ‘She’s injured.’

Ducal Uhtren came forward, reaching up to Tilde, who rallied a little. She put her hands to Uhtren and Hadiah, dismounting. Elise helped catch her, holding her up.

‘That is not possible, we can’t be here …’ said Dagobert, his voice found again. He looked back at the forest, then down at the sea. It was impossible to tell how much time had passed. Had it been days? Weeks? If the wood had bent so, allowing them to arrive as they had, who was to say how long it had been?

‘I knew it,’ the priest breathed, his eyes alight. ‘I *knew* she was a witch! She called the forest upon us all!’ He had his sleeve to his head, and it was staining red.

‘She didn’t,’ Hein protested, shivering. ‘She put the monsters away!’

‘She sang a song!’

‘A Cynghal song,’ said Uhtren. ‘A song of the Wing, Dagobert.’

Dagobert hesitated.

‘She saved us!’ said Lisane softly. ‘She called upon the Wing.’

Tilde was breathing shallowly, and Elise didn’t know what to believe. Did she believe Tilde had called on the grace of the Wing? No. Elise had called for her god so many times she had accepted that their pleas were too quiet to be heard.

But had Tilde saved them? Yes. All she had seen was Tilde reaching into a thorn bush and dragging up a piece, but that was no madder than the actions of the rest of them. She had seen her close her eyes and seem to pray, and then call out in a song that brought them back together.

Yet Elise had felt … she had felt the tug of sound in the wood, its power honing in on Tilde, like she was the eye of a hurricane. This was more than the thorn.

But Tilde had not wanted them to enter the forest, she had not wanted this. And that was enough for Elise to take her side.

‘It is by the Wing’s grace that we are saved,’ said Tilde, holding tightly to her, and Elise nodded.

‘The Wing saved us,’ rasped Alar, gathering his faculties, ‘through her. Dagobert, don’t you see, you wanted to prove the Wing’s power over the wood, and she has!’

Conrin was grey, he had been sick on the grass. His sword was still bare, and in his hands. Egil was staring at the blood on his own blade, as if wondering how it had got there. Elise wondered how long it would be until they knew the names of the dead and lost; many, she realised as she looked around, had not made it. Several of the black guard, many of the grey, warriors who had not come when Tilde called. At least most of those in Tilde’s own green seemed to have listened to her.

‘She is fooling you!’ said Conrin. ‘I … Dagobert is a priest! He guided us through. She is a witch and a sinner and a liar!’

‘Dagobert led us into the wood,’ said Liran. ‘*Dagobert* overruled his king.’

There was a rumour of approval, some horrified glances.

‘And now,’ said Miras, with some venom, ‘he has been marked and bloodied by an owl. One of the five great tenets of the Wing. Wisdom.’

Dagobert pressed his sleeve to his head more tightly.

‘It was a wild animal,’ protested Conrin.

‘It was the Wing’s creature,’ said Alar, smiling, turning happily on Conrin. ‘Our god knew Dagobert led us into darkness.’

‘The Synod will not like this,’ said Low Priest Aeswyth.

‘Please, King Liran,’ appealed Dagobert. ‘Tell them!’

Liran only looked at him, and then smiled. The way he had smiled whenever Elise’s mother told him she was with child, the smile he gave when a siege fell.

A smile of victory.

Elise had seen it many times. And every time, during her childhood, it would make her heart feel so big it would burst. He did not smile *at* her. No. But still, she felt she could catch his warmth by its proximity, she could feel his glory radiating.

Now, she felt her heart twisting, sickened. He had allowed Conrin and Dagobert to lead the court into the woods, knowing it might go wrong, might frighten them. He had meant to weaken Dagobert, who coveted and nibbled at the edges of his power, but he had risked the entire court to prove that point, believing his arrogance could carry them through.

He would not admit the error, the failure, only take the victory.

‘It seems the Wing’s will is not yours after all, Dagobert,’ said Liran. ‘The feathers opened to the queen instead.’

Dagobert was no fool. He shut his mouth.

And Liran turned away.

‘Gather the injured,’ he said.

More had come from the woods, crawling and bleeding. One serf had been scratched across the eyes, though Elise could not tell if it was by nails or thorns. Another palati had deep scores across his neck and chest, blood dripping steadily from his front as he was lowered to the ground and the king’s own surgeon saw to him grimly.

‘I’m all right,’ Tilde said, her voice soft, and Elise realised her arms were still around the queen. ‘Put me down. Look to Hein.’

The boy was clutching his arm to his chest, his bones sticking out at a strange angle, and his lip was puckered with the pain.

‘We need to look to that wound, Brother-hyem,’ said Elise, obeying Tilde.

He shook his head, pale with terror. ‘They will cut it off,’ he said. ‘They’ll cut it …’

‘Physik Ziyan is very good,’ said Tilde. She went to the earth beside him, all but falling to her knees as Hadiah helped her down, looking worriedly at where her branch-tangled arm was hidden in her cloak. ‘He will not cut it.’

Hein stared at her, and though her voice was still strained, she managed a smile. The physik himself was standing staring at the sky, muttering calculations.

‘Five days,’ he said at last. ‘That’s not possible.’

‘Ziyan, please,’ Tilde called, and he jerked around, frowning.

‘Ziyan, Zee-yan you all say,’ he mumbled, his gaze still miles away. ‘There is no grace to it.’ He blinked, his focus coming back as he realised who he was speaking to, but held his nerve.

‘The woods rub away at the rules we live by,’ said Tilde. ‘The bad ones, the good ones. But I will try to say your name correctly.’

He nodded once, coming over. Hadiah hovered anxiously, and Elise knew why. Others were looking at them, at Tilde.

‘I had almost forgotten … Zi-yaan is how it is said. The name my mother gave me, the name that even my oldest friends elide in Argentha. The one I forgot.’ He frowned at Tilde. ‘The woods gave it back to me. In her voice.’

‘Physik,’ said Elise. ‘Please.’

Ziyan shook himself, crouching by Hein. The boy flinched back as the physik took his sleeve, and Ziyan sighed. ‘I can’t help if I can’t see it, little cygnet,’ he said.

‘I don’t want you to have my arm!’ Hein cried.

‘Let him and I’ll tell you another story,’ said Tilde. Hein pursed his lips, but nodded, screwing his eyes shut as Ziyan reached again for his arm, putting his silver left hand under the boy’s wrist, and taking out a sharp blade with his right to cut away at his sleeve.

‘What kind of story?’ asked Hein, wincing as Ziyan sliced through the cloth, and began to roll it down.

‘Another Merogian tale,’ said Tilde. ‘From Widdin, these lands, so I’m told.’ Ziyan peeled the sleeve down further. Hein’s arm was badly bent, and bruising was already spreading across it, black like a raven’s wing. ‘About a boy whose naughty auntie turned him into a lichwyrm.’

‘What’s a lichwyrm?’ he said, opening his eyes. But, when he did, he caught sight of his own arm and let out a sob. ‘I knew it,’ he said. ‘It’s going black and stinking. He’ll take it away. Where’s Mog?’

‘If that is the name of your mouse, then he is sitting on your shoulder,’ said Ziyan. The mouse was indeed hiding in a rumple of cloth that had been torn up from Hein’s arm. Elise ruffled her brother’s hair as he let out a sob of relief.

‘There are worse things than losing a hand,’ Ziyan continued, showing his silver fingers. ‘And I am the very, very best at taking hands away. But, you be sure, Prince Hein, that this isn’t that kind of black.’

‘It isn’t?’ Hein was distracted enough

‘You speak of wound rot. I know it well. But this is just a break in your bone and it needs to be reset.’ Ziyan looked at Elise, and Hein let out a tiny whimper that broke her heart, pressing tighter on to her lap as if he could disappear into her body.

‘A lichwyrm,’ Elise distracted him, ‘is a snake that breaths fire.’

Tilde smiled at her, because it was a tale from another book she had offered her, when she had not returned her mother’s. Now she knew Elise had read them.

‘Your sister is right,’ said Tilde. ‘His aunt turned him into a lichwyrm and banished him from the palace so she could marry his father. He was sent to live in the wastes, while his sister was adventuring across the sea.’

‘Girls don’t adventure,’ said Hein, as Ziyan took his arm, bending it slightly, perhaps testing to see where it snagged and ground.

‘This one did,’ said Tilde. ‘And when she came back, and heard what had happened, she went to find him.’

Hein sniffed. Ziyan motioned to Elise to hold the top of the boy’s shoulder, which she did as he now put a grip on Hein’s elbow with his silver prosthesis, and his wrist with his flesh one.

‘She rode over high hills, and deep valleys, till she found where he had run,’ said Tilde. ‘To a cave just in those mountains over there.’ She pointed, and Hein looked over just as Ziyan *twisted* his arm, and pulled.

It made a sound like a dull thudding, and Hein screamed, Mog skittering up his neck and down his collar. Elise held him as he convulsed with the pain and swallowed the nausea in her throat. He calmed for a moment, sobbing quietly.

‘She was not scared of the lichwyrm,’ Tilde continued, louder.

Some others gathering looked fearful as she spoke.

‘She saw his great teeth, and his armour-hard scales, and saw the melted stone where his fire breath had breathed, but she laid down her sword, and

laid down her shield, and went to him.'

Tears were dropping from Hein's eyes, his fair head bowed as Ziyan barked requests to a serf for a splint and muslin. 'Did he eat her?' he said.

'No,' said Tilde. 'She walked straight up to him, and planted three kisses on his scaly head.' She touched Hein's blond hair with her unhurt hand, once, twice, three times.

He was pale and trembling, but managed a little laugh as Ziyan had a splint of split wood placed along his arm and began binding it tight.

'And with the third kiss, his scales fell away, and he was free from the wicked spell.'

Ziyan made quick work of the rest of the bandages, tightening the fixing on Hein's arm so it hung bent and crossways over his chest. Elise looked to her father, hoping he would offer his youngest son a word of comfort, acknowledgement of the harm he had done, but the king was looking out towards the blue strip of sea to the north.

It was Egil instead, and Aeswyth, who came with a stretcher for him.

'Well done, Hein, you were very brave,' Elise said. 'Father will be proud of you.'

Hein looked at their father's turned head and sniffed, but let himself be folded on to the stretcher and laid down.

'Get him some spirit for the pain,' said Ziyan, 'Pour it on his wound. Egg whites, too, will seal any broken flesh.'

He pushed back his hair, looking over the rest of the court. A lot of work for one physik, but Hadiah made a noise of fear that drew his attention. Elise looked back at Tilde, and saw that blood was soaking from her wrist down into her travelling skirts, turning them a darker shade of red.

'Tilde?' said Elise, taking her good hand as Hadiah pulled her wounded wrist up. Tilde didn't resist as Marolyn helped with deft fingers to pull out the bite of bramble, a piece of twig, the top of a thorn.

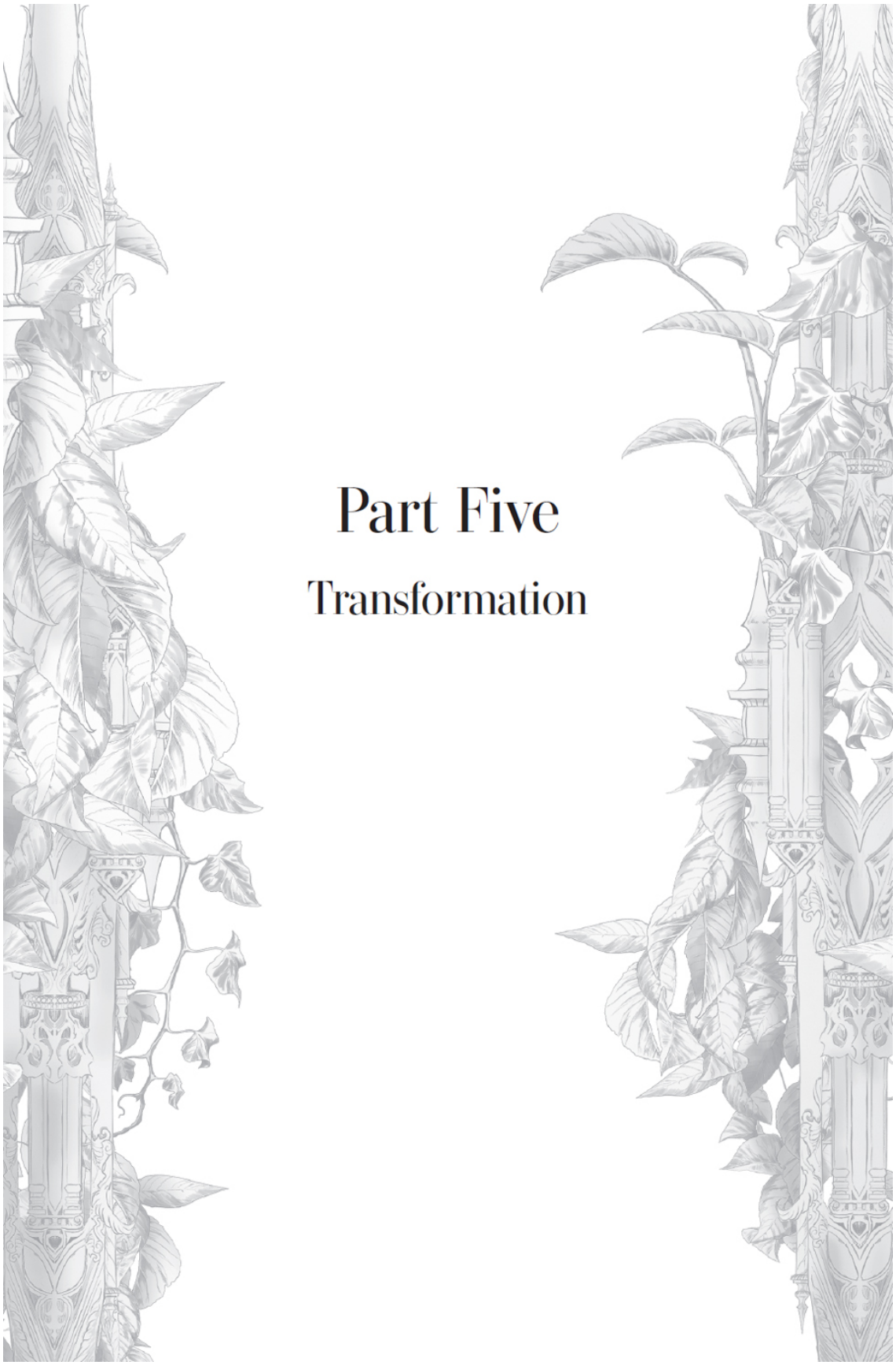
But the thorn was long, not brown or black, but white as bone beneath the blood, and as long as fingertip, as if Tilde had been bitten by a wolf.

Tilde stared it for a moment, then turned and vomited on to the grass. Elise caught her, holding her as she retched.

'I think,' she said, after a moment, 'I have forgotten something.'

And Elise caught her as she fell.

BookSharekh.com



Part Five

Transformation

BookSharekh.com

Argenthan philosophers turn sour at the thought of magic. I understand this tune, I have played it myself, perhaps too loudly to distance myself from the rumours held of foreigners and mysticism, but agree to some extent that there is truth in only trusting what we can see.

But I have heard of mysteries unexplained, of beasts with human speech, of spirits wandering looking for their home, and of falling stars that draw the future across the firmament. I have with my own ears heard trees speak with the voices of people long dead, and buried far from this strange place.

My mother told me that when gods speak, the earth listens. Even if we are too small and stupid to understand the words, we can open our hearts and feel it all around us. Denial is wilful blindness, and acceptance is an open eye. This is why I have never understood this western order of the Wing, this Synod, refuting all faiths except their own. Perhaps it is because if they turn all eyes to the sky, then all will forget the power at their feet.

I think of my mother now as I mix blood and liver from a swan's breast with dwale and sea salt, her long-lost voice still echoing in my mind. There is a black market for such things in any Merogian city where the Synod's lore blends with magic and superstition; folk will buy feathers to hang above their door, or mix a swan's tongue in their soup before winter, thinking it will give them the strength of the Cynghal king, or the glory of the god.

But there is a grain of truth in their fancies, for under a dark moon, I have found with a drop of blood I can echo this old magic of Cynghal. It will bind a person to your blood's will for some brief hours, befuddling their mind and filling it with unreason.

I swore years ago when I heard of my friend's plight that I would help him. But all the world has balance. All things have a cost. We just haven't found it yet.

Diary of a physik, 1060

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Forty-two

Tilde

I woke from a dream of flying swans to the sound of rain pattering on glass and the scent of smoke.

Enclosed again in one of their palaces, confined to a chamber when I would walk in the green-laced air. I did not want to open my eyes.

I had saved them. I had chosen to bring them out of the woods. I'd had the opportunity to let them all tear themselves apart in darkness, and I had not taken it. I had chosen to live.

And I felt I had lost something. Something precious, but I couldn't remember what it was.

But I had also gained something: I knew how to reach for the power in the kithwood, how to barter, how to use it. I just had to understand what to do, where and when.

'Tilde?'

Marolyn pulled me from my dreams, her voice heavy with concern.

I opened my eyes.

She was sitting by my bedside, her brown hair braided back from her head and down her back, held cleanly by a copper circlet. Hadiah was beside her, her locks fresh at the root and kept back in a net of blue threads pinned in place with combs of silver. Some time had passed, then.

'Oh you fucking fool,' said Marolyn.

'Marolyn!' said Hadiah, with a nervous laugh.

'I take it we made it,' I said, weakly. My body felt heavy, my belly ached, my breasts, worse, as if I had been kicked by a horse. My arm was bandaged, no bloodstains.

I looked around my new chamber. This room was larger than the last I had been in, with walls of bright and colourful tiles painted with flowers, stags and birds, and overhung with thick tapestries for warmth; two covered the door, muffling sound so it would not escape, the floor covered with soft rugs.

I remembered little of the past days, dark dreams had plagued me, the same one I had before, of my mouth filling up with feathers, choking my

throat. One part was new though: thorns bursting from my skin, my fingers, my eyes.

‘We’re in Widdin’s palace,’ said Hadiah. ‘Ademar and Ysel’s home. It has been five days. *Five days*, Tilde. You almost died.’

I knew the magic had a cost, but I felt it had taken more than I offered, the thorn-teeth almost draining the blood from my veins. I felt nauseous, but there was nothing in me to throw up. Instead, I dragged myself upright, my wrist twinging.

‘You did it,’ Marolyn breathed. ‘You used the power of the Ways, of the kith.’

‘Hush,’ said Hadiah, looking at the door. ‘Elise and Hein would not leave you. Day to night, they might be back. Even scowling Marolyn couldn’t chase them off.’

‘You should learn to scowl better,’ muttered Marolyn.

‘You do it enough for the both of us,’ Hadiah nudged her, trying to coax her into good humour. ‘It will ruin your face.

The princess had been there. My heart tightened with some fearful anticipation, but relaxed as I heard Marolyn and Hadiah bicker. Easier than they had been for a while. I sank back into my pillows, relieved. But Marolyn still looked awkward, tense. She still held her anger with me in her heart.

‘You have letters,’ said Hadiah. ‘I … I read them. I think you should, too. Dagobert is gone, disappeared two days ago.’

‘Disappeared?’ I said.

‘Some say he took a ship back to Holy Isle,’ said Marolyn. Hadiah sighed.

‘I hope a whale eats him,’ she said with such quiet fervour that I almost laughed, but instead I swallowed dryly, my mind working slowly back into sense. ‘When is Isen’s funeral?’ I asked.

‘It was this morning,’ Hadiah told me.

This made no sense. Dagobert had been so insistent on arriving in Widdin. Even if he had fallen from grace, surely he would take the glory of a prince’s funeral to scrabble it back?

I received the letters with some precious ginger brew from Ziyan. The first was from Merovin. Hadiah pulled it out of her tunic, where she had hidden and deciphered it.

The birds are panicked, they will move soon. When they come for you, be ready.

When, not if. I took the warning as a certainty: another blade would come for me soon. But I had Ademar's guard, at least to protect me. Still, I was not at my full power, I had hoped to hold off a head-to-head with the wild swans for a year or more, and certainly I was not ready to lose the king's protective shield.

The other letter was finer parchment, sealed with a bloody-hearted swan, wings outstretched.

Alar. I peeled it open with a curled lip of disgust as Hadiah threw the first on the fire.

Queen of beaten paths and most chainéd hearts
Takes mine in her hand, and I play my part.
Kingdoms under wing, may united be,
But once root, now nest, rots deep our great trees
Red heart goes beating, where the sky once greyed
The wings will fold and new birds greet the day

'What is it?' said Marolyn. 'Why are you smiling?'

I looked at her. 'So you're talking to me now?' I said. Marolyn froze, and Hadiah gave her a sideways look. She went to bring over a covered dish that had been waiting for me, lifting the linen on it to reveal Widdin's famous small pottery bowls, filled with honey and fresh preserves, sour redcurrant jam, blackberry, apricot, and some dried biscuits and a pot of dried herbs and seeds for dipping. She placed it on the counterpane and furs that covered me, and I found myself feeling nauseous again, holding Marolyn's gaze.

'It's been months, Marolyn,' I said at last. My hands trembled as I held the note, and I let some of the pain of my heart and body run through my voice. Was she glad that I had saved them? Or did she want us all to have died in the forest? Was I more valuable to her when I had offered her my death, and her own?

'I know,' she replied quietly.

'I thought you would leave me.'

'Then you do not know me as well as you thought, Tuathilde.'

‘Nor you I.’

‘No one’s leaving anyone,’ said Hadiah. ‘Tilde, please explain.’

I didn’t crumple this page, not yet, I might need it. ‘I am smiling,’ I said, ‘because the eldest prince intends to marry me.’

‘What?’ Hadiah snatched the paper and reading it again, her brows flying upwards into her hair. Marolyn went to look over her shoulder at it, baffled.

I knew it, with Isen gone, Alar’s only real challenges were Liran and Conrin. And he didn’t think Conrin worth a glint in his eye.

After a moment, Marolyn looked up, still confused and hurt, and now angry. ‘This makes you happy?’ she said with a sting in her tongue. ‘He’s handsome enough, more so than his decrepit father.’ She scoffed. ‘So is that your grand shitting plan? Is this what Guwetha died for? What you had a poor serf flogged for? A second kith-damned marriage to exchange one swan for another?’

I stared at her. ‘Are you done?’ I asked.

‘I’m not fucking done,’ said Marolyn. She looked away, jaw flexing. ‘I do not know you, Tilde. I don’t know this version of you, full of secrets, and cruelties, and lies.’ She pulled out a blue crystal vial, filled inside with black liquid. ‘I don’t know why you are working with a Geveran and his physik, making poison. I don’t know why you lied to us about walking in a storm when Perin says you were with Elise. I don’t know why so many of our own people had to die.’

I didn’t know what to say to that.

‘Why would you want such an evil thing?’ said Hadiah, eyeing the bottle.

The blood magic, the poison. Ziyan had come through.

‘I asked you to trust me,’ I said. ‘I told you this would be a long and bloody battle, and you are a damned fool if you think you can walk through war and keep your skirts clean.’ I was ravenous, I was nauseous, my belly ached. I sat up, wincing, and felt like a sack of water in tender skin. I put my hand to my chest.

‘Then why do you not tell us anything!’ Marolyn insisted.

‘Because you stopped talking to me as soon as things became harder,’ I bit back, swinging my legs out of bed. Marolyn tightened her hand on the vial. ‘Between your sword and Hadiah’s silk, I had to find a balance, and some of that balance is bloody.’

‘You are turning into the thing you hate,’ said Marolyn. ‘You move like a tyrant, expecting the world to bend to your will!’

‘And it has.’ I waved the note, dropping my voice to a whisper. ‘You want to know why I am happy? Because he means to turn on his brothers. The bastards are going to start killing each other before I lift a finger.’

‘They will,’ murmured Hadiah, still scanning the page and understanding it now. ‘*Red heart goes beating, where the sky once greyed, The wings will fold and new birds greet the day*.’

‘He speaks of his banner, and Conrin’s,’ I said. ‘Once root, now nest. He has no love of the Synod; he and Isen were raised Cynghal, not like their brothers in Galen, and like King Liran’s uncles wants to return to the old world, under his command. He was the one who reopened the gates to their blood magic after he learned of it.’ I laughed. Liran had sowed the seeds of his own destruction, I had just come with water and light to make them grow. A war between brothers and father, without fealty, without love. ‘They will turn on each other, and we will rise out of the carnage alone.’

Marolyn sat heavily on the bed, looking lost. Hadiah shook her head, and sank down beside her.

‘It is too soon,’ she murmured. We were gathered together in the canopy, like the children we had once been, conspiring about simpler things. ‘We are not ready. Liran’s reputation falters, but only in his closest court. We have no allies in Hallion, Suneheim, Galen or Cynghal itself. If he dies, even at his sons’ hands, you will not be the first they choose for the throne.’

I reached for the vial and Marolyn handed it to me.

‘Then we will save him,’ I said. ‘But bind him.’

‘You mean to use this on Liran?’ said Hadiah. ‘His own family’s magic?’.

I could but try. If only my mother knew how rotten I could become. Would she be delighted, or filled with horror?

The door shook with a knock, three slams, and dust fell from it. We leapt up, Marolyn stuffed the papers and vial down her dress as Hadiah clinked the tray to hide the noise of her movement, though much would have been silenced by the tapestries.

‘What is it? The queen is awake but resting!’ she called out.

‘I know the plotting of women when I hear it,’ I heard a man say.

Not just any man. Palati Odon.

The king’s general.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Forty-three

Tilde

General Nefka, brute of war, captain of ships, first of the king's blue guard. Colfinn and Ebba had told me horror stories of him, and he had been named in the feasts of the kingsmoot as the man the Merogians most wanted to kill.

Nefka, who had slaughtered Widdin's old council and burned the capital to the ground. Nefka who had stood with Isen before our walls, and told him what to do to my family to make us open the gates. Now he sat before me, and fixed me with a stare, as if I were a knot he wanted to slice through. He would have already, if he had truly heard what we were whispering.

'What were you muttering about?' he said.

'We were discussing my health,' I said. I felt sick to my stomach, and woozy with it, but I had already eaten all the biscuits in the tray. I suspect I had been fed on oat-water and gruel while my world was dark.

'It took a while.'

'Women like to chat,' I smiled tightly. 'What do you want? Today you burned a prince, and your queen woke from her sickness; it must be important if you feel fit to disturb me.' How did he know that I had woken? Perhaps he had men watching the door, immediately running as they heard a change within. Perin might have tolerated that, might even been bribed to allow it. It was not a great infraction, certainly not worth the cost of his promised protection.

Odon flexed his good hand on his knee. His boar-damaged arm was still in bandages, but he moved it more easily now against its splints, and his sword was by his good hand. I was grateful that Perin was in the room, but Odon paid no more attention to him than he might have to a spider on the wall.

'You know who I am,' said Odon.

'I do.'

'Do you remember when we first met?'

When my mother opened the gates of Nandenys, he had not removed his helmet, but I remember the grin of his broken teeth beneath it as he was

welcomed onto our land. He had greeted me then with a mocking little bow before my mother had me ripped away to my room, preserving the only child she had left.

‘I remember,’ I said. ‘It was not so long ago.’ Colfinn and Ebba came into my mind, tortured, broken, humiliated. I tried not to let my fear show on my face.

‘Some men carry hatred to their grave,’ said Odon.

‘I am not a man,’ I said. Hadiah, at last, looked impressed with me. I was not a man: I would carry it beyond my grave, into the forest, into death. But he did not know it yet.

Or perhaps he did. He leaned back, his eyes glittering as he looked at me. ‘You’ve been playing this part well, girl.’

‘You will refer to me as your queen,’ I said. ‘That is my part.’ Odon scoffed. His own guards, all Cynghal, were outside the door. They had rough knuckles and weatherworn faces, I wondered if the two of my own guard could stand against them. I needed more.

‘And why does the queen think she has been visited by an old Cynghal general?’

‘Perhaps he wishes to celebrate my recovery after I saved the remaining few years of his life,’ I said. ‘So he can toy with sick women all he wants.’ I saw Perin bite his lips to keep from smirking.

‘Not quite,’ he said. ‘I am here to advise that you toe the fucking line.’

‘Palati,’ Perin reprimanded, stepping forward, but I waved him back.

‘What line would that be?’ I asked.

‘I know dark magic when I see it,’ Odon said, touching his Wing pendant. Was he a true believer? Not just making deals with the faith for their finances, really believing in the Wing’s power? ‘And I knew it was suspicious you saw the boars before anyone else.’

‘I saw more than the boars, and you know that, too,’ I said.

Odon leaned back in his chair, and I rested my thumbs in my thighs, feeling the tenderness there. It was not an unfamiliar feeling.

‘Sixty-three years I have walked this earth,’ said Odon, looking down his nose at me. ‘I have worked long and hard to clean up the princes’ messes, wipe their bloody noses, find them special battles to fight, men and women to fuck in private, all to keep them from killing each other long enough to prove they are worth a blade of grass in the empire their father built.’ He tutted. ‘It has made them weak.’

‘They were raised to be kings of the world,’ I said, ‘but given nothing to prove it. Do you think that makes it easy for a man to fail?’

‘You defend them? You?’

‘It is better to understand my enemy,’ I said.

‘They are not your enemies.’

‘Then tell them that,’ I replied.

‘This is why I come to you,’ said Odon, he sat forward again. ‘Enough of this political shifting, these half lies, this claiming of the faith for your connivances. You saved us with your art, stolen from the druidim I suspect. But whatever you did, it stops now,’ he said. ‘You will not walk in the trees, you will not touch them, you will not *look* at them.’

‘That might be hard,’ said Marolyn from where she waited in a corner, thumbing the hilt of her scramasax, not even bothering to hide it. Almost like she wanted him to fight her. ‘Half this fucking land is trees.’

Odon ignored her, his attention was fixed on me. ‘You will have this prince the king wants, you will make him good and fat and strong, and we will do it fucking right this time. No more magic, no more shows of sycophancy and ingratiation. Stay in your rooms, do your job.’

I considered him. His fine garb and his rough face, the gold and silver and gems on his fingers, and the jewels in his ear. I was scared of his reputation, but now he threatened me so ungraciously, I felt little else but scorn.

‘So your grand plan to protect your king is simply to provide another boy to be fodder for his brothers’ rancour?’ I raised an eyebrow.

‘That is what you’re for,’ he scowled.

‘How wise the great Nefka has become,’ I said with sarcasm. ‘Perhaps I have more value than a pretty face and a slit between my legs. And perhaps the king needs more help than a babe.’

To my delight, the man flushed slightly, taken aback, and Perin actually snorted. It emboldened me. Did he think I would simply nod? He was not my king, nor my husband, nor even a high born noble.

‘I have ended sieges,’ I said. ‘I have saved your lives, and you come to threaten and abuse me when I have barely woken from five days in sickbed? Were you expecting a simpering maid who would weep and call you “uncle”? I am a queen, *Nefka*, and all you have told me I already know. All you want from me I am already trying. Do not taunt me with empty threats, old man.’

That was a mistake. His face went still, and his eyes widened, deadened. In them I saw the cold gleam of a predator. ‘Empty?’ he said.

He moved as fast as Liran, fast as a snake. The bastard should be proud. He grabbed my wounded arm and dragged me from my seat. Perin drew his sword, levelling it at him, and in response Odon drew out a dagger, putting it to my neck, point first. Fractured arm or no, he moved it just the same, even though I heard a suppressed groan of pain.

‘Try it, you Galenish prick,’ he snarled through it. ‘And you’ll have a dead moneybox.’

I did not think he would kill me. I shook my head at Perin, who hesitated, and stepped back. Marolyn was clutching Hadiah, and they both ran after me as Odon dragged me into the corridor.

I had not seen the grand palace of Daostet before I was dragged through its halls by an upstart Cynghal. I had the impression of tiled walls, painted, and rounded archways set with twisted blue and yellow, ceilings of wood painted with swans.

Odon hauled me down beneath them as the others followed, limping through a narrow door and up a stairwell to a galleried balcony enclosed by windows and a high roof. The wall around us was white limestone, and styled like an outer rampart, interspersed with lines of red clay bricks. Ivy hung from the walls, thick and vivid green, crawling down over the stone while windows let through shafts of light, down into an enclosed courtyard where a little fountain sat trickling around all the green leaves. A strange place. Outside and inside, overlooked by several galleries all the way up, but roofed and hidden from the sky.

‘Do you know what this is?’ Odon snarled, shaking me by the shoulder. My arm ached with the needle pinpricks, my head pounded. I had not yet been sick, but I soon would be.

‘What are you talking about you crazy fool?’ We had not passed anyone in the corridors, not a single soul. The funeral: the rest of the palace was in mourning. He had chosen to see me when there was no one close to witness whatever he said or did.

‘This is a place where lessons are learned,’ he said, dragging me to the balcony’s edge, where the ivy draped thickly over the stone balustrade. ‘It used to be outside the castle, enclosed by forest, and filled with bones and trees.’

I gasped: I knew this place. Ardnamur had been a trade hub, but Daostet was the holy city where the fox clan buried their kings. The stories told that the kithwood's roots reached to the very foundations of the chasm that held them.

The crypt was gone: just a flat piece of land beneath a rebuilt palace, a green enclosed by a newer wall entirely of clay stone, cut through with tiny round windows like blinking eyes.

But the ivy wasn't dead, the ground was soft with grass. Why? There was not enough light in here to feed it.

'You know it,' said Odon, satisfied. 'We cut down the great heathen pillar.' That story we knew, Hadiah's mother had wept when she was told. 'And filled in the graves. As we did, a tarn in the north who at first bowed to our king then would not accept the laws he made. He refused his taxes, tore down the holy Nests of the Wing as they were being built. He sent the priests, innocent men, back to the palace in pieces. And, worst of all, he kept returning to your rotten woods, blessing his children in the green.' His hand still held me, tight as a vice. 'So, I sent a messenger and told him to choose. The Nest and the king, or death. Which do you think he chose?'

'Death,' I whispered, looking at the fountain. Now I recognised it; it was the shrine of the first king of Widdin, poking out of the ground and still flowing with water, a marble and tile base added so it still looked intentional.

'He chose death,' agreed Odon. 'The siege barely lasted two weeks, for his guards knew god was on our side. Then we brought him here with his wife, his children, his lovers, his servants, and we sat them with their dead kings that they loved so much, and laid bars of iron above their heads.' He continued his dead eyed stare, which scared me almost more than his words. 'It took two days to bury them. Two more till we could no longer hear the screaming.' He wanted my horror, my reaction. 'Do you know what the next tarn chose who was given the same offer?'

'I imagine you intend to tell me,' I muttered.

'The Nest. They all choose the Nest eventually. Sometimes we bring other rebels here, peasants or nobles, and they sleep among their ghosts. Sometimes they starve to death, sometimes we burn them and their bones. Sometimes we have garrisons camp here on wild days, and they say they can hear the screaming. And they smile, knowing it is traitors who scream.'

'Why are you telling me this?' I snapped. 'Do you mean to shock me?'

‘I mean to tell you that no threat I make is ever empty. I want you to know that if you even *think* about entering the woods, if you whisper another word of that magic you claim is for the Wing, I will reopen the ground beneath us and throw in you, your women, and anyone else who speaks for you, to be buried alive. You do not have enough uses for me to risk our future on your grace.’

I stared at him for a moment; I couldn’t help it, I laughed. A little chuckle at first, but then I allowed a cackle to burst from my lips as he stared at me. Did he not know I was raised on horrors? Did he not know I had lost more than I had ever held?

‘You think this is funny?’

‘You think I am one of your piss-stained soldiers who is afraid of a moment’s frailty?’ I said, laughing harder so it felt like a snarl. ‘You are a weak man, losing your grip on power, and so you shake and degrade a woman carrying your king’s child?’

Odon reddened. ‘You …’

I knew this feeling, this fatigue, this belly-ache hunger and touching of sickness. I had felt it before.

‘You heard me,’ I said, and wrenched my arm away, and he did not stop me, his expression was twisted between joy and anger, his dark eyes glistening as if he had spotted land on the horizon of a tumultuous sea. ‘That is what my ladies were talking about when you charged into my room. You ask me to be a good little queen, and so I am. But it is not me you should be threatening. It is the other swans who have a hunger for their father’s throne.’

‘They would not dare move on their father,’ said Odon. ‘*The Wing is the swan is the father is the king.* The bonds of faith and blood are deep.’

‘Feather deep,’ I whispered, stepping closer. ‘Not deep enough to save a brother from certain doom. Not deep enough to save a sister from themselves.’ Odon flinched. ‘Not deep enough for a father who poisoned their mother and denied their succession so he could grasp his crown a little longer. I imagine you had a hand in that.’ Odon’s jaw flexed, and I knew I had struck home. Ysel was right, and Elise. Isabella had been seen away when she no longer had a use.

‘This family would kill each other for glory,’ I said. ‘And you are the one washing the blood from their hands, staining your own. Are these the kind of bonds you speak of?’

He could not find a lie to tell me, or himself. Doubt was planted in his ear, hissing in his mind, and with it, the smallest breath of fear.

'Why do you speak of this?' he whispered.

'To protect your king, *Nefka*,' I said. 'Look to his walls, not to his wife.' I put my hand over my belly. 'Or his only innocent child. If you are not wiser you will end with another queen's death, and another prince's blood on your conscience.'

His hand loosed, and he stepped away. I, free, looked at him with all the disdain I had ever felt. He had thought he was still on a battlefield, that I was an unruly soldier to be brought in line. Liran had built his empire on conflict, had thrived on it. Odon understood terror, not intrigue, honour, but not betrayal. He knew open waters and open fields, crumbling stone and torture. But the arena had changed: this field was shadows and closed rooms, and the weapons to wield were laughter, slips of paper, and doubt.

He didn't speak, and I turned away and put my hands on the green banister. He hesitated a moment longer, then turned without a word. The wound I had dealt him was no vengeance for Colfinn and Ebba, nor Isabella, nor Elise, not yet.

But I was forming a plan for when Alar and Conrin came for the king and each other. I would rally to Liran's defence, I would battle the lot of them down. Perhaps then the king's most loyal hound would trust a newer master.

And perhaps Elise would as well.

I felt the stir of leaves beneath me: *bones in the roots in the earth in the ash. Screaming we are screaming to the ground we have gone.*

There were the faintest whispers coming from the leaves in this strange prison room, this hall of remembrance and terror.

Tooth in the thorn in the kings in our deaths.

I dug my fingers down into the little twigs. There, the song grew louder, the whispers seeping into my bones.

Wing cut us down cut our lungs cut our breath.

Despite the desecration of this holy place, the roots of the wood were still there beneath us. Green connected to green.

I did not need to enter the wood to reach its power.

The forest was already here.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Forty-four

Tilde

The next evening slipped in like a secret. I took a day to prepare, then I brought my husband a jug of fine wine on a tray with an oil lantern of the eastern sort, smoking thickly.

I wore the dress that he had intended me to be married in, Isabella's dress, a pale drop of silk panelling over linen skirts, open at the chest. I shivered as I passed by the red tiles near his chambers, gleaming like blood in the lamplight. I was weak still, and trembling with cold.

The guards stood at attention as I reached his door, and that alerted him to my presence. One of them was rather red-faced, embarrassed about something.

'Who is it?' my husband barked from within.

'It is your queen,' I said. 'Tuathilde. I bring good tidings.'

I heard him grunt, a few low, harsh words were spoken that I couldn't make out, and a few moments later the door opened. Three women stepped out in a state of undress, their hair unbraided, and wearing pretty jewels in their ears.

'Ardweni King,' one greeted me in a whisper in the Widdish dialect. She went to her knee in a quick bow. The three had their faces whitened like Galenish women, but still covered themselves as respectfully as they could.

I nodded my head to them as Alar came out behind.

'My queen,' he said, with a deep bow. 'My apologies for such indecorum.'

I knew I was supposed to be offended; perhaps Alar thought Merogians were like the Galenish, and tight-kneed at the idea of paying for sex. If he thought his condescension was ingratiating, he was not as smart as he thought he was.

I thought of his note.

'If the king is occupied,' I said meekly, covering the lantern's smoke so he would not breathe it, 'I could return tomorrow.'

'If I am occupied it isn't by Alar's jiggling whores,' snapped Liran from inside the room.

Alar sighed, put what I am sure he thought was a reassuring palm on my back. ‘You have the floor for now,’ he said.

I resisted the urge to slap his hand away, and instead tipped my head, opening my lips a little, and gazed at him beneath my lashes as if entranced. ‘Thank you, Prince Alar,’ I said sweetly. ‘Your wife is a lucky woman.’

‘She will be.’ He nodded, giving my shoulder another squeeze. He couldn’t stay there too long, I needed to be rid of him. I again wondered what he had done with his wife.

‘I hope I can rely on you again in future,’ I said, and his eyes widened with a little fear, a little anticipation, and he glanced at his father’s door.

It was enough to make him drop his touch, scared himself that he would be caught too soon, and give me a curt little bow before departing.

I was perhaps more afraid of him than Liran. My gut told me to run as far from his predator touch as I could. But I could use his interest, and his greed. He thought he could have me, and that with my strength bound to his he could wash himself of the Wing’s distaste and the stain of his past, and break free from their fetters.

Between him and Conrin, the balance was tight, the stalemate held by their father’s life.

Softly.

I nodded slightly at the guards, and entered swan’s Nest again.

The king was sitting on a low stool, peering over a table spread with plans in the fading light, tapers and a stoked-up fire casting just enough of a glow for him to see. Crumbs covered the paper, the remains of a small supper, supplemented by the acrid stink of the bowl he was drinking from. War plans, it looked like, with army numbers, horses, cattle, and other structures: an aqueduct, a great wall around a port. From its shape, the port looked like Scorda, the city held by Hadiah’s brother in Ardwen. I did not think he would take kindly to changes in plans, nor would the Cynghals treat Hadiah with generosity if he rebelled.

‘Come closer, Isabella,’ Liran grunted, lifting a sheet. ‘You know I dislike you hovering like a gull scared of water.’

‘My king,’ I said, and he looked up and frowned as I went to my knee.

‘I said I’d had enough of whores,’ he snapped. ‘Who are you? Where is Isabella?’

‘Isabella died,’ I said carefully as the guards closed the door. ‘I am your new queen. Tilde.’

He stared at me a moment, his eyes scraping over my shoulders. I had bound my hair back in a loose braid and teased out the soft curls around my face. The scar from Guwetha's thorn spear showed in its purpling shades as it healed, I wanted to be sure he saw that.

'I know that,' he covered, though he still looked uncertain. 'Come, sit.'

I came to him and placed the lantern and wine on the table before him. I felt … discomfited by his seeming frailty. Despite all his cruelties, he was a sick man, and all around him those who should support and guide him in his age and illness were instead determined to take advantage. And I was one of them.

Pity would not help me now. His eyes went to the wine.

'So,' he said, 'some whores depart and another arrives. They were skinny little things, with no bite to them. Do you mean to seduce me instead?' He sniffed, inhaling the smoke of the lantern. I had added rose oil, and mint, which mingled with the salt scent coming from the waves beyond his chamber. 'Sit then, you have slumbered too long.'

So, he remembered me again.

'I come to speak with you,' I said, picking up the cup before him. There was some stinking liqueur left in it, which I offered to him. He took it in one hand, and finished it, before handing it back, his eyes never leaving my face, and my body. Desire was written into his expression, despite his grumbling. He liked this performance. 'Now I have woken.'

'They say the forest bit you for defying it,' said Liran. 'Is that what you told them? The erls seem determined to think you incapable of witchery. How you have charmed them.' He clicked his tongue. 'Merogian charmers, women, witches, all of you …'

As he began to mumble, I laughed lightly. 'Do you think them charmed?' I said. 'I am glad they did not repay my suffering with reprobation. It would be a shame to see me burned when I am, at last, pregnant with a child of the swan.'

Liran's entire demeanour changed, he looked up at me, shoulders dropping, face softening, as I poured his wine with shaking fingers.

'You are?'

I nodded, picking up the wine and offering it to him. He looked at it suspiciously, then at me. Instead of taking the cup, he put his hand to my breast. I gasped as he felt its weight, and winced.

'Maybe,' he said at last. 'They are heavy.'

‘They ache,’ I agreed, though the moment had shaken me. ‘My stomach churns, and a weariness eats to my bones.’ I took his hand and put it to my lower stomach. ‘I only hope your boys will accept their brother.’

Liran smiled wide, sitting back and taking the cup from me, his scar puckered in his cheek, and I saw the teeth behind it were missing from the strike that had almost killed him.

‘Thank the Wing,’ he said, touching the gold emblem that hung at his chest. ‘I knew it had not forsaken me, Isabella. This will settle our futures at last. The Synod will guard a gravid woman, and my sons would not dare upset them. When the territories here settle and our coffers begin to fill, they will understand everything I have done for them. What they owe me.’ He clapped a hand on his thigh, and I watched the cup as he balanced it on his knee. ‘They are gathering in the east, Isabella, one of their kingsmoots. We have planned for it long. We have a Geveran broken to us entirely, and he will go as a snake in the grass, or we will destroy the last of his blood and then him.’

Merovin, he was speaking of Merovin. Time was colliding in this man’s mind, and he was speaking of the rebellion six years ago. The ducal had already confessed his betrayal. I would never forgive him, but could I depend on him? I was not sure.

Uplift those you understand, not those you love.

I did understand Merovin, at least a little. And I understood Liran. A man whose greed was enough to swallow the world.

‘I am not Isabella,’ I reminded him. Liran’s smile dropped, and he frowned at me. ‘I am Tilde.’

‘Yes,’ he said softly. He was worse. The shock of Isen’s death, perhaps even the journey through the wood, had hastened his unravelling, but I needed him to loosen a little further, and take his threads in my hands. I nodded at the wine.

‘Then please, swan king,’ I said, ‘drink to our country’s future.’

He put the cup to this lips, and sniffed, after a moment coughing slightly on the black smoke of the oil lamp, then held the bowl out to me instead. The wine was a dark red, and rich. When close, it covered the scent of roses.

‘You first, Queen Tilde,’ he said. I blinked. He was alert again.

‘I-I wouldn’t dare,’ I tried. ‘The king must drink first—’

‘You will dare,’ he said, holding out the bowl in both his hands. When I hesitated further, provoking his volatility, he picked up my right hand, from my belly, and then my left, and pushed them to hold the bowl so it hung between us. He was blinking slowly, suspicious, and my heart protested, beating fast. I thought for a moment of the life inside me, and made a silent prayer.

I hesitated a moment too long. Liran released one of my hands and put his fist to the back of my head, shoving the cup hard into my mouth and splashing wine over my tongue and across the pale silk of the dress. He thought I was a plaything, a doll he could touch and use in any way he wanted. I swallowed, tasting good wine and blood.

‘Do you think I am stupid?’ he snarled at me, dropping the cup to land in my lap. I touched at the stained fabric, my stinging mouth, and my fingers came away red from a cut he had put in my bottom lip. ‘Poison in the wine?’

I smiled feeling the split in my lip deepen, then licked away the red. So he was not so far gone to know we were still playing this game between us. People thought power was a crown or a sword, but power was a web, delicate and always trembling. ‘Is that what you’re afraid of?’ I said. I picked up the fallen cup and licked it deep enough to make him blush, then I put it back down on the table quietly. He was swaying a little as he stared, and my head swam.

‘If the wine was poisoned,’ I said. ‘You would have killed me and the babe in me too.’

Liran tightened his jaw, breathing in through his nose, and then exhaled again, a little black of the smoke showing between his lips. ‘There are antidotes,’ he said. ‘I trusted your woman’s instincts would have saved you and him. If not.’ He shrugged. ‘Better a dead child than a useless wife. I could buy another.’

‘Is that why you poisoned your last one?’

Silence stretched between us. Liran’s lips parted, and then he shook his head, as if dislodging water from his ears.

‘Tell me,’ I said.

‘We could not sail a sinking ship,’ he said at last. ‘She had lost her uses and it was kinder than sending her home. Kinder for her daughter too, to be free of her endless grieving …’ He trailed off, his hand going to his mouth as he frowned at the bowl.

‘Is it so strange to tell a wife your secrets?’ I said sweetly. It had been a test. He had passed.

He looked up at me, and I could see the blackness between his teeth, on his tongue.

‘Hold my hand,’ I said, putting out my fingers. ‘Kindly.’

His fingers shook, but slowly, he lifted them, putting his thumb on my palm.

‘Kiss it for me darling,’ I said, and my hand was halfway to his lips before I took it away. His hand hung in the air, one he had struck me with, bruised me with, forced me with. He stared at it. By now his mind must be slipping with my voice, as mine had done with his sons’ words. His already struggling wits would grasp at what they could hold, and it could only hold me. Would only hold me.

For the glory was not in the wine: it was in the smoke. With my blood mixed into the incense, it was my voice he had to obey.

To anyone who did not know intimately the magic of his kin it would be just another symptom of his age, his declining mind, his power and his faith in me.

‘You should go to bed,’ I said. ‘Stand up.’

He stood, and I smiled and stood with him. I could see the confusion behind his eyes, the resistance, but I did not want him to fight it so hard just yet. I smiled, and touched his face.

‘Get some rest, husband, and think on this happy news.’

I didn’t tell him of his sons’ plots. They must embarrass themselves, eat each other, and Liran and I would be united. I would be his anchor, and his strength.

Suffering Tilde, a princess converted to the Wing’s grace, defier of the forest, holding up her aged husband against his foolhardy sons.

One day, I would tell my own story. How I made the swans pluck out their own feathers, how I wrung their pretty necks and fed them to each other.

I tried not to think of Elise.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Forty-five

Elise

Elise had gone to Tilde's chamber, over and over. Before morning song, after the funeral, when the sun had set, only to be turned away each time.

But now the servants whispered that the queen had awoken.

Elise had packed a bag, some gold, her hand loom, her distaff. She wore her greys with simple cotton smocks underneath. She had packed books, too. Her years' long penance for a crime she did not commit, had been as self-inflicted as her wounds, her sadness, her isolation. Her father did not notice when it lapsed. Of course he didn't.

No more. She could bear this place no longer. She had watched her brother burn, and the others who killed him had pretended to weep. Elise was tired of these games. The loyalty that had been written into her very core, her piety, her love of her father, her faith in her brothers, it was all breaking under pressure; better she leave while she still had a little left.

I have failed you, Mother. But perhaps you should have wanted more for me.

Now she waited impatiently in the queen's chamber, clenching and unclenching her hands.

Elise had made her decision, but where was Tilde? She was willing to leave it all, willing to lose everything she had, all her certainties in this world, to take her away. To be safe, with her.

Yet Tilde was gone, her serfs too, her women, and Elise was alone once again, and waiting for life to happen to her. She looked around. There were some bottles and tinctures on the desk, and a small knife with dried blood, the faintest scent of roses and mint. Elise determinedly read the small book she had in her hands, and tried to still the fluttering in her chest.

Eventually, the door opened, and Elise stood, catching her breath. She dusted off her tunic and pushed back her hair as Tilde stepped through. She was alone, which seemed foolish until Elise saw the guard of five that stopped outside. The queen looked weary to her bones and half sick with it. Elise bowed, bright wings flapping around her heart.

‘Princess,’ Tilde murmured, not surprised to see her, for the guards at her door would have warned her, but certainly Elise was not expected, and that stung. Tilde was wearing a cloak, but underneath it was a pale dress that Elise recognised, wine-stained. Her mother’s dress. Strange. She had refused to wear it before. And there was a split to her lip now, blood drying there.

‘Are you all right?’ Elise asked, going to her. ‘Where are Marolyn and Hadiah?’ She took Tilde’s hands in hers and drew her into the room, closing the door on her guards. The same rose scent was on Tilde’s hair, but nothing unusual. She always smelled like sweet things.

‘They have other duties while I went to see your father,’ said Tilde, her fingers cold. She spoke with a strange caginess.

‘Oh,’ said Elise, relieved. Though it hurt to think that Tilde had gone to Liran first, that she had sent her women away, and not come directly to her, to say she was all right.

Tilde sensed her distress, and took her hands away, going to the window that looked over the darkness of Daostet spreading towards the sea. Some windows held lamplight, closer to the palace; further away there were fires in the streets where some of the citizens were cooking food together.

Tentatively, Elise joined her and put her arms around her waist, resting her head on Tilde’s shoulder. Tilde let her, putting her arms around Elise’s, and pressing herself back against the princess.

‘I thought we were forgetting this,’ she murmured.

Elise felt the curves of the woman pressing through her dress, fitting in her arms, and wondered how she had never understood what desire might be. She thought back over her life, her hesitant friendships with the women of court, the servants, too afraid to let them too near, as if they might burn at her touch.

But she was the one who had been afraid to burn.

She was ready now.

She turned her head down and pressed her lips to the bareness of Tilde’s neck. ‘Let’s run away,’ she murmured into the skin.

The queen startled, moving away. ‘What?’ she said with a shocked laugh.

‘I have means,’ said Elise. ‘I have coin and weaving, you know the land and the language. Let us go.’

Tilde did not move for a moment, as if caught in a net. She opened her mouth, winced a little at her split lip, and closed it. She closed the distance

between them slowly, reaching up to touch Elise's cheek.

'Oh princess,' she said, stroking her thumb across her cheekbone, tenderly, but the gentleness in her face faded. 'You want the impossible.'

Elise had practised her arguments in her mind, determined she could convince her, but in her heart she had hoped Tilde would be willing.

'It … it is not impossible. I am stronger than I look, Tilde, I can protect us.'

'Against an army?'

'With Hadiah and Marolyn, with Hein, we can do anything.'

Tilde shook her head, still speaking low. 'Your father would hunt for us; if we were lucky he would let us live, but we would not get far. Even if we were to use Hein as a hostage, that would not stop him.'

A hostage? No, Tilde misunderstood, Elise wanted to save him from all of this, give him another chance.

'He has plenty of sons, he would give up eventually,' Elise insisted. 'I know you have the kithwood's power, I could feel it; you can take us on the narrow paths and we'll escape over the sea to somewhere else.'

Somewhere she could walk in the hot sun, hold a woman to her in love, buy salt, read books. Her father had made an empire, yes, but she had no place in it, she knew that now. He did not need her, he needed a different version of her, someone she could never be.

Tilde turned away now, dropping her hand and chuckling. Elise shivered. It was not a kind laugh, but harsh, and cold, and bitter. 'We cannot protect anyone we love,' said Tilde softly. 'Elise, you cannot even protect yourself. Why are you saying all of this? It is madness.'

Elise reddened, folding her arms over herself, but she was determined she could do it. Break away, be someone else. Something, anything else. No more swans, no more kings, no more dead sister, dead mother. She stepped closer to Tilde.

'I am saying this because I love you Tilde,' she said, fiercely. 'I love you and I cannot hide it. I—'

'Don't,' Tilde said, closing her eyes. 'Please don't.'

'My mother never ran,' said Elise. 'My sister never ran. I don't want us to be like them, living in fear and in spite of ourselves. I can't do it. The Synod is wrong, by the grace of the Wing I am who I am, and who I am loves you.'

‘Don’t Elise!’ snapped Tilde, her eyes flashing open. ‘Don’t you dare. Listen to me. This life you want with me is out of reach. It was out of reach the moment you and I were born on different sides of a war. You don’t even know how much grace the world has given you Elise, to imagine freedom. One night cannot change that.’

‘I don’t care about sides!’

‘*I care.*’

Elise stopped. She had seen Tilde angry before, but not this quiet, simmering anger, not this stance like an anchor of stone and root, as if she could have a knife in her hand and plunge it into Elise’s heart without blinking.

And she did.

‘I am with child, Elise,’ she said in a whisper. ‘Your father’s child.’

Elise lost her breath. She backed away a step, looking down at Tilde as if she could see the truth through her cloth and skin.

‘Do you think he would let us go now?’ Tilde’s voice dropped to a shaking whisper. She put her hand over her belly. Who knew such a gesture of protection could also be a declaration of war? ‘What about your brothers? They will never let a competitor go into the dark without lighting the way to their corpse. And then they would hang my body from the ramparts and pull out my lungs as a warning to my people. No.’ She shook her head, and gave Elise a pained look, as if she was about to reach for her. But she did not.

‘And what of you?’ she continued. ‘Princess of the swans, born for the ships but kept to the chamber. You they would catch and sell to the highest bidder, for a bit of land, perhaps, an alliance. What is one girl to the flow of silver and swords?’

Elise balled her fists, desperate to protest, but unable to say how. Pregnant, with her father’s baby. The thought was horrifying, the thought she had flinched from, had been too afraid to touch. Because Tilde was never hers.

‘It is not love I need,’ said Tilde. ‘It is not love that will save us. It is power.’

‘You sound like him,’ said Elise bitterly, but Tilde did not flinch.

‘Perhaps I do.’

Elise went to her, wanting to make her see. She did not touch her, but knelt. ‘What grace has the world given me?’ she said, her hand on her heart,

and Tilde's face softened slightly, though Elise did not enjoy the pity she saw in it. 'What I have for you is simple hope.' She reached out, and when Tilde didn't stop her, she touched her wrist. 'Hope for us. For you. Child or no. You can teach me the Ways of the kithwood, I can hear it, I can do it. Together we will be unstoppable.'

Tilde wrested herself from Elise, pity gone. '*That* is your grace. Don't you see, Elise? You are a thief of power without even trying, while I serve the murderers of our people, who punish them daily with the loss of their land and their faith.'

'I have been punished!' cried Elise. 'I have been punished in a thousand little ways, by a thousand tiny cuts. Let us be bold, Tilde, let us be free!'

Tilde would not relent. 'Love cannot shield us, hope cannot fight for me, and you cannot protect me. Your father can.'

'My father rapes you!' said Elise, her temper cracking. She stood. 'He hurts you! And you let him!'

She regretted it the moment she spoke it. Tilde looked as if she had struck her in the gut, pulled out her heart and gloated over it. The woman retreated, her expression closing and cold.

'We all do terrible things to survive,' she said. 'All I can do is become more terrible than those who hurt me.'

Just then, there was a brief knock at the door. Elise covered her face before it opened and revealed Hein, his arm in his sling and an odd smile plastered to his face.

'Queen Tilde—' he said, too bright, and stopped when he saw Elise. The smile dropped.

'Elise-hyem,' he said. 'You're not supposed to be here.'

Elise frowned at him, glad she was practiced at masking her emotions. 'You're supposed to be abed, Brother-hyem.'

Tilde, who was still standing apart, gazed hard at little boy, then her head snapped to the door as she heard boots coming down the corridor, and a query from Perin.

'You need to go,' said Hein to Elise. He took a step towards her, then ran a little faster as the boots approached. 'You need to go!'

'What are you doing? Hein!'

'Protect the queen!' came a shout from outside, and Elise heard the sound of swords being drawn. Then, a clash, metal on metal.

‘Shit,’ said Tilde. She went to her mantlepiece and reached up into it with her bandaged hand, wrenching down a short spear from where it had been hung, hidden, beneath the lintel.

‘What’s happening?’ said Elise.

‘Stay back!’ said Hein, pushing her with his good hand, brow creased. ‘Close your eyes, like Conrin said!’

Elise looked down, aghast.

The swords clashed in the corridor, and a man came running through wearing a grey scarf at his neck. He glanced over Elise, and Hein, his expression shifting, then back to Tilde, who backed away, her spear lowered, face wild. Someone screamed outside.

‘You betray your queen,’ Tilde hissed.

A curdled yell made the man who entered flinch, but he stepped forward, both hands on his sword. ‘I act on orders of the new king,’ he said.

Tilde lifted her spear, paling, but determined to fight as he lifted his long blade and ran for her, swinging it with terrible force.

No matter how heartbroken she was, Elise could not let her fall.

‘Elise! No!’

Hein cried out as Elise threw herself at the man, grabbing him by the shoulders and dragging him back by his scarf before his blow could even reach the queen. Tilde took her moment, a forward step, a strike, and her spearpoint burst into his face in a crunch of bone and blood. He howled as she ripped it out, then used the point to stab through his throat.

Elise dropped him. Hein had his head in his arm.

‘What are you doing?’ came a voice outside, hissing and urgent over the sound of the metal. ‘You were supposed to surrender—’

Another scream, and Perin and another of Tilde’s guards came into the room, the latter limping, wounded.

‘Queen Tilde,’ said the captain, ‘are you—?’

‘I am well,’ said Tilde.

Behind them, a third guard dragged through a struggling man wearing a grey scarf.

‘You were supposed to let us through,’ he protested. ‘You—’

‘When are they moving?’ said Perin in Galenish. ‘How soon? Now?’

The knight did answer, still struggling, but then when the knife pressed harder to his throat he stopped, moving away.

‘Do you want to live?’ hissed Perin.

‘Tomorrow!’ he said. ‘At council. Tomorrow.’

Perin nodded to the guard, and the knife flashed. The man fell, choking on his blood. He twitched twice, then was still. Tilde watched him for a moment. She did not look shaken, she looked triumphant, but still turned her eyes back to her captain.

‘“Supposed to let them through?”’ she asked. Perin shrugged.

‘Ducal Ademar believed the prince would only play his hand if he thought the table was clear,’ he said. ‘Conrin believes we are his.’

She considered this. ‘They are dead?’ she said.

‘All of them. They were not expecting resistance.’

Perin smiled with satisfaction, and Tilde put the butt of her spear to the floor. She stood with peculiar grace, like a prince in a tapestry, and then she turned to Elise. The princess, despite it all, felt that tug in her heart again, the tie that bound them, the thread of her growing devotion. Still there, still hurting.

‘That is thrice now your brothers have tried for me,’ Tilde said, and turned her baleful gaze to Hein. ‘This time stooping so low as to use a little boy as a distraction.’

Hein shrank, and Elise took a protective step towards him. It was instinct, and she held to it.

Tilde turned to her guards. ‘Take the prince Hein into custody. Confine him to his rooms and say it was Conrin’s orders.’

‘Wait!’ said Hein. ‘You can’t do that!’

‘Tilde!’ protested Elise.

‘Wear the grey of his flag,’ Tilde continued, ‘but keep green on you for when the tide turns.’ Perin remained coolly at attention.

‘You,’ she told him. ‘Go to the prince and say I am slain.’

‘You can’t …’ Hein said, looking to Elise. ‘You can’t do that!’ He backed away. Perin nodded at the knight with the throat-slitting dagger.

‘Tilde, please!’ said Elise, pushing Hein behind her. ‘He’s just a boy!’

Tilde wiped the blade of her spear on the man. ‘Aren’t they all?’ She tossed her dark hair back over her naked shoulder, and between her split lip and her certainty she looked magnificent.

‘The woman who asks me to run from her brothers won’t let me punish them for their transgressions,’ she laughed, and clicked her tongue. ‘It seems I trusted the right people. You are just like your father.’

How dare she? She knew Elise's hurts, and she knew where to press them.

'He is a prince of Cynghal.'

'And your father is king!' said Tilde. 'I his queen. Do I step back when his own sons plot against him?'

'They wouldn't,' said Elise. 'They wouldn't dare.'

'They *have* dared,' snapped Tilde.

'Then have them arrested!'

'No,' said Tilde, as if she had said something absurd. 'My word against theirs? I will not allow them to turn this story to their own ends. No, I will let them show their ugliness to the world where it cannot be denied, and I will put a stop to it. You will fight with me, Elise, or you will stay the fuck out of my way.'

Family was family. Terrible, poisonous, tangled, but still blood. It was everything Elise had ever known. Everything she had fought so hard for. She had *raised* them.

'I cannot fight my brothers,' she said. 'I want no part of this.'

Tilde's jaw clenched for a moment; she seemed about to protest, but then nodded at her guards. 'Confine her as well. They cannot warn the others that we know.'

'Yes Queen Tilde.'

Elise did not have the heart to struggle. She stared at Tilde as she was seized by her own nation's guards once again. All her hopes were unravelling. Her brothers were in pieces, her father was in danger, and her lover had chosen to abandon her. Tilde looked close to tears, but she held them back. This was a woman Elise did not know.

'You chose love,' said Tilde, in almost a whisper. 'I choose power.'

No, Elise had chosen nothing. Once more, all her choices were gone.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Forty-six

Tilde

I watched the dawn come in, cutting bright across the city, down to the red harbour, exposing it like an open wound. I could see the rivers clearly now, cutting through the motley-coloured houses down to the growing port. Widdin had fallen before I could speak in full sentences, before I understood the nature of war, and I had only ever imagined the wind-worn northmost city, the shine of the famous rivers, smoke rising from the tile and tanning factories as the labourers commenced their day's work. The sacred pillar and tombs of kings.

I had not imagined the gleaming statue I could see from the sprawling palace in Daostet's city square: a great colossus with Liran's face, its finger pointed to the sky.

Today, the swing of power in the Cynghal empire would be decided. Conrin, beloved of Galen and the Wing, Alar the vicious, the cunning, or Tilde, queen and blood of Merogia.

Conrin believed he had the advantage. To him, I was a dead woman, cold in my chambers, my corpse guarded by his allies. He did not know of his older brother's intent to claim what he wanted, nor that Ademar and Merovin, his supposed friends, had no intention of seeing him to the throne. He intended to strike the inner council, show his strength, pride and power, and expected the nobility of Galen and Cynghal to fold.

It might work, even now. Dagobert's disappearance was no coincidence, nor his guiding us to Widdin. Thedemer commanded the hannerast to Falcan, he believed Merovin would hand him Gevera. Dagobert, I suspected, would gather pockets of loyalists they had been embedding in this stronghold. Together, it was a strong play. Cut off escape, depose the king, and claim it all before any help could come.

And then there was Alar. He meant to move against Conrin, but perhaps underestimated his brother. Still, he had a number of cutthroats gathered with him to Widdin. While Isen's black guard were leaderless, and Conrin's grey occupied with the king, it was not impossible for a bold red swan to fly through the chaos and land on top.

I could not lose. I would not. This was a game now of faith and cowardice. Of who would break first. Either way, by nightfall, this would all be over. The balance would tip in my favour, and Liran too at my commanding, or we would all be lost.

‘I have replaced the censer in the king’s chambers,’ Ziyan was saying, the red light of dawn gleaming on his handsome face. He stood behind me with Marolyn, his hands behind his back in his usual way, as if reporting to a king. ‘He was quiet, mentioned you once, and a child, but then spoke about holy war. Conrin yesterday asked the council to gather in the chamber of blue, the furthest from the eastern gate. It will not go with Liran, so your influence may fade. I have not tested the difference between inhalation and ingestion.’

The physik wore a curious smile as he anticipated the prospect of the coming brutalities. Perhaps because he would make his name from his surgeoning, or perhaps because he enjoyed the thrill of intrigue. He had refused to carry a weapon, while I still had my clean short spear and Marolyn her swords.

Both of us wore tunics, leggings, boots, though I had chosen a tabard in a feminine style, cut in at the waist and decorated with a pale blue swan in the style of Liran’s flag. On my shoulders, I bore light Galenish pauldrons, made for a youth, and beneath a short coat of mail.

Hadiah, despite her protests, I had sent with a baffled Muirenn and Helwinde into a private chamber in the city. I wanted them far from the palace. And, if this went wrong, Ardwen would need her, and her brother too, to continue our line and protect our people for as long as they could.

‘Did anyone question it?’ I said to Ziyan. ‘The incense.’

‘They question everything I do,’ shrugged Ziyan. ‘I am a foreigner. But they questioned more when I suggested using fine needles in his brow to calm his mind; after that they had no issues with a bit of rose oil.’ He rocked back on his feet, sniffing. ‘I don’t know if they are blinded by arrogance or I am just quite good at this conspiring. I have always been thought a spy, even in Argentha; perhaps I should have chosen a different career.’

He grinned, and Marolyn pinched the bridge of her nose with irritation. I, however, welcomed his levity. Better to smile in death’s jaws.

Every scenario played out in my mind. Elise would escape and be caught up in the crossfire. Liran would win, but shake off the glory, and he and

Odon would condemn me to pregnancy in a cage then a poison death. Conrin would win, and have us slaughtered before a rabid army of his fellows. Alar would persevere, continuing the cycle of blood and children, upon me or some other poor girl he decided would give him more power.

I feared it now, my end. I had chosen life with all its pain and terrors, with its hopeless nights and dragging days. I wondered if that made me a hollow thing, always reaching outwards, never settled within.

'What do you think, Ziyan?' I said, looking out over the city. 'Will Merovin hold, or will he turn?'

Perin's confession had disturbed me. That if Ademar had turned another way, I would already be long cold on my own floor, and Elise would have watched me die.

'He has fighters in the city, waiting for attack,' said Ziyan. 'Ademar's in the palace, knowing what will come. Why don't you trust him?'

I didn't answer. He knew.

'Ah, because he is Geveran,' said Ziyan. 'And yet you trust me, both Shatuan and Argenthan.'

'Your land and your blood have never hurt mine.'

Ziyan chuckled. 'That is not true,' he said. 'The histories that forged us are never clean. You would do well to remember that.'

'Liran says much the same,' I muttered. He shrugged, because I knew he was right. Liran was right. Merogian clans had battled for centuries, over petty vendettas and spits of land, atrocities had been inflicted from cousin to cousin, cattle stolen, children slaughtered. We did not speak of these histories, for they paled in the face of the greater atrocity, the machine of war that had come from over the sea.

Still, in a world free of swans, perhaps I would have loved Sanafin, perhaps I would have one day killed her myself.

In a world with them, perhaps I could have loved Elise, and made a future without the blood of retribution.

But, in truth, this was always going to end in pain. At least I was the one holding the knife.

I hoped she was safe in her chambers. I did not waste time hoping she would forgive me.

When a distant Galenish horn blew at the city gates, barely enough to reach the palace if we were not listening for it, we knew it was time to move.

We left Ziyan behind, and joined the six of my guards who were waiting outside my rooms, quickly falling into line with us. All chosen by Captain Perin, his favoured, his best.

‘The east gate has raised a grey flag,’ said the captain, nodding towards the arched Widdish windows that pointed out into the waking city.

‘Dagobert comes,’ said Marolyn, with almost relief in her tone. And Merovin would go to meet him. I could not believe I had allied with the one who brought about the death of my dearest ones. I longed for Rivani, to ask if I had done right.

I would see her soon, one way or another.

‘Have Palati Odon warned a new flag has been raised,’ I said. ‘The wall guards will have been bought, but Conrin hasn’t the coin for all of them. I suspect the king’s guard will have something to say.’

Perin nodded, grinning, his eyes alight with anticipation. I wondered how many battles he had fought in against Merogians, and now he had a sword drawn at my side.

I was glad, though, that Marolyn had stayed with me too.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Forty-seven

Elise

Elise had not slept. She had veered between numbness and rage. With the latter, she had slammed her fists against her door, but Tilde's guards were stoic and unrelenting. No threats had worked, no pleading. Elise feared for Hein. Feared for Tilde. She wondered if Conrin would go check on the little one, realise what had happened.

Of course he would not. He would think his little brother a convenience one moment, a baby the next; let him cry in his room, it would toughen him. And he thought her a prudent recluse, a hopeful monastic, a nothing of importance.

He had turned on their father, conspired against him, a sin of the mind, of the tongue, of the body, a riot against the order of the Wing. The order did not matter when it was convenient to them. Elise was seeing the game better now, the grey colours, the priest, the boars, the whispers in dark rooms between him and his fool-shadow, Gaisa.

No, Elise was the fool, blinded by her own misery.

That *is your grace.*

You chose love. I choose power.

Tilde was chaos itself. She could have taken her fears to Odon, who would have cut the fighting off at the root, would have responded quietly, as he had done for Alar before. No one need die, the order need not change.

'You stupid, stupid girl,' Elise hissed, pacing with her swan shuttle clutched between her fingers. Her belly ached, her hand bled, her heart was shattered, but it beat for Tilde. The queen. Her enemy. Her lover. Her friend.

What good had the way of things ever done her? All around her, changing lands, changing courts, changing rules. She had wanted to run away from it all, flee with Tilde to any place that would take them, live in poverty and peace.

But Tilde would not go.

I choose power.

What did she mean? Women could not have power. Women could not rule. Women could not change. It was their place to accept, to manage, to

mitigate and mend. It was its own kind of power. But Tilde wanted both.

Was it Elise's lot always to be betrayed? Always to wait as the world changed around her?

She stared at her tapestry. The climbing swans, the window where the swan queen had been trapped, bound to their dynasty, to her children, to the man who had claimed her.

Then beyond it, she saw through the window: a grey flag had been raised on the low palace walls. And, in the distance, down the main street, she could see a small band of gleaming knights in full Galenish armour and grey tabards, gathering beneath the legs of her father's victory statue.

Amongst them riding a shining white stallion of ridiculous size, carrying the banner of the swan with the folded wings, was Dagobert. He wore a cap close over his head, mail over his priestly robes, and was directing them to gather wood and things to burn. A signal fire, to show they were ready to attack, most likely.

It was the confirmation Elise needed. The priest who had spoken so often of her sins and her brother's virtues, who had dripped poison in his ear, and condemned her to a life she had never wanted.

No, not just he, her father too.

In a flash of agonised fury, Elise swiped the shuttle across the threads. Years of hoping for forgiveness, for the crime of speaking for her sister. Years of desiring nothing but isolation, and even that she could not be given. Years. And at the end of it, a dead mother, a murdered brother and a broken heart.

She slashed at it again, the sharpened edge cutting through the blue, the white, the beaks, the feathers, again, they burst out like broken flesh, curling apart, spinning away. She cut at the ones who had trapped her, contained her, tricked her. The swan that was her mother, the wings of her brothers, the beak of her father, rising, crowned, who had valued the world over his family.

And Tilde was just like them, valuing everything over her own heart.

The threads were in pieces, the tapestry ruined.

Elise heard raised voices, and ran to the window.

The east gate. The grey guard on its parapet were still, waiting, but there were a few confused warriors in blue gathering around its base: her father's men. They did not look too concerned, gesticulating instead and arguing with a man who had descended to speak with them, and was making

dismissive gestures, shooing them back to the palace. It seemed someone had warned the king's guard that something was afoot.

Elise had always thought Conrin arrogant, if harmless, frustrated, but still family. How much had she forgiven him, only for him to commit to treachery, poison and murder? All while Elise had been grieving and flirting and dreaming of escape with Tilde, her brother had conspired for power.

The argument had intensified; more in blue were arriving to see what the fuss was about. One young squire was pointing at the flag, and, from this distance, Elise still heard his voice as it raised into a shout.

An arrow felled him from the top of the gates, and his warning was cut short. Another. Elise heard the echo of shouted orders, and the blue darted together in formation, another felled by a shaft in his leg. They drew their swords, those at the front slicing away the arrows that they could.

Why were there so few? Isen's black guard at least was usually training at dawn, and Liran's blue following soon after. Elise had been woken to their clashes more than once of a dewy morning.

Of course. Conrin would imprison his competition, shove them in corners so he did not have to face them. The black guard was known to be disciplined, brutal, and loyal to their prince. He would not risk them turning on him, but he would want to use them when he won.

The barracks.

Elise did not hesitate any longer. No more hiding in her rooms, watching the world happen without her.

She picked up her carding stool, littered with pieces of the broken tapestry, and smashed it through the glass of her chamber window.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Forty-eight

Tilde

The doors to the blue chambers were guarded by only two men as the nobles came to their conference. Perin's scout had told us so. 'One in a grey scarf, one with a red ribbon around his wrist.'

Conrin the former, Alar the latter. Colours marked friends from foe. Best not to kill your own by accident.

'There should be more guards for a gathering court,' said Marolyn. 'Even if half of them are still on their way from Kanaan. Has Conrin turned them all, or pinned them in the barracks?'

'There weren't many in the barracks last night,' said Perin. 'The only ones remaining are the last of the black guard. The blue are mostly elsewhere.'

'Deserted?' said Marolyn.

'I doubt it,' said Perin. 'They turn up to training, and rotation. More likely, someone repositioned them to hide the true size of their force, and reduce the chance of them being pinned down. Like ourselves.'

Our main force was occupying another chamber, arranged by the ducal. Perin seemed unshakable, but the idea unnerved me. Liran? Had he only been pretending to be poisoned? Surely not.

Odon?

'Then perhaps we should draw them out of hiding,' I said. 'Put all the pieces on the board.'

'What—'

'I will go join the council,' I smiled. 'And see the look on Prince Conrin's face.

Perin frowned, his hand flexed on his blade and he glanced at one of his other guards. 'That seems unwise, Queen Tilde.'

None of this was wise, but I offered what I hoped was a confident smirk. 'You think they will kill a pregnant woman for walking through a door?'

'Tilde, there is no reason to do anything but wait,' said Marolyn.

'There is all the reason,' I told her calmly. 'Cynghals respect strength, Galenish respect loyalty.' That was pitiful, considering so many Galenish

lords had turned to Conrin. ‘I would show neither if I did not go to meet my enemies, eye to eye.’

I smelled burning, faint and distant, and glanced towards the balcony. For such a northern city, Daostet’s palace had many open doors and pillared halls, letting the wind in to whistle amongst the colours and the tiles. But, in the distance, I noted a plume of smoke rising around the feet of Liran’s statue, thick and grey. A signal.

If Merovin did as he said he would, then he would turn any signal green.

‘Nothing frightens a man more than a dead woman walking.’ I said. ‘And nothing dismantles an army faster than disarray.’ I thought of the kingsmoot. ‘I should know.’

Nausea churned in my stomach, despite the ginger root Ziyan had given me to chew on, though perhaps that was the aching thing growing in my belly. But Marolyn put her forehead on mine, and I took a breath. Deep in the palace, I could feel the thrumming of the crypt, the ivy heavy with the screams of the dying, the earth thick with the bones of the dead, and the wood still growing within.

They gave me strength. Marolyn and the wood.

The guards at the council chambers startled as we approached, serene as anything, my spear hidden in the back of my cloak, Marolyn’s blades stuffed back along her leggings. I still wore my mail, hidden, my pauldrons, covered, but I suspected they were too tense to notice a woman was wearing armour. I was still pale and weak with my convalescence.

‘What are you doing here?’ said the one in grey, his voice tight and stance poised as if to charge or flee. I blinked with feigned yet gentle surprise. Within the doors, nothing was amiss. We could hear the chink of a goblet, the laugh of good humour, I heard the faint tinkling of a jester’s bells and Miras, his voice raised in song, though he could still not play.

How could those nobles do it? Smile while tipping poison into each other’s wine? Laugh at a joke when the conspirators knew they would soon be causing screaming death?

‘Do you mean to stop me entering my court?’

The guard in red said nothing. The guard in grey had paled as if he had seen a ghost.

‘It is the king’s court,’ he said, tentatively.

‘It is the court of the Cynghals,’ said Marolyn. ‘This is the swan queen. The court is hers.’

Grey looked to his companion for reassurance, and, finding none, stepped back, taking his hand off his blade. This was perhaps above his level of pay.

‘Well?’ I said. ‘Open the doors.’

The two moved to my order, grabbing the handles of the chamber doors and heaving them open.

Within was a sheltered room tiled in vivid blue, swirling patterns like the ocean passing from one to the other, while green curtains had been closed against the incoming wind and, presumably, to muffle the sound. Standing braziers burned from a floor of red clay, sending off scent but little heat, in a curl of smoke that drifted around the flower-carved rafters. Wreathed in it was the mingled nobility of Cynghal: Suneish erls in shades of red, Galenish high nobility, Cynghals of varying degrees, and two Merogian tarns who looked at me askance as I entered.

I wish I had found a way to poison the braziers. Then I would have had them all kneel and eat from the palm of my hand.

The king himself sat on a stool before a table of papers, a cup in his trembling hand, his eyes unfocussed. Odon was with him, looking worriedly on.

Conrin stood in a tangle of Galenish lords in grey. He himself wore fine pleated silks, a chestplate that looked like a moulded wing of feathers wrapped around his neck, holding his regal cloak to his shoulders. He looked hot, sweating. There was mail beneath. As he turned to see who had entered, he went as grey as his flag.

‘You,’ he said. Alar was leaning against the window, and he stood up suddenly as I entered.

‘Me,’ I said, smiling.

Gaisa, who was pretending to listen to something Egil was telling him, startled, his jaw setting, and his hand flashed to the hilt of his sword.

‘What are you doing here?’ snapped Conrin. ‘You are not welcome at court.’

Marolyn shut the doors behind me, and the room fell silent, turning to look at who had caused a disruption. I looked at Liran.

‘Welcome me to court, King Liran?’ I said. ‘Husband?’ I put strength into my tone, just enough, and he looked up, frowning.

‘Be welcome, wife,’ he muttered after a moment. Odon blinked at me, fast, shifting painedly to his feet. Egil, however, frowned as Gaisa.

‘Why is your hand on your blade, Gaisa-hyem?’ he said. And Gaisa turned a look to him so guilty that Egil immediately understood. He flexed his hands, paling, uncertain. His eyes darted to his father, to me, to Odon, to Alar. Poor Egil, forgotten by his brothers. Even Hein had a role and he did not.

‘My court of Cynghal, I am come to save you,’ I said. ‘As swan queen, and the mother of the heir to the Merogian throne.’ I put a hand on my belly, so tentative a seed was there, but I depended on it. ‘There are soldiers marching on the eastern gate.’

‘Liar!’ said Conrin, striding forward to his father. ‘Queen of thorny tongue and barbarian stock.’

Odon looked at me sideways, and then moved in front of his king, just a little, but enough to know he was ready.

‘She has not spoken a word against you, Brother-hyem,’ said Alar. ‘Why do you say she lies?’

Conrin opened his mouth and closed it.

‘Showed your hand too soon, little Conrin,’ said Alar. ‘You were never any good at games.’

That snapped Conrin into action, he snarled at Alar.

‘You should refer to me as King Conrin, brother,’ he said. ‘For I am not playing games any more.’

He drew his blade, and raised it. ‘Now, my friends, rally to the new swan king!’

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Forty-nine

Elise

At the breaking of her window, Elise's door slammed open and the two guards ran inside.

Elise was ready; she had ducked behind the canopy of her bed, plucking up her hunting bow and arrows as the men ran to the window to see whether she had gone the way of Isuire.

She fired from behind the bed, catching one man behind the knee. The other turned, swift on his feet, but she struck him in the belly before he got far. He grunted and fell, and Elise flung her quiver over her shoulder then ran for the door, her childhood practice sword swinging at her hip.

She raced down the tiled corridor between sunlit beams, reached the panel that covered the servants' stair and flung it open. She raced past the women's apartments, to the ground floor, the kitchens, where oblivious cooks were stirring pots of autumn stew. At first it seemed a normal morning, then Elise saw two guards at the outer door, standing at alert and wearing silver scarves. They did not move as she entered, though the cooks stirred with surprise, and Elise's heart dropped through her gut.

But though the guards eyed her, they didn't seem worried. Elise slowed her pace, thinking quickly, and plucked up a crowberry tart that was cooling by an open window under a cover of cheesecloth.

'Practising for the next hunt,' she smiled at the scullery maid, who looked at her like she had gone mad, but dipped her head with a scared glance at the guards.

And Elise strode out towards them, past them with a calm polite nod. Clearly, they had not been told to stop her, and barely turned as she wandered past them.

Perhaps being underestimated worked in her favour.

She came out into the courtyard, where the coopers were fixing barrels by a little girl who was peeling potatoes with a sharp knife. To the side, two serfs were scrubbing out chamber pots with willow twigs. Even a coup did not stop the work of the castle.

Elise did not stop either. The sun was bright, and the breeze biting from the north coast. Elise let it fill her lungs, tasting the faint trace of salt. This was the wind that had carried her family over the sea, had launched the campaign of empires. This was the wind that had brought them to Merogia, to slaughter Tilde's people, and her kin.

Elise headed not to the practice range, but through the paddocks where the goats were bleating and towards the barracks.

She looked sideways at the long stone building, pretending her interest was in the herb garden on the other side.

She was right, there were two more guards in grey tabards guarding the door to the soldiers' sleeping quarters. Isen's black guard and her father's too would be trapped inside so they could not come to the aid of their king.

Elise walked past, as if she had noticed nothing out of the ordinary, but then looped through the herb garden to the other side of the building.

Here, there were only narrow little windows on this side to let in light, set high, and the stink of urine from the guards too lazy to go to the latrine pits at night. She leapt up and caught onto the sill, the stone biting at her fingers. She put a boot on the wall and pulled herself up to see what could be done.

Inside, there were two dead men, and fifteen of Isen's black guard sitting cross-legged, their eyes on the floor and hands to their heads under the watchful eye of three more Galenish knights who stood in the doorway with long pikes. None of Liran's blue, they must be elsewhere.

Elise let herself down and pressed her head to the wall, her heart slamming hard against her throat. She shouldn't get involved. Let it play out as they willed, simply find Hein and escape. Or, she should wait to see who would win, see if they would grant her everything she wanted.

No. She was done waiting. The shell of herself was broken, and it would not be resealed. She would choose, she would act, she would fight. For better or worse, she was her father's daughter.

She crept around towards the front of the building again, sliding an arrow out of her quiver and gripping its metal head between her fingers so it pointed out, a tiny blade. In her other hand, she held her bow staff. Gripping both tightly, she paused at the corner of the barracks, took a breath, then kicked a loose little stone out into the open.

It skittered, rattling past where the grey guard were waiting. Elise held herself still, straining her ears for the slightest sound. She wondered if, within the barracks, the black guard had tensed in anticipation. She hoped

they would act as she wished, if they were brave enough. But it was Isen's guard. They had courage if nothing else.

Conrin's warriors were good. They made almost no sound, only the soft slide of a boot.

One appeared at the corner of the wall, sword bared and ready, but whatever he was expecting, she was not it, even though she had just walked past. His eyes widened, the point of his blade dropped a little. She tried not to think that this was a Cynghal guard; her guard, her father's. She only allowed herself one thought: enemy.

She had always told herself that if she could cloak herself in glory, she would.

'What—'

'Oh!' said Elise in a high, girlish voice, and flung her arm up and around his neck. 'I was so afraid …'

With her other hand, she drove the head of the arrow into his throat.

He grunted, bending over her, the sword dropping. She held him up, shuffling the both of them back into the open as she ripped the shaft from his still bleeding neck.

'Oi,' hissed the other guard. 'Meet your fancy woman another time, this is—'

He saw the blood too late. Elise shoved the dying man aside, choking and bloody as the other one cried out.

'Attack!'

Elise smiled, and sprinted away.

The guard made chase over the grass, but she still had the bloody arrow. She dropped it down to the feathers and nocked it to her bow, turning just as the guard gained on her, close enough to touch.

She loosed at close range. Her grip hadn't been strong, but her aim was true enough for it to lodge in his eye. He screamed.

Another knight came out from the barracks to see what was happening, but then there was a roar from inside as the black guard took advantage of the distraction and set upon their captors. A strangled yell rang out and was cut short as the balance of power changed.

Elise stepped over the writhing soldier, back to the barracks, drawing another arrow. Over the distant wall, a thin trail of grey smoke was rising in the air, but as she watched, a cloud of green chased it, smothering and choking it into the colour of leaves. At the gate a number of Liran's blue

guard were now advancing across the walls and the green, clearly gathering from hidden parts of the keep to reclaim the walls from Conrin's claim.

A black guard came out of the barracks and stared at her where she stood, hands and tunic red with blood, not her own, a weapon in her hands and a swan stitched onto her chest. He bowed, and the others came, joining him, weapons found, drawn and bloody. Ready.

'What orders, Princess?' they asked.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Fifty

Tilde

Alar drew his sword, his erls with him, as Conrin's grey-clad faction turned on their neighbours, Thedemer, Gaisa, and other Galenish rounding on the Cynghals and Merogians. Liran stood with a roar, the understanding of betrayal cutting through his stupor.

'Terrors!' he cried 'Usurpers!'

'To the king!' I cried, drawing out my spear from my cloak. 'Protect the king!'

Conrin was panicking. His army had not arrived. Merovin and Ademar, two of his most powerful allies, were nowhere to be seen. But after his first call a panel in the tiled wall burst open, spilling out fifteen men in grey, sweating and cramping from where they had been hiding.

'Treachery!' bellowed Uhtren, drawing his sword and diving for the incoming greys, a warrior to his heart, as Conrin went straight for his father, blade down and pointed. To wound or kill him, I did not know, but Odon stood between him, and in a breath he was charging into the young swan, batting his blade aside and throwing him back from the king.

'Gaisa, what are you doing!' cried Egil as Gaisa drew his blade and went for Alar, who grinned cockily as he bellowed out his rage. Marolyn pulled me backwards, away from the clash of brothers.

Alar took Gaisa's attack, smiling cockily as he dashed aside his brother's onslaught with almost careless ease.

'Traitor!' cried Gaisa. 'Backstabber! Abomination!'

'Ugly words from a pretty mouth,' snapped Alar, who swung his sword. Egil had his own sword out, but he didn't use it; he seemed torn between fighting and running, uncertain which side to pick as the greys and the reds clashed. His father's? Conrin and Gaisa's? Alar's? Mine?

He decided at least one thing and threw himself bodily at Gaisa, tearing him away from Alar while their older brother laughed.

'Stop this!' bellowed the king, slurring and unsteady. He did not seem in control of his limbs, and I regretted for a moment poisoning him before the

coup, rather than after. His might would help here as Conrin fought with Odon, the young and spry against the old and vicious.

‘Come on then!’ Odon cried, wielding his sword only one handed and slamming down the younger man’s blade before using his hilt to backhand him across the jaw. ‘Attack your father. Attack your own goodness. The Wing will bleed for you!’

Conrin stumbled but didn’t fall, finding his mettle and dragging his sword up in a clash that set the older man on the back foot. Strike after strike, Conrin advanced as Odon shifted away, step after step. Neither of them noticed that Alar was now free, and advancing on Liran.

‘We have a score to settle, Father,’ he said. ‘You and I.’

‘After all we have done for you!’ Odon cried to Conrin. ‘After all your father has done to protect you!’

‘His era is over, Nefka,’ Conrin snarled. ‘It is time for a new future. It is time for the young swans to rise!’

Where was Perin? He was supposed to come at the first sound of swords, and yet my green guard, Ademar’s gift, had not appeared at the chamber door. Had the ducal told them to hold back, as he had told them to offer surrender to Conrin’s assassins? My command of them was borrowed, and Ademar, if his mind was changed, could take it back.

I could not be distracted by the family’s bloody retribution as Markal Thedemer advanced on Marolyn and me, his sword red with the blood of Alar’s erls.

‘The new king will be blessed in your heathen blood, sinner,’ he growled.

Only Marolyn stood between us. Her blades were smaller, and she had not trained in battle for six years, but she was breathless with anticipation, her hands flexing on the hilts. She bared her teeth. ‘Snoutband fool, even the Wing will have no home for your soul,’ she hissed.

He blinked, surprised with her viciousness, and Marolyn charged. Her long knives shining out to sing once, twice on his longer sword, putting him on the back foot.

Alar was still advancing on Liran through the melee. The swan king gazed upon his eldest son.

‘You think you have it in you, lad?’ he said.

‘You took my inheritance from me,’ said Alar. ‘I am your eldest, father, your wisest, your strongest. I deserve this rule, and I am here to take it back.’

Liran advanced. ‘I’ll give you nothing you haven’t earned,’ he snarled. ‘I *earned* this land with my blood and sweat and body. It is *mine.*’

It will be mine, I thought, gripping my spear.

Alar let out a roar and went for his father, who batted his sword aside with his bare hand, despite the poison in his breath and blood.

‘At me again, fool!’ cried Liran. ‘Let us see what your blood is worth!’

Alar let out a strangled cry, striking for his father over and over. Caught in the energy of a fight, Liran marked him. War was his heartbeat, battle his breath, and his son could not take it from him. As I saw him fight without drawing a weapon, I wondered that I had ever thought I could kill him with a little knife.

The council had torn itself apart, the tarns had turned on the erls, the Cynghals on the Galenish, greys and reds taking chunks out of each other. Uhtren fought well against two of the red guard as Gaisa and Egil wrestled, Conrin and Odon battled, Liran taunted Alar, Marolyn and Thedemer paced the floor in an exchange of silver blows, caught up in a flashing dance of death.

The chamber doors burst open, and my heart lifted as at last Captain Perin entered with his fighters. A precious, cooling relief filled my gut before I noticed they had painted slashes of red over their tabards of green.

And then I saw the captain was carrying Ducal Ademar’s head in his hand. His eyes were rolled back, his mouth gaping in surprise, and I realised the red was not paint, but blood.

Perin’s eyes found me, and he shrugged. ‘The older brother paid better,’ he said.

‘Captain, take the queen into custody!’ cried Alar, as Marolyn let out a cry of vicious rage. ‘See off the grey threat!’

I said nothing, lowering my spear and backing away. No, I would die before I let the red swan take me. No wonder the Galenish captain had been so appeasing; it was through neither loyalty to me, or Ademar, but Alar: he wanted only to follow the line he thought would win, and pay him the most.

And now, he advanced on me, smiling, his soldiers diving into the fray. Gaisa and Egil were separated, dragged apart, both with bloody faces and pummelled lips.

I want to say I held my ground, that I leapt with my spear and by some miracle finished the life of the knight.

I did not. I backed away, palms sweating, unsure where to begin.

‘Come now, Queen Tilde,’ said Perin, bloodied sword in one hand, the hand that held Ademar’s head in the other. If he meant to scare me with it, it would not work, I had seen worse things than the head of a dead Galenish noble. ‘This is wisest. You should have stayed by me, I would have brought you in and forced a surrender from the king, and we could have joined the eldest together.’

‘You mean you wanted me as a hostage.’

‘That ducal wanted vengeance for his queen,’ said Perin, and dropped the head. ‘There is no money in that. I want wealth, Queen Tilde, and you want power. Alar wants both. Is that not a match made in the Wing’s shade?’

‘I have chosen my path,’ I said, shaking. ‘I will not relinquish it now.’

Marolyn was fighting for her life against Thedemer. Each time she tried to turn to help me he blocked her with strikes, bearing her down with his weight and strength. She kicked out with her leg, throwing out his knee, but he caught her finishing blow with his vambrace where he had hidden it beneath his cote.

No one was coming to save me.

‘Just bow, little queen,’ said Perin. ‘I’ll make it easy.’

I watched his eyes, his stance, remembering the ways Ebba and Colfinn had taught me before the end. When he feinted to my left I held my nerve, and then when his sword came to my right I dashed it aside with my spear. The force of it sent a sting of pain up my wrist, to my elbow.

‘He wants you whole, Queen Tilde,’ he snapped. ‘Stay still won’t you—’

He stumbled, the feathers of an arrow shaft sprouting from his back.

Perin coughed, catching his feet, but then another slammed into his throat. Like Sanafin, his blood flew out, a fine spray staining the swans of my tabard. Unlike Sanafin, it brought me utter joy as he fell.

I turned to see Elise, her bow in her hand.

And from around her came a final faction. Not green, not red, not grey or blue, not a ducal’s guard or the princes’ conspirers, but hard-bitten warriors in black and no armour. Despite that, they roared their retribution. ‘For Isen! For Isen!’

No moment to breathe. I gripped my spear, taking its weight, and with a cry of my own fury I set it point first, charging into Thedemer and skewering him through while his back was turned. His plates buckled, then his knees as I kept running, driving the blade with all the force I could muster. He screamed, but still tried to lift his sword, but Marolyn was

ready: she slammed her knife into his chin with all of her strength, and the pointed edge of the blade burst out through the side of his skull.

Over the sound of the swords, I could hear the attack bells clanging.

‘To the king!’ cried Elise, and my heart sank. ‘Arrest the princes!’

‘What are you doing!’ cried Conrin. Elise ignored him. ‘Traitor! I will have your head for this!’

Conrin brought down a terrible strike on Odon’s wounded arm and the palati fell back, dropping his sword as blood burst from his bandages. Despite this, bleeding heavily, he picked up one of the metal braziers in one hand, howling as it burned him, and slammed it into Conrin’s side. The boy shrieked as hot coals spilled out on to him, and he fell to the floor as his jacket caught and burned, revealing the mail he had hiding underneath for this attempted coup. The black guard surrounded him, beating out the flames and his resistance with their fists while Perin’s men, leaderless, held on to the other princes and dared not move.

‘You are fading, Father!’ snarled Conrin. ‘You are weak and getting weaker. We have castles turning as we speak, all declaring for me. For us!’ A fist slammed into his face with a crunch.

‘They will be quick to turn back,’ I said coolly, ‘when they find you have failed.’

Alar was still fighting with Liran, who was breathing heavily, angry. ‘Ingrate!’ he snarled. ‘Prince of nothing, king of nowhere. Where is your loyalty?’

‘Loyalty?’ Alar laughed. ‘What loyalty have you shown us, you callous piece of sea rot? What have you made that you have not hoarded for yourself?’

‘Isen was grateful!’ said Liran. ‘Isen was—’

‘Oh yes, precious Isen, your killer boy,’ said Alar. ‘What a disappointment I was, that you broke your second son so early? Never asked questions, never said no. You made your boy so hollow that he *walked* to his death.’

Liran spat on the floor, he was swaying from foot to foot, but animal instinct, the wildness in him, held him strong against Alar’s attacks.

‘What did you say?’ he growled ‘About Isen?’

‘I said he deserved his pathetic little death,’ said Alar. ‘And I am glad we sent him to it.’

Liran’s hand whipped out, striking past Alar’s sword and grabbing the side of his head.

Alar gaped for a brutal, terrible moment, eyes widening. Then Liran moved with the whole force of his body, throwing his son by the skull to the floor and slamming his head into the tile with a brutal, terrible crack.

‘Father!’ screamed Elise.

I knew well the strength of that fist, the momentum of his anger when loosed from his fraying mind. ‘You killed!’ he said, slamming him again. ‘My son!’ Again.

Alar could not fight back, and the crunch was sickening. Even Conrin had stopped shouting; the chamber was suddenly still.

‘King Liran!’ I shouted. ‘Let him go!’

He did. Opening his hand in a spasm and stepping back. His eldest son lay on the floor, twitching, blood and clear liquid spilling from the crushed side of his skull.

I looked up at the swan king. Something was broken behind his eyes, like the wrench of a tree root as it is pulled from the earth. He let out the scream of a madman, and Odon stared, panting, at Alar’s damaged body, as if the prince had fallen from the sky.

‘My son,’ muttered Liran, then howled again. ‘I have killed my boy!’

This was it. This was my moment. Between the shattered remains of the swans, to take root, take flight.

‘Ducal Uhtren, see to the king,’ I said, and the ducal turned to me, his face grey, but he nodded. ‘Take him to his chambers, and summon the physik Ziyan, who will tend to him.’ I turned to Odon, who was bleeding, but still alert. ‘Arrest the factions wearing grey and red. Arrest all other than my own personal guards.’

There were four of them left, holding Gaisa and Egil, their red sashes over the green I had given them. I lifted my chin: Perin was dead, Alar gurgling his last on the floor, and the princes they held, Egil and Gaisa, were silent with shock. Who would they serve now?

The closest to me ripped off his reddened tunic first, removing any sign they were one of the reds. The others followed, throwing their clothes to the blood-soaked tiles.

The nobles left standing looked from their weeping king to their kneeling princes, to Odon, and then all of them, every Cynghal, Galenish, Merogian and Suneish knelt in the blood of the massacre.

And they bowed to me.

All except Elise. I turned to the princess, who stood taller than I had seen her, straight-backed and proud, her lips lightly parted as if she wanted to say something. I met her gaze, one in which I had found pity, and comfort, heat and desire.

Now, I saw only challenge, and I was afraid.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Fifty-one

Tilde

‘We suffered heavy losses,’ said Merovin at my elbow as we walked our horses through the Widdish capital, surrounded by the king’s guard, and the queen’s, in blue and green. It seemed Odon had taken my warnings to heart, and positioned Liran’s guard in different parts of the palace, so when the east gate raised its grey flags, they gathered to fight them down.

Now, Liran’s flag had been raised along the Great Way, a road that had been cleared through Daostet by the Cynghals. It did not seem so great up close, but stinking, the drains clogged with straw and dust. We were on horseback, two Merogians, flanked by Uhtren behind us, and a local markal that Merovin had chosen for his rich garb and avoidance of politics.

‘You speak of Ademar,’ I said.

‘He led Widdin with a steady hand, and there are few who could do the same.’

‘Lady Ysel steadied his hand,’ I said.

‘Cynghal does not accept women in positions of power.’

‘But, Merovin,’ I said with a smile, ‘I am Cynghal now.’

I put my hand up from where I rode gently on my horse, and the gathered crowd of Merogian and Cynghals cheered. My steed was grey, I had chosen it, my blue cloak sewn with swans, stretching over the back in a sea of shining velvet. I wore a circlet of roses on my head, and Miras walked before us, singing the song of my marriage under the gently falling rain. It beaded on my braided hair, on my cloth, and when the sun burst out I knew I shone, for the folk around us gasped.

‘*Mother Tuathilde!*’

‘*Queen of wings.*’

‘*Saviour of Cynghal.*’

Merovin kept his serious face. I swear I had never seen the man smile.

We made our way to the market square, where Liran’s great statue still stood, polished and gleaming, hung with garlands and blue and green flags.

There, Dagobert was held in penance, his hands in stocks. The bonfire they had laid and started to signal Conrin’s coup was still a heap of ash,

sealed in places by pieces of charred copper ore that Merovin had used to turn the signal green for Perin and his fellows.

Dagobert's face was smeared with ash, vegetables rotted around his knees, his skull was cut through still with the mark of the owl's claws; I thanked the kith and the Ways for such a delightful thing.

Around him were the traitorous guards of the eastern gate, of the city and the palace. They had been nailed by their hands to boards on the ground, none of them daring to move against the spike that crushed through their bones and broken fingers. They would never wield swords again, those who had not sworn to me and King Liran over the swan prince.

Those who had, had hammered in the nails.

There was no pity in victory. I had to show myself ruthless enough to be Liran's regent as the king himself raved amid blackened smoke and green scents, his mind torn with his dead children and their betrayals.

The people had been told there was a rebellion. Under Odon's insistence we had not accused the swan brothers, but still, rumours spread.

'*Blasphemy and treachery from the swan's foreign children,*' a low priest was calling within the crowd, his hair unkempt, his robes ragged and ashy, but people listened. '*Wing take them away.*'

Elise had not been imprisoned. I had no excuse to confine her to her rooms, not when she had freed the guards from the barracks and saved our lives. Had saved me. Still, I feared the remains of the black guard, and I feared what she knew. She knew I meant to facilitate her brothers' fall from grace, and perhaps her father's as well.

I feared my longing for her too.

Dagobert looked up as we approached and stood over him.

'What have you done with him?' he croaked as I dismounted and approached him. 'My young king. My princes. What have you—'

'They are under arrest, awaiting the judgement of their father when he recovers.'

'Not your judgement?' snarled Dagobert.

'Women do not pass judgement,' I smiled. 'That is the recourse of the council and the Wing. Is it not?'

I turned to Merovin, and nodded, and barked an order to the four men we had brought with us. Dagobert had looked at me with curious relief for a moment, perhaps thinking I would free him, before he realised what they

were doing: drawing their blades, they began at the end of the line, and to the cheering roar of the crowd they began to behead the conspirators.

‘Liar!’ screamed Dagobert, as he understood what was happening. ‘Lunatic! Traitors! Hysteric! You, Geveran! Conrin saw you as a brother! You were his ally!’

Merovin did not deign to answer.

‘Behead a priest and the Synod will come for you,’ Dagobert spat at me instead. ‘The Wing will destroy you. The true princes will not be imprisoned for ever, they will rise up and—’

Lord Uhtren came forward with a silk rag, and stuffed it in the priest’s mouth. With each beheading, the crowd screamed, and so did the captured fighters, some howling to their death as the sword came to them, clean and hard. I wanted to do worse to them, I wanted their ribs cracked open, their lungs ripped out, I wanted them hung from cages from the wall and starved, or flames lit beneath them as they screamed.

I wanted all this and worse for Dagobert. But for him I had chosen not the path of vengeance, but the path of a ruler. And until I knew my brewing warlord’s life was certain, until I knew Liran and his council was entirely in sway, I had to make some sacrifices. I looked at Merovin, and he nodded.

‘Petty vengeance is no work of kings,’ he said.

Kings. King Rivani. King Tilde.

Would my mother be proud? Even though I had trusted a Geveran, even though I had not held on to my honesty, integrity, or pride? I had won, and I needed to keep winning. With the Nest disrupted, the swans’ feathers cut, now was the most delicate and dangerous process of taking command without turning what remained of the world against me.

‘I do not intend to kill you,’ I said to Dagobert. ‘It is not the right of monarchs to kill a priest of the Wing.’ He gasped, surprised. ‘No, you will be sent to the Synod for their judgement. I wonder how they will feel knowing one of their number elected himself kingmaker and swan-killer, marked as he is now with the Wing’s disgrace.’

Dagobert’s eyes widened. He screamed through his cloth rag, but I needed pay him no heed, even if I knew what he was shouting.

The princes will rise. The princes will rise.

I turned away, the rain beginning in earnest, and it was the storm in the sky that washed the blood from the stones.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Fifty-two

Elise

Elise had rarely been bowed to. She had always stood at a distance, behind her mother, behind Tilde, back from the light. She had never been their equal.

She was their equal now. No one stopped her where she walked, carrying books, no one removed the sword from her waist, the bow from her back. Elise was not afraid. She refused to be afraid again, even though her brothers thought her a backstabber.

Egil had not looked at her, Gaisa walked away whenever she came into the traitors' green, the inner hall where the ivy grew, with the little windows in the walls. Tilde had ordered them to be put together and learn brotherly care, and it was the only room that was big enough. Elise, knowing her now, suspected there was something deeper in her order.

So she weathered her brothers' spite, and Conrin's insults, to care for Hein. They did not stop him when he ran in to her embrace and took the sweets she brought for him and his mouse. Only once did they ask what had happened to Alar's body.

He had been burned privately in the gardens. Elise did not weep for him.

Soon, she knew, Tilde would call for her. She would forgive her, and beg forgiveness. Elise would kneel at her feet, and kiss the tips of her fingers.

And she would ask for leniency, for Egil and Hein at least. Gaisa, she hoped. Some kindness for her father, who had lost himself and had become strangely reliant on Tilde, following her every request with almost dogged devotion. So strange, that Tilde had come almost as an offering, but sunk her teeth into every part of the court's life, so slowly that none of them felt the pain of it, and only Elise had felt the pleasure.

No, she couldn't think like that. Her feelings for Tilde were a tangle of hurt and fear, shame and pride, desire and yearning. Tilde had chosen power, and Elise could not blame her, but she would not have it if Elise had not come to save her.

This was not a lovers' quarrel, this was a negotiation. Perhaps, if she was gentle enough, Tilde would give her Conrin as well. She could not lose all

her brothers in one year; she would show them what her power could be. Soft power, and strong.

She went to them now to tell them her plan. She had never liked that strange green place that stuck to the Widdish palace like a barnacle. Her mother had avoided it too, walking long routes to avoid the ivy-covered walls and the faint trickle of the fountain. Why had Tilde put them there, of all the places? If it was to humiliate them, it was working.

Elise passed by one of the higher balconies first, and looked down. Her brothers were huddled together around a small fire. Hein had Mog sitting on his knee, and they looked almost sweet all together. There were no guards watching them, there was no need, there was no way to escape that place.

But there was someone watching: the queen.

Elise, by some bone-deep instinct, shrank into the wall. Tilde was standing with Hadiah and Marolyn, gazing down on the princes.

And Elise felt the reason she had long avoided this place. If she focussed, carefully, she could feel the muttering of the ivy. She heard it now, but it was different mutterings: this time it felt like a pulse, a song.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Fifty-three

Tilde

The princes will rise.

‘You cannot kill them,’ Hadiah murmured, standing at my elbow as we overlooked the desecrated crypt of Merogian kings and the princes contained within it, where my people had suffered and died. ‘Everyone will know it was you.’ She sounded regretful, which I liked, even if I knew the bitter truth of her words. Her advice was always sage, always calm. ‘For any reign you have, it will be a mark of their martyrdom, a terror against you. Their bodies will become shrines to anyone who wants you dead.’

‘Then kill them too,’ said Marolyn, her voice low. Her quietness since the coup had lost its edge, but she was still not herself. Her mood was dark. ‘Kill them all who dared set foot here on our land.’ Her hand tightened on her scramasax. She hated that she had barely blooded it.

I reached for her, Marolyn the strong, Marolyn the fierce. ‘Forgive yourself, Marolyn,’ I said. She took her hand away.

‘I wanted a beautiful death, not a failure. After all I doubted you, I should have had one use. Instead, I was not the one that saved you.’

Elise. She had mentioned nothing of the prison I had put her brothers in; she had not asked for anything, but I knew she was building to it. She was not like her brothers, she was content to wait. Her silence was more frightening to me than her fury.

‘You have saved me Marolyn,’ I said. ‘You have saved me over and over again by being here, by staying with me even when you did not agree, or understand.’

‘I should have died for you,’ she murmured. ‘I could not even kill for you.’ She looked below. ‘I cannot even kill them. What use is a blunted blade?’

‘Death is not the answer,’ I said, trying to reassure her. ‘Banishment, perhaps.’

Conrin limped from the ivy towards the high windows, to the door and back again. He had tried to convince the guards into releasing them, but they had reported it to Odon, who had told me. The old man seemed to have

lost all faith in himself, busying his waking hours with minding the king and inhaling the same smoke I used to control him.

‘There is nowhere we could send them that they could not use to reach us,’ said Marolyn. ‘We would live our lives afraid.’

Every breath they took could be poison in our lungs. I would watch my hard-gotten child grow as if under the weight of a knife, his own brother looking to end him.

I put one hand to my belly. My breasts were still aching and the nausea growing. I put the other on the cloth of green leaves across the balcony, feeling the pulse there of the kithwood, like a current unseen, beneath the surface of the world. The power of the Ways, the strength of the wild. The power to change.

It hummed deep in me, and all around us, muted, buried as the kings in their crypts.

‘Perhaps the kithwood has the answer,’ I said.

‘Wait,’ Hadiah stopped me with a hand on mine, ‘pain and memory, Tilde. The last time you offered it was almost too much, you were gone from us for days. We do not have the freedom to lose you; your power hangs by a thread.’

‘I have to try,’ I said. ‘I have not fought for it to risk it all now, Hadi.’

‘You cannot keep it if you lose yourself!’ said Marolyn.

What offering would rid me of these beasts, without a chance to return? I remembered Yoldan, the mad druidim, vacant, no memory left in him. I remembered Guwetha, who had given her life.

‘Let me at least ask our ancestors what we can do,’ I said.

Hadiah bit her lip and shared a worried glance with Marolyn, but at last nodded and stepped back.

I dug my fingers into the ivy, not daring to step too close to the edge where the princes might see me, might hear me. I felt the hardness of the vines under the softness of the leaves, like teeth hidden behind lips, beneath gums.

I opened my mind to the voices.

Know me, I said, and I pushed the thought into the tangle of branches, through the roots of the vines, into the black earth, down further into the crypt where the bones of the Merogia had been buried, where the flesh of the slaughtered family and house were still rotting where they had been trapped. *I am your daughter. I am known.*

I could feel the forest, connected in the warm loam of the earth, in the roots and bone and thorn, in the fungus and the worms, in the rot and the new growth and old deaths of the seasons and the year.

Druidim, spoke a voice that sounded like Sanafin. *You are known.*

They would sing better songs of me.

Give me power, I said. *The power to send these swans to the sky, for no one to look for them. Give me the strength to rule. Tell me how.*

Kill them, said Colfinn's voice. *Open the doors to the city, and the wolves will be loosed from the wood's edge. In exchange, we will take the first tastes of wine from you, and whatever agony you offer.*

Wrap them in green, and we will put death in their veins, said Sanafin, *and we will take all the laughter of your childhood and the boiling of your flesh.*

We will send our birds to peck out their eyes, hissed Ebba. *And we will take the pain of your tongue and the first time you tasted red meat after the winter of terror.*

I frowned. None of this would work, it was too obviously the wood magic. Odon at least would trace it to me. Bodies, questions, swans and martyrs. My frost-thin grasp on power would melt between my too-hot hands, my thirst for vengeance. I could not be a witch of the wood, I needed to be the voice of the Wing, holding the Synod's trust and shared power with the throne. For now.

But I could not lose this moment, this chance. The princes must be gone. Conrin the murderer. Gaisa the cruel, Egil the poisoner, Hein the betrayer. They could not remain here: every breath they drew would challenge me and my crown. The sons of the swan.

What did the songs and stories say of the kithwood? Lost children, quick travels over the paths, memories of family fractured and burned, bodies preserved over centuries, or returned home as creatures of the wild.

To wipe their memory would make them like Liran, susceptible but still dangerous, and boys without memory could have their minds filled up with any ideas. I could age them, have them melt away to decrepitude and death.

No: dark and deadly magic, far from the Wing's shade.

Unless …

The god is the Wing is the swan is the king …

Wild creatures, like these wild boys. The Wing was known to return souls as birds, and if the magic could do such a thing, then even the Synod might

see it as punishment for their sins. They could be changed into something holy, something untouchable. Wild swans.

Would they see it as a miracle? Terrible and beautiful? No bodies, no danger. No deaths. Just the Wing taking them into its shade and flying them away.

Leaving us behind to rule.

What would it take, I asked the green, *to turn them into swans?*

It was like a stone in a pool, setting ripples of sound and surprise through the waters of the kith.

Four lives, four bodies, four necks.

Four beaks, eight eyes, eight wings.

All those teeth, milk teeth too.

It will cost, it will cost. All things have a cost.

I had to make an offer, or they would make one for me: *I could offer memory of pain, of joy, of hope.*

No. Not enough. Not nearly enough.

Memories made and unmade.

It will take a life.

A life? I thought.

A life of pain, a life of memory, and that living will give us power, purpose, strength.

It could be your own, Guwetha's voice whispered. *It could be a lover. It could be the seed of life that has taken root in you*.

The child in me. The little hope that might not stay in me even if I wished it; it might unstick its root from my womb and travel the way of all hopes. This growing child was but a little silence, a little nothing, was it not?

No, not nothing. It was the hope of this prince that the Cynghals bowed to. Not to me, a woman grown. Without Liran and an inheritor anchoring my claims, I was nothing to them, just a barbarian, just a woman.

I had fought so hard for this little seed, I could not spit it out.

What about a barter? I tried. *I will come to you later, I will kill three soldiers.* And explain it to their families. *I will give you a second born.* And explain it to myself.

We do not bargain. The voices of the woodland laughed at me in Sanafin's voice, and I shivered. *We are no servant who would kneel for you, no lover who would die for you, no friend. Green leaf has no fealty, roots have no compassion. We are the ancient wild.*

I protested in my mind and heart. *What you ask I cannot give!*

Then do not ask.

I took my hand back as if I had been burned. It was true, I had thought of the kithwood as a friend, as a hope. The voices in the swell of sound were just echoes, of my sister and brother, of Sanafin, of my father, tangled up in a thousand lifetimes, no longer souls of themselves.

'What is it?' Marolyn whispered as I took my hand away. The two of them hadn't moved, barely blinked, while I felt most of an hour had passed.

'The cost is too high,' I said. 'I wanted to transform them into beasts of no land, into swans.'

Marolyn smiled slightly, and Hadiah sighed. 'Swans,' she whispered. 'Genius. So they would think it was their own god who turned against them.'

I shook my head, disheartened, and still entangled with problems. 'It cannot be. We will find another way.'

'What do they ask?' said Marolyn, curiously.

'A life,' I said. 'A life I love, and there are none I am willing to part with.' My mind drifted to Elise, but I let it drift no further.

Hadiah nodded. 'We will find another way,' she said.

But Marolyn lifted her hand, and put it on the ivy. 'A life,' she said. 'Or a beautiful death?' She turned her gaze to the light outside the circle windows, the outer wall built where the forest had been. 'Would our love still be enough?'

'Come now,' said Hadiah, laughing nervously.

'No.' I said it with finality.

'Is it any different from the rebels? From Guwetha? She said Yoldan could have shared his pain with her. Let me take yours, let me take it all.'

'Yes,' I said, horrified that she would even suggest it. 'It is different.'

She stepped towards me. The sunlight shining from the upper reaches gleamed across her face, brightening her eyes. She smiled, but it had no gentleness in it.

'I have failed you, Tilde,' she said. 'More than once. I did not trust you, I did not hold you up when the dark dragged you in. I am not built for this life, these games and politics. I am only a simple woman, not born to rule, not born to lead. I am a warrior who wished for a warrior's death, and it was taken from me. Let me take it back.'

'Marolyn …' Hadiah shook her head.

‘It won’t work,’ I said quickly, looking for a better reason. ‘You do not love me, and I do not love you.’

‘Now I know you’re lying,’ Marolyn laughed, her lashes were glistening with tears. ‘Love isn’t bound by kisses or the demands of blood. Love is a vine that grows in shared soil and shared light. Love is us. Don’t lie to me about love. Because I do love you Tilde, and you love me.’

She drew her scramasax and swiped it at me when I reached for her, the blade nicking my fingers. Hadiah stuffed her hand into her mouth, stifling a gasp as I winced. Terrible fool that I was, for Marolyn quickly put the point to her throat.

We froze. ‘Use me,’ said Marolyn said, her eyes alight and daring. ‘Use me to end them. To secure your peace. Our peace. Please, my king. Or I will end it myself.’

‘No!’ I breathed. Hadiah tried to grab her wrist, but Marolyn pushed the blade in, a drop of blood rolling down her neck.

‘Stop this!’ Hadiah hissed. ‘Please.’

‘There is another way.’ I told Marolyn. ‘I will find a battle for you to lead, glory for you to seek, but I will not sacrifice you for my ambition.’

‘For Merogia, Tilde,’ said Marolyn, softly. ‘For our women, for our ancestors, for our future. In one moment you could turn their symbol of power into the destruction of their hopes, claim the favour of priests and kings, claim their holy fucking Synod. Do it.’

‘We will find another way,’ I said, though I was less certain now. My eyes were on the rivulet of blood that trickled down her lovely throat. I had been too wrapped up in my own fears, my own games, to see the desperation growing in her, the darkness too. She was right, but there were other choices, better choices than the loss of another Merogian life.

‘The good ruler hammers the metal when it is hot,’ she said. ‘And I give myself willingly, unlike the princess you might consider dragging here screaming.’

I drew my breath in through my teeth. She had seen through me. Better Elise than Marolyn. Better me.

I felt frozen under Hadiah’s dark stare, Marolyn’s bleeding certainty. How many lives were worth a kingdom? How much could be saved, with one destroyed?

‘No.’ I hated that I had even thought of the possibility. I hated how corrupt I had become. ‘I will hate myself for ever. I would mourn you every

day, and I will die mourning you. You would wish that for me?'

'At least I will be remembered,' she said. 'No sister to a fallen warrior, no maiden who could not kill a rebel. I would be a fighter who gave her life to win back her land, and who destroyed every prince who would claim it as his.'

'I wouldn't do it,' I said. 'Marolyn, please, stop this.' I was begging her now.

Marolyn was shaking. 'I couldn't have survived what you have survived,' she said. 'I doubted and hurt you. I am sorry. But if I gave my life to the kithwood, would that not be a death worthy of me?' She smiled, tears falling now. 'Is that not beautiful?'

She was right. I hated her, and she was right. Was this worse than her offering herself to follow me here to kill the king and die? Was it worse than sending her to fight on a field of battle, to be taken by a stray arrow or a blackening wound?

I understood her, and she me, and I knew I would do it. Perhaps, another time, I would not, I would have a soft part of my heart in me, that felt like a sour-sweet kind of hope.

But I did not, and I could find no other ways.

'No, Tilde,' said Hadiah, seeing me waver and grabbing my arm. 'Do not even think it.'

'How much have we sacrificed, Hadiah?' said Marolyn. 'How much have we lost? What is one death among thousands?'

'It is not one death,' I murmured. 'This would be the best part of me, the part that hopes, the part that is good. But that is what the power demands. This is not just your end, it is mine as well.'

Another degradation, another slip towards the worst and most ruthless version of myself.

'Then make it worth it,' said Marolyn, water dropping down her cheeks. 'To pain or death, I said. Do it for me.'

This would work. The princes would be holy, yes, but they would be gone.

Hadiah was shaking her head slightly, her eyes wide, but Marolyn was determined. 'Give me to the kithwood,' she said. Her dress was reddening where her blood touched it. 'And turn their empire to ash.'

Meet me in the kithwood.

Ways forgive me. Mother forgive me. Hadiah, forgive me.

I reached out my hand, and she took it with the one that did not hold the blade.

‘*Tilde*,’ said Hadiah, starting forward, but before she could stop us, I put both of our fingers to the green.

A life for your magic, I poured my heart into it. *She offers it freely. Turn the princes into the symbols they crave, twist their bodies into the swans of their line. Send them in exile back to the lands they flew from.*

Hadiah’s mouth was open in protest. Marolyn had closed her eyes, and the air had slowed. The trickle of blood from my warrior-maid’s neck had slowed to a single, crawling drop, and her hand in mine was cold.

And the kithwood answered: *Then we take and we give again.*

The change was quick. The ivy fronds turned sharp, sliding into Marolyn’s hand and burrowing deep. I do not know if she gasped. The air around us, the light, the leaves, throbbed with power.

I do know that her eyes opened, and a fear was in them that there had not been before. A fear of death. I know the way her skin looked as its brightness faded, turning grey, and the way her mouth went slack.

I know how it felt when the kithwood opened to me through the gate of her death.

The green came into me, with Marolyn’s life as the passageway. I became one with bark and nut and stem. Through it I could feel the pulsing movements of the castle, the deep ivy roots travelling through mud and clay and bone all the way back to the forest that stood a bastion against the mountains and the sky. I could feel the first touch of frost on the leaves, the breathing of the creatures as they began their winter sleep, the steady heartbeat of the wolves.

I could feel the power in the wood, its longing for purpose, for life, for land. I could feel the history, the druidim and their sickles, their sacrifices, their pain. The wars. The thousands dead, the battles over rock and tree. The felling and growing and endless ages of pain, memories and madness, sacrifice and sacrilege. I felt the rise and fall of kings, the memories and bodies given to the wood for the sake of war, I felt the knifing slice of the hannerast.

I felt hunger. There was hunger in the wood, and it echoed in me.

Marolyn collapsed, Hadiah catching her in the moments it had taken to drain her of all life. I did not move to her, I was drowning in power; it filled me up, and ran through me.

I reached out my hand.

Hein saw me first, looking up and then shrieking in alarm as Marolyn fell to the floor. Veins of green had crept up my arm, my neck. I could feel my hair turning thorny and dark, my teeth sharpening like the teeth of a beast, my eyes yellowing like the glare of a bird.

Druidim.

I smiled, though I had just killed my closest friend, as feathers sprouted from my own arm, spattering blood on to my clothes, white and sharp as blades and thorns. My nails lengthened, turning grey then black, and I pointed at the princes below even as Conrin saw me and his laugh of dismissal turned into a squawk of fear.

The change took him first. His neck lengthened, his bones cracking, turning hollow. Feathers sprouted from his elbows, then his arms, tearing through his clothes and wrapping him in a blanket of ancient magic.

Pretty Gaisa twisted, his body diminishing, wings breaking out not from his arms but his sides, his arms flattening into his body, his legs turning black and twisting smaller as his feet widened through his boots. He ran for the door, hammering on it, but as soon as his fists met wood they burst with feathers and he howled, running back, falling over as he tried to tear the white from his belly.

The guards ran in, hearing the distress as Egil cried treachery, and threw himself upon Hein, as if he could protect the boy from my magic with his body alone. But before he could say my name his voice turned into a bird's hiss.

I had given Marolyn to the kithwood, loyal, beautiful, proud Marolyn, and I would not relent. I could not.

Hein did not make a sound as feathers sprouted around his mouth, his chin stretched, hardening into a beak, his body dappling grey-brown as well as white, a fledgling's colours, as his little mouse Mog squeaked and ran from him in fear. His broken arm snapped out, and then was wrapped in feathers as if a storm had come to eat him. His eyes turned shining black.

And then there were no more princes. Only four swans, crying out in agony and fright.

The guards were in uproar, sprinting into the palace for help. One dropped to his knees and prayed as his princes turned into beasts of the Wing and sky, into creatures without voice, without crowns.

Wild with fear, knowing their destruction, the boys beat their wings at the walls of their prison, tangling together, shrieking and fighting and running, all of them becoming mixed into one mass of knotted beasts, a flight of wild swans.

Some combination of animal instinct and terror burned within the creatures as they took flight, flapping up the walls, their feathers falling like drifting snow. The largest, Conrin, slammed into one of the small windows, shattering it outwards, and the others followed into the silver light.

I fell to my knees, shaking, as my body returned to itself, and Marolyn's did not. Hadiah sobbed, grasping her hand, shaking her, but the woman did not respond. My love, my friend, my handmaiden, my guardian, was already cold, as if the forest had claimed her days ago.

I would make it worth her life.

Look up.

I heard her voice, as clear as a bell tolling, as sharp as a beak.

And I did.

There. I saw Elise. She stood on a balcony on the floor above us, her face pale, gripping the edge. Her mouth was open, but no scream had come from it.

And she was not looking at the wild swans, or the horrified guards. She was looking at me.

And her face was full of horror.

Full of betrayal.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Fifty-four

Elise

Elise ran.

She could make no sense of it. Tilde had stood, her hand outstretched, feathers sprouting from her fingers, her wrist, her arm, crawling up her neck. And Marolyn, blank-eyed and dead as a cracked skull beneath her feet.

Feathers and blood, bursting skin and death, and the whisper of the kithwood had become a scream in Elise's mind.

It had screamed in Marolyn's voice.

Elise had trusted, *trusted*, that there was a future here. That Tilde would be merciful, that after the centre of a storm, the pain of cataclysm, the pieces would fall at last right as they should. That her brothers and herself would cut all the strings that held their world together, and tie them better, fix them anew.

But it had fallen apart. Her brothers had twisted, screaming, transformed into monstrosities, and fled. Little Hein! Eight years old. Feathers taking root in him, bursting through his clothes, curling up like summer ferns and tearing them to scraps. She had never seen creatures writhing in such torture, stretching, twisting and morphing into the flag of their father, huge and wild and terrifying, taking off and battling each other for the sky. Just like her ruined tapestry.

It was the wish of any Cynghal for their soul to return as a glorious swan after death. It was the beast of glory, the Wing's finest messenger. But this was no work of the Wing.

Elise was naïve, foolish. Desperate for love, she had trusted too deeply, clinging to any piece of kindness and shoving any hurt into her heart. That, she had learned it from her mother, from her brothers, and she had never stopped learning it from Tilde.

They had let a heathen inside their court, and Elise had let a witch inside her bed, trusted her, helped her, saved her, loved her.

I choose power.

She knew she would be next, and fled.

The Wing is the swan, is the king, is the father, is my lord. The Wing is the swan is the king is the father is my lord.

She needed to tell someone, tell anyone. She needed to run, because this was power ensuring it had no match.

Elise went back to her room, threw open the door and Torna leapt up from darning a frayed dress with neat and perfect stitches.

'What is it?' she said. 'What's happened?'

What could Elise say? How could she explain? 'I need to leave,' she told her. 'Now.'

Torna gasped. 'Why—'

'Don't ask me,' said Elise. 'Help me.'

The maid hesitated no further, she threw down her work and opened a chest, dragging out a travelling sack and stuffing in a shirt, leggings, clothes, simple gold and solid jewels, as Elise pulled on her cloak, armed herself with her childhood sword and her bow. She did not look at the bed where she had dreamed of Tilde, where she had touched herself with Tilde's hands, where she had sinned in her mind, where she had failed.

Not Hein. He was just a little boy. The others perhaps she could understand. Gaisa, Conrin, Egil, had all hurt Tilde in some way. But Hein had been led astray; he was not yet old enough to be the worst of himself. He could have still changed and been changed, he could have learned.

Hein was innocent. And this Elise could not forgive.

'I knew,' said Torna, making a bag for her. 'I knew she was a bad choice. I knew you were opening your heart to her and I did nothing to stop it.'

Elise paused, staring at her. 'You—'

The door opened, and two knights stepped in. Elise did not recognise them, they wore unnerved expressions and green tabards.

'Princess,' one said. Was that a thread of reluctance? 'Your father summons you.'

'My father?' Her father was delirious, he hadn't spoken in days. 'Why?'

'The princes … They have run away.'

Torna looked at Elise, apprehensive. Run? They had flown. Elise wanted to say so, that she had stood and watched the queen turn them into swans. That she had used dark and forbidden magic.

But even now she could not bring herself to betray her lover. She would sound mad, and then she, or perhaps both she and Tilde, would be burned by priests. Despite it all, she could not do that.

But if her father wanted her, perhaps she had a hope, perhaps she could convince him.

Perhaps he would at last listen to what she had to say.

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Fifty-five

Tilde

When I went to see my husband, it was the first time I did not feel the clench of fear, the unknown, the danger. I could still feel the magic, the pulse of the kithwood, the flapping of the birds. Marolyn's life.

The child in me, still rooted, still growing.

I could still hear Hadiah's sobs, and worse, I could still feel Marolyn's cold hand under mine. My cousin would not look at me as I left. Elise had seen, Elise knew. And I did not trust her. Something had to be done.

I went alone into the swan king's chamber. It was dark, the curtains closing in the healing scents in the air, for some of the physiks feared it was the salt wind that carried madness. Herbs burned from several dishes, sickly sweet and choking.

We did not need to burn the glory now. Ziyan could slip a daily drop into his tonics, as long as his supply of swan liver would last.

'Queen Tilde,' he bowed to me as I came in. 'There has been no change.'

Liran sat on a raised chair in a shaft of cold light that escaped through the shutters. The walls in this area were plastered, not tiled, and painted with swans flying from wave to sky. Like his sons.

I smiled.

'Leave us,' I said.

He bowed and departed, and I was left alone with the king.

'Do you remember me?' I asked, coming closer. He stared, his blue eyes vacant. His nailbeds were bloody with picking, and I thought of my mother; I thought of Elise, the way she put her hand into her pocket, the way it came out with little cuts. The way she used pain to contain herself.

No, no guilt.

'Wife,' he said.

No name. Only a title I had been given. Not the one I wanted.

I wanted his.

'Yes, I am your wife,' I said. 'I bear your child, King of Cynghal. Another prince to destroy perhaps, or princess to break.' I felt no love for this thing in me, no stirring, just a nausea in my pit, an ache in my breasts,

my bones. My body was slowly bubbling with change, and I was discomfited by it. Afraid of it. ‘What else am I?’ I said. ‘As the wife of a king, and the mother of his child.’

The king’s lip trembled. He closed his eyes. The scar in his cheek was slack, the threads that held this great, terrible man together had been cut. ‘Oh Wing,’ he said. ‘Oh Wing, oh Wing. Father, I do not know.’

‘It makes me a queen,’ I told him. ‘Your queen.’

He mumbled something I couldn’t hear, then blinked his watery eyes. ‘Queen of Cynghal,’ he whispered, hands clenching and unclenching.

I nodded. ‘Yes. Queen of Cynghal.’ I was close to him now, and I put my hand on his arm. I did not like to touch him, feel the press of muscle and the knot of bone beneath his aging flesh. His body was still strong, his reputation stronger; if his mind healed, the poison weakened, there would be no hope for us at all.

‘Mother,’ he murmured. ‘They killed you Mother, they killed him too.’

‘I know,’ I said, a little relieved. He was remembering his own past, the horrors of long ago. If the king who had tried to break me was in there, he did not make himself known. He was bound by his own old magic, his memories churned with rot, the glory eating whatever was left of him. I just needed him a little longer. ‘Will you obey me then, and give me retribution?’

‘Yes,’ he said.

‘Whatever I ask?’

‘Yes, my queen.’

BookSharekh.com



Chapter Fifty-six

Elise

In her father's dark chamber, Tilde stood like a sentinel, her hair loose, her hands empty. No feathers now, no blood or shame was on her. She stood proud as a conqueror, her Tilde. Her witch. Her wilderness. Her sin.

Elise bowed, shakily. 'Queen Tilde,' she said, aware of the guards at her back. They had brought her without aggression, but they did not stray far from where she stood. The princess looked to her father. 'My King,' she said. 'Father-hyem.'

The swan king's face was empty. He did not look at her, staring instead at his wife as if she was a light shining on him in the dark, while Tilde had levelled her gaze at Elise.

The princess shuddered, and found her skin crawling with fear as she looked into her lover's eyes. Tilde had led Elise back to herself. Had helped her find her voice, her words, her books, her desires. She had given her freedom after a lifetime in a cage, and Elise had fallen in love with the shape of it.

But Tilde had never loved her.

'Father,' Elise whispered, turning back and hoping for Liran's attention. Could she call him back to himself, or was this to be her fate, to be forever torn between love and pain?

Liran frowned.

'Father …' he echoed. 'Who is that?' He looked at her at last, and there was no recognition in the sea blue of his eyes. 'Who are you?'

Elise grimaced while Tilde held her face as calm as a still pool. There was something missing in it, a gentleness, or warmth, as if she had lost some essential part of her being, and she was running hollow.

'I am your daughter,' said Elise. It was not the first time Liran had forgotten her name. It hurt her then and it hurt her now. 'Princess Elise. Isabella's child.'

He frowned. 'Isabella.' He looked to the queen again, then put a possessive hand over her belly. She flinched, slightly, but let him, holding

herself tense with disgust, and Elise found a mote of pity breaking through her fear. Pity for Tilde, that she had been forced to come to this.

Pity for Liran. The man who had conquered the world, and now had been conquered by it.

‘Is she?’ Liran asked Tilde. ‘Is that my daughter?’

Elise looked at Tilde, and their eyes met. Elise wanted to go to her, to hold her and be held, to be told it had all been dreaming. She was angry, she was furious, but was there forgiveness there too? She clutched onto hope like it was an ember lying on a bed of ash, like it was a green shoot breaking through the winter frost: the hope that this was all dreaming, and that there was still a future there.

‘No,’ Tilde whispered, and Elise felt the word like ice in her breast. The ember died, the shoot shrivelled. ‘She is no one. We do not know her.’

The guards did not stir behind Elise, unmoved by the lie. The princess laughed slightly, coldly. ‘He knows me,’ she said. ‘He always remembers Tilde. He will remember eventually.’

Tilde turned to Liran, who was still holding her. ‘We do not know her,’ she said.

And Liran shook his head. ‘We do not know her,’ he echoed.

‘She has come to trick you,’ said Tilde. ‘Betray you. Like all the others.’

‘Traitor,’ whispered Liran, nodding. Then turned to her, accusing, obeying Tilde like a dog who had been offered a treat. ‘Traitor!’

This was wrong, this was not a mind drifting. This was obedience. Liran had never obeyed anyone in his life.

‘Tilde,’ said Elise, scared now. ‘Don’t do this. Tell him you know me.’

Elise saw tears rise up in Tilde’s eyes: they shone, but did not fall. She was cutting out the warmth in her, balling it up. This was not the vulnerable, desperate woman who had clung to Elise for warmth.

This was a usurper. A witch. And the pieces in Elise’s mind fell into place: a poisoner.

The glory. It was not just the Merogian magic Tilde had learned, it was the blood magic too of Cynghal, of Elise’s family. And she had used it on the man who had first taught it to Alar.

‘She’s lying,’ said Elise, standing. She felt the guards move closer behind her. She had not been sent for to plead her case or to advocate for her brothers. Tilde could not let her live to challenge her, not with what she knew.

‘She betrayed you like all your other children,’ continued Tilde, her voice strident. ‘The sons have all fled. Have abandoned you.’

‘No!’ Elise cried, running forward, but Tilde’s guards took hold of her, twisting her arms behind her and forcing her to her knees on the floor.

‘Stay still,’ one said.

‘Traitor,’ whispered Liran, then cried out. ‘Traitor! My hyem! My children! Betrayers. Destroyers! Get out! I have no sons! No daughters!’

‘Tilde!’ Elise snarled, finding anger instead of fear. ‘Stop this. This is loveless, bitter, cruel!’

Tilde pushed Liran’s compliant hand from her body, and came towards Elise. She was trembling, and for the briefest of moments, Elise thought she saw some humanity still in her, some regret as she came closer, a tinge of softness in her eyes.

But then she spoke.

‘It is not love that will save us,’ she whispered.

It is power.

The softness was extinguished. She stopped in front of Elise and put a warm finger to her chin, tipping up her head. Teardrops still hung in her eyes, clinging to her dark lashes, tears Elise would once have wished to kiss away.

‘For the kindness you have shown me,’ she said, her voice steady. ‘I will give you a chance.’ Elise breathed quickly, pinioned, her neck exposed. She knew Tilde could kill her now, and her father would not whimper or complain; the guards would wash her blood from the floor, and all would forget the prudent princess.

‘A chance,’ Elise echoed.

‘A chance to have what you wanted, the life that you hoped for,’ said Tilde. ‘Merogia should never have been yours, you have no place here, so my guards will take you far from the castle, to the harbour’s edge. There you can take a ship, any ship, far from here.’ A tear fell, trailing salt across her expressionless face, and she leaned down her mouth close to Elise’s, close enough to kiss. ‘Far from war, far from this land your bloodline burned.’

Elise was too proud to bow her head as Tilde drew her warm hand away. She could still feel her lover’s fingers, burning into her jaw. She met Tilde’s eyes with challenge, and accusation.

The queen stepped back. Her lover no more. Her enemy now. The guards dragged her to her feet.

‘Freedom is my last gift to you,’ said Tilde. ‘Take it, Princess, and run.’

Elise felt the sharp pain to the back of her head. Her vision flashed white like the feathers of a swan, then turned as dark as the shadows of the whispering woods.

BookSharekh.com

Epilogue

Dear Mother, my king Rivani,

I hope you had good harvest. Not six moons have passed since we parted, and yet so much has changed. My husband, Wing grace him, has taken ill after his sons betrayed his trust and were punished by our god.

Mother, I have done it. I have taken command, and have rid his sons with the magic of the Ways.

I am blessed, at least, by his growing prince inside me. His life is strong, and I pray for him daily. Perhaps, as he grows stronger, so will my dear king, and thus the great Cynghal will be pulled back from the brink.

I am with child, but I fear to lose him and the power I have gained. My control will not last.

Some rebellious markals take advantage of the king's distress, closing off cold Hallion, and the hannerest to Falcan, but the might of Cynghal, Galen and Merogia united will see to their capitulation.

I will gladly watch them burn.

I have enclosed a locket, a gift from a ducal, that I hope you will wear. A show of all the great wealth that Merogia has to offer, if turned in the right direction. I hope that you will bring it with you, and come visit us with some bounty of home. We have much to discuss.

Join us. Come to us. Bring weapons. But tell me too, why have you lied?

Marolyn has been taken into god's grace. We mourn her, a true warrior of our people, and an ever-faithful maid.

I did what I must.

The princess has fled, and has not yet been found. But we continue, with love in our hearts for this great nation.

I loved her, I undid her. I do not regret it.

Your daughter,
The Swan Queen Tilde

Child of the Forest, daughter of the snake, King of Merogia. Druidim.

BookSharekh.com

Acknowledgements

My first thanks for this book has to be to my readers. Thank you for taking time out of your worlds and joining me in mine. Thank you for trusting me to write something new. Thank you for coming with me on this journey. None of this is possible without you.

My second thanks is to Ali, my husband, my best friend, my bastion. You empower me every day, and while writing this book has been among the hardest things I have had to do, loving you and being loved by you is the easiest and best. Thank you for seeing who I am and helping me shine.

My next goes to the teams from Harper Voyager: Charlotte Trumble, Jane Johnson, Julia Elliot, thank you for the grace and time you gave me when I was struggling to keep it all together. Thank you as well to Catherine, Susanna, Chloe, Robyn, Isabella, Deanna, Sian, Fleur, Sam, Sean, Kate, Maud, Natasha, Frankie, Rachel, every bookseller, and everyone who works so hard across the industry. Thank you for believing in these books.

To Juliet and the Mushens Entertainment team, and to Ginger. Thank you for believing in me. Even when I don't believe in myself.

To Tom Roberts and to Alice Cao, your art has brought this world to life, both for readers, and for me.

To my family, old and new, this last year has been a tough one, thank you for being there for me and I hope I can be there for you. Mam, Dad, Josh, Gen, Felix, you are my saving graces. Dianne, Julia, Simon and Charlotte, I am so lucky to have you in my life. Thank the skies none of you are like the madcaps I've written into these pages.

To my chosen family who have supported me at home in Scotland, in Kinshasa, in London, Wales, in bookshops (my love to Argonaut), in cafes, on phones, from near and far, you are too many to name, you have been a light in the dark. So too have my incredible inspirations and ink-spattered friends: Saara, Tasha, Kate, Cherae, Samantha, Rebecca, Alice, Feli, Ian, El, Gabby, Adam. We survived! Let's do it again.

Thank you to the women and LGBTQIA+ communities who carried history forward, thank you to those who help each other and lift each other

up. You are who you say you are. We have a past to know, and a future to fight for.

BookSharekh.com

Discover more …

For more by No.1 *Sunday Times* bestselling author Hannah Kaner discover The Fallen Gods, her first epic fantasy trilogy.



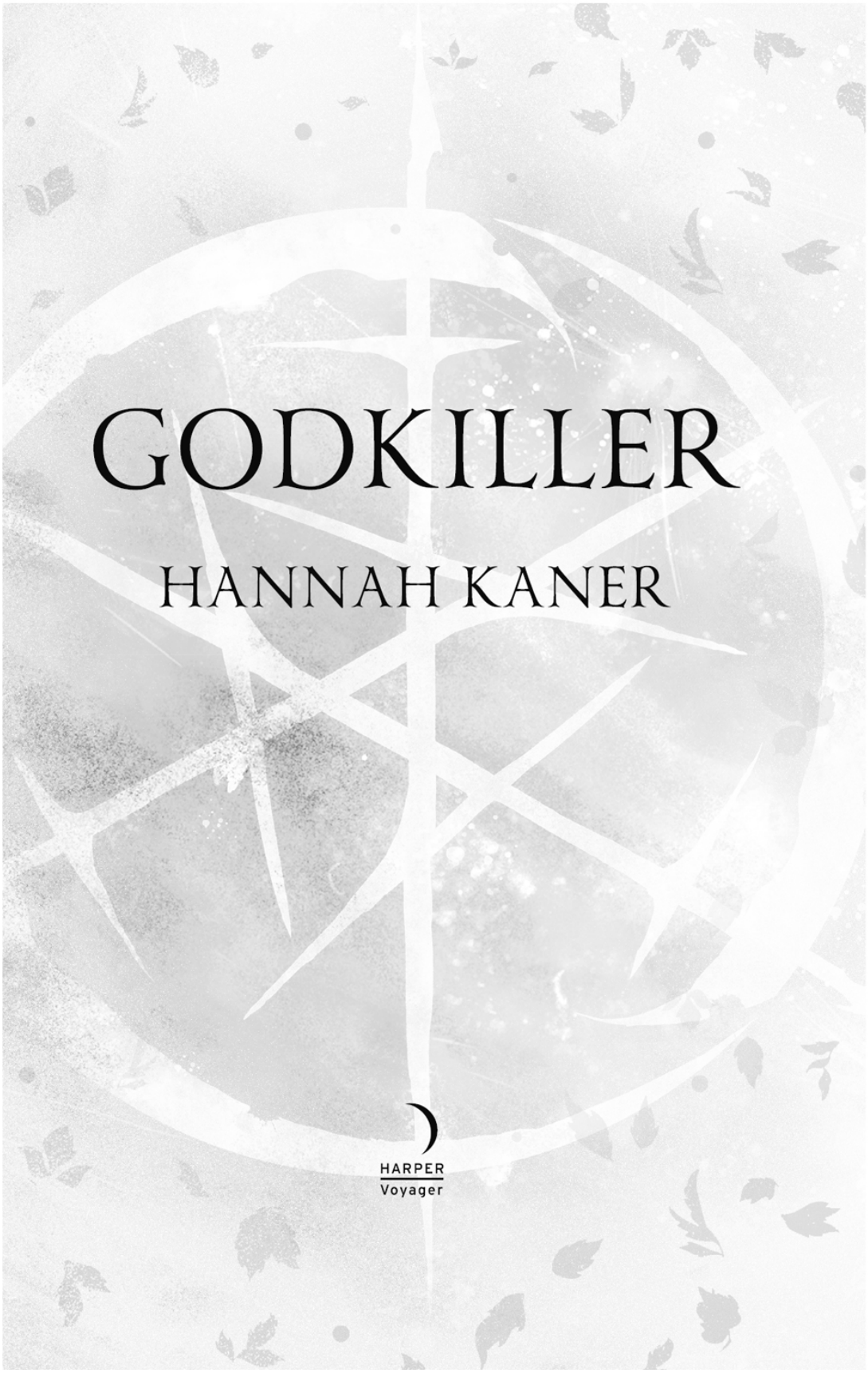




Continue on to read the prologue of book one in the trilogy, *Godkiller*.



BookSharekh.com



GODKILLER

HANNAH KANER

HARPER
Voyager

BookSharekh.com

PROLOGUE

Fifteen Years Ago

HER FATHER FELL IN LOVE WITH A GOD OF THE SEA.

The god's name was Osidisen, and her parents named Kissen and her brothers in honour of his attention: Tidean, 'on the tide'; Lunsen, 'moon on water'; Mellsenro, 'the rolling rocks'. And, finally, Kissenna, 'born on the love of the sea'. Osidisen filled their nets with fish, taught them when to ride a storm and when to hide, and brought them safe home with their catch each day. Kissen and her family grew up in the sea's favour.

But the sea god didn't bring fortune to the lands of Talicia. Eventually, the villages on the hills were enticed by a god of fire, Hseth, and her promises of riches.

Everyone wanted the wealth of the fire lovers. In Hseth's name the Talicians burned their boats and felled their forests to forge weapons, heat brass, and make great bells which rang from sea cliff to mountain border. Osidisen's waters emptied, and smoke rose over the land. Soon other, darker stories of violence spread from town to village: sacrifices, hunts, and purges in the fire god's name, enemies and old families burned for the fire god's pleasure.

One night, the night after Mellsenro's twelfth birthday, when his fingers were inked with his name, eleven-year-old Kissen woke to smoke, strangely thick and sweet smelling. It scratched at her throat.

She came to, and realised she was being carried by men with cloths tied over their mouths, their faces daubed with coal dust, and bells shining in their hair like little lamps. Kissen's limbs wouldn't move, and her chest was heavy as if dreams still lay on it. The sweet smoke, she recognised it: a sleeping drug made by burning sless seeds, along with other scents she didn't know. Below her house, the sea was lashing at the cliffs. Osidisen was angry.

She tried to speak, but her mouth wouldn't work, her tongue sticking against her cheek. Her head flopped to one side, and she saw Mell too, his

fresh-inked hand dragging along the floor.

‘Mmmelll,’ Kissen tried again, but her brother didn’t stir. The drug smoke was seeping through the shutters, through the walls. It hung in the air.

‘Quiet,’ said one of the men holding her, giving her a shake. She knew that voice, those smudge-green eyes.

‘N-Naro?’ Kissenna asked, her voice a little stronger now. The waves crashed outside, and the smoke stirred as some sea wind forced its way through the cracks in the wattled walls. She felt a fresh bite of salt air across her face, on her lips. Her head cleared a little. Naro glanced at her, panic in his eyes.

‘They said they wouldn’t wake yet,’ he said through his mask.

‘Hurry.’ The other voice she recognised too. Mit, Naro’s brother-in-law. The masks were protecting them from the drug. ‘Hurry!’

They were carrying her deeper into the house, to the hearth at its centre. ‘What are you doing?’ Kissen asked, her voice thick but clear. Her body still wouldn’t move.

They reached the hearth, a round stone beneath the thatch roof which opened to the sky so smoke could escape. Around the embers of their evening’s fire, a tangled cage had been set, in the shape of a bell, forged out of driftwood and metal. Her parents were already bound to its outer edges. Her brothers were being tied: ankle, ankle, arms, neck. Offerings. Kissen was the last.

Naro and Mit flung her against the bars next to her father. The sea wind tore through the smoke hole in the roof, ripping around the beams. The shutters rattled and the house shook with the sounds of angry water.

‘Naro, stop,’ said Kissen, stronger now; the sless smoke was almost gone from the air, though it bound her limbs still. ‘Why are you doing this?’

Naro was twisting her legs to tie them to the foot of the cage while Mit strapped her hands to the bars. Lunsen was crying, hiccupping with fear. She had lost sight of Mell. Kissen found the strength to struggle as they bound her against the metal, but they were bigger and stronger than she was. Outside, bells were ringing, their sound broken and battered by the rising wind. The sound could have been from thousands, though the village was barely a hundred souls. All of their neighbours must be out there. They had planned this together, to catch the sea god’s favoured family. Kissen could smell hot pitch close at hand. Terror clawed down her throat.

‘We’re not sorry, *liln*,’ said Mit. How dare he call her ‘little one’? That was what uncles did, friends. He was not a friend. He was a traitor. ‘It is what must be.’

Kissen drew up her strength and snapped at his hand with her sharp teeth. He leapt away, clutching his thumb pad where she had caught it.

‘Leave her,’ he snapped. ‘It’s time. They won’t wait for us.’

They ran. Kissen was shaking. She spat out Mit’s blood and tried to breathe, turning against the ropes to find the closest family. ‘Papa.’ He was not far from her. ‘Papa!’

Bern, her father, was breathing badly. His mouth was torn and bloody, his face bruised. They must have beaten him in his drugged sleep. That ruined mouth had kissed the god of the sea, but now coal daubed his forehead in the bell-shaped symbol of Hseth.

The air thickened with smoke again, not sweet this time but bitter and sticky, hot and black, rising up through the floor. Their village had lit the pitch beneath their stilt foundations.

Kissen yanked at her wrists, her legs. ‘Papa!’ she cried. They had left her neck unbound when she had tried to bite. She writhed, tugging her arm into strange contortions, the bones popping as she craned her neck towards her closer hand. There. She could reach. She set her teeth to the rope, gnawing and tugging at the knot. It was sea-rope, not meant for fraying, but she didn’t want to die.

Tidean was awake too. ‘You filthy castoffs,’ he was shouting, struggling against his bindings, choking as they tightened on his throat. He coughed on the smoke. ‘You saltless traitors!’ His voice was raw.

The heat was rising. Kissen could feel it on the soles of her feet. ‘Be calm,’ their mother said, her voice drug-thick. ‘Be calm, my loves. Osidisen will save us. I promise.’

They couldn’t see the flames yet, but the air swam. Osidisen’s sea wind was still forcing its way inside, and the smoke and air were dancing together like oil and water. Kissen’s mouth, her eyes, her nose dried out. She set her teeth to the rope with renewed force.

‘I’ll make you all pay for this!’ Tidean yelled his promise over his mother’s, but he was bound too tight, tighter than Kissenna. His wild thrashing did no good. The floor cracked in places. Bright light peeked through from the foundations. The walls blackened. Then, an ember, a

spark, a lick of flame, and the wooden doorway caught alight, sending sparks into Tidean's eyes. He screamed, and thrashed.

'Breathe deep, my son,' said his mother. 'It's all right, Osidisen will come.' She was lying, lying to ease their deaths, lying to herself. Osidisen was a water god; he would not come far past the shoreline, not even for them, just as no fire god would dare swim in the sea. Gods couldn't save them now.

The rope sliced the delicate flesh between Kissen's teeth, and blood poured thick and hot across her tongue. She growled and bit down hard, wrenching at her restraint. A shot of pain, a grinding in her gums, then a snap. The rope! The rope was loose, her canine still buried in it, ripped clean from her mouth.

Kissen snatched her wrist free and went to work on the other, letting her salt blood drip down her chin onto the stone below, where it hissed and steamed.

Second hand, free! Her feet. She bloodied her nails on the ropes, snarling with desperation. She would save them. She had to. Her breath was hot, her eyes stinging, but she would not stop. Her mother was coughing now.

'Breathe deep, my children,' she said. Kissen could hear the tears in her voice. Lunsen was whimpering now; Tidean's struggles were less and less intense. Mell had not even stirred. 'Let the smoke take you to sleep, and Osidisen will come for you.'

Kissen's ropes came away, and her feet were loose. The floor was now on fire, and the sea wind was doing nothing but thinning the smoke, losing them the chance their mother wished for: a painless death.

'Papa.' They had tied her pa hard to the metal, which was getting hotter. Kissen climbed anyway, her hands burning.

'Kissenna,' Papa mumbled through his swollen lips. His eyes were open. They shone with dazed relief. 'My girl, run.'

'I'm going to save you,' she growled between coughs. 'I'll save you all.'

Kissen pressed her fingers into the hard sailor's knots; they were tight, but she could work them, releasing her papa a piece at a time. Her eyes were stinging. Mell woke at last and yelled as the flames reached the edges of the hearth, nipping at his heels. Good, all awake. If they were awake, they could run. She freed her father's left hand and moved to his foot while he unbound his right. They were losing time. The sound of the bells outside was rising, sonorous, merging into a single note, louder than the fire.

The flames changed. They twisted together, spinning up the walls, then plunging to the floor in a pillar of fire, sparks spinning out like snow. Laughter crackled in the smoke, harsh and delighted.

The fire span and blossomed into skirts of light and embers. Within them, a woman twirled, her arms wide. Hseth, the fire god. Her hair sparked with yellows and poisoned red, and heat rose from her, cracking and splitting the wood and beams.

‘Sea god!’ she cried, then she called him by his name. ‘Osidisen! Look how they turned from you and gave your loves to me. You cannot touch me, you gutted old water goat! This land is mine!’

Hseth did not look at Kissen or her family. She did not flinch at their screams. She burst through the ceiling in a scourge of flame and the roof came crashing down.

Kissen blinked. Black heat. Then light. Then pain. The cage was shattered under the heavy beams. Mell had stopped screaming. She blinked again. Her father was there, free from his ropes. Her head hurt. Her mouth was full of ash.

‘Pa …’ she choked out. He was wrenching the rubble from her, but he could not lift the warped metal that had buried itself into her right leg, shattering it below the knee. By flesh and bone she was trapped. She was going to die; she could see it in her father’s eyes.

‘It will be all right, Kissenna,’ he said, lying like her mother had, in the soft voice Osidisen admired. He stroked her hair as if putting her to sleep. ‘Be brave, my love, my daughter.’

‘Run away, Papa,’ she said, stifling a sob of fear. ‘Please.’

‘Don’t cry, Kissenna,’ he said. ‘It is better this way.’

Pain. Blinding, atrocious pain. It drove into Kissen’s leg. She screamed, but the smoke stuffed the noise back into her throat. Her papa had orange-hot metal sizzling in his hands, fresh and hissing with both of their blood. He heaved it up high.

‘Her leg for her safety, Osidisen!’ he cried. ‘I beg you, save her from this place in return for this, her flesh, blood and bone, my own making.’

He brought the metal down another time and *turned*.

Kissenna screamed again, the pain devouring her faster than the fire. But her father was not done. Her vision went black, white. When she came to, her papa was dragging her out of the wreckage, leaving the bottom of her

leg behind. Charcoal ran down his face, cut through with tears, streaming into his beard.

Then she saw the seas below their shattered walls. Raging, impotent, beating at the base of the cliff. The salt air rose. It had stung Kissen awake for a moment. The waves were catching each piece of wood as it fell from the house and tearing it apart.

‘My life, Osidisen!’ her father cried. ‘My life for hers, the last thing I will ever ask.’

‘No!’ Kissen croaked, barely conscious.

‘This you owe to me! My lover, my friend. You owe it to her now. My life for Kissenna’s!’

The sea rose, tearing up the cliff as if to reach him. Osidisen’s face rose from the waves, his eyes as dark as the depths. For a moment, Kissen hoped he would deny it, save her father instead.

But gods love martyrs.

He nodded.

Kissenna tried to struggle. She did not want a god’s promise; she wanted her father, her mother, Tidean, Lunsen, and Mell. She wanted her family. Her papa clutched her a last time to his chest and scratched her face with his beard as he kissed her.

‘I love you,’ he said, and threw her to the sea.

BookSharekh.com

A REMINDER TO ALL CITIZENS OF MIDDREN

BY WRIT OF

KING ARREN THE SECOND

HERO OF BLENRADEN, THE RISING SUN OF THE WEST,
NOW IN THE THIRD YEAR OF HIS REIGN

After Saving Our Country From the God War

WORSHIP OF GODS IS PROHIBITED WITHIN THE BORDERS OF THE NATION OF MIDDREN

This law carries from the NORTHEAST border with the DANGEROUS TALICIAN LANDS to the WESTERN SEA PASSAGE and TRADE ISLANDS

HARBOURING SHRINES, TOTEMS, CHARMS, and SYMBOLS associated with any named GOD is PUNISHABLE BY LAW

PILGRIMAGES to HOLY SITES will result in FINE, GAOL, and PUBLIC WHIPPING of your DISLOYAL FEET

THE VEIGA, KILLERS OF GODS, NOW OPERATE IN THE NAME OF THE KING

If you SEE or SUSPECT a SHRINE, a GOD, or LAWBREAKERS,
REPORT THEM TO YOUR LOCAL SETTLE

BookSharekh.com

ALSO BY HANNAH KANER

The Fallen Gods Trilogy

Godkiller

Sunbringer

Faithbreaker

BookSharekh.com



About the Publisher

Australia
HarperCollins Publishers Australia Pty. Ltd.
Level 13, 201 Elizabeth Street
Sydney, NSW 2000, Australia
www.harpercollins.com.au

Canada
HarperCollins Canada
Bay Adelaide Centre, East Tower
22 Adelaide Street West, 41st Floor
Toronto, Ontario M5H 4E3, Canada
www.harpercollins.ca

India
HarperCollins India
4th Floor, Tower A, Building No. 10, DLF Cyber City,
DLF Phase II, Gurugram, Haryana – 122002
www.harpercollins.co.in

Ireland
HarperCollinsPublishers
Macken House, 39/40 Mayor Street Upper
Dublin 1
D01 C9W8, Ireland
www.harpercollins.co.uk

New Zealand
HarperCollins Publishers New Zealand
Unit D1, 63 Apollo Drive
Rosedale 0632
Auckland, New Zealand
www.harpercollins.co.nz

United Kingdom
HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF, UK
www.harpercollins.co.uk

United States
HarperCollins Publishers Inc.
195 Broadway
New York, NY 10007
www.harpercollins.com

BookSharekh.com