DEBORAH KALIN was once addressed by a recruitment agency as ‘Cheng Soon’ no matter how often she corrected them.

A resident of the east coast of Australia, she shares a birthday with Pablo Picasso, was born in the year of the Fire Dragon, collects books beyond her ability to read them all, and once worked at an aluminium smelter where a sparrowhawk routinely ripped pigeons to pieces on a lamp post just outside the cafeteria.

She mostly ate not the meat at this cafeteria.
To my mother
for creating kindness in a world that isn’t always so
ACT ONE
THE WIDENING GYRE
~
ONE

MY GRANDMOTHER BEATA had matched the squabbling drightens in might and cunning, and ruled the fractious Turasi tribes unchallenged for nigh on thirty years. Her hold on the throne was so sure even the blasphemy of allowing a Skythe shadow-walker to pour foreign memories into her skull had not unseated her, though it had sorely tested her power. Her command over her children had been less successful. Not long after her beloved son (and my father) was executed, her headstrong daughter chose exile over a marriage that would have secured our House’s hold on power.

As we waited in the sharp spring wind for the return of that same daughter, Grandmother wasn’t inclined to overlook any of my delinquencies, pinching my elbow when I rose onto my toes for a better view.

‘A Duethin stands still, Matilde. None among the Turasi will bend their neck to a fidgeter.’

None will have the chance, with my coronation two years past due, I thought peevishly, though I knew better than to voice it. If I talked back now, if I failed even one of her myriad tests over this coming month’s Aestival celebrations, Grandmother might not step down at the gadderen and I’d have to wait another year entire for the drightens to ratify me as Duethin.

So I held my tongue, dropped my heels to the flagstones, tucked my hands into my sleeves, and stood as still as I could despite the exhilaration bubbling through me as I waited for my first glimpse of Aunt Helena in thirteen years.

The messenger who’d brought word of Helena’s imminent arrival claimed beauty and youth still graced her. I scarce remembered her – I scarce remembered my own parents – though I’d noted, over the years, the sour set of Grandmother’s mouth when anyone asked after my aunt, dismissing any such queries with a curt, ‘Helena is travelling.’

People crowded the upper courtyard, the thanes in their embroidered tabards pushed cheek by jowl against merchants, freeholders and farmers. Thralls dotted the throng, too, their bronze collars glinting in the sunlight, their duties temporarily abandoned. Everyone jostled for a glimpse of the prodigal daughter, blocking my view of the gate so that I had only a mere glimpse of the triumphal arch of its pale pink stone, the swan crest carved on the keystone.

My place, on the dais formed by the broad midmost stair at the courtyard’s end, was more spacious, with only Grandmother beside me. Thanes and court officials ranged along the stairs to our left and right, the highest among them standing a careful step below us.

To my left, tucked into the gap between the master of horses and the wall, stood Sepp, my closest friend despite the difference in our rank. He had pleaded for any other duty, but Grandmother would hear none of it – and it was that cold-eyed command, after years of gleaned rumours and hidden whispers, which banished the last of my uncertainty. Sepp was Helena’s natural son, born on the bloody side of the sheets, and today Grandmother wanted that reminder of Helena’s disloyalty in plain view.

Sepp was not the only gambit Grandmother had on display. Closest to her right hand stood a collared housecarl wearing the colours of House Falkere. He had arrived from the Ayrholm last week with an offer for my hand in marriage. Judging by the hours Grandmother had since spent closeted with him, she was considering the offer with some seriousness.

The irony did not escape me – it was a scion of House Falkere whom Helena had spurned when she chose exile.

Movement eddied through the crowd and, glancing sideways to check on Grandmother, I popped up on tiptoe again. As the ermine-trimmed hem of my dress lifted, a ferret poked her nose out, blinking in the pale sunshine. The dark markings of the kit’s face stood out against the white hem like soot on fresh snow.

Grandmother’s fingers tightened around my elbow, hard enough to bruise. She didn’t need words to express her disapproval.

Summoned by Grandmother with a glance, Sepp lured the wriggling kit from my feet, flashing me a sympathetic grimace. He’d come prepared – his closed fist, no doubt holding a sliver of chicken bone, distracted the kit immediately.

‘A Duethin does not cart kitchen ferrets to official functions. Particularly not at nineteen. A little decorum,’ said Grandmother, ‘or I won’t take you with me on tomorrow’s progression.’

‘I’m not Duethin yet,’ I replied, my impertinence only deepening the iron of her stare. ‘And I don’t know how you expect me to govern if you insist on keeping secrets.’

‘My daughter is not the province of politics,’ she said – resolutely glossing over the way Helena’s betrayal had plunged our House into chaos, threatening longstanding alliances, dissolving several trade agreements, and weakening our hold on the throne. Sepp wore a thrall’s collar to both exclude and protect him from those very
politics.

‘If you’ve been paying attention, you know all you need to,’ Grandmother went on. ‘Including how to keep silent. Now, stand still, or do you have yet more creatures beneath your skirts?’

From his place against the wall, Sepp winked at me, chasing away any sour mood before it could take hold. He had always been able to cheer me, despite his own less-than-favoured treatment at Grandmother’s hands. I didn’t laugh, though, because I knew exactly what Grandmother would say: A Duethin doesn’t giggle, Matilde.

Suddenly, the crowd before the gate pressed aside, a narrow path opening to reveal an enclosed chair advancing. People surged back as soon as the shuttered box passed, closing the path in its wake. Stares and silence followed the chair, and the four olive-skinned men bearing it. The latter wore short linen tunics over trews and sturdy leather boots, cloaks trimmed with fox fur their only concession to the leftover winter chill hanging in the air.

Another two men walked behind, both with short upper lips and beetled brows. The elder bore battle scars and rheumatoid-swollen hands, the younger sported hair untouched by time. Their clothes were finer than the bearers’, a rich dark blue instead of undyed linen. Each wore a foot-long blade belted to his hip.

A coldness that had naught to do with the wind touched my nape. Helena had been among the Ilthean.

I’d heard rumours, of course, but other rumours had placed Helena among the luxurious Morvingen courts, or with my mother’s people – the nomadic Skythes – wandering the plains under the eastern sun. Some even claimed she’d fled north to the chain of islands scattered among the white-capped waves. The idea that she had gone south, into the nest of vipers that was the Ilthean empire, had seemed too fantastical, too great a betrayal, even for the brash Helena of House Svanaten.

Yet now she dared worse – she had brought those white serpents north, brought them into the Turholm itself, the very heart of the Turasi nation.

I chanced a glance at Grandmother. No wonder she’d looked like a storm brewing this past couple of days.

The chair halted at the base of the stairs, the faint squeak of its door opening setting my teeth on edge. It wasn’t hard to stand still anymore.

Helena stepped forth, dark hair twined through with slender braids and coiled atop her head. Pale sunlight flashed off the rubies threaded in her hair and strung around her throat. Black edged her eyes in a face made pale by cosmetics.

Two followed her from the chair, a flaxen-haired woman who kept her eyes downcast and a boy of about ten, sulky-mouthed and wearing a circlet of silver in his short dark curls. The hair and the shape of his eyes marked him immediately as Helena’s son, though he stood as far from the women as he could without disappearing into the crowd packed close behind.

I snuck a glance at Sepp, but his dark, curly head was bent over the ferret kit he still nursed. I didn’t need to see the slope of his cheekbones or the shape of his eyes now, however, to recognise his mother when she stood before me at last.

Flanked by the Ilthean noblemen, trailed by her son and the other woman, Aunt Helena climbed the stairs, her gaze slipping over me without pause.

She didn’t notice Sepp, although he’d finally lifted his head and was staring at her.

One step from the top, she stopped, meeting Grandmother’s eye with a bold tilt of her chin. ‘Mother.’

There was an awkward pause as Grandmother cast her eye over Helena’s retinue, though my aunt made no attempt at introductions. In return, despite their obviously high status, no thrall stepped up to them with the traditional welcome of traveller’s meat and mead.

‘You must be weary after your journey,’ Grandmother said at last, her tone turning the civility into something close to a command. ‘None will begrudge you rest, if you wish to forgo Aestival.’

Helena had poise enough to withstand such an artificial welcome. ‘Not so weary I cannot greet family,’ she replied.

Grandmother didn’t flinch, her expression as hard and set as bedrock. ‘You’ve arrived at an awkward time, if it’s family you seek. My granddaughter and I leave tomorrow on the Aestival progression, and won’t be back until the gadderen. Come. I’ve had rooms prepared for you. I’m sure you’ll want to change at least,’ she said, raking an eye over my aunt’s red gown.

Beneath the cream, hot colour stained Helena’s cheeks and made her eyes glitter.

Standing between them, heeded by neither, I looked from Helena’s temper-flushed features to Grandmother’s implacable expression.

‘So.’ Helena folded her hands. ‘We’re back to this. I had hoped for more.’

‘As had I, a long time ago.’

I stepped forward, thrusting myself in between them. ‘Aunt Helena,’ I said, claiming her kinship and attention both. ‘You’re welcome in the Turholm. My parents spoke of you so often this feels more like a homecoming than an
Helena rewarded me with a smile which unfolded like petals stretching towards the sun. ‘You have the look of your mother about your eyes,’ she said. ‘Her height, too. I wonder you remember them – you were young when they passed.’

Warmed by the comparison, I beamed back at her. ‘I also have my father’s dislike of the chill. Come, let’s inside. We’ve rooms with fires prepared for you all.’

Like an oak picking up its roots, Grandmother turned and walked ahead, gathering Sepp to her side as she did so. Helena’s frown hinted at darker thoughts as she watched her firstborn walking away, a thrall’s collar around his throat.

Falling into step beside me as we followed, she leaned close and murmured, ‘Well, you have my ability to prick her temper.’

I smiled back at her as we crested the steps, but dared not reply. Grandmother had a bat’s hearing.

The Turholm’s great oak doors stood open, and we stepped through into the white-marbled foyer. The seneschal waited for us, his bronze collar intricately carved; Jonas had been in thrall to House Svanaten since his birth. Now, catching sight of Helena, he blinked away tears.

Sigi, Jonas’s granddaughter, waited by his side, her hands dusty and her feet bare. She spent most of her time in the dovecote and rarely wore shoes, for they made too much noise and disturbed the birds. Sigi had Jonas’s large, dark eyes, which were now fixed on Grandmother. Her presence meant the birds had brought a message of import.

Grandmother turned to Helena. ‘Jonas will show you to your rooms. You must excuse me.’ Without waiting for an answer, she gestured for Sigi and Sepp to follow her, and swept away.

Ashamed of such churlish hospitality, I surrendered the Iltheans into Jonas’s care and led Helena to her rooms myself. Though her Ilthean companions weren’t welcome, Helena was still kin.

She stared at everything we passed, from the tapestries cloaking the walls to the carved wood panels depicting past victories, the standards of loyal and conquered Houses and the many statues. Perhaps she was noting changes from her own days.

‘Thank you, Tille,’ she said when we reached her rooms. ‘May I call you Tille? It’s what I used to call you when you were little. Such a quiet thing you were back then, with such wild hair! But perhaps you don’t remember,’ she said, laughing.

Instinctively I touched my hair, smoothing it behind an ear even though my braid was still tight.

Helena noted the gesture, sharp eyes belying her easy manner.

‘No. I don’t, I’m sorry,’ I said, uncomfortable beneath her gaze. ‘I’ll leave you to prepare now.’

‘Stay,’ she said. ‘Sit with me a while. It would be a kindness, to talk of old times.’

I hesitated, then decided against it. ‘We’ll talk at supper. You must rest, get warm. Prepare for the battle,’ I added with a smile.

She flinched at my joke, her answering smile watery and too late.

I took a step back. Perhaps Grandmother was right to have treated her coldly. Helena had been years absent, after all, and probably all of them among the white serpents of the south. Maybe this wasn’t a simple visit home after all.

‘Before you go –’ she began, and I braced myself for a question on politics, or how best to win over Grandmother these days.

Instead, slipping her hand into the folds of her skirt, Helena fetched forth a closed fist. ‘I have a gift for you,’ she said, opening her hand to reveal a necklace.

My breath caught in my throat as I bent over it. The central piece was solid gold, worked in the shape of a swan with a slender pointed shaft growing from its brow.

‘The swan, for your father; and the spear, for your mother,’ said Helena. ‘I’d tell you it’s enspelled to keep you safe, but you’re long past the age of believing such prattle, so I suppose plain gold will have to do. Go on, take it.’

I picked it off her palm. The piece was heavy and warm. A tiny sliver of gem formed the swan’s eye, flashing crimson as I turned it to let the light run over it. ‘Thank you. It’s fine work.’

‘I thought you might like to wear it to Aestival tonight.’

The glint in Helena’s eye told me she knew what being raised by Grandmother was like.
TWO

GRANDMOTHER HADN’T STINTED on the evening meal, which had less to do with Helena and more to do with Aestival. Tonight’s feast marked the end of winter, and the late-night revelry would give way to a night of prayers to herald the dawn of a new day and with it a new year. This afternoon’s confrontation had soured my eagerness for the Aestival feast. Still, my hopes for a peaceful evening rose as I took my seat. It was hard to remain angry when food flowed freely.

The feast included haunches of venison and entire roasted pigs for all, even those who took their meal in the surrounding courtyards. There was apple sauce for the pig, cheese sauce for the vegetables, fruit pastries with cream in between courses – even lark’s tongue.

Coming hard on the heels of winter, the court was reduced to its bare minimum, with few emissaries to break the familiar circle of faces. The Falkere housecarl sat at table with the master of horses and the master of hounds. The falconer broke bread with Oren, officially the master of the dovecote and unofficially the man with an agent or contact in every drighten’s court. In a month, with the Aestival progressions finished and the gadderen beginning, this hall would be crammed with drightens and their vassal thanes, but tonight it was only half filled with merchants and freemen.

Grandmother sat at the head of our table, her stony expression at odds with the finery of her garments. She had bound her white hair back into a crown braid, from which not a strand dared escape.

Opposite her, Helena’s expression remained as serene as the surface of milk. Even Grandmother’s refusal to allow Helena’s son at table hadn’t affected her, although she’d needed to hold in a quick breath before she ordered the boy back to his rooms.

The Ilthean men had been more perturbed. The older frowned and opened his mouth to speak until a look from Helena silenced him, although the effort required to still his tongue was considerable. The younger stared at the food and shifted in his seat, an angry flush staining his cheeks. Meanwhile, the flaxen-haired woman sat with her hands folded in her lap, her gaze fixed on the infinite. Grandmother probably would have liked to refuse them a seat as well, but their status – and her curiosity – made that impractical.

Though the rest of the dining hall rang with the clatter of crockery and the clamour of conversation, at the high table we sat dull and stupid as the meat in our trenchers.

Perhaps the meal’s festive atmosphere wouldn’t be enough after all.

‘Aunt Helena, perhaps you might formally introduce your companions?’ I said, my voice faltering at the end, fearful of Grandmother’s reaction, though she didn’t so much as glance at me.

‘Certainly,’ said Helena, taking a sip of wine first, an indication I wasn’t the only one wary of Grandmother’s temper. ‘Mother, Matilde, may I present my brothers, Flavian and Varis. And Varis’s wife, Cassia.’

I smiled mechanically in my turn, noting Helena’s omissions. She’d neglected to mention the clan of her Ilthean kin, and their clothes lacked any insignia, familiar or otherwise. Too, why bring your husband’s kin but not your husband?

After a wary glance at Grandmother, Flavian addressed me. ‘It is an honour to meet the relations of our esteemed Helena.’

‘And to sit at your table for such an occasion,’ added Varis.

Cassia said nothing, nor did she bother to shift her stare from whatever blank spot on the far wall she found so much more interesting than our conversation.

I knew precisely how she felt, though sitting silent wasn’t an option I could choose. ‘Aestival is my favourite time of year,’ I said, smiling at Varis. ‘The last of the winter freeze, the new growth everywhere. Sharing the experience is part of its charm.’

Grandmother’s gaze conveyed what she wouldn’t voice in front of others: Frippery does not become you, child. But keeping my mouth shut wouldn’t gain me the knowledge of Helena’s activities while in the south.

Helena rewarded me with a smile. ‘I’ve always loved it, too. For all its stuffiness’ – she slanted a look at Grandmother – ‘I’ve missed Aestival in the Turholm. There’s nothing like it for spirit.’

‘It’s different, in Ilthea?’ I asked.

The mention of the empire which had been pressing at our southern border for generations, back even to the years of the Raven’s reign, brought a wave of silence in its wake. I hid a wince behind a sip of ale, though Grandmother sawed at the meat in her trencher as if she’d not heard any of the conversation.

‘It’s larger,’ said Cassia, her voice full of disdain. ‘With less emphasis on cavorting around a fire and glutting
ourselves. Your aunt wouldn’t know. She spent little of her time in the capital. Aestival in the remote and less
civilised corners of the empire is all she’d understand.’

The ale turned to a sour stone in my throat. On second thoughts, maybe silence wasn’t such a bad idea.

‘Please forgive my sister,’ said Helena, favouring Cassia with a frosty look. ‘She is homesick, and more
intermperate with it than usual. Ilthea is unforgettable.’

‘And its reach is long,’ Cassia retorted.

This time both Varis and Flavian condemned Cassia with a meaning look and she subsided with ill grace.

‘If the girl cannot comport herself civilly at table, she can feed with the thralls or not at all,’ Grandmother said.

Cassia tilted her chin a little higher, but didn’t respond.

Helena looked as if she was going to say something, then hesitated, worrying at her lower lip with small, stained
teeth. In the end she decided on silence, bending her head over her meal.

No one else spoke – and I no longer wanted to play hostess.

Grandmother, however, had finished with silence.

‘Go on, Helena. Tell us of Aestival among the Ilthean. Join your sister,’ she said, the word dripping with scorn,

‘in her censure of our barbarous nature.’

Helena pushed her plate away with both hands, a gesture more dramatic than symbolic, since she’d picked it clean
already. ‘It’s been years, Mother, and yet here we are. Immovable. Obviously I was wrong to think you might ever
put the past behind you.’

‘You didn’t come here to heal rifts, Helena. You came because it was expedient.’

‘Try and stem the tide all you want,’ countered Helena, her voice strained now. ‘Sooner or later the emperor will

turn his eyes this way – and where Jurgas Avita Angeron looks, his troops soon follow. Scorn me as you will, at
least I’ve done what I could to prepare for it.’

I fought a surge of panic, made uneasy by the truth of Helena’s words. The Ilthean empire had extended east and
north since their last concerted foray into Turasi lands, swallowing the nations which had served as a buffer and
gaining control of a second pass through the mountains, making the Juthir tribelands as vulnerable to Ilthean attack
as the Majkan tribelands. Even Nureya, the kingdom at the top of the world, had fallen; now only the sacred,
impassable peaks of the Sentinels stood between the Naris tribelands and the Ilthean empire’s newest vassal nation.

Our natural safeguards were vanishing, the Ilthean empire’s baleful strength pressing ever closer, and

Grandmother, as ever, was fully occupied with keeping the Turasi tribes from squabbling among themselves.

A hot flush crept up Grandmother’s throat. ‘My son’s throne will pass to his daughter’ – if she is worthy
always

completed this sentence, its omission now conspicuous to my ear – ‘no matter how large an army you camp along
our southern march.’

I stared at Helena with dawning horror. Perhaps her husband waited at the southern border, in charge of the army
she would use to conquer us, to bring us under the yoke of the Ilthean empire.

My parents loved you. They defended you when Grandmother criticised you, I wanted to say, but the words
couldn’t fight their way past the sick lump in my throat.

‘Oh, please!’ Helena waved a dismissive hand with a flash of pale wrist. ‘There’s barely a legion of troops, and
they’re stationed in Nureya – miles south of the border, not to mention the mountains in between. Have been for the
past five years, I might add. They’ve as little intention of marching as I have of throwing this rib at you right now,’
she said brandishing a pork rib stripped clean of all but a few tatters of flesh, the fierce gesture contradicting her airy
tone.

‘Ah yes, Nureya,’ Grandmother said. ‘Your emperor’s pledge that the Nureyan king would retain sovereignty was
honoured for all of a season, if I remember correctly. Just long enough to send in his slave-born general.’

Helena drew a sharp breath, and Cassia smirked, her response hinting at politics within Helena’s adopted family.

‘My husband was required at the fort and, being so close to the Turholm, I thought to visit. There’s nothing
sinister in it,’ Helena insisted.

I wanted to believe her; there was something bright and bold and hurt about her manner which spoke of sincerity.

Only loyalty to Grandmother – and knowledge of her normally rational judgement – kept a seed of doubt lodged in
my mind.

‘Five years,’ said Grandmother. ‘And every year the patrols encroach further north. Every year they push at our
borders, testing us, shedding yet more of our blood. And now you arrive.’

Helena put her hands on the edge of the table as if to push her chair back. But she remained sitting, rigid and
unnerving.

‘Visiting kin,’ she said.

Cassia kept her eyes trained on her plate.

Grandmother didn’t react.
‘They’re canny, Helena, these people you’ve chosen. Perhaps as canny as you. Don’t mistake me for a fool, however. Do you think I don’t know about the symbol you’ve chosen for your son?’

Helena went white, but Grandmother wasn’t done.

‘I know the future you hope for him, but hear me now,’ she said. ‘It will not happen.’

‘You know nothing,’ said Cassia, brazen-faced. ‘The sun is setting on your days, old woman, and it is a simple matter of time before these lands bloom under the sway of Jurgas Avita Angeron, instead of wasting under your stewardship. The world has fallen from your grasp already. You simply don’t realise it. Either of you,’ she added, shifting her stare to Helena.

‘Do your best,’ said Grandmother, addressing Helena as if the warning had come from her. ‘It won’t be enough.’
THREE

THE FEASTING LASTED late into the night, and while those at the other tables or at their revelry in the courtyards enjoyed the passage of time, at our table it dragged, so that I found myself looking forward to the prayers which would welcome the arrival of the first dawn of the new year. When the plates were cleared and the ale finished, I stood as soon as Grandmother did.

Varis, in quiet conversation with Flavian, blocked my way forward. And behind me, Helena was shaking out her skirts, smoothing their fall with diligent care. I hovered in their midst, trapped unless I was willing to push around them.

As Grandmother turned from the table, Helena caught me before I could hurry forward. Tucking my arm through hers, my aunt drew me close.

Grandmother’s look told me to behave, but she let me go. Contrary old woman.

Arm in arm, Helena and I followed Grandmother outside in silence.

My apprehension gave the upper courtyard a sombre cast as we traversed the covered terrace linking the dining hall to the sanctuary. Orange and yellow sparks flew up from the crackling bonfire about a hundred yards away, the distance blocked by a steady crush of bodies, though the heat of the flames was strong enough to make my cheeks glow. The faces of the crowd looked strangely demonic in the firelight – cheekbones and chins and brows aglow, teeth glinting from dark mouths and the whites of eyes from dark sockets, hair and arms and laughter whipping through the chill night air.

I longed to leap from the terrace walkway and plunge into the riot, which seemed a truer celebration of Aestival than our own dry prayers inside sombre walls would be. With the tension brewing between Helena and Grandmother, even the stone lintel of the sanctuary’s doorway, carved with ravens and roses, seemed welcoming.

Helena drew a breath, eyes shining, as we stepped inside and the cavernous hall of the sanctuary opened around us. Lamplight bounced and refracted from the room’s polished parquetry and gilt-work, the crowd’s clothing and jewellery.

‘Oh, I’ve missed this!’ she laughed, her free hand plucking at her skirts, red as the flashes of carp in the Turholm’s ponds. ‘It’s like being young again. There’s absolutely nothing rational about it,’ she added with a happy sigh.

Unwise or not, I warmed to her again. I liked the sound of her laugh. Perhaps she wasn’t the most judicious of women, but at least her crimes were born of her passions, not some innate cruelty. Still, I couldn’t rationalise away the army at the southern border.

Helena’s laughter faded as she noted my expression, and Grandmother’s voice sounded in the back of my mind: Must you display your every thought on your face, Matilde?

‘Tille,’ Helena said. ‘Your grandmother is wrong about me. I’m not planning an invasion. Nor do I want to subvert the succession: the throne will be yours.’

Words mean little, especially at night, came Grandmother’s voice in my head, and the best I could do was hold silent.

‘In fact I’m eager for you to take the throne,’ Helena continued. ‘The Turasi have been ruled by an old woman far too long. It’s time for the fire of fresh blood. Well past time, actually,’ she added, a light in her eyes I didn’t trust.

‘Isn’t it?’

I shifted uncomfortably. ‘The circumstances surrounding my father’s death haven’t left House Svanaten in the best position. Elevating me to his throne is a delicate matter.’

I bit back a sour urge to laugh. I’d spent years swallowing with ill grace those words of Grandmother’s as she delayed my coronation yet one more time, and here I was offering them up in her defence.

Helena gave a careless flick of her wrist and turned her gaze back over the crowd entering the sanctuary. Court officials and merchants, thanes and landholders, all eddied towards the far end of the hall and the circular doors – made of apple wood, orange as the rising sun and grained like the swirl of water in a creek’s elbow – which led from the hall into the smaller temple behind. The doors were large, but their rounded design allowed only one through comfortably, two if they pressed shoulder to shoulder and ducked. Even the most powerful thanes must shift and fidget and push forward and back as they waited their turn to enter.

We, of course, would be last. House Svanaten stood apart, always.

Conscious of Helena’s serene demeanour – she would never crane or bob like an over-eager chick – I strove for stillness.
The hall cleared but even then we waited for everyone to settle, that Grandmother might sail into the temple like a swan upon the lake, us lame ducks trailing behind.

At last she started towards the temple doors. The babble and clatter of people beyond was like smoke in my blood, heady and confusing and urgent.

I put out a hand to steady myself, my fingers brushing the surface of the doors – and the vision took me.

The parquetry floor washed to black. The orange grain of the doors flared brighter and brighter, as did the jewellery of the men and women and children, and the lamplight gilding the windows and tapestries. As if sparked by the hard glare, a fire burst and raged through the temple, the flames hot enough to crisp bones and raise the smell of marrow burning to cinders. And me in the middle, wrapped in the black shroud of the dead and yet still quick with life.

The vision passed as rapidly as it had arrived, my awareness returning to the feel of Helena’s gentle hand on my shoulder. Still I could not rid myself of the queasy touch of fear in my belly that always accompanied my visions. I buried my shaking hands in my skirts. The intensity of the vision, and the temple’s appearance in it, told me the future it presaged was near.

‘Tille?’ Helena slipped her hand under my elbow to take some of my weight and glanced around the room to assess who was watching. ‘Are you ill?’

My rickety smile did nothing to dispel Helena’s concern. I could tell what she was thinking: the shadow sickness. No one wanted a Duethin who might fall frothing to the floor.

‘I’m fine,’ I assured her when I felt strong enough to speak, though the shiver in my hands was creeping through the rest of me, leaving the cold of the dead in its wake. It had been years since a vision had taken me as strongly as this one. As a child, before Grandmother taught me how to resist their lure and quash their power, the foretellings had plagued me day and night. In recent years, they overcame me only when I was too weary to guard against them – or when danger stalked me.

‘We can talk about it later, if you like,’ Helena murmured.

I shook my head, insisting I was well, but she held too tight a grip on my arm for me to pull free. Swept along by her, we followed Grandmother, who was already bearing down the central aisle towards our seats at the front. The lantern light caught at the edges of my eyes, dazzling me. The sooner I could sit and shut my eyes, the less chance I’d be sick.

Slipping into my seat, I fixed my gaze on the wall in front of me, where an intricate carved and inlaid wood panel stretched the length and height of the wall. Its familiar contours soothed me, even if it didn’t settle my stomach. I had traced the story in it every Aestival since I was old enough to sit through the prayers.

Depicted on the far left of the panel, Gunde the Raven sat the throne, her skill with the shadows making her inviolate and unassailable. It had taken faith, in the form of the prester Tamor, to drive her out, and to bind and shackle the children of Irmao, the ninth daughter of Turas. His success was thorough: the silent tribe were known now only as the mara, those cloistered presters who used their skill with shadows in aid of the church. It was a story which always drew me, and always made me shiver. If it weren’t for Grandmother, I too would be cloistered and shackled, no longer the scion of House Svanaten but instead a simple prester, bound to a life of roaming the shadow world.

As always, my eyes slid onward to the centre of the panel. It depicted Turas, the first man, surrounded by his nine daughters, with Irmao kneeling and silent at his feet and the ancestor of my own tribe, the shieldmaiden Suebe, standing at his right hand. As ever her gimlet stare sent a tingle of awe down my spine.

Helena didn’t step around me to take a seat on my other side. Instead she paused in front of me, an abstracted expression on her face as if she were studying the panelling after a long absence. Surprised, I slid along the pew until I was at its far end, only the cold aisle between me and the wall of dressed stone. Helena slipped into the space I’d opened.

The whispers started before she’d even sat down, a tide of speculation prickling at my neck as it lapped around the room. The disowned daughter was not only returned, but taking precedence over the uncrowned Duethin. Was there a change in Beata’s plans? Would she reinstate Helena as heir?

I resisted the impulse to turn and silence the gossip with a glare. Instead I leant forward to peek around Helena, wanting to warn Grandmother of my vision. Unfortunately she wasn’t looking my way.

A latch rattled in the alcove tucked into the corner nearest me. The door, its dark wood banded in black iron but otherwise undorned, opened to admit a prester, barefoot and clad in black linen. The voluminous sleeves of his robe reminded me of a raven’s wings as he lifted his arms above the gleaming brass cauldron atop the altar.

There was no more time. I must risk Helena discovering the truth of my visions if I was to warn Grandmother.

‘Something dreadful is about to happen,’ I whispered, my nausea returning in force.

‘Hush,’ whispered Helena, patting my knee, her gaze fixed on the prester.
I had spoken too softly; Grandmother didn’t hear, and a moment later my chance to speak was lost. The prester
dipped a ladle into the carved cauldron, fetching up an amber fluid which he poured into a small wooden bowl.

Apparently determined to reassert her place within House Svanaten, Helena stood and was at the cauldron in a
heartbeat, reaching out to accept the bowl in both hands. Shocked by Helena’s breach of protocol, the prester
hesitated, fumbling and nearly dropping the bowl. Helena took it and drank, not a ladylike sip but the entire draught,
while the temple buzzed with the scandal.

Grandmother stood, her expression serene. When I remained seated, nailed to the pew by nausea, the thanes and
court officials and freeholders slipped into the aisle after Grandmother to drink of the cauldron’s brew. Even the
Iltheans lined up, though the sneer on Cassia’s face betrayed what she thought of the ceremony.

I sat still, certain the raw wine would be my undoing. In the quiet as everyone else shuffled forward in turn, the
clamour from the courtyard was boisterous enough to reach into the sanctuary, a confusion of shouts and screams.

Lips shining with the dregs of her drink, Helena turned back. But before she’d taken a single step, an arrow
bloomed from her throat, pinning her smile.

Her gaze locked with mine as one hand instinctively reached up, but her questing fingers never found the arrow’s
stem before her knees folded and she sank to the floor. Flavian cried out and pushed forward, stumbling to his knees
at her side.

A second arrow took the prester in the eye, pitching him backward, the stem and fletching protruding from his
socket.

Someone screamed, setting off a host of echoes which filled the room.

Spinning on her heel Cassia ducked behind Varis, who pushed her down with one hand and turned, seeking the
source of the arrows. A bolt slammed into his thigh and he stumbled.

‘Down, child,’ Grandmother shrieked at me, her voice swallowed under the din.

I slipped to my knees as Grandmother turned and summoned the thanes in the hall then rallied the guards.

An arrow took her in the shoulder, slamming her around and down. A second took her in the side, driving up
through her ribs.

‘Grandmother!’ I screamed, as her head cracked against the floor.

I tried to stand, but my skirts tripped me. My knee came down hard on the wooden foot of the pew, sending a bolt
of pain through my head. An arrow buzzed over me and thunked, quivering, into the back of the pew. The hairs on
my nape stood on end, waiting for the flames of my vision to burst into life, or a blade to fall. Screams and cries
were cut short by the smack of steel through flesh.

Blood splashed onto the floor in front of me before trickling along the cracks. I was torn between the desire to
jump to my feet and run, or huddle into a ball and squeeze my eyes shut.

Glancing behind me, I saw Grandmother’s white hair flashing like a beacon between a tangle of moving legs.

Keep your head down, child. That’s what Grandmother would say. You must be calm, and bold, to think your way
through this crisis.

Jolted into action by her voice in my head, I scrabbled between two pews, away from the central aisle. The
sanctuary hall would be no safer, but it had more exits, more opportunities for escape. Dust and grime from the floor
covered my hands, the wooden pews closing me in on either side. Empty air hung like a threat over my back and I
slunk closer to the floor.

At the end of the pews I hesitated, frightened to poke my head out and risk certain death. Screaming and footsteps
sounded from everywhere, echoing back and forth from walls and floor and ceiling.

I peeked out. The cloth-merchant Theodor was creeping towards the back wall, his back facing me. There were no
soldiers in sight.

Still on my knees, I started into the aisle after Theodor till he froze with a grunt. An arrowhead, running with red,
burst out near his spine as he collapsed.

I couldn’t scramble out of the way fast enough. Theodor fell backward, his slack weight catching me halfway out
of the pew, pushing me to the cold floor and crushing my ribs. Hot blood slicked down my neck and collar.

My heart clattered, its rhythm racing and stuttering, making my breath short and fast. Panic and the stench of fear
stifled what little air I could scrape into my lungs. Hidden by Theodor’s corpse, I dug my fingers into the cracks in
the parquetry floor, fighting back my fear and revulsion, deter-minded to stop my feet scrabbling for purchase. I had
to lie still and feign I was just another corpse.

A foot nudged my calf. Hidden by Theodor’s torso, I pressed my face to the floor and kept myself limp, trying not
to imagine the soldier testing my reflexes with his sword instead of his toe. My trapped breath burned in my throat;
my lungs ached with holding them shut. Blackness threatened to swallow my mind. I fought it, for if I succumbed I
would drag in a deep, shuddering breath.

After what felt like an eternity I heard the footsteps start to move away.
Unable to hold it any longer I let out my breath and drew a new one, sure that at any moment a sword would shear through the flesh of my back. I waited, counting the moments by the beat of my blood.
FOUR

MY THOUGHTS RACED, seeking answers. To attack now, so close to the gadderen and with no time to court the
drightens to the victor’s cause, spoke of power and alliances already in place. Who had dared?
The Somner drightens had no love for my House, but the same could be said of Saschan, or Raethn. House
Falkere was an unlikely candidate, given the recent marriage discussions between our houses, and House Vestenn,
while not a strong ally, was surely too busy guarding the southern marches. Ambition was a powerful spur, however,
and it was possible that the Vestenn counted the loss of the southern lowlands reasonable if it gained them the
Turholm, and the throne.

Thoughts of the southern border introduced new possibilities as well. Was the Ilthean empire behind the attack?
Would they sacrifice Helena and her kin, if so? And how had they reached deep into the heart of the Turasi nation?
Had they slaughtered the Majkan tribe, or bribed them? It seemed incredible, but then, so did everything about an
Aestival coup.

Cries and carnage still sounded around me, muffled by Theodor’s body smothering me. But it would be dangerous
to wait for total quiet to escape. I had not forgotten the flames of my vision.

With hands made sticky by blood, I shoved at the dead cloth-merchant, but his leaden weight didn’t budge. I held
back a sob as the gorge rose in my throat. Then, bracing with my legs, I pushed again. His body heavy and limp, and
my arms trembling with the effort, with aching slowness he finally toppled off me, and I scrambled free.

The aisle remained clear, but I didn’t dare raise my head above the pew. On hands and knees I shuffled along the
length of the side wall, impeded by my blood-drenched skirts. Blood had splashed the dressed stone, and dark grey
lines and chips showed where blades had struck.

At the last pew before the back wall I paused, my bruised knee throbbing and fear making my stomach unruly.
Sure there had never before in the known world been an expanse of forehead so broad, I peered out.

The door seemed an interminable crawl away: the length of the pew, the central aisle, another pew and the narrow
side aisle. All were scattered with the dead, but empty of soldiers.

I crept forward, expecting an arrow to whistle towards me at any moment.

On reaching the centre aisle I paused to catch my breath, wanting to scuttle past without knowing how close
danger lay. Reason was still stronger than fear, however, and I looked towards the altar.

Grandmother lay on her back in a tangle of bodies, her white hair gleaming in the lamplight. Arrows stood out
from her body, the clothes where they’d driven home black with blood.

Helena lay nearby, a wan, forever stare on her face. One of the soldiers was pawing her for trinkets, tucking a
gold chain into his belt pouch. Mouth dry and limbs shaking with panic, I hurried forward while his attention was
distracted, slipping through the temple’s doors and back into the main sanctuary hall.

The hall was a veritable slaughterhouse of blood, bodies and overturned furniture. Turasi had fallen like wheat to
the scythes, their attackers’ boots tracking prints through the spilled blood. I kept to my hands and knees, hoping the
blood and darkness already slicking the floor would hide any trail my sodden skirts left.

Orange glimmers from the bonfire in the upper courtyard lit the space between the grand teakwood doors. I
crawled along the south wall, scurrying from one spill of darkness to the next. A foot from its end was an alcove, at
first glance a niche missing its feature piece. In fact one stone, at waist height, would give slightly beneath a touch,
swinging open a concealed door in the back wall. The thralls’ runs formed a network of corridors squirrelled
throughout the Turholm, built to allow for efficient but unseen service. If their secrets hadn’t yet been plumbed by
the attackers, they might shelter me awhile.

Cautiously, I rose to my knees. I was still in darkness, but I didn’t trust it to cloak me. Scanning the hall and its
grisly inhabitants, I fumbled behind me with terror-numbed fingers seeking the catch-stone.

Near the temple doors I’d fled through, a shadow twisted free of the general darkness and resolved into the outline
of a soldier, mercifully looking in the other direction.

My fingers found the catch-stone and the alcove door swung open onto a lamp-lit corridor.

The sudden flare of light caught the soldier’s attention and in an instant he was running towards me.

I turned and ducked into the corridor, pressing my foot down on the catch-stone just inside. The snick as the
mechanism caught and swung the stone door shut cut off the soldier’s command to stop.

Pulse pounding, I fled wild and blind along the passage, the soles of my shoes slapping against the stone, my
hands pushing against the walls for speed and stability. My knee throbbed with every step, threatening to pitch me
face-first onto the floor. The lamps blazed in their glass cases like trapped butterflies.
The first turning stopped me. Moments after my speed faltered, my blind rush did too. I sank down, my stomach churning, my eyes blurring beneath tears as the truth of my situation swept over me.

Grandmother, the last of my family and the only parent I could truly remember, was dead. Slaughtered. My stomach convulsed, forcing a thin, sour stream of vomit between my teeth.

And Helena, regained only this afternoon, was lost once more, this time forever.

I was alone.

And, in all probability, rushing towards danger instead of away from it. The attack had been carefully timed to find all the officials of note gathered together, all unarmed, trusting in the Aestival truce. That spoke of a Turasi hand, since only a Turasi would have such an intimate knowledge of my court. Which meant either a Turasi allied with a foreign power, or another House’s attempt to steal my throne.

I shook my head, dizzied by the endless circle of possibilities and suspicions, none of which could be resolved until I knew whom I faced. If the Turholm wasn’t taken already, it was simply a matter of time. Yet here I was, the one they most needed dead, possibly running straight towards them, like a ferret kit too ignorant and ineffectual to protect itself.

I drew a deep breath to try to calm myself. Now I’d stopped, the smell of blood in my hair, and on my hands, face and clothes, was overpowering. And even as I huddled here the soldier who’d seen me escape was probably searching for the catch to open the passage …

I squeezed my eyes shut tight, fighting the urge to let fate overtake me. I needed to gather all my wits and every ounce of courage I had. They had killed Grandmother, and intended to wrest the throne from my House. I could not let them. No, if they thought the threat despatched, then it would be their first mistake.

Gathering my strength, I chose the path away from the sanctuary hall. Slowly this time, I crept forward, straining for any sound from ahead or behind, looking for shadows on the walls that might warn of guards in the corridor. My heart hammered at every turning.

The door at this passage’s other end was also of stone. On the other side lay Grandmother’s private rooms, her study and sitting room and her bedchamber beyond. The suite would not stand unguarded, I knew, but the revolutionary would most likely be in the throne room, hungry for the power and protection it offered.

Though I strained to hear anything, there was no sound. The waiting and conjecture made my heart beat ever harder and faster. Before the panic could overtake me again I stepped on the catch-stone in the floor, triggering the latch. I would not suffocate with panic like a rat in a smoked hole.

The door swung in towards me, admitting a spill of warm firelight and cutting off a murmur of conversation. Fixing my eyes on the wall opposite me, I stepped out, imagining I was behind Grandmother, my dress newly pressed and floating around my ankles, my hair, heavy and slightly awkward, piled on the crown of my head.

In reality my hair straggled down my back in snarls and my dress, filthy with blood and grime, clung to my thighs and calves, but the fiction gave me poise enough to look around. Only two people occupied the room, and both stared at me in alarm. Their boiled-leather armour marked them as professional soldiers; the lack of insignia hinted at mercenary employment. They were Turasi-born, I was sure of it. Had the Iltheans bought their lord’s allegiance?

Both had hands to their hilts, but neither had actually drawn their blades.

I stopped two steps into the room. Fixing them with my most imperious stare wasn’t difficult. All I had to do was think of everyone I knew, dead in the sanctuary – Grandmother crumpled on the floor, blood in her white hair. Aunt Helena, staring into forever while the sacred wine soaked into the seams of the floor.

The urge to speak bubbled up my throat like flood waters, black and boiling. I wanted to rage at them, I wanted to drop to my knees and plead for my life.

Instead, I glued my tongue to the roof of my mouth and said nothing.

They broke first.

‘My lady,’ the one on the left said. Though his tone held a sneer and he didn’t bother with a bow, he hadn’t moved to strike me down; my veneer of confidence had won me that much.

Doubt and fear squirmed in my stomach as I played the only hand I had left: ‘I presume it’s safe for me to return,’ I said, ‘now we’ve succeeded.’

They were both startled, although the man on the left hid it better. ‘Succeeded, my lady?’

With no insignia, it was hard to judge what rank these men held. But if Grandmother had taught me anything, it was that the flow of information slowed to a trickle as soon as it left the upper echelons. It was clear they did not believe me, but neither could they be sure I was bluffing. All I had to do was keep them uncertain.

‘I doubt there’s a one of them left alive,’ I continued, keeping my voice level and confident. ‘Certainly no one to oppose us. I’d call that success, wouldn’t you?’ I paused for a count of two before adding, ‘Don’t tell me there’ve been no reports back yet. That doesn’t speak of efficiency. Which, I can assure you, will not go unnoticed.’

The man on the right glanced at his counterpart for guidance, making it clear it was the man on the left, with his
caution and distrust, I had to worry about. The latter assessed me with a narrow, flat stare, searching for deception.

The blood yammering in my veins, I held his gaze, remembering the hacked and bloodied sanctuary to keep my expression taut. Not furious, not desperate – displeased and impatient.

‘My lady,’ he began, breaking the silence at last, still without the barest hint of deference. ‘The sanctuary has been subdued, but the same cannot be said of the rest of the Turholm – yet.’

‘You can subdue nobles at play, but not a handful of thralls?’

His more nervous companion glowered at my tone, but from the cautious one there was no reaction. Yet every second he did no more than stare at me was another second gained by those pursuing me. A hot itch between my shoulderblades had me fighting to stand still.

‘If you will follow us, my lady, we will escort you to the rooms we’ve secured,’ he said at last.

My heart leapt into my throat. Did he believe me? Or was he simply reluctant to make the decision to kill me himself? Either way, I was at his mercy, and where he led me now would decide my fate. Would we go back to the sanctuary for a summary execution, or to the cells, to await a more public death as an example? Hopefully, if my gambit had worked, he would lead me into the nest of my enemy. Whoever that was.

‘Very well,’ I said.
FLANKED BY THE soldiers, I examined our route as we walked, my apprehension building with every turning. It was immediately apparent we weren’t headed back to the sanctuary, and gradually I became sure the cells weren’t our destination either. It had to be the throne room, I thought, until my escorts led me instead to the skein of offices tucked behind the public façade.

The place was thick with soldiers. Every single one of them stared at me – some of them sidelong, but most of them openly. Bedraggled and soiled as it was, my finery still marked me as highborn, and a target; no doubt they were startled to see me alive.

It was a dangerous ploy I dared. Under those mercenary eyes, to accept my fate and die at the hands of a military coup seemed suddenly easier than to match wits against those behind tonight’s massacre.

Left outside while my arrival was announced, and still feverishly trying to work out who had attacked, I went back through the details of my vision. I had stood – shrouded, yes, but untouched – in the flames which consumed all else. Death was not my fate. Yet.

Counting flecks on the walls to distract myself from shaking, I was startled when the door cracked open before I reached a hundred. A flick of a soldier’s head ushered me inside.

Mentally preparing myself for whoever I might meet, I did my best to sail regally into the room, making it into the middle before my step faltered.

The man in front of me was a complete stranger. He stood, one hip resting upon the edge of the desk, arms crossed and chin turned towards his right shoulder, watching me aslant. That narrow and knowing glance, coupled with the unrelieved black of his clothing and the pale eyes beneath dark brows and close-cropped dark hair, minded me of a raven.

My heart gave a great painful thump against my ribs. The fact that he was unknown to me made his motives unfathomable – and his reactions difficult to predict. Was this perhaps the slave-born general so favoured by Ilthea’s emperor? He didn’t have the look of Ilthea about him, but the empire took slaves from all the varied corners of the known world.

His gaze picked over my appearance, from the swan necklace Helena had given me to the garnets and diamonds threaded through my hair in deference to the colours of House Svanaten. The gleam in his eye made me wonder if he knew of me by more than symbols and repute. Had there been a turncoat in my court, supplying him with intelligence?

‘So,’ he said, with a speculative look. ‘You survived.’

His voice had the quick, murky accents of the northwest, and with a jolt that stole the air from my lungs the truth dawned on me. He wasn’t Ilthean – he was from the Marsachen, the first tribe. They had not attended the gadderen, nor responded to any emissaries, in living history. In my life there had been reports, from Oren’s agents and from the Somner drightens, of the Marsachen’s growing strength, and a new leader who had conquered the northern islands and even the fabled lands beyond.

Grandmother had always dismissed any potential threat from them as insignificant in light of Ilthea’s expansion.

The thought of standing mute before him, giving him the opportunity to mock and dismiss me, spurred me out of my shock and into speaking.

‘Are you surprised?’ I said.

‘A little,’ he replied, his face giving nothing away.

‘A woman with no resources would be of no value to you.’ I spoke as casually as if we’d had this conversation before, as if the whole of my part in this play had been planned.

He smiled, though it wasn’t reassuring. ‘No,’ he said. ‘She wouldn’t.’

I sifted through what else I might proffer, but came up with precious little. If Oren lived, and was loyal, I could control access to his network of information – but that was a lot of maybes to hang my life upon. I could bring the Marsachen lord alliances with those tribes loyal to House Svanaten, perhaps – if those loyalties hadn’t already shifted in his favour.

Silence prowled the edges of the room as we waited – I for his decision, he for me to break. Damned if I’d beg. Survival was one thing, self-abasement another. So I set my teeth and offered a tiny shrug; let the man interpret it as indifference or submission or contempt as he may.

After what seemed an eternity he pushed up from the desk. ‘Right, then. Let’s make it official, shall we? After all, I could use a resourceful wife,’ he said, his smile taunting me.
I tried to keep my face expressionless, unsure of his sincerity but, trapped by my own ploy, unable to question him further. With an open hand and a tilt of his head he gestured for me to precede him out of the room, then signalled to someone behind me.

I turned, and for the first time realised we were not alone. A second man stood in the corner not far from me. His face was long and keen, too refined to belong to a bluff trade like soldiering. His slender fingers bore scars and calluses from his work, however, and a scar nicked his right eyebrow and ear. He wore the same garb as the soldiers now infesting the Turholm, except his tunic bore an emblem: a crouching weasel, white on black. The information didn’t help. I’d never encountered a white weasel before, thane or mercenary. Like his lord, he didn’t bother with an introduction and I glided past his blank stare and continued on my way.

My apparent betrothed walked beside me. He didn’t glance at me that I could catch, but I had no doubt he was observing me, keen for a reaction. Soon enough I reasoned why: he was leading us back to the sanctuary hall.

My step faltered as we emerged into the crisp pre-dawn air of the upper courtyard and I saw the austere line of the hall’s roof breaking the skyline.

He caught at my elbow, all false solicitousness. ‘Are you too tired, perhaps?’

‘A loose stone underfoot,’ I lied.

Pushing down the fear – which tasted like blood bubbling in my throat – I let him lead me onwards. Inside the sanctuary, the bodies of the fallen had been dragged into haphazard heaps along one wall. I gagged on the smell of it, fresh slaughter trapped in a place of worship, seething and stewing and clamouring for the sky.

Alone among the dead, Grandmother lay on her back on one of the pews near the altar, her eyes closed and arms crossed as if laid out on a bier. The arrows which had killed her had been snapped off so only small jagged stumps of wood protruded from her flesh. The apparent mark of respect surprised me, and I glanced at the man who’d triggered all this carnage.

Still grasping my elbow, he stepped us up to the altar, then said, ‘Surprised I haven’t put her head on a spike? This way is more practical. I look reasonable – and I give the people the chance to see she really is dead. Gerlach,’ he ordered, gesturing the weasel-liveried soldier forward. ‘If you’d do the honours?’

I struggled for calm. He was going to kill me after all. He was calling my bluff. I had nothing left to bargain and my first subterfuge had stripped me of the dignity of honesty. His face said he knew it all and hoped to see me grovelling in the blood of my own court and kin before he had his man, Gerlach, despatch me.

My knees collapsed and I fell to the floor with a thump. Gerlach reached out and put his hand on my brow. Though he must have felt the fear flushing heat through my skin and the slick of sweat beneath the pads of his dry fingers, his long face gave no indication of it.

I trembled, my lips parched as I waited for the final slice of steel across my throat. But Gerlach’s lord didn’t draw out his dirk. Instead he knelt beside me, and Gerlach touched him too, upon the forehead.

Done with any pretence at self-control now, I stared at the man who had killed my family, who was looking up at Gerlach. At his lord’s nod, Gerlach began to intone. They weren’t the words of any binding ceremony I knew, and I’d never heard of a soldier sanctifying a binding, but the import was clear enough. My bowels turned to water with the relief and the sick, sick hope of life rising in me.

Kneeling amid the carnage of my court and clad and tangled in their blood, I bound my life to the man who had engineered the slaughter.
FROM THE SANCTUARY hall we stepped out into the nascent glow of dawn. All over the upper courtyard, soldiers in unadorned garb were at work: sorting through bodies, stacking the dead, despatching the wounded. I didn’t see them saving any wounded for healing.

A half-dozen soldiers snapped to attention as we emerged, their gazes seeking out my husband for orders.

My stomach contracted, forcing a rank, burning knot up into my throat. No doubt they waited for me: bound now – wife and captive in one. I mustn’t quail when they surrounded me. I would insist on walking unassisted to my prison cell.

Instead, my husband clasped my hand and tucked it through the crook of his arm as Gerlach’s men formed into an escort behind us.

‘We need to find you clean clothes,’ he murmured, pulling me closer with nary a grimace.

Shaken and exhausted by the night, my ability to reason was limited. All I knew was that this man had won – the Turholm was his in its entirety. And now he had me in his power, the ultimate living token to cement his claim to my throne. He didn’t need me to look like an accomplice anymore, so why maintain the pretence I was part of his plan?

With a gentle squeeze of my forearm, he bent his head towards me as if sharing a confidence. ‘Smile,’ he whispered. ‘You’re a bride.’

A strange gurgle escaped me in place of a laugh. I choked it down, for it would surely turn to sobs. ‘A particularly bloody one.’

‘Appearance is everything,’ he said, his answering laugh genuine for all I could tell.

Which was my answer, of course. By maintaining the pretence of collusion, he cut me off from those still in the Turholm who might otherwise have aided me against him. If I hadn’t been numb and fog-headed and still in shock, perhaps I’d have guessed it earlier.

His grip on my arm tightened as we neared the stairs. Surrounded by a cadre of soldiers, a huddle of thralls knelt on the filthy stone with hunched shoulders. Careful not to make eye contact, I scanned them, desperately hoping to find Sepp. I glimpsed Jonas, his arm wrapped around Sigi’s shoulder as she leant shivering against his side. There were other familiar faces – the stable thralls and the kitchen staff – but Sepp wasn’t with them.

I swallowed against a sudden, hard ache in my throat. Had he survived the slaughter? Or was he, too, lost?

It seemed the thralls all watched me pass with sullen glowers. One man, wizened with age and work in service to my family, spat in my path.

My husband was right: appearance is everything. Covered in blood and grime I might be, but I stood beside the invader, apparently free. Even those who reasoned I had little choice in the matter would reckon me a turncoat, or a coward. The pretence cost my husband little, but it isolated me from those not loyal to him, nullifying any threat I might otherwise pose.

I was in the thick of my enemy’s camp, and I was alone.

With an effort, I fought back the black tide of despair. I was alive, which had not been in my husband’s plan twenty-four hours ago. And I was useful – for now. The hope it offered me was too sickening to contemplate – and too sweet to ignore.

He swept me up the stairs and into the Turholm’s corridors. I hardly paid attention to our way – exhaustion had seeped into my marrow, leaving me heavy-lidded and limp. I badly needed sleep. I came awake, however, when we stepped into the suite he’d taken. Grandmother’s rooms.

Dropping my arm, he turned and closed the door, cutting off any sight of the soldiers arraying themselves in silent guard outside. He stood still a moment, his back to me, his shoulders slumped and his head bent forward. Then, turning around, he sought out a couch and sank onto its soft cushions. Whatever reprieve he’d allowed himself at the door, all trace of it had vanished. Arms behind his head and ankles crossed, he watched me.

Freed of the bluff which had bought my life, at least temporarily, I could finally afford bluntness.

‘I don’t know your name,’ I said.

‘Did you not pay attention during the binding?’

‘I had … other concerns,’ I replied with a blush, which made him laugh.

‘I suppose a woman should know her husband’s name,’ he relented, propping the heel of one boot on the toe of his other and watching me keenly for a reaction. ‘Dieter, of House Raban, drighten of the Marsachen tribe. You and I are cousins, of a sort. Don’t worry,’ he added, ‘not close enough to make our binding immoral.’
I didn’t respond to the jibe. ‘I’ve never heard of the line,’ I said instead, baiting him to elicit information. ‘The Marsachen haven’t elected a drighen in decades.’

‘Your education is lacking. We simply chose not to participate in your endless squabbles and to rule our own from Grabanstein, and Beata chose to continue House Svanaten’s fine tradition of ignoring us. Which worked out well for me – if not for you.’ He stood and flicked his hand at me in dismissal. ‘Clean yourself up, Matilde.’

Fear twisted my guts again, and my knees shook too much to stand.

The glint of his eye said he guessed at my state. ‘Stow your eagerness, my dear – that must wait until after the official ceremony. After all, I don’t want anyone claiming my coronation is a sham.’

Tears pricked at my eyes, hot and shameful.

‘In the meantime, you’ve a long day ahead as a trophy,’ he added, his humour replaced by sharp scrutiny, no hint of solicitousness in his words. ‘I hope you’re up to it.’

I stood and met his gaze square. ‘I lived, didn’t I?’

It was foolish, perhaps, to point it out again and reveal how I clung to the fact. But it had won me a chance to one day avenge my Grandmother and House Svanaten. Or the opportunity, a shameful voice inside me whispered, to flee, disappear into obscurity, live quietly – anonymous and untroubled …

‘Burdens on society generally do live on. It’s part of their charm,’ he said. ‘Now go and clean up.’

The cold water served to calm my temper. It was too soon to play at power games. Dieter held it all – for now, at least.

I dug soapy fingers into my hair and scrubbed every last trace of blood from the tangles. Only when the water ran clear did I emerge.

Outside, clothes had been laid out for me. They must have been fetched from my own rooms, for I recognised them instantly. A simple cream robe for beneath and a wrap of summer-sky blue, the hems at ankle, wrist and throat worked with silver thread. Grand enough to establish my position, demure enough not to eclipse his.

Had Dieter chosen them? I wondered, the thought of such efficiency chasing a shiver down my spine. I didn’t quibble, though. Clean clothes were a luxury, and in truth I was lucky he didn’t want me in sackcloth.

When I emerged, Dieter was talking to Gerlach about horses and provisions for the Aestival progression, and what holdings they might reasonably reach in a condensed excursion. The effects of the night were taking their toll on me, and I couldn’t fight back the yawns and blinks of weariness.

Dieter smiled. ‘None of that now, Matte. We’ve a long day ahead.’

Gerlach, still wearing his weasel-emblazoned tunic, kept his face as blank as ever.

‘Now,’ continued Dieter. ‘First, this hidden corridor of yours. If you’d oblige us by showing the way?’

It wasn’t a request. I showed him the catch-stone in the wall, which clicked beneath the weight of my hand. Dieter peered into the corridor, unlit now. The lamps had burnt out.

‘The others?’ he asked. ‘Where are they?’

‘There are only a couple.’ Too fogged with lack of sleep, I lied before I considered the consequences. ‘This one leads to the throne room as well as to the sanctuary. You can get most anywhere from the kitchen.’

I held my breath, sure he’d fathom precisely how many corridors I was omitting from the sketchy tally.

He did. ‘Thralls’ runs. Should be easy enough to map.’

Gerlach dipped his chin; even the man’s nods were laconic. ‘I’ve men questioning the surviving staff. Thus far, they’ve proved cooperative.’

My heart sank. Reap as you sow, child, Grandmother’s voice whispered in the back of my head. You spent most of the past few hours convincing everyone you were on Dieter’s side. That the thralls would follow suit was inevitable. Somehow, it didn’t make me feel any better.

Dieter was thorough: nothing would do short of my traipsing the palace with Gerlach to show him every hidden corridor and how to access it. Defeated by my isolation, I didn’t attempt to conceal any.

When we returned, sometime around midmorning, Dieter was in conversation with a young woman. They stopped mid-sentence when they saw us, and Gerlach reported my cooperation with a half-smile and the taunting comment, ‘Only a couple of others.’

‘My blushing bride is quite the helpmate,’ said Dieter.

If he hoped to raise colour into my cheeks, he failed. I was too weary and heartsore to enjoy the victory, however. He gestured to the woman at his side. ‘Matte, meet Amalia. She’ll be your companion.’ His inflection on the word ‘companion’ carried laughter. ‘I’m sure you’ll get along famously.’

If anything, Amalia looked less thrilled than I. She had a sheet of frosted blonde hair and eyes pale as the foxfire which flickered, eerie and distant, in the marshes at night. Despite their dissimilarities, I judged them kin, for she
had the same shape to her eyes and arched brows as Dieter.

‘Your sister,’ I hazarded.

The girl could have been taking lessons from Gerlach for all the reaction she showed. Dieter flicked an eyelid as if
my guess either surprised or pleased him. Perhaps both, perhaps neither.

‘Indeed. And your maid in today’s ceremony. It’s a pity there’s none of your own kin to stand at the binding, but
shift as shift can, I suppose. Speaking of which, you’d best prepare,’ he said, before turning his attention to Gerlach,
dismissing Amalia and me.

Amalia’s haughty look as she waited for me to precede her didn’t hide her irritation at the dismissal. The girl had
pride, then, and a temper easily inflamed. I tucked the knowledge away.

Once again garments had been laid out for me, this time the earthen-hued underdress and black wrap of the
binding ceremony. The ribbon I was to fasten around Dieter’s throat lay coiled on the bed, slender as a serpent.

I had expected Amalia to stand guard and watch me dress, but instead she stepped forward to help me, as if she
was in truth a thrall. Her brisk hands raised prickles on my flesh. It was strange, being ministered to by his sister in
this way.

‘Do you always do as your brother bids?’ I asked, earning myself a sharp look, though nothing more. ‘I suppose
he’s promised you something in return. Is it to sit by his side, as his equal?’ I voiced a false laugh. ‘Now you’re
reduced to being his wife’s maid.’

‘My brother is no fool.’ Again the sharp look, this time with a cruel smile. ‘And neither am I.’

Her words could have meant many things, too many to reply to any one in particular. So I kept silent while she
wound the black gown over my shoulders and secured it at my waist with a simple braided cloth belt.

‘This Gerlach,’ I said, when she’d finished. ‘He bound us last night.’

‘It was valid, if that’s what you’re angling at,’ she said. ‘The general was a prester before he took up the sword.’

‘He can’t be both.’

‘Spoken like a true Tamoran,’ said Amalia. ‘Don’t worry, today’s ceremony will be “real” enough to satisfy your
people.’

‘If you don’t follow Tamor’s teachings –’

‘Tamor was an upstart prester,’ snapped Amalia, cutting me off. Giving a last tug at the belt, she stepped back.
‘He led the Turasi away from the true faith. It’s past time they found their way back.’

Another fact to tuck away against future need. I was like a starveling ferret kit, fossicking through a ransacked
pantry for scraps.

Then we waited and, whether I closed my eyes or not, I must have slept, somewhere deep inside, for I have no
memory of those hours other than Amalia’s pale eyes hovering over me.

The afternoon was bright but grey with cloud, and a cold wind licked around our ankles. Once again I stood on the
midmost step of the upper courtyard’s stairway, in full view of those gathered there. Dieter wanted the binding to be
as public as possible. The crowd consisted in large part of Gerlach’s men, some in their blank uniform and some not.
They were easy to spot: not a one of them showed any confusion. Thin among their ranks were genuine citizens.

Amalia stood by my right shoulder and Gerlach stood by Dieter’s left. This time we knelt before a real prester, the
grey paving stones hard beneath my knees. This time I understood the prester’s speech, though I struggled to pick
out the words over the drone of the wind. Somehow this more familiar ceremony seemed stranger than last night’s,
which had been the real binding, tight and final. This one was simply for show, for others to witness the totality of
Dieter’s ascension to what should have been my throne.

As the ceremony unfolded around me I felt the first inklings of both my safety and my death, balanced each side
upon the knife’s edge I would have to walk. When the prester had finished I wept, slick tears of grief and exhaustion
that Amalia and Dieter clearly found distasteful. It was over, and yet it was only just begun.

At the prester’s bidding I turned to Dieter and tied the ribbon about his throat. It looked well on him there, the
strap of black. The ribbon he tied about my throat – his fingers surprisingly gentle – was the colour of red clay. It
cought my tears and held them, cold and stiff. Dieter rose after fastening it, his hand on my shoulder keeping me on
my knees.

The prester did not look at me as he picked up the bronze circlet last worn by my grandmother. It had been in my
family for eight generations. Now the prester slipped it on to Dieter’s head, and the obsidian stone of Turas gleamed
from his brow.

Noise rattled against the sky as the soldiers slapped swords against shields. As simple as that was his coronation.
I had expected him to make more of it, to drive home his ascendancy. Instead he seemed content with the stone of
Turas crowning him, me bound by his side. He even reached down a hand and helped me to stand.

Fool that I was, I allowed myself to hope.
ALL EVENING WE sat presiding over the wedding feast. Cold roast meats, salted ham, smoked trout, cheeses old and new and, to wash it all down, copious quantities of the Turholm’s best mead. It all crossed my palate, though I barely tasted it.

I had won my position and my reprieve, but the prospect of consummating our binding was already turning my stomach into a tight knot of acid. Only after would it truly be over. I could rest then.

When dusk had washed to full dark, Dieter stood and pulled me to my feet. ‘Time to retire, I think.’

As he ushered me out to a chorus of stamps and whistles from Gerlach’s men, Amalia’s expression sent a chill through my marrow.

I walked beside Dieter in dazed silence, and he seemed content to let me be. At least, he didn’t taunt me.

Our ever-present guards peeled away at the doors to Grandmother’s rooms, leaving us alone. Inside, the sitting room was lit only by the cherry glow of the fire in the hearth and a single lantern, set to burn so low a greasy smoke clouded its panes.

I stopped in the middle of the room, unable to continue.

Dieter smiled at my trembling, a snake’s smile. ‘I’d heard the Svanaten women were fearsome to behold. Certainly Helena had that reputation, as did your grandmother, in her day. Perhaps you were adopted?’

‘Mockery is the method of the craven,’ I retorted.

My dignity, however it was cobbled together, neither disguised my fear nor dented his humour.

‘Kneel,’ he ordered, pointing to the hearth, where the bear-hide rug lapped up the fire’s glow. Then he turned away and disappeared into the bedchamber.

I stood, unmoving, blanking my mind of what was to come by staring at the fire. It was a vain attempt to avoid conjuring visions of his return. His reappearance – still clothed, and carrying a fine tray of worked pine and bone inlay – was not what I’d imagined.

He took one look at me and clicked his tongue in exasperation. ‘Stubborn.’

Carefully setting the tray on the couch, he walked over to me, gripped my shoulders and led me towards the hearth. My defiance didn’t extend to struggling; I’d just look a fool, and a weak one, and gain naught for it. So I allowed him to lead me until he pushed me to my knees on the bear-hide rug.

‘This will go much better for you if you hold silent and don’t move,’ he said, then, kneeling before me, he fetched the tray closer.

It was a work of art in its own right, slivers of bone and crescents of silvery shells picking out strange patterns. Its surface bore a small ceramic bowl containing a dark ink or paste, a short-handled brush, and a scattering of bloodstones. Dieter plucked up the stones, their jade surface cracked through with splashes of old red. One he folded into my right hand, another into my left, then, with a flick of his fingers, he gestured for me to open my mouth.

‘Hold silent,’ he reminded me, then slipped a third stone – small and flat and cold – under my tongue.

Reluctant and frightened, I closed my lips and tried to breathe calmly. With his gaze resting on me, he weighed a final stone in the palm of his hand before casting it deftly into the embers of the fire. He began to chant something, perhaps a polysyllabic word, perhaps a phrase. I didn’t recognise the language. Melodic and hypnotic, it spilled from his lips, and I fancied the stones sparked in my grip. A spreading tang like the taste of copper suffused my mouth.

I became bewitched by the movement of his hands, which seemed to glow from within. I wanted to ask if he’d painted them but he pressed a silencing finger to my lips. With his other hand he picked up the brush and dipped it into the bowl of ink. The blackened tip drank in the uncertain light, releasing back no gleam or shine. I had time only to wonder if it would hurt before the wet tip caressed my brow. It was warm, but not so warm as to make me flinch.

Right to left the brush moved, inscribing Dieter’s will. I couldn’t interpret the message he wrote me, wrote others about me. For some reason it didn’t matter. The whispering touch of the brush banished anger and fear. The paste was slick when it first touched my skin, but dried tight and gritty. The now-warm stones in my hands and under my tongue flickered and twitched with heat, sending a gentle lethargy creeping through my limbs and making my eyelids droop.

When he stopped I didn’t react. A strange fog shrouded my mind. It must be the stones, I thought, though even that was a struggle.

I had been right to think of the raven on my first sight of Dieter. The man had worked some hex on me, summoned a shadow to hold me. I tried in vain to uncurl my fingers, to part my lips and spit out the stone beneath
my tongue.

The tick as he replaced the brush on the tray freed me. I looked up, expecting him to be smiling in triumph, but instead he was sombre and quiet.

Taking my right hand in his, he smoothed open my fingers. My palm was whole, unmarked – and empty. The stone had vanished. As if he’d granted permission, I could open my left hand and my lips now, too. The stones were also gone from them.

‘They’ve melted,’ Dieter said. ‘Into your blood.’

‘Stones can’t melt,’ I replied. The fog was lifting, but it left fear in its wake, stronger now than before.

‘Not in an ordinary fire,’ he said as, with one hand on my elbow, he helped me to my feet. ‘In one of my making, they can.’

I didn’t want to believe him, but the stones were nowhere to be seen – and now I fancied their smooth green flavour threaded through my veins with every heartbeat.

Dieter slid a small looking-glass from the tray. I had never seen one so exquisite, without flaw or bubble or distortion, clear and sharp as summer sunlight. When he held it up, however, I ignored the glass in favour of what it displayed.

He had worked three strange characters onto my forehead with the black paste.

‘Emet,’ he said, tracing them out. ‘It means truth.’ He didn’t say what language he had used, but it was none I recognised. From the direction of Dieter’s fingers, as he traced the word, the written form was clearly scribed right to left, which made the language indeed.

I met his gaze in the sliver of mirror, surprised. ‘That’s your spell? Truth?’

This brought back his snake’s smile and, with two fingers, he covered the rightmost character. ‘Meit,’ he said. ‘Death.’

His words stole any response I might have made.

‘I own you, Matilde,’ he said. ‘I’ve bound you as one binds a golem. Whenever I want, I can turn you into lifeless clay, simply by erasing this one little mark from your pretty brow.’

The trap was sprung now, with me inside it – and no guarantee I’d survive. In fact, there was almost every chance I wouldn’t.

With a light clasp of my hands he raised me to my feet. The slight, slippery burn of his brand, still fresh on my brow, was cause enough for fear. The knowing look in his eyes as he measured my reactions gave me cause for more alarm. When his hand dropped mine, I shivered, wondering where I would next feel his touch.

He turned to tidying his tray. ‘You should get some sleep,’ he said. ‘If you can. Tomorrow will likely be another long day.’

I tried to twine my shaking hands together, but their clumsiness made me slow.

Dieter, straightening up with the tray, didn’t comment. He’d noticed, though – the man missed nothing.

A single hard tap at the door preceded Gerlach’s entrance. I whipped my head to the side and down, hoping the inadequate light would hide the shameful branding, but Gerlach only glanced at me in passing. His focus was on Dieter. ‘All is ready,’ he said. ‘We depart at your word.’

Remembering their earlier conversation of horses and provisions and distances, he must be talking of the Aestival progression. Grandmother and I had planned to depart today; now Dieter was Duethin, and the duty of visiting vassals fell to him.

A duty he did not intend me to share, I realised as soon as he turned my way.

‘Go,’ said Dieter. ‘I’ll send Mali in to keep you company.’

‘No,’ I said, too quickly. Then, summoning a calmer voice, I added, ‘I’d rather be alone.’

He glanced at Gerlach, who nodded to confirm I would be well guarded – unable to escape.

‘If that’s what you prefer,’ he said, handing me the tray. ‘Put this away for me, would you? Oh, and just before Gerlach walked in …?’ He winked. ‘Hold that thought.’

My stomach flipped, causing the implements to rattle on the tray. Chuckling, Dieter left, his and Gerlach’s footsteps gradually fading into the distance until only my ragged breath and the faint pop of the embers in the grate disturbed the silence.

For the first time since Aestival prayers, I was alone, and free of the prospect of imminent death.

With aching care I knelt and edged the tray onto the bear-hide rug. I couldn’t uncurl my fingers from the rim, though the rattle my trembling caused threatened to upend the bowl. A creeping sensation travelled downwards from my scalp, as if my flesh were trying to pull free of my bones.

Pryingly my fingers from the tray, silencing it, I curled forward around the pain in my middle until my forehead touched the soft hide. My lungs were knotted tight as a petrified trunk, and the pressure in my head increased with
every pound of my pulse.
Slowly, like dissolving, the tears came and I cried for my dead, for my kin and my court. I cried for Grandmother, and for myself: bereft, trapped, and as nigh to helpless as made no difference.
I had bargained with a man more powerful than I – and lost.
I DON’T KNOW how long I lay there. I only remember flashes of consciousness – glancing at the fire now and then, waking at one point to find myself lying on my side, another time poking half-heartedly at the embers, then shoving too much kindling on them and snuffing them.

When I wasn’t sleeping I was crying, dredging up yet more tears long after salt had scoured my eyes and cheeks raw. There were lulls when I thought myself spent – only to find the tears rising once more.

Sometime in the pre-dawn the grey night became too cold to withstand any longer. Every joint creaked as I levered myself upright from the frigid floor, my shoulder aching. The fire was dead, the hearthstones cold. Dieter’s tray lay abandoned nearby, the brush stiff with dried ink, the ink crusted on the surface of its bowl. Surely there must be a way to reverse his arcana? I thought wildly.

If there is, he’ll not have trusted you with it, came Grandmother’s voice. Whatever help you need, you won’t find it in last night’s discarded workings.

Stiff and aching, I struggled to my feet, leaving the tray where it lay. First I needed to wash. I hobbled to the door on an ankle protesting any movement, my feet prickling with pins and needles. The guards turned sharp-eyed faces towards me as I cracked open the door.

‘Fetch me a tub and washwater.’ I pitched it as a command, pulling back into the room and latching the door before they could reply in the negative. If I wanted to establish a habit of obedience, best to start as I meant to go on.

It worked. Within half an hour I had a tub and water, hauled in by a soldier who cast me speculative glances when he dared. I’d used the intervening time to find fresh clothes, an unadorned kirtle and gown that Grandmother had favoured for those rare hours when all her official duties were done and she was free to relax. Though they didn’t fit well – she had a stouter build than I – the shabbiness was comforting.

One task at a time, I used the daily rituals of living to block out my grief. Afterwards I waited, braced for changes, prepared for some further disaster, for Dieter to return or his sister to arrive – for it all to be over. But I knew what Grandmother would say, dead though she might be. There’s a difference between biding your time and cowering in a closet. A Duethin doesn’t cower, Matilde.

Even if she’d given her crown to keep her life? I asked silently. Even if she’d been bound and branded by her husband?

But I knew what answer the formidable Beata would have made: Even so.

I set myself to the task of hiding Dieter’s brand. It was bad enough I’d wed him and publicly acknowledged his power – there was no need to sport his mark as if I were livestock.

A suitable length of linen was easy enough to find, and soon I had a makeshift veil covering my head and brow and knotted at my nape. It wasn’t a high-born image I presented, my head bound like a common field thrall, but the marks didn’t show through the stiff, creamy fabric.

I headed towards the doors, pausing to wipe my palms on my skirts before stepping out. The guards swung towards me, faces as bland as the flat of a blade.

‘My lady is going somewhere?’ one asked. He had hooded eyes, one more heavily lidded than the other, and he leant on his stave as if it were supporting him. A streak of white from temple to crown spoke of an old scalp wound.

‘Astute,’ I said. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Mathis, my lady.’ If his tone hadn’t been so phlegmatic, I might have suspected him of laughing at me. ‘His is Gunther.’

‘Well, Mathis, I’m going to inspect the palace.’ I wouldn’t escape an escort, I knew that much. Lies now would only cause trouble later. ‘I need to know what damage has been done.’

His left eyelid twitched. ‘My lord’s men did not pillage or plunder,’ he said.

An image of the soldier pawing Helena for trinkets flashed into my mind.

‘More than halls and mortar can be damaged, and more than sculptures and idols can be plundered,’ I replied.

He acknowledged this point with another twitch. ‘The palace is secure, my lady, but it’s not necessarily safe to wander about.’

I fixed him with my best imitation of Grandmother’s stare. ‘If I were in the habit of avoiding dangerous pastimes, I would not now be your lord’s wife.’

‘Very well,’ he said, shifting his grip on his stave.

They fell in on either side of me, barely a half-pace behind – prisoners were accorded more space. It didn’t matter, I reminded myself. All the better to maintain the ruse of my defeat.
As it transpired, Mathis had spoken truly. Barring an occasional spill of blood, and nicks and chips in the facing of the walls at odd spots in the corridors, the Turholm was physically intact. The idols stood undisturbed in their niches. Even the various statues of Tamor had suffered no damage – surprising given Amalia’s vehemence, which Dieter’s men might reasonably be expected to share. In fact, judging by the petals and cut glass gathered at the various statues’ feet, they’d received further prayers overnight. All the daughters of Turas had received devotions, but the ravens in particular, their eyes of jet alive in the carved ebony figures, stood over a tumbled hoard of offerings.

When death stalked the corridors and spared you, it paid to be grateful.

The offerings were the first hint of the emotional damage wrought by the violence. All the rooms in the living quarters stood open, most of them featuring shifted furniture and wardrobe doors hanging open – the result of a search for concealed exits, or perhaps seeking those in hiding. Thralls still crept about their duties, but they wore a haunted and hunched look. Not a one failed to scowl, turn away, or spit at the sight of me.

Soldiers in Dieter’s blank livery were everywhere: the living quarters, the rooms of state, the courtyards, the stables, even the sties and fields sported a handful of the plain steel-grey tunics. Their unfamiliar faces, flat and wary, sapped any sense of home I might otherwise have found in the subdued and depopulated palace.

Stopping in a window embrasure, I watched those at practice with staves in the courtyard. It was no wonder he’d overrun us with ease. But how had he gathered such a number of swords? There were too many possible answers. Some of the men might be mercenaries. Maybe Gerlach had bought them – the man was not a normal soldier, with the light of learning in his eye and his presterly past. Or perhaps Dieter had acquired troops from wherever he’d learnt his arcana.

At every turn, the reality of foreigners conquering the Turholm increased. What I could do about it was another, more frustrating matter. Pondering it, an idea dawned slowly. The kitchen chimneys stood still and smokeless against the sky. *Organisation is a form of power, child,* Grandmother whispered. Pushing away from the window, I made my way to the kitchen, braving the upper courtyard and its sparring soldiers.

Mathis stopped me at the door. ‘If we’re to venture outside, you’ll need a larger guard,’ he said.

‘We’re not venturing outside,’ I replied. ‘We’re going to the kitchen. If a courtyard full of your men can’t keep me safe while I cross it, a legion can’t either. Let’s go.’

He didn’t argue. It was probably the promise of food.

The clack and clatter of the soldiers’ practice stuttered to a halt as I walked past, feeling self-conscious with every over-loud step. Fixing my gaze on the kitchen doors, which stood ominously closed, I fought the urge to run.

If the lack of smoke and the closed doors hadn’t been warning enough, the cold flagstones before the doors would have surprised me. Pushing inside, I found the great stone hearths cold, grey and dead, the benches and stoves empty, the cavernous room deserted.

I rounded on Mathis. ‘What did you do, kill all the kitchen staff as a matter of priority?’

That opened his heavy-lidded eyes sure enough. ‘We’ve had greater concerns than the running of the kitchen, my lady.’

‘More like you didn’t dare let the staff back in for fear of a revolution,’ I retorted. ‘Go on, fetch them here, all you can find. You can’t run a palace on army rations.’

Mathis didn’t move, though Gunther watched him the way a dog watches the master holding him from the hunt. The impulse was there; all I had to do was needle him into acceding.

‘What’s the matter? Aren’t you hungry? I can’t cook for the whole palace by myself, and I’m certainly not cooking for you two,’ I said, before turning to survey the kitchen and its stores. ‘What, you think I’ll crawl up the chimney to escape?’

When Mathis finally relented, Gunther turned and fled as if he’d not eaten in days. The prospect of real food could do that, especially after travel rations.

Mathis remained, glaring at my left shoulder as I savoured my small victory. Rationalise it as he might, deny it as he tried, I had given him an order and he had obeyed. True, it had been a simple order, both logical and innocuous, but habit was as good a base for authority as any.

I’d use what resources were available – even if it meant building an army from the kitchen staff.

By the time Gunther brought back a handful of kitchen thralls and bread-maids, I’d sorted through the stores, the simple task soothing my ragged spirits. Only a little had perished from lack of care. More worrying was the depletion wrought by winter and the Aestival and wedding feasts. Still, there were ham hocks for flavour, and vegetables aplenty, including potatoes, carrots, beans, onions, turnips, cauliflower and pumpkin. Together with some barley, it would make a more than creditable stew.

One look at me – chopping vegetables, heating water and worrying at one of the pork haunches for meat – and the
kitchen thralls dispersed throughout the room to their familiar tasks. Within minutes they had the ovens lit, bellows blowing to rekindle the guttering furnace. Doors banged and knives flashed, subdued chatter overtaking the room.

A slab-handed woman took her place beside me. ‘You’ve no need to muck your fine fingers in this, y’grace,’ she said quietly, though her tone and bearing were hard as a rock face.

‘I don’t mind,’ I replied, hitching a shoulder to indicate Mathis and Gunther. ‘It’s better than sitting locked up in my suite.’

‘You got marital problems, that’s between you and your bound,’ she grunted, taking up a knife and attacking a stack of carrots. But she didn’t order me out, which was more than I’d expected given the snakelike glances the others were sending my way.

I bent my head over the bench. The rhythmic slide and slice of cutting, the chatter and bustle, and the gasp of the ovens behind me left no room for any other worries.

We worked until we’d cooked enough to feed the whole of the Turholm. It wouldn’t be a feast, but there would be stew and fresh black bread for all. The pumpernickel would take longer, but it would be fresh for tomorrow’s meal. In the meantime there was ale steeped in oak barrels to wash the meal down. Only when afternoon fell into evening, and all the breads for the next day were safely baking, did anyone speak to me.

‘Enough,’ said the slab-handed woman, whose name was Leise. Not that she’d bothered to introduce herself. I’d caught her name in snippets of conversation throughout the day. ‘You’re not a scullery maid. You’ve done enough.’

‘For now,’ I agreed. ‘What about tomorrow?’

Her gaze made me want to squirm. ‘You figure to hide down here forever?’

‘We all need to eat,’ I said, allowing anger to edge my voice. ‘Anything which returns me my palace, even if only for an hour, is worth my attention.’

She sniffed, and turned back to the rabbit carcass she was shredding. ‘It’s always about power with your type.’

I gaped. ‘I’ve just spent hours cooking for the entire palace –’

‘Because it needed doing?’ she interrupted. ‘No. You did it because you saw an opportunity to grab the reins.’

It was all I could do to stop myself throwing the closest chopping board at her flat-eyed face.

‘My entire family was cut down not two days ago,’ I said through gritted teeth. ‘Yesterday I married the man who had them killed. Last night he hexed me.’

She scraped a handful of the shredded rabbit meat into a small wooden bowl and fixed me with a sharp eye. ‘My family were wiped out by your mother’s people. Mind, this was after your father, ravens rest him, had settled the borders. What do you think he did about it? Why, nothing. Foreign armies meant more to him than a few dead peasants. Do you see me wailing over my misfortunes?’

Angry heat prickled my cheeks. ‘I’m sure when I’ve had forty-odd years to get over it, I might be more sanguine too.’

‘When you’ve sold your family to death, you’ve no call to cry pitiable if you don’t like the bargain,’ she said, poking me hard in the chest.

‘I didn’t –’ I hissed.

‘Careful, gosling,’ she said, cutting me off. She was breaking dark bread into crumbs now, adding it to the bowl. ‘You don’t want to throw away what you’ve salvaged, do you? Now, maybe you didn’t plan this from the outset. It doesn’t matter. You’ve struck a bargain, and you’ve to live with it, and live within it.’

She thrust the bowl at me, fierce enough to spill some of its contents.

‘For the critters,’ she said, jerking her head towards a far corner. ‘They survived.’

I stared at the bowl in confusion. First the woman insulted me and walled me out, then she remembered how I loved the ferrets. When I looked up, she was wearing her bluff-as-rock expression again.

‘Yes,’ I said, not without spite, ‘by hiding.’

To my surprise, a smile cracked her face. ‘Now you’re learning.’
CRADLING THE BOWL, I turned and headed for the corner Leise had indicated. Away from both the pantry and the ovens, it was the corner most favoured for sitting and chopping in the heat of summer. A wickerwork cage stood there. Inside it, slung in a cotton hammock and blinking in her banded face, was a ferret kit. At the sight of me she scrabbled to her feet, back arched and tail stiff. The movement set her hammock to swinging, but she kept her balance, eyes fixed on the bowl.

I didn’t crouch before the cage to feed her, however, because a boy was hunkered there already.

For a single, glorious moment my heart soared with hope – Sepp had survived! Then I registered the rich dark blue of the tunic, the narrower breadth of the shoulders, the absence of a thrall’s collar, and grief smothered my short-lived joy. Guilt followed quick in its wake, that I hadn’t yet thought to check on Helena’s other son. Serpent-born he may have been, but he was still kin.

The boy looked up and over his shoulder, following the ferret’s line of sight. Then, drawing his fingers out of the cage, he stood. He still wore the silver circlet in his dark curls.

My mind spun through possibilities. He hadn’t been at the service, of course; the initial slaughter would have passed him by. But since? He was obviously free to wander the palace. Had he slipped through the net? Or had his importance gone unrecognised?

‘Ren, isn’t it?’ I asked, choosing the abbreviation his mother had used when speaking of him.

‘Renatas,’ he corrected with a scowl. ‘I’ve long outgrown Mother’s doting nicknames.’

Renatas: born anew. I knew enough Ilthean to recognise the roots of his name. The boy wore a talisman around his throat, a winged serpent. Son of the swan, son of the serpent. This was the symbol Grandmother had spoken of at the Aestival dinner, and its amalgamation of the crest of my House and that of the Ilthean emperor showed Helena’s political ambitions for the boy. I know the future you hope for him, Grandmother had accused her.

‘My name’s Matilde,’ I said.

‘I know,’ he replied, measuring me up and down with an authority far beyond his age.

To escape his look I bent to unlatch the cage. The kit streaked out, scrabbling at the bowl before I could put it down.

‘Have you been well looked after?’ I asked the boy, though I kept my eyes fixed on the kit so as not to spook him.

He shrugged, squatting beside me. ‘I suppose. The soldiers were smart enough to recognise the emperor’s name, at least, and their general told me he’d make plans for my ransom,’ he said, dashing my hopes that Dieter did not yet know of Renatas’s presence. ‘It’s not exactly civilisation, though, is it? Even your bread has meat in it. And what do the cooks keep shoving at me? Milk!’ he said, with a disgusted shake of his head.

I smiled. ‘If you have your sights set on the ale, you’ll be disappointed. You won’t find anyone willing to serve ale to a boy your age, I’m afraid.’

He looked at me as if I’d sicked all over his foot. ‘I wouldn’t touch your beloved ale even if milk were the only alternative.’

His tone minded me of Cassia’s sneering views. Maybe he’d learnt disdain at his aunt’s knee. Then again, he was at an age for bravado. Slender and short as he was, from this close it was clear the boy was surely into his twelfth year, not ten as I had earlier guessed. Or perhaps his scorn was simply a shield for a heart tender with grief.

‘Renatas, you don’t need to worry,’ I said impulsively, holding his gaze. ‘I’ll look after you. I won’t let Dieter or his men hurt you, and I won’t let them use you as a hostage. I promise.’

He didn’t smile, just stared at me, mouth downturned and eyes dark beneath a gathering frown. He looked so like his mother.

‘After all,’ I said, ‘we’re family, you and I.’

Again he looked me over as if measuring me. ‘You plan to keep me safe using … what? The kitchen maids? Your fearsome ratter here?’

‘That’s right,’ I refused to be baited. ‘I’m not entirely powerless. Come on. We’ll start with the doves.’

Tucked high under the eaves of the pitched roof, the slatted walls of the loft let in slim planks of light. From the shadows, doves and pigeons murmured and rustled in their nesting boxes, with an occasional flash of feathered wing or the glint of small, dark eyes through the gloom. The air was thick with their fungal smell, and a dry, chalky odour rose from the soft wood of the floor. I took small, shallow breaths through my mouth.

Stooping to avoid a low beam, I stepped off the ladder. Renatas clambered up behind me. One breath and he set
off with a coughing which made the birds startle, wings beating and scaly toes scratching at the lip of their boxes as they launched into a feathery torrent above us.

The dovegirl came running, her bare feet raising clouds of dust but nary a sound. Sigia clapped a hand over Renata’s mouth. ‘Quiet!’ Even her voice was muted, as if she’d spent too many years caged up here, until the accumulated debris, grit and moulted feathers, and the endless powder of birds on the wing, had filled her lungs.

She glared at me. ‘There’s been disturbance enough this week already.’

Once Renata had stopped coughing she released him. Instinctively, he sucked in a deep breath. His eyes bulged and tears streamed down his red cheeks as the clouded air tickled his throat again, but he didn’t cough.

‘Good,’ Sigia said, as the birds began, with many false starts, to resettle.

‘Which drightens do we have birds for?’ I asked her.

She gave me a distrustful look, and calculations ran quick behind her eyes. Granddaughter of the seneschal and apprentice to Oren with his network of information and contacts, Sigia was no simple dovegirl. She had a quick grasp of politics.

I hesitated, uncertain where her loyalty now lay. Still, what other choice did I have? The chatter of dovegirls wasn’t highly regarded, as a rule. Maybe I’d be lucky.

‘I need their help to drive Dieter out, Sigia.’

‘Your husband,’ she said, eyes narrowing.

‘Not by choice.’

She didn’t believe me, but it was enough to make her relent. ‘The three Houses Somner, although we’ve only the one bird for Lady Helma. House Raethn and House Saschan.’ She shrugged. ‘That’s all.’

Five drightens out of a possible eight, and three were Somners – most likely to have lent their soldiers to swell Dieter’s ranks. Had Raethn and Saschan likewise allied with the new Marsachen drighten, or could I rely on their aid? What I needed most was one of House Falkere’s birds, or a bird for House Vestenn.

Sigia gestured to a small table positioned in a fall of sunlight. ‘There’s paper and ink over there. If you leave me copies of the message, I can send them out when birds for the other drightens come back to roost.’

I sat at the table and searched for the wording I needed.

Sigia turned to Renata. ‘I suppose you want your mother’s birds?’

I swung back in surprise. Helena must have brought birds in order to communicate with the army camped along our southern march. The army under her husband’s charge.

Sigia already had her hands in the wickerwork cage wedged in the space where the steep-pitched roof met the floor. I looked at Renata, who answered my question before I could phrase it.

‘I want to send a message to my father so he can send an escort for me to go home,’ he said.

His simple honesty won me. ‘I know how you feel,’ I said, resisting the urge to reach out to him. The boy was fractious and distrustful, and of an age which mistook affection for coddling. ‘But what will he do when you tell him your mother’s dead at Turasi hands?’

Renata hesitated. ‘You’ll still have to explain Mother’s death. And the deaths of my uncles Flavian and Varis, plus my aunt Cassia.’

‘Yes.’ My heart thumped hard against my ribs. ‘But I’ll have the head of the man who killed them. It should be enough to avert any impulse to retaliate.’

Pray to the ravens it would be – but that was a problem for later.

Renata fidgeted, looking over his shoulder at Sigia and the birds. She had given up waiting and sat cross-legged by the cage, chin in her hands, staring out at the free blue sky.

‘When?’ he demanded, turning back to me. ‘When will you go to the Skythes?’

‘I’ll talk to Dieter as soon as he’s back.’

‘When is he coming back?’

‘A couple of days,’ I said firmly, as if I had no doubts. ‘At most.’

He was silent awhile, considering. At last he said, ‘Okay. I’ll wait.’
The breath whistled out of me, taking the pain of tight lungs with it.

‘The army will come anyway,’ he added, cool and distant again. Helena’s son or not, this boy was Ilthean to the core. ‘Whether they hear from me or not, they’ll march to retrieve me.’

I swallowed my fear and turned back to composing my message to the Houses Raethn, Vestenn and Falkere. I just needed time.
TEN

I LEFT RENATAS in the loft with Sigi, who promised to help keep him out of sight, and to find him some shabbier
clothing so he might venture the thralls’ runs when he needed. It was nerve-racking, entrusting him to a network I
hadn’t yet established, but if I wanted him safe from Dieter I had no other option.

Rather than retire to Grandmother’s rooms – I couldn’t bring myself to think of them as Dieter’s – I made my way
back to my own suite, hoping it might indicate to the Turholm’s thralls where my true loyalty lay. It would also
mean I didn’t have to spend another night in his rooms, waiting for his return, reminded of his ascendancy at every
turn.

My suite had lain undisturbed since the Aestival coup, and the wash of air that greeted me as I opened its door
whispered of less dangerous times. The gown I had considered wearing to dinner that night but discarded still lay
across the back of the couch. The room was cold, no fire in the hearth, no meal awaiting me, no lanterns lit against
the falling night.

I built a fire in the hearth with my own hands, and soon its comforting heat stole through to the corners of the
room. I wasn’t hungry, but I ordered a meal anyway, so I might question the thrall who brought it to me. She was a
starveling child, with a misaimed eye, a running nose and a look of intelligence about her. My Ilthean guards did not
leave her alone with me, however, giving me no chance to question her in depth. I learnt only that the master of the
horses was dead in the coup, as was Oren. Of Sepp, she told me, there was no sign.

I curled up on the couch, ignoring the food, wondering at his fate. Had he fallen? Most of the Turholm’s residents
would have known him, but Dieter’s soldiers had aided in disposing of the dead; he could well have been buried
unnoticed. My tears flowed freely. Sepp, if he had lived, would definitely have sought me out by now. I couldn’t
imagine life without him.

By the time I stopped weeping, black night cloaked the palace, cutting off the world outside my rooms, until I
could almost fool myself that only familiar faces walked the corridors of the Turholm.

The rattle of the suite’s main doors some time later startled me, snapping me from my reverie. A glimmer like the
light from a hooded lantern played along the floor outside.

Dieter! I thought, scrambling off the couch in a flurry of panic. But it was Amalia who stepped through the
doorway, her pale hair gleaming in the lantern light. Relief flooded through me.

‘So you’ve finished tramping around pretending you’re one of the staff?’ she said, walking past me into the
bedchamber, hooking the lantern onto the wall and climbing into the bed. ‘I half expected you to sleep with them as
well.’

I watched her settling the bedcovers with a sinking heart. Obviously it had been too much to hope that Dieter
would leave me unwatched at night.

‘Are you going to stand there all night?’ she demanded.

I lay down on the utmost edge of the bed, every muscle clamped tight. Amalia made no attempt to converse, and
fell asleep easily. I, on the other hand, lay awake, my mind chasing tactics and strategies through the long darkness,
wondering how many holdings Dieter had won to his side in his progression, and how far my pigeons had flown.

A pale and creeping dawn found me weary and listless. The night had passed in worry, my thoughts circling
endlessly around the same track. I needed military support to regain my throne, and I couldn’t rely on the drightens
until I gauged the alliances Dieter had made. I needed the Skythes, but would my kinship with them be enough to
secure their support?

Amalia stirred as I rose, sitting up with eyes blurred by the remnants of sleep. She was awake enough to insist on
accompanying me, but trail me as she might, she could do little to stop me.

Guarded once again by Mathis and Gunther, I made for the kitchens. Instead of involving myself in the food
preparation, this time I suggested a plan for the meals to come, establishing the times at which various segments of
the Turholm’s population should eat.

Next, I dared to send a detail of Dieter’s men hunting. There could be no objection to such a reasonable and
necessary use of them, no matter how mulish Amalia looked, or how many disgruntled glances Mathis cast my way.
I had to bite my tongue to stop a torrent of further orders, however. If I made them too fractious now, all my
cautious first gains would be lost.

Within the span of three days, I established a routine – and authority with it, of sorts. Throughout the Turholm –
the kitchens, the hallways and suites, the stables and sties and gardens – the thralls fell into the habit of obeying me,
though some more reluctantly than others. I even managed to get Dieter’s men to accept my commands, although on that score, of course, my authority was provisional at best. Still, it was a start.

Intent on seeing how far I could push the boundaries, I went so far as to request that horses be readied.

‘What I want to know,’ the captain in charge of the stables replied, ‘is where you think you’re going that requires horses.’

‘You needn’t be concerned for my safety,’ I said. ‘Amalia is most conscientious; she will rustle up a sufficient escort.’

By the clench of his jaw, he was on the point of denying me any egress from the palace. I cut him off before he could.

‘The horses need their exercise, as do Amalia and I,’ I snapped. ‘And the horses in question are a particular breed, gifted to my stables by the Skythes. I wouldn’t want them ridden by those who cannot handle their spirit.’

‘My lady,’ he said, looking fit to explode, ‘my men need those horses. A number of my own are lame –’

‘I should hope you don’t travel without spares,’ I said.

‘– and the stables now belong to my lord,’ he went on, ignoring my interruption. ‘You need not worry yourself in the matter – your horses will have plenty of exercise providing mounts for my men.’

I hesitated, debating whether to act ingenuously and insist on my own exercise, when another soldier appeared. ‘My Lord Dieter and the general are returning. They should be here in a little less than an hour,’ he reported.

‘Good,’ I said. ‘Just in time for a late luncheon.’

Both the captain and the soldier gaped at me. Even Amalia looked startled.

‘They’ll be hungry – and like to stay so if you don’t stop gawping,’ I said, already making for the kitchens. ‘Find the seneschal, have him ready the dining hall. In the meantime, Captain, we’ll have to discuss my horses later, if you don’t mind.’

Leaving Dieter’s men speechless in my wake, I made my way into the depths of the kitchen. Laughter rose in me like bubbles – but a flat look from the slab-handed Leise, when I told her of Dieter’s return and my orders, quelled my mirth.

‘The majority are rank and file soldiers,’ I offered. ‘They won’t need much – warm bread and ale and they’ll be happy. We only need the meat and mead for a half-dozen, at most.’

Still she stared at me. ‘We wouldn’t need any, if you weren’t so fond of tossing orders around.’

‘You advised me to live within the bargain I struck,’ I retorted, fighting the urge to glare her down like a common riverwife.

She rolled one shoulder in a half-hearted shrug. ‘So I did, at that.’

We worked together in silence, and it wasn’t long before the first scents of the meat and mead known as traveller’s rest, bitter orange and coriander, rose through the steam. Others were already sawing at loaves of bread and tapping fresh barrels of ale.

Within forty minutes we were ready, ferrying meals to the mess hall for the men, and to the dining hall for Dieter and his captains. For my part, I made my way to the upper courtyard, carrying a small wooden platter bearing a sample of the meal. The wind was brisk as I waited, blanching the great empty courtyard of colour and spirit.

Finally, the clatter of hooves and the stamping of dismounting men on the other side of the gate announced the arrival of Dieter and his retinue. A clamour of voices bounced against the pallid arch of sky as the men relinquished their horses to the stableboys.

Deep in conversation with Gerlach, Dieter strode through the gate with wind-flushed cheeks. His stride checked as he caught sight of me, and he catalogued my appearance with a glance. He noted the veil with a gleam in his eye, but said naught of it.

I raised the platter and proffered its contents: two wooden cups filled with mulled mead, two hollowed heels of pumpernickel stuffed with spiced mincemeat.

Both Dieter and Gerlach accepted their portions in speculative silence. The mead brought a flush of relaxation to their cheeks. A bite of the meat saw Gerlach closing his eyes to savour the taste.

‘Welcome home,’ I said, making sure not to falter on the home. ‘There’s food in the mess hall for your men, and I’ve prepared the dining hall for you and your captains.’

‘The dining hall will do for my men, but I will take my meal in private,’ said Dieter. ‘Come. Let’s dine in my chambers.’

He didn’t speak on the way, nor did he look at me again until we reached our destination. In silence he waited for me to dismiss the thrall. His steady, direct gaze brought the blood rushing to my skin. Under such a look, my voice failed. Instead I stood back, folding my hands before me.

His words were as direct as his gaze. ‘What is it you want?’

My grandmother back, I thought, unshed tears closing my throat. And your head, on a pike.
‘Out with it, if you please,’ he said. ‘It’s much the quickest way.’

I sat down, my hands pressed tight together in my lap so they couldn’t shake. ‘I thought it time we discussed the conditions of our binding.’

‘You disappoint me. I thought you might have something worth listening to,’ he said, then began eating as if the matter were dismissed.

I hesitated, unsure how best to persevere, but the idea of waiting until nightfall, and bargaining with him at my weakest, spurred me on.

‘I won’t be sharing your chamber,’ I said.

He cocked his brow at me, his stare reminding me, unaccountably, of his touch on my throat. A cold frisson crept over my skin.

‘You bound yourself to me willingly, Matilde. There’s no retracting,’ he said.

‘I retract nothing. I’m merely setting out what our agreement covers, and what it does not.’

‘What, pray tell, does it cover?’ he asked.

‘You have the appearance of my support, which may help sway the drightens, come the gadderen and the inevitable question of ratifying your position on the throne. If you want more,’ I said, the words nigh tripping over themselves, ‘you’ll have to pay for it.’

His expression went blank, possibly the presage of anger. ‘I have no desire to spend the afternoon – or indeed the rest of our wedded lives – haggling with you,’ he snapped.

‘You’ll want to consolidate your position first of all,’ I forged on, my pulse jumping in my veins, the brand on my forehead burning in reminder of his power over me. Would my dissolution to clay be immediate? Would my consciousness fade? Would I be ever aware, trapped in an unresponsive substance? Buried alive. In a strange way, it served to keep me focused.

‘Military might and strategy won you the Turholm and my throne, but only the drightens’ support will see you keep it,’ I continued. ‘Drightens who know me personally. I won’t need to speak openly, or at all, to convey whether my support is genuine or enforced.’

‘I won the crown without you and I’ll keep it, with or without you. Surprising as you may find this, Matte, not all the drightens supported your claim to the throne.’

‘Gaining the drightens’ backing with my support will still be easier,’ I replied firmly, knowing confidence and the illusion of power mattered. ‘I could bring you an alliance with the Skythes. I could give you an heir.’

‘Oh? I understood you were denying me that,’ he said, relaxing back and spreading an arm along the spine of the couch. His gaze never left me, however; his lack of interest was a disguise.

‘My mother was a Skythe.’

‘Yes,’ he said with a small smile. ‘The barbarian heiress, they call you. Me, I think the Skythe blood could well be all that kept you alive. It’s certainly given you more spirit than the rest of your House ever showed.’

‘Which I’m guessing was one of my selling points for you.’

It was a reasonable assumption – my parents’ marriage had turned my mother’s tribe into an unofficial army along the eastern border. Maintaining good relations with them meant Dieter would not have to waste men protecting the eastern lands and could instead keep his throne closely guarded.

‘But a wife who brings you an alliance is more valuable than one who brings merely the possibility of one,’ I went on.

‘Can you?’ he asked, looking at me intently. ‘Bring me an alliance?’

I hesitated. ‘I’m the only one who can.’

‘I see. Gambling you have bargaining power – when in fact you might not. Intriguing.’

His guarded response betrayed an interest that went further than cordial border relations, I thought. Did it mean some or even all of his soldiers were mercenaries? Perhaps his alliances with the drightens were not as solid as he liked to imply, otherwise why would he entertain the thought of securing this new treaty in the short time remaining before the gadderen.

‘Say I choose to let you bargain,’ he said, plucking an apple from the fruit bowl and snapping off its stem. ‘What are you after?’

‘I want Helena’s son – Renatas – given over to me. Unharmed.’

‘Done,’ he said, and laughed, his odd humour touched. ‘Although I was figuring on giving you a child of your own, Matte. No need for desperation.’

Let him laugh, I thought, submitting to his questions as he planned the journey to the Skythes. The spears of my
mother’s people would strike soon enough. All I had to do in the meantime was keep Renatas out of reach, so he couldn’t be used as a hostage against me when Dieter’s men retaliated over the death of their precious lord.
ROUSED IN DARKNESS by a rough shake, I scrambled straight from sleep to blind panic. Had they found Renatas? Perhaps the boy had grown hungry and ventured into the kitchen before everyone slept, or perhaps Amalia had followed me, in spite of all the care I took –

The feeble light of a candle flame struggled to relieve the darkness. Incapable of reaching the room’s corners, it was enough to reveal Amalia standing over me, laughter in her foxfire eyes. ‘Morning isn’t your best time, is it?’

Understanding came too late to slow my thumping heart. ‘We’re leaving?’ I asked, glancing around the room, trying to gauge the time. When Dieter had said to be ready early, I hadn’t suspected that meant before dawn. ‘Now?’

‘Diet’s already dressed,’ she said. As was she. ‘Probably mounted by now, too. I’d say you have about five minutes.’

Necessity gave me speed. I pulled on the clothes Amalia handed me, then grabbed my makeshift veil and knotted it in place before she hurried me through the corridors. We emerged into the glimmering dawn to find Dieter and his men ready to depart.

A handful of soldiers waited in a cluster by the doorway, Mathis among them. They hurried me atop a horse so fast we were trotting out in Dieter’s wake before I’d even finished gathering my reins.

Clouds blew in soon after the sun rose, chilling the air and dimming the landscape. The rain arrived during the first afternoon, a steady drumming which turned the grass to slops. Our pace slowed to a crawl as the horses climbed rain-slick slopes. For the first time I was grateful for my veil: I could pull the tail of it forward to shield my numb cheeks and chin from the worst of the downpour.

It took three rain-filled days for us to cross the eastern arm of the Dragonstail mountains, days I spent hunched inside my oilcloth wrap, wondering what lay ahead. On the fourth day we crossed into the border lands, descending the skirts of the mountains to the vast, empty plains that, further east, beyond the River Pela, became the steppes. There was a palpable change in the way we rode, a stiffening of the shoulders, and a deepening of the seat on the horse’s back. It was as if the immeasurable span of the sky pressed us down.

These lands supported few holdings, all of them belonging to the Sueben tribe and beholden therefore to House Svanaten. Good feeling for my House ran thin here, however. My father had taken a barbarian bride from the Nilofen, one of the fiercest and mightiest Skythe tribes, buying an army to guard our eastern border, and surcease from raids. In return, however, he had ceded to the Nilofen the right to winter here. Nigh-barren by Turasi standards, these lands were yet richer and gentler than the steppes, the Skythes’ traditional homelands. Grandmother had been forced to give substantial tax concessions to pacify those thanes whose lands were annually invaded and, they claimed, denuded.

Directions from the first holding we reached sent us northeast, and on the seventh afternoon smoke from distant fires muddied the horizon. We would reach the Nilofen on the morrow. I shrugged my wrap tighter, grateful that the rain had stopped, and wondered what reception I might find. I did not even know if any of my mother’s immediate family still lived.

Hoofbeats roused me from my reverie. Gerlach had nudged his mount over to my side, proffering a heel of bread smeared with thick, cheesy butter.

‘Thanks,’ I said, hunger not allowing me to refuse it.

He simply nodded, and rode alongside in silence while I ate, then offered me a swallow from the flask at his saddle horn. What I expected to be water turned out to be liquor, its hot spice so unexpected I nearly choked on it. Instead, just as undignified, I croaked.

Gerlach took back the flask with a faint smile, hooking it onto his saddle with practised ease.

‘I’ve not seen you smile before,’ I said on impulse.

‘I’ve had little reason of late,’ he said, a sparkle in his eyes.

I hovered on the edge of questioning him. How much, if any, of Dieter’s military strength was mercenary, and therefore of questionable loyalty? What was Dieter’s faith, and Gerlach’s, that allowed a man to be both prester and soldier? Asking might mean the end of his good humour, though, and it wouldn’t yield answers. Amalia, with her fierce pride, would be easier to goad into talking. So I let the moment pass.

He watched me as if he’d read my thoughts, but when I didn’t speak, said, ‘Your husband would like a moment. When you’re ready.’

Of a sudden I was glad I hadn’t pried. Dieter’s summons wouldn’t have included food, and time to eat it in peace – that had been the general’s idea.
Sombre now, I took the time to meet his gaze. ‘Thank you. For the moment’s grace, I mean.’

‘Come,’ he replied. ‘We shouldn’t delay longer.’

Together, we picked a way through the moving crowd until we came abreast of Dieter. He was riding one of his own horses, a dove-chested fleabit mare. Gerlach fell back then, though I didn’t doubt he could still hear every word we exchanged.

‘Tell me about these people of yours,’ said Dieter, holding his reins in one hand, idly pulling the spare length through the fingers of his other.

‘I’ve never been this far from the Turholm before.’ My legs were too taut, the pressure urging my mare into a trot. I pulled her back with a soft curse for my nervousness. ‘I’m hardly an expert.’

‘Your mother lived past childbirth – you know something of them.’

‘A little, yes.’

‘Enough to insist I journey out instead of inviting them to me.’

I decided to gamble on the truth. If he was ignorant, it was giving up an advantage. But he had travelled and, in all likelihood, had learned of the Skythes’ ways already, making this a test. One I couldn’t afford to fail.

‘What do you want to know?’ I asked.

‘The best way to win their alliance would be a start.’

I swallowed my rising fear. ‘I don’t know, not for sure. Family’s my best guess. Otherwise … I suppose we find a bargain.’

‘Profound,’ he said, cutting me a mocking glance. ‘And the horses you had me bring – those are your bargaining chips?’

I looked back towards the baggage train. A handful of my House’s prize mounts picked their way across the slippery ground, their hides rugged against the weather.

‘Potentially,’ I said. ‘My mother brought Skythe horses as part of her binding contract. My father bred some Trakkan blood into them. He hoped to breed a horse with the looks of the Skythe mounts and the endurance of the Trakkans.’

‘Did he succeed?’

I shrugged. ‘More to the point, will the Skythes care? They value their horses, and that includes the purity of the line. Although of course I hope they’ll find the new line intriguing – they’ve better pulling strength and a longer lifespan, both of which could prove useful on the steppes.’

‘You’re saying the creatures I’m forcibly dragging up and down flooding hillsides in the hopes of winning an alliance might, in actual fact, offend these people?’

‘More or less,’ I said, then clamped my lips shut over an insane urge to giggle.

‘Tremendous. That’s truly …’ he hesitated over a curse, and finished with a sarcastic, ‘tremendous.’

‘My mother had a saying, from her people,’ I said. ‘She used to say, “Life isn’t fair. The sooner you learn, the faster you grow bitter.”’

‘Meaning?’ said Dieter after a moment’s puzzled silence. ‘What context did she use it in?’

‘I have no idea. Sometimes she was bitter, or not bitter so much as melancholy. Mostly, though, she was laughing. Usually at me.’

He laughed, and without time for thought I found myself smiling at him. Then, confused by my response, I looked away.

‘Tell me about her,’ said Dieter.

I shrugged, hesitating over a range of responses. ‘She … died when I was young. I don’t remember much. Nothing that can help in bargaining, leastways.’

‘You might be surprised,’ he said, then looked ahead awhile, apparently lost in thought.

What was he thinking of? The bargains he might strike?

‘Tell me about your mother,’ I said.

He looked at me askance, brows cocked.

‘What?’ I said. ‘You asked about mine. It’s only fair.’

‘If you take after your mother, driving a bargain with these people could prove difficult.’

‘Turn and turn about,’ I said, refusing to be distracted. ‘Besides, you claimed royal blood when we first met, but I don’t recognise your crest, if it’s your crest Gerlach wears.’

‘It isn’t,’ he said, not elaborating on what was, or whose crest the weasel was.

‘She wasn’t a woman to be trifled with,’ he added after a while. ‘Although my father, may the ravens devour his canny soul, tried to anyway.’

‘And the result?’

‘Ask my brother some time,’ he said, then spurred his horse ahead.
TWELVE

THE ENTIRE NILOFEN tribe turned out for our arrival, children racing to the outskirts of the camp to point at us, adults watching more warily. Excitement and nervousness put a flutter in my stomach as I rode. Every hoofbeat, every heartbeat, brought me closer to the moment I had hoped for throughout our journey, when my mother’s people would claim me as their own and lend me their strength to vanquish Dieter.

When it became obvious we intended to approach directly, a wall of Skythes formed between us and the main camp. Picking up on their elders’ caution, the children stood behind the adults. I rode with a nervous ball of anxiety and excitement lodged in the pit of my stomach.

Finally, our column halted and concertined in as the stragglers caught up. I didn’t need Gerlach to tell me Dieter would want me by his side for this, and spurred my horse forwards, Amalia following in my wake.

Level with Dieter, in the vanguard of our column, I felt a jolt at finally seeing my mother’s people. The Skythes were a tall folk, dark of skin and pitch of hair and eye. They had broad faces and clothes cut in long, swathed lines that made me think of the paper birch tree. They wore feathers and braids in their hair and some had paint on their broad, golden cheeks. They looked nothing like the way I remembered my mother.

Dieter turned to me. ‘I presume a small party is best?’

He didn’t need me to tell him. Another test? Or did he honestly rely on my knowledge of them?

I nodded, too anxious to trust my voice.

‘Gerlach, an escort, please,’ he said. ‘Mali, you stay here.’

Staring, fascinated by the wall of Skythes, Amalia appeared ready to ignore her brother. She didn’t move, however, as Dieter and I rode forward onto the open ground, Gerlach and his three soldiers feeling like far too thin a protection.

Inked and untouched faces alike giving little away, the Skythes watched our approach. None stepped forward, even when we drew to a halt before them.

Dieter allowed a moment of silence first. Then he offered their traditional salutation as fluently and naturally as if he’d been born to the tongue, his mastery exceeding mine. A shiver touched my nape.

‘Always the man was testing me; always he was a step ahead.’

The Skythe man who answered him wore a crest of eagle feathers woven into his hair, patterns of blue ink highlighting and distorting the angles of his face. ‘Those who come in peace are welcome,’ he replied, before casting an eye behind us, assessing our retinue.

‘My wife wished to meet her mother’s kin,’ said Dieter, drawing all eyes to me.

I stiffened my spine as they looked me over, seeking some sign, behind my veiled appearance, that I belonged to them.

‘Indeed?’ the tattooed man said coolly. ‘Few of our daughters would relinquish the sky for stone roofs.’

I cursed Grandmother for her refusal to allow me to keep in contact with my mother’s people. I needed both the Skythes and the drightens – and if I’d journeyed to them during my childhood I wouldn’t be standing before them now as an unknown supplicant.

Every one of the drightens would have toyed with the idea of killing you, the shadow-touched barbarian child, murmured Grandmother. Journeys are perilous undertakings.

That doesn’t help me now, I thought.

Accidents are common, child. Grandmother’s reply was swift. Coups aren’t.

I drew a deep breath and made my reply. ‘Her name was Laleh, daughter of Shadi. She was born of the Nilofen tribe, whose emblem is the spear and horse. She gave up the sky for love of Luitger Svanaten, son of the Duethin. My father.’

A long silence followed, long enough to make me itch to add some further comment. But I fought the urge. Dieter held similarly silent.

The Skythes watched the tattooed leader, awaiting his decision.

‘Laleh was dear to us, and sorrowful we were to lose her to your halls,’ the Skythe chief said at last. ‘Our sorrow increased tenfold on learning of her untimely death. If you are truly her daughter, we have much to discuss. You may camp nearby. We will talk more on the morrow, after you have rested.’

The expressions on the faces of his fellow tribesmen relaxed into smiles. Slowly, careful not to let my shoulders slump, I released my pent breath.
The next day, Dieter’s entourage included Amalia – who emerged garbed after my own fashion, in a simple robe and gown, her brow concealed beneath a veil. My heart sank. So simply, so deftly, had Dieter removed any mystery surrounding my choice of dress. The Skythes would never ask about my veil now.

‘You look pale, Matte,’ said Dieter.

I shot him a glance full of hatred. He obviously sensed how much I loathed his calling me Matte, taking delight in trotting it out whenever I felt most powerless.

He tucked my arm under his with a laugh, and we set off towards the camp of the Nilofen, the ground crisp with cold and the pale sky vast with sunrise. Amalia and Gerlach followed with a handful of soldiers and two thralls to act as runners.

It didn’t matter, I resolved as we walked across the steppes. Dress his sister as he would, none of Dieter’s ploys mattered. These were my mother’s people, my people. They would guess what was amiss. I would make sure of it.

This time, instead of a wall of people blocking our approach, a way through the camp opened for us. Guided by the stares of those we passed, and by the boldest of the children running before us, we ventured into the camp’s heart.

The dwellings were all the same size and shape, great circular huts of wool felt fastened over wooden frames. Canvas flaps served as doors, all but a few tacked open. From within, broad faces watched us pass.

Every little detail woke Grandmother’s voice in my mind, a flood of minutiae she had never shared with me in life. *The tattoos are significant: every arc and curve and line tells a story. Tribe and family are the least of it. Not everyone wore visible tattoos, but Grandmother had an answer for that, too. Some identities are covert. Don’t assume it's for shame.*

We came to a couple sitting cross-legged on the ground. The tent behind them spoke of their importance. It was made of a brilliant red felt, a spear and horse woven on its side in vibrant blue hues. The eagle-feathered speaker of the previous day looked to the elderly woman beside him, her face bare of inking but creased and weathered by time, her dark-streaked grey hair bound in a messy knot at her nape.

Looking at her, a shock of recognition jolted through my spine. I remembered this Skythe woman as she had looked over twenty years ago, her cheeks and hands smooth, her eyes bright and bold in her face. My mind reeled.

I had long been so accustomed to knowing what Grandmother would think, and what she would say, that I had simply accepted her voice in my head as a memory I could turn to, both for comfort and advice. This was more than knowing her well enough to guess her thoughts, however – I had her memories folded in amongst my own.

Moved by instinct and too dazed to question it, I sank to my knees and bowed my head to Shadi, saying, ‘Mother of my mother.’

The old woman gave a gleeful *ha* and held her arms up, tattoos on the back of her hands peeking from beneath her cuffs. ‘Didn’t I tell you, Ardas? Memory breeds true. Up with you, child, and let me look on you.’

I did as I was told and her mouth twisted. ‘H’m. Your father has given you a narrow face, I see.’

Her assessment made me selfconscious. I had never felt such an outsider before.

Shadi flicked a glance at Dieter, and bade him sit with a simple wave. ‘You are the husband she chose?’ she asked.

‘Say rather she is the wife I chose,’ he replied with a glint of humour that Shadi showed no interest in deciphering. He didn’t squirm under her examination and neither, when Shadi looked in her direction, did Amalia.

‘My sister,’ Dieter introduced her. ‘Amalia of House Raban.’

Shadi nodded and turned back to me as if she needed nothing more. ‘Well, child, this is not a social call. Why are you here? Why now?’

Surprise made me speechless, though Dieter laughed. ‘Forthright as your granddaughter, I see,’ he said. ‘Well, Matilde – answer them.’

Everyone was watching me and I picked my words carefully.

‘Because,’ I began, ‘my family are lost, and I have taken my grandmother’s throne. Or rather’ – the brand on my forehead burned so hot I thought it must show through the veil – ‘my husband has.’

Ardas searched my face. ‘You gave him your rank?’

_The Skythes believe only a creature rotten with fear casts aside their power,_ Grandmother murmured. _He looks for your strength, child. Pray find some._

‘I had little choice. My husband killed my family and my court for it. Relinquishing the throne was the price of my own life,’ I said.

If Dieter thought he’d left me with no allies, if he thought it safe to march a reluctant wife into the heart of her mother’s kin, more fool he. Ravens above, let Renatas still be safely hidden and not already captured and held hostage for my good behaviour.

Dieter had stiffened beside me, and I waited for the anger to crack his closed expression. Or the fear, should
Ardas signal an attack. But nothing of the sort occurred. Instead, Ardas eyed Dieter with respect.

‘Good,’ Shadi pronounced. ‘You’ve taken a strong man.’

Their response confused me. I had lured Dieter here, away from the Turholm and his main strength of arms, where he would be at his weakest, in the hope that my mother’s people would support my cause and help me destroy him. And yet, far from condemning him, they seemed instead to be lauding him.

Perhaps their ease was no more than pretence, I thought wildly. Perhaps they were lulling Dieter into a false sense of security so they might seize him later, when his guard was down, when I was not in the path of danger. Surely. Please let it be so.

Gerlach’s strained expression showed he was entertaining the same thoughts. But the interview went on amicably. Dieter, gradually released from caution by their continued approval, relaxed into the conversation, flashing his smile about and drawing good humour from the Skythes in turn. Inch by inch Gerlach too relaxed, while on my other side Amalia grew increasingly white.

When we finally stood, I was so dazed that Dieter had to lift me to my feet. I don’t know what I said in leaving; perhaps Dieter spoke for both of us. I remember Shadi ducking in close to peer at me, and asking if I was well. I think I muttered something about being weary.

‘You’ll break your fast with me tomorrow, and tell me somewhat of your mother,’ she said, more a command than an invitation. ‘See your lady rests once back in the camp,’ she added to Amalia, earning me a scowl from Dieter’s sister.

We returned to camp, my arm tucked under Dieter’s, only his momentum keeping me walking forward. Fear fluttered behind my breastbone, my pulse stuttered.

I had played my hand. And failed.

Amalia peeled away and ducked into the shaded depths of our tent without a word, already worrying at the knots of her veil.

Dieter didn’t release his iron hold on my arm, walking me straight past my tent to his. Three steps in, he dropped my arm. I stopped, adrift in the dim interior, waiting for his fury to burst.

‘Bold ploy, my dear,’ he said. ‘You look a little white about the outcome, though. If you’re going to play this game, I’d advise you to judge your steps more cannily. Or learn not to flinch when you fall.’

I met his gaze as if I’d done nothing wrong. ‘You wanted them as allies, didn’t you? I believe I just won them to your side.’

In one swift step he stood before me, fingers digging again into my arms.

‘Make no mistake, Matilde – I should strike your head from your shoulders, or at the very least pattern that cheek of yours with my fist, for what you tried today. Ravens know you deserve it,’ he said, his eyes full of dark threats. Fear poisoned the air in my lungs as I waited.

‘But, as it happens, you amuse me,’ he said, the lightened tone and abrupt disappearance of his anger confusing me. ‘And, intentionally or not, you have won me the allies you promised.’

His grip loosened but still he held me close, close enough to feel the warmth of him.

‘So, while I won’t yield your precious cousin, I will give you this much: you can sleep here tonight.’

Furious, I pulled free. ‘Your choice of punishment is as predictable as it is pitiful.’

He only laughed. ‘Sleep in your own tent then. My punishment will be of another kind entirely. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.’

His constant mockery made me want to spit blood. Instead, I turned away and pushed through the tent-flap into the morning sun, his laugh following me.

But I couldn’t count on Dieter’s amusement lasting. For my sake and that of Renatas, I had to strike a new bargain before we returned to the Turholm – or kill Dieter.
THE CAMP WAS too noisy, too full of Dieter’s men. Even those from my previous life had assumed the stamp of his reign. Five tents away, Leise bent over some stitching, occasionally stirring a cauldron beside her. Apart from a day or two of upheaval, the substitute of one Duethin for another had scarce touched her. Everywhere I looked, the world had moved on.

But I couldn’t.

I turned towards the Skythe camp, and my heart swelled until I could hardly breathe. What would it be like to slip into their midst, to discard my mantle and walk among them as a daughter of the wind and sky, no more than one of the tribe?

What would it be to be anonymous in the world?

If I fled, Dieter would pursue me. The men he sent might well kill me and any others if we dared oppose him. I would be brought back, penitent, to serve whatever other uses he had for me – besides providing him with his heir.

I was figuring on giving you a child of your own, Matte, he’d said.

Shuddering, I ducked into my tent, pausing to blink in the dim interior. My thoughts whirred. I wanted no more than to rip off the veil binding and obscuring me, blurring what people saw of me.

Before I could do anything I was struck hard in the shoulder and I fell, the veil tangling around my throat, my hands scrabbling in vain for purchase. The floor slammed into my spine and an elbow speared the soft flesh under my ribcage.

I gasped for breath, pain bursting like stars in the back of my head as Amalia’s face hove into view. Fury and drink had turned her cheeks red as a burn. A tooth had cut her lip in the attack, and blood filmed the teeth she bared at me.

Bucking under her weight, I freed an arm and grabbed her wrist, straining to keep her fingers, rigid as claws, from my face.

With one elbow still planted firmly in my midsection, she lodged a palm under my chin and shoved it up until I thought my neck would pop and my lower jaw would drive through my face. Still she held silent.

Scraping my heels under me, with a mighty heave I shoved her up and off. I tried to roll away, but the veil caught at my head, pulling me up short.

‘No, you don’t,’ breathed Amalia, grabbing at the cloth and yanking my head backward.

My fingers scrambled at the pins in the veil, tearing them loose, freeing me. The tent-flap was only an arm’s length away when Amalia’s shoulder drove into my back, forcing me down. I struggled and jerked like a landed fish, unable to reach the tent opening.

She clapped a hand over my mouth before I could cry out. ‘How dare you,’ she hissed into my ear. ‘I’ll kill you. I’ll rip your black heart out.’

Gripping a hairpin tight between the slippery pads of my fingers, I heaved my hand back and up, stabbing blindly. She yelped in surprise and pulled away, giving me room to wriggle free. I didn’t get far before she grabbed my ankle. I flipped to face her, kicking, but she avoided it easily.

‘Hel–!’ I screamed, before Amalia launched at me again, her paired fists driving through my midsection.

‘I’ll rip your tongue out first!’ she said, pouncing at my face, her fingers spread into talons.

I scrambled backwards on hands and heels, but my skirts mired me. Her fingers raked my cheek, tearing at the soft corner of my mouth.

I shoved at her face, felt the slide of her cheek beneath my fingers. Pushing up, I found the soft socket housing her eyes and jabbed.

She twisted her head back, releasing her hold, her vision obscured by her watering eyes.

Lunging to the side, I grabbed the first object which came to hand – a lantern, shuttered and unlit – and brandished it between us, ready to bludgeon her with it.

Crouching, Amalia stared at me through narrowed eyes, still blinking away tears of pain, calculating her next move, mentally searching the room for weapons.

If I could keep her distracted, I might be able to circle around to the entrance and freedom.

So I talked. ‘Your brother isn’t angry,’ I said, though my arms still ached from where he’d gripped me.

‘He doesn’t need to be. He has me to take care of it for him,’ she snarled.

‘How fortunate,’ I replied, but my voice was too shaky to convey haughty sarcasm. Carefully, still holding out the lantern, I stood and inched towards the doorway. ‘Ever consider you’re simply in his way?’
‘I’m not the one who tried to have him killed.’

‘Fine,’ I said, daring another surreptitious step. ‘If you want to kill me for being on the wrong side, try your best. But first, you’ll have to give up the betrayed act. I don’t owe either of you my loyalty.’

She shook her head as if she pitied me. ‘You do, though. He’s your husband.’

Surprise rooted my feet to the floor. ‘Is your head made of oak? He killed my family, remember?’

‘You chose to bind to him – after the coup,’ she replied, implacable.

‘It was that or die!’

‘If you wanted to play the opposing side, you should have picked the dying,’ Amalia insisted, eyes bloodshot. A heartbeat later she noticed the space I’d opened between us, and sprang at me.

Yelling, I swung the lantern, cracking her in the temple. But it didn’t stop her hurtling into me and I collapsed beneath her once more. I landed a knee in her stomach, batting at her with the strength of desperation. Scrabbling and tumbling, we rolled out into the bright spill of sunshine.

Tears of relief stung my eyes, and I forgot about the skirts tangling my legs, almost oblivious to the heavy weight of her landing on my back. Someone would see, someone would help –

But no one moved forward.

I registered a cold shiver at my throat as the touch of sharp steel.

‘Like I said,’ Amalia whispered, ‘you should have picked the dying.’

‘Lady Amalia,’ came Gerlach’s voice from nearby.

I didn’t dare swallow as Amalia pressed the knife deeper against my throat.

‘Amalia,’ Gerlach said again. ‘Leave her. On your brother’s orders.’

The knife didn’t move and I stared straight ahead, gasping in the scent of dry grass and damp dirt.

‘My brother can’t kill his wife,’ she said. ‘It would be wrong.’

‘Your brother doesn’t want her killed,’ said Gerlach.

‘Perhaps,’ she rasped, her every breath swelling and ebbing against my back. ‘But he should. She’s treasonous.’

‘Actually,’ came Dieter’s voice, entering the fray, ‘she just won me a valuable alliance.’

Amalia didn’t answer and I felt her waver. At least, I prayed to all nine daughters of Turas that she was wavering.

‘I don’t want her dead, Mali,’ said Dieter softly. ‘Release her.’

But her elbow only pressed down harder. ‘I’m doing this for you, Diet.’

Dieter lunged forward, his arm snapping out to grab the blade. He wasn’t fast enough. Amalia drew it hard against my throat, parting my skin and releasing hot blood down my neck. Then there was a cry and her weight vanished from my back, the knife dropping to the ground.

I struggled to my knees, groping at the slippery sheet of blood at my throat.

Gerlach caught me as I swayed. Easing me down, he crouched beside me, pulling my hand from my throat so that he might see. ‘You’ll live. Come on,’ he said, one arm around my back helping me up and guiding me forward.

‘Let’s stitch you up.’

‘They’re both as crazy as each other,’ I said to him, though it hurt to talk.

He met my eyes with a shake of his head. ‘He did warn you. And you did marry him.’

‘Why does everyone keep reminding me?’ I replied.
ACT TWO

UPON A DARKENING FLOOD

~
FOURTEEN

BACK IN DIETER’S tent, Gerlach peered down at me, pressing a wadded cloth to my throat.

‘Amalia says you’re not Tamoran,’ I said, the words popping out of my mouth without time for thought. It was hard to talk past the force of his hands.

‘You were fighting over theologies?’ said Gerlach. ‘Not that I’m advising against passion in your beliefs, you understand.’

His voice sounded distant and faint to my ears. I must have lost a lot of blood. ‘Before,’ I whispered, an inadequate explanation. ‘The first binding wasn’t a Tamoran ceremony.’

He lifted the wadded cloth to peer at the wound, just as quickly pushing it down again. ‘My people, and Dieter’s, come from the northwest –’

‘The Marsachen tribe,’ I interrupted with illogical happiness. ‘They turned away from the rest of the Turasi.’

He accepted my lunatic cheer without qualm. ‘It would be more accurate to say they stayed Beneduin, while the other tribes turned to Tamor’s teachings.’

‘Is that where Dieter learnt his arcana?’ I asked, my voice slurring as drowsiness threatened to overcome me again. ‘From the Beneduin faith?’

‘No,’ said Gerlach.

‘Oh.’ I wanted to ask more, but it was hard to concentrate. The words kept slipping away unformed.

‘He knows the lore of many nations,’ said Gerlach. ‘In my experience, however, he’s most fond of the knowledge he learned from the Amaer.’

I nodded, and allowed my eyes to close. Someone had let the sunshine into the tent, I thought dreamily. The warmth was delicious, like sinking back onto baking sands.

The names Gerlach had given me – Beneduin, Amaer – chased through my head while I slept.

When next I opened my eyes it was Dieter’s face bending low over me.

‘You’ve quick reflexes,’ he said when he realised I’d woken.

‘Not quick enough,’ I said, an inexplicable shame burrowing through my chest.

He thumbed the cut on my throat, his touch gentle, then re-dressed the wound, carefully winding a length of clean linen around my throat, before fastening it and kneeling back.

I pushed up off the cot until I was sitting, a dull ache clutching at my throat and tension knotting my shoulders.

‘Thank you,’ I said.

‘You’re welcome.’

The next part came harder. ‘I should have heeded your warning.’

He pulled a blanket close and wrapped it around my shoulders. ‘Don’t be too grateful. If I’d let Mali kill you here, it would’ve dissolved the alliance and seen us all slaughtered. I acted out of simple prudence.’

Humiliation stung my cheeks and I felt a flash of hatred for him.

‘The Skythes saw the tussle,’ said Dieter. ‘You’ll have to trot over and show them you’re okay. I told them it was a disagreement between sisters. The old woman was impressed, actually, to find you weren’t a weakling.’

When I didn’t answer, he lifted my chin with the tip of his finger. With his other hand he held before my eyes a small glass vial filled with a dark red liquid – blood.

‘It’s yours,’ he said. ‘I drew it while you slept.’

‘Why?’ I demanded. ‘What do you need it for?’

‘I’m hoping I won’t,’ he said, drawing the vial away and tucking it into a pocket near his heart. ‘It’s clear, however, that you’re determined to make trouble. With the blood, I don’t need to be nearby to transform your brand. You remember your brand, don’t you, Matilde?’

Silent, I looked up into his pale eyes.

‘I can turn you to clay no matter where you are,’ he warned. ‘Or I can think up a few other uses for the blood. But that’s neither here nor there. What you need to know, Matilde, is this: one wrong move against me, and I’ll finish what I started at Aestival.’

I couldn’t sleep.

Not with Dieter in the tent, a few breaths away, though he attended to his papers, not even bothering to watch me. This increased my terror – that I was so completely his he might even forget me. Curled up tight around my
nauseated stomach, I couldn’t calm the sense of nervous anticipation that pervaded me.

When eventually he stood, I watched him moving around, extinguishing the lanterns, progressively dimming the interior until only the red glimmer from the brazier traced the shadows around me. After a time, rustling told me he was peeling off his clothing in the dark, then he slipped into his bed on the other side of the brazier.

Even after his breathing told me he slept, I lay awake, wondering over my fate.

Two weeks before, my most pressing concern had been whether Grandmother would take me on the Aestival progression, and if I’d be able to conceal the clues, should one of my visions overcome me in the presence of the drightens. Now everyone dear to me was dead, slaughtered by my husband’s troops, and I was bound by a hex I could neither understand nor unravel. And should I reach for the shadows to escape Dieter’s binding, I risked a life in the cloisters of the mara.

The idea gave me pause, however. The Nilofen had lauded Dieter’s military acumen, but would they be so sanguine about his brand on my brow, and the power it gave him over me? And the drightens, I knew, would not countenance a shadow-worker on the throne. It was a small chance, but it was all I had.

I must have fallen asleep eventually, for between one blink and the next it was morning and a young boy was kneeling at my head, entreating me to wake.

‘Forgive me, my lady,’ he greeted my bleary stare. ‘The old Skythe lady claims you.’

‘Wait outside,’ I said, the effort of speaking, even quietly, paining my throat. ‘I’ll be ready in a moment.’

Dieter stirred as I finished dressing, rolling over and revealing a glimpse of bare chest. I quickly turned away and fled the tent before he woke fully.

Mathis and Gunther stood up as I appeared, both eyeing my bound throat. At least they didn’t question me; routine had settled that much into us.

Stepping up from behind them, a Skythe girl beckoned me. Points of black and gold paint outlined her eyes and swept up the line of her temples. I joined her and she led me to her camp in silence. When we reached the small breakfast fire before Shadi’s tent, I expected the girl to continue on or perhaps vanish inside. Instead she knelt and peered into the pot resting over the embers, for all the world as if I didn’t exist.

Emerging from her tent, Shadi took in my wounded throat and the soldiers behind me with a glance.

‘Sit,’ she said, waving me to a cushion on the ground some distance from both herself and the girl by the cookfire. My heart fell. There could be no soft speaking over such a distance.

When Mathis and Gunther followed me, Shadi banished them. ‘Don’t crowd her! You’re a strange lot, aren’t you? Huddling beneath stone walls, always mobbing each other. Don’t your lungs ever ache for fresh air? Go, break your fast somewhere else. No harm will come to her in this camp.’

Once they’d retired out of earshot, Shadi turned back to me.

‘See what your stone roofs do to you? They make you lazy, sleeping past the dawn. I hope my daughter never fell prey to such a custom,’ she said, a savage sorrow twisting her face.

I had watched my family die. I had bargained and schemed and manipulated, biding my time until yesterday – only to earn a cut throat. I was through with being insulted.

‘Would you have preferred her to remain different to the people she chose?’ I said, although in truth I had no idea whether my mother had been in the habit of sleeping past dawn or not. ‘To be an outcast in her new home?’

‘Better that she had never chosen them,’ Shadi said, ladling some of the pot’s contents into a bowl worn smooth and dark by generations of hands.

The food was a uniform mucky yellow colour, and had a curdled texture. It smelt burnt, hot and cinderous. Eggs, my first mouthful told me, flecked with onion and sprinkled with cheese, probably goat’s from the crumbly texture. It tasted better than it looked or smelled, though, and resolution flooded through me with every mouthful.

‘Nothing like eggs to put colour back into the flesh,’ said Shadi, watching me eat, ‘even for a creature so pale as you. I was beginning to think you were weak. You did lose the squabble, after all.’

‘Constrained, not weak,’ I said, savouring the final mouthful.

‘Bah! What is there to constrain you? You’ve the sky in your blood, the wind in your marrow, a strong husband.’

Fury kept me silent.

‘Young Roshi here,’ she continued, gesturing towards the girl who’d fetched me. ‘She has constraints. Poor Roshi will relinquish all this’ – a sweep of her arm took in the tents, plains and sky – ‘to accompany you back to your stone boxes. Do you see her moping?’

I made no reply, though I thought Roshi’s studied refusal to look up during this exchange did look rather like moping.

‘Of course not,’ Shadi said. ‘She knows what is due her kith. She will do her duty, without griping.’

‘I’m not griping, and I’m not shirking my duty,’ I snapped, weary of lectures. ‘Forgive me if I’m not thrilled about the turn my life has taken. Crawling on my hands and knees through my family’s blood has left me in no
mood to be harangued by strangers.

Shadi blinked, taken aback, and Roshi stared at me, the morning sunlight twinkling off the gold specks of paint around her eyes.

At last I’d gotten through to them! The alliance would crumble around the man’s damnable ears while he slept.

‘We’re not strangers,’ said Roshi, in scandalised tones.

‘With everything I said, the “strangers” part is the most upsetting?’ I said, incredulous.

‘You came here seeking an alliance in the name of kinship, yet now you call us strangers,’ Roshi retorted, her eyes narrow and dark. ‘We’re not here to be claimed and dropped as it suits you!’

‘Nor are we lecturing,’ Shadi added.

‘With respect, buapi,’ said Roshi, turning a decidedly disrespectful look on the older woman, ‘you were lecturing her. She has that part of it right.’

‘Ingrates, the both of you,’ said Shadi, scowling. ‘Grandmothers should be listened to, not constantly interrupted. I’m sure I was never so rude as the both of you. How is it that I produced rude daughters who produced rude daughters?’

‘Don’t you think you’re straying off the point?’ I cried, battling to control the edge of hysteria in my voice.

‘What is the point?’ Roshi demanded, glowering.

‘There, you see? Rude daughters. Can’t you see the girl’s worried?’ Shadi said, rounding on Roshi. ‘Yet still you want to bicker –’

‘Enough!’ I cried, then stared them both down until I was sure I wouldn’t be interrupted. For a moment I studied Roshi, stunned by the revelation that she was my cousin, the daughter of my mother’s sister. Perhaps it was the paint, but I could trace no similarity to myself or my mother in her features, nor did I feel any kinship to her.

I didn’t have time to explore it; the hex was the most important subject. Now that both Shadi and Roshi had calmed, I continued, speaking quietly but firmly.

‘I’m sorry you think so highly of my husband, both of you, because I suspect that will change,’ I said, after looking around to make sure Mathis and Gunther were still well out of earshot. ‘If the circumstances of our binding don’t trouble you,’ I continued, turning back to Shadi, ‘the truth of that night may.’

Shadi grinned.

I flushed, embarrassed by her assumption, and ashamed, too, at having been so easily duped by Dieter in the first place. I summoned the words, practised them first in my head: *He hexed me. He branded me to remind me of it, and he holds my life in thrall to his whim;* but when I opened my mouth to speak them, no sound emerged.

‘Well?’ Roshi demanded.

*He bound me with shadows, and holds my life hostage,* I tried to say, but the words which emerged were, ‘He didn’t touch me. He left me alone.’

Shadi reached over to pat my hand, but I snatched it away, cutting short her pity.

*He can kill me whenever he wants simply by erasing a single symbol branded on my forehead,* I wanted to say, but, ‘We haven’t spent the night together since,’ came out instead.

I snapped my teeth shut on my damning words. It seemed Dieter’s hex not only held sway over the pulse of my life, but also controlled my tongue and blocked my words like a weir across a river.

Perhaps if I unbound my veil, I thought desperately, but my hands gripped each other until the knuckles seemed fused and I couldn’t pry them apart. I wanted to scream with the frustration of it, but my throat was still locked. The extent of Dieter’s trap threatened to overwhelm me.

How could I ever unlock the hex if I couldn’t find a way to speak of it?
I spent our remaining days with the Skythes in a haze of misery and frustration. Each anxious night huddled in Dieter’s tent robbed me of rest, and each day I walked by his side as we went among the Skythe tribe, building the foundations of an alliance. Here Dieter’s weapons were diplomacy and words, and he wielded them with skill, charming my mother’s people, forging friendships and shaping relations.

He had taken the Turholm and my throne through force and bloodshed, but he took my mother’s people with geniality and assurances. First he reinstated the agreement my father had made, ceding them the right to winter in Sueben lands in exchange for protection from the raiding of other Skythe tribes.

Then he went further. He promised them access to trade among the Turasi. He pledged military aid, and bolts of silk from the Ilthean empire, and steel spearheads from Turasi forges. In return he won the alliance he needed, the promise of Nilofen aid should he call.

And all the while I must hold silent. For no matter how hard I tried, the words which would damn Dieter and dissolve the alliance turned, like chameleons, into secrets I would never willingly speak aloud.

‘I wish for a life of anonymity,’ I confessed to Roshi when she fetched me one morning. ‘I want to be inconsequential. That’s true freedom.’

‘Pretend you’re a goatherder while you eat buapi’s eggs, then,’ she said, screwing her face up.

Our final day with the Nilofen drew on to a calm blue evening. To mark the alliance and bid us fair speed, they prepared us a feast. A great fire built midway between the two camps sent showers of sparks leaping for the stars before drifting downwind. Haunches of goat, marinated in a honey and nut glaze and stuffed with goat’s cheese, were wrapped in great mats of woven grass and buried over a bed of coals. The rich, tender scent released on opening the buried ovens was intoxicating.

Dieter presided over the feast with an easy grace, firelight casting a rosy flush on his cheeks. Frightened of what might slip from my mouth, I kept silent.

There were gifts, of course. Dieter presented the Nilofen with three pairs of magnificent foals from my stables. ‘They’re of Skythe stock, primarily,’ he glibly repeated what he’d learnt from me en route. ‘But we’ve bred a little of the Trakkan line into them, to increase their stamina.’

Briefly, I dared hope it would offend them. But the man led a charmed life, the Skythes’ deep bows indicating appreciation of such a kingly gift.

As well as gifting me my newfound cousin, Roshi, as a companion, the Skythes presented me with a half-dozen men to serve as my honour guard. They all wore a new symbol sewn to the lapels of their goatskin tunics: a spear-headed swan. Shadi must have copied the design from my necklace.

Hope flared bright, and I had to duck my head to hide it. For the first time since the nightmare that had begun at Aestival, I would be guarded by people loyal to me, not Dieter. These people wore my emblem.

‘You are our daughter,’ said Ardas, noting my happiness. ‘We send you back to your throne represented as such.’

Roshi drew my attention with a hand on my elbow. ‘Come,’ she said, leading me away from the thick of the feast. On the far side of the bonfire, glimmering and dancing in the night-cloaked plains, torches mounted on staves driven into the ground marked out a circle. Shadi stood in its centre.

Memories that weren’t mine prompted me to bow to Shadi once I stepped into the circle.

‘Mother of my mother,’ I said, my voice firm, ‘I remember the days of your life.’

Torchlight cast a yellow gleam in her eyes, a sparkle which didn’t touch the depths of her gaze. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I suspected as much. Beata was a woman of many talents.’

Over my shoulder she addressed Roshi. ‘Back to the feast with you, child. There’s time enough for your new duties on the morrow.’ She turned back to me. ‘You must be gentle with her, child. It is a great pain to her to leave.’

‘Let her stay, then,’ I said, an easy enough offer given my cousin’s moodiness and scornful words over the past days. ‘I don’t mind. I have maids aplenty back home.’

‘Nonsense,’ said Shadi. ‘The choice is made.’

‘If she doesn’t want to –’

‘Who said anything about not wanting? The girl asked to accompany you,’ said Shadi, dismissing the topic with a flutter of her fingers. ‘Come closer, child, we must get you ready. Tonight you will be Nilofen – if a somewhat wire-haired specimen.’

She had clothes for me, a slit-skirted dress of wool dyed a brilliant red. The bodice sported an elaborate pattern worked in beads, bones and claws. As she dressed me she explained the meaning of each, a complex interpretation
of colour, placement and original owner.

The dress felt strange against my skin and cut off my air after Shadi cinched the goat-leather belt around my waist. My head swam with the familiar disorientation of a vision. The flames of the torches turned to spears, darting up and down, in and out, until I didn’t know which way was up.

Hoofbeats drummed in my ears and a herd of horses galloped at me from all directions. Tall and spare and gleaming in the stabbing torchlight, every horse in the herd bore a whip-thin serpent with bright green scales twined around its neck. The drumming built to a dazzling crescendo, clattering and bouncing around inside my skull, as the horses trampled my old clothes into the ground, then vanished in a cloud of dust which wouldn’t settle.

I drew in a shuddering breath as the spears of flame, the horses, the dust, all melted away and it was just me and Shadi, alone in a circle of torchlight.

‘Do they always take you by surprise, child?’ said the old woman, peering at me.

‘I’m fine,’ I said. ‘A dizzy spell is all.’

‘Oh yes, a dizzy spell. Of course. Well, if the time comes when you need to deal with those, have Roshi bring you back to me. I will teach you.’

‘Buapi,’ I said, the Skythe word for grandmother familiar in my mouth now, as if I’d always used it, ‘was it you who worked the hex on Beata? The one to pour your memories into her head?’

She nodded. ‘Beata permitted it, of course. No one can enspell you against your will if you’ve the knowledge to stop it – which Beata had.’

Pity she hadn’t passed on that knowledge, I thought, then I wouldn’t have a brand on my brow or the voices of two old women in the back of my head, planted in the folds of my consciousness without my knowledge or consent.

Perhaps it’s the source of your dizzy spells,’ Shadi suggested slyly. ‘Beata’s gift, I mean. If you didn’t fight it, it might not hurt so.’

‘You don’t understand –’ I began.

‘I understand this much. You mustn’t fear. You’ve our blood in you, and you mustn’t smother it in your walls of stone. You don’t have to live on the plains to commune with the sky. Seek high ground, child, where walls can’t impede you. Then you’ll find your strength.’

‘I have no strength, not the way you’re talking about,’ I said, crossing my arms.

‘When you change your mind, come back and visit old Shadi again, eh?’ she said, then picked up a brush, its tip gleaming with ink, and gestured me closer.

Memories of my wedding night rooted my feet to the ground.

‘To finish the outfit, child,’ said Shadi, setting to work on me.

The paint was cool, not warm like Dieter’s had been; a few swift strokes across my cheeks and Shadi was done, indicating her satisfaction with a curt nod.

‘Now, let’s back to the feasting,’ she said.

The remnants of fear still drummed through me with every quickened heartbeat. My feet dragged as I followed her, the noise of the feast growing with every step. By the time we’d made our way into the wash of light thrown out by the great fire, the noise was thrumming through the back of my head like a migraine.

The sight which greeted me did nothing to dispel my apprehension. The Skythemen who’d been gifted to me, my loyal kinsmen, sat in the midst of a throng of Dieter’s men, laughter and alcohol transcending any language barrier.

Roshi was there too, as rowdy as any of the men, her smile brighter than the glow of the firelight on her cheeks. I should have known better than to think Dieter would leave me any advantage. It had taken him less than an hour to prise this newest gain from me.

The Skythemen looked up at my return and immediately sent a volley of calls and cheers into the crisp night air, oblivious to the fact that the Turasi would not regard my new costume with the same enthusiasm.

Dieter hid his reaction behind quiet mockery. ‘Ah,’ he whispered, ‘the barbarian heiress.’

‘I think I shall retire for the night,’ I replied, taking my leave with a dip of my head.

Dieter laughed, his point scored. ‘I’ll see you shortly,’ he said, still keeping his voice low enough not to carry, though the glimmer of his gaze was unmistakable.

The nearby Skythemen banged their fists on the ground and raised tumultuous cries as I walked away in my borrowed foreign finery.

To my surprise, Roshi climbed to her feet and followed me, weaving only slightly. My escort of Skythemen dutifully followed as well, their features suddenly sombre. I wondered how long it would be before their sense of duty fell before Dieter’s wiles. Tonight, however, it seemed they were still mine.

Changing direction on a sudden impulse, I headed for my tent instead of Dieter’s. Amalia looked up when I appeared, a cup halfway to her mouth. After taking in my appearance, her eyes flicked to Roshi, and to the shapes of my guard visible outside the tent. She made no move.
‘Perhaps you’d prefer to sleep elsewhere tonight, if my company is so odious.’
‘And leave you alone with your precious cousin?’ she sneered. ‘How long do you think Diet would allow that? It’s either me inside with you, or Mathis and Gunther. Take your pick.’
I held silent as Roshi measured Amalia with a long, calculating stare. ‘You’ve abandoned your headcloth,’ she said.
Scowling, Amalia snatched up her makeshift veil, then changed her mind. ‘So?’ she said, tossing it aside, though her voice couldn’t match her casual gesture. ‘Only Matilde is so modest she wears it even to sleep,’ she added, sending a vicious smile in my direction.
Tonight it couldn’t touch me. With Roshi between me and Amalia, and my Skythe guard outside, I finally slept.
SIXTEEN

YET AGAIN, I woke to anxiety.

Today we were to journey home. Bitter as the truth was, I feared it, dreading also the gadderen which would shortly follow. Time was short, and my resources were sparse.

Nothing in the journey allayed my fears. Dieter’s men constantly blocked my Skythe escort from me. The Skythes, however, seemed neither perturbed nor frustrated by it. It wasn’t long before they grew accustomed to the arrangement and stopped trying to jockey closer. Each night brought revelry – food and drink flowing around the campfires, Turasi and Skythe voices racketing across the land long into the night.

Roshi showed little inclination for my company, preferring the midnight festivities to our tent. Amalia had clearly been instructed to let me be, and she and I settled into a routine of ignoring each other.

I had never felt so alone.

On the third day we rode further south than necessary, stopping when the wooden walls of a holding greeted us. I sat clenched so tight in the saddle my horse skittered beneath me, sawing at the reins. Janek, the thane of this holding, had long been loyal to House Svanaten, but the ease with which Dieter sat his horse, and the smiling arrival of Janek, told me his loyalty had shifted.

Janek bowed to Dieter as he dismounted, then cast me a nervous glance.

Mindful of the lesson I’d learnt when I tried to reveal Dieter’s arcana to the Skythes, and weary of games I couldn’t win, I kept my mouth shut and ignored Janek’s welcoming patter. The temptation was strong, however. If I could only reveal Dieter’s use of the shadows, Janek’s loyalty would flip faster than a jackknifing hare.

First I had to free myself of the hex which bound my tongue.

As Dieter’s soldiers dismounted, they resolved into two distinct groups. The smaller group were clearly guests. They waited, reins in hand, to be informed of their billet.

The larger group tied their mounts to hitching rails with the ease of homecoming before greeting the women and children who rushed towards them.

‘It’s fortunate you won me the Skythes as allies,’ murmured Dieter, taking my elbow and smiling down at me. ‘Now I can release these men back to their homes for a spell. Between you and me, they were getting a touch fractious.’

My answering smile was a sickly, pale creature with roots reaching all the way down to my tight-knotted stomach. We continued on, Janek still babbling away, this time about the meal he’d prepared. ‘You’ll find some of the sauces familiar,’ he said, turning to me with an ingratiating smile, ‘since the Turholm’s chief cook is the daughter of one of my thralls.’

‘You mean Leise?’ I asked.

He nodded. What was it Leise had said? My family were wiped out by your mother’s people. Do you see me wailing over it?

‘I know that look, Matte,’ Dieter said. ‘You’re puzzling again. What is it this time? You always notice meaning in such small details.’

‘Sometimes, Dieter, I think you’re the only totally honest person I know,’ I said. ‘That could almost be a compliment.’

‘Let’s just say I’m reassessing the value of frankness,’ I said.

Dieter laughed. It wasn’t his usual mocking tone but a clean, hearty sound.

With Dieter on one side and Amalia on the other, I sat down at the table of a man who’d pledged loyalty to my House yet given aid to overthrow it. The thought was enough to make my head spin and I sprang back up, the legs of my chair scraping on the stone floor. Conversation stilled as faces turned my way, though Amalia kept her nose buried in her cup.

‘If you’ll excuse me,’ I said, a quaver in my voice. ‘I need fresh air.’

‘Of course,’ said Dieter and summoned Mathis and Gunther to escort me.

Once out of the room I picked up my skirts and ran back through the corridors until I burst out into the courtyard. Twilight had turned it into a place of purple shadows and secret breezes. Despite the breadth of space, it seemed too narrow, closing in on me until I couldn’t draw breath.

Seek the high places, Shadi had said.

My eyes snagged on a watchtower in the centre of the western wall. Squat and blocky, it was still the highest structure in the holding. A plain, iron-bound oak door opened into the tower’s base, stairs looming dark behind it.
They stretched endlessly ahead of me, winding up and around, step after step, so that climbing them was like a mantra, lulling me into a daze. But when I reached the top and crept out onto the turret beneath the open sky, a brisk wind slapped my face, waking me with a start.

It was then that I glimpsed Roshi, perched in an embrasure as if falling couldn’t hurt, leaning out over the depths like some awkward, wingless heron.

Mathis and Gunther ground to a halt behind me. I made a gesture of dismissal and they retreated back into the shelter of the stairway. After all, I couldn’t escape, and Roshi they judged no threat either, since my mother’s people had clearly shown their preference for Dieter.

Stepping up to the battlements, I rested my palms on the cool, gritty stone. Below and behind me lay the sprawling, random slopes of the holding’s roofs. In front of me, sharply demarcated by the thick battlement wall, the silent plains stretched into the darkness. Janek’s farmers must have had permission to pasture their herds on those grounds, for more than a single flock of sheep milled around the tower’s base.

I pulled the collar of my gown tighter, and looked up at the sky until the sensation of swaying threatened to topple me; only my palms on the wall keeping me steady. Roshi didn’t turn or speak, and silence stretched between us.

The stars had started coming out when Roshi finally said, ‘You do not like your husband?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘No, I don’t like him.’

‘You hesitated.’

‘I respect his power,’ I said, touching the scab on my throat, still raw and prone to cracking if I turned my head too sharply. ‘Why does it matter?’

‘A woman should like her husband.’

‘Whether or not you understand my reasons has no bearing on their validity.’

‘True. He is your husband; yours is the opinion which matters,’ she said, speaking as if she had come to some decision.

I didn’t probe. All I needed to know was where her loyalty lay, and time would reveal that more truly than any words spoken now. Meanwhile, I had more pressing concerns. Unseen beyond the dark horizon, the threats would be moving, converging on the Turholm. The gadderen – which would confirm or deny Dieter as Duethin – was imminent.

Dieter still held my throne. With the Skythes by his side, his hold was now stronger than ever. And if he’d turned Janek, one of Beata’s most loyal theanes, he could turn anyone.

It was past time the power shifted back in my favour, but first I needed to rid myself of Dieter’s hex, and for that I needed knowledge.

‘Roshi, the spell Shadi worked on my father’s mother – do all your people know such workings?’

‘Only those with the gift for it study the shadows,’ she replied. ‘Some glamours can be worked without the gift, and most all of us know a couple of those.’

A gift! If I had my say in the matter I’d want nothing to do with spells and hexes; I’d give back every vision that had ever plagued me, every foretelling which had threatened to see me locked into a cloister, my life given over to scrying for the church. I’d live simple and untouched by the strange foretellings which came in the middle of the night, through the touch of wood or cloth, riding on the tails of the summer winds.

‘Do you have it, this … gift?’ I asked, desperate for the answer to be yes.

‘No,’ she said. ‘Do you?’

‘No.’ I didn’t hesitate – Grandmother had beaten that response out of me long ago. Hesitate, pause, show any crack in the façade and I would be shut up in a cloister, and with my freedom lost, so too would House Svanaten be lost.

I fixed my eyes on the horizon and curled my fingers over the edge of the wall. ‘If I wanted to reverse a hex, would you know what I’d need?’

Roshi frowned. ‘One of my people’s spells?’

I hesitated, fearful of the consequences should this conversation make its way back to Dieter.

What of it? Grandmother demanded. The man holds all the cards. It will make him overconfident.

‘No,’ I said. ‘I believe it’s from the Amaer.’ The word sat oddly on my tongue, unpractised and halting.

Roshi gave me a blank look. ‘Where do they roam?’

‘South,’ I said, my heart squeezing into a tight, hot ball of bitter disappointment. ‘A long way south, apparently.’

‘I’ve never heard of them. Is it … is it a simple spell, this one you want reversed?’

‘No,’ I said, almost choking on the word.

If I stayed, I’d begin babbling. I could already feel inappropriate words fighting their way up my throat.
Muttering goodnight, I fled.
SEVENTEEN

FIVE DAYS AFTER leaving Janek’s holding, the walls of the Turholm loomed ahead of us. A sense of dread suddenly overwhelmed me. How strange, that coming home should feel like losing my freedom.

Riding in a tight cluster nearby, the Skythes clearly felt no better. With every pace their faces set into sterner masks. Not one of them complained, by look or by word, yet it was apparent they anticipated our arrival with an apprehension which echoed my own. Our common feeling raised a sense of kinship in me, the first I’d felt for these people. I dared a glance at Roshi, who was staring up at the approaching walls.

The shadow of the gate cut off the sky as I rode beneath. Inside, the sky seemed smaller and more distant, carved by the upthrust of the walls.

Most of the army of followers stopped in the lower courtyard, their horses whinnying while thralls and soldiers chattered and laughed, relieved to be home. As I moved away from the press of bodies, the noise fell away to a muted clatter. The clean scent of new mint growing in the kitchen gardens was a welcome relief from the stink of hot horseflesh. Finally only Dieter rode before me and Amalia beside me, with Gerlach for our escort. Even my Skythe guards had stayed behind.

On reaching the upper courtyard, Dieter drew his horse to a rough halt and slipped to the ground before striding away to some business he didn’t want to share with me. No doubt it would include making arrangements for keeping the Skythes beyond my reach.

Or perhaps he went in search of Renatas. The need to find him first was like a drumbeat in my blood, but before I could I had to shake off Amalia and the guards assigned me.

As soon as Amalia and I were shut in my suite she started muttering and grumbling, unable to sit still. Every other minute she’d be up again, stamping around like a hound endlessly pacing the walls of its pen. Occasionally the ale drew her back, but soon enough she’d jump from the couch and start circling again.

Meanwhile, I stared into the unlit hearth and kept my hands beneath my thighs to stop them twitching. What with Amalia’s presence, I couldn’t slip away and check on Renatas.

Anxiety threaded through me like fishing wire, drawing ever tighter until I thought it would slice open my veins from the inside out. I yearned to climb the slatted walls of the loft until I gained the steep-pitched roof and the freshening winds.

Dieter arrived after night had fallen, after we’d taken a light supper. Amalia had abandoned her muttering and pacing and had settled into a place by the window, staring morosely into the blackness outside.

Dieter dismissed his sister with a flick of his chin and she retired with ill grace to the bedroom. No doubt she’d have her ear pressed to the adjoining door.

I resisted the urge to stand.

‘Where is he?’ said Dieter.

‘When I didn’t answer, he added, ‘Don’t prevaricate, Matte. We both know who I’m talking about.’

‘Where you left him?’ I said, blinking up at him.

‘Coquetry isn’t one of your strong points.’

I shrugged. ‘Why do you think it’s my doing? I’ve not left this room since we returned. Ask your sister. She’ll tell you of our prison, as she’s so cheerfully taken to calling these rooms.’

‘Who said you hid him this afternoon?’ He stepped closer and tugged at my veil, as if I needed a reminder of what it hid. ‘Strangely, no one’s seen the lad since we left. Not particularly subtle, Matte. But then, you didn’t expect me to be returning home, did you?’

‘I haven’t smuggled him out of the Turholm, if that’s what you’re implying,’ I said, twisting away from his hand.

‘And the pigeons?’ he demanded. ‘Will you pretend ignorance of them, too?’

This time, I did not have to feign confusion. ‘What pigeons?’

He gave me a thin-lipped look in return. ‘I grow weary of these games, Matilde.’

‘I’m not playing any games,’ I snapped, ‘and I don’t know what pigeons you’re talking about.’

‘I had no messages sent, nor did I have any messages waiting for birds before they could be sent. And yet I return home to the news that birds were released from the dovecote during our absence. Tell me, what am I to make of that?’

I was too busy chasing possibilities to answer. Had Sigi sent birds out to Houses Vestenn and Falkere, as she’d
promised? Had Renatas tired of waiting, and sent word to his father?

‘Who did you contact, Matilde?’ Dieter demanded. ‘What ploy have you set in motion now?’

His grim tone woke me to the danger of my situation, remembering the blood he had taken from me. I had no idea how he might use it to punish me – and I had no desire to find out.

‘I know nothing of any pigeons,’ I insisted, summoning every ounce of sincerity I possessed. It wasn’t enough; distrust still lingered in his gaze.

Dieter crouched before me. ‘Did you think the boy struck a deal only with you?’ he said, his words sending a spear of ice down my spine. ‘I see I have your attention,’ he continued. ‘Perhaps you thought he needed protecting? Doubtless that’s what he played on. It seems I know the lad better than you after all. Come now, Matte, were you truly naïve enough to think an Ilthean would rely only on you?’

Possibilities raced through my mind like wildfire, sparking and leaping, embers alight on the wind. But one hard fact remained.

‘If you’re so confident of your own bargain with him, why can’t you find him?’

His expression darkened. ‘There’s no one you can trust, and no one you can bribe. I’ll find him, Matilde. And when I do, all bargains are off.’

Punctuating his point, he pressed his thumb to my brow, a stroke of warmth that penetrated even through the veil. The skin of my nape prickled.

In the doorway, he turned back. ‘Oh, and your little barbarian handmaid tells me you want to know of the Amaer. Shall I enlighten you? I’ll tell you this much – you’ll have a long journey before you find them, or any who know of them.’

I sat up late into the night, huddled before the fire, though its warmth couldn’t dispel the chill lodged in my core. I felt as if even the slightest movement might crack me open, like clay fired too long and made brittle. No matter what I tried, Dieter always seemed a step ahead.

Had Roshi told him of our conversation, as he implied, or was that simply one of his tricks, sowing dissension to keep me isolated and powerless? Who could I trust? And which way could I turn to break Dieter’s hex, if none knew its source?

My head ached from the constant anxiety and I buried my face in my hands, letting long minutes slip by. Suddenly warm fingers slipped like silk across the back of my neck. I jolted upright and swivelled around in fear.

Amalia stood behind me, clutching a blanket close.

‘Sorry,’ she said.

I took a deep breath to calm the racing of my heart, and sank back into the cushions.

She sat down on the other end of the couch, drawing her bare feet up and tucking them under the blanket. ‘It’s cold tonight. Are you ever coming to help warm that cavernous mattress, or must I hunt out a heated brick?’

‘I’m not tired,’ I lied, turning my eyes back to the hearth and its banked embers, though I could still feel her watching me with those foxfire eyes of hers.

‘Why do you always wear that veil, anyway?’ she said.

‘Ask your brother some time,’ I replied.

Amalia cocked her head to one side. ‘If you can’t tell me, show me.’

Before I could frame a response she’d leaned forward and drawn out one of the pins.

‘No,’ I protested, pulling back.

But she’d anticipated me, and her free hand gripped mine, the length of her pressing down on me, trapping me, as pin by pin she loosened the veil.

Tears stung my eyes as she slid a thumb under the veil’s edge at my temple, and peeled back the cloth.

‘Oh,’ she said, examining the markings. ‘I tell you what,’ she continued, sitting back on her heels, her expression gentle. ‘I know a little something of those glyphs of Diet’s.’

Hope coursed through my veins. ‘Tell me,’ I said, the demand emerging shamefully like a plea.

‘And in return?’

The familiarity of the bartering stole my fervour, and my voice was flat. ‘I have naught of value to you.’

‘Oh, I don’t know. You could always tell me where the boy is.’

Stung, I sat up, straightening my veil like a shield between us. ‘So that’s what all this is about.’

‘Oh, don’t clam up again,’ said Amalia, snaking one arm forward and tugging at my sleeve. ‘You take everything so seriously.’

I stood as if to flee her, as if I had somewhere to run, but the walls caged me, and the night blocked me in.

‘It’s one extreme or the other with you, isn’t it?’ said Amalia. ‘You think I want to know where he is so I can turn him over to Diet. That wouldn’t be so dreadful, in any case. Diet doesn’t want to harm the boy, though you’ll never
believe it, so I won’t waste my breath trying to convince you.’

‘Good,’ I snapped, angry at myself. Why should it surprise me that all she wanted was the boy? ‘In that case, you can tell me what you know about the Amaer.’

‘Oh no,’ she said, wagging a finger. ‘You didn’t actually give me anything in return.’

I turned back towards the window. It wasn’t as if I could trust whatever she might tell me anyway.

‘Is it entirely bad? Being married to him?’ she said softly.

The question, and her gentleness, shocked me to sudden tears, though I blinked them back before she could catch a glimpse of my face.

‘I know he likes to make mock,’ she said, stepping closer, ‘but it’s not like he’s hurt you.’

‘That doesn’t mean I like him any better,’ I replied, ignoring the blush pricking at my cheeks.

‘You must hate me for sure, then, since I’ve tried to hurt you.’ Amalia dropped her gaze and pulled at a thread on her cuff.

Though she didn’t sound insincere, I suspected this was another ploy.

‘I’m sorry,’ she continued, ‘about the killing part, at least. I’m not saying I wasn’t right to be angry. Only … maybe I shouldn’t have tried to stick a knife in you.’

I gaped at her.

‘It’s all right, you don’t have to forgive me,’ she said peering at my throat as solicitously as if she hadn’t put the wound there. ‘Does it still hurt?’

I found my voice at last. ‘You tried to slice my throat and you’re … sorry?’

‘What more can I say? I’ll not lie, not with the wound still scabbed. Do you hate me for it?’

I turned away, overwhelmed by a flood of conflicting emotions. ‘You’re crazy. You and your brother, both of you are as crazy as hens that have been drinking from a blacksmith’s barrel.’

‘Sometimes I forget how difficult this must be for you.’ Her fingertips grazed my spine, then inched up to brush my nape. ‘I know my brother’s a good man – you don’t. How could you, after all?’

I shuddered, and her hand retreated momentarily.

‘You must be so very alone,’ she whispered.

A great sob lodged in my throat. I bowed my head over it, choking it back. In the face of my loneliness, her display of affection was a heady offer, waking in me a thirst for the comfort of simple contact.

Amalia ducked around in front of me, her knees bent so she could peer up at me. Uncomfortable with the intimacy, I raised my head and drew it back. She followed me, however, pressed as close as before, her gaze drinking me in. Prickling raced the length of my spine and settled in my belly.

‘I know I’m not what you’d choose, and neither is Diet. Still, we are here.’

‘You’re here for the throne.’

‘Diet may be. I’m not.’

‘No. You’re here for Diet.’

Her hand snaked up my arm and coiled around the back of my neck. Slight as the touch was, I couldn’t pull away, though I avoided her gaze.

In the end Amalia decided to stop waiting. While I was still staring resolutely away she leaned in and, with a twist of her neck spilling her frosted hair over her arm, pressed her lips to mine.

Before I had time to so much as blink, she’d pulled back.

‘Come to bed,’ she said.

Ravens help me, I did.
EVERY INCH OF my skin flushed with memory as soon as I opened my eyes the following morning. I screwed them shut again, trying to deny what I’d done. But the memories rose up inside me – and Amalia lay warm and drowsy beside me.

Careful not to wake her with my shivers, I sat up and pulled on the nearest scrap of clothing I could find, a muslin shift so thin it was nigh transparent. I’d barely yanked it over my head when the latch of the bedroom door rattled, freezing me into a wary stillness.

Amalia stirred, but didn’t wake as Renatas stepped into the room, nursing a ferret kit in his arms. Fear hammering spikes through my veins, I glanced from him to Amalia, certain she would wake up and discover him. Gesturing urgently for quiet, I slipped from the bed and fumbled for my veil.

Lonely people make easy marks, Grandmother harped. I had no time for her now.

‘Renatas!’ I hissed, tiptoeing closer. ‘What are you doing here? What’s happened?’

Dark circles haunted his eyes, but his attitude was calm. ‘I am tired of waiting,’ he said, meeting my gaze with a challenging stare and making no attempt to keep his voice down.

From the bed Amalia mumbled in her sleep. I gestured for him to precede me into the sitting room, but he ignored me.

‘I know it’s hard to understand, Renatas, but it’s important –’

He cut me off. ‘No. You don’t understand. I have no interest in living in this stone hovel any longer than I must. It’s clear who holds the power – and it isn’t you. So I don’t need your help.’

Taking in my state of undress, he paused, his gaze flicking to the bed, where Amalia’s bare leg protruded from beneath the coverlet. All amusement faded from his eyes then, replaced by a hard, flat stare. Stalking to the bedside, he yanked back the covers, revealing his sister’s naked sprawling figure.

Amalia awoke with a yelp. The sight of Dieter looming above her brought a second cry, before she recovered her customary attitude. ‘Do you mind? It’s cold, and it’s still dark!’ she protested, clawing for the blankets.

‘Interesting tactic,’ said Dieter, refusing to release the blanket to her.

Amalia shrugged and, admitting defeat, looked around for clothing. ‘We had a bet, right? I told you I’d find him first.’ Then her eyes lit on Renatas and she scowled, cross at losing.

‘This isn’t a game, Mali,’ he snapped, yanking her upright by an elbow. ‘They hang adulterers in these parts. How could you be so stupid?’ he continued, throwing a gown at her.

‘Well, I’m not married, so I guess I’m safe from the noose,’ she said glibly. ‘And in any case who said anything about adultery?’

Dieter glowered at her, stealing some of the starch from her spine.

‘Please. I’m the Duethin’s sister and she’s your wife,’ she said, though her bravado was shakier now, and her hands were clumsy and slow as she pulled on the gown. ‘Who’d risk angering you?’

‘Right now, Mali, I wouldn’t count on me for protection.’

‘It’s a good thing nobody else knows about it, then.’

Dieter didn’t answer, but his grim stare said it all.

Panicked, I snuck a look at Renatas. The ferret kit had crawled halfway up his chest and was nosing at his ear but he was oblivious to it, watching the scene unfold with avid curiosity.

Amalia flung a sullen glance my way, cowed at last. ‘I don’t see why you’re not shouting at her as well,’ she said glibly. ‘And in any case who said anything about adultery?’

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The focus of attention again, I grabbed the first gown I could find and thrashed into it like a woman drowning. It was Amalia’s.

Decently covered, I still couldn’t look either of them in the eye, so I lifted my chin and stared behind them. An all-too-familiar prickle touched my nape and brought a sting of sweat to my palms.

Quickly I measured my options. Dieter and Amalia were between me and any exit, unless I retreated to the bed. But that wouldn’t hide me, or stop the questions. I had to keep standing, and hope I had time before the vision claimed me. To conceal the tremble in my hands, I busied them with lacing the sleeves about my wrists.

It was then that it took me.

Renatas faded to white, as thin and stark as bones beneath a winter sky. Dieter’s hand still rested on his shoulder, but it was a hand grown wasted and hard, and his clothes had turned to leather and armour, draped about in wisps of
shroud-like cloth. Small snakes wreathed the both of them, fangs bared and biting at their tender flesh, opening wounds which dripped slow red blood. Neither flinched.

As always, the vision vanished suddenly. I came to on my knees, one hand flung out before me as if to ward off what I’d seen. Gradually Dieter, Amalia and Renatas, normal and fully fleshed, swam back into focus.

‘Well, now,’ said Dieter, calculations running swift behind his pale eyes. ‘This is interesting.’

Swallowing against my queasiness, I pressed my hands to my stomach and closed my eyes. The vision had left me pale and shaking, as they always did.

‘I feel sick,’ I said.

‘I don’t doubt it,’ said Dieter. ‘I remember hearing about your … shadow sickness.’

‘If you were ill, I wouldn’t mock you,’ I said.

‘No,’ he said, ‘you’d gloat.’

I bit my cheek against the urge to respond.

‘You’re not going to throw up on the carpets, are you?’ said Amalia.

‘You are a woman of strange sensibilities, Mali,’ said Dieter. ‘You’ll knife her for gaining me allies, and you’ll …’ he cut himself short with a glance at Renatas, although coyness now seemed ridiculous – ‘… persuade her by a means which could see you both hanged. Yet a little vomit turns you squeamish.’

‘Mock away,’ said Amalia. ‘You won’t have to sleep in the smell of it.’

‘See to the boy, then, unless you’d rather tend to Matilde?’ he said, which had her snatching at Renatas’s elbow and hurrying him from the room.

‘What will you do with him?’ I asked, my heart in my throat.

‘Are you planning on standing?’ Dieter replied. ‘I hope you don’t want me to kneel. It doesn’t look comfortable.’

‘Don’t be cruel.’

‘If you were truly sick, I assure you I’d be the soul of solicitousness,’ he said and held out a hand.

Reluctantly, I let him help me up and lead me to the couch in the sitting room.

‘Pretty strange fit,’ he said, pouring me a drink of ale and handing me the wooden cup with care. ‘Quite short,’

Dieter continued. ‘And lacking in the actual fit.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ I wanted to stand, but he pulled a footstool in front of me and perched on it, blocking me in.

‘Tell me, Matte, what did you see?’

I clutched the cup in both hands. ‘A frightened little boy. Whom you promised not to kill. Will you honour it?’

‘Ah, but it was you who broke the bargain, Matte.’

The truth of it made me tremble. I had gambled, and lost. Would Renatas pay the price?

‘And it appears the boy’s location wasn’t your only secret. No, you also had the secret behind your rumoured shadow sickness. I must confess, I’d always wondered why your grandmother let you live if you were prone to such a weakness as fits. I thought her soft-hearted for it.’

He paused, eyeing my rising flush of anger, as if to give me time to speak. I gritted my teeth, refusing to give him the satisfaction.

He shrugged. ‘When I met you, I revised my opinion. Obviously you weren’t entirely without strength. After all, you, alone of all your kin, had crawled out of the carnage. And then you’d had the gall to march up to my men and pretend we were allied, the blood of your court still on your clothes and in your hair! It was impressive, Matte. Bold.’

I wished a real fit would seize me and paralyse my mind, leaving me frothing and insensate.

‘I had no other choice,’ I hissed.

‘Well, you could have fought back in the sanctuary. Although you would have died, of course.’ He leant closer, his eyes alight. ‘And you couldn’t die, could you, Matte? Because you’d already seen that you didn’t.’

I leant back into the couch, shaking my head.

‘It wasn’t simply canniness saved you, was it?’

‘Leave me alone,’ I whispered.

‘You saw the invasion. You saw how to survive,’ he persisted.

‘I saw my shroud!’ I cried.

Silence followed as I stared at him, trembling.

He smiled, a slow bloom of triumph. ‘So you did foresee the attack.’

‘No,’ I replied. ‘The results of it. Fire, death all around. And me, walking dead among the dead.’ The impossibility of that outcome still left me cold with fear, and acutely conscious of the brand I bore.

‘Good,’ said Dieter.

‘Good?’
‘I liked our first meeting,’ he said with unabashed cheer. ‘I liked you, bold and brazen. I’m glad it wasn’t the false courage of foreknowledge.’

A tiny spark of pride lit the hollows of my heart, making me despair at what I’d become. What sort of sick and twisted creature was I, to be jealous of the good opinion of a man I … I wanted to say I hated, but how could I claim that, even to myself, when I wanted him to think well of me?

Dieter leant closer still. ‘So, Matte, tell me, what did you see?’

‘Nothing,’ I insisted, my hands fluttering up between us as if to ward off his persistence.

He caught them in his own, stilling them. ‘The boy, Matilde, you saw something for the boy.’

I shook my head.

He gripped my hands tighter, pressing me into the back of the couch and moving so close that he filled my vision and I couldn’t look away.

‘Tell me what you saw for the boy.’

‘Bones,’ I intoned, the intensity of his gaze drawing the words out of me in a whisper.

I felt like I had on our binding night, when I’d knelt down before him, frightened and alone, and he’d daubed my head, marking and claiming me more intimately than any mere binding.

‘He was bones beneath the winter sky. You were draped in snakes, as was he. Tiny little snakes with red fangs.’

He digested this in silence, staring through me with an abstracted look. I shifted, trying to ease the pressure of his hold.

‘And the meaning – does the lad die? Do others die because of him?’

I frowned, shook my head, shrugged. ‘Neither, for certain.’

He cocked his head to one side. ‘Is it possible you’ve never learnt to interpret your visions?’

‘You’re the one who dabbles in the arcana, not me,’ I retorted.

He drew back. ‘Your mother obviously had something of the wild knowledge in her blood, to pass it on to you. And your father’s mother let another woman pour memories into her head. And yet still you sneer? You Svanatens truly are a priggish lot.’

Again his stare turned distant. ‘Snakes, you say? How many? How large?’

‘Hundreds. And tiny.’

He gave me a calculating smile. ‘What a valuable wife I have.’
NINETEEN

THERE WAS NO more time. Curl as deeply into the couch as I might, the truth was inescapable. As a political trophy, I’d served out much of my usefulness in the binding. My connection to the Skythes meant little now that Dieter had secured their alliance.

The vision had changed things – I’d proven myself his personal soothsayer. He would never let me go. Worse, with the power of my foretelling at his service, he could prove invincible. Unless I lied – convincingly. But then he seemed to know intuitively when I was dissembling.

Desperation threatened to engulf me. If I fled, what use would I be, free of Dieter’s watchful eye but outside the sphere of power? An outcast gathered no armies to support her. The risks of lying were higher still. Dieter had a vial of my blood, and his promise to finish what he’d started at Aestival filled me with panic.

Be calm. One thing at a time, and all will fall into place, said Grandmother, her voice catching me before the panic could overwhelm me. Breath by breath I fought it back, calming my mind, gradually dulling the fears, and eventually regaining my ability to think clearly.

First, I had to find Roshi. Uncertain as her loyalty might be, it was all I had to depend on. She had relative freedom, and opportunities I lacked. I needed her to help work out a way for us to escape.

I rose and dressed properly, in a clean gown that covered me from throat to wrist to ankle, as if linen and wool were a kind of armour. Then I ventured into the corridor. Outside, Mathis and Gunther jumped to attention. They pressed so tightly about me as I walked that I couldn’t hear my steps over theirs. Clearly, Dieter had left strict instructions.

After stalking through the corridors, steadfastly ignoring anyone we passed, I found Roshi in the upper courtyard, dicing with a handful of soldiers and thralls from the stables and fields. As I hesitated on the portico, uncertain how to proceed, Roshi glanced up from the game. For an agonising moment she stayed where she sat, cross-legged and propped up on one arm on the bare stones. She seemed relaxed among these people, while my company made her stern and ill-at-ease.

Dropping the dice onto the stones with a flick of her wrist, she stood. Then, dusting the seat of her narrow leather dress, she approached with her customary blank expression.

‘I need your help,’ I started, but my escorts were still too close, still able to overhear the softest word. I took her arm and drew her to a seat nearby.

Distracted by the game, and reassured by the still-slight distance between us, my guards didn’t follow.

‘What do you know about cooking?’ I said brightly.

‘Less than you, I fear,’ she said. Then, in a lower tone, she added, ‘What is it you want?’

‘Freedom. I must escape the Turholm.’

We interspersed talk about cooking with the real topic of our conversation. ‘Leave?’ she whispered. ‘Why?’

‘I’ve dallied too long. There’s a boy, my cousin. Dieter has him captive. I must get him, and myself, out of the Turholm.’

‘But a very few days –’

‘Will it take so long?’ I interrupted. ‘I’d be gone sooner, if you can arrange it. Roshi, the plan doesn’t need to be elaborate. The boy and I, you and your kinsmen. We can seek support and succour from … one of the drightens.’

I bit back on telling her precisely which drightens might support me, in case she played me false and reported to Dieter.

‘What has happened, that you cannot withstand a handful of days longer?’ she said, fixing me with a searching look.

I hesitated. I couldn’t tell her – not after denying any skills with the shadows. And then the opportunity to speak passed as Mathis, drawn by our whispers, stepped sharply nearer.

Roshi leant close, as if to share a last confidence, but she caught the soldier’s eye and spoke in a mocking drawl deliberately loud enough for him to catch. ‘There’s an uncommon large number of crows around the stronghold for this time of year, don’t you think? Carrion eaters,’ she added with false sorrow. ‘Even after they’ve feasted they’ll linger, scavenging for more deaths.’

I laughed, surprised and cheered by her gall.

Mathis curled one hand into a fist, glaring at Roshi; she met his gaze without fear, as if the prospect of his retribution gave her no concern. Perhaps it didn’t. He wouldn’t kill her, not if it risked my displeasure and, through me, Dieter’s – but men of the sword had other ways of disciplining impertinent thralls. From the amount of time she
spent among the soldiers, she must be aware of the danger she courted, and yet her eyes gleamed as she waited.

Even as I was summoning an answer that would defuse his temper, his eyes flicked over my shoulder and he stilled. A light step behind me solved the mystery of what had quelled him.

‘And some who should be dead continue to linger in life,’ said Amalia. ‘And constantly seek to escape their assigned companions.’

I didn’t turn. ‘Sitting in a courtyard in full view of dozens of soldiers hardly constitutes escape.’

There was a sudden clatter of noise near the gates, but Amalia stepped in front of me, blocking my view. ‘I should have known you’d seek the open to sulk,’ she said. ‘Turasi aren’t comfortable with acres of sky – except you, with your Skythe blood. The barbarian Duethin. The puppet Duethin.’

My hand lifted to my brow, touching the brand through the veil.

Her triumph complete, Amalia turned away. ‘Come. I don’t want to sit outside,’ she said, as if she were the Duethin and I the companion.

More noise from the gates spared me the need to retort – or worse, to obey. I stood and craned for a better view.

‘Visitors?’ asked Roshi

‘One or more of the drightens.’ My voice was calm, though my heart was hammering. If the first of the drightens had arrived, the rest wouldn’t be far behind. The gadderen was beginning, and would see Dieter ratified in my place, with me powerless to stop it.

‘You’ll want to fetch your brother to greet them,’ I said to Amalia.

She dithered, furious at being ordered around, hesitant to disobey. Eventually, political acumen won out over personal spite, and she turned away. The victory was trivial. I had, I judged, as long as it took her to find a thrall, deliver the message and return.

Crowds of people were streaming through the gates now, some on horseback, more on foot. I leaned close to Roshi. ‘Tonight,’ I whispered. ‘If you can. Tomorrow at the latest.’

‘When –?’

‘Make an opportunity,’ I hissed. ‘There’s no time left!’

Amalia returned with a hurried step, the flush of exertion colouring her cheeks. She didn’t waste her time on jibes, however, not now.

‘You need to come down and welcome them properly,’ she said. ‘Don’t you dare make him look too weak to control his own wife.’ Her gaze held the promise of that knife of hers.

‘You may find this difficult, Amalia, but I don’t actually take orders from you. In fact, I think you’ll find it’s the other way around.’

‘That’s not what you said last night.’

The flush of my cheeks was enough to put a speculative frown on Roshi’s face and earn a guffaw from Gunther. Amalia was unperturbed.

‘Last night you drank yourself into your usual stupor and spent the night dribbling on the couch,’ I rejoined, silencing her.

I turned back to the visitors, who were close enough now to recognise. The drightens of the three Houses Somner. Black beard bristling over his armoured chest, Rudiger rode in the fore, with the beady-eyed Evard on his left and their cousin Helma on his right. Grandmother had always warned me about them, Helma in particular, who had a reputation for being as coldly beautiful as winter’s touch. The three must have met at the Aedhold, Evard’s stronghold, before travelling down together.

Relations between my House and the three Somner Houses had never been cordial, but shortly after my father’s marriage they had descended into outright enmity when the Somners eradicated House Wilan, scattering the tribe’s few survivors and swallowing up their lands.

The approach of the Somner drightens now started Grandmother muttering again: *Watch the eyes, child. See how bold her gaze is? A killer’s confidence. And the hands – smooth and clean. That’s a woman who has her underlings do her killing.*
DIETER ARRIVED IN time to greet his guests, sparing me the effort of speaking. All I had to do was stand beside him and keep my face blank. He’d obviously known of their arrival, for he had a small portion of traveller’s rest to offer each of them. But then, he controlled the flow of information inside the Turholm now: he had pigeons and scouts and messengers at his command. All I had was a ferret.

The Somner drightens scrutinised me, cataloguing the significance of every aspect of my appearance, from the finery I wore to the exact distance separating Dieter and me. Between them, the three ruled a great swathe of land to the west and north of the Turholm. So long as they remained united – and the Houses Somner always had – they represented the greatest single power bloc among the drightens.

By the air of satisfaction radiating from them, they all three approved of me standing silent by Dieter’s side. The barbarian granddaughter of the despised Beata: humbled at last, their eyes said.

Dieter was all graciousness, inviting them inside, promising an evening of feasting and entertainment. I took this to mean he did not consider them completely won to his side, which was wise of him. Any who trusted the Somners without reserve, as House Wilan had, only invited downfall.

As we turned for the main house, Roshi plucked at my elbow. ‘Let us go to the kitchen and you can show me that recipe you spoke of.’

I looked at Dieter and the Somner drightens as they disappeared through the doors. ‘I was going to see if I could find the boy,’ I whispered. ‘While Dieter’s occupied.’

‘Let me worry about him,’ she said, taking my elbow.

Relenting, I let her lead me across the courtyard, although my cheeks burned at the thought of what the Somners might have to say about the barbarian princess slaving over her new master’s meals.

The kitchen was already in a roar of activity when I stepped inside. Leise was in the thick of it, naturally. Catching sight of me, she planted her fists on her hips.

‘Come in, then, if you’re coming. If not, stop blocking the doorway. I’ve food and staff need to go through it.’

I spun round, an apology on my lips. There was no one behind me. And Roshi had disappeared.

Leise let out a howl of laughter. Scowling, I moved into the wash of noise and the aroma of roasting meat.

‘So you’re back to helping, are you?’ said Leise, shoving an enormous pumpkin towards me. ‘Bored with your muckity life and come to slum it again? Well then, you can scoop out seeds for me.’

‘Perhaps I missed your soothing company,’ I said, digging my hands into the sloppy orange interior, where great clumps of seeds and fibrous flesh met my questing fingers.

That earned me a laugh, and a slap on the shoulder. ‘Good for you, girl. De-seed a dozen more pumpkins in that mood, and you might yet grow a spine. Maybe, if you’re lucky, it’ll stick around after the mood lifts.’

‘If I am in a mood, as you call it, maybe it’s because I have to spend my days with your dishonesty. I supped on your mother’s cooking, at Thane Janek’s holding. There was no raid on your village, was there? The Skythes didn’t kill everyone you know – they probably haven’t killed anyone you know. I’ll wager my mother was the only Skythe you’d ever sighted before this year.’

‘So I can’t stand whining,’ she shrugged. ‘What if it didn’t happen to me? It happened to someone. And they’re not able to whine about it. You, on the other hand, are still flapping on over it.’

Seeds and sticky orange strands oozed between my clenched fingers as I drew my hand forth. It would be so satisfying to see it dripping off her broad nose.

Roshi’s solitary reappearance, threading through the bustle to my side, brought worry to distract me. Had she not found Renatas? Could she not find us any means of escape? Had she confided my plan to Dieter? The pumpkin slipped from my fingers and splattered on the floor, causing Leise to mutter and complain about the high and mighty messing up her kitchen. Roshi squatted to help me clean it up.

‘What’s the matter?’ I whispered.

‘Nothing,’ she replied, scraping the pumpkin seeds together. ‘Now hush. This is hardly the place.’

Standing back up, she took a pumpkin for herself, her refusal to look up making it clear she’d neither welcome nor answer any questions.

Her dexterity showed she was not unfamiliar with cooking – but she hadn’t worked in the kitchens since our return to the Turholm. Dark suspicion threaded shadows through my mind. Had she run to Dieter? Was she now keeping me under watch until he had time to deal with me?

When Amalia arrived to fetch me – scowling at the errand duty and angry at my dishevelled appearance and the
delay fixing it would cause – Roshi elected to stay behind in the kitchens rather than accompany me. Perhaps she
trusted Amalia to keep me under a watchful eye.

Amalia kept up a constant taunting chatter down the length of every corridor. ‘Were you planning on serving the
meals as well? You look more fitted to it, covered in flour and pumpkin, or whatever it is you have smeared across
your cheek. I certainly wouldn’t guess you to be the Duethin’s wife, if I were the Somners. In fact, they probably
think he only keeps you around for the bed sport.’

‘Is this counted acceptable among the Marsachen?’ I rounded on her. ‘I’ve never known such loose proprieties as
you and your brother display!’

Amalia choked on her laughter, her cheeks turning red and tears beading on her lashes. ‘For someone who has a
problem with my social mores you certainly seemed ready to embrace them.’

‘Would you hurry?’ I said, giving her a withering look undermined by my blush. ‘We’re late enough as it is.’
She only laughed.

I wasn’t in time to enter the dining hall by Dieter’s side, but followed in his wake, the thralls bearing the meal sharp
on my heels. The Somners’ quick eyes took note, of course.

Roshi slipped in among the thralls and stationed herself behind my right shoulder as the trenchers were
distributed. The meal was a specialty of my tribe, a melange of beef strips and broad beans buried in a thick cheese
sauce and spiced with paprika and onion. The thralls placed my meal and Dieter’s before us at the same moment,
marking us as equal. By the light in Roshi’s watchful eye as the meals were set down, I knew I had my Skythe
cousin to thank for the subtle ploy.

Before we could begin, Helma planted the point of her knife in the table and spun it under her thumb. ‘We have
brought you a gift, my lord of Raban. I think perhaps now is as good a time as any to present it,’ she said.

A gift, presented now, meant only one thing: Houses Somner approved of Dieter’s coup. They never did like the
idea of a Duethin with Skythe blood, murmured Grandmother.

The doors at the far end of the hall swung open and numerous thralls shuffled into the room. Their steps hobbled
by hemp rope knotting them one to another, they made their way towards our table in silence. Each and every one
bore the dark complexion and tribal tattoos of Skythes. Captives of legitimate warring or illegitimate raiding, the
meaning of Helma’s gift was clear enough. A half-dozen conquered barbarians highlighted the jewel of Dieter’s
possessions: the barbarian princess.

Stillness gripped the room as Helma, spearing a strip of beef, kept her gaze fixed on me. I, in turn, looked straight
ahead. I would not give her the satisfaction of seeing me duck my chin, or turn to Dieter to defend my honour.

‘A gracious gift,’ said Dieter, but despite his smooth tones, his hand clenched mine beneath the cover of the
bench. Whether he meant to warn me or comfort me, I couldn’t tell, nor did I care. It was time to let the Somners
know they did not outrank me.

‘Unbind them,’ I said, and Roshi sprang to obey, pulling a short blade from beneath her belt as she did so.

The thick ropes binding the captives hand and foot presented hard work for her small blade. As she cut their
bonds, they stared up at me, mistrust plain in their eyes.

‘I do not know which tribes you once belonged to,’ I addressed them. ‘Nor does it matter. Willingly or not, you
have stepped under a stone roof, and thus you have renounced your previous life. Those of you who choose to
remain may do so, provided you set aside any tribal rivalries you may once have known, and swear fealty to me and
mine. Those who choose to leave may do so without fear.’

They were silent at first but, as Roshi continued her work, their mistrust was slowly turning to wonder.

In contrast, the Somner drighens were now watching Dieter – waiting for his response, clearly hoping to see me
disciplined.

Leaning over, I picked a broad bean from Dieter’s plate and popped it whole into my mouth. It tasted hot,
gloriously hot, like swallowing sunshine. All three Somner drighens watched me eat that broad bean, their gazes
flicking back to Dieter to gauge his reaction. I chewed and swallowed, willing him not to slap my hand and chastise
me as if I were no more than a wayward child. The rich flavour lingered in my mouth.

Apparently my ploy amused him, for he let me have my way. He even pushed his plate a little nearer me. They
had assumed I was no more than a captive, of little value and a safe target for their taunts. Dieter’s acceptance, both
of my decision regarding the Skythes and of my impertinence, told them how wrong they were.

Helma’s smile had turned positively feral, but it was still there. Her cousin Rudiger showed less control,
glowering at his food, while Evard kept his face blank.

Like as not the thralls had come from Rudiger’s halls; in the far northeast, the Treudhold and its vassal thanes
routinely warred with Skythe tribes, whereas Evard’s people shared a smaller border with the steppes.

Aglow with satisfaction, I took another bean as Roshi started on the ropes of the last Skythe. Rudiger and Evard
waited for Helma’s response, by which I guessed the gift had been her idea. Which meant the apology was hers, too.

‘I hope we haven’t caused offence,’ she said eventually, her tones smooth as honey. ‘We had heard your wife was
in the habit of collecting Skythes,’ she continued, her gaze flicking to Roshi, ‘and thought to add a few prize
specimens to her collection.’

This time Dieter’s grip was definitely a warning.

‘We aren’t offended, good lady of Somner,’ he assured her.

The bean turned bitter in my throat as I listened to him making peace, accepting Helma’s false apology at face
value. He needed them, I reminded myself. I was lucky he’d let me presume so far.

As Dieter gestured for the thralls’ removal, and I watched them leave in silence, Roshi slipped past me to take her
place behind my shoulder once again, sheathing her blade behind her belt.

Absently, I reached for another bean.

Roshi changed direction mid-step, colliding with a thrall who was moving to fill Dieter’s cup. Knocked off her
feet, Roshi lunged at me, meals scattering around her, crockery clattering on the wooden bench. Dieter reared back
in his chair to avoid the Skythe girl landing in his lap.

‘Ravens above!’ I cried, shoving my seat back from the table, then picking the remains of Dieter’s meal from my
lap. The gleam of Helma’s smile showed the pleasure she took from the situation, making my blood run hot.

Roshi wouldn’t meet my eyes as she climbed to her feet, but she didn’t apologise.

I stood, food raining onto the floor, and excused myself.

Dieter looked at Amalia, who had not moved. ‘ Attend your mistress,’ he commanded.

Hot colour stained her cheeks, and she didn’t speak once the whole way back to our rooms. Once inside, she flung
herself on a couch and stared moodily into the hearth.

I didn’t have time for her tantrums. Covered in slop, I felt like throwing one of my own. Anger left a sharp pain in
my stomach.

Peeling off my dirty gown, I threw the wadded fabric into a corner. The gown fell in a crumpled heap, yards
short.

Abruptly, a slick of heat crept over my skin, even down to my palms and the soles of my feet. Suspicion crept up
on me like a pale, sickly creature. Clad only in my thin shift, already soaking with sweat, I stared at my trembling
hands. The pain in my stomach was hardening into a blade.

‘Amalia,’ I said, but my voice was too quiet and she didn’t hear.

The shaking radiated up from my pale fingers until it took my shoulders, and finally seized me entirely. ‘Mali,’ I
cried.

At the thump of my knees on the floor, she slewed around. One look at me, crouching tighter and tighter around
my belly, and she ran to my side.

‘What do you see?’ she demanded. ‘Tell me!’

Oh, ravens devour her – the girl thought I was taken by a vision! I shook my head, gathered the energy to speak.

‘Sick.’

‘Diet told me about your fits,’ she said disdainfully. ‘And he told me to find out exactly what you see.’

I clamped my arms around my pain-staked stomach, groaning. Heat coursed through me in mounting waves and
numbness stole across my fingertips. My lips felt rubbery.

Memories rushed through me as swift as the mounting pain and heat. The sharp, hot taste of the bean I ate off
Dieter’s plate. Helma’s hateful smile. The soft scrape as Dieter edged his plate nearer me.

For the first time since the Aestival feast, our meals had been served individually.

‘Matilde?’ Amalia touched my shoulder, then my forehead. She thumbed back my eyelid. ‘What could take you
so quickly?’

Shoving her hand from my face, I stuck my fingers down my throat. My stomach heaved, vomit burning my
throat as it flooded out of me, splattering the floor.

‘Again,’ said Amalia, suddenly understanding. ‘As often as you can stand it.’

On hands and knees and staring into my own vomit, I couldn’t summon the strength. My elbows trembled,
threatening to give way at any moment. Sweat slicked me from brow to ankle, trickling now across my nape.

‘Again,’ she commanded.

When I didn’t move she did it for me, prying open my mouth and thrusting her hand in until my jaws creaked
with the strain. Vomit streamed out of me again, hot and burning, leaving a terrible taste of bile in its wake.

Amalia slipped an arm around my back, a hand under my elbow, and prodded me to rise.

I tried, but dizziness overcame me and my hands slipped in the mess.

She hauled at my arm, trying to pull me upright by sheer force of will, but she couldn’t lift me; my body was a
slack weight now.
‘I’ll be right back,’ she said, standing and departing the room.
I lay where she left me, grateful the heat had lessened. The pain still spiked through my veins, however, and the room spun in and out of focus.
Eventually Amalia’s footsteps returned, a second pair in counterpoint. ‘Here,’ Amalia said. ‘Help me lift her.’
Hands hefted me by foot and shoulder. I fought my eyes open, catching a bleary glimpse of the bed drawing close. Voices cussed and shouted in the distance, but the mattress was taking me, the room was black and I was screaming, screams no one could hear.
I LIVED IN a ceaseless nightmare, wracked by fever, even the slightest touch lancing me with pain. Light blinded me, voices haunted me and a constant knot of agony in my gut nailed me in place.

I had nothing to gauge the passage of time except the occasional touch of the faceless, hovering overhead, and the frequency with which they poured their dark, choking brew down my throat. It was as if I was drowning in the mattress, pulled down and under, all my cries going unregarded.

But I didn’t drown, and eventually, little by little, I began to swim back to the surface. Gradually, the moments when calm granted me rest grew more frequent, lasting longer each time. The voices haunting me quieted a notch further, until I realised it was my own cries that had ceased.

Eventually I opened my eyes to find not a faceless creature with hands of lead, but Roshi. She was sitting on the bed’s edge at my feet, propped against a bedpost, dozing. Her features were drawn and dark shadows rimmed her eyes.

The suite was silent, though distant sounds from the Turholm drifted in: the snuffling of the pigs as they hunted in the gardens outside my window, a clatter of hooves, footsteps in a nearby corridor. For a moment I lay still, relishing the pleasure of having my mind returned to me, though new physical discomforts crept over me, too. My back ached, stiff with lying down so long.

Before long dark memories, the scrape of the plate across the bench, prowled at the edge of my thoughts. When I stretched, Roshi jerked awake, her gaze flying to me.

‘You look dreadful,’ I said.

She smiled, relieved. ‘You look worse.’

‘I feel worse,’ I said, shifting as a sharp pain ratcheted down the muscles of my left side. The sheets bore the rank odour of sickness in their weave. My mouth was dry and raw, and the ache in my head made thought slow and difficult. ‘What’s happened? Since the dinner, I mean,’ I said, trying to push myself up.

‘Don’t sit up,’ said Roshi, holding the edge of a cup to my lips and gently tipping it. The water was icy, cleaning the horrid taste from my mouth.

‘Not too much,’ she said, pulling the cup back. ‘I doubt your stomach is strong enough. You’ve had enough salep poured through you to turn you into an orchid yourself, and that was the nicest part of your treatment. It was … unpleasant.’

Her talk of orchids made no sense to me, but I had no inclination to learn the details of my treatment.

‘The leech fears permanent damage to your stomach,’ she added with a sorrowful look.

‘What poison was it?’ I asked.

‘There’s a pinkish flower which grows along the border of the little garden with the fish pond.’

‘The autumn saffrons?’ I’d always thought them purely decorative, planted to give colour to the garden when the spring and summer flowers wilted and dropped. I shook my head in an attempt to dispel a growing ache.

She shrugged, then gave me an angry frown. ‘Why did you eat off his plate? I’ve never seen you touch one of his dishes before.’

‘Believe me,’ I said, ‘I regret it more than you do.’

‘Yes,’ she said, dropping her gaze. ‘The crocus is thorough.’

I froze. Not the saffron, the crocus. And she’d said it was thorough.

‘You poisoned the food?’

‘Of course,’ said Roshi, her guileless eyes reminding me of how she had stepped forward, colliding with the thrill, interrupting the meal before I could take another bite.

‘I also went to a lot of trouble to get you in the kitchen and working on the meals,’ she went on, ‘then you went and ate his meal! Now no one assumes you were behind it. All my effort to keep your honour intact,’ she said with an angry shake of her head that set her braids and feathers to swinging, ‘and you undercut it.’

I gripped the bedcovers to steady my hands at this new revelation, a sharp pain in my fingertips reminding me of the damage the crocus had inflicted.

‘You meant for me to be blamed?’ I cried. ‘Why?’

‘If you want your throne back, you can’t afford people to think you will shy away from doing what’s necessary,’ she said.

‘I asked you to get me out of the palace, not kill him!’ I snapped, appalled.

‘What did you want but your freedom, and eventually your throne? Running won’t achieve either.’
The truth of her words brought on a fit of trembling. I should want Dieter dead, I needed him dead to end this – so why did I shy so fiercely from it?

‘You need to rest,’ said Roshi.

I fought the suggestion, trying to sit up. The smell of the sheets and my unwashed body were nauseating; I wanted to tear off my rank garments and bathe. ‘I don’t have time to rest,’ I snapped.

Dieter was no fool; after Roshi’s behaviour at the meal, he would surely suspect she was behind the poisoned food – and he would infer her orders came from me. He still had the vial of my blood. One wrong move against me, and I’ll finish what I started at Aestival.

‘You’re not strong enough,’ Roshi protested as I shoved at the bedding in a vain attempt to rise.

I wanted to rail at her and order her out of the room, she with her loyalty more dangerous than any betrayal could be. With difficulty, I fought the urge down. I needed information, and I didn’t have time to spare.

‘Has Dieter questioned you?’ I demanded, finally succeeding in untangling my legs before having to pause to rest. ‘What have you told him?’

Roshi grinned, sharp and conspiratorial. ‘That I was so distraught at the sight of my kin in chains, I didn’t notice one of the hounds at my feet, and when the thrall collided with me, I tripped. I do not think he believes me,’ she concluded happily. ‘He’s charming, isn’t he? I can see why you don’t like him.’

Skythes, I decided, were mad. Perhaps the voices in my head weren’t the artefacts of arcana after all, but insanity from my mother’s bloodline.

My racing pulse, and Roshi’s inane cheer in the face of disaster, made my head ache. ‘How long have I been sick?’

‘A little more than a week. You need to be abed longer still,’ she added sharply as I tested my weight on my feet. ‘Don’t think waking up is all the recovering you have left.’

‘The gadderen,’ I said, forestalling her further. ‘Which drightens are here?’

‘All except the Vestenn lord,’ she said, surprising me with her prompt answer. She had obviously been paying attention. ‘There’s been no word of him. Maja of the Saschan arrived yesterday morning.’

I knew what she had left unsaid. House Saschan ruled the Cuathn tribe, and ruled their holdings from Eysgard in the far west. If Maja had arrived, Harald of Vestenn should have, too. The Eberholm, his stronghold, stood south and west of here – in the throat of the fertile valley which served as a pass through the Sentinels. The Ilthean empire lay south of the valley; Nureya, and Helena’s Ilthean army, lay east. The Vestenn’s absence spoke of trouble, for his Majkan tribe and for the whole of the Turasi.

‘Has the gadderen started without him?’

Roshi shook her head. ‘Not precisely. Dieter has spent much of his time watching over you. When he isn’t here with you, he’s closeted with them. Not much happens, though, except the consumption of vast quantities of food and ale. The thralls say Vestenn’s absence has the other drightens worried.’

Worried, but apparently not yet united. If they knew or even simply suspected an army camped on the southern march, they should have ratified someone by now. What held them back?

‘Which way do the drightens bend? Will they ratify Dieter as Duethin?’

‘I’m not privy to their counsels,’ she shrugged. ‘But they seem … reluctant.’

Reluctant? It made no sense. The man had all the pieces in play: support from the three most powerful drightens; support from the Skythes; even the threat of an Ilthean army at the gates.

‘And Dieter?’

‘He …’ She trailed off while she considered her answer. ‘He is fractious.’

A sly, dangerous hope sparked within me. If I could play on the drightens’ prevarication, if I could nudge them into refusing Dieter … If he were refused the throne, he could be held accountable for the Aestival slaughter. I might see justice done. Although that didn’t mean I’d get to sit the throne. Why support me, when the drightens might each angle for their own interests? At least Dieter would be banished back to the swamps of the northwest where he belonged. Inexplicably, that thought brought a pang of guilt – and sadness.

‘If you won’t rest, you need to eat,’ Roshi said, standing.

‘I’m not hungry,’ I said, queasy at the very thought of food.

But Roshi set her chin and refused to let me out of bed until I promised to eat. The food – black bread soaked in soft-boiled egg – proved problematic. Sore and bruised from the after-effects of the poison, I had also developed a fear of eating. When Roshi brought me the meal, my throat closed over and I struggled against an urge to gag.

Gently, Roshi put the tray on my lap, then lifted a piece of the bread, took a generous bite, and chewed slowly before swallowing.

The simple gesture, apology and penance both, brought a sting of tears to my eyes. It took all my strength to force my voice through my throat.
‘Thank you,’ I said.
When I’d eaten as much as my tender stomach could handle, Roshi let me rise. The effort of walking from the bedchamber to the couch exhausted me, however, and I sat down to rest a moment.
Night had settled, bringing chill winds and dark thoughts for company. I rested my head on the back of the couch and closed my eyes while I caught my breath.
The door opened, admitting a rising murmur of conversation from without. I didn’t look. It would only be Roshi, slipping out to return the uneaten food to the kitchen.
‘I’m glad to see you’re regaining your strength at last.’
I turned at Dieter’s voice, my eyes opening in time to watch him stop before me. The lines around his eyes were deeper than I remembered.
Awkward and self-conscious, I scrambled to a sitting position.
‘You look tired,’ I said, surprising myself with genuine concern. It was quickly eclipsed by a rising dread, however. I was not ready for this encounter and whatever punishment he had devised. Did he have the vial of blood with him?
He sat on the floor, his steady gaze bringing a flutter to the pulse at my wrists.
‘You look as if you’ve had some hard news,’ he said. ‘Roshi was here, was she not?’
I stared at a crack in the plaster on the far wall to buy some time. If I told him of her guilt, he wouldn’t believe I had not ordered it, not when Roshi could tell him of my desire to escape.
‘She moved fast, when she saw you eating off my plate,’ he prodded, confirming my suspicions. He wanted to know what she had told me of the poison, and whose hand had wielded it.
‘She tripped,’ I said, the lie sounding thin to my own ears. Roshi hadn’t given me much to work with, however, and I feared to say more lest I contradict her outright.
Dieter waited for more, his gaze fixed on the fire. Silence stretched between us.
‘I was prepared,’ he said at length. ‘I’d made alliances to ensure my position, provided I won the throne cleanly. Which I did. Cleaner than I anticipated, if truth be told.’
He turned from the fire. ‘Thanks in some part to the Skythe alliance you brought me – not to mention you yourself, the jewel in my pocket. The skies were thick with pigeons when the drightens found out about you. All of them wanting to know whether you were a prisoner, or a willing accomplice. What did it mean for them, and the side they’d chosen?’
He paused, closed his eyes and massaged his brows from the bridge of his nose to his temples.
‘I had them, Matilde. Every single one of them.’
‘What happened?’
‘You did,’ he said, staring into my eyes.
‘I thought I was the jewel in your pocket.’
‘That was before the poison,’ he said, the intensity of his gaze silencing me.
‘That dish destroyed my chance at cementing my position,’ he said. ‘You know what the drightens thought, don’t you?’
‘They wonder if you’re strong enough to hold the throne,’ I said.
‘And if I’m not, it opens the way for them,’ he said, drawing his knees to his chest and locking his arms around them. ‘Suddenly I have a pack of drightens circling me, day and night, bickering and manipulating, coy and probing, never settling. And not a soul in the palace knows’ – he broke off, hesitating before he continued in quieter tones – ‘who did this to you.’
I kept my gaze on him, impassive, despite the leap in my pulse that was part panic, part hope. Perhaps he didn’t suspect me of Roshi’s poison after all, perhaps he wasn’t here to punish me …
‘Amusing, isn’t it? Everything I’ve won crumbling around me, and all I can think about is you,’ he said dryly. Was it possible he truly cared for me? The dizzying idea pushed me into answering him honestly. ‘No more amusing than my being alone in the world but for my enemies.’
He rose to his knees and leant closer. ‘Matilde,’ he murmured, his breath tickling my ear. ‘I find I’m relieved not to have lost you.’
‘Small enough loss,’ I said firmly despite my fluctuating emotions. ‘You have the throne, and the Skythes to swell your army. You have your alliances.’
His hand stole down my shoulder, trailing warmth in its wake.
‘I’m sorry the drightens are wavering,’ I said. ‘But you’ve charm enough to bring them to heel. You don’t need me.’
‘I don’t have that heir you promised.’
‘You have renatas now,’ I said, anger my best weapon against the strange feelings he evoked in me. ‘If he doesn’t
suit your aims, Amalia will bear children sooner or later. No doubt you can mould them exactly as you wish. Tell me, will you brand them, too?"

Gently, he turned my face to his. ‘I would bear your mark, Matilde, if you asked it of me.’

‘I don’t know the common practice in your lands,’ I said, icy with a month’s pent-up bitterness. ‘Here we only brand cattle.’

With surprising ease, Dieter unpinned my veil, shucked the cloth back, and brushed a thumb over the markings, tracing out their shape. His touch was enough to put me into a daze, though I struggled against it.

‘You haven’t thought it through.’ He was still looking at the markings. ‘It’s not all bad. Any who know the spell can erase the crucial mark, of course. But do you realise how few know it?’

‘That’s supposed to cheer me?’ I retorted.

‘Virtual immortality, Matilde,’ he said, his eyes intent on mine.

I stared at him, uncomprehending.

‘What can kill you now? Weapons that would slay mortal flesh and blood will do little to you.’

Harsh laughter erupted from me, breaking through the bewitching moment. ‘I’ve a stomach and throat nigh dissolved from poison. I’ve spent the past week comatose, and I can’t stand without panting for breath. You’re lying.’

‘Yes,’ he said with an unrepentant grin, and took my face in his hands.

Words drowned in my throat like water seeking underground caverns, as his fingers traced a line down my cheek.

‘I’m glad you didn’t die,’ he whispered.

‘I’m not,’ I countered.

He pulled away with a breath of laughter. ‘You don’t want to be dead. You just want to be a goatherd. I’m told there’s a difference, although I struggle to see it.’

I flinched, shame burning my cheeks.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Roshi told me. The shocking truth! A woman who could be Duethin, and what does she want? A hide tent and a flock of goats. Although you would look fetching with nannies scampering around your every step. Perhaps I’ll buy you some.’

‘Goatgirls aren’t poisoned. Or wed against their will.’

‘The poisoning I’ll grant you,’ he said, rising from the floor to sit beside me. ‘Goatgirls have their share of pain, though, and I dare say their share of arranged marriages. I didn’t exactly marry the woman I’d have chosen at the time, either.’

Hurt flared, hot thorns piercing my throat and words. ‘No one forced you to utter the vows.’

‘Political necessity isn’t the same as free choice. Still, I can’t complain. I seem happier in my wife than she is in me, so I suppose you truly are the bigger victim.’

I swung my hand at his smug cheekbone with all my weight behind it, the blow leaving a raw handprint smeared across his cheek.

‘So there is spirit left in you after all,’ he said. ‘Good. I prefer it when you’re brazen.’

Something had changed in his voice: it was lower, and his pupils had dilated. He hadn’t moved, yet he felt closer.

‘Being bound to you is never dull, I’ll grant you that much. And I suppose I should thank you for it, since I couldn’t abide a tedious wife,’ he said. ‘Come, what will you have?’

‘A herd of goats?’ I said bitterly.

His smile sparked lights in his eyes. ‘And goat-leather skirts like Roshi’s, so you can disappear among them?’

A bittersweet hurt suffused me. He had taken everything from me. Since our first meeting, me in my blood-stained finery and him at the head of a mercenary army, he’d used me to further his own ends.

But at the same time he’d protected me.

He’d saved me from Amalia’s rages, sheltered me from her sullen revenge. He’d hidden our indiscretion, saving both of us from a hanging. The smears of weariness beneath his eyes told me he’d barely slept while I lay sick. He’d been truer to me than Roshi, who’d taken my plea for freedom and interpreted it after her own ends. He had accepted my implicit chastisement of the Somners, drichtens he desperately needed as allies, because they’d insulted me. I clenched my hands into fists to keep them from reaching out to him.

‘You’re not alone, Matilde,’ he said, his eyes drinking me in. ‘You don’t have to be alone.’

It seemed an eternity before his lips dipped down against mine. The lightning flick of his tongue in my mouth sent a shock through my core.

‘It’s okay.’ Dieter’s murmur soothed away my stiffness. ‘I’m your husband, remember?’

And he was all I had left.
ACT THREE

THE CENTRE CANNOT HOLD
MORNING BROUGHT a strange lassitude. Nestled in bedding smelling of sex – musky and pervasive – I gazed at Dieter as he slumbered beside me. He was more handsome awake, with the sparkle of humour and appreciation in his eyes. The openness sleep gave him, however, was strangely endearing.

Conflicting emotions warred within me. He was my enemy, and I should hate him. For what he’d ordered done to my family, for the binding he’d put on me, for the hex, I did hate him. My thoughts shied away from the painful memories, however.

Simplistic thinking had no place in politics, of the nation or of the heart, and perhaps it was my hate itself that had made me so vulnerable to him in the first place. Hate or love, passion clouded observation, as Grandmother would have said.

Thought of her made me realise that her voice had been missing since I’d awoken from the poison. Surely if anything would have made her mutter, it would be the fact that I was lying in the warmth of a conjugal bed, with Dieter’s outflung arm across my stomach. There was nothing, however. Hoofbeats on the stones of the courtyard spoke of soldiers at their training, or stable thralls exercising the mounts.

Tentatively, I considered my new circumstances. I couldn’t blame what had happened between Dieter and me last night on the binding, or fear for my safety, or even political necessity. It had been a conscious choice, and my own desire, there was no denying it. Perhaps it was time to accept the inevitable.

Dieter had been strong enough and canny enough to take the throne, and with my help he would be strong enough to hold it. Perhaps it was time we worked together instead of against each other.

The sound of Amalia’s voice outside jolted me to alertness. I couldn’t make out her words through the wall separating us, though her voice was pitched high and fast. She was clearly in a mood. I glanced across at Dieter, still sunk in the depths of sleep, and shifted slightly, careful of disturbing him.

Whatever point Amalia had made to the guards, it was sufficient, for soon the latch rattled and the doors opened, admitting the tail end of her sentence. ‘… ridiculous,’ she was haranguing them. ‘I left her alone the whole night, as you insisted. She didn’t mean me.’

Dieter stirred and opened his eyes, a frown pleating his brow as he tried to reconcile his sister’s voice with the sight of me.

‘What is that godawful racket?’ he said, turning his head on the pillows and staring at the ceiling.

‘Your sister.’

‘Nothing for it, then. She’ll have to die,’ he said, and hung an arm over his eyes. ‘Or at least have her tongue severed. Can one still talk without a tongue?’

‘I dare say Amalia could,’ I replied, smiling even as she stomped into the bedchamber, cloth-draped tray in hand.

‘I’m sorry, Tilde. Those pig-headed guards kept me out all night. On the offchance you actually did want to be alone, I let them. Can you believe they were still trying to keep me out this morn–?’ She broke off when she saw Dieter in the bed. He was still flat on his back, the crook of his elbow sheltering his eyes.

‘I hope you at least brought breakfast, Mali,’ he said. ‘It’s the only thing between you and the noose right now.’

An ugly flush was creeping up the column of her throat as she looked at him, revulsion twisting her face.

‘Well, it turns out you got the cosy family you wanted, after all,’ I said, though not unkindly.

Amalia switched her gaze to me, a faint clatter from the tray betraying the tremble of her hands. Then, with a hateful look for both of us, she turned and stalked from the room without a word.

‘Did she leave the food at least?’ asked Dieter.

‘No. She looked very angry,’ I murmured, conscious that Amalia was still in the adjacent room.

‘What? No,’ he said, then paused, as if considering the idea, and shrugged. ‘Well, okay, maybe. She was very quiet.’

I coughed to hide my amusement at his understatement.

‘Before, actually,’ I said. ‘Since the morning you … barged in.’


‘I think she’s jealous of your attentions. I.’

His only response was a noncommittal grunt as he closed his eyes and tugged at the sheets.
Aren’t you going to talk to her?’ I whispered. ‘I think she’s waiting in the other room.’

He frowned, his eyes still closed. ‘Why? She didn’t pull a knife, did she? Chances are she’ll get over it. Sooner or later.’

‘Letting her stew isn’t going to mellow her mood any.’

‘I’ve no time for tantrums today. I need to get back to courting those drightens,’ he said, then sighed and swung his legs out of the bed, stood and pulled on his clothes.

‘If she draws a knife on you, scream before she gets it to your throat this time, okay?’ he said, kissing my brow, before leaving dressed but unshaven.

His swift kiss woke a tingle in my skin, and after he’d left I squirmed against the sheets, remembering the previous night – the flick of his tongue across my lips, and the feel of his hands caressing my body. Lethargy suffused my muscles, and for some moments I lay wrapped in the warmth of our bed, reliving the delicious sensations of last night.

But I could not lie abed all day, and eventually I stirred.

There had been no sound of voices as Dieter left, and I dared hope Amalia wasn’t waiting in a sulk in the other room.

I was to be disappointed. When I went to check, she was slouched on the couch, arms crossed, chin driven into her chest. She glared up at me with a heavy frown that had me stopping in the doorway.

‘Did the poison eat away some vital part of your mind?’ she exclaimed. ‘And don’t tell me he forced you. A forced woman doesn’t look like you do right now.’

I looked down, selfconscious. My hair was still unbound and wild from sleep, and I was wearing yesterday’s shift because I had no other clothes to hand. The smell of her brother was rising from me.

‘He is my husband,’ I replied. ‘Finding him in my bed shouldn’t be so alarming.’

‘Finding him in our bed is.’

I dropped my gaze, turning away. As if I could possibly hope to hide the flush on my cheeks behind a curtain of hair.

‘Have you forgotten what he did to you?’ she demanded.

‘Of course not!’ I snapped back, anger and guilt spurring me to meet her gaze. ‘Of course I haven’t forgotten. But I have to move on. You’ve said as much yourself.’

‘I see,’ she said.

‘Frankly,’ I added defiantly, ‘I don’t need to justify myself to you. What does it matter whether I’m on good terms with my husband or not? Unless you’re worried he’ll like me more than you.’

That struck home. Anger narrowing her eyes to slits, she rose to her feet and made as if to speak, but couldn’t seem to summon the right words. In the end she gave up and stalked to the door.

Swinging around when she reached it, she pinned me with a glare. ‘You know what I think? I think you like to play the victim. Poor, piteous Matilde. But you choose your traps. Consciously and consistently, you take the path that makes you powerless. Look at you now! You were nearly free of him. You had all the pieces so carefully gathered – the Skythes loyal to you, Dieter lulled into thinking you weren’t a threat, the drightens thinking you conquered. You even had me!’ she said, her voice cracking.

Her hurt was too raw, too fierce, and the apparent depth of her feelings for me were too shocking – I couldn’t answer her.

‘So what do you do? Destroy it all! Otherwise you might actually have to own your decisions and their consequences. And that’s harder, isn’t it, than everyone knowing you never had a choice?’

Tears spilled down her cheeks and she raised a hand to dash them away.

‘Damn you,’ she choked, her voice drowning in her throat, ‘I would have kept you safe!’

Then she fled, the door banging in her wake, leaving me standing with one hand lifted towards her.

I tried to summon all the reasons why her words shouldn’t hurt. If she thought my choices weak and snivelling, so be it. Being underestimated had been my aim, after all. She had bedded me on a whim and in an attempt to win a bet, and even if she had found some affection for me in it, that didn’t mean I should let my own morals unravel.

What I’d done last night was right by all of us, even Amalia.

None of it, however, soothed away the sting.

Gerlach appeared seconds later through the door. Though he had to have seen Amalia fleeing, her face flushed with emotion, his expression was neutral. His presence felt so familiar and surprising at the same time that I struggled against a sudden urge to weep. Instead, I tucked away my hurt until my face was as blank as his.

‘Are you well?’ Gerlach asked.

‘I’m fine,’ I said. ‘No knives this time.’

Weak as the jest was, I expected a smile in response. But no twitch or ghost of mirth touched Gerlach’s
expression, even briefly, making me acutely conscious that I was standing before him in nothing but my shift, my hair uncombed and my face unwashed. I was conscious, too, of how loud Amalia’s voice had been. How much did Gerlach know?

Swallowing the urge to offer explanations, I turned away. Behind me, the door closed quietly. Whatever Gerlach thought of me, he would do right by his lord’s wife.
By the time I dressed and emerged from the bedroom, the breakfast Amalia had brought was gone and in its stead stood a replacement. By the foods chosen – fresh bread and cold meats – I guessed the tray to be Gerlach’s work.

Too queasy to eat, I could only pick at the food, pondering my next move. When at last I dared to emerge into the corridor, Gerlach turned his all-seeing gaze on me and asked where I was going.

‘To my husband.’ What else was left? At least I might see the drightens’ reactions for myself.

I let Gerlach walk ahead of me so he couldn’t see my face, pale after my illness and the exertion even a slow walk caused me. By the time we turned in to the council chamber, my lungs were burning with the effort.

Dieter perched straight-backed on a couch, Roshi kneeling at his side as he parried with Helma and Rudiger Somner simultaneously. After a quick look up at my entrance, Roshi bent her head and stared into her lap.

The seven drightens who’d arrived thus far were gathered in various stages of recline on a loose circle of couches. I wondered what Grandmother would have thought, seeing the room turned into a smoking pit, but still there was no murmur from her. Perhaps the poison had burnt her out.

Thralls moved through the gathering, distributing food, refilling drinks and tidying up any mess.

‘Matilde.’ Dieter welcomed me warmly and beckoned me to his side.

Grateful for the chance to rest, I didn’t hesitate to share his couch, although I did draw the line at reclining in public like some weak-spined Ilthean noble, an attitude not shared by all the drightens.

Only Maja of House Saschan sat upright, her legs crossed, staring at the carpet’s pattern as if it held important secrets. Though seemingly oblivious to the talk ebbing and flowing around her, she was a sharp player and I did not doubt she caught every nuance of every comment.

Krimhilde of House Raethn lay on her stomach, her head pillowed on one arm, in conversation with her brother Merten, who sat in a nest of cushions by her. Rein of House Falkere, whose son I might have wed had Dieter not staged his Aestival coup, had his eyes closed and his face turned to the ceiling, drawing deep on a pipe as he listened to the whispers of Evard Somner.

Dieter lay a proprietary hand on my shoulder as the drightens directed a barrage of questions at me. How was I feeling? I looked unwell still, did I have the strength yet to share their counsels? Who could have committed such a cowardly act?

Exhausted from my illness, lack of sleep, and the sudden exertion, I didn’t have the breath to answer. Dieter spoke for me. Perhaps he sought to cement the image of his power over me – or perhaps he understood how I struggled for the energy to speak.

After a while the flurry of questions died away, and the drightens talked of trivialities, their conversation going around in circles, never settling, never committing. They glossed over any suggestion of a vote whenever the subject arose, their eyes shifting constantly, measuring and assessing the currents, gauging the positions of the other drightens.

Dieter’s fears were true: they were at a stalemate.

While they prevaricated, there would be no vote. If they did not vote within a fortnight, there would be no ratification and Dieter would need to conquer them all to keep the throne.

Even with the Skythes to back him, Dieter wouldn’t have the manpower to withstand all the tribes united against him. His only hope now lay in divisiveness, and he was bending all his charm and cunning to the task, with a comment here, a silence there, a significant glance at one and a thoughtful appraisal of another’s speech. Though he appeared at his ease, he was working hard to keep the drightens separated, his grip on the back of my neck betraying his tension.

A thrall appeared in the doorway, bowing awkwardly before daring to enter. Scanning the room, her eyes settled on me.

‘Excuse me, my lady,’ she said, stopping before me. ‘There’s a messenger in the courtyard, with an armed escort, calling for the Lady Matilde.’

Just like that, the safe ground I’d worked hard to create beneath me – Dieter’s trust, the drightens’ disregard – were suddenly at risk.

All eyes turned my way.

‘Matilde,’ murmured Dieter, suspicion sharp in his tone. ‘Is there something you want to share? Perhaps you’ll tell me now who it was you contacted, while I was busy evading the Skythe trap you set for me?’
He was talking about the damnable pigeons again, the birds that had been released while we were securing the Nilofen as allies. Sigi had not been able to tell me anything of them or the message they might have carried, but that had not allayed Dieter’s suspicions. Now there arrived a messenger, calling for me by name, awakening Dieter’s distrust again. And where Dieter distrusted, the drightens discovered a keen interest in following suit.

‘You’ve made a mistake,’ I said to the thrall. ‘My husband is the Duethin – the messenger would be asking for him.’

‘No, my lady, he was definitely asking for you. He said he’d speak to no other,’ said the thrall. ‘However, it’s possible he’s lost his wits. He has the starveling look of a stray, and his eyes keep rolling in his head.’

‘You could have added that snippet earlier,’ I snapped, fear making my tone hard. ‘He doesn’t know what he’s saying, obviously.’

No one laughed. No one relaxed. Stray and lunatic or not, the stranger was armed and asking for me by name. Was he a plant, or a ploy? Had one of the drightens decided to oust Dieter in my name? Or perhaps one or more sought to undermine Dieter’s position.

I snuck a glance around the drightens, but none had the look of guarding secrets. Indeed, all of them were waiting to see my reaction.

‘Perhaps we should see what the lad wants,’ I said, keeping my voice calm.

Despite the energy it cost me, I walked the entire way with Dieter a half-step behind me – his choice of positioning, not mine. The drightens followed, of course. There would be no keeping them from this spectacle.

Stepping into a pale wash of sunlight, I immediately saw a ring of soldiers surrounding a stranger in the courtyard’s centre. The stranger was loudly demanding, ‘Matilde of House Svanaten’, and insisting he’d speak to no other. Behind him huddled the ragged remains of an entourage, the bear of House Vestenn on their tabards. As one, they looked up at me, and the gaunt stranger stopped his cries.

Silence fell over the courtyard as, sour horror choking me, I recognised him. Beneath all the grime it was Sepp standing before me, thin and wild and hurting. I’d thought him dead in the Aestival coup, yet here he was, bedraggled and broken, in the midst of the ragged remains of House Vestenn. Where had he been in the meantime? And what had befallen House Vestenn?

Dieter bent his head to the level of my ear. ‘Friend of yours?’ he whispered.

A commotion broke out before I could answer. ‘You fool!’ shouted a young man storming from the ragged entourage to grab Sepp’s arm. ‘You’ve brought us to our deaths!’ he bawled, giving Sepp’s arm a violent shake.

Sepp hung limp in his grasp, his head jerking back and forth.

‘Release him!’ I shouted, the command escaping me with no pause for thought. The agitated man abruptly loosened his grip and Sepp lifted hopeful eyes to me.

‘I knew it,’ he said. ‘We heard stories, stories of blood –’ He stopped, his voice cracking, then let out the sigh of one laying down a heavy burden and finished simply, ‘I knew you’d hold true.’

The man who’d berated Sepp glanced at Dieter and the drightens, silent and waiting. ‘Is this true, my lady?’

He looked familiar, and in a moment more I had puzzled out why. Take away the tension creasing his brow and drawing down his mouth, add fifty years, and he would resemble Harald of House Vestenn, our missing drighten. He was obviously close kin to Harald; given his group’s ragged appearance, he could well be the heir to that House now.

Fear of hurting Sepp stopped my tongue and silence fell over the courtyard.

‘Do you hold the Turholm?’ the Vestenn demanded, grounding his stave with a thud.

‘No,’ I said after a brief hesitation. ‘My lord and husband does. Dieter of House Raban is Duethin, not I.’

Sepp slumped down on his knees, squeezing his eyes shut. Meanwhile, the Vestenn stared at Dieter, a sickly green sheen stealing the flush from his cheeks. His lips moved as he soundlessly repeated, ‘House Raban’. What had he heard, that the name caused him such horror?

A large crowd had gathered by now, thralls drifting from their duties and soldiers drawn from their posts. They stared at Sepp, who looked utterly broken.

I tore my eyes away, Sepp’s despair too painful to contemplate. Behind him, the Vestenn was stepping backward, still staring at Dieter.

Dieter stepped forward. ‘Enough of the theatrics. I want to know why this ragged group –’

The Vestenn spun on his heel and dived into the circle of his men, who held their weapons tight, watching everyone with wild eyes.

Dieter placed one hand on my shoulder but made no other move. The Vestenn and his men stood ready, shoulders forward, sunlight glinting off swords, axe heads and pikes. For one strangled moment the entire courtyard stood as if trapped in amber, golden and glinting and frozen.

Then everything exploded.
‘VESTENN!’

Howling the name like a battlecry, the Vestenn and his men burst forward, swords and axes held high, shouts ringing around the courtyard stones.

Hard and swift, Dieter pushed me behind him, then drew his sword with his other arm. Looking up, I glimpsed the Vestenn’s men surging forward, one knocking Sepp an accidental blow with the butt of his pike that sent him sprawling to the stones.

Dieter’s men flew forward, a tide of black birds, throwing their own cries against the sky. It was only a matter of time. This was not an attack. It was suicide.

‘Take them alive!’ came Dieter’s command over the clamour. He didn’t join the fray, instead remaining in front of me, sword at the ready.

One of the ragged men loomed out of the fight, and swung his axe at Dieter’s head.

Dieter flexed back to avoid the blow, his sword raised in defence. The wind of the axe’s swipe ruffled his hair then whistled past my cheeks. The attacker had underestimated Dieter’s agility, and the force of his swing left him overextended. Roshi darted past me. A strange expression crossed the attacker’s features and he dropped to the ground like a rotten tree, Roshi’s blade buried in his heart.

Yet more of Dieter’s men streamed out of the Turholm and plunged into the fight.

‘I want them alive!’ Dieter ordered again.

A few straggling clashes later, it was over, the tide of Dieter’s men easily overwhelming the ragged band. Like clockwork winding down, they separated, resolving from a swirling tangle of limbs into individual men, some standing, some kneeling, some motionless on the ground. The Vestenn knelt, head hanging, a cut to his temple bleeding into his dazed eyes. Blood lay dark and already congealing on the paving stones.

‘Escort them to the cells,’ Dieter ordered. Then, pointing at the Vestenn and Sepp, he continued, ‘And have those two brought to the council chamber.’

Turning, he linked my arm through his and we moved inside, Roshi and the drightens gathering in our wake like magpies caught by the current of a passing hawk.

‘The lad?’ said Dieter.

‘Sepp,’ I supplied, then hesitated over how to explain him.

‘Tell me.’

Distracted by the impossibility of Sepp’s arrival, my answer slipped out without thought. ‘He’s my cousin.’ Then I clamped my lips shut, cursing the misstep. The last thing Sepp needed was to be considered of political worth.

‘Yes,’ said Dieter, giving me a strange look. ‘I know.’

‘You know?’

Dieter rolled his eyes. ‘You Svanaten – always so pure and righteous. Did you think the rest of the world couldn’t figure it out? He’s Helena’s son, born on the bloody side of the sheets. Given his age, she must’ve been not much older than you are now when she was tumbled.’

I couldn’t answer, the words lodging in my chest like a tangle of thorns.

‘She couldn’t wed a common thrall. Not Beata’s daughter,’ Dieter continued, shaking his head, his familiar mocking smile reasserting itself. ‘A formidable woman, your grandmother. Ravens forbid her daughter should marry beneath her – though Beata not only let her precious son wed a goatherd, she allowed the goatherd’s mother to pour memories into her head.’

‘Easy for you to say! The only thing more putrid than the swamps surrounding your family’s holdings are the morals! Here, it’s a wonder Helena wasn’t executed, with Grandmother wielding the axe herself.’

Dieter shrugged. ‘The fact that she wasn’t is your clue, Matilde. What we’re told is fact is not always so. When it comes to morals and rules, I dare say it’s almost never true. The Turholm is littered with illegitimate children, as are the holdings. They’re simply hushed over and ignored. I have one myself, you know.’

‘A child?’ I gasped, a hush from behind telling me I’d spoken too loud.

Dieter snorted, pinning my arm closer to his side to quicken my lagging steps. ‘No. A bastard in the family. In my case it’s a brother.’

My head was swimming. I’d spent years piecing together snippets of conversation and significant pauses, looks given and avoided, then for even more years I’d carefully hoarded the unspoken knowledge that Sepp was my cousin. Now, not only had I blurted it out, careless and casual, but I’d learnt it was no secret after all.
As we drew level with the council chambers, I gripped Dieter’s arm. ‘Please don’t hurt Sepp,’ I implored him. He gave me a leaden look, and shook his head. ‘I’ve far more important concerns right now.’

Really, to hear Dieter tell it, almost anyone could have overthrown my family. In a lot of ways I was lucky it had been him. I wouldn’t have liked my fate had the Somners been behind the coup.

Grandmother muttered in the back of my head, too quiet and quick for me to catch her words, although her disgruntled tone was clear. It was the first time she’d stirred since the poisoning, and her return made me uneasy. Grandmother would not approve of my new circumstances and, once the poison and its damage had receded, I would hear more than half-formed mutters from her on the matter. I pushed the uncomfortable thought aside as we turned in to the council chamber together, my mercurial husband and I.

We sat next to each other on a couch again, our backs ramrod straight. I folded my hands in my lap and did my best to look blank and meek. This was not the time for Sepp to get ideas.

Once all the drightens had reassembled, Sepp and the Vestenn were marched in and pushed to their knees before Dieter, who let the silence stretch while he studied them.

Sepp’s left eye had already swollen shut and his cheek was split, blood still trickling from the wound. Misery hung over him like a shroud.

In contrast, the Vestenn’s fury was clearly sustaining him. Though he knelt, hands bound, chin smeared with the blood of a bitten lip, he fixed an angry gaze on Dieter.

‘Start with your name,’ said Dieter.

‘Start with the Lady Matilde’s status,’ the Vestenn countered. ‘Why does she walk free?’

‘Because I’m not in the habit of shackling her,’ said Dieter. ‘The sport’s better this way.’

I stared at my lap and thought of winter winds and snow. Anything to keep the heat from my cheeks.

‘Your name,’ Dieter repeated. ‘It’s a simple enough question.’

‘Xaver,’ replied the Vestenn, his shoulders slumping a little, as though by admitting to his name he’d relinquished some of his power. Or his defiance.

‘That would make you the nephew of our missing Harald,’ said Dieter.

Xaver made no comment.

‘You’re not his heir, though,’ Dieter continued, pushing for answers. ‘What happened to Alina?’

‘Dead with him,’ Xaver said quietly into a room hushed with suspense.

Harald’s death wasn’t precisely news, of course. His absence had spoken of trouble, and the ragged and weary appearance of Sepp’s companions confirmed it. What was difficult to fathom was the reason for their suicidal attack.

‘When?’ asked Dieter, digging for details.

‘It can’t have been more than a week, I suppose. A fortnight?’ This last Xaver directed at Sepp, but he didn’t respond and Xaver fell silent.

‘What happened?’

Xaver’s jaw clenched with anger and he spat. This earned him a crack across the ear, which knocked him to the floor. His shoulder took the impact with a thump. The soldier who’d delivered the blow then planted a fist in Xaver’s hair and hauled him back to his knees.

‘I’ll answer no more of your questions, Ilthean scum!’ Xaver panted.

The words sent a buzz around the room like the aftershock of lightning, the drightens betraying their tension in the still, fixed way they watched Xaver as he continued talking.

‘I don’t know what hold you have over the Lady Matilde, nor what bargains you’ve wrought with the other drightens. But you couldn’t sway my uncle, and you can’t sway me. You may as well save yourself the trouble and kill me now.’

The soldier cocked his fist again, and Xaver flinched in anticipation, but Dieter checked the blow with a gesture.

Tension thrummed through the silence, Xaver’s words echoing in every mind. Ilthean scum. The drightens were still, some watching Xaver, more watching Dieter, all of them waiting.

My heart thumped. The drightens would tear us limb from limb if they believed Dieter was allied with the Iltheans. I thought of Renatas, hidden somewhere about the palace. Did you think the boy struck a deal only with you?

‘Interesting,’ said Dieter. ‘Do you use the epithet for all those you detest, or am I unique?’

When Xaver didn’t respond, Dieter pressed further. ‘I’m being quite literal,’ he said breezily, as if the weight of lives didn’t hang in the balance. ‘Exactly why do you call me Ilthean?’

‘Your brother didn’t tell me you were a halfwit. How do you keep them all under control? Or perhaps he made the bargains. They must be powerful tempting ones,’ sneered Xaver before turning a spiteful glare over his shoulder at the drightens circled behind him.

All the drightens watched Dieter intently, their allegiance ready to fracture along unpredictable lines. Helma
licked her lips, eager for the downfall.

_I have one myself. A bastard in the family. In my case it’s a brother._

Could his brother be Ilthean? Dieter certainly didn’t have the look of a white serpent, but perhaps his father had dallied with an Ilthean woman.

_She wasn’t a woman to be trifled with,_ Dieter had said of his mother. _Although my father, may the ravens devour his canny soul, tried it anyway._

‘Fascinating as it is to watch a deranged mind at work, this is going nowhere,’ Dieter said, his voice sounding light enough to float away. I could feel the heat radiating from his side, however, belying his calm.

He gestured at the drights with a lift of his chin. ‘They’ve not decided one way or the other about me. Of course, if you insist on calling me Ilthean, they might believe you. Then they’ll decide against me. I have a lot of men here loyal to me, it’s true, but not enough to fight them all. So you understand, I hope, why I’m keen for you to drop this nonsense. I may not be of House Svanaten, but that doesn’t make me any less Turasi than you. In fact, if you’re looking for a pedigree, I can assure you that House Raban held the throne long before the Svanatens, with their penchant for goatherds. Plus, I married a Svanaten daughter,’ he added. ‘I’d call that impeccable lineage, wouldn’t you?’

Xaver studied Dieter a moment, then turned to me for confirmation. ‘Tell me true, Lady Matilde – is he Ilthean?’

I shook my head.

Xaver looked back at Dieter, his face hardening again. ‘Your brother Sidonius –’

‘I have no brother,’ Dieter cut him off, gripping my elbow tighter, warning me to silence. ‘If I did, he would be Turasi, like me and my sister.’

‘Yes,’ he said when Xaver frowned. ‘I have a sister, Amalia. Did this Ilthean “brother” neglect to mention her? She was raised with me, in the stronghold of Grabanstein. Quite a way from Ilthea and her conquered nations, I think you’ll agree.’

Slowly, Sepp lifted his head and turned his weary, hopeful gaze on me. ‘He’s not Ilthean?’

I held silent as he and Xaver stared at me, waiting, depending on me for their answer. Why would they trust my word? Didn’t they know I’d turned my back on my family and my House, not only wedding their killer to save my own shivering skin but now also having the coward’s heart to esteem him? Their trust hurt. But Sepp was my cousin, and my closest friend since childhood. I met his gaze squarely. ‘He’s not Ilthean. I’d never turn my people to the Iltheans.’

No need to add that even if Dieter had been Ilthean I wouldn’t have hesitated to act the same way I had back at Aestival. What was a little lying, for a woman who’d committed adultery and betrayed her House and family?

‘Now,’ said Dieter, drawing all eyes back to him. ‘Let’s get to the bottom of this Ilthean brother business, shall we?’

Xaver slumped, the tension leaking from his muscles, so Sepp took up the story.

‘The Lady Helena arrived at Aestival,’ he said, his head hanging. ‘She claimed she was visiting her family. Lady Beata was suspicious of her intentions. She sent me south that afternoon, to investigate the Ilthean army gathered on the border.’

Sepp looked up and cast me a glance of appeal that I couldn’t decipher, then dropped back into his dejected pose. ‘Getting there was easy enough. Lingering nearby to scout them out was more difficult. Getting back …’ he paused, unable to continue.

‘Was nigh impossible,’ said Xaver, taking up the story once more. ‘They’d crossed the river at the foot of the Sentinels, where it bends north in an ox-bow, which left their bulk in between my uncle’s holding and the Turholm.’

The Iltheans had built a half-dozen pontoon bridges to secure their lines of supply and retreat. Nureya was their main base, just as Helena had claimed. She’d failed to mention how many legions had gathered there: a full ten, Xaver told us, and more on the way.

Xaver had been captured while scouting, and it was then he had met Sepp, captured several days earlier under similar circumstances. Sepp had kept his head because the general took a liking to him and claimed him; Xaver they kept alive for the ransom. Freedom for both arrived in the form of a Vestenn raid to retrieve Xaver; they had escaped through a combination of luck, the Vestenn men’s superior knowledge of the land, and Vestenn lives spent to buy them time.

Xaver’s gaze snapped back to the here and now. ‘My uncle’s land follows the line of the river. Generations of blood and battle have made it the official boundary. Unofficially, however, the lands on both banks are of … nebulous allegiance. My uncle always cultivated the support of the rustics as a way of recruiting informants.’

‘A canny man,’ said Dieter.

‘A vulnerable man,’ Xaver corrected. ‘With Ilthea to the south and the Morvingen to the west, it would take little to pen him like a weasel traps a hare in its burrow.’
‘The Iltheans made alliance with the Morvingen?’ asked Dieter.
‘There was no way out. My uncle tried to head north. A longer route, but it would see us arrive safely, if late,’ said Xaver, his eyes hazed with the memory of blood and battle.
‘What happened?’ I prompted, impatient.
Xaver made to speak, but Dieter answered instead. ‘They held the north as well.’
‘The Iltheans? Or the Morvingen?’ Fear fluttered against my ribs. Was every land angling for my throne?
‘Both,’ said Xaver. ‘The Morvingen have always hankered after my uncle’s lands. They let the Ilthean army march north to outflank us, then swelled those ranks with their own men, hiding behind Ilthean livery.’
The drightens were all stiff with tension now, their indecision burning away like mist beneath a rising sun.
‘And why would the Iltheans wish to detain your uncle?’ Dieter asked.
‘He knew the size of their force. He knew of their stronghold on Turasi lands. He knew the legions were marching on the Turholm.’
His words were followed by indrawn breaths and wide eyes, the drightens baited and hooked. Maja looked to be already calculating, while Merten had his eyes squeezed shut.
‘Marching here,’ said Helma.
‘Scarce a week behind,’ Xaver answered.
‘Who leads them?’ asked Maja. ‘Which of the Ilthean generals seeks glory this time?’
‘His name is Sidonius,’ said Xaver, cutting a glance at Dieter, though it was Sepp who reacted with a shudder. Xaver put a hand on Sepp’s shoulder and finished, ‘He’s better known as the slave-born general.’
And there it was: the crisis point.
Sidonius. The emperor’s prized slave-born general had reputedly never lost a battle, never allowed a land he invaded to escape the conqueror’s yoke. He had brought swathes upon swathes of land under the empire’s dominion.
What they had heard stilled the drightens, eddied through the minds of each. Divided, they hadn’t the force to withstand the snakes. United they might. There was a man already at their head, awaiting only their decision to pledge to him.
My accidental poisoning had threatened to topple everything Dieter had garnered. Where one Svanaten failed him, however, another saved him. Sepp and Xaver’s news dissolved all uncertainty. This Sidonius might bring war in his wake, but in his bow-wave the threat of him brought unification – under Dieter’s rule.
It was obvious to me that Dieter realised it. He’d run the numbers through his head, but the gathering of his dark brows, and the throbbing beat of the pulse at his temple and throat, didn’t speak of equanimity. Perhaps he strove not to appear too victorious too soon.
He caught the eye of a soldier and nodded towards Sepp and Xaver. ‘Unbind them. Then let them supp.’
Sepp, and Xaver’s men with him, were to be offered rooms and refreshment. Xaver would now represent House Vestenn. He looked dazed by the sudden change in his fortunes. It was one thing to be the last surviving Vestenn; it was another to be acknowledged as such.
Struck bone-weary by politics and manoeuvring and the inevitable, I followed Sepp’s shuffling feet from the room. The political currents were settling before I’d reached the door. The drightens had much to discuss. Dieter would be ratified by the end of the day.
TWENTY-FIVE

BRIGHT-EYED, EARNEST, AND only two years my junior, Sepp had been my closest friend for as long as I could remember. Most of my early life had been spent in his company – hunting frogs by the river, helping him herd the geese on summer days, stampeding through the thralls’ runs.

In later years, when we left childhood games behind us, his time had been monopolised by an apprenticeship with the master of horses, while mine had been swallowed by Grandmother’s strictures. We still stole every moment we could together, precious times in the kitchen, where I learnt the intricacies of cooking, or in the stable, where he taught me how to nurse a colicky horse, his touch sure and deft. My favourite times with him had been when we took the ferrets into the kitchen cellars. In the dim and cavernous depths we would set the ferrets free to hunt the rats while we sat, perched on barrels containing apple cider or oil or brine for pickling, and simply talked, free and unguarded and ungoverned.

We had shared our thoughts on everything, from Grandmother’s mercurial treatment of Sepp to the marriages she was considering on my behalf, from the progress of my father’s breeding program with the horses to news of the latest stirrings among the nations bordering our lands.

Although Grandmother’s manner towards Sepp was never warmer than indifference, and was often far colder, still he had stood apart from the common thralls. He’d learnt politics in his apprenticeship with the master of horses, and through his friendship with me. These factors, combined with his collar and his unspoken ties to House Svanaten, made it no surprise that Grandmother had included him in the party sent to investigate the Ilthean threat. A horse-handler would be ignored or dismissed, and thus have the opportunity of employing his sharp eyes and political acumen where others would not.

But now, walking beside me, was a creature entirely changed from the Sepp I knew.

Privation had stolen the flesh off his frame, and strain and nervous exhaustion were etched into his face. Worse, though, was the way he slumped, like a candle in its last moments.

‘What happens now?’ he asked, his monotone voice expressing as little interest as his posture.

‘The drightens will ratify Dieter as Duethin,’ I replied, taking the opportunity of guiding him around a corner to touch his forearm, though he didn’t appear to notice. ‘They’ll send for aid. Then it’ll be a race to see who arrives first, the Iltheans or the support,’ I said.

He stared at his feet, and I dared not disturb his silence.

‘Did they all … everyone?’ he asked.

‘Most,’ I said, then corrected myself in the next breath. Sepp’s ‘everyone’ had never been the same as mine. ‘Most of the court, that is. The majority of the thralls are still alive. Still working here, too, although none with a high opinion of me, as a rule.’

I offered a smile, but he didn’t look up and the smile slid off my face, sickly and pale as a stillborn.

‘Aunt Helena didn’t survive,’ I said hesitantly. ‘Her son, Renatas, did – Grandmother wouldn’t have him at the celebration.’

Sepp said nothing, and we lapsed into silence as we walked. At last, as we neared our destination, he spoke.

‘You married him,’ he said.

Despite the flatness of his tone, a lot rode on my response.

I showed him into his room, grateful for the chance to prevaricate. There were too many layers in his statement, too many reminders of the person Sepp had known. Too many choices had turned me further and further from that ingenue who’d stood on her tiptoes, eager for a glimpse of her infamous aunt.

Stopping inside, Sepp glanced around, taking in the luxury of the room before turning an enquiring glance on me.

‘You’re my friend, and you need to rest. You can’t do that in a stable loft,’ I said.

‘I always managed fine before,’ he said.

‘Sepp,’ I started, but he shrugged me off, shuffling across to the window, where he stood, clutching at the sill and staring out into the snatch of garden it revealed.

He needed to know why, of course, and how I’d come to marry the man who’d wreaked havoc on our world, but it wasn’t something I could proffer with ease, or without pain.

‘It’s more than the binding, Tilde,’ he said, his voice bouncing back off the window like chips of wind-borne ice.

‘You’re loyal to him. Why?’

You don’t understand what it was like, I wanted to say, living when nobody else did. But the words died in my mouth. Looking at him, wearing more grime and weariness than flesh, I thought perhaps he did understand.
‘I did what I had to,’ I said. ‘At first, that’s all it was.’

Hunching his shoulders, he rested his head against the glass.

‘But, Sepp, there’s been so much … and I’ve been alone. I lost Grandmother, you, my court, even my mother’s kin … he’s never hurt me.’

It sounded feeble, even to my ears. Words couldn’t convey the nature of a normal binding, let alone mine to Dieter.

Sepp didn’t speak, and I edged closer, dared to put a hand on his back. His shirt was stiff with grit and dried sweat.

‘Sepp, please.’

‘What, Matilde? What do you want of me? Don’t you understand? I have no more to give!’ he cried, throwing off my touch, finally roused. ‘I spent it all, trekking back here. For you. Now you tell me you’re happy?’

‘No, I –’

‘I don’t want to hear any more,’ he cut me off. ‘You’ve made your choices, and you don’t owe me explanations. But don’t ask me to understand, and don’t ask me to be happy for you, because I’m not and can’t be.’ Blinking back a swell of tears, he went on, ‘I’ll not speak out against him or undermine him, if that’s what you’re worried about. So please, leave me.’

Anger and shame kept me silent, conflicting responses tangling in my throat, so I turned and left, latching the door quietly behind me.

He didn’t come after me.

* * *

Gerlach was waiting for me outside Sepp’s room and fell into step beside me. He had been my escort since I woke from the poison – since I’d committed to Dieter in deed as well as name. Evidence, perhaps, of Dieter’s fondness for me? The idea made me smile.

‘The lad seems distressed,’ Gerlach said, speaking suddenly when we were almost back at my own rooms.

‘Yes,’ I agreed hesitantly, wary now. Gerlach was not a loquacious man. If he spoke, it was with a purpose in mind, and I could not yet gauge it.

‘The Lady Amalia also seemed distressed this morn,’ he said.

‘She is … impulsive,’ I said, and Gerlach grunted, whether in agreement or disbelief I could not tell.

We reached my rooms and I expected Gerlach to wait outside, as was his norm, but instead he followed me in. Turning, he latched the door, but didn’t advance further into the room.

Baffled, I turned and confronted him. ‘Is there something on your mind, General?’

He took a moment before he answered, saying only, ‘I’ve seen it before.’

‘Seen what?’

‘Prison sickness.’

The words slid deep inside my marrow, like slivers of ice.

‘There are other names for it,’ he continued. ‘Bound is a popular term, and an apt one, but prison sickness describes it without the irony.’

‘You do realise you’re making very little sense?’ I said, perplexed.

‘Freedom is the only cure,’ he went on, ‘although if it’s not gained in time, even that will fail.’

Shock rooted me to the floor. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Was the loyal Gerlach truly telling me to flee? It made no sense – unless it was some test of Dieter’s.

‘Have a care, General,’ I said, ice in my tone. ‘Your words are treason.’

He shook his head, his look softening to one of pity. ‘You still have a chance, my lady, but every day you remain decreases it.’

I took a step back, fear making my heart beat quick. ‘Why would I leave? My husband is Duethin, and for the first time since we …’ I faltered over how to express it diplomatically, ‘… since we met, we understand one another.’

‘My lady,’ he murmured, reaching for my hand and clasping it gently in his long fingers. ‘Matilde.’

‘Don’t …’

‘He’s not a bad man,’ said Gerlach. ‘In truth, he’s not. But you’re not in a position to appreciate it. He’s not good for you, and nor is his sister. They have you twisted around inside yourself so you don’t know up from down.’

I shook my head, denying his words.

‘You don’t love him, Matilde,’ he insisted, his eyes dark with shadows. ‘You think you do, I know. It’s part of the sickness. He holds your life in his hands and your soul under his thumb; he has done since Aestival. Living under that strain … it breaks even the strongest, eventually.’
‘No,’ I whispered.

‘It’s no shame,’ he said gently, pulling me a step closer. ‘What resources did you have to combat him? None. How can any mind stay strong, living under the constant threat of his displeasure? Every nicety, every touch of restraint he shows towards you twists you further and further the wrong way.’

I snatched my hand away. ‘I’m not leaving him –’

‘He killed your family, Matilde. He branded you,’ he said. ‘He let you live even after you tried to betray him, knowing it might meld you to his cause. A little guilt makes a prisoner more malleable. Even now, you’re wondering if he’s testing you.’

I had no more will to protest. I couldn’t even shake my head, and the thought that I hadn’t denied it made me feel sick.

‘Why are you doing this?’ I asked weakly.

‘I’ve watched a woman turn herself inside out over Dieter before,’ he said, his voice soft, his gaze pinning me. ‘I’ve no desire to see it again.’

I stumbled backward, reeling with confusion, clinging to the one thing I knew was true: Dieter was not above testing me, and Gerlach would do anything his lord asked.

‘Get out,’ I ordered, unable to keep the rising hysteria from my voice. ‘Get out!’
TWENTY-SIX

TWO DAYS LATER, a knock at my door set my heart to thumping. I had been jumpy and fearful ever since my odd conversation with Gerlach, waiting for Dieter to reveal the test and whether I’d failed, waiting for Gerlach to start in again. To my surprise, Sepp stepped through the doorway. His sombre expression shrivelled the bloom of hope I felt at seeing him.

‘Matilde,’ he said softly, without preamble. ‘You need to come with me.’

‘What has happened?’ I asked, grim possibilities racing through my mind. Riot inside the walls, or the glimmer of Ilthean campfires signalling the army’s arrival?

‘Don’t worry,’ he said, but didn’t elaborate.

I hesitated, and he frowned and added, ‘There isn’t much time, Tilde.’

‘Much time for what?’ I demanded.

Instead of answering, Sepp pushed past me and opened the entrance to the thralls’ runs.

I paused on the threshold of the lamplit corridor, uneasy at the lack of guards. I did not believe the guards’ absence to be coincidence, but it was difficult to credit that Sepp could have arranged it. Gerlach’s strange behaviour flashed to mind, but I dismissed the idea. Sepp’s distrust ran too deep; he would not work with Dieter, or any of his men.

‘Sepp, what’s going on?’

He turned to look at me. ‘Do you trust me?’

‘That’s not fair –’

‘Do you?’ he demanded.

‘Yes, but I need to know –’

‘You need to come with me,’ he said again, turning away. ‘I’m not talking to you anywhere those guards of his can overhear us.’

With a sigh I followed, and the stone door snicked shut behind us. His urgent stride gave us no time to speak as he led me towards the lower courtyard. As we stepped into the brisk night air, Sepp’s pace quickened even further and I had to trot to keep up. The hurry put a sting of fear back into my veins. What was so urgent?

‘Sepp, what –?’

‘Not yet,’ he said, his eyes scanning the shadows.

I fell back, increasingly nervous of the familiar contours. The corner of the kitchen bore ominous new outlines that could have been peering heads. Was it the wind, rustling across the gravel of the garden, or the tread of unfriendly feet? The pitch blackness beneath the Pigs Gate set my heart to quailing. Only Sepp’s unhesitating step prodded me through into the thick scent of mulch and fresh manure. The pigs yoinked and grunted and came trotting to the side of their pens.

Though mud slicked up and around our feet, Sepp’s stride didn’t slacken in the least before he ducked into the musky darkness of the stables up ahead, the gloom swallowing him in moments. I hurried in after him. The air that washed over me carried spores, I was sure of it: fungal fur would be taking root in my lungs with every breath.

Shapes resolved out of the dim interior, slat-fenced stalls and the bulk of tack hooked to the walls. This section of the stable housed only the horses, for the ceiling was too low to admit an upper level. The hayloft, and the loft where the stable thralls slept, lay in the other direction, hidden by the darkness. Ahead of me, Sepp stood near the final stall – near what appeared to be the mouth of a tunnel.

Sweat slicked my palms as I stopped.

‘You need to hurry, Matilde,’ Sepp said.

Rustlings from the stall near him spoke of another presence, one of the horses disturbed by the unusual visit. Squaring my shoulders, I stepped forward.

‘Watch your step,’ Sepp added, but it was too late. My foot sank into a warm pile of horse manure. Ignoring the wet warmth seeping through my thin shoes, I joined him near the furthermost stall. Taking in the sacks gathered in a heap in front of the stall, a nameless dread chilled my spine.

Roshi stepped out of the gloom of the stall dressed for practicality in boots, goat-leather pants and tunic, her hair gathered back into a braid at her nape. She carried a leather hackamore in one hand, a coil of rope in the other.

‘It’s time to go, Matilde,’ she said.

‘What are you talking about? I’m not going anywhere,’ I said, panicked.

‘Yes you are, and you’re leaving now,’ said Roshi. ‘We have provisions enough to last us a fortnight if we’re
thrifty. This tunnel will bring us out closer to the walls than I’d like, but if we keep our heads low, we’ve a solid enough chance of escaping notice.’

‘In case you’ve forgotten, there’s an army out there, marching towards us and in all likelihood intent on destroying my land and beheading my husband. I won’t let it happen!’ I said, hot tears springing to my eyes. My voice had risen, sending abrupt echoes through the quiet stable, startling the sleeping horses. Quietly but firmly, I finished, ‘I’ve lost one family already. I’ll not walk away from another.’

‘We need to hurry,’ Sepp said to Roshi, who nodded, turning to bridle the pony.

‘I’m not leaving,’ I insisted.

Roshi shared a look with Sepp. I didn’t wait to find out its meaning. Readiness sharpened my muscles as I mentally measured the spaces in the stable aisle, then I turned, already running. As I clawed and shoved past Sepp, my soiled foot slipped on the dry rushes, losing me precious moments as I righted myself.

Roshi must have whipped around, for the next thing I knew she’d snagged my forearm. The stall slats stopped her from gaining a good grip, but it was enough to slow me. Not that Sepp needed any help: he too was fast, hooking my leg out from under me. I landed on my back with all the grace of an upended turtle, slamming into the rammed earth hard enough to wind myself. Blackness shrouded my vision. When it cleared, Roshi had jumped the stall to crouch over me. Hands on my shoulders, she peered into my face. Behind her, Sepp bent to the provisions, working swiftly.

‘I won’t lose him too,’ I said, breathless and dazed. ‘He’s all I have left.’

‘He’s the one thing you don’t have,’ she replied. ‘But until you’re clear-headed enough to see it, and to see him without forgetting it, it isn’t wise for you to be around him.’

I squirmed in the sodden rushes, but Roshi’s legs gripped me too tight.

‘It’s time we freed you,’ said Roshi with a hesitant smile. ‘Your way, this time.’

‘I won’t!’

‘I’ll bind you if I must.’

I spat, but my aim was dreadful, the gobbet brushing a few stray strands of her hair.

‘Fine,’ Roshi said. ‘Sepp, the rope, please.’

Sepp passed the coil of rope over my head. As Roshi lifted a hand from my shoulder to take it, I shoved her off me and into Sepp’s legs. They both dropped in a tangle and I scrambled to my feet, lifted my skirts and ran. A bang and a startled whicker sounded behind me, but I didn’t look back. Ahead, a light flickered to life – one of the thralls had been woken by the clamour. Hope rose in me as the light strengthened.

Roshi took me down in a tackle that splayed me face-first into more horse manure. ‘Willing or not, cousin, you’re leaving,’ she murmured. ‘Now.’

Hauling my hands behind my back, she snaked the coarse rope around my wrists, tying it so tight it burned, no matter how little I struggled. After she’d bound my wrists, keeping one knee planted in the middle of my back, pinning me, she stood. It all happened so swiftly that the light had not yet moved forward. There came a single moment of freedom from Roshi’s pressing weight, then I was being hauled to my feet. I turned my head to find it was Sepp helping me to stand.

Between them, he and Roshi hustled me forward, towards the sturdy pony standing ready in the aisle, laden with the provisions.

I summoned one last shred of resistance, digging in my heels and pulling against their guidance. I only needed a few more moments, and we would be discovered. ‘You’ll have to knock me out to take me,’ I said.

‘Very well,’ Roshi said, then swung her fist at my temple, the crack of the impact turning the world black.
WHEN I CAME to, the throbbing in my head was an instant reminder of what had happened.

I lay still, focusing on the sounds around me as I tried to work out where I was. The smell of leaf-mould and forest litter filled the air. Fern fronds, gathered beneath a length of canvas, served for my bed. Everything was damp, including the bracken of my bedding.

A blanket covered me, at least, a thin but sturdy arrangement of layers of wool and goose-down sandwiched between an outer shell of canvas. Pity my skin wasn’t as weatherproof as the blanket.

Branches formed a false sky, alive with shivers and the darting movement of birds. The time was hard to gauge beneath the dense canopy, but night appeared to have passed.

I rolled onto my side, careful to retain the ruse of sleep, surveying the makeshift camp through slitted eyes.

A cast iron cauldron balanced on a rickety spit above a small fire nearby. Steam dragons twined above the cauldron, but the slight breeze was against me and brought no scent of what was brewing.

The pony stood tethered on the fire’s far side, its eyes half closed and its tail twitching at occasional midges and mosquitoes. Sepp lay nearby, head down, eyes closed, mouth open and faintly snoring. Roshi sat cross-legged by the fire.

‘A bear could be savaging me, and you’d never know,’ I said.

She glanced over with an amused expression. ‘Oh, I think I’d notice that. All the snuffling, you understand, and bears do have an unmistakable odour.’

I elbowed myself to a sitting position as Roshi watched whatever she was brewing.

‘You could untie me,’ I snapped, when I’d finally managed to sit up.

‘Not until you’ve learnt to behave,’ she replied, giving the pot a stir.

I examined the forest, trying to guess our location. We couldn’t have been more than a night’s walk from the Turholm. I had dim memories of waking, slung over the pony’s back like a sack of meal, with Roshi walking in front. Had she walked all night? A pale and papery look to her skin suggested she might have. In which case we should have been clear of the forest by now. Unless …

‘So,’ I said, ‘we’re not heading for the Skythe grasslands.’

‘No,’ she said, her voice flat. ‘We’re not.’

‘Interesting. I wouldn’t have thought you had any better place to seek sanctuary. Or any other place at all, for that matter,’ I goaded.

She poked again at the pot, leant forward and inhaled. A faint whiff reached me, stinging and sharp like nettles and citrus gone rancid. Removing the pot from its perch with a forked stick, she poured a wooden mugful of the tea and brought it to me. ‘I don’t need sanctuary.’

‘Those who’ve kidnapped queens normally need a place of safety.’

She nodded at the mug. ‘For your headache.’

‘I don’t have a headache.’

Her smile called me a liar. ‘You will. And I’ve not kidnapped you.’

‘This isn’t what I’d consider a pleasure jaunt,’ I said, holding my hands out in front of me to display my trussed wrists. On either side of the rope the flesh stood out in ridges, red and chafed.

‘I’m sorry about that,’ she said, her voice totally without chagrin. ‘We’re still too close to the Turholm to risk otherwise. Drink your tea,’ she added. ‘The headache you don’t have is making you white around the eyes.’

The sharp burn of ginger overwhelmed any other taste hidden in the brew. Once I’d gagged down a sip Roshi, apparently satisfied, turned and shook Sepp awake. He stared at her blankly for a few moments, then rubbed his eyes and finally nodded. After he’d got his bearings his glance slid to me. Finding me awake made him jerk upright.

As Roshi bedded down for her rest, Sepp watched me. I drank my tea, watching him in return.

The forest ticked by around us, insects creaking in the hidden depths, bird calls echoing through the open wooded corridors, a breeze curling as if by whimsey this way and that. After a while Sepp sat back against an elm tree, occasionally glancing my way.

I sat until the tea went cold in its mug.

‘She says you’re sick,’ he said at last.

I didn’t respond and, with a nervous glance at Roshi, sleeping on her side curled into a ball, he stood and stepped quietly across to me, flinching at the sight of my wounded wrists.

‘I’m not comfortable about it,’ he said, ‘but she says you’re not well, Tilde.’
‘Her only evidence seems to be that I love my husband.’

‘Tilde …’ He picked at detritus on the forest floor, digging his fingers into the earth, not daring to meet my gaze.

‘You don’t mean that. He’s done something to you, something to warp the way you think.’

My laugh had no humour in it. ‘Do you know, when I first met Roshi, she thought me ill in the head for not liking him?’

Emotion heated his cheeks and I wanted to bite my tongue for being sharp with him. Angering him now wouldn’t be my smartest tactic.

‘Sepp, I’ll be the first to admit it’s strange. I’ve hardly let up lately, complaining how much I dislike Diet. But you have to understand – we didn’t exactly meet under the best of circumstances.’ Now that was a diplomatic way of phrasing it. ‘I had a lot to overcome before I could see the good in him.’

Sepp avoided my gaze. ‘And you have overcome it? The massacre of our people, people we loved, friends?’

I dropped my hands to my lap, stinging under the reproach. How dare he! He hadn’t had to live through the Aestival slaughter, nor the days and weeks since. But I fought back the rising anger to keep my voice clear. ‘Other bindings have started on harsher foundations. He’s gentle, Sepp, and considerate.’

‘Which is sufficient?’ he said, his voice loud enough to make Roshi stir in her sleep. ‘Sufficient to make up for killing your family? Sufficient to make you love him?’

‘It’s more than could be said of a lot of men!’

‘Would you mind keeping your voices down?’ snapped Roshi, glaring at us, then rolling onto her other side and burrowing her head under her arm.

I shoved the mug away, spilling cold tea onto the soil, and raised my wrists, forcing Sepp to look at what they’d done to me. ‘He never once bound me!’

Sepp’s gaze flicked to my brow. ‘Then how do you account for the branding?’

I shoved my wrists up to hide my forehead. Where was my veil?

‘Is it part of the love?’ Sepp demanded, anger making his cheeks feverish.

‘He says I wouldn’t have survived the poison without it,’ I replied, seizing on the first words that came to mind, though Dieter’s lie tasted strange and false in my mouth.

‘Ha,’ came Roshi’s voice, bouncing off the trees and back at us. ‘You survived the poison because I acted quickly enough to stop you eating it all. Those marks did you no favours.’

I glared at her back. ‘I suppose you want me to thank you!’

‘No.’

The quiet dignity of her response robbed me of any retort.

Sepp swung his gaze between us, trying to piece together the story. I didn’t enlighten him. When it was clear Roshi had no more to add either, he said, ‘Tilde, please, you have to trust me.’

‘Like I trusted you last night?’

He winced, and I used his moment of hesitation to drive home the blade of guilt.

‘What reason do I have to trust you? You believe her over me, though we’ve been friends for a lifetime,’ I said. ‘How can I trust you? As far as I can see, I’m the only sane one here.’

His eyes turned hard and flat as slate. ‘You’re right. I have known you longer. Which is how I know the Tilde sitting in front of me isn’t the same person I left a month ago.’

Then Sepp, my closest friend and cousin, turned away.

The hurt made me desperate – and bitter. ‘I suppose you think I should’ve lain down and let them hack out my throat, too, do you?’

He flinched and turned back in a rush, pain alive in his eyes. I could still reach him.

‘Tilde …’ he said, extending his hand, his fingers brushing the rope. ‘I’d never wish you dead. Don’t say such things.’

Roshi grunted. ‘I wish the both of you are dead. Or at least gagged. And if you don’t shut up and let me sleep, you will be.’

Sepp ventured a smile.

‘Don’t misjudge her words for a joke,’ I warned. ‘She tried to kill Dieter and frame me for it. It would’ve worked if I hadn’t made the mistake of eating the tainted meal.’

Instead of displaying the fear I’d hoped, however, Sepp took a moment to consider my words. ‘Good,’ he said at last.

‘Good?’

‘We need someone who won’t baulk at what needs doing. You should have tried killing him long before last week. If you were in your right mind, you would have.’
TWENTY-EIGHT

BY THE TIME Roshi woke again, I’d had hours of silence in which to think.
She looked from me to Sepp, then said, ‘Breakfast for the squabbling children?’
My stomach grumbled and my mouth watered in anticipation as Roshi dug through the baggage, emerging with a
heel of bread and a winter apple. Such was my hunger that stale bread and a withered apple looked appetising.
‘You’ll have to eat on the march, because there isn’t time for fineries,’ said Roshi, hooking her hand through my
elbow and hauling me upright. ‘On your feet. The pony is carrying the bags today,’ she added firmly.
Sepp rolled up the groundsheets and loaded the pony’s panniers. Meanwhile, I’d gobbled down the bread before
he’d tightened the last strap.
‘Where are we heading, then, if not to your people?’ I asked Roshi as we set off.
Marching ahead of me, neither Roshi nor Sepp answered. The forest canopy still filtered the light in such a way
that I couldn’t judge the sun’s position.
‘Seems to me we have nowhere to go,’ I said, a hard edge in my voice. ‘The Iltheans block the south and the west.
None in the north will shelter us, for they’re loyal to the Somners, or to Dieter directly. You’ve already said not east,
to your people. Where else can we flee?’
‘It’s always politics and lectures with you,’ said Roshi, not bothering to glance back. But Sepp cast her an anxious
look. He at least saw my point.
‘I am Duethin,’ I said.
‘You were,’ Roshi retorted, then tugged on the rope tied to my bound wrists. ‘Lately you’ve been a captive. Right
now you’re exactly what you’ve wanted to be for the past month: free.’
I tugged back on the rope and had the satisfaction of causing her to stagger. After that I let silence shroud us while
we walked, the impossibility of our position seeping in. Or Roshi and Sepp’s position; I was innocent in this flight.
They wanted to put as much distance between Dieter and us as possible, but my aim was the opposite – and my best
chance, I reasoned, lay with the Ilthean army.
Xaver had claimed the Ilthean general was Dieter’s brother. It was too ridiculous and fanciful a claim to be
untrue. I have one myself, you know. In my case, it’s a brother.
Perhaps Dieter already had an agreement with the Ilthean army. After all, he had Renatas in his care, accomplice
and hostage as the need arose. An alliance with Ilthea would also explain the daring of his coup: the attack staged
while an army gathered on the southern marches; the small number of troops he’d used; the army’s arrival in time to
ensure his ratification. If I found the army, and talked my way through the guards to this Sidonius, I might be able to
make my way home. To my husband.
First, though, I’d have to talk my way past Roshi. When I judged the silence had stretched long enough for doubt
to squirm through her mind, I spoke.
‘Free, you say?’ I called, my voice startling Sepp after the tramp of our feet and the calls and whispers of the
forest. ‘I suppose you mean to turn me into a farmer, then. Not with your people, because you’ve slept beneath a
stone roof and you can’t return.’
Guilt pricked me at this – she’d given up her home for me, after all. But guilt wasn’t enough to stop me.
‘I can’t imagine you have a good sense for the Turasi landscape. It must be Sepp setting the direction.’
‘Do you think she’ll shut up if we tell her?’ Roshi asked Sepp.
‘Not a chance,’ he said.
She sighed, then answered me. ‘We’re not heading to my people because that’s the first place Dieter will look for
you, and my people will not stand between the two of you while you remain bound. We’re heading south, to the
Ayrholm, House Falkere’s stronghold.’
Her political acumen surprised me. Of the three southern tribes, Falkere was in the strongest position to aid me
simply by virtue of not sharing a border with the Ilthean empire. Their previous alliance with my House also made
them a sound choice. I had picked Falkere myself, when I first thought to flee, but I hadn’t told Roshi that.
I looked at Sepp. Had he suggested our destination? Or had Roshi garnered the political knowledge on her own?
‘And does Rein know of his part in all this?’ I asked, naming the drichten of House Falkere.
Roshi let out a breath of laughter. ‘Of course.’
She didn’t elaborate any further, leaving me to wonder at the extent of her collusion with Rein – had it been he
who arranged for my rooms to be unguarded when I’d been abducted?
Unable to find fault in her plan, I took a deep breath and plunged in. ‘We’d be better off aiming southwest.’
Roshi stopped in her tracks and was nudged into a stagger by the inattentive pony.

‘Southwest?’ Sepp cried, his eyes wide.

Roshi was calmer. ‘The Iltheans infest the Majkan tribelands now. Even if we could avoid the army, which I doubt, there’s no land beyond the pass which doesn’t belong to the empire. There’s nothing but death in the southwest for you.’

‘Actually, it’s probably my only hope of surviving,’ I said, taking advantage of the halt to rest. My illness had left me weak, unfit for so long a walk.

‘Think about it,’ I said. ‘Dieter will assume I ran away. So what will he do?’

‘Shrug and switch to worrying about the army,’ said Roshi. ‘Which, I might add, we need to worry about as well.’

‘He may forget you two. Not me.’

‘Because you’re his beloved wife?’ sneered Sepp.

‘Because I was Duethin, or due to be. Because he killed my family and took my throne. Whether I seek power to wrest the throne back or provide a rallying point for dissatisfied drightens to do the same, I’m a threat. He will have to hunt me down.’

A retort rose to Sepp’s lips but then he dropped his gaze, acknowledging my point. Roshi took longer, staring at me with thinned lips.

‘How does heading southwest keep you safe?’

It was Sepp who answered. ‘Even Dieter can’t reach her in the depths of an army.’

‘The Iltheans will kill her before he can,’ said Roshi.

‘Not if I tell them who I am,’ I said.

Sepp’s head snapped up. Roshi was slower to understand. ‘The southern snakes invade and conquer,’ she said.

‘They’ll put this Sidonius on the throne, not restore you.’

‘As Dieter’s wife, I’m a bargaining chip. They can offer to ransom me back, and win without bloodshed.’

Suspicion hardened Roshi’s face. ‘You’d march us to our deaths to get back to him.’

I fought to slow my breathing. If there was one thing living with Dieter had taught me, it was how to bury a lie among the truth so it went unchallenged. ‘None of us will die. The ransom is the bait I’ll give the Iltheans, that’s all.’

‘If they agree and march you back to him, Dieter will kill us for helping you escape,’ she pointed out. ‘If they don’t, the Iltheans will kill us on the spot. Doesn’t sound like a great idea to me.’

She was a heartbeat away from a flat refusal, I could see it forming on her lips. So I sat down. ‘I walk southwest, or I don’t walk at all.’

Roshi crossed her arms, her mouth set and eyes narrowed. ‘We can carry you.’

‘For how long?’ I countered.

She hitched her shoulders in a shrug.

Sepp didn’t have her talent for a straight face. He stood, chewing his lower lip, watching Roshi for her decision.

‘Don’t you understand?’ I said. ‘If I can sway the Iltheans, it might not come to fighting, and lives lost – the lives of those in the Turholm. They’re my friends, Roshi, my only family now. I don’t want to see them slaughtered. And the Iltheans are treacherous – they won’t honour the ransom. A truth if ever I’d spoken one. I’d have to watch for their deceit. ‘It’s our best chance to walk out of all this alive,’ I finished.

Roshi shifted her weight from one foot to the other and looked at Sepp, who shook his head and, casting an apologetic glance at me, said, ‘It’s a bad idea. Sidonius is Dieter’s brother –’

‘Dieter said he doesn’t have a brother,’ I interrupted.

‘Forgive me if I don’t believe every word that comes out of Dieter’s mouth,’ Sepp snapped, then, turning back to Roshi, he went on, ‘Brother or not, Sidonius has a reputation for brutality which wasn’t earned lightly. He can’t be trusted. He claimed an alliance with Dieter already, and if he spoke true then seeking his aid is no different to turning around and walking straight back to the Turholm. And if he spoke false …’ He trailed off with a shudder, his gaze dark with memory.

‘We can’t take the risk,’ Roshi decided, cutting me off before I could protest. ‘I’ll think about your idea, but no more. In the meantime, we continue on towards the Ayrholm.’

I didn’t fight any further, not yet. The idea was planted, and time would see it bear fruit. Besides which, the shattered mountains known as the Dragonstail stood directly between us and the Ayrholm – and west was the quickest way around.

Getting to my feet was an awkward procedure, and neither of them helped. I had to lean forward until I rested on my hands and knees, then lever my feet under me and wobble upright. I held my wrists out, but refused to actually voice the request.

‘Not until you’ve proved you can behave,’ Roshi said, starting off again. ‘You’d better convince me before we
reach the Falkere lands, otherwise you’ll meet the Falkere lordling bound and gagged.’
WITH MY OBJECT in sight I was a model prisoner, meek and uncomplaining. After two days Roshi relented and unbound my hands. We dallied by a streamlet that morning, scrubbing the odours of travel and hardship from our clothes.

Conscious of the inevitable pursuit, Roshi had us moving again within an hour. I nudged and drifted west every chance I found. Roshi was too sharp-eyed a navigator to let us drift too much off her course, however, and by the third night I had achieved little.

That night, the dream took me.

After a dinner of pork jerky and water warm and musty from too long in a bladder, I slumped by the fire, staring into its depths, wondering how I’d ever get back home. Worry over me and the implications of my disappearance would be gnawing at Dieter, though no doubt he’d be hiding it. I massaged my wrists, which were still sore from the ropes.

The flames lay heavy on my eyelids, drawing down sleep. My chin drooped, and by increments I slid sideways until I settled on the ground. Heat from the fire bathed me, narrowing the world to a snapping glow of shifting reds.

At first, when an image of banked embers lapped closer and swam into focus, I thought I was waking and blinked. But there was no moment of blankness – for I had no eyelids to blink with, just as I had no limbs to move. Behind the steady red glow of the embers was a room, not a forest. And the room was familiar, for I had run my finger across every seam in those hearthstones, and buried my hands in the uneven lay of the rug’s pile. I had curled up on the couch too many times to count. Dieter lay on it now, one hand absentely drawing shapes in the carpet, the other resting across his belly as he stared at the ceiling.

‘Matilde,’ he said, turning and looking deep into the fire, pinning me with his gaze. Stillness radiated out from our locked gazes, smoothing away the flutter at the room’s edge. The embers glowed brighter, burning my cheeks and brow, stinging tears from my eyes. I tasted charcoal and ash but I couldn’t look away.

‘There.’ He swung his legs off the couch and sat up with his forearms braced on his knees, his hands hanging between them. ‘That’s better. I’d offer you some wine, my dear, but I think it might make you more uncomfortable than not, right now.’

Relief swelled in me like a spring tide, a sweet chill bubbling up my throat and quenching my anxiety. How did you find me? What sorcery is this, that you can seek me out in my sleep? I’m scarce two days’ ride south of you – bring me home!

The words tumbled through my mind, but none escaped my lips.

‘Gerlach told me you’d fled,’ he said – casually, conversationally – as if none of it mattered. ‘Do you know, I actually believed him. All your mutterings about the quiet life, all your meekness. I thought you’d given up.’

No! Roshi knocked me out and strung me up on a pony like a sack of meal, I wanted to say, but silence glued my tongue to the roof of my mouth.

‘Yet here you are,’ Dieter said. ‘In my hearth. Spying on me.’

Pain lanced through me like Roshi’s poison, the flames snapping and flaring around me, the embers glowing cherry red in Dieter’s hearth.

He leaned closer, his eyes pits of shadow in his face. ‘What is it you need to know, Matilde, that you come to my room in the middle of the night? Mine is not the only hearth banked with a living glow; mine won’t show you the drichtens, or the numbers of our force.’

I willed all my strength to speak, but the struggle was in vain.

He frowned. ‘Don’t go yet, Matilde,’ he said, even as a hand jostled my shoulder, cooling and banishing the flames. Dieter’s voice faded, tinny with increasing distance. ‘We’ve much still to discuss.’

Darkness surrounded me, disorienting me, but the hand jostled and anchored me. I followed it like a lifeline to air, swimming up through the black depths.

Roshi’s face emerged in a shiver and ripple, as though I was breaking the surface of water. Weariness bruised her dark eyes.

‘Dieter!’

The trapped cry escaped me at last, but it was to Roshi and the campsite I cried, not the stone hearth and my husband.

‘Anything you want to share, cousin?’ said Roshi.
‘A bad dream,’ I replied, dragging myself up off the hard ground, every joint aching, stiff from absorbing the earth’s chill. The flames of my dream had left me weak.
The explanation didn’t satisfy her. She gave me a heavy-lidded stare and turned away, every line of her back tense and watchful. ‘Try not to shout during them,’ she said over her shoulder. ‘You’ll bring Dieter’s men or the Iltheans down on us.’

Fine by me, either way, though this time I said nothing by choice. The dream stayed with me all day. Had Dieter found me, or had I found him? Either way, the fire had been the key. If the link had been forged once, it could be again.

That night I tried to replicate the details of the previous night as best I remembered them. I sat eastward of the fire, roughly four feet away from it, and I stared into its depths until I slid onto the ground and into sleep.

I woke stiff and cold and aching, a crick in my neck and my left leg and foot numb. The disappointment at my failure was as sharp as blood in my mouth. It took three more nights, three more failed attempts, before I once again forged the link.

The terrain had forced us further west than Roshi would have liked, and she worried about the Ilthean army. Increasingly, the look she turned on me was tight-lipped and pinch-eyed. Fear was edging her ever closer to confronting me, to blaming me for our detour. I kept my mouth shut and avoided her eye; the longer I could postpone an argument, the closer I drew to the army.

When I slept that night, the fire was waiting for me. Once again I followed the trail, the link between my fire and his which brought me through the darkness and into his hearth.

This time he stood with his back to me. My vision of him had barely focused before he turned and looked into the fire, his gaze striking through the depths of the flames to find me. ‘Matilde. I’ve a present for you.’

Prepared for the struggle to speak, I willed myself to overcome it. My heartbeat pounded in my ears and strained my brow until I feared the skin might burst. But still I produced no sound.

Dieter gave me a puzzled look. ‘Are you trying to speak, Matte? Is that why you keep gaping at me?’ he said, regarding me more closely, amusement making his eyes sparkle from their shadowed depths. ‘Ah, I see. This is Roshi’s doing.’

Hope flared bright in me. ‘Didn’t she teach you how to talk?’ he said, his laughter dashing my hopes like a slap of cold water. ‘Rash, Matte, spying on me when you don’t know your arcana. I could turn them against you.’

At a flick of his fingers the flames soared bright and hot. Sweat burst from my skin and I whimpered – but I doubt he heard it.

He let the flames die back and I sucked in a great lungful of cool air. A figure lurked behind him, seated on the couch.

‘I warned you, Matilde,’ said Dieter, all his mirth chased away like clouds scattered before a curling wind. ‘Do you remember? One wrong move, I said.’

A chill stopped the breath in my lungs. One wrong move against me, and I’ll finish what I started at Aestival.

‘I was prepared to simply let it go,’ he said, then paused, reconsidering. ‘Actually, no. I wasn’t. But I was prepared to wait. I had more pressing concerns, after all, than to chase a runaway. Except now you’re in my fireplace, plotting against me once more.’

He held up a small glass vial and tipped it left to right. The dark fluid inside left faint pink smears on the glass as it moved. My blood.

‘I found the perfect use for it,’ he said, then looked over his shoulder, lifting one hand in a summoning gesture. The figure behind him rose and stepped forward, brown head twisted to keep heavy-lidded eyes fixed on Dieter at all times.

At first I thought it a man, a great, beautiful man, with skin as dark as the loam and eyes black and bright as sloes. But no hair marred the sweep of his head, not even eyebrows. In their place he had heavy ridges, as if shaped by a careful thumb. He wore black trews and one of Dieter’s white shirts, unlaced at the throat. His feet were bare.

‘Well? ’ Dieter raised an eyebrow in challenge. ‘How do you like him?’

The flames and the panic had confused my vision. The stranger’s skin wasn’t completely unmarrred: his brow bore three marks as familiar as the hollows of my heart, inked in black that sparked with red and blue and green highlights. I remembered the gritty, slick taste of the bloodstones as Dieter scribed those same symbols on my own brow.

Emet.

The stranger was a construct. Not a girl bound by the rules of one, this was a true golem. A creature made of clay and arcana and – I swallowed, hard – blood. My blood.

‘I’ve named him Clay,’ said Dieter, his grin wolf-like. ‘He has only the one task, Matte: to find you.’

Clay swung his head to stare into the fire too, and his eyes fixed on me. Abrupt and unpractised, a grin split his face. Not any grin – Dieter’s. Dieter’s with great white slabs of teeth and a tongue behind them red as a beating
‘Matilde.’ His voice was like boulders shifting, like rocks rolled along a streambed by the current. ‘I’ll find you. I’ll carve out your heart.’

When I swung a disbelieving look at Dieter, he nodded. ‘I warned you – remember?’

I flailed backward and the room drifted away, shrinking and fading.

‘Don’t go,’ Dieter called mockingly.

But the golem had a different message: ‘I’m coming to find you, little queen.’
THIRTY

I WOKE GASPING like a landed fish, the golem’s voice still ringing in my ears, the memory of Dieter’s grin cracking wide that clay-wrought face chilling the blood in my veins.

‘Bad dream again?’ Roshi asked, stoking sparks from the fire.

I didn’t answer, my throat full of the taste of betrayal. Not only was Dieter not worried for me – he’d set an assassin on my trail. It wasn’t the action of a man who loved me. It wasn’t the action of a man even mildly fond of me. My stupidity and blindness tasted worse than the tea Roshi passed me.

‘Tilde?’ said Sepp, frowning. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘I dreamed of Dieter,’ I said. ‘It was a true dream somehow. I was in the Turholm, in the fireplace of Grandmother’s old room. It’s now Dieter’s room.’

‘How were you in the fireplace?’ Roshi demanded, suddenly intent.

‘I don’t know. I fell asleep watching the fire here, and the next thing I knew the fire was in between me and Dieter’s room. Around me, too.’ No need to mention that this was the second time.

Roshi pursed her lips. ‘You told me you hadn’t inherited the gift.’

When I didn’t answer, she hugged her knees into her chest and said, ‘What did you see?’

My hand rose to my brow, brushing the marks Dieter had put there. The skin beneath them felt no different, neither thickened nor stiffened nor raised, yet my fingertips tingled every time they touched the ink.

Roshi noted the gesture and intuited what it meant. ‘He threatened you?’

‘He’s created a golem,’ I said.

Their expressions told me the word was unfamiliar to them.

‘A construct, a creature of clay and will. It’s coming after me.’

Sepp’s eyes widened.

‘Sepp.’ Roshi snapped her fingers, dragging his gaze to her. When she had his attention, she said, ‘This creature, it either left last night or, if we’re lucky, this morning. Unless it can fly it won’t find us right now, or today. We still have time.’

Her words gave me no comfort. ‘Do we?’ I asked. ‘We’ve spent the last two days heading more west than south. We’re probably only three full days ahead of it. Can we reach the Ayrholm before the golem catches up with us?’

Sepp buried his head in his hands. I wanted to do the same. My only reason for seeking out the army had been a foolish, irrational, heartsick desire to return to Dieter. It made no sense now – if he was so ready to punish me, I doubted I could convince Dieter of my innocence in this flight.

‘We have to seek the army,’ said Sepp, his voice strangely flat, fear stark in his eyes. I gaped at him, stunned by his sudden change of mind.

‘No!’ said Roshi. ‘If we head directly west now, we’ll only shrink our lead on the creature. We need to reach House Falkere’s stronghold. If we continue south, we still have a chance,’ she said, though her voice didn’t express any real hope.

The canyons and gorges of the Dragonstail still barred our way south, and the Ayrholm lay deep in the heart of the Naris tribelands. How fast could the golem travel? Was the army too close to risk further travel west?

‘Maybe we should turn east?’ I hazarded. ‘Or venture into the deeps of the Dragonstail as far as we can, and hide?’

‘We need to seek the army,’ Sepp insisted. ‘We need bodies between us and the creature, and a shadow-worker besides. The Ayrholm is too far away.’

‘You’re coming to your senses just as Sepp loses his. The creature doesn’t know where we are,’ said Roshi, cutting me off when I tried to interrupt. ‘Trust me, cousin. Unless you specifically told Dieter where we were, he doesn’t know, and neither does the creature. We still have time.’

‘But we don’t know how it hunts,’ Sepp argued.

I remembered Dieter holding up the vial of my blood, and feared I did know how the golem hunted.

‘What if it can smell us over distances?’ Sepp went on. ‘What if it can taste the wind, or track us the way a bird tracks true north? How do we know it doesn’t fly? Matilde doesn’t know, not for sure –’

Roshi grabbed him by his hair, jerking his head back. ‘You need to trust me,’ she said, cool as frost. ‘I’ll keep us ahead of this creature, I promise you.’

I didn’t point out that it was a promise she couldn’t keep.

She released him, and Sepp rubbed the crick from the back of his neck.
'You work on breathing,' Roshi said. ‘I’ll worry about everything else that needs worrying about.’

‘But –’

‘In,’ she said, ‘and out.’

When he didn’t protest further, she rose, giving him a companionable squeeze of his shoulder.

‘First,’ she said, ‘breakfast. Then we walk. Fast.’

We picked up our pace, walking quickly enough to trip and stagger over roots, slipping in the leaf-litter as we headed south and west through the forest. Midmorning, troubled by the pace Roshi was setting, I edged close to her.

‘Do you fear it will find us today after all?’ I murmured.

She shook her head but didn’t answer directly. Reaching to move a branch out of her way, then holding it so it didn’t slap the pony trailing behind us, she said, ‘It would help if you could tell me aught of its nature. How does it hunt? How fast can it move?’

I raised helpless hands. ‘It’s a magic wrought by the shadow-workers of the Amaer. I don’t know anything about the creatures or their abilities.’

Except how to kill them, I thought before the brands on my forehead silenced the notion. I, for one, didn’t want to be close enough to the golem to touch its brow.

That night I feared to fall asleep, feared slipping into dreams and hearing Clay crooning to me: *Wait, little queen.* But though his slab-toothed smile chased me throughout the night, it was fear and memory, not the same sort of dreaming as before.

Which disappointed Roshi, come the morning. ‘We could have done with the knowing,’ she said, irritably kicking dirt over the fire. ‘Let’s get going.’

She’d pushed us hard the day before, enough that she now feared the flank guard of the Ilthean army. Sepp strode beside the pony, clinging to her bridle and often leaning his head on the warm velvet of her neck. Although he’d suggested seeking succour among the Iltheans’ ranks, he didn’t appear to relish the prospect of meeting them.

When I edged closer to the other side of the pony, touching the corded strength of her neck, Sepp didn’t look up and his hand stayed on the other side of the pony’s neck – it was like we were touching through a pane of glass.

‘You don’t have to stay with us,’ I said, careful to keep my voice calm and soothing. It was an offer I was making.

He didn’t answer.

‘You could head east. Find yourself a village and vanish inside it. Who knows? You might be lucky and find one where none of this matters.’

He hesitated briefly, then said, ‘My place is with you.’

‘Sepp.’

He hunched his shoulders against my voice. ‘I won’t run from my place, Tilde. You are my Duethin, crowned or not. I’ll see you back on the throne in your own right, or I’ll flee with you to that village you think we can vanish into. But I won’t run from you, even if you dare the snake’s fangs.’

My heart twisted. ‘I’m sorry I got you into this.’

Finally he met my eyes over the pony’s neck. ‘I would have helped you flee even without Roshi.’

Somehow, it didn’t ease the sharp edges of guilt lodged in my chest. The words bubbled up my throat: *You were right* was what I needed to say.

‘Why did you want to go back to him, Tilde?’ said Sepp, his gaze evading me. ‘He killed everyone we know. He took your throne from you, took your people and your country. He means to hand them over to the Iltheans!’

‘Not everyone,’ I said, thorns in my throat making it difficult to talk. ‘He didn’t kill me. Even when I gave him reason to.’

Sepp’s sidelong glance burned with scorn.

I couldn’t find words to explain how I’d come to twist and turn so thoroughly under Dieter’s power, until the only way out was to yield up even my heart.

‘I don’t want to go back. That’s all that matters now,’ I said at last.
WE CAME TO the forest’s tattered edge by early afternoon, hesitating to go any further. Open plains stretched before us all the way to a river, and from the moment we stepped out of the forest we’d be all too visible, and all too vulnerable – Dieter’s golem behind us, the Iltheans before us, and both as likely as not to kill us on sight.

Roshi scanned the plains and the treeline on the river’s far bank for movement, while the sun moved a finger’s width across the sky.

‘Okay,’ she said eventually, gesturing us forward. ‘Slow and steady. We’re villagers on the move, no more.’

The sun beat down, baking the filth crusted onto my skin and clothes. The prickle of Clay’s pursuit itched at my nape. Anticipation of attack drove sweat through every pore. A hawk’s sudden keen as it coasted above us made me jolt like a startled rabbit; the old pony only twitched an ear.

‘Calmly now,’ said Roshi, though her shoulders were tight and she scanned around us constantly.

Sepp murmured a mantra under his breath. When I edged close enough to hear, I wished I hadn’t. ‘Ravens and the shieldmaidens of Turas protect us,’ he was whispering, his eyes fixed on the ground in front of him. ‘Don’t let the creature or the Iltheans kill us.’

I moved away until I could no longer hear him, though I could still see his lips mouthing the prayer.

Another hawk keened and I jumped again. Swinging my eyes skyward, I caught a sliver of movement off to the side. Fear bolted through me as a shadow rose from the grasses less than a half-mile distant. I stood, mesmerised, as a dark head appeared. It wore no grin now, and Dieter’s crisp shirt had been replaced by a duller one. A rich, cloying scent of loam reached us and its black eyes locked on me across the grasses.

‘Roshi!’ I shrieked.

She and Sepp turned as one then froze at the terrifying apparition. We all stood unmoving, overwhelmed by the danger.

Clay rose to his full height, relinquishing any pretence at camouflage and leaned forward, bracing against the air as if it were a solid force. Then he sprang into a run, every footfall thudding through the ground, moving as fast as a surfacing earthquake.

‘Run!’ cried Roshi, finally galvanising us.

I burst into a wild sprint, blood and breath pounding through me in time with the tremors of Clay’s pursuit. Sepp raced after me, hauling the pony into a canter, his face white and drawn.

Wait for me, little queen. I’m coming.

Slew back to glance at me, Roshi’s gaze darted to Clay. I dared not look, putting every ounce of strength I had into each stride, kicking at the ground faster, faster, faster –

It wasn’t enough. Clay snagged my hair, jerking my legs from under me. I went down heavily, the breath slamming from my lungs, the sky bursting into white light above me.

I rolled onto my back, but he was coming too fast, hands outstretched, hungry for my throat.

I kicked, my feet finding his belly, but it was useless. The impact merely cracked back through my knees and jarred my teeth. Clay didn’t even flinch, though it did make his leap turn slightly awry, and I heaved my shoulders to the side as he landed, his hand slamming across my chest like a rockfall. One of my ribs cracked in a burst of white lightning.

Roshi came at him over the top of me, knife raised, hair flying like a banner. Clay lifted his arm to face her attack as I scrabbled at the earth, tearing fingernails and fingers and grasses and earth until they all seemed one. Inch by inch I dragged myself forward.

Clay reached after me, but Roshi drove the knife down, aiming for the soft join of neck to shoulder. He batted her away as if she were a feather. Deflected, her knife sank deep into his bicep, releasing a waft of his earth scent. The cut stayed open, revealing small dark creatures squirming through his flesh like worms. It didn’t seem to trouble him.

Roshi landed badly, an ankle rolling beneath her.

A hand strong and implacable as mud seized my ankle then, dragging me back, reversing my hard-won escape. I rolled and kicked, and this time my foot found his face. The ball of my foot smeared some of his slab-white teeth down the back of his palate, and he jerked away with a gagging snarl. But still he didn’t release me.

Spitting dark blood, he wrapped a hand around my calf and dragged me closer. I dug my fingers into the ground, but it tore in furrows, affording no purchase.

‘Hello, little queen,’ the golem said, with a grin made hideous by broken teeth.
‘Clay.’ Even as I said it, I knew beseeching him would prove useless. Still, I had to try. ‘Clay, you can’t kill me. Look!’ I swept my hair from my forehead, exposing the marks we both bore. ‘We’re the same!’

He stopped, and raised his free hand to paw at his forehead. I wondered whether he felt the same buzz as me – like lightning trapped beneath the surface of his skin. What skin does a man of clay have? My eyes dropped to the wound Roshi had carved in his arm, still open and showing a glimpse of his worm-veins.

Clay met my eyes again, searching for something. I lay still, battling my terror, the ground thrusting into one side of me and Clay bearing down on the other.

‘We’re the same,’ he said at last.

A sob lodged, sharp and jagged, in my throat.
‘We cannot disobey,’ he continued, extinguishing the breath in my lungs.
‘Clay, no –’

Leaning on one elbow, the other hand clamping ever higher up my body, he drew me closer.

‘You didn’t wait for me, little queen,’ he crooned. ‘But I found you anyway. We cannot disobey.’

Broken grass stems pricked the bare flesh of my neck and wrists as the sun glared down, releasing the scents of blood and dirt. Small dark sods dripped from Clay’s torn lip. A worm forced its blind head out of the wound, waving in the air as it twisted further out before dropping, cold and clinging, onto my throat.

Still crooning, Clay wrapped his hands around my neck and squeezed. The world brightened to a painful glare, brimstone orange hues leaping across the pale sky, turning Clay as dark as a patch of night. Familiar and hypnotic, the twisting sensation of an oncoming vision gripped me.

The earth throbbed beneath me, yielding its secrets – the soft places where the crust shielded rich, crumbling soil; the fire buried deep under the land like a sun, calling to its twin arcing across the uncertain sky.

It was the simplest thing I had ever done to close my eyes and imagine the crust breaking, the earth collapsing beneath him like water …

A thud ripped Clay’s weight off me. When I opened my eyes, Sepp stood over me holding a thick branch in both hands. Discarding it, he pulled me to my feet. Clay was clutching at his head, a dark stain visible beneath his broad fingers. His legs had vanished up to his knees in the earth, which was raw and bubbled, as if it had been boiled. Clay started digging, his great hands scraping out great clods of dirt.

I stumbled as cold crept through me and the world snapped back to its normal hue, the sky a sweep of pale blue gone to white at the horizon, the broken grasses a rotting yellow.

Sepp on one side and Roshi on the other, we limped towards the river. Roshi’s ankle hurt, and I hunched around the pain of my broken rib. Every time I looked back, Clay was handfuls closer to freedom.

The river ran bright and sharp, cutting through the summer-grass scent of the plains. ‘Here,’ said Sepp, pointing to a rope staked between the banks of the river. Beneath the rope’s slack span, the water ran fast and troubled, throwing off glints in every direction. A ford, of sorts.

We plunged into the water which rose above our knees, the rocks of the ford slick and treacherous beneath the river’s pull. The force of the water shoved us against the rope, threatening to pull us beneath and past. My arms burned as I strained to keep my feet. Two slow, wrenching paces out from the bank, the water rose to my neck, and only the rope kept me anchored. The water’s icy touch washed the sensation from my muscles and sapped my strength.

A spume of dirt swirled downstream as we struggled into the river’s centre.
‘Little queen!’ came Clay’s angry cry.
‘He’s free,’ Roshi gasped.

The rocks pitched sideways beneath me, the rope burning my hands as I scrabbled back to stand against the water’s pull.

One step at a time, we pushed onwards, pulling ourselves along the rope until the water sank from our necks to our waists, then to our knees. Gasping, we burst onto the bank one by one. I stumbled and fell to the ground, unable to continue.

The pine trees were close enough for me to see the cones scattered at their base. But not even Clay’s cry could pump blood and strength into my legs now.

‘Tilde,’ Sepp cried, hooking his fingers into the shoulder of my gown and pulling. ‘Come on. You have to get up!’

‘We can’t outrun him,’ I replied, fully spent.

Roshi dragged herself up, but her face twisted with pain when she tried to put weight on her ankle.

A splash and a shudder through the ground told me Clay was attempting the ford. We had only moments left.

Roshi hobbled to the staked rope, slipped a small blade from her boot and set to sawing through the fibres.

‘Hurry!’ shrieked Sepp, his gaze fixed on the golem pushing across the river.
The final fibres separated with a twang, and the rope slithered downstream, whipping Clay away with it.

It was no victory, however. He regained his feet and braced himself against the flow, using the staked rope to anchor his position in the centre of the river. At first he looked trapped, unable to release the rope for fear of being swept away, his only recourse to pull his way back to the opposite bank. Instead he turned his back to us and edged to his right, pushing against the flow. At the same time, he took a step backward, letting the taut rope play carefully through his hands. The river battered him, but with the rope's aid he had the strength to resist it. Inch by inch, he would reach the unsecured end of the rope, and his path would arc him back to this riverbank, and us.

'Now what?' shouted Sepp, rounding on Roshi.

She ignored him and looked at me. 'The sun can burn without casting heat. The soil can deny life while a stone can nourish it. Water can run hard as a rockfall.' She spoke as if she knew what I'd done to the earth around Clay's legs, and how. And why not? She'd been raised to it, raised to women wielding it. Water can run hard as a rockfall.

This time the colours didn't shift, but still the world thrummed beneath my touch. I imagined the slavering roar of a wall of water, the swell and surge of it as it slammed over the ford, tearing away all it encountered ...

Nothing happened. A sting of panic quickened my breath and made it hard to concentrate, but still Roshi's gaze held me, and I bent all my will to the task. Perhaps I could not manipulate the water, but I knew how to influence the earth – and Clay's hold relied only on a thin sliver of wood thrust into the ground, a splinter barely scratching the surface of the world's layers.

The rope's anchored stake jumped free of its mooring. Clay let out a yell and was quickly swallowed.

She ignored him and looked at me. 'The sun can burn without casting heat. The soil can deny life while a stone can nourish it. Water can run hard as a rockfall.' She spoke as if she knew what I'd done to the earth around Clay's legs, and how. And why not? She'd been raised to it, raised to women wielding it. Water can run hard as a rockfall.

Sepp helped me upright. The light alternately dimmed then brightened to a glare, disorienting me and threatening to make me topple. After a moment's wobbling, I thought I might actually be able to stand without falling. I fixed my gaze on the pines and started walking towards them.

'The pony?' Roshi asked Sepp.

'Panicked and bolted when that creature came close enough to drop worms on her rump,' said Sepp. 'All our food is gone with her.'

Dazed, I wondered vaguely why the pines had boughs needled with spear-tips, and trunks with steel skirts and greaves, too. Then the truth seared through me.

'Iltheans!' I cried.
THIRTY-TWO

THEIR COVER BLOWN, a swarm of the southern serpents pushed forward out of the pines, spears raised, eyes hard behind the cheekplates of their helmets.

‘Hold!’ cried the foremost, the Turasi word rough and guttural in his mouth. A red horsehair crest topped his helmet, marking him as an officer.

My heart thudded at the sharp spears levelled at us.

‘I hope you know what you’re doing,’ Roshi hissed.

If he hadn’t been supporting half her weight, I think Sepp might have sunk to his knees then and there.

‘I seek an audience with Sidonius,’ I said, hazarding what little of the southern tongue I knew.

The name brought a shuttering of their gazes, their spear-tips dipping a little before settling once again on a line for my heart.

‘Naturally,’ the officer answered in Turasi. ‘But why should he grant you an audience?’

I hesitated. I could proffer my name and former position, but an ousted queen meant only supplication for aid, which was not the best opening gambit. His men would, at best, laugh and enslave me as a quaint spoil of war.

‘Because water can run hard as a rockfall, and the earth can boil like a pool of water over a geyser,’ I said at last.

‘If the right person bids it.’

To a man they stilled, eyes wary. It was clear they’d been watching our battle with Clay. The release of the staked rope might have been a fortuitous accident from their vantage, but not the way I had buried Clay.

‘You expect us to let you within sight of the general?’ the officer said. ‘What else can you do, witch? Bring down a mountain on his head, perhaps, or set the trees alight around him?’

‘I value my own life too highly for such tactics, Captain.’ Was it weariness that made my voice so calm, as if my life might not be ended by the thrust of a spear at any moment? ‘Besides, I don’t wish him dead. In fact, I come to ask his aid.’

I wondered how far downstream Clay had washed ashore, and whether a creature of his ilk succumbed to weariness or wound. None of it crossed my face as I waited for the captain to make his decision.

‘You’ll keep your powers in check, witch,’ he said at last. ‘One hint of anything unnatural and we’ll slice you open.’

‘Naturally.’

‘Get behind her,’ the officer barked at two of his men. ‘If she twitches, run her through.’ He paused and regarded Roshi and Sepp, as if wondering what powers they might summon. ‘The rest of you watch the other two,’ he snapped, then bid us all move with a curt gesture.

Steel-tipped spears touching my back, I followed his red crest into the shadow of the pines.

It took the better part of a day to reach the main camp. It was a regimented affair: hooded bedrolls in precision lines, a circle of stones to mark a cookfire every sixth place, a thicket of spears and swords every second.

The foreign soldiers glanced at us only in passing as we were led through their midst, their assessment of us as prisoners obvious in their slack, distant expressions. Some stared a little longer, quick enough to wonder what it was about us, filthy and bedraggled and without obvious assets, that warranted a personal escort instead of a swift throat-slitting. But even they dismissed us soon enough: not my problem, I read in the glaze of their eyes.

It made me shiver.

In a Turasi army, the arrival of any new factor warranted speculation and investigation. It could provide leverage, after all, or an opportunity to wrangle more standing in the alliance. These southerners were different – cold and impartial. They would stand their ground – and accept their position – without question. Could the fractious, scheming Turasi hold against such discipline?

The officer motioned us to a halt in the camp’s centre – a great open space, rectangular to a fault. On the opposite side stood the full tents, more utilitarian than luxurious. We watched as he approached the centremost tent alone. After slipping his helmet and crest off short-cropped hair, he ducked inside.

To calm the anxiety flooding through me, I occupied myself with mustering arguments for my meeting with Sidonius. Any slight movement – smoothing a sweaty palm over my skirts, or flicking a wisp of tickling hair from my cheek – made the soldiers sharp-eyed. When I reached down to scratch an itch on my calf, one of them threatened me with his spear. ‘None of your tricks, witch.’

It was almost funny. I was so staggeringly weary, I could barely stand. A sheen of grey overlaid everything, as if I
viewed the world through a pane of imperfect glass.

Finally the officer returned to the entrance and gestured me forward. A poke in the small of my back with the flat of a blade got my legs moving before I was ready, and I stumbled. Another soldier jerked me up by my bicep. ‘None of that now, either,’ he barked.

I said nothing, too tired to correct him.

‘Just the witch,’ the officer said, when Roshi and Sepp tried to follow me.

I glanced back, and Roshi gave me a look heavy with meaning: *Bargain well, cousin.* Beside her, Sepp kept his head down and his shoulders hunched.

I ducked into the tent, with the officer immediately behind me. All my senses felt on high alert, taking in the lamps throwing shadows around the single, cloth-walled room. Braziers either side of the entrance radiated warmth and the sweet, cloying stench of burning dung. A man stood with his back to me, bent over a table in the centre of the tent.

The officer prodded me further inside. ‘The witch, General,’ he said.

The man straightened and turned. His eyes were pale and piercing as frost. Amalia’s eyes. Ravens above, it seemed he was Dieter’s brother. How then had he come by an Ilthean name and army?

‘Sidonius,’ I said.

‘My men did not bother to learn your name. I presume you have one?’ he greeted me in turn.

‘Matilde,’ I replied, opting against meekness. ‘Daughter of Luitger Svanaten and Laleh of the Nilofen, niece of Helena Svanaten, granddaughter of Beata – rightful Duethin of the Turasi. You speak my language well.’

*Good, child,* Grandmother murmured in the back of my mind. *Disarm him, unsettle him. Settled is certain. You can’t afford for him to be certain against you.*

‘I should do,’ he returned. ‘It’s my milk-tongue. Which is how I know that anyone who can take and hold the throne is the only rightful Duethin.’

‘Anyone with might enough can take the throne, General. Holding it is the trick.’

‘Indeed,’ he said, with a crooked smile.

I wrapped my arms around my ribs, nursing the pain. ‘Might I enquire as to your purpose, General? I can’t help but notice you’re marching an army unerringly towards my palace.’

‘My brother’s palace, actually, at this precise moment,’ he corrected. ‘And throne, too – although he’ll soon be sitting it under the auspices of the Ilthean emperor.’

Sidonius’s clear confidence sent chills down my spine. If Dieter and he had an alliance, my ploy was beyond foolhardy. The memory of Clay, however, and his implacable grip on my leg, firmed my resolve. Allied with Dieter or not, Sidonius was the only thing between me and the golem right now.

‘If he refuses?’ I said, keeping my fear in check with an effort.

‘He’ll be vacating it in favour of one less squeamish.’

‘I see,’ I said, letting a smile touch my lips.

He pushed a stool towards me with a foot, inviting me to sit with a lift of his chin. I didn’t hesitate: pride could only keep me upright for so long. *A throne is a state of mind, child,* Grandmother added, so I inclined my head in a gesture learnt at her knee and, spreading my skirts as if they were the glorious garb of a queen, I sat. My ribs sent a burst of pain through my lungs at the movement, forcing me to clutch the seat’s edge before I could regain my breath.

Sidonius leant back against his table and crossed his arms over his chest. ‘I suppose this is where you tell me how you come into the picture?’

‘I am his wife, General. One might imagine he’d be eager to see me returned,’ I said, offering an elusive smile.

‘One might also imagine he’s already taken what he needs from you,’ Sidonius countered.

‘I presume your men told you of the creature we escaped.’

‘The golem of the Ilthean emperor,’ I offered.

‘She was wrought by my husband, to recapture me,’ I continued.

Sidonius glanced over his head, seeking confirmation from the officer. I prayed the distance had clouded their vision enough for the encounter to have appeared as though Clay was trying to capture me, not kill me. Behind me, the officer must have assented.

‘So he wants you back,’ Sidonius said. ‘Why?’

‘I dare say he wants an heir, General. Men in the midst of building empires generally do.’

‘An exceedingly good reason for me not to return you to him.’

‘Fine by me,’ I shot back, though it came out more quietly than I’d have liked, my voice nigh buried by the pain of Dieter’s betrayal. Perhaps that helped. ‘I thought we were looking for ways to bend Dieter to your will. I never insisted you honour your bargains.’
He grunted. ‘You would have made a good Ilthean matron.’
‘I am my aunt’s niece.’
His pale gaze, so like Amalia’s, pinned me, and again I wondered at his ancestry, how he and Dieter fitted together as kin. To judge by his looks he was between Dieter and Amalia in age. How had the middle child landed in the snake’s pit when the elder and younger had not?
‘Indeed,’ he said, pushing up and away from the table, then turning back to study whatever it was he had weighted to its surface.
Unseen currents tugged at me, threatening to pull me under. ‘You mean to put Renatas on the throne?’ I asked.
‘When he’s of an age,’ he replied matter-of-factly.
‘In the meantime?’
‘A boy can’t rule in his own right, lady. He’ll need a regent,’ he said, his gaze fixed on the shadow tracery of branches behind the tent wall.
*Naturally.* Grandmother’s voice merged with my own thought as I measured his profile – Turasi man, clad in Ilthean garb. ‘And what better man for the job of regent than the emperor’s most loyal general?’ I said. ‘You aim high, considering your start in the slave pits.’
He laughed. ‘Oh, I will not be regent, lady, although I will remain to advise the boy, if my emperor bids it.’
‘Then who?’
‘The boy’s father is the obvious choice,’ Sidonius said, ‘but Jurgas Avita Angeron, may he reign forever, has granted me discretion in the matter.’
I strove for calm. ‘Then might I suggest, General, that the boy’s cousin is an equally obvious choice.’
‘Given you want the throne for yourself, and I can’t see you sitting in it again unless you bend your neck to the emperor, I don’t see how we can bargain, lady.’
‘What makes you think I can’t bend my neck?’ I said, my mouth dry.
‘Lady, as you say: you are your aunt’s niece.’
Surprise stretched my eyes wide.
‘Didn’t you know?’ he laughed. ‘She was a matron of impeccable degree, there’s none will dispute it. But her arrival on the southern border was not accidental.’
‘It was at the head of an army,’ I said. ‘This army.’ The army that would put her son on the throne and bring my people under the empire’s yoke. Except Helena’s army had been led by her husband, or so I had assumed. Was Sidonius her husband?
‘The army was certainly quick on her trail, but we marched to bring the traitorous bitch to heel,’ said Sidonius. My heart twisted, images of Helena floating to the surface of my memory: her face, made pale by make-up which couldn’t soften the flash of her eyes; her flagrant red dress, her laughter, her hand limply reaching for her throat and the arrow as she collapsed, the life fading from her.
The pain of it thickened my voice. ‘Yet you’ll still put her son on the throne?’
‘The boy is the one who betrayed her,’ said Sidonius, his eyes hard as flint. ‘He has an Ilthean heart. As do I. And I will do as my emperor bids.’
Struggling for composure, I wondered why this blow should surprise me. Renatas had turned on me, after all. But betray his mother, and at such a tender age?
‘You’ll have a hard time of it,’ I said. ‘Put an Ilthean on the throne and you’ll have to beat every Turasi into submission – individually.’
He shrugged. ‘The boy has Turasi blood, remember? Svanaten, no less.’
‘But an Ilthean heart,’ I countered. ‘And House Svanaten hasn’t enjoyed a great deal of fortune or popularity of late. In fact,’ dazed and stupid with pain, the words slipped out of me, ‘the boy’s probably dead already.’
Sidonius was before me in a stride, plucking me from the stool with a fist clutching my gown before pulling me close. ‘Who would *dare* touch him?’
‘Dieter, for one. To punish me,’ I said, battling to hide my terror and gritting my teeth against the starbursts of pain from my ribs. ‘Any of the drightens, for another.’ A whimper escaped me, despite my resolve.
Sidonius collected himself with an effort, uncurling his fingers one at a time.
My heels dropped to the floor and I took a cautious step back. The stool caught my legs, dropping me onto the floor. Pain exploded up my spine, blurring my vision. When it cleared, Sidonius was pacing the length of the tent wall off to my right.
He stopped, turned on a heel and looked over my head. ‘Leave us,’ he said.
The crested officer must have hesitated, for Sidonius switched his gaze to me. ‘I’m sure the lady will stay her powers. Besides, she’s too tired to stand without help, let alone work any more shadows.’
Behind me the officer clapped a palm to his breastplate and soon the slap of the tent-flap told of his departure.
'So, my lady,' said Sidonius, ‘you are in my power.’
‘True, but you are also in mine.’ The quaver of weariness in my voice, and the way my shoulders hunched around my broken rib, undermined my attempt at bravado.
‘And what is the price for lending me that power, instead of turning it against me?’
‘My throne, of course.’
He tilted his head in the beginnings of a refusal.
‘I’m not yet of age, you know,’ I forestalled him. ‘Not for another year.’ I swallowed hard after daring the lie. 
Bargain well, cousin. Iltheans didn’t come of age until twenty, and it had been Iltheans who raised him – from birth, if I was lucky. If he didn’t know the Turasi came of age at seventeen I might have a chance of emerging unscathed.
‘You’re a married woman,’ he countered. ‘By Ilthean standards, that qualifies.’
I chewed on my lower lip, reconsidering. He would not grant me the throne under the auspice of an Ilthean regent, then.

Which is no misfortune – a serpent with a toehold is a serpent embedded, Grandmother warned.

Her words were all too true, but I could see no other way out of this with my skin intact, so scraped together my courage, and spoke.

‘Very well. What must I do to earn your trust?’
He snorted. ‘The last Turasi woman I knew betrayed even her marriage vows for her country. My own brother thought nothing of sacrificing me for his gain. I don’t know what bond those marks on your brow signify, but I expect it’s not a slight one. Which you’ve broken.’
I couldn’t speak of them, not to tell him they were involuntary, nor to tell him they still bound me.

I wanted to rise, to stretch my legs and pace, hide my desperation behind movement. Or better yet, to flee. Gather Roshi and Sepp in my wake and run, fast as the swirl of snow on winter winds. But it wasn’t winter, there was no wind, and pain and exhaustion pinned me where I sat; besides, we’d be recaptured in moments.
‘General.’ I paused, swallowing my hesitation, firming my resolve and voice both. ‘If it means blood will not be spilled, I will lend my power to you. The palace shelters every person left in my world. I would keep them safe.’

‘No. It’s not enough. I need your power pledged to me, not on loan. If I thought hostages would do it, I’d have reminded you of the pair sitting outside.’
It seemed Sidonius was just as determined and headstrong as his brother. But if I didn’t rest soon, I would collapse – and there was no guarantee as to what might happen while I was unconscious.
I took a breath and closed my eyes, so as not to witness his triumph. ‘Win me back the throne, General, and I will pledge my power to Ilthea’s aid. Now, and in the future.’
I opened my eyes, seeking his reaction. He was silent, considering.

‘Perhaps,’ he said at last, noncommittal, though the cautious way he held his shoulders hinted at a decision in my favour.

‘But I want you shadow-pledged to it before you rest,’ he added.
THIRTY-THREE

I LET MY head hang while I waited. After all I’d been through I had gambled on Sidonius not having a shadow-worker with him. Gambled and lost.

Grandmother had never allowed the mara residence at her court. She had feared the discovery of my ability. With no others to take my place and carry the name once the mara inevitably claimed me, discovery would have led to the demise of House Svanaten. But Grandmother’s was not the only Turasi court with little or no access to the shadows – only Evard of House Somner had a mara in permanent residence. So it had seemed unlikely a general in the field would be travelling with one.

Except, reasonable or not, I had been wrong.

I wished I had Roshi by my side. No doubt she’d tell me the risk I was taking now was tantamount to suicide. But, trapped between Dieter’s clay hunter and the Ilthean army, what other choice did I have?

Thankfully, Sidonius’s shadow-worker arrived before the delay overwhelmed me. To my surprise, he was not an Ilthean. His whipcord thin body was swathed in what looked like a sheet, and the pits of his eyes were stained with ink dark as plum juice. Braids and tiny chips of glass threaded his hair. I could only suppose his homeland, wherever it lay, had been absorbed by the empire, for surely only a citizen could hold such a position of trust.

Two steps away from me he stopped, staring at me. I refused to make eye contact. The pain in my midsection was becoming a feverish burn now and sweat ran down my cheeks in runnels.

‘Achim,’ said Sidonius. ‘This is the Lady Matilde. She wishes to pledge her aid to Ilthea.’

‘I take it a simple vow won’t suffice,’ said Achim, his voice like the rasp of sand over sand. His excellent command of the Turasi tongue hinted at an expensive education.

Achim moved closer, his robes whispering. Squatting, he peered up at me, tilting his head back as if for a better view. A tiny circle of gold pierced his septum, and I stared at it, wondering at its significance. Perhaps his people worshipped the bull.

I raised my head, displaying Dieter’s brands. ‘As you can see, there is the problem of a prior … allegiance, if you will.’

‘Where did you come by such markings, my lady?’ he said, before slewing a look over his shoulder. ‘My lord, this woman needs rest before she can undergo a shadow-pledge.’

‘She can rest afterwards,’ said Sidonius. ‘When she is safely chained.’

‘Look at her colour –’

‘After.’

Achim turned back to me. ‘My lady, I’m afraid this will not be pleasant.’

‘Just don’t break any more of my bones,’ I said.

He put a thumb on my brow and spread his fingers around the back of my head, his hands warm and dry as a snake’s sun-baked hide.

‘These runes are your brother’s work?’ he asked of Sidonius, who only shrugged in reply.

‘Lady,’ asked Achim, ‘do you know their meaning?’

Having learned the hard way what happened when I tried to speak of Dieter’s runes, I didn’t answer, reluctant to risk confessing embarrassing half-truths in front of an Ilthean general.

‘You can speak of them without fear,’ said Achim, gentle but urging.

My heart raced at the prospect of what would happen if he were wrong, and I shook my head. Hope quickened my breath – the shadow-worker spoke so bluntly of the runes. Did he know how to release me?

‘Answer him,’ Sidonius commanded, his tone brooking no dissent. ‘If he says you can speak, you can speak.’

‘Emet,’ I answered, the word slipping out without obstacle. ‘Truth. To kill me, Dieter can erase a single rune and turn the phrase to Meit: Death.’

Achim frowned and gave the circlet of gold piercing his nose a sharp tug. It must have stung, for he blinked fast and furiously afterwards.

‘If you were a creature of clay and anima, yes,’ he said. ‘But a human woman? No. Although …’ Again the quick tug at his piercing. ‘Oh, he is a sharp one, this brother. Canny. He uses the mind against itself.’

Anger gave me strength as I untangled his meaning. ‘You’re saying this was a trick?’

Achim’s smile revealed orange-stained teeth and gums. ‘Yes. A simple spell, to bind you from speaking of what he’s wrought. Chicanery, or another spell, to bind you into believing him. Then he tells you he’s bound you to the clay, yes? Erasing a rune will kill you. If you were Amaer, lady, you’d know this is not possible, for a human is born
with the *mechaiah*’s spark bestowed in heart and mind. But instead, you believed him. And thus, you obeyed him.’

I scrubbed at my forehead, my hands shaking so hard I couldn’t still them.

‘Rub them out!’ I begged, too unsteady to worry about my pride.

Achim laid his hands in the lap of his strange robe and said, ‘But the spell is already broken.’

I lowered my hands, nauseated by all I had suffered and all I had fought through because of a meaningless scribble on my brow.

‘It relies on ignorance,’ he added. ‘Now you know the truth, you can stand before him with impunity. His witching eyes and conqueror’s smirk cannot sway you anymore.’

As I turned away from him, Achim muttered something in a tongue I didn’t recognise.

‘Enough,’ said Sidonius. ‘If Dieter has no hold over her, you can work a pledge. See to it this one will hold her.’

Achim lifted his hands from his lap, fingers splayed and palms cupped.

I stared at the space between them, mesmerised. Was that a glimpse of sun-scorched sand? Of rock sere beneath the sky? If so, it vanished in a blink. The fancies of a mind wracked by pain.

When Achim’s gaze met mine, I thought I could see that land in his eyes, like a reflection off the surface of onyx.

A great wash of sunlight and the staggering power it brought, a power too great for tender, water-lush creatures to withstand. The inhabitants of Achim’s land were sparse and spare, water-starved muscle and tendon beneath stretched skin. Their bones knew the heat of day, the cold snap of night. The plants were thorny and rigid, the birds wheeling in the sky in a ceaseless hunt for death.

*Emet, meit.*

The air around us shimmered, a whisper of parched desert heat curling the wisps of hair about my face, drying the sweat from my cheeks and brow. Sidonius watched Achim, impatient for an action already being wrought.

The Amaer man released whatever insubstantial item he’d been holding and a great rush of power skittered through the tent. My skin tingled as it passed through me, the strands of it scribbling along my every fibre. Any words I uttered now would cling to those filaments of power, invading every strand of my being.

Any words I uttered now would bind me, irrevocably.

Achim lifted a hand and pressed the warm pad of his thumb over the centre of my brow.

‘Speak now your vow,’ he intoned, his voice holding the echo of aeons in which nothing shifted but sand.

I glanced at Sidonius. What would he accept? What would he demand?

‘It is not wise to keep a shadow-pledge waiting, lady,’ Sidonius said.

Everything seemed to be vibrating, a thrum building in the ground, rising through the soles of my feet and tickling every fragment in my body, until it made my lips tingle on the edge of numbness.

‘I, Matilde of House Svanaten, rightful Duethin of the Turasi, do pledge my aid to the empire of Ilthea, now and when I am returned to my throne.’

The words burned like bile as my mouth formed them, then hung in the air. I felt the binding tasting and absorbing them, like spider silk swelling in the dew-filled morning.

‘More,’ Sidonius said. ‘In return for your throne, you will pledge whatever aid the emperor, or any of his representatives or ambassadors, deems necessary.’

I eyed him warily, but Achim still had his thumb pressed to my forehead. Already the binding was tightening.

‘So be it,’ I whispered.

A triumphant smile lit Sidonius’s face. Then Achim released me, and the binding took hold. All the power he’d summoned – the power of sun and sand, of the rocky bones of the earth and the dark corners they provided for hiding many-legged creatures and thorny plants – snapped back into me.

An agony like venom lit my every nerve to screaming as Sidonius barked a laugh, the sound of his triumph merging with my pain before chasing me down into blackness.
ACT FOUR

A GAZE BLANK AND PITILESS
A HUM OF VOICES nearby tugged at me through layers of grey sleep until I jolted awake.

Remembering what had happened, I lay still, gradually gaining a sense of where I was and if anyone was near. I was lying not on a bedroll spread on the ground, but on a tick stuffed with wool and laid atop a low wooden frame. A travelling bed! An unlit brazier and a single lamp squatted in the centre of an otherwise empty floor, casting a weak, orange gloom over the small tent.

The door-flap hung slightly ajar, revealing a slant of afternoon sunlight and no tree shadows. How long had I been asleep? Were we already approaching the Turholm?

The tent-flap twitched aside and I jerked upright – and froze, hunching over the sharp pain of my ribs. When it receded, I saw that it was Roshi and stood up. Carefully. Her smile was bright as the light framing her, when she saw that I could stand. ‘Welcome back.’

‘How long have I been asleep?’ I asked, brushing unwashed hair from my face.

‘Three days – we’re back near the Turholm. Achim says you would’ve woken sooner, but he had to dose you up because the travelling would have pained you too much.’

The mention of Achim brought the memory of my last waking moment ramming into me with the speed and force of a kick to the stomach: You will pledge whatever aid the emperor, or any of his representatives or ambassadors, deems necessary.

I’d found the Amaeri who could dissolve Dieter’s binding – and then I’d turned around and sworn my aid to Ilthea. What had I done but exchange one collar for another? I sank back onto the cot, burying my face in my hands with a groan. Need seemed a weak justification now.

Roshi came forward and knelt by me, lightly touching my knee.

‘He’ll put me back on the throne. That was our bargain. He’ll unseat Dieter and put me back on the throne. Then, ravens take my eyes, I’ll owe my throne to Ilthea,’ I said, speaking through my fingers.

And ravens take my eyes if it wouldn’t give rise to an endless round of requests, and eventually demands, from the empire.

I shook my head. ‘Everything I’ve done has been so I could live, but that doesn’t excuse any of it. I sold my throne to the man who murdered my family, and now I’ve sold my people to the Iltheans. None of it’s excusable.’

‘You listen to me,’ Roshi said, gripping my knee hard. ‘The blood of the Skythes runs in you. We are not a people who lie down and die. I’ll not hear you rail against your fierceness like some limp Turasi cowering beneath a stone roof.’

I didn’t answer and she chose to interpret my silence as acquiescence. ‘Good,’ she said. ‘Now let’s wash that bird’s nest on your head. Then I think you should talk with Achim. He’s a most interesting man.’

Within moments she’d organised for a basin to be fetched, along with buckets of water and fresh clothes. She’d obviously settled into life with a travelling army.

‘Cold, I’m afraid,’ she said with offensive cheer, combing the chill water through my hair then scrubbing the soap into it, her fingers working some of the tension from my scalp.

I fell to wondering about Clay and whether he’d been destroyed. If he hadn’t, he would still come seeking me. Thought of the golem sparked an idea. As everyone kept reminding me, taking a throne was never bloodless. Sidonius’s campaign would be no exception. There would be a battle. Clay might come hunting again. Even if he didn’t, there were uncountable ways in which a general might find himself an inadvertent casualty of his own campaign. A dead general couldn’t carry word of my pledge back to his emperor.

‘Stop it,’ said Roshi, as if she could read my thoughts.

I cleared my mind and smiled at her.

‘Better,’ she said approvingly, before winding my hair into a braid and binding it on the crown of my head.

I cast an eye over the clothes she’d brought. The Ilthean matron’s sleeveless gown she held was cinched under the breasts with a string of silk and fastened at the shoulders with bronze clasps worked in the shape of a serpent’s head, fangs bared. There were also sturdy leather sandals with crisscrossing straps, which Roshi wound halfway up my calves. A great swathe of cloth, blue as sapphires, completed the outfit. Roshi draped it around my shoulders like an oversized shawl.

So easily had I been turned into a southern snake.

The choice was Sidonius’s, I had no doubt.

I stood, conscious only of the ache of my ribs against the linen bandages as Roshi stepped back to admire her
handiwork. I grimaced as she twitched the stole first this way and that, adjusting its fall to her satisfaction. When she was done I feared to move at all lest the entire contraption collapse around my feet.

‘Enough,’ I said, when she looked like she might dive in for another round of adjustments. ‘I don’t need to look like the perfect Ilthean woman.’

Roshi bit her lip and held the tent-flap aside for me as I stepped outside, the pain of ducking through almost too great to bear.

I emerged to the sight of line upon line of Ilthean soldiers stretching between me and the plain behind which the Turholm towered, Dieter’s black raven banners snapping in the wind from every turret and tower. Despite Roshi’s warning, the sight was a blow.

I gazed at my beloved home, standing tall and proud before the approaching onslaught, and thought I might break somewhere deep inside.

To my left, Achim rose from a squat. ‘Lady,’ he greeted me.

‘I find myself in unpleasant circumstances,’ I replied stonily.

Achim cast a questioning glance at Roshi, but she had planted herself beside Sepp, who sat cross-legged at the far corner of the tent, shrunk in on himself, head down. Neither he nor Roshi came to Achim’s rescue.

‘Tell me how you came to be here,’ I said, still staring at the Turholm.

Squatting again, Achim rolled his shoulders in a shrug. ‘It is a long story, if you want all the details, not to mention a dry one. The short version is, I came away from my homeland to find someone and I joined Sidonius because he asked.’

‘Who is Sidonius to you?’

‘Dieter’s brother.’

‘What is Dieter to you?’

‘Private,’ He replied, his expression making it doubly sure I understood this was a closed topic. ‘This much I will tell you. We learned the lore of the Amaer together, during his time in my homeland.’

‘You know his tricks of old.’

‘I do,’ He said, flicking a finger I assumed was meant to encompass the marks Dieter had put on my brow. ‘He was always one for the quick and easy way. Most of us scorned him for it, for usually it is the most easily broken.’

He paused and shook his head. ‘But Dieter always had a trick up his sleeve which turned the quick and easy way into the best way.’

‘You mean his ruse with believing.’

‘Yes. Use the victim’s mind to make the lie true,’ The shadow-worker said. ‘Brilliant. Amoral, but brilliant.’

I considered the black raven snapping in the distance. ‘Must it be amoral? Couldn’t the same trick be used to make a sick patient believe themselves healed?’

‘Don’t let Roshi hear you talk like that – she has a most decided opinion as to your regard for Dieter.’

This time it was my turn to shrug. ‘She has good reason.’ There were no words to explain the riot of confusion which made up the way I felt about Dieter, so I didn’t try.

‘My lady, if I may say, you look ravishing,’ Came Sidonius’s voice, and I turned to find him approaching, wearing the self-satisfied smile I’d heard in his tone. ‘Dressed as you are,’ He continued, ‘I see the likeness to your aunt.’

The mention of Helena made me shiver, and I could find no response that didn’t choke me.

‘Silence is a good attribute,’ Sidonius noted. ‘You might want to cultivate it. Particularly during the parley.’

His words started a trip-hammer in my breast. Parley meant Dieter.

‘Come,’ He said.

‘Now?’

‘Second thoughts, little queen?’ said Sidonius, his choice of epithet sending a chill down my spine.

I had to stiffen my neck against the urge to turn and check for Clay’s approach.

‘Might I suggest it’s perhaps a little late?’ he added.

‘You may not,’ I snapped.

Sidonius examined me with a critical eye before offering me his arm in its white silk sleeve. ‘In that case, your throne awaits, lady.’

I rested the tips of my fingers on his arm, taut and warm beneath the thin layer of silk, and let him lead me towards the parley, and Dieter. My knees felt weaker with every step, his pace quick enough to make my bound rib twinge.

A makeshift pavilion had been set up, an open-sided tent of white silk, excess scraps of cloth fluttering at each corner. A small party on horseback were picking their way across the plain towards the pavilion already.

We had no mounts of our own, not directly. Instead, a single horse stood harnessed into the traces of a small open
carriage.

‘In you step, lady,’ said Sidonius.

‘I’ll ride the horse,’ I said, not moving.

He took no notice, urging me into the carriage with a hand on the small of my back to block off any escape. The carriage creaked as I stepped in, then rocked and tipped as Sidonius followed me. He stood dead-centre, lifting the chariot’s prow from the ground.

I clutched at the lacquered wooden rim, terrified by the thought of landing on my backside in the dust.

‘Closer to me,’ said Sidonius.

‘I’m fine here,’ I said, curling my fingers tighter.

He pulled me towards him, forcing me to release my hold on the rim and step back. Only a fraction of an inch separated us as he reached around and tucked me into the crook of his elbow. He picked up the traces and the horse flicked glossy ears back and forth, shifting on its hooves as it felt the subtle change in its harness.

An escort formed around us: soldiers in bronze breastplates, scraps of white silk knotted to the tips of their lances. Sidonius flicked the reins and gave a sharp cry in my ear and the horse burst into a trot. The chariot’s rattling start swayed me tighter into his grip. Unsteady with the jolt and sway, pull and lag, I didn’t fight, but concentrated instead on controlling the pain shooting through my body and the nerves making my hands hot.

Heralded by the beat of hooves and the rattle and creak of the chariot, clad in the garb of the Iltheans and cradled in the arm of his brother, I made my way towards my husband.
DIETER REACHED THE pavilion ahead of us. He had Gerlach with him, and two of his men. Surrounded by a
brace of ilthean soldiers, I nevertheless felt weak by comparison. So be it, I thought. He made me weak.

The thought birthed a spark of anger, which I visualised gathering close in cupped hands and nurturing, to steel
myself against the coming confrontation. Even from this distance, unable to make out the exact nature of Dieter’s
expression, I wanted to quail with shame.

After a time, the Iltheans dropped back to a walk, leaving the chariot to pull ahead in a rattle and creak of wheels.
Sidonius drew in on the reins, slowing the horse to a brisk walk and finally stopping.

I’d expected something showy, a sweeping turn perhaps, or a pull sharp enough to stand the horse on its hind legs.
Instead, the chariot rocked on its axis and tilted slowly forward to resting.

Silence stretched between us. Dieter and Gerlach remained on their horses – my father’s horses – and Sidonius
and I stood in the chariot. We all four stared across the yards separating us, the only noise that of the pennons of the
pavilion rustling and murmuring in the breeze.

Sidonius moved first, his hand on the small of my back. I clutched at my skirts as the damnable bucket tilted
beneath us. Pain shot through me as I stepped down. Then the breeze brought a hint of Dieter’s scent, triggering a
flash of memory from our last night together. The night I had turned to him, the night we had consummated our
binding. Heat flashed across my skin.

Sidonius guided me into the shadow of the pavilion as Dieter and Gerlach dismounted and stepped inside. The
four of us stood behind chairs opposite each other.

‘It’s been a long while, brother,’ said Sidonius.

‘You’ve grown since I saw you last,’ Replied Dieter, before pulling out his chair and sitting, legs outstretched and
one elbow crooked onto the chair’s arm, as if completely at his ease. Gerlach remained standing, belying Dieter’s
composure.

I pulled out my own chair and sat before Sidonius could hand me into it. My cheeks burned to sit before my
husband dressed as an Ilthean and allied with his brother. But I had only to remember Clay, the weight of his hands
pressing me into the earth and death, to firm my resolve, though it did nothing to banish the creeping sensation
which stalked my nape at the thought of leading an army of serpents towards the Turholm. There’s no temporary
when it comes to power, child. Give those serpents a toehold and you’ll spend buckets of blood before you dig them
out again.

‘I can’t help noticing you’ve marched an army onto my lands,’ said Dieter. ‘Nigh up to my gates, in fact.’

‘You claim sovereignty over the Turasi?’ said Sidonius, taking a seat and casting an arch look my way. ‘I had
heard the position belonged to another.’

‘You need more reliable sources,’ Dieter said equably, not looking my way even for a heartbeat. ‘You also need
to give me reasons for marching an army onto Turasi soil. Make it a good one, won’t you?’

Sidonius responded to Dieter’s easy stare with one of hooded hatred. ‘You hold the future vassal king of the
Turasi. For your sake, I hope the boy remains unharmed.’

Dieter picked at a nail. ‘The Duethin has never been, nor will ever be, a vassal to Ilthea,’ He said, then looking up,
his fixed Sidonius with a glare and added, ‘No son of a snake will ever sit the throne. The boy is nothing more than
the half-caste spawn of a svanaten. And who are the Svanaten?’

‘They are ashes scattered before the wind.’

For the first time he shifted his gaze to me. ‘They are dead,’ he said, triumph and cruelty threaded through his
voice. ‘They are ashes scattered before the wind.

It took all my strength to hold Dieter’s gaze until he turned away, releasing me.

Sidonius leaned forward a fraction, his smile crooked, his cheeks bright with colour. ‘The emperor’s reach is longer
than yours, brother. The Turasi will fall under his sway as countless other peasant tribes have done before. I have the
power to negotiate an agreement which will see you live.’

‘Your emperor’s promises, and therefore yours, are a false coin,’ Dieter said. ‘They will buy nothing from me.’

If the insult angered Sidonius, he didn’t show it. ‘I understand you killed Helena of house Svanaten,’ he said, with
no trace now of the fury he had shown when he first learned of her death.

‘I’m afraid she did not find the homecoming she wished for.’

‘She was fleeing justice,’ Sidonius went on. ‘Jurgas Avita Angeron will look kindly on you for dealing with her in
such a manner – and let me assure you, the emperor’s gratitude is no trifling matter. Yield the boy, and we can talk
of your reward. Refuse’ – here a grim tone darkened Sidonius’ Voice – ‘And there will be no clemency for any of
your people.’

Dieter looked up at the wind-rippled ceiling as if the conversation bored him.

‘Your threats and promises are both as empty as the winter wind,’ Said Dieter, bringing his gaze back to his
brother. ‘Attack the Turholm, and the boy –’

‘Dies?’ Sidonius interrupted with a sneer. ‘If so, you lose any advantage. And any chance of surviving.’

‘Suffers,’ Dieter corrected him, then stood. ‘I will bend knee to no one. If you’ve nothing further to hint at and
imply, let’s be done with this chicanery.’

‘Your creature is dead, Dieter,’ I said, my voice arresting him before he could turn away.

A dark shadow touched his eyes as he measured me. I kept my expression closed, giving him no clue that my
words might be untrue. Did he grieve for the golem? Or did he merely wonder how it had died by my hand?

‘The throne is mine by right. Hand it back, and this all ends here,’ I added.

Sidonius and Dieter both looked at me with matching expressions of disdain, banishing any doubts as to their
kinship.

‘A moment alone with my wife, if you please,’ Dieter said to Sidonius.

Sidonius nodded and withdrew to the ranks of his men, but not without a sharp glance my way. Gerlach retired as
well.

Dieter stepped closer – enough to lower his voice, not enough to make Sidonius nervous. ‘I held your life in the
palm of my hand for weeks on end. And I did nothing. Remember that.’

‘I’m quite familiar with the details of your little trick,’ I retorted, anger quickening my tongue.

He considered this, obviously wondering how his arcana had been broken.

‘I did what was necessary to keep you alive,’ he said, not pursuing the questions shadowing his gaze.

‘Ha!’ The laugh exploded from me, sharp as thorns. ‘Oh yes, I was valuable to you – I made sure of it. Don’t
confuse any affection you may have felt for genuine emotion, Dieter. I did what was necessary to keep myself alive.’

The words were bitter in my mouth. ‘You simply thought me weak enough to ignore.’

‘Well,’ He said, regarding me, his gaze speculative. ‘At last you don’t need to convince or manipulate me
anymore.’

‘See what progress we’ve made in our marriage.’

‘Do you know why I seized the throne?’ He said, stretching out the fingers of his right hand as if fighting the urge
to make a fist. ‘Because the Turasi falling was inevitable otherwise. The Svanaten are a weak bloodline, too weak to
keep the snakes from our borders. Ravens take your eyes, your aunt kited off and married one of them! If you don’t
know what she planned with that boy of hers, you’re as stupid as the rest of your kin.

‘I thought it’d be her who handed us over to the empire. But you’ve outshone any of her meagre efforts, Matilde.
You’d give us over on a platter, garnished with an eternity of servitude.’

I flinched, but anger kept my back straight. ‘You’ve always underestimated me, Dieter, always made the mistake
of taking my intent at face value. Yet you think you’re the clever one. Why? Because you can perform tricks with
clay?’ I put every ounce of disdain I had into my voice, until it pumped through my veins and oozed from every
pore.

He leaned close, his pale and witching eyes pinning me. ‘Don’t underestimate me,’ he said, his voice low and
thrumming with violence. ‘I’m not always nice. And don’t overestimate yourself. You don’t have what it takes,
Matilde,’ he said, then turned on his heel and strode back to the horses, Gerlach falling into step behind him.

I stood watching them until their horses were small with distance, until Sidonius put chill fingertips on my
forearm.

‘Lady,’ he said. ‘It’s over. Let’s go.’

I looked up, my cheeks rubbery with schooling them to blankness. ‘He won’t yield.’

‘He will,’ said Sidonius. ‘Tomorrow we ride to war. And Ilthea always wins.’
SIDONIUS DIDN’T SPEAK on our way back to the camp.

As soon as we reached his command tent he gathered his captains to council. He ordered my attendance, though there were no introductions to his men. He demanded every fragment of information I could dredge forth, from the depth the Turholm’s walls extended beneath the ground to the number of men under Dieter’s command, from the strength of the fortifications to the quantity of stores. It took every ounce of concentration I could muster to answer him while balancing honesty and my desire to retake the throne with keeping my court and my people safe.

When at last Sidonius had asked everything he wanted to, he dismissed me, not deigning to include me in his battle plans. I left the command tent torn between wanting the battle over and wanting it never to start, trapped like an insect in the slow seep of sap. Anger and anguish about Dieter also warred within me.

The Ilthean camp was already abuzz with preparations, the soldiers at work sharpening their blades, testing their weapons and readying stores of ammunition. Their efficiency chilled me as I hurried to my tent and ducked inside. Roshi and Sepp were waiting for me, and the three of us talked long into the night, trying to stave off fear and uncertainty.

We all had friends behind those walls, and bloodshed was the morrow’s only guarantee.

When at last we retired, I tossed and turned, unable to sleep, finally rising as dawn glimmered just beneath the horizon. Tiptoeing past Roshi and Sepp, careful not to wake them, I stepped outside.

Two soldiers guarded my tent: I still wasn’t trusted. At least this pair didn’t question me but simply fell in behind when I chose to venture into the camp. An air of tense purpose pervaded the Ilthean, the soft comings and goings of those returning from duty or heading out to their vigil lending a scatter of pale shadows to the site.

At the camp’s perimeter I stopped. Ranks of soldiers stood gathered on the skirts of the plain, a great bulk of greaved and breastplated and helmeted men. Standards pierced the earth every twenty yards, the white snake of the south winding across a crimson background.

The arrangement of the men surprised me. This was not the thin spread of an army laying siege behind ditch and fortification. This was a force readying for frontal attack.

Morning revealed a causeway of packed earth which the Iltheans had laboured at overnight. Though not yet complete, the line of its path was still clear. The ramp would rise from the ground to the top of the walls, a walkway into the Turholm. Sidonius must have had all his men working on the ramp, to have achieveved so much in a single night.

The Iltheans waited in companies a hundred strong, ignoring the causeway for the moment. Instead they brought out their machines of war: the cartwheeled onagers, their spoons resting empty against their stops; the nimble-footed catapult called the scorpion for its stinging tail; and the bulkier ballistae, complete with crossbow bolts the size of a man. My heart cramped to see the weaponry being screwed together while other men carted forward armful after armful of ammunition.

As Sidonius approached, he fired commands like volleys into those flanking him on the right, and directed questions at three weary men to his left, their faces bleary with lack of sleep.

‘Fetch Matilde,’ he commanded at one point.

Someone pointed me out, and moments later his steps crunched behind me. I didn’t turn, just kept staring at the Turholm’s walls.

‘Lady,’ he murmured, folding his arms behind his back and joining my vigil with an air of satisfaction. ‘It’ll be ours in a week, if that.’

‘You’re very confident,’ I replied, measuring the ramp and trying to guess how many days would pass before it was completed. The Turasi would not be so complacent as to let construction continue unhindered. The last spans to the top of the wall would be hard-won now.

Some force kept me guarding the secret of the bolthole through which we’d escaped the Turholm, the revelation of which would see Ilthea boil inside the walls and overtake the Turholm with ease. I was determined not to aid the serpents so completely – and they didn’t even need it.

‘Ilthea didn’t become an empire on the strength of idle boasts, lady,’ Sidonius said. His easy certainty reminded me of his reputation, the emperor’s favoured general who had never failed to conquer.

‘Is that why you serve them?’ I asked, my voice icy.

His eyes were as cold and bright as the curtain of northern lights in a winter sky. ‘No. I do it because they took me in when my people cast me out. They are a better race, a people who understand loyalty and duty. The Turasi …’
'Yes?' I demanded. ‘What of them?’
He shrugged. ‘The Turasi are no more than barbarians making sport in the straw they share with their swine. You
will see,’ he said, fervour lighting his features. ‘When you are crowned, you will travel to Ilthea and see what a city
is. You will see what civilisation means.’
‘It’s a wonder Ilthea takes an interest at all if we are so vile,’ I said.
His answering look bordered on contempt. ‘The vilest of creatures can nest above a gold mine. Or iron ore mines,
as the case may be.’
I let the rebuke pass unremarked. If we’d used our resources better, perhaps it would never have come to this.

It was midday when Sidonius ordered the attack to begin with a nod which trumpeters turned into bugling cries,
triggering the Iltheans to thump their spears into the ground and set up a rattling of shields.
From the Turholm, silence answered the challenge.
The onagers fired first. With a smack of wood against their stops, boulders hurtled through the blue sky. The
machines kicked out when they fired, the force of their own blow almost too much for the wooden frame. Most of
the stones fell short, but two shattered down over the wall, sending back screams and the shriek of tortured masonry
from inside the city. The ballistae sent enormous arrows arcing after the stones, and these flew truer, all but one
breaching the walls.
The Turholm would not long withstand these men, even without their earthen ramp.
‘Now, lady,’ Sidonius turned to me after yet another stone inflicted its damage inside the walls. ‘Where does the
city draw its water?’
I wanted to prevaricate or delay or even deny outright any knowledge. The best I managed was vagueness.
‘There’s a well in the city, and a natural spring in the heart of the palace. And the river, of course.’
‘Drawn by hand?’ he demanded, the condescension in his tone stiffening my spine.
‘No,’ I snapped. ‘It’s siphoned off upstream, and run through pipes to a reservoir inside the walls. The rain water
collects there as well. If you’re thinking to drive them to their knees through thirst –’
‘That’s exactly what I’m thinking,’ he interrupted. ‘I suggest you hold back on claiming I won’t succeed because,
all things considered, you’ll look foolish when I do.’
I ached to shove my balled fist into his face. Instead I turned back to the city as the machines fired again:
buckshot this time from the onagers, and stinging bolts from the scorpions.
‘Cutting off the water is a siege tactic. This,’ I said, indicating the army, the machines, the earthen ramp, ‘Isn’t a
siege.’
‘I’m not interested in a protracted affair. You tell me all the drightens were present when you left, but that may
well have changed by now. Even if it hasn’t, they’ll have summoned reinforcements, not to mention those demons
of the northern plains. If Dieter’s not bluffing and they are riding to his aid, then I face the uncomfortable
circumstance of being stuck between the walls and the oncoming hordes.’
I wanted to claim my mother’s kin wouldn’t support Dieter over me, but a mutter from Grandmother warned me
not to dare it.
Again the machines fired, their missiles this time trailing yellow flame. At least one took root inside the walls and
soon tongues of fire licked skyward as cries echoed faint and thin.
His enemy distracted, Sidonius signalled an officer to sound the next attack. Within minutes the Iltheans marched
forward in step, helmets and interlocked shields providing little access for Turasi missiles. A rain of Ilthean arrows
sang through the sky to provide extra cover.
Ravens above, would they be inside today?
‘There’s also the matter of Dieter’s creature,’ Sidonius continued.
It took an effort to drag my attention from the Turholm. ‘What of it?’
‘What’s to stop him concocting an army of the creatures? Given time, he could swell his ranks until he
outnumbers me.’
An army of Clays? I shook my head, though my heart raced. ‘They need blood,’ I reasoned. ‘He’d deplete his
strength at the expense of creating them.’
Sidonius glanced at me sidelong. ‘From what Achim tells me, they need only a drop. If it were me, I’d judge the
price worth the return.’
Only a drop. I shuddered. How many drops did a glass vial hold? Even if Clay was dead, Dieter could send golem
after golem hunting me, each of them given life by my blood, each of them tied to me.
‘I must attend to the battle, lady. You might prefer to retire to your tent,’ he added, his tone less an invitation than
an order. ‘This won’t be decided today.’
With that he stalked off, summoning a team of men and giving them orders to find and stop the water supply
pipes even as he left.

I watched him go with my heart in my throat. Perhaps it wouldn’t be decided today – but it would be soon.
I passed the long afternoon in my tent with Roshi and Sepp for company. Sepp had barely opened his mouth to speak since arriving in the Ilthean camp, as if he feared drawing attention to himself. It was Roshi who solved the mystery of his behaviour.

‘They recognised him as Helena’s son, when he and the men of House Vestenn first encountered the army,’ She explained in a murmur.

I cursed myself for not realising sooner what the Ilthean army would mean to Sepp’s fate. As Helena’s son, the Ilthean would count him as one of her husband’s household. Sepp’s lack of Ilthean heritage would not concern the white serpents – they considered everyone and everything the rightful property of their empire.

In allying with the emperor’s favoured general, I had as good as handed Sepp over into true slavery.

In contrast to Sepp’s silence, Roshi chafed at our enforced isolation and the lack of news. Every noise drifting back to us, from the slam of the ballistae against their stops to the distant whine of arrows, brought from her fresh speculation as to what might be occurring on the field of battle. She demanded news from our Ilthean guards, but their task was to ensure I did not slip away unnoticed or otherwise create strife, and they told us nothing.

The day waned and passed into night with little change. To my surprise, the battle did not cease with the failing light. Cries still came from afar – perhaps, under cover of darkness, the Iltheans were at work on their ramp again. We had long since worn ourselves to silence, speaking only when anxiety or restlessness burst through our restraint. Now we huddled, swathed in blankets to fight the settling chill, and waited as best we could.

Some hours after true dark fell, a boy slipped into the tent, his gaze seeking me. ‘The general calls for you,’ He said.

I squinted up at him, seized by a cold spike of dread. ‘What for?’

“You’re needed,” he answered, truculent. ‘With some urgency, lady.’

‘All right, I’m coming.’

I looked at Roshi and Sepp, who both nodded and stepped up to accompany me – regardless of anything the boy might say.

We stepped out into the moon-frosted night together and the boy led us across the field, its surface rutted and potholed by Ilthean cleated sandals. He walked without misstep, and Roshi glided behind him as if she had the eyes of an owl.

Lantern and torchlight dotted the top of the Turholm’s nearest wall, shedding dim shadows over the swarm of bodies on the earthen ramp.

Sidonius waited before the ramp’s base, out of arrowshot.

‘I don’t know what he thinks I can do,’ I muttered.

Achim was by the general’s side, his gaze cast downwards. A slight hunch of his shoulders betrayed his tension. Now I understood how the earthen ramp had been constructed so quickly. The soldiers fought only to distract the Turasi and protect the Amaeri shadow-worker while he used his power to build the ramp, or at least they had. By the melee on the causeway something had changed. Something Achim couldn’t – or wouldn’t – counter.

‘The Turasi will hardly listen to anything I have to say,’ I forestalled Sidonius.

‘It’s not your oratorical powers which interest me,’ he replied, pointing at the ramp.

Squinting through the darkness, the figures on the ramp I had at first taken for soldiers were in fact dark-skinned, and I didn’t need light to know they were hairless and marked as Dieter had marked Clay, as he had marked me. Golem. Dieter could lose any number of them without significant harm, but every Ilthean who fell sapped Sidonius’s strength.

‘Get rid of them,’ Sidonius ordered me.

I opened my mouth to protest, but his look forestalled any protest.

‘My men saw what you did to the other. Buried him to his knees in solid earth, they tell me.’

My stomach squeezed tight around a flutter of anxiety. ‘Your men have sharp eyes. Sharp enough to know precisely how little impact that had on the creature.’

Sidonius grabbed me by the arm and pulled me close, sending a jolt of pain up my spine. ‘I don’t care how you do it, just kill them,’ he hissed, releasing me.

Roshi’s hand on my shoulder steadied me as I stumbled back. I dared a glance at Achim.

‘He’ll not help you,’ said Sidonius. ‘He won’t lift a hand to stop them.’

‘Dieter is their mechaiah,’ Said Achim without lifting his head. ‘For any other to extinguish the anima he gave
‘If you won’t help, don’t disturb the silence,’ snapped Sidonius. ‘I’ll not have you handing her excuses to refuse me – she’s not in the position. As for you, lady, if I lose one more man to those creatures, I’ll take payment out of your own hide when all this is settled.’

‘Keep a civil tongue in your head when you address me, General,’ I retorted, the words putting starch in my spine. ‘Making threats you can’t follow through is a fool’s practice.’

I didn’t delay, however, immediately edging nearer the ramp. But the night was too dark; even closing the distance didn’t improve the view. I drew Achim to my side. He came reluctantly, pulling against my grip. If it weren’t for Roshi directly behind him, he would have stopped altogether.

‘The general spoke true,’ he said, when we halted. ‘I’ll not kill those creatures. Think carefully on what you undertake, my lady – destroying a golem brings a burden with it. You will owe their mechaiah the anima you have stolen from him.’

‘I owe my husband more than a little stolen anima,’ I muttered, the foreign word strange in my mouth.

I wondered what hold Achim had over Sidonius that he could refuse the general’s demands. Perhaps, when the time came, the Amaeri shadow-worker would come in useful in my struggle against both brothers. I tucked the thought away; there was no time now.

‘Stop your moralising,’ I went on. ‘You were happy enough to build a bridge which would lead to the deaths of Turasi men and women, and you’d lift your hand against them quickly enough if those golem hunted you.’

‘They do not.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘Which means you can help me figure out how to do … whatever I did last time.’

He turned surprised eyes on me. ‘You don’t know?’

‘I wouldn’t be asking if I did.’

A terrible cry drew my attention to the ramp. One of the golems gripped an Ilthean by the throat, crushing his flesh. The crack of his neck breaking caused the soles of my feet to tremble.

‘Now, Achim,’ I said.

He closed his eyes and held his breath, but he acceded. ‘Empty your mind. You must be calm. You’re not calm.’

‘You’re not hurrying,’ I said.

‘You need to find the quiet within, where you can listen to the voice of the mechaiah.’

I choked on a rising rush of panic. There hadn’t been any quiet within when I fought Clay, and there wasn’t any now.

Roshi touched my forearm, her fingers warm, her eyes so compelling I couldn’t look away.

‘Think of the earth beneath them,’ she said. ‘What does it feel like?’

As I stared into her eyes, the earth sent a tingle up my spine. Suddenly it was as if I could sense every single grain in that thrice-cursed ramp, rubbing each against the other, and the vortices and sippets of air threading through them.

‘Earth can ebb and flow like a wave on the shore,’ murmured Roshi. ‘It can reach for the sky, or open wide its maw and swallow us whole.’

‘Call the men off,’ I whispered, frightened to lift my voice lest I break the tender thread connecting me to the earth.

‘The men, General. Call them back!’ Achim cried across the night.

A fluting summons disturbed the night, causing the Iltheans to break free and back down the ramp, desperately trying to fend off the golems who dared follow.

The last soldier jumped off the ramp. This was my chance, while the Iltheans were safe but the golems still stood upon the ramp. Closing my eyes, I clutched at the thread connecting me to the earth, sending my will plummeting down it.

The ground rumbled, a great roar building like a leviathan surfacing, then it split open, releasing its pent thunder with a blasting breath of sulphur and rot. Excess earth flowed away from the lip of the maw but, caught in the centre of the eruption, the golems and ramp tumbled into its depth, swallowed without trace.

Still I didn’t release my hold, though it was like clutching a filament of silk under water. The pressure of the displaced earth pushed at me until my ribs creaked with every breath. The connection transmitted tiny sounds back to me, the sensation like a plucked lute string, telling me the golems had fallen to the bedrock.

I turned my face skyward and let go, and the earth rushed back in like a tidal wave, crashing and foaming, closing over the gaping hole as if it had never been.

The connection broke with a snap, and I sagged where I stood, shivering with sudden cold. Solidity eluded me, as if the hole had opened inside me, a spinning, gaping, directionless whorl.

Roshi caught me and held my weight, and we turned as one at the sound of Sidonius laughing.

‘Brilliant,’ he called, grinning broad as a split melon. ‘Now why couldn’t you do that?’ he said to Achim,
clapping him on the shoulder.

The Amaeri cast me a shadowed look, and his eyes slid away. Somewhere deep inside the hole I’d opened inside me, I could feel fingers scraping, scraping, digging for air. ‘Roshi,’ I cried, my voice cracking as I swung my head around, seeking her. ‘Ignore it, Tilde,’ she said gently, her hands firm and warm on my shoulders. ‘It’s the effect of the power, that’s all. It will pass.’

‘Lady, I need you to –’ Started sidonius, drawing my attention back to him.

Roshi pushed forward before he could make any further demands. ‘That little stunt you had her pull wasn’t exactly easy – you do realise that, don’t you?’

‘You coached her in it as surely as I asked her to do it,’ he countered. ‘Which reminds me – I should hope you’re not hiding any talent of your own.’

The uncertain light of nearby torches took on a menacing hue and I blinked prisms of light from my eyes. My legs shook and my ribs were on fire.

‘You have until dawn,’ Sidonius relented, his gaze sweeping from me to Roshi to Achim. ‘Eat, sleep if you can. But be ready before first light.’
DAWN BROUGHT LITTLE by way of relief.

The sense of a chasm yawning open inside me hadn’t vanished with sleep. I eyed the ground warily as I sat up, convinced any step would be the booby-trapped one – and down I would go, tumbling end over end until the earth closed off the sky and there was nothing left but to scrape and dig, dig and scrape, my fingers working blind as maggots.

Roshi put a bowl of stew into my hands. ‘Eat,’ She said. ‘It’ll help.’

The scent of lamb and coriander cleared my head a little, and thank the ravens it did because I’d barely managed three mouthfuls before a soldier poked his head in. Fixing the space behind my left shoulder with a stare, he announced, ‘The general wants you.’

I rose, stiff as if I’d run a marathon the night before. Roshi put a steadying hand on me and Sepp made a trencher from a hollowed heel of black bread and filled it with stew.

Waiting near the swathe of churned earth which had once been a ramp, Sidonius was garbed for battle. He carried a mace and had a short stabbing sword strapped to his waist. Robbed of the cover of darkness, he had not ventured as near the walls as our position last night.

‘Do you need to be close, to work your tricks?’ he asked, not bothering with greetings.

‘No,’ I answered, after Roshi gave a tiny shake of her head.

I squinted at the Turholm, and the scored dark earth before its walls. Surely it would be more difficult to work from further away? I didn’t voice the thought, however, in case Sidonius commanded me closer to the fray.

‘Good,’ he said, and turned to give the command to stand ready. Movement ran through the ranks like an ebb tide as the soldiers gripped weapons and shifted their shields forward.

‘It doesn’t need to be glamorous, lady, merely serviceable. Make a ramp wide enough for four men abreast and take it to the top of the wall. We’ll take care of the rest.’

‘Oh, is that all?’ I snapped.

The look he gave me helped me to focus, and I stared at the patch of earth I needed until I had it memorised. Someone – presumably Achim – had made a start at rebuilding the ramp, but it was only a dozen paces long.

I closed my eyes, and reached for the connection. The quiet place, where the mechaiah dwells, I thought. The tight place, where the earth thrums deep inside me. I pictured it in my mind, the earth melting until it flowed, drawing together and running up to the walls, building on itself, and finally settling back to solidity. Four men abreast, and serviceable.

When I opened my eyes, no ramp breached the wall’s face. The earth had not shifted so much as a single grain. Sidonius, Roshi, Sepp and rank upon rank of soldiers were all staring at me.

Squeezing down a panicked breath, I shut my eyes again. This time I imagined Clay’s breath cold and close on my nape, his massive hands pushing me, grovelling and suffocating, into the ground. That only made me remember the golems I had killed the previous night, with the gaping pit and the endless tumbling.

I swayed on my feet, my eyes snapping open to steady my balance, and shook my head weakly. I couldn’t summon an apology for my failure. It must have fallen down the same pit as the golems.

Sidonius’s hands curled into fists, and his gaze told me he’d like nothing more than to pierce my ribs with a pike.

‘Then you’re no use to me,’ he said, dismissing me with a curt wave of his hand. ‘Wait quietly somewhere nearby, until you find something you can do to help.’

I retreated back to the treeline, where I found Achim sitting cross-legged with his back supported against a tree trunk, watching events with his pitch-smeared eyes.

‘Why aren’t you out there building his ramp for him?’ I snapped. ‘It won’t cost any golem lives this time.’

‘I tried,’ he said, ignoring my tone. ‘And succeeded, for a time, despite Dieter’s counter-efforts. He never was particularly strong in manipulating the earth. Which is how I ended up stuck by one of his arrows.’

Belatedly I noticed the bandage around his shoulder. Not waiting for any apology, Achim went on, ‘The beginnings of the ramp took me two hours. I need rest before I can continue. I suggested to the general that Dieter would be too strong for you and he should have you collapse the wall instead.’

‘But that would damage the Turholm.’

‘That’s what he said.’

‘What will he do now?’ Roshi asked.

‘Build his ramp by hand, I suppose, for now. But that won’t be his only strategy.’
In fact, Sidonius appeared to have abandoned the idea of the ramp. He was deep in conversation with a group of green-crested officers, and from the way they scratched maps in the dirt at their feet, I thought his next tactic had less to do with the ramp and more to do with flanking the Turholm. Was he planning a siege after all?

Whatever he was planning, no more golems appeared to defend the walls. Whether it meant Dieter was too weary for more tricks, or something more sinister, I couldn’t judge.

‘And you?’ I demanded of Achim. ‘What will you do?’

‘Until Sidonius takes the palace, very little. Unless he requires counsel on Dieter’s latest conjuring.’

I didn’t point out that his counsel last night had been sorely lacking. ‘And when Sidonius takes the palace?’

The shadow-worker met my gaze. ‘I will bind Dieter, and take him back to Amaer. Every man must meet his chosen fate.’

I looked away. What did it matter to me what happened to Dieter? He was not my friend, neither was he someone who commanded either duty or loyalty from me. So why did Achim’s words provoke a gnawing feeling deep in my guts?

Sepp was watching me closely, as if he suspected the direction my thoughts were taking.

I countered the sickness the only way I knew how. ‘You could teach me, while we wait,’ I said to Achim.

‘How will you use my teachings?’

When I didn’t answer, he shook his head. ‘I thought so. Would you give me your oath, before I taught you?’

‘I’m a little short on oaths right now,’ I said.

‘You are like Dieter – there is no boundary you can’t justify crossing. You would use my teachings to kill and subdue others. I will not help you.’

‘Fine. I doubt I’d find your help useful, anyway.’

After that, Roshi and Sepp and I made for our tent, where Roshi tried to teach me more of what she knew. It was little enough, however, and none of it helped me connect with the power again.

At midmorning we learnt Sidonius had received good news. The men he had sent to find the source of the Turholm’s water pipes had succeeded in blocking them. Provided no one broke out of the palace and unplugged them, the Turasi would soon suffer the stab of thirst. We left our tent and headed back towards Sidonius and his men.

Bad news arrived hard on the heels of the good, however. Scouts, windblown and harried, with the shadow of pursuit in the circles under their eyes, brought a straining silence in their wake.

‘Turasi from both north and west, General. Judging by their paths, they mean to join forces before they reach us.’

‘When?’

‘Two days, perhaps.’

Sidonius cast me a dark look. ‘I don’t suppose you’ve remembered anything of use yet?’

Numb, I shook my head and he turned back to his men. ‘That’s not all, is it?’

‘The Skythes approach from the northeast, General. Further away than the Turasi, and a smaller force, but every one of them mounted.’

As Sidonius cursed under his breath, Roshi plucked at my elbow, her eyes wide, the whites bright with worry.

‘Tilde,’ she said, a strangely timorous note in her voice. ‘Those are my people – and yours.’

I said nothing – words seemed superfluous – but reached for her hand instead.

She shook me away. ‘They’re coming because of you.’

‘Because he’s your husband.’

Stubbornness set my chin. ‘They treated him as my husband even after I tried to point out I had no choice but to marry him. They chose to support him then, they can support him now. I don’t figure into it.’

She grabbed my arm, stopping me from turning away. ‘They don’t know he’s not your husband anymore,’ She hissed.

‘A binding is eternal, Roshi. He’s still my husband,’ I protested. Then a new and uncomfortable idea occurred to me: ‘Do you mean to say your people can … can …’ I sought for a word. ‘Unbind?’

‘You’re allied against him, Tilde, and sending men in to kill him –’

‘Not kill.’ Not right away, at least, I thought, remembering Achim’s purpose.

‘If they knew your alliance, they’d not send him aid,’ Roshi insisted.

‘Their inattentiveness isn’t my concern.’

‘They’ll die,’ she whispered, fear tightening her cheeks and pinching at her eyes. ‘You can stop it.’

I shook my head. ‘How? I’ve no way to get a message to them. Unless you mean me to ride out and meet them? Actually, that’s not a bad idea. We could turn them to our aid. I’m sure Sidonius would –’

‘No!’
Her cry drew other eyes, but she stared them down before turning back to me. 'Ilthea doesn’t ally. Sell your Turasi if you want, they’re used to masters and lords and orders. My people will die, starving for the sky.’

‘You’re being melodramatic,’ I said. ‘Stone roofs didn’t kill you. Besides, I don’t know what you think I can do. If you don’t want me to ally them with Sidonius, he’ll see them as a threat.’

‘Tell him about the bolthole,’ she said.

I shook my head, drew back a step. ‘No!’

‘Damn you, matilde!’ she hissed. ‘Would you pick a side and stick with it? You’ve allied with this Sidonius, stop hampering him.’

‘I’ve picked a side,’ I replied coldly. ‘Mine.’

‘And it’ll get us all killed, stuck between Dieter’s walls and my people’s spears!’ she cried, squaring her shoulders and setting her jaw, determined. ‘If you don’t tell him I will. This conflict is yours. I’ll not let it draw my people to their deaths.’

Stubborn as I was, I didn’t want to see more bloodshed either. That had been one of the reasons for allying with Sidonius in the first place, so I relented. As it turned out Sidonius refused me the courtesy of privacy when I asked to speak to him alone, though he did at least gesture to his men to move away, though they didn’t draw out of earshot.

When I told him of the bolthole, and the precise location where it breached ground, he closed his eyes and drew a deep breath.

‘You didn’t think to mention this before because …?’ he asked, his eyes still closed and his voice tightly controlled.

‘It didn’t occur to me,’ I said, the transparency of the lie making my voice weak.

Giving me a contemptuous glare, he summoned his men back. ‘The lady has miraculously remembered a bolthole. I’ll organise a force to take the tunnel and break in, then we’ll overrun them from the inside. Give us two hours’ – this with a glance at me to ensure the time would be adequate – ‘Then bring out the scaling ladders and the battering ram to distract them. Given his injuries, it isn’t likely that Achim will have finished the ramp by then, so we’ll open the gates for you –’

‘Easier said than done,’ I interrupted. Why couldn’t I keep my mouth shut? ‘The passage leads to the stables. The main gates are courtyards away from there.’

‘It’s a good thing we’ll have you to guide us, then.’

‘Me?’

‘You,’ he said. ‘You’ll forgive my lack of trust, I’m sure, but I’m not sending my men into a bolthole you’ve conveniently forgotten until now without insurance. I can’t think of a better safeguard than sending you into the dragon’s maw with them.

‘Oh, and in case that’s what you were planning all along? My men will have orders to kill you at the first hint of betrayal,’ he said, his expression as cold and sharp as winter sunshine. ‘Nothing else you want to tell me?’

I shook my head. All of my careful plotting and planning, all my luck and daring to keep me alive this far – would it end here? If Dieter’s men didn’t kill me on sight, Sidonius’s might stab me in the back anytime one of them got twitchy.

All you need do is get inside the Turholm, child. Men die in battle all the time. I turned my face away, hoping the thought didn’t show.

Sidonius’s hundred men looked pitifully small for an invasion force, even more so when the bulk of them gathered behind me, each of them watching me with heavy, foreboding looks.

One of them summoned Sepp forward. Eyes downcast, cheeks and brow pale, Sepp obeyed without comment. I looked at Sidonius.

‘He’s coming with us,’ he said. ‘More specifically, with me. A little incentive, to make sure you don’t view my safety too lightly. Roshi is confined to the tent, and she’ll share Sepp’s fate. Whatever it may be.’

Sepp wouldn’t meet my gaze and I was almost glad of it. There was no way to explain, with or without words, that I needed Sidonius dead.
IT TOOK US an hour to travel to the northeastern wall, where hills and forest backed up close to the Turholm. It took Sepp a further twenty minutes of casting around to find the tunnel’s entrance, twenty minutes full of dark glances from the soldiers, their knuckles turning white as grips shifted and tightened on sword hilts.

At last Sepp found the remnants of the pony’s tracks, deep-cut crescents indicating how much she’d laboured under the weight of me, unconscious on her back. Following the tracks brought us to the entrance, a chink of darkness hidden slantwise behind a fallen boulder.

‘There,’ he said, pointing.

Sidonius eyed it doubtfully, but a soldier slipped through with a scrape of metal on rock, and pronounced it true. Moments later I was ducking my head forward into the darkness, the air damp with the smell of limestone and earth. Every fifth man carried a torch, the guttering red light deepening the walls to black and setting off a hissing when water dripped into them. The rest of the world was cut off as we walked.

There was no telling how the battle overhead progressed, whether Dieter had unleashed any disastrous new tricks, whether the Iltheans were scaling the walls or ramming the gates. There was only the steady tramp of feet through echoing stone passages, the squeak of studded sandals, the drip and hiss of water, the flutter and gutter of flames from the torches.

At last the tunnel climbed steeply, grooves cut into the rock floor aiding traction. The stable was nigh. Every nerve felt on edge.

Sidonius must have guessed we were close, for he motioned me back from the lead before he and a handful of men approached the rear of the false wooden wall. They paused, listening, then Sidonius motioned to me: be ready.

I had no weapons other than my strange power, and no Roshi to help me guide it forth. If the door was guarded by one of Dieter’s golems or some other arcana, it would be up to me to overcome it. I shivered, terrified.

The door swung open, and a half-dozen Turasi faces turned towards the movement, hands reaching for their weapons.

The Iltheans were faster, Sidonius spitting two of them before they’d even drawn their swords. His men swept by on either side, their short, brutal blades driving through the lungs or stomachs of the remaining four.

The bodies slumped to the floor, their blood soaking into the straw, giving a coppery note to the warm, rich air. Down an aisle a horse whickered, then fell quiet.

I held my breath, but no one came.

Sidonius gestured the rest of his force into the stables behind me.

‘I don’t suppose there’s any other way out of here?’ Sidonius asked in low tones.

I shook my head, uncomfortably aware of the short, claw-like swords unsheathed at my back.

‘Figured not. Right, then, lad. Your turn,’ he said, hooking a hand under Sepp’s elbow and jostling him towards the courtyard, where every Turasi worth his salt would be waiting for them.

Fear twisting my guts at the thought of Sepp caught in the midst of Turasi fire, I hurried to keep up. With aching care we crept the stable’s length towards the square of daylight tumbling in from the courtyard. Just inside the door, still in the safety of shadows, Sidonius stopped.

The upper courtyard appeared empty. All the men were on the walls. By the cries and the clash of metal and the whistle of arrows, the Iltheans outside were keeping them occupied. Stepping into broad daylight felt like walking to my doom. I couldn’t keep my eyes off the sky, transfixed by the threat of death falling from the pale blue sweep overhead.

A faint whistle built around us, flowering into a whine, then rocks exploded down into the courtyard, a scattershot of fist-sized stones which tore through flesh and chewed into wooden beams.

I screamed and ducked, arms over my head. No one else so much as flinched.

‘You didn’t call off the ballistae?’ I asked, indignity heating my cheeks as I straightened.

‘If I did that, they’d have more time to notice us,’ said Sidonius.

‘It’ll be hard enough getting to those gates unseen without having to dodge missiles.’

‘I can hardly call them off now,’ he pointed out. ‘If you’re worried about being hit, figure out a way to protect us.’

This time he let the bulk of his force precede us, a rush of Iltheans borne forward by the ferocity of their weapons, stabbing and hamstringing Dieter’s men from behind. Blood flowed and splashed, and we followed in the wake of a red mist curling on the breeze.

We kept to the stable wall and, for one long moment, while the surprise lasted, it looked easy. Effortless. Like
stabbing unarmed nobles in the midst of Aestival.

But it couldn’t last, and in the next moment the Turasi rallied, turning to face the new threat, rushing from the walls and into the courtyard. Like ants swarming from a kicked nest, their numbers seemed endless as the hot swirl of battle pressed in on us, hemming us in on all sides, crippling our progress.

The gates were only spans away, but between us and our object stood scores of Turasi. Though they wore different liveries, all had a single purpose – to annihilate us.

Sidonius welcomed them with a feral cry, hefting his sword as Turasi rushed towards us.

You called up the earth as if it were a fluid. Whether the voice was Grandmother’s, Roshi’s or my own, I didn’t know. *Air is not so different, surely?*

I tried to imagine the air turned solid above us, like a blanket stretched taut to keep out the rain. But I found no tremor of connection inside me.

Forgetting Sepp, Sidonius pushed to the front line to meet the battle. Cocooned in the jostling centre, I groped for Sepp’s hand, which was as clammy as mine. The men in front stood close enough that I could trace the muscles in their back without stretching. The squeal of iron and snarl of ripping cloth beat at me from all sides. Underneath the grunts and smacks, came the moist sound of flesh puncturing.

An Ilthean rammed his sword outward, a crimson arc exploding from the back of his Turasi opponent. At the same time hot blood sprayed across my chest as a Turasi scored his own Ilthean. The ilthean crumpled to the ground, opening a gap in the circle before me. No one stepped in to close it.

The Turasi soldier recognised me and, wrapping his knuckles tighter around the shaft, aimed the point of his spear towards my heart. A thin wail like rocks screaming sounded overhead and I looked up. The dead Ilthean soldier’s blood dripped down my chest as I saw the boulder arc towards my head.

Sepp jerked me back and the rock slammed down onto the Turasi’s head, driving him into the ground in a puddle of meat. Bone and brain splashed up at my face.

Sidonius was watching me. Swallowing hard, I bent and retrieved a dropped sword, its grip sticky with fresh blood.

‘Which is the best way?’ Sidonius shouted at me.

‘In the open,’ I replied, my voice distant and shaky. ‘Let’s finish this quickly.’

He hesitated, distrust in his eyes, wondering if I’d simply snapped, my sanity broken by watching a man struck down before me, by the sheer dumb luck of it all. Or perhaps he saw his death in my eyes.

‘Lead the way,’ he said, removing any chance I had of sticking him in the back. ‘Sepp, with me,’ he added.

I stepped into the lead, the blade heavy and awkward in my hands. Sepp walked to my right, Sidonius on his other side. The Ilthean to my left suddenly lunged forward, blocking my way with his shield. An arrow thunked into the solid wood, tail quivering.

Dust puffed from the main gates with every smack of the battering ram, the noise of it like a pulse. Blood pounded in my ears, in counterpoint to the ram’s rhythmic thudding. The winch and chain shivered with each blow.

Sidonius and his men charged at the gates and the Turasi protecting them, again raising the song of steel. As they streamed past me, I stood in the open, forgotten. No one grabbed at me or insisted I follow. The blade pulled at my arms, only the tacky grip keeping it from falling. Sepp stood at my side. He had found a blade, and held it with more confidence than I gripped mine. Swivelling on his heel, he was scanning the battle all around us for direct threats even as he said, ‘We should find somewhere safer …’

I didn’t answer.

Catching sight of my expression, Sepp followed my line of sight and found the reason.

Dieter stepped out of the swirl of people and stopped before me, his black uniform bloody, his knuckles ripped raw beneath their torn leather bindings. Fear pinned me where I stood and turned my muscles to water.

He smiled as if he knew the effect he had on me. ‘I should have slit your throat at Aestival.’

‘Do it now,’ I said.

His smile faded. ‘Tempting, thank you, but no. I think you should try living with what you’ve done, Ilthean.’

The gates creaked and groaned as, inch by inch, they swung open. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Sidonius and his men momentarily besieged at the mechanism, but then Iltheans poured through the gap from outside.

There wasn’t a man who saw that gap didn’t know the truth: the Turholm was lost. It belonged to Ilthea now.

‘Enjoy the fruits of your labour, Matilde. You’ll find my brother a crueler master than I,’ said Dieter.

‘You were never my master,’ I retorted, ‘And your brother won’t be, either.’

He turned away and, swinging a white cloak over his shoulders, disappeared into the swirl of Ilthean troops.

I took a step after him, one hand raised, but he was gone amid the melee.

I had no doubt, come the end of battle, he would be vanished, counted among neither the living nor the dead.
EVEN BEFORE THE battle wound down, Sidonius had sent a detail in search of Renatas, and another in search of Dieter. Achim insisted on accompanying the latter group, despite his injury, but only after promising Sidonius he would return within the hour.

Sidonius turned to me and gestured for me to precede him.

‘It’s time, lady,’ he said.

Fighting back my nerves, I led the way.

This time the sanctuary was clean, its parquetry floor unstained, its polish unmarred, the chandelier shedding glittering light over the empty hall. This time, Sidonius and I were the ones to track in the blood.

Every step I took left a smear, and blood dripped from my hems. Sidonius’s cleated sandals dug wounds into the polish and wooden boards alike, raising a clatter and squeak. More blood ground into the holes he left in our wake.

‘General …’ I started, trailing to an uncertain halt. ‘Wouldn’t it be better to do this later? When the people, Turasi and Ilthean both, have had time to rest?’

‘No, we do it now,’ he said, gripping me by the elbow and marching me forward.

I stared at the throne. It was a simple wooden chair, for all that the back had been inlaid with apple wood like a crowning sunburst, and the arms and legs and seat were delicately carved. Just a simple wooden chair.

I had fought long and hard to unseat Dieter and regain it for myself, for the Svanaten. But I had shed more lives in my pursuit than Dieter had in his coup. And I had never imagined it would be an Ilthean frogmarching me towards it, the blood of my people still warm on my clothes.

Dieter had killed my family – and united the Turasi more thoroughly than my family had for generations. And now I walked the Iltheans into the sanctuary – not as suppliants, but as conquerors.

You don’t have what it takes, Matilde, came Dieter’s voice, echoing through me, filling me with shame.

‘Go on,’ said Sidonius, releasing my elbow and propelling me forward. ‘Take it. It’s yours, after all.’

I climbed the steps that led to the throne: the first for the thralls, second for the freeborn, third for the drightens, fourth for the Duethin. A fifth step stood behind the throne, too narrow to support the whole of a man’s foot, which was for the prester. None ruled higher than the Duethin but the ravens above, and not even the mara could know what they wanted of us.

I hesitated, turning back. ‘I’ll bloody it,’ I said.

‘It can be cleaned, lady.’

No it can’t. I couldn’t tell if the voice were Grandmother’s or my own, not anymore.

‘Take it,’ he repeated.

The seat was cold, the polished wood silken beneath my chapped fingertips when I laid my hands along the armrests as I sat, bloodied conqueror, and looked out upon my empty hall.

‘Stay there,’ Sidonius ordered, as if he were the Duethin. Then, with a wry smile, he added, ‘I hope it’s comfortable.’

Alone in the cavernous hall, I fought back my shame. This was not what I had imagined. Dieter still lived, as did Sidonius, and the slave-born general would not be satisfied with a vague and nebulous promise of aid.

The throne, however, was returned to my House. And I had driven out Dieter – I could drive out his brother, too.

First Dieter’s soldiers, then the thralls and freeborn of the Turholm, were marched into the sanctuary by the Iltheans. There were so many that I wondered if any were left to guard the walls, any left cleaning up the dead and tending the wounded. Every person still alive crammed into the room, tracking in yet more blood, staring up at me on the throne. Without exception they looked at me with hatred in their eyes.

I didn’t have the heart to force them, nor bend them to my will.

A Duethin doesn’t quail from command, child, said Grandmother.

To shy away now would betray every decision I had made since Aestival night. Whether I had the heart for it or not, I must finish what I had started. Dieter was unseated and the bonds of his arcana broken, and now was my chance to reclaim my birthright.

Though it broke my heart to compel my own people, I nodded to Sidonius. Well versed in the art of conquering, he understood my unspoken instruction, and a moment later it began. With Ilthean swords at their backs, every Turasi left alive knelt and bared their neck to me. By the time they were done the blood from their as yet untended battle wounds pooled at the bottom of the steps, and every knee was smeared with it.

I was near to wilting with the pain of my broken rib. Every fealty offered under duress tasted sour, catching in my
throat. By the last I was shaking, my hands huddled in a white knot in my lap, unshed tears burning my eyes. Thank the ravens it was over!

Now it was time to take command.

I looked to Sidonius. ‘General. Do you have a report on the whereabouts of your brother?’

Achim had slipped into the hall partway through the ceremony; the Amaeri shadow-worker now stood at the bottom of the steps, beside Sidonius and Sepp. I wished Roshi were here, not in an enemy camp surrounded by soldiers.

‘He has not been found yet,’ Answered sidonius. ‘No doubt he has fled like the cowardly dog he is.’

I bit back my response. Defending Dieter’s character was not the first of my priorities right now.

‘Then we will find him in due course,’ I said, my voice even and strong. ‘In the meantime, I think it best we dispense with the usual feasting and frivolity, and tend to our wounded. If you would send to your camp, General, and have Roshi fetched here …?’

‘Certainly, my lady,’ he replied, though he didn’t pass the command to any of his men. Instead, he glanced at Achim and, after receiving the Amaeri’s nod, climbed the steps to the throne. First, second, third – fourth.

Dread dried my mouth.

‘But first, lady,’ Sidonius said. ‘You will bend your neck to Ilthea.’

‘You are mistaken,’ I replied, my voice bouncing off the polished walls, sinking into the draperies.

‘You will acknowledge the sovereignty of Ilthea,’ He commanded, steel in his eyes and voice.

‘You won’t make me into a puppet,’ I said. ‘Ilthea has my gratitude for her aid, but I won’t hand my people over to her rule.’

‘You will,’ said Sidonius. ‘And if you do not stand of your own free will, I will force you to it.’

‘Drag me from the chair and bend my knee for me, General? It would not look well.’

‘I won’t be physically picking you up, lady. I will use your own strange power against you,’ he countered.

The colour drained from my cheeks.

‘You pledged whatever aid the empire deemed necessary,’ he said. ‘As the emperor’s representative in these lands, I require public acknowledgement of that pledge.’

At the bottom of the stairs Achim stepped forward, his drab brown robes stark among the white and bloodied clothing of the Turasi and Iltheans. Lifting a hand, he breathed a single word I didn’t hear.

I jerked up as if someone else had control of my limbs. A strange power surged through me, forcing me to step towards Sidonius, then my knees dropped with a thump that jarred my teeth. A weight bent my head down until I bared my neck like a humbled dog.

I clenched my teeth, choking back the words. Time. I just needed more time! But there was no time. Sepp stood huddled by Achim’s side, spent. Roshi sat in a tent she would never leave, should Sidonius die. Both their lives hung in the balance, and I had no more time or opportunity.

You do not have what it takes, Matilde.

Squeezing my eyes shut, the oath tumbled from numb lips: ‘I, Matilde of house Svanaten, Duethin of the Turasi, do pledge fealty to the Ilthean emperor,’ I said, my voice ringing through the chamber. ‘I acknowledge and accept Ilthea’s sovereignty for myself, and those sworn to me.’

Tears scalded my eyes but the pledge bound my muscles tight. I riffled through my mind for an addition, an ambiguity I could work into the vow. The words that escaped me were the exact opposite: ‘Until death release me.’

‘On behalf of Ilthea, I accept your vow,’ Sidonius intoned, touching the top of my bowed head with his hand.

It was done. My promise – or Achim – released me and I stood, legs shaking.

The Turasi in the room stared daggers at me. I might be Duethin, I read in their gaze, but without an Ilthean escort I would be dead before the day was out.

I had guided my country and her people into the snake’s pit. Until death release me.

Now I must guide them out.
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