





# ALOREN

E.D. Ebeling

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## One

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Father asked what the condition was.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Shut it.” Tem sounded sick.

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

“Shut your mouth, I said.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Mothers see them,” said Tem.

“Did ours?”

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

## Two

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It'll taste better."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It smells like mushrooms," Floy said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Arin looked down the hole.

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

"Reyna—" said Mordan.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s stuck.”

“Let me try.”

“You idiot, you tied it too tight.”

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

“Let me out!”

“Give it a minute.”

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

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

“Floy, go get a knife,” said Mordan.

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

“No, you’re not,” said Arin.

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

The boys rushed after, leaving me alone.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You’re not Father,” said Leode.

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

Tem gave a tiny shake of his head.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No,” said Tem.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I fell silent. Something had heard me.

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

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

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

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

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

An arrow.

There was a flaming rag wrapped around the shaft.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Where’re you going?” I said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“They want to die?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I thought the broken spirits were the cure—”

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

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

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

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

He had forgotten I was ten.

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

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

I nodded, only to mollify him.

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

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

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

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

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

“Be brave.”

“Don’t leave me.”

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

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