

LADY OF
THE ICY
SHORES

THE SELKIE QUEEN: PROLOGUE

Isobel Robertson

Chapter 1

The rich darkness, the kind only found at the bottom of the sea, wrapped around the walls and houses of the fasthold. Svanhild drifted along silently, her red curls twisting in the gentle currents. She should have long since been in bed, but she had been unable to resist the bright crescent sliver of the new moon above the water. Such a night was worth any punishment - but she would rather her uncle didn't catch her sneaking back into her room.

The hall had usually fallen quiet by this time of night, everyone asleep or in their private quarters. If anyone spotted her, she could claim the desire for a midnight snack. But getting into the hall in the first place might prove more difficult. Creeping through her secret gap in the magical nets that surrounded the fasthold had been hard enough. The well-defended walls of her fortress home kept almost everyone out.

She slipped in through the side door of the hall, keeping close to the wall so that the green glow of the witch-lights didn't fall on her. Tantalisingly close, the curtain that led to her sleeping-room hung on the other side of the hall.

“You shouldn't make such a fuss.”

The voice, harsh and cutting, slid telepathically into her brain and she froze. Selkies like her, seal shape-shifters, communicated telepathically underwater. One-on-one communication drained energy quickly, though, so even private conversations were often broadcast. Still, the hushed sound of this thought suggested that Klaus did not want to be heard. Who was her uncle talking to?

Casting a longing glimpse at her sleeping-room curtain, she turned in the opposite direction, hugging the shadows as she moved towards the screen separating Klaus's sitting-room from the main hall. As the Lord of the Icy Shores, he had a little more privacy than all the other selkies who dwelt in his fasthold, with an entire suite of rooms reserved for his private use.

“Someone has to be cautious.”

This was a woman's voice, although it sounded nothing like Margit, Svanhild's aunt. It must be Katrina. Klaus's beautiful young mistress had never liked Svanhild in the slightest. The slight clicking of her knitting needles drifted from behind the screen, the metal hitting together as she knitted the traditional magic nets of the selkie people.

“I kept this a secret for years before I even met you. Don't worry about what doesn't

concern you.”

“If she finds out that you murdered her father, I'll suffer for it too. Of course this concerns me.”

“You're not my wife. Don't act like it. My niece doesn't have the brains to work out what happened to her father. And even if she did, who would believe her? She may be an adult under the law, but I'm still her guardian. Don't let a ridiculous thing like her twentieth birthday fluster you so much.”

Svanhild froze in the shadows, her heart pounding so hard it might wake the rest of the hall. Surely he could not mean what she thought? Her uncle Klaus, stern but loving, could not have murdered his own brother - her father.

But already, her shock was hardening into anger. Klaus had as good as admitted it himself. She would learn the truth, and then she would make him pay. After all, she had as good a claim to the Icy Shores as he did. She would have her vengeance, and her inheritance, whatever the cost.

Her heartbeat pounded in her ears so loudly that she could barely hear anything else. She wrapped her arms protectively around her chest and then let go with a hiss of fury, carelessly hitting against the wall. The thick rope cuffs around her wrists made a louder noise than she would have expected.

“Who's there?”

Klaus broadcast the thought wide, slamming into the heads of everyone around him. Svanhild heard the selkies across the hall begin to murmur as they came awake, their tie to their lord alerting them even in deep sleep. She shot forwards, sliding back behind her curtain in time - she hoped - to avoid being seen.

Could Klaus really be a murderer? Since her father's death before her tenth birthday, Svanhild had lived under the guardianship of her uncle. He was strict, sometimes a little cruel, and certainly not affectionate, but she had always believed that he loved her. He nodded approvingly when the poets sang tales of her father's deeds, and he helped Svanhild to sacrifice in her parents' memories every year. Could he act like that if he had killed his own brother?

She thought about the warm childhood days when Klaus and Margit had taken her onto the shore, laughing as she tested out her human form for the first time. They were no longer loving towards each other, it was true, but could everything have been a facade?

Klaus had admitted it in his own words. Questioning and worrying would not benefit anyone. She needed vengeance. And she knew who could help her get it.

She left her room as soon as the first light of dawn began to filter down through the water, turning everything an icy shade of pale blue.

Aleksander, head of Klaus's guard, stood exactly where she expected to find him. He hovered in one corner of the training cube, watching as the men worked through their morning exercises. He raised a hand to her in greeting, then turned back to his men, swimming gently around the cube to watch them from all angles.

She waited, hoping that the men were almost finished. It would be better if no one else heard her - at least, not yet. She had known Aleksander her entire life, as he rose through the ranks of first her father's guard, then Klaus's. They had never been close, but she had a strange feeling that Aleksander was one of the few men who truly respected her. The atmosphere of Klaus's court did not encourage men who believed in the worth of women.

"I need to talk to you," she said, slipping the thought privately into Aleksander's mind as the first group of men left the training cube.

His eyebrows raised slightly, but his handsome face otherwise remained blank.

"I am at your service, my lady," he replied.

"I need to learn how to fight," she told him. His surprise was so strong that she felt it physically ripple through the water.

"You know that your uncle disapproves of women engaging in fighting," he said, his emotions now under tight control.

"You said you were at my service. I want you to teach me how to fight."

His expression didn't change as he gazed at the next group of men to enter the training cube, but she could imagine the conflict behind his stormy blue eyes. He lifted one hand to his head, shifting gently in the water as he thought. Svanhild tried not to admire him too much. A handsome man, yes, but first and foremost a tool to get what she wanted. Vengeance.

"You were my father's man, were you not?"

“I was. I owe my career to him.”

“Then do this in his memory.”

He sighed, so faintly that she wouldn't have noticed if she hadn't been listening for it.

“As you command, my lady.”

“We begin tomorrow,” Svanhild told him.

“Why not now?” Aleksander asked. His voice held a mocking challenge that she couldn't resist.

“Now it is.”

She swam up to the training cube, feeling a little light-headed as Aleksander dismissed the warriors waiting inside. He ordered everyone away from the cube, and held the ropes open for Svanhild to enter.

She drifted inside, her heart beating fast. She had never really expected to see the inside of the cube - only warriors ever entered. Women, even the daughters of warrior lords, certainly did not.

“Which weapon do you wish to learn?”

“Sword.” The answer came quickly and easily. The sword had been her father's weapon.

“I thought that might be your answer,” Aleksander said. Was that a touch of gentle humour in his voice? His face still showed no expression. Perhaps she had imagined it.

He pulled a lightweight training sword out of the floating storage barrel and sent it spinning through the water towards her. She caught it eagerly, waiting for Aleksander to climb into the training cube and face her.

“What under waves is going on here?”

Klaus's voice boomed across the training area, his telepathic force making Svanhild wince. Why could her uncle not have stayed busy with his gold coins and his pretty mistress? Part of her wanted to scream in his face that she knew what he had done, who he really was. But the time had not yet come.

“Apologies, uncle,” she said, keeping her voice light. “I always thought that sword fighting looked like such fun. Aleksander here warned me that it isn't for ladies, but I'm afraid I pushed him into it. Can I not try even a little?”

Klaus chuckled indulgently, but his smile held a dark edge, and his jaw looked tense. She felt a rush of fury at the sight of his jewelled silver circlet and the silver rings stacked up his arms. That wealth should have been her father's.

“Always looking for some silly new adventure, Svanhild. Go inside now and help your aunt with the rope-making, before you get hurt. Aleksander, I don't expect to see this again.”

Aleksander bowed low in the water - although perhaps not quite as low as he might have - and murmured an apology. Svanhild smiled sweetly at her uncle and skimmed past him, tossing the sword back to Aleksander.

For one brief, beautiful moment, she imagined a true steel sword in her hands, flashing down to slice through Klaus's neck. The adrenaline rush felt real, even if the image was fantasy. She could almost taste the sweetness of revenge.

“We will continue tomorrow. In secret,” she said, sending the thought privately to Aleksander, drawing on their long acquaintance to keep it hidden from everyone else around them. She felt his agreement flow back along the same thought channel.

Let Klaus imagine her a silly little girl as she swam back towards the hall, skirting around the nasty black seaweed that seemed to grow everywhere in the fasthold. He would not realise his misjudgement until it was far too late.

He had reminded her of the precariousness of her situation, however. With her guardian dead, who would protect an orphaned young woman? She could not kill Klaus until she had prepared to protect herself.

Chapter 2

The noise and bustle of the hall swirled all around, but Svanhild sat silently, like the still water at the centre of the storm. She felt poised and ready, her muscles tight and her heartbeat quick. The time had not yet come, but every moment gave her a chance to get closer to Klaus. She wanted to learn more about her father's death - to eliminate the last of the doubts, and to expose all of her uncle's secrets.

When Margit swam up beside her, reaching for an oyster from the women's table, Svanhild spotted an opportunity.

“I've been meaning to talk to you,” she said, sending the softest whisper of a thought across the distance between them. Was she imagining the nervous expression on Margit's face?

“I've been very busy,” Margit said, one hand smoothing along the rope netting that separated off the women's corner of the hall. She didn't meet Svanhild's eyes. How much did she know?

Svanhild kept her thoughts careful and controlled.

“I need to ask you about my father. About how he died.”

“We all know how he died.” Margit's thoughts were flat and unemotional. “There's nothing else to tell you.”

“Please, be honest with me, Margit.”

“I've told you everything I have to say. Stop asking.”

Margit swung around and swam away, the oyster still in her hand. She squeezed herself into another group of women, leaving Svanhild alone. What was she hiding?

Once upon a time, Margit and Svanhild's mother had been the closest of friends. When Svanhild found herself an orphan, Margit had cared for her and loved her. Safe and secure, Svanhild had adored her new mother.

But, over time, things had changed. Klaus became colder, more distant. Margit became sadder. And then Katrina arrived, taking Margit's place as Klaus's lover, if not his wife. Klaus was not foolish enough to throw away the political connections that came with a woman like Margit. And poor Margit was not foolish enough to expect that her

own clan would take back a childless middle-aged woman.

Klaus had hurt all the people he should have loved the most. How dare he sit there in the hall and hand out food like a good lord? He was as false as the so-called rubies that dripped from his fingers. Svanhild almost felt sick just looking at him across the length of the hall.

When Klaus left his place at the table and drifted up into the rafters of the hall, high above everyone else, Svanhild frowned. What was going on?

“Good people of the Icy Shores!”

Klaus's words boomed around the hall, echoing through the minds of everyone there. Chatter stopped and the music died away as everyone looked upwards, turning their attention to their lord. Svanhild studied each face. Who else might suspect what he had done?

“I have exciting news this evening,” Klaus continued, catching Svanhild's attention again.

“We are honoured with a visit by Lerritz of the Endless Deeps, here on behalf of his lord, Harald of the Endless Deeps.”

A murmur of interest spread across the hall. Svanhild's frown deepened. What business did Klaus have with the southern selkie lords? She didn't like this.

The envoy, a large, muscled man, covered in battle tattoos, swam up to hover just a little below Klaus. His eyes swept the hall, dismissing Svanhild with a glance - and then freezing on a point just behind her. Slowly, almost afraid, she looked over her shoulder.

Aleksander hovered in the far corner of the hall, alone and half-hidden by the shadows. He met the envoy's gaze unblinkingly, his hands relaxed as he held the remains of a fish.

“I will not discuss our alliance while that man sits in your hall,” the envoy said, his words ringing clear and true through the water. He never looked away from Aleksander.

“He is a traitor, a murderer, and a desecrater,” the envoy continued, his words burning with power as they slammed into each mind. “He killed my uncle, and my honour will not let me feast alongside him.”

Klaus sank a little in the water, resting one hand on the man's shoulder. The gesture looked fatherly, but Svanhild could almost feel the falseness radiating from him.

“Lerritz, I understand your anger,” Klaus said, his tone conciliatory. ”But we cannot make peace if we hold on to grudges from past generations. Aleksander is my man now, and he carries out my orders. He will do no more harm to your family - but I will not hear any word spoken against him in my hall.”

The tension drifting through the water was so thick that Svanhild could hardly breathe, her magic frozen in place as she waited for what would happen next.

The envoy gazed at Klaus, his lips pressed hard together. Did words pass between them? Svanhild looked across the hall at Margit, who had gone white. Her aunt had always heard thoughts more clearly than others.

The tension dragged out for a moment longer until, at last, the envoy inclined his head.

“As you wish, my lord. I will do no harm to this man in your hall. I promise nothing if I ever encounter him outside the borders of the Icy Shores. But for now, I bring only peace.”

Svanhild shivered. The envoy's words sounded too much like a threat - perhaps even a promise. She glanced over at Aleksander, who still waited alone, in the shadows.

“Don't even look at him,” Margit said quietly, inches away from Svanhild's ear. How had she returned so quietly?

“Who?” Svanhild asked, but Margit just shook her head.

“He's dangerous, that man. I won't say any more, but I want you to stay away from him.”

She swam away again, her thoughts too tightly hidden for Svanhild to probe further. What did she mean? What unspeakable thing could quiet, serious Aleksander possibly have done? A dark, unwelcome thought flickered into her brain. Handsome or not, Aleksander was Klaus's man now. What might he have done to earn that place? Would he have killed his former master? She didn't know Aleksander at all.

“And now, we come to the true reason for this feast,” Klaus called, and Svanhild jerked out of her unpleasant thoughts. She didn't look back at Aleksander, focusing on Klaus instead.

“As you all know, these are dangerous times for all selkies. If the Icy Shores are to

prosper, we need allies. So I am delighted to announce that we have sealed an alliance with the Endless Deeps.”

Svanhild joined everyone in applauding politely. What did a faraway southern lordship have to do with the Icy Shores? The Endless Deeps lay hundreds of miles away and had their own problems, with the fearsome Dolphin People battering at their borders.

“Svanhild?”

Klaus appeared beside her, addressing her directly. She had missed something.

“My lord?” she asked politely. He smiled, his teeth unsettlingly sharp.

“I am delighted to announce the betrothal of my niece, the Lady Svanhild of the Icy Shores, to the great Earl Harald of the Endless Deeps.”

A gasp of surprise rippled around the hall, followed almost instantly by a wave of applause. It was a sensible alliance, the rational part of Svanhild's mind told her. The Endless Deeps were rich and powerful, Harald one of the wealthiest selkie lords. These newcomer southerners, their territory carved out of the Dolphin People's land, would consider it a coup to marry into an ancient house like Icy Shores.

But her anger was not rational.

“I have agreed to nothing,” she announced, sending the words out as loudly as she could, feeling extra magic spark in her veins from the effort. “I will marry when I choose to marry, and I have not chosen Harald of the Endless Deeps.”

Against her will, she let her eyes flick to Aleksander. He leaned forward, his gaze intent on her face. She looked away.

Silence filled the hall. No doubt everyone spoke amongst themselves, but Svanhild heard nothing.

Klaus burst into laughter, the sound loud and abrasive in Svanhild's mind.

“A true lady of the Icy Shores!” he said, wrapping one arm around Svanhild's shoulder and smiling down at her. “She knows her own value! But please don't worry, my dear. Earl Harald is a powerful man, well deserving of a lady like yourself. And you will, of course, have time to meet him before you are officially bound.”

The hall filled with murmurs of agreement, and even a little laughter. Svanhild's

hands began to shake from the effort of holding in her furious response. Not here. Not in front of everyone.

“Don't make a scene like that again,” Klaus said, speaking to her alone. “If you humiliate me in front of the Endless Deeps men, you'll regret it. And I will tell you this: you will be marrying Harald. Whether you agree to it or not. Do your duty.”

He pulled out of her mind so sharply that it left her dizzy. What kind of strength did her uncle have that he could creep past all her walls and straight into her mind? She shook her head and made the mistake of looking up. Aleksander still watched her, his eyes dark and blank. She felt a tingle of warmth as she gazed back. Had he always been so handsome?

“Drink with the envoy,” Klaus said, pushing her forwards. Svanhild took the drinking bubble he offered, breaking the seal and sucking in a quick gasp of human whiskey before passing it over to the envoy. Her body seemed to move without her mind intervening at all. Whether Klaus had enspelled her or not no longer mattered. She was just a pawn to him - a foolish, weak woman to be married off when he chose. Just one of many women to use as necessary.

She smiled at the envoy, hating every inch of his face.

What help would the men of the Endless Deeps be to her? How could she learn about her father if she travelled hundreds of miles from his home? West, to the Firelands, she could have learnt to live with. That had been her mother's home, on the rocky shores where the land spat liquid fire. But the south? That could never be her home?

A smile on her face and twisted panic in her heart, Svanhild hovered beside her uncle, drinking everything he gave her, and barely taking her eyes off Aleksander. So much for revenge - she couldn't even manage her own fate.

Chapter 3

Svanhild arrived late to the hall that morning, rushing back from a morning swim around the edges of the fasthold's palisade, and so she found herself at the only free loom - between Margit and Katrina. No wonder all the other women avoided this space. They sat in awkward silence, Svanhild not quite daring to look to either side. She focused on the fabric in front of her, quietly wishing that women were allowed to do anything except weave cloth and twist rope. At least that would provide an excuse to be somewhere else. The enmity leaking from the two women either side of her practically turned the water black.

A loud noise cut through the silence of the hall - a clang of metal, only partly muffled by the seawater, and then the sound of men shouting, both physically and mentally. Svanhild shot up, swooping down the length of the hall and out of the door before Margit had time to forbid her.

Busy men and their loud voices filled the square outside, clustering around the door to Klaus's strongroom, a small building set apart from the hall.

“What's happening?” Svanhild asked Aleksander, drifting up beside him, close enough to communicate privately, but not so close that they were touching. Uncertainty still interfered with her trust for him.

“Klaus found the old crown,” Aleksander said, not bothering to make his words entirely private. “It appears that it was lost, not destroyed when your father died. Klaus intends to offer it as a sacrifice at the full moon.”

Svanhild cut him off there, shooting through the crowd to confront her uncle.

“You intend to destroy the crown, uncle? When you've only just found it?”

“Destroy is rather a strong word for a sacrifice,” Klaus said soothingly, his most patronising expression firmly in place. “This is what your father would have wanted. Such a crown has no place in our time. It is better off dedicated to the spirits and bringing us all good fortune.”

What her father would have wanted? That was the biggest lie he'd told so far. Svanhild's father had dreamed of one day seeing a new king wearing the crown and uniting the warring tribes into one kingdom again.

There and then, staring into her uncle's eyes, Svanhild made a decision. She would

save that crown from destruction before the full moon, in just two days time. And she wouldn't stop there. Avenging her father wasn't enough. She would build a legacy for him, using that crown to rally the selkie lords together. That kingdom her father had dreamed of would be reborn, or she would die trying.

As Klaus smiled gently and turned away, dismissing her, Svanhild realised that she needed help. Determination alone would not get her into Klaus's strongroom, not with all the magical ropes bound across the door and the constant rotation of guards.

She looked sidelong at Aleksander.

“No,” he said immediately, speaking silently this time. “I know what you're going to ask, and I won't help you to steal that crown from your uncle.”

“Come with me,” Svanhild told him. “I need to talk to you.”

She drifted across the square and around the side of the hall, where a small overgrown seaweed garden sat almost forgotten. Half-hidden among the deepest fronds of seaweed, she waited.

Aleksander came a few moments after her, his expression alert and his body tense. At least it didn't look as if anyone had followed him. He spotted her instantly and followed her into the darkness of the seaweed cloud. They both moved deeper into the foliage, away from prying eyes. He came a little too close and it took Svanhild a moment before she could breathe normally.

“I don't know what you want, but this has to stop,” Aleksander said, his voice low and dangerous inside her head. “I can't keep risking my position with Klaus just because you're bored and spoiled.”

Svanhild swung her hand to slap him, but he moved too fast, ducking out of reach.

“This isn't about me,” she told him, letting the anger radiate from her thoughts. “Klaus killed my father. Or did you already know that?”

The shock on his face told her straightaway not to worry. He hadn't known.

“Are you sure?” he asked. His thoughts had a rough edge to them. “He admitted it himself. He just didn't realise I was listening.”

Aleksander shook his head, his eyes distant, dark seaweed fronds stroking against his

cheek.

“How could I have not known? I knew that Klaus was capable of terrible things - but I didn't imagine this.”

“He's kept it a close secret. I only found out through luck. Or perhaps the spirits guided me. It doesn't matter. I want revenge.”

Aleksander's expression was cold and hard.

“I'll help you. I imagine that you intend to start with that crown?”

Svanhild nodded.

“We steal it tonight.”

At last, her father's dream could be realised. He might never see it himself, but perhaps his spirit might still wander the selkie lands and see his people united once more.

What was now dozens of fragmented, ever-shifting tribal lands had once been a single kingdom, united and powerful. Its capital, far to the west, had ruled over an empire half of the land and half of the sea, selkies living peacefully alongside other shifters and creatures of both earth and water. But the city had been destroyed, by earth, water, and fire, and its people had scattered. The great empire had collapsed, as people gathered around their own leaders and stopped trusting their neighbours.

For some people, like Klaus, the ancient empire represented a threat. An overlord would take power away from the petty lords who now governed each province like kings. But as far as Svanhild could see, unity meant strength. And she wanted that for her people.

She and Aleksander met in the garden again at dusk, their plans all in place.

“We need to begin with the ropes,” Aleksander said. “Did you find a way to get past them?”

Svanhild nodded, her guilt turning to a sick feeling. “I stole Margit's shears. They can open any rope in the fastness.”

“Good.”

Aleksander didn't seem to have time for guilt.

Everyone had left the square between the safehouse and the hall, its darkness lying empty. Svanhild didn't ask how Aleksander had managed that. She cut through the ropes quickly and efficiently, the magical shears slicing easily through the fibres, as they were intended to do. Margit would be heartbroken when she learnt that Svanhild had betrayed her.

Aleksander picked the lock just as quickly, then shouldered the door open. It juddered slightly on the threshold, making a little more noise than Svanhild would have liked, but no movement came from the hall.

“I'll keep watch,” Aleksander said. Svanhild hesitated. This was the moment she had to decide whether to trust him.

She nodded sharply and slipped into the room, the bubbles of her breath rippling through the still, dark water. She scanned around quickly, casting out a faint thread of magic to feel her way in the darkness.

There it was. A heavy metal chest, larger than anything Klaus kept in the strongroom usually. She illuminated it with a soft flash of magic, casting a green glow around the room. Shark decorations, Klaus's favourite symbol, curved around the chest, ropes tying it shut. Svanhild touched one gently and smiled at the familiar texture. Margit's ropes. The shears would slice through them even more easily than the ones outside.

She made quick work of the ropes, leaving them floating loosely in the water, and pulled the chest open, grabbing at the crown inside.

A blaring, howling magic burst into her brain, so loud that she collapsed to the floor, the crown wrapped in her arms.

“Get up!” Aleksander shouted at her. “We have to go!”

She weakly swam upwards, trying to block out the chaos inside her head, fumbling for the door. Damn Klaus. He must have attached some kind of curse to the crown. Could everyone else hear?

“Aleksander,” she began to ask, but he grabbed her arm and pushed her through the door before she could finish.

“It's an alarm,” he told her tersely. “We have to get out of here.”

Hardly able to think through the noise in her head, she nodded and headed towards

the edge of the compound, away from the hall.

“Stop! Thief!”

Someone had heard the alarm. Too late. Svanhild span round, ready to fight with all the magic she had, but she moved too slowly. Blood streamed through the water, bright red, curling around the gently floating body of a selkie warrior. Aleksander tucked his knife back into his belt, his face expressionless.

“We need to leave,” he told her again.

She nodded, the noise in her head almost overwhelmed by the pounding of her heartbeat and the panicked roaring of her lungs. He was right. She made for her gap in the fasthold netting, Aleksander close behind her. They flew past the defences in moments, both changing into their seal forms as they went. Sleek and fast, they sped through the kelp forest that carpeted the depths west of the Icy Shores. Svanhild didn't know this forest, which would have terrified her at any other time, but the excitement and adrenaline flowing through her veins left her close to laughing for joy.

After a few moments, Aleksander slowed down, and Svanhild followed suit. It didn't seem as if anyone had followed them. Had they made it? She changed back into her human form, pulling the crown off her arm, where it had awkwardly balanced. Here, in the soft light of a breaking dawn, it looked tarnished and old.

Seal-Aleksander, his tool belt still around his waist, shifted back as well. Their loose-fitting clothes, tied on with the traditional ropes, still hung in loose drapes around them, but Svanhild blushed as she rearranged hers slightly. She had never shifted in front of a man before.

“We should find somewhere to hide,” Aleksander said softly. “It isn't safe here.”

“Perhaps a cave,” Svanhild began, and froze. Ripples spread through the kelp, far stronger than any natural wave in the water. They were not alone.

Aleksander saw them at the same time she did. He frantically gestured her down, and they both sank onto their bellies, covered by the kelp. Where were the ripples coming from? Svanhild shivered with tension.

And then they came, pushing through the kelp. Heavy figures, tattooed in red, almost like selkies, but subtly different. Knives hung at their belts, while gold ringed their arms and glinted in their braided hair as it flew out behind them. Svanhild shrank back even further as the group passed, so close that she could have reached out to touch their bare

feet through the undergrowth.

Then they vanished as suddenly as they had come, the last of the ripples fading behind them.

“Twenty Wildlings,” Aleksander said, his face grim. “They've not come this close to the Icy Shores in decades.”

The Wildlings hadn't terrorised these waters since before Svanhild was born. Some people said they were extinct. Clearly, they were wrong.

“Should we warn the others?”

Aleksander hesitated.

“They can defend themselves. We need to find somewhere sheltered for the night. I'm worried that a storm's drawing in.”

Much as she hated to abandon the Icy Shores to defend itself, Svanhild knew he spoke the truth.

“Do you know of anywhere we could go, Aleksander?”

“There's a place not too far from here that might do. And you can call me Aleks.”

He held out a hand to her and she took it gingerly, letting him guide her through the kelp forest as she clutched the crown in her other hand.

They drifted at last into a small clearing, where blocks of carved stone protruded through the weeds.

“This bit is still enough of a shelter,” Aleks said, tugging her into a small room built halfway into the rocky hillside. Its paved floor was cracked and worn, but Svanhild could still see colourful patterns sprinkled across the slabs.

“What is this place?” she asked. Aleks just shrugged.

“No idea. Just try to get some sleep.”

She would have to trust him that this place was safe. Hesitantly, she curled up beside him, feeling her body gently settle down to the floor, the weight of the water warm around her, Aleks almost close enough to touch.

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

