

A
THRONE
of
SWANS

BOOKS BY KATHARINE AND ELIZABETH CORR

A Throne of Swans

Look out for
A Crown of Talons

The Witch's Kiss series

A Throne of Swans

Katharine and
Elizabeth Corr



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For Mum and Dad, who encouraged us to
read *everything*. (EC)

For Victoria, who told me *Swan Lake* would make a
great starting point for a story, and was totally right.
(KC)

Surrounded by unspeakable deeds, I am forced
into something terrible.

I know my rage. It cannot go unacknowledged.

But amidst the terrors I will not resist this ruinous
path . . .

ἐν δεινοῖς δεῖν' ἡναγκάσθην·
ἔξοιδ', οὐ λάθει μ' ὀργά.
ἀλλ' ἐν γὰρ δεινοῖς οὐ σχήσω
ταύτας ἄτας . . .

Sophocles, *Electra* vv.221–4, trans. Georgie Penney



Prologue

It is nearly midnight, and my father is dying.

The physicians continue to scurry around him, grinding up herbs with pestles or chanting over their poultices. But the lavender-scented smoke of the fire can't mask the odour of decaying flesh. Candlelight can't conceal the laboured breath, the claw-like fingers clutching convulsively at the bedclothes. He pushes the nearest doctor away, irritable, and beckons me closer.

The doctors mutter about infection. Still, I obey. As I balance up on the edge of the massive oak-framed bed, my red silk skirts are like a spill of blood in the dimness. I lean in, holding tight to one of his hands.

'This . . .' he gestures to the weeping sores on his chest and shoulders, 'a mistake. I . . . stayed too long. And the contagion . . .' His speech is thickened, as if his tongue is swollen. 'I'm sorry, Aderyn.'

I understand him. The sickness that has ravaged one of our port towns for the last month has led to quarantine and death.



My father – to help his people, or in the cause of science, or both – stayed with the afflicted, hoping to discover a cure. He has gambled his life in pursuit of knowledge before. But this time he lost. And now – now he wants absolution. I try to tell him that all will be well, that the doctors might still find a way to save him, but the lie catches in my throat. Instead, I stare into his clouded eyes and murmur, ‘I know. It’s late, Father. You should rest.’

But he shakes his head and grits his teeth, blinking, trying to focus. ‘I want you to . . . stay here, once I’m gone. Stay in the castle.’

His words are not new. I’ve been confined within our castle and the peninsula upon which it stands for years. So many years that I long ago stopped asking when I would be allowed to leave. I have learned that it is possible to stand in the open air with the wind on my face and still suffocate. That it is possible to command others and still be a prisoner.

‘You must stay –’ He breaks off in a paroxysm of coughing; a servant darts in and wipes the blood and spittle from his chin. ‘Stay here, where it’s safe. Promise me.’

Perhaps this sickness is finally claiming his mind. If I never leave, I cannot do what will be required of me. And I cannot believe my father truly expects me to become my own jailor, trapped behind these walls through an oath of my own making.

But I am wrong apparently. He grips my upper arm tightly, pulling himself up, the pressure of his fingers still painful despite his loss of strength. ‘Promise me, Aderyn. You know I love you. All I want is –’ he gasps with pain – ‘to protect you.’

‘I know you love me, Father. And I love you too.’ But I make no promise. I won’t lie to him now.



Mercifully he does not notice my omission. He sinks back into the mattress, eyelids fluttering as the clock begins playing the chimes that lead to the hour. 'Good. You'll understand eventually, I hope. And finally . . . finally, your mother . . .' The words fade into silence.

'Father? What about her? Please, if there's anything you haven't told me, anything . . .' My voice seems to be coming from a long way away. I shake his shoulder. 'Father . . .' The doctors cluster round and I am moved gently to one side as they check pulse and breathing and heartbeat.

And then someone is closing his eyes, and drawing the sheet up over his face. The clock strikes the hour.

'Your Grace?'

For a moment, I don't understand. I think, *My father is dead. He can't answer you.*

But the servant repeats the question. 'Your Grace?'

And then I realise: he is addressing me. I am no longer a seventeen-year-old girl who can spend her time exactly as she wishes. I'm no longer merely Lady Aderyn. I am Her Grace, Protector of the Dominion of Atratys, sole mistress of Merl Castle and all the lands that belong to it.

Somehow, in the space between the end of one day and the start of the next, everything has changed.

For the next week or more, I seem to be submerged, looking out at the world from inside a bubble of my own grief. Grief; anger; pity. For my father. For myself. I take care that no one else should know. I walk and speak as normal, eat and sleep at the appropriate times. The dressmaker brings mourning



gowns, and I try them on; I give my red dress, that had been my favourite, to a servant. Lord Lancelin of Anserys, our steward, sets before me suggestions for my father's Last Flight – food, music, people to be invited – and I make a show of reading through his lists. But the scratches of ink on the pages convey no meaning to me; I agree to everything so that I might be left alone. When I am alone, I sit and stare at the waves breaking against the familiar granite rocks beneath the castle, stare until my eyes are sore. I listen to my own breathing, crushed into immobility by the ache in my chest, the onslaught of this second loss. And so, the time passes.

The day of the Last Flight comes. My father may have ignored the rigid etiquette of the court while he was alive, but his death brings its own set of demands. I am dressed in my new black gown – high-collared, with long sleeves that almost hide my hands – and from somewhere in the vaults my maid produces a heavy mourning diadem of jet and silver. She sets it on top of my dark hair; the clips dig into my scalp. When I arrive at the jetty, the guests – castle inhabitants, tenant farmers and local lords, mostly – are already assembled, a mass of shadow like so much inky seaweed cast up on the shoreline. There are the required number of speeches and songs, and then my father – like my mother, and their parents before – is laid in the high-prowed boat that awaits him and pushed out into the current. At the last minute, a fire is set among the dry kindling piled around the body. Red flames swarm. And as they do, the honour guard steps forward. Each member a noble, representing his or her family, they are dressed in long black cloaks.



One by one, they hand their cloaks to the leather-garbed servants. For a moment, each noble shivers, naked in the chill morning air. And then, they change.

Cranes, cormorants, ravens and rooks, herons and falcons – the air fills as each person shifts seamlessly from human to bird. Birds far larger, far more dangerous than their namesakes that live in our forests and fields. Together, the transformed nobles follow the blazing boat out to the sea. So many different types of bird. But no swans.

Now my father is dead, I am the only swan here.

And I do not fly.





One

I'm sitting at the large desk in my study. A new room this; my father conducted business in the long gallery, under the dead gaze of our ancestors' portraits. Like most of our kind he walked as he worked, orbited by servants taking notes or carrying stacks of paper; it's easy for your leg muscles to wither if you spend much of your life on the wing. The steward pauses in his pacing and raises one forefinger – a sure sign that he has thought of another argument.

'You only came out of mourning last week, Your Grace. Only four days ago. To hasten to the society and pleasures of the court the moment you are no longer wearing black . . . Some might consider it unseemly. Demonstrating a lack of respect for your late father.'

'They might. But I am out of mourning, and I'm not proposing to go to court tomorrow. We both know my visit will take some time to organise; I see no reason for delay.'

A muscle twitches in the side of my lord steward's lean face. 'And I see that you are determined to leave Merl and your



dominion as soon as possible.' He raises an eyebrow. 'Regardless of my attempts to persuade you otherwise. Regardless of the fact that there is so much to be done here and now in Atratys, Your Grace.'

The sound of singing floats up from the courtyard. Abandoning our quarrel, I go to the tall, arched windows and open the casement wider. There are servants working in the kitchen gardens, walking to and fro between the vegetable beds with hoes and wheelbarrows. Leaning outward, I turn my face to the sun, trying to catch the stray beams just lighting up the angle of the wall, wishing I was outside. On a fine morning like this my father would have summoned me to walk beside him through the castle grounds, testing me on my knowledge of Atratyan plants and crops, teaching me about those we export, entertaining me with tales of his visits to other dominions and the differences he found there. Places I'd never been allowed to see for myself.

'Your Grace . . .'

'I've been shut up here long enough, Lancelin. I know I have responsibilities –' I cast a guilty glance at the piles of paperwork that take up at least half my desk – 'but I won't be gone long. And it's the court. I would have spent at least two years there by now, in the ordinary course of things –'

'But your situation is not ordinary, Aderyn.' The use of my given name surprises me into silence. My steward pinches the bridge of his nose, sighs. 'Forgive me for speaking plainly. But you know very well that your father kept you here at Merl for your own safety. If the king realises that you are, for all practical purposes, flightless –'



'I am *not* flightless.'

'We've discussed this. You cannot shift your shape; not at the moment. If the king asks you to transform for some reason –'

'Why would he? Nobility is not put to the test; it would be considered an outrage.'

'But if he did –' Lancelin glares at me over the top of his spectacles – 'you won't be able to comply. And you know what will follow.'

Disgrace and death. The flighted rule; the flightless do not. A Protector who could not fly would automatically be stripped of power and banished, no matter who was on the throne. To be sent away from Atratys would be bad enough. But Lancelin tells me I wouldn't even live long enough to grieve. With my claim on the throne, no prudent ruler would leave me alive.

'It isn't fair.'

'But it is the law, Your Grace. The Elders spoke, and the Decrees are what they are.' A stock phrase, used by parents to silence children, or by those in authority to explain why something cannot change. I heard my father use it often enough.

'But it must be nearly two years since my cousin the prince lost his arm. And he has not been banished. Or assassinated.'

'No, he hasn't. Not yet. But only because Prince Aron is protected by the king, and the king's pride.' Lancelin eyes me a little warily. 'And I'd like to remind you, Your Grace, that the prince has been cut out of the succession since his accident. Moving you one step nearer to the throne. Putting you more at risk.'

'I've no desire to become queen, you know that.'

'But does anyone else?' Lancelin ignores my scowl and



continues. 'I'm sure you've read my reports on the situation at court: your uncle the king's new wife, the rumours of factions, of a power struggle.'

'Yes, I read them.' I raise my eyebrows. 'What's your point, my lord steward?'

'My point is, things change. Even in the kingdom.' *The kingdom* – that is how Solanum is always described, in books or in speech. As if the rest of the world does not exist. Or is, at best, unimportant. 'The current political climate makes the Silver Citadel even more dangerous. Your father did his best to shield you. Everyone here has worked hard to keep your secret. But really, it is impossible to know what words might have been whispered into the king's ears. And to put yourself into harm's way, when it is not required, when your uncle has not sent for you, when your father specifically asked you not to go . . .' He throws his hands in the air as if despairing at my stubborn stupidity.

Anger lends acid to my tongue. 'You do not need to remind me what my father said as he lay dying, Lancelin. It was only six weeks ago. I remember his words quite clearly.'

My steward does not answer. He seems absorbed in straightening the papers stacked on the desk.

I clamp my mouth shut. Bite down on my irritation. Manage – just about – not to stamp my foot. 'Really, Lancelin, if the political situation is as you say, then all the more reason for me to go to the Citadel – someone needs to protect the interests of Atratys from those who might scheme against us. We've heard nothing from my uncle the king since his letter of condolence. I do not trust his silence.'



Through the window next to me I can see fields full of early crops, and brightly coloured fishing boats rocking gently in the harbour. Further off, looking landward across the causeway that links Merl Island to the mainland, are the straggling stone buildings of the nearest town, dominated by the copper-roofed sanctuary, the tapering chimney of a tin mine, the tall masts of ships docked in the port at the end of the next headland. Just a tiny fraction of my Atratys, but so heavy with life and history and expectation that I sag forward, bracing myself on the window frame as the weight of my inheritance, my home, bears down upon me. There is almost nothing I wouldn't do to defend my dominion. Almost nothing I wouldn't give up to protect what my parents were trying to build here, to keep Atratys free from the oppression and poverty that stalk some of the other dominions.

Almost nothing.

A huge rose bush scrambles up this sheltered side of the castle. If I stretch down from the window my fingertips will just brush the tops of the highest, pale green buds, but in a few weeks' time this section of wall will be veiled with deep pink roses, my mother's favourite flower. She and my father used to walk in the rose garden every afternoon during the summer months. I was often with them, and I remember darting along the paths between the flower beds, gravel crunching beneath my feet, breathing in the scented air, collecting up the silken rose petals that had fallen to the ground. I remember looking back to see my parents strolling, hand in hand, behind me. Or sometimes sitting, her head on his shoulder, his arm tight about her waist.



My father never returned to the rose garden after she was murdered. For him, there seemed to be no more summers.

‘Why did my father stop visiting his brother?’

A shadow crosses Lancelin’s face. ‘Your father never took me into his confidence. I only know that he became more reclusive after your mother’s death, burdened as he was with grief. Grief, and anger, at his own inability to find and punish the culprit . . . I believe he held the king in affection, when they were younger.’

Strange, then, that my father should never even talk about him. But I suppose there were a lot of things we never discussed. Whether it was my mother’s death, or my requests to be allowed to leave the castle, my father’s response to unwelcome topics was always the same: fly into a rage and lock himself in his laboratory.

There’s a painting on the wall above the fireplace: my parents holding me as a baby, my uncle standing next to them, looking at me. Or perhaps at my mother. Likenesses captured to commemorate the celebration of my fledging, images of the living side by side with those now dead.

A cold gust of wind makes me shiver and I shut the window.

There are plenty of portraits here at Merl. Plenty of ghosts. But no answers.

‘I’m going to court, Lancelin.’ I don’t intend to explain myself to him. To try to make it clear why, after all these years, my hunger to know the truth about my mother’s death still rages unabated. Or why I think I’ll find that truth at the Silver Citadel. But, as he gazes at me from his slightly hooded eyes, I decide he probably understands.



Another moment passes; my steward, finally, bows his head in assent.

‘As you wish, Your Grace. I will, of course, accompany you –’

‘No. I need you here. There’s no one else I would trust to take care of Atratys.’

He bows again. ‘Thank you, Your Grace. There is indeed much to deal with.’ Moving back to the desk he lifts a sheaf of papers from the top of one pile. ‘We’ve had a report of more people crossing the border into Atratys from the Dominion of Brithys.’ His nostrils flare. ‘And demands from the local Brithyan lords that we should round them up and send them all back again.’

I can’t help groaning. ‘Must we? From what I know of Brithys, I can’t blame its inhabitants for wanting to live elsewhere. And there’s plenty of work for them here. The port master at Hythe was complaining only last week about the shortage of labour.’

‘The situation is causing a certain amount of political friction with Brithys. But I will do my best.’ He picks up a lump of red quartz that serves as a paperweight, turning it over and over in his long, thin fingers. ‘It would still be as well for you to take an adviser to court, in addition to your servants.’

‘But why?’ I turn away to pace the room. ‘I’ve studied hard, my lord. I’ve learned everything about Atratys that you or my father would teach me. Spent more hours than I can remember watching him deal with treaties and land disputes. Am I not qualified to represent my dominion?’

‘I’m not questioning your ability, Your Grace. You know Atratys. But you do not know the court.’

I can’t argue with him on that point.



Lancelin clears his throat. 'Do you remember meeting my son, Lucien?'

I have a very vague memory of gangly awkwardness and dark hair, but I can bring no other image to mind. Lucien has never lived at Merl, but he visited a few times while my mother was alive; I must have been about nine when I last saw him. 'A little.'

'After spending three years at the Citadel, he was sent to Frianland as part of our diplomatic mission.' The steward's stooped back straightens a little. 'He has a gift for languages, it seems. But he has now been released from service and will return home shortly. I'll send for him if you wish. Lucien knows the ways of the court. He knows who to trust and who is best avoided. You may even appoint him your clerk, to give his position formal status. I'm sure he will be happy to accompany Your Grace.'

And I am equally sure that he will not be happy at all. Despite my inability to picture him, I have a sudden, strong recollection of at least one outburst of rage. The Lucien of my memory does not seem especially . . . biddable. But perhaps the last eight years have mellowed him. 'Very well. I will take Lucien, and Letya. As to what clothes and so on –'

'Your Grace may leave the arrangements to me. I suggest . . .' Lancelin plucks a notebook from his pocket and flicks through the pages. 'I suggest that you leave the day after your eighteenth birthday. That will give us five or six weeks to prepare – the minimum necessary, I would say – and you should arrive just after the midsummer celebrations. Assuming . . .' he hesitates for the merest fraction of a breath, 'that you are proposing to go by coach.'



Unless I suddenly recover my ability to fly, we both know a coach is the only way I'll reach the Citadel.

'Yes. That is exactly what I'm proposing.' I speak firmly, hoping this is the last I will hear on the matter.

The next three weeks pass in a flurry of appointments: with dressmakers, dancing instructors, weapons masters. Over a year has passed since my last formal lesson in wielding a sword; as unlikely as it is that I will be required to use a blade, I choose not to go to court unprepared, and spend hours working on my riposte. Any time not spent brushing up my skills is taken up by Lord Lancelin, hurrying through as much estate business as possible, any decision that might need my authorisation. I have to meet tenants, arbitrate disputes between minor lords and sign trade agreements. There is no spare moment for riding or reading. No time for worrying about leaving my home, about the court or about how I'm going to get there. But finally, one afternoon when the sunlight is glinting and dancing on the surface of the estuary below the castle, and the swifts are chasing each other about the battlements, I rebel.

'I'm going out.'

The dressmaker kneeling by my feet, pinning the hem of a lilac satin over-gown, glances up. 'But we're not finished, Protector. There's still the grey silk after this one, and then –'

'It can wait until tomorrow.' I gesture to one of the maids hovering nearby. 'Find Letya, tell her I'd like to go riding. And get me some comfortable clothes.' Thirty minutes later I am hurrying downstairs to the stables, in a baggy, faded old dress with coarse leggings underneath, my hair tucked up into a



wide-brimmed hat like the countrywomen wear for working in the fields, and the prospect of at least a couple of hours of freedom ahead of me.

Letya is waiting just inside the main gate of the castle and brings her horse into step with mine. There's no need for me to speak: my friend knows when I wish to be silent. She's only a year older than me, and practically grew up with me. We even learned to ride together on the horses that carry us now. Animals on the whole are nervous around shape-shifters. They find our presence, even in human form, uncomfortable. But Henga and Vasta were introduced to me when they were too young to know any better, and Henga is used to the leather caparison she has to wear beneath her saddle to protect her hide. For perhaps an hour and a half, Letya and I ride contentedly through the maze of narrow lanes that thread the fields between sea, river and hills. But as the air grows warmer and more still, filled with the buzz and chirp of insects, the tall hedgerows either side of the path seem to close in on me.

'I need some space. Let's go to the beach.'

Letya hesitates. 'The beach? The one past the caves?'

'Obviously. What other beach is there nearby?'

'I'm not sure that's a good idea . . .'

'Why not?'

'Well –' she frowns down at her saddle, fiddling with a lock of blonde hair that has escaped from her hat – 'there have been rumours about cows going missing from the farms over that way. And one of the farm-hands. And then Fris told me that her cousin's friend was looking for moon-clams on that



beach one night a few weeks ago and she heard this terrible, unearthly –'

'Enough.' I hold up a hand. 'I don't care what my maidservant's cousin's friend thinks she heard. And you should know better than to listen to gossip.'

'But the beach could be dangerous . . .' My glare must be effective, because my companion falls silent and screws her mouth up into a pout. Still, when I turn Henga's head towards the beach, she sighs and follows me.

By the time we get there – Letya, for once, has not spent the intervening minutes commenting on my reckless indifference to endangering my life – the low tide has exposed a wide expanse of black sand. I can feel the heat rising from the ground, but there is a breeze here, creaming the distant sea into a mass of white-crested waves. We set off, racing to the end of the beach, to where the sand tapers away and the land begins to rise into the cliffs that I see from my bedroom window.

Letya has the lighter horse and she accelerates quickly, glancing back to smirk at me over her shoulder. But I ride harder. Soon I draw level, then overtake. Still, it's only a narrow lead. So I lean low over Henga's neck, tightening my knees a little around her girth, urging her forward as loose strands of hair whip around my face. Her hoofs strike the hard, damp sand and every forward plunge jars my whole frame, but I don't care; the spar of rock that marks the end of the beach is so close now. Almost close enough for me to jump.

Faster now, Henga. Faster –

Henga bucks and twists and rips the reins from my hands, and there's space surrounding me, and salt spray . . .



The force of my landing drives the wind out of my lungs, sends stars wheeling across the blackness inside my eyelids.

Silence. Until –

Until I gasp, sucking in air, and the world comes back again. ‘Aderyn?’

Every muscle and bone in my body throbs. When I open my eyes, Letya is crouching above me, her face white. ‘Aderyn, are you hurt?’

‘Um . . .’ I flex my fingers and toes. ‘Just bruised, I think.’ The ache in my shoulder makes me flinch. ‘What happened?’

‘A sand mole. It shot up right in front of Henga, but I don’t think she’s injured.’ A bit of luck, that – sand moles have fangs as long as my hand. Letya is scanning the ground anxiously. ‘I knew we shouldn’t have come here. And what is Lord Lancelin going to say to me, when he finds out?’

I sit up, wait for the dizziness to pass and try to stand. Too quickly – a bolt of pain shoots the length of my leg and sends me sprawling.

‘Aderyn . . .’ Letya holds out her hands. ‘Here, let me help you.’

I shake my head. Letya is my best friend – my only friend, in truth – but she is flightless. One of the ruled, not one of the rulers, brought to Merl to be my attendant after my mother died. And I cannot safely touch her. Anything but the lightest brush of my skin against hers could hurt her. ‘No. Not unless you have some spare gloves.’

My companion stiffens and huffs with irritation. ‘Of course I do.’ She pulls a pair of gloves from her pocket and drops them into my lap. ‘Your Grace.’



I ignore her sudden attack of formality and drag them on.
'May I?'

'Yes! Just hurry up.'

I take hold of her gloved hands, she pulls me upright and, though I'm gritting my teeth with pain, I manage to limp to a large flattish rock nearby.

'I'll get help.' Letya wags a finger at me. 'Don't move, Aderyn, please. I'm going to be in enough trouble as it is.'

An unnecessary injunction; other parts of me are beginning to hurt almost as much as my leg. Letya and the horses are soon out of sight, so I switch my attention to the sea. The tide has turned. I try to distract myself from the pain by counting the seconds between each ebb and flow, thinking about the phases of the moon and the tidal bore on the River Rythe, in the west of our dominion; my father took me to see it once, many years ago. I don't notice the heavy grey clouds creeping across the sky, and the first fat drops of rain take me by surprise. There's still no sign of Letya. No sign of anything much: the beach seems oddly quiet, missing the usual flocks of sandpipers and true gulls. Wincing, I shift position, wondering where the birds have gone, wondering whether the sea will reach this rock before my rescuers –

Shock jolts me back to the present. To the inexplicable, impossible solidity of a rock dragon, lurking in the cool darkness at the foot of the cliff, its marbled grey-and-white scales blending into the background.

I hold my breath. Try not to blink.

Perhaps the creature hasn't seen me: its yellow eyes are sunken, rheumy, and it twists its head as if it can't quite focus.



It looks old, and more than half starved. But it could still crush me. Or rip me to shreds. Even its blood is toxic, supposedly. And yet . . . The creature stirs in the shadows, and the faint chime of metal on metal tells me my eyes aren't deceiving me. Someone has put an iron collar around the dragon's neck; a broken length of chain dangles towards the ground.

The path to the top of the cliffs is about five wing-spans away. Maybe I could crawl. Or maybe . . . Maybe I could transform. That's what I should try to do. I have no weapon. The dragon's scales are doubtless too thick for the creature to be hurt by my touch while I'm in human form. But as a swan, the power that runs beneath my skin is hugely magnified. And of course, I could fly away –

Too late. The sun breaks through the clouds, lighting up the rock on which I'm perched. The dragon sees me. Drops forward into a crouch. And as it begins thundering across the sand, and I sit there, paralysed by fear, some part of my brain starts screaming at me, cursing my own stupidity: would I really prefer to die here than shift my shape?

Apparently so. As the creature bears down on me I can do nothing but stare, mesmerised, at the strands of saliva dripping in anticipation from its huge jaws –

The black-feathered bird – a rook or a crow, I think – drops out of nowhere. Not a true crow – the bird's massive wing-span, the size of its outstretched claws, proclaim it to be a shape-shifter. The dragon feels the force of the crow's approach and skids round, bellowing in discomfort seconds before the crow first rakes its talons across the creature's back. Again and again the shape-shifter strikes, gouging the dragon's



eyes, tearing its armoured hide, while the dragon snaps its jaws in vain, closing only on empty space. As the air fills with a mist of blood and the dragon's screams get louder and louder, I cover my ears and screw my eyes shut –

A thump – the earth shakes – followed by silence.

'You can open your eyes now.' The voice of a young man. But not one I recognise, even when I look at him. He's walking towards me, his feet stained red. I switch my gaze carefully to his upper half and I'm surprised – and embarrassed – by a flutter of admiration in the pit of my stomach. The boy's shoulders are broad, his chest and arms contoured: the result of much time on the wing, despite the fact that he can only be a little older than me. He's pale, for a member of one of the corvid families. But his hair and his eyes are a deep, iridescent blue-black. When he draws nearer, I see that there's an arrogance to his expression, as if he is well aware of his worth. 'Are you injured?'

'My horse threw me, and my leg –'

'Stay completely still.' Without asking he rips two wide strips of fabric from the bottom of my dress and wraps them around his hands. Then he starts running his fingers down my injured leg, carefully avoiding the exposed flesh of my ankle; he takes me for one of the flightless, who would be damaged by his touch. Blood burns beneath my skin.

'Stop it.'

He ignores my request. 'Can you move your foot?'

'A little. And I order you to stop touching me.'

'Order me?' There is a definite edge to his voice.

I straighten up as much as I can, given my aching muscles. 'I am the Protector of Atratys, and you're on my land.'



‘You’re the Protector?’ He sits back on his heels, looking me slowly up and down. ‘A Protector who is completely unattended? Who wears homespun and gloves like a servant?’ He laughs – his face softens, for a moment – and shakes his head. ‘If you’re the Protector of Atratys, I’m a princess. Perhaps you’re a liar, or perhaps you’re concussed. Either way, you need to move from here: the tide is coming in. Be careful not to touch me.’

Ignoring my protests, he slides his arms beneath me, holding me out away from his chest as if I weigh no more than a bundle of feathers, and carries me up onto the tumbled boulders at the edge of the beach. From here I can see the castle, red-walled in the afternoon sun. Part of me wants to keep arguing with him, but I’m starting to feel sick, I’ve got sand in my hair and inside my clothes and somewhere along the way I’ve managed to lose a shoe. I really just need him to go away so I can cry in peace.

The boy is watching me. ‘I’ll send someone down from the castle to make sure you get home. You’re welcome, by the way.’ He gestures to the carcass of the rock dragon.

I can’t repress a shudder. ‘Thank you, Master Crow.’

‘I’m not a crow. I’m a raven.’ He grunts and pushes his hair out of his eyes. ‘I’d like to know who managed to chain up a rock dragon. And why. And where it came from – they don’t even breed around here.’ Perhaps he takes my silence for fear, because he adds, ‘Don’t worry: you’re not in trouble. No one is going to blame a child.’

A child? I open my mouth to reply, but he has already turned away and is climbing the path towards the top of the cliffs.



My tears have dried by the time Letya returns down the same path with servants and a doctor, but she stops short when she sees me and puts her hands on her hips. 'You were supposed to stay still! Look at the state of you. And bleeding too.' She gestures to the side of my head, then spots the dead dragon. Her eyes widen. 'What in the Firebird's name . . . ?'

'I'll explain later.' I put my fingertips to my head; sure enough, my earlobe is tacky with congealing blood. 'Just remember you're my friend, not my nursemaid. Or my bodyguard.'

Letya shoots me a long look. 'I'm your paid companion. The lord steward pays me to keep you company and to wait on you. I have certain . . . responsibilities.'

'So, you wouldn't – Ouch!'

The doctor stops prodding my leg. 'You've sprained your ankle, Your Grace. Quite badly, I'm afraid.' She gestures to two servants, who are waiting nearby with a sedan chair.

Once I'm settled I turn back to Letya. 'Do you think I look like a child?'

'What?' She frowns, confused. 'Of course not. Though . . .'

I raise my eyebrows, waiting.

'I suppose you do look quite young, dressed in those clothes. And covered in dirt. Why?'

'No reason. Would you really not come riding with me if Lord Lancelin didn't pay you?'

My paid companion crosses her arms and tilts her head. 'Well, I probably would. I've grown quite fond of you over the last five years. Besides, there's a certain entertainment to be gained from watching you risk your neck on an almost weekly basis.'



I've never talked to Letya about why I have to take such risks, but I suspect she understands. 'I love you too, Letya. I'll love you even more if we can keep this a secret from Lord Lancelin.'

She chuckles, a little reluctantly. 'He won't hear of it from me.' But her gaze returns to the dragon carcass. 'Did you kill it? Or did someone –'

'It died. It was old, I suppose.' A wave of nausea makes my head spin; I sink back into the cushions behind me, glad of an excuse to end the conversation. I don't want to talk about the raven boy. I don't want to think about his identity, or whether I'm ever going to see him again.

Please let him not be who I think he might be. Please . . .

