

BROTHER BEWITCHED  
BY  
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# INTRODUCTION

Welcome to your book. I wrote this for you. I couldn't have done it without help from the following people, and if I left someone out, and I am sure I did, I also thank you and will buy you dinner by way of apology.

Michael McDonnell, esq. who workshopped the book with me and made a great many suggestions that made this a better story.

Lord Lady Serren, whose diaries and recollections were an invaluable resource.

And, of course, the amazing Selkie, who by my count read and offered notes on at least 4 different versions of this manuscript.

## LEGAL NOTES

This book is not based on any real people at all. Any resemblance to real people is coincidence. If you are from The Shattered Isles, can work magic and were involved in the Restoration War, please be assured that I did not base any of this on you, but do drop by and say hello. It has been some years since I have been able to cross-over.

# PROLOGUE

When Witch Moon waxes war begins  
light of reason in the isles dims  
Pestilentia rises from her tomb  
the temple breaks as The She King looms  
unnatural acts the world consumes

Pestilentia rises, men turn thralls  
Pestilentia rises, rules all  
Pestilentia rises, men turn thralls  
Man's reign ends at the Seven Falls

Primary Appollon, high lord of the Church of  
Maxis, stood on the roof of his tower staring  
up at that very Witch Moon, and he cursed it.  
He heard voices in the street below shouting,  
and looking down he saw people rushing out  
to witness the emergence of the Witch Moon,  
a moon that no one had seen in over 600  
years.

"Maxis help us," Appollon whispered,  
crossing his arms. "Pestilentia rises." Gazing  
up at that moon, he saw what looked like the  
outline of an eye-- *her* eye-- and he cringed to  
feel the goddess' eye upon him, staring coldly.

He felt... naked beneath her moon, and felt himself overcome with dread.

Appollon covered his mouth, shaking his head, looking up at her, that infernal moon, and then he raced from the roof down the stone stairs, back down to the rectory, running frantically, until he found Capithian, on his knees, performing vespers. Seeing Appollon and sensing his panic, Capithian ceased his prayers and rose, a great slab of a man, looking down on Appollon with wet, gray eyes. "What is it?"

"Pestilentia rises" Appollon said. "Bring me a witch to burn."

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Miles away, on the outskirts of the capital, a group of women gathered in a cool, dark hollow. Drums beat, mixing with the steady rush of the seven falls pouring silver in the moonlight and filling the central pool, where dozens of women and girls danced in the shallows, the water splashing as they moved. Others swayed on the sandy shores, while still more lounged on the rocks, smoking and drinking, in a semi-circle, talking about school, friends, life.

Scattered here and there among the trees and bushes stood crooked pillars encrusted with moss and wrapped in vines, as well as great slabs of marble—all that remained of the temple which had once stood in this sacred place.

In the middle of the hollow, Queen Annya Denae stood with Lady Ollia Falconette, Primary at the Girl's School, and Stone Mulders, a servant in the castle. The three women studied the sky, their eyes filled with wonder—and uncertainty.

“No. I see it,” Ollia said, “there.” She pointed.

“Praise Progenita,” Stone said, putting her hand to her mouth.

“I don't see it,” Annya said. “Wait--No, that's just a cloud.”

“It's not a cloud,” Ollia said. “It's the Lost Moon. It has to be.”

“You're just seeing what you want to see,” Annya said, shaking her head. “Anyone else want some more wine?”

“Yes,” Ollia said, handing Annya her stone cup.

“You know I do,” Stone said, looking up, eager and hopeful, but then she snorted. “Maybe it is just a cloud.”

Annya walked away, clutching three cups to her chest, toward the makeshift tables that had been arranged and where a few jugs of elderberry wine still waited, unopened, among a great many empty vessels. She glanced around for her daughter, Pattenia, and saw her splashing one of the serving girls, Bucket, who was laughing and splashing back. Annya smiled, glad to see the girls all having fun, enjoying one of their rare nights of freedom, where the hekatins freely mingled and openly worshiped their goddess, Progenita.

She’d just started to pour the wine when the whole hollow seemed to brighten.

“It is the Lost Moon,” Ollia cried out, her voice loud and clear, bouncing off the walls of the hollow. “Look.”

The drums stopped beating. Annya and all the others looked up. Right above them, between the Night Moon that hovered, huge and orange to the west, and the tiny Day

Moon, small and cold in the east, a round, golden moon grew brighter and brighter. On the surface of the moon they could see the faint outline of what resembled an eye, which now seemed to stare right at them.

“Impossible,” Annya said, keeping her eyes on the moon while her feet carried her back toward Ollia and Stone. In fact, all the girls moved in that direction now, coming together in the golden light, all looking up, their faces and eyes sparkling.

“The first sign,” Ollia whispered. Then, she said it again louder, before finally shouting, “The First Sign!”

The crowd clapped and cheered.

Annya found herself grinning despite herself, and she finally pulled her eyes down from the moon, looking into the faces of all the girls and women surrounding her—common and royal, young and old—all full of joy and wonder. She spotted Pattenia, talking to some other girls. Hurrying over, she threw her arms around her daughter, pulling her in for a hug.

“Mom!” Pattenia said, embarrassed.



“Oh, just let me share this with you for a moment,” Annya said, brushing Pattenia’s inky black hair from her face. “This is the first time the Lost Moon has been seen in over 600 years!”

“I know,” Pattenia said. “It’s... weird. I kinda never really thought it was a real thing.”

“Right?” Bucket said.

Annya laughed. “I had my doubts, too.”

“This mean the goddess is returning, right? Or, that’s what it’s supposed to mean.”

“It’s the first sign,” Annya agreed. “It could be happening. It’s exciting, right?.”

“I guess so,” Pattenia said.

The three stood together awkwardly. Annya tried to think of something to say. She wanted to prolong the moment with her daughter. She seemed to have fewer of them with each passing year. The drums started beating again and a cheer rose up from the crowd. Pattenia sighed with relief, then grabbed Bucket’s hand and said, “Bye, Mom!”

“Have fun!” Anya called out, feeling her heart grow heavy as she watched her daughter run off to be with her friends.

Anya walked to where Ollia and Stone stood, talking while staring up at the sky. It seemed... impossible. She'd read about the Lost Moon, seen illustrations in the ancient books, but as she'd gotten older, she'd come to believe it was just another myth, like dragons or fairies. “I feel like I'm dreaming.”

“I do, too,” Ollia said.

“When Progenita returns,” Stone said, reciting the scripture, “dreams follow.”

“We'll be free to practice our faith in the open,” Ollia said. “Stop living in fear.”

Anya shivered, and though the night was chilly, and she'd felt a breeze, she knew the chill came from a deeper place inside her. “I'll send for the Visikas. There's no time to spare.”

## CHAPTER 1: NINE DAYS LATER

“What’s the difference between a dragon, and a girl on the rag?” Serren asked.

“You’re an idiot,” Pattenia said without looking up from her book.

“Come on. Guess.”

“Mother, can you do something about this--child?”

“Serren,” Queen Anya said absently as she nibbled on a piece of toast. “Enough. Get ready for school.”

“The difference between a dragon and a girl on the rag is—a dress,” Serren said, giving his 17-year-old sister’s long, raven braid a tug, then leaping away to avoid her angry swipe.

“I’m going,” Pattenia said, clapping her book shut. Standing, she arranged the skirts of her floor length dress.

“You know you have to wait for your ladies,” Anya said.

“Tell them to catch up with me,” Pattenia answered, walking out of the room.

“But you have to protect your virginity!” Serren shouted.

Pattenia groaned.

“You should be careful about harassing your sister too much,” Annya said.

“Oh, we just like to tease each other,” Serren said, shoveling some bacon into his mouth. “She rides me when you aren’t around.”

“Your comments go beyond sibling teasing.”

“It’s all fine.”

“Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“You didn’t warn me,” Serren said, wrapping his arms around his mother’s shoulders and giving her a kiss on the cheek.

“Have you been watching the Lost Moon?” Annya said.

“Why are we still calling it The Lost Moon? Shouldn’t it be called The Found Moon now?”

“Very funny. Last night it seemed bigger than ever, hanging so low in the sky I felt I could reach up and touch it, with my hand, and it would be cold and smooth as ice. It was so beautiful, and...”

“But, isn’t that moon supposed to mean the world is coming to an end or something? Dragons and snakes and all kinds of ugly, man-hating witches with warts on their noses?” Serren grabbed an apple from the table and took a bite, the juice running down his chin.

Annya wanted to correct him, to tell him about the goddess and what the moon truly represented, but simply bit her tongue. “That’s all a myth.”

“The rule of women a myth? I’ll say.”

Annya frowned. “You’re awfully smart this morning.”

“Oh, you know I love you, Mom.”

“I love you, too. Sometimes.”

“Ha! Now we know where I get it from!”

Serren sauntered off to his rooms in the west wing of the palace. Grabbing a shirt from

the floor he smelled it, pulled it on, then repeated the process with breeches and socks. Once outside, the damp, cool spring air washed over him. The sight of a group of teen girls in their bright silken dresses heading toward the Ladies' Conservatory brought a smile to his face. He let his eyes linger on their bodies. Then hurrying to a trot, he closed on them and passed, calling back, "You girls look good coming and going!"

The girls giggled and waved, and as he ran past they exchanged appreciative glances. Serren stood over 6'tall, with a mop of messy golden hair and a long, lean body that years of training had already sheathed in hard muscle, but as much as all that it was the swaggering confidence of his walk that the girls found so appealing.

As Serren walked, he saw a pair of Purgationists in their black, hooded robes standing on the cobbled street along the path to the girls' school. "Gents," he called, but they ignored him, instead seeming to stare at the girls as they walked by. *Mudcluds*, Serren thought, putting it out of his mind and preparing to climb The Steps, also called The Man Builders.

The marble steps gleamed white with silver specks and rose at a steep angle up the side of Holden Berry Hill. At the peak of the hill, flashing in the morning sun, stood the soaring pillars and snapping banners of The Academy of Man, the boys' school which the Builder-Priests of Maxis had carved from the rock of the mountain using great and ancient magic. And they, too, had cut the steps, and every boy in the city knew the steps were there to build men, and that years of walking up and down the steps turned "Boys into mighty men."

After all his years climbing and training, Serren bounded up the side of the hill two steps a time, stopping to glance down at the girls to see if he could get a glimpse down their tops.

Then, he hurried to what he and his friends had dubbed "The Spot," a landing cut into the side of the hill about halfway up the stairs, where some stone tables and benches squatted. To the left Serren saw Prett Wensea and his friends smirking. They wore tight, knee length britches and white socks, plus polished shoes that flashed in the sun. Each of them sported an embroidered silk jacket in a different color. Prett had short, spikey red hair, and he'd already had a beard,

the sight of which alone made Serren want to punch Prett in the face.

Making eye contact, Serren showed Prett his little finger, an insult meant to suggest he was very small in a place men prided themselves on being large. Prett returned the gesture, then went back to talking to his friends.

“Asryn!” Serren called out to his best friend, who waited to the right, as he had every morning since their days as school boys began.

“Brother,” Asryn said, and they shook hands, then embraced and slapped each other on the back. Asryn was almost as tall as Serren. Almost as broad shouldered. Almost as good looking. All those almosts made him a perfect best friend for Serren, who liked to be the best in everything. Asryn, for his part, seemed content to be his friend’s second.

“How about after school we go riding?” Serren said. “This is the best weather we’ve had in months.”

“I like it,” Asryn said. “We could ride the Old King’s Road through the Royal Reserve. Hunt some deer.”



“That works for me,” Serren said.

Asryn pulled out his pipe and began to pack the bowl with moist, sky blue dream leaf. Striking a match on the table, he took a long toke and holding his breath, held the pipe toward Serren.

“No,” Serren said, glancing over at Prett. “Need to stay fit for the tournament.”

“Give it here,” said Oper, a short, pudgy boy with wild, unkempt hair and a sad attempt at a mustache. He grabbed the pipe and took a huge toke before handing it to Kencrick, who nonchalantly took a hit and then passed it back to Asryn.

Serren sat on the table, gazing down the hill to the King’s Street below, which led from the palace down into the city, dropping below in a series of terraces, the roofs of the top three tiers all red clay tiles, the bottom golden straw. Morning mist hovered over each terrace, and he smiled, loving how beautiful the city looked, his city looked. There were more boys coming up the steps, and girls in their bright spring dresses walking towards their school. “I saw Callia Manea the other morning,” Serren said.

“She’s suddenly all grown up.” He made a cupping gesture over his chest.

“She’s friends with my sister,” Oper said. “She came over once in the winter, and when she took off her coat my eyes just about popped out of my head. One minute she was just a skinny little runt, and then it seemed like all of a sudden--”

“Her face isn’t so great,” Asryn said.

“Yeah, but she could wear a bag over her head,” Serren said, smirking.

The boys all laughed.

Serren slapped his knees and got to his feet. “Lords of the Realm, I am to the steps,” Serren said. “You mudcluds are riding with us after school, right?” He said, looking at Oper and Kencrick.

Oper was still holding his smoke, but shaking his head, no. Kencrick said, “I was just gonna vegetate.”

“Vegetate? That’s stupid. You’re riding with us. I’ll see you at the stables.” He turned and started up the steps, not waiting for an answer.

Oper finally let the smoke out of his lungs, breaking into a coughing fit.

“I really just want to vegetate, you know?” Kencrick said.

“Well, that’s not happening now,” Asryn said. He was about to tap out the pipe, but Oper made a desperate sound.

“Let me hit it again,” he said. “I have an hour of Old Debberman lecturing on something some old people did once.”

“I believe that is called history,” Asryn said, handing him the pipe. “Smoke it clean.”

“I want to vegetate so bad,” Kencrick said. “Why do we always have to do what Serren wants?”

“Well, because he is going to be king someday,” Asryn said.

Oper was pounding his chest, his eyes watering. “And then he’ll be able to get us the best dream leaf in the kingdom,” he said, smoke pouring out of his mouth, a blissful, faraway look in his eyes.

“And lands and gold and titles, too,” Asryn said. “But, yes, most importantly leaf.”

The three laughed and started up the stairs, ignoring the sneering glances of Prett and his silken, shimmering crew.

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Pattenia had passed Asryn on her way to school, and she'd felt her cheeks flush and had started to hurry past him when he'd called out, "Pat!"

She took a breath, trying to compose herself, then had turned and waved, awkwardly, then she shook her head and said, "That looked ridiculous."

Asryn laughed and said, "you could never look anything less than a vision."

Pattenia looked up at him, her heart racing. Her little brother's best friend, she'd known him all her life, an annoying little brat, but something had changed. He now stood at least a foot taller than her, and his shoulders had somehow spread way out, and his chin seemed to have gotten square, and his lips just looked so kissable, and—

"Something wrong?" Asryn said, stepping closer, watching as Pattenia stared at him, her

mouth hanging open, revealing just a little hint of her pink tongue.

‘Oh! No,” Pattenia said, realizing she’d been gawking. “I have to go!” She lifted her skirts and hurried off, cursing herself for having a crush on her ridiculous brother’s ridiculous fool of a little friend.

“See you, Pat!” Asryn said, shrugging. *Girls are so weird, he thought. Impossible to understand.*

Pattenia endured her morning classes, if you could even call them that. She and the girls in her cohort spent their first two hours working their looms, weaving a tapestry that would be presented to her father, the King, on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his reign. The teacher alternated between sitting on a stool on the perimeter of the room, staring into space and occasionally hopping to her feet and checking on the work, correcting or demanding improvements.

Most of the girls chatted as they worked, still mostly about the sudden appearance of the Lost Moon—where they’d been when it first appeared, what they’d done, who they’d talked to about it.

Pattenia stayed focused on her task, weaving with care and precision. Her father had always told her to be the best at everything she did, and so she had, driving herself to perfection. The sight of the slightest error in her work drove her insane. Her weaving was great and she liked it that way, even if it was “only” woman’s work.

After loom work came poetry, and then the girls were sent off to lunch, where Pattenia found her best friend and premier lady in waiting, the Duchess Danalia, a spritely girl who today wore a green dress and had her kinky black hair in pigtails.

“Aren’t you a little old for pigtails?” Pattenia said, sitting down next to her and giving her a peck on the cheek.

“You’re never too old for pigtails,” Danalia said. “How was tapestry sciences this morning?”

“Riveting.”

“I’m sure.”

Pattenia’s food arrived, even at school brought to her table for her by the staff. Pattenia opened a silver urn, sniffed the soup

inside and began to eat, blowing on the hot liquid and then sipping.

“You want this?” Danalia said, snatching a lumpy sandwich stacked with meat and cheese and taking a bite without waiting for a reply.

Pattenia’s attention had been drawn to the other side of the room, where a girl with long, red hair cascading down over freckled shoulders sat by herself, reading. “Who is that?” she asked.

“MMmmff?” Danalia said, her mouth stuffed with food.

“Her. With the strawberry hair?”

Danalia turned and looked. Shrugged. Managed to mumble, “never saw her before” around her food.

The Ladies’ Conservatory was only for the children of royal blood. Most of them started attending when they turned five, and everyone knew everyone. It was rare, so very rare, that a new face appeared. Pattenia sized her up. The girl looked up as if sensing the eyes on her. Meeting Pattenia’s eyes, she smiled.

Pattenia did not smile back. She just stared long enough to show the girl she was not threatened by her, and then turned back to her soup.

“Have you given any thought to the seating arrangements?” Danalia said.

“Don’t bother me with that nonsense,” Pattenia said.

“It’s my responsibility as your lady, and your wedding is only a few months away.”

Pattenia felt her stomach sour at the thought of her wedding, and the groom her parents had chosen, a boring boy who collected insect specimens and talked of bugs incessantly. A boy with no chin, and shoulders as narrow as a twelve-year-old girl. Runtick. He repulsed Pattenia, revolted her, but she was expected to do what was best for the kingdom and her marriage to little Runtick would bring the wayward House of Ansey more strongly into the fold.

“Just let them sit on the floor wherever they like,” Pattenia said. “And they can eat cow dung with their fingers.”



“Your mother will burn me alive if we don’t get this done.”

“I have to find some way out of this,” Pattenia said, turning to her friend. “I can’t marry that sad little bug boy!”

“It’s not your choice.”

“Well, it should be.”

“You’re going to drive me insane.”

Lunch ended. The girls all got up and started toward their afternoon classes. Finally, Pattenia felt her spirits rising, as they did every day at this time. While most of the girls headed off to learn to be a good hostess or to singing or dancing classes, she, Danalia and a few other girls went down a long dark hall until they came to a large oaken door. The stone arch above had been carved long ago with the words Boys’ Chapel.

Danalia pulled the door open, and Pattenia entered the room, which was lit by flickering candle light. She and Danalia gratefully slipped off their shoes, kicking them into the corner along with the other girls, and then walked into the cavernous vault of the chapel, its ceiling lost in darkness high above them,

the massive pillars that ran down the sides and center blackened with hundreds of years of candle smoke. Long, oaken pews glowed a warm honey color in the soft light of the candles, and stood in rows marching back deep into the distant dark at the back of the church, but all the girls sat together in the first two rows.

Niches along the walls stood empty, and behind the altar, an alcove where a great status of Maxis had once stood, masses of flowering vines prospered in the light that poured down from the oculus. On the altar itself rested a large stone head, a representation of the goddess Progenita, which legend held had been broken off her statue at the Temple in Regis.

Professor Falconette stood at her podium, glancing over the ancient book in front of her, and when the twelve girls sat, she looked up and said, "Praise the goddess."

"Praise the goddess," the girls answered.

Pattenia had always felt a little thrill of excitement when she entered the temple and heard the words of the first prayer, but now with the return of the Lost Moon, with the

Witch Hunters roaming the streets, she felt the excitement of her and the other girl's defiance all the more. Here, she felt her power, her hope.

"Goddess, we..." Professor Falconette started.

The door opened with a creak. Pattenia looked over to see the red girl from the cafeteria entering. "My apologies," she said. "It's my first day. I got lost."

"Sit, and welcome," Falconette said. "I have been so eager to meet you." The girl took a seat at the back in a pew by herself.

Pattenia looked at the girl again. Her freckle dusted skin was pale, so pale it almost looked like it was glowing, and she had pale blue eyes like sapphires. And for some reason Professor Falconette knew who she was and was excited to meet her? *Hmmmm*, Pattenia thought. *She and I are going to have to become either very good friends, or very bitter enemies.*

Falconette refocused, continued, reading phrases from the ancient papyrus scroll, the girls repeating each phrase with voices growing in passion:

“Goddess, we beseech thee

*“Goddess, we beseech thee...”*

“Grant us the strength to restore thy temple,”

*“Grant us the strength to restore thy temple,”*

“And the rule of woman”

*“And the rule of woman.”*

## CHAPTER 2

Serren lunged, the point of his smoky ghost blade striking right in Asryn's heart, sending a painful shock through his body. "You have to move faster," Serren said, laughing.

"I'm trying," Asryn said. "My knee hurts."

Both boys were drenched in sweat. "Again," Serren said, moving back to his mark.

"I need a minute," Asryn said, wiping his brow with the back of his arm and walking over to the water bucket.

"Someone come in here and spar with me!" Serren said. Looking around he saw all the other guys drop their eyes and back away.

He turned his attention to the other side of the room, where Prett unleashed a flurry of blows against Jaggit, a tall, lanky and awkward boy who hadn't mentally caught up with his recent growth spurt. Jaggit backed away, backed away, clearly overwhelmed and barely managing to block Prett's blows.

“Yield,” Jaggit called out, his voice warbling with fear as he found himself pressed against the wall. “I Yield!”

“Yield?” Prett said, slapping his ghost blade across Jaggit’s head, causing his hair to stick out. “Yield on the battlefield, and you die.”

“Stop,” Jaggit said. “What the hell?” He raised his arms to fend off the blows, and Prett whipped his blade across the other boy’s palms, causing them to smoke.

Prett kicked Jaggit’s foot out from under him, and when Jaggit fell to the ground Prett straddled him and began to thrust his hips against his midsection. “To the victor go the spoils,” Prett said, grinning at his sycophants, who all laughed and clapped.

But then the clapping suddenly stopped as they looked beyond Prett, who turned just in time to see Serren’s fist as it collided with his forehead, knocking him onto his back.

Prett rolled with the punch and popped up on his feet, fists raised. “You want to start something?” He said.

Serren raised his fist and stared calmly into Prett's eyes. "I already started something."

Both boys' friends gathered around, eyeing each other up down. "Bust his face," Asryn said.

They were circling now, fists raised, the guys egging them on. Prett jabbed with his left, then again.

Serren blocked easily. "I'm going to give that pretty face of yours some character," he said. "Maybe a broken nose. You're prettier than my sister."

"You've said little. Your sister is a beast."

The comment infuriated Serren, and he slammed a fist into Prett's side, then moved forward, taking a couple of jabs. When he retreated, Prett charged, and Serren dropped down and did a sweep kick, knocking Prett off his feet. In a flash, he was on top with one hand locked around Prett's neck while he raised the other and said, "I've been looking forward..."

"BREAK IT UP!" he heard Master Volmack shout, and years of conditioning kicked in, causing him to get to his feet and step away,

clasping his hands behind his back, standing at attention.

Volmack stood nearly seven feet tall, and seemed just as thick, with a square jaw that jutted out like a war machine. Of Yashian stock, he had the distinctive caramel skin, dark kinky hair, and bright green eyes that always seemed to burn with rage.

“You two. Clean up duty. The rest of you get out of here.”

“Master, I was just—“

“Another word and it’s clean up for a week.”

Serren sighed. “See you guys later,” he said to Asryn and company.

“I can help...” Asryn started, but one look from Volmack sent him on his way.

Prett and Serren started to pick up the gear and dirty towels the other guys had left around the room. Volmack watched. When the room was done, they came and stood before him. “All right. You know what you need to do. Like men.”

Serren turned to Prett and held out his hand. They shook. “With respect to you and



your house,” Serren said through a clenched jaw.

“And with respect to you and yours,” Prett answered.

“Dismissed. And save the fighting for the tournament!” Volmack shouted.

As they walked out together, Prett mumbled, “Clown.”

“Turd.”

Still angry, Serren stamped down to the stables, where he found that Asryn, Oper and Kencrick had the horses all saddled up and ready to go. “Good deal, gents. Let’s get riding.”

Serren tucked his hair back and then put on his riding hat—a tattered old leather hat of black and brown with brass buttons his father had passed down to him. Effortlessly, he swung himself onto his horse.

“It’s too bad you didn’t get to bust his face,” Oper said. “I can’t stand that weasel.”

“I’ll put him in his place during the tournament,” Serren said. “In front of everyone.”

He spurred his horse to a gallop, loving the feel of the cool spring air, the smell of the grass and trees as nature began to awaken, buds forming, new grass sprouting. A flock of geese squawked overhead, and after working his horse to a nice sweat, he slowed and veered off the main road onto a dirt path formed of cart furrows.

“The Reserve is this way,” Asryn said.

“I know. Change of plans.”

“What?” Asryn said.

“You’ll see.”

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Pattenia placed her beaker onto the wire frame above the flame. Soon, the blue liquid inside bubbled. She carefully measured out a portion of a black powder, double-checked the formula, and poured it into her beaker. Reading from the Book of the Goddess, she uttered the words of goddess’ tongue, with all its wide, wet vowels. The liquid bubbled and a series of tiny toads leapt from the beaker and began hopping madly around the table.

“Damn,” Pattenia whispered, slapping at the toads, which popped in explosions of sticky purple goop. “Ah,” Pattenia said, hoping against all reason no one had noticed her error, but heard a voice say, “Pardon. Do you mind if I offer a suggestion?”

Pattenia turned and looked up into the bright green eyes of the mysterious blonde girl. “Excuse me,” Pattenia said. “I don’t think we’ve met.”

“I’m Lady Actonia Gaunefer,” she said holding out her hand.

Pattenia looked at the other girl’s outstretched hand. “You’re not serious?”

“Why not?”

“Ladies don’t shake hands.”

Actonia shrugged, and plucking at her skirt did a curtsy. “Good?”

“Yes.” Pattenia said. “Well, it was nice to meet you.”

“Pardon. The potion? I might be able to help?”

“No. I am fine, thank you,” Pattenia said.

Actonia remained, smiling. “Women are stronger when we help each other. We’ll never restore Progenita if we can’t work as one,” she said, putting her hand on Pattenia’s shoulder. At Actonia’s touch, Pattenia felt a shock.

Pattenia shook her head. “I can do it on my own. Thank you.”

“As you wish,” Actonia said with a smirk, curtsying, then again, and a third time. “My Prince.”

Danalia, who’d been listening to the whole thing, came over after and said, “Did she just call you her Prince?”

“Yes,” Pattenia said, rolling her eyes. “Weirdo.”

She cleaned out her beaker, arranged her supplies, and started again.

At the back of the lab, Professor Falconette walked coolly over to where Actonia worked, and leaning in she whispered, “So?”

Actonia smiled, her eyes dancing excitedly. “Yes,” she said. “Pattenia is the Vessel of the Goddess.”

The two looked at Pattenia. Long and lanky, she had inherited her father's height and stood at 5' 10" with an athletic body and regal features that tended toward cold. Her hair was inky black, and her skin pale. Her wide, dark eyes glittered with the constant curiosity that suggested an active and intelligent mind. She looked born to rule, though she was, yet, a teen-age girl and often seemed like she was yet a child not used to her body. As they watched her, she seemed to have an aura about her, a soft glow of energy.

Professor Falconette wavered, putting a hand on the table to steady herself. Tears came to her eyes, a sight which would have shocked every girl in the school, as they'd come to doubt the Professor capable of crying. Or smiling. "The goddess is returning? At long last?"

"As long as Pattenia has the courage to do what must be done," Actonia said, looking with delight and wonder at Pattenia.

"She has to," Falconette said. "The fate of the world depends on her."

"The fate of all of us."

Just then, Pattenia's potion exploded once again, and this time winged toads emerged, flying around her head. She and Danalia grabbed them and squeezed them, making them pop.

"We have a lot of work to do," Falconette said. "A lot."

\*\*\*

Serren and the boys road down a narrow, winding path until they emerged into a field just outside a bright, newly painted barn. Serren whistled, and a long-haired girl appeared at the loft door, shouting, "Serren!"

"Oh, I should have known," Asryn said.

Three more glossy headed girls appeared, laughing and waving. Serren turned to the others and said, "She has friends."

A little time and a little wine later, Serren knelt and said, "climb on." Skye, the most beautiful of Innman's daughters, climbed onto his back, wrapping her legs around his waist

and her arms around his shoulders. She giggled as he stood and carried her on his back up the ladder leading to the loft.

Asryn stretched out in the hay, unlacing Iris's bodice, grinning as her smooth skin was revealed. Iris was idling toying with the buttons of his pants, undoing them while staring back into his eyes.

Oper and Kencrick sat on hay bales across from Rye and Wind, all four blushing as they looked back at the others and waited for someone to make a move or speak.

Off to one side, Asryn climbed on top of Iris and kissed her.

"Wait," she said, looking toward the four sitting awkwardly and crinkling her nose.

"Why don't you kids go outside and take a walk?" Asryn called.

Up in the loft Skye squealed and said, "You're bad!"

"I know," Serren said.

Rye, Wind, Oper and Kencrick stood in unison and hurried through the barn door into the bright sunlight. Rye started giggling, and

then her sister did, too, and the boys started laughing. They walked away from the barn, all feeling flushed and light-headed. "What are we supposed to do?"

The girls eyed the boys, then each other. Oper and Kencrick looked around, down, anywhere but at the girls. Finally, Rye hissed with exasperation, grabbed Kencrick's hand and dragged him toward the stream that ran behind the barn. "Don't follow us!" she called back to her sister. Kencrick met Oper's eyes, pleading, but Oper shrugged even as Wind put her hands over his eyes and kissed him on the cheek.

Down on the river banks, Rye held Kencrick's hand and said, "Why don't you want to kiss me?"

Kencrick flushed. "It's not that I don't want to, exactly, it's just that..."

Rye's eyes went wide. "You've never kissed a girl!"

"What? Of course I have."

Rye bit her lip and put her hand to Kencrick's cheek. "It's okay," she said. "I'll teach you."



Kencrick leaned away, and then more, until he was on his back and Rye had her lips pressed against his. Breaking off the kiss, she licked her lips and smiled down at him, holding his face in her palms as she got ready for round two.

There was a loud shriek from the barn. Kencrick sat up. "Are they okay?"

"They're making love," Rye said, shaking her head. "You really don't know anything, do you?"

"I do, but--"

Before he could finish, Rye had smothered his words with another wet, sloppy kiss.

\*\*\*

Adjacent to her bed chambers, Pattenia had a studio crammed with easels, art supplies, musical instruments, costumes and sets from years of putting on plays with her friends. A recent addition was her drafting table, upon which she had been drawing plans

for her architecture class, taught secretly to her by the hekatinis. Each girl's task had been to design a temple for the goddess.

Pattenia, preparing to work, tied her hair back and pushed up her sleeves. Closing her eyes, she asked the goddess to help her in her task.

Pattenia sat down and looked at what she'd been sketching and planning, shaking her head. It didn't seem right to her somehow. The towers and gables and pillars. It too closely resembled a temple of Maxis, the God of Men, and though she had thought that using white marble and designing it with large windows would let in light, it seemed to her more like she'd just put up curtains in a man's room and not made it her own. She stretched and wriggled, wishing she could work free of the corset wrapped tightly around her body, which kept her back ramrod straight. How she would love to be able to slouch around like a boy sometimes.

Taking a fresh piece of paper, she lost herself in sketching different ideas, thinking back on what she'd read of the ancient temples of Progenita from the days before The Usurpation. She wished she could bring

books home from the hekatin library, but it was too dangerous to risk discovery, for her and all her sisters. She would have to go back and read, take notes...

She heard the door to her bedchamber slam open and her brother calling, "Pattenia! What are you up to?"

Covering over the sketches, Pattenia hurried to her bedchambers, pulling the door to her art room closed behind her. "Get off my bed!" she said. "You're filthy."

Serren had sprawled out and was hugging one of her pillows to his chest. "Ahhhhh! I think I'm in love!"

"Go! Get off!" she said, slapping at his leg, then covering her nose as his odor hit her. "You smell like a horse!"

"That's not just a horse you smell," Serren snickered. "It's also a farmer's daughter. Her breasts are the most--"

"Don't brag to me about your sluts. It's disgusting."

"How can love be disgusting?" Serren said, laughing.

Pattenia sat down on the edge of the bed, giving up on getting him off her bed and out of her room anytime soon. “What is it, little brother? What do you want?”

“What makes you think I want something?” he said. “Can’t I just visit my beloved sister to say hello, and to tell you I think you are the best, most amazing sister ever?”

“Are you drunk?”

“Drunk on love.”

“You wanted what again?” Pattenia punched him on the thigh.

“Ow! Okay. Fine. I wonder if maybe you could talk to Nemeria for me? She’s super mad at me.”

“How did she find out so fast?”

“Not about the farmer’s daughter. Another one. Before. A cleaning girl. Miss Bucket.”

“You slept with *her*, too?”

“She was lonely, and I was lonely.”

“Get out!” Pattenia said, punching him hard. “You’re disgusting!”

“Ouch!” Serren said, rolling away from Pattenia and falling off the edge of the bed, thumping to the floor.

“How would you feel if you knew Nemeria was cheating on you with every stable boy and kitchen knave?”

“Cheating? We’re not married yet!”

“So? How would you feel?” Pattenia kept slapping at him, driving him toward the door.

“I’m doing it for her!” Serren said, opening the door and stepping out, trying to shield himself from her blows. “So I’ll learn to be a better lover! You can’t imagine the tricks these common girls know.”

“Arrrrrgggghhhh!” Pattenia said, slamming the door in his face. *Why does my brother have to be an idiot?* She thought. *Why do men have to be such selfish, self-centered little brats?* She thought of her mother’s face when her father would see certain maids in the halls and greet them just a little too warmly, or when the serving girls at dinner would flirt in a far too familiar manner. The hurt. The shame. And yet when she asked about it her mother’s face grew hard and she said, “that’s just the way it is.”

“So, is that a no?” Serren called through the door.

“Go away, or I will kill you!” Pattenia screamed, throwing her brush at the door.

## CHAPTER 3

Queen Anya, Serren, and Pattenia ate quietly. Miss Bucket poured water, and Pattenia caught her making eyes at Serren, who winked back at her. Ugh. He was so infuriating.

It seemed dinner would pass in awkward tension until they heard a clattering in the hall, and a big voice boomed, “Where is my dinner? I am starving!”

As King Garrick Denae strode into the room, it seemed to grow smaller. Tall and with a lean, hard body, he wore riding leathers and boots. Without Queen Anya there to manage him during his latest journeys, he’d allowed hair and beard to grow long and wild during his travels. He had dark, joyful eyes that flashed beneath thick brows. “Family,” he said to the children, leaning down to give Anya a kiss on the cheek. Bucket hurried over to fill his water glass, and he gulped it down and said, “That’s the worst excuse for wine I’ve ever tasted.” Everyone laughed, just

as they had at that joke the previous dozens of times he'd told it.

Garrick ate and drank, and only when he'd sated his appetite and had begun to pick his teeth did he look at his family and begin his ritualistic bonding efforts. "Serren. You look tall and strong. Ready for the tournament."

"Thank you, father."

"Pattenia, you grow prettier by the day."

"Thank you, father." Pattenia had inherited his black hair, while Serren had always favored their mother, with her golden hair and pale eyes.

Annya covered Garrick's hand with her own. He cleared his throat and took a sip of wine. "Pattenia. Your mother tells me you have been less than cooperative in regards to your wedding plans."

Pattenia looked to Anya, her eyes wide. "I... well... I'm not..."

"Do what your mother tells you. I don't want to hear about this again." He started to get up.



“No!” Pattenia said. “I will not marry that gross little bug-eyed beetle!”

Garrick stood, his eyes smoldering. “You will do your duty.”

“Father! He’s grotesque!”

“We need the House of Ansey in the fold. I’ve told you since you were a child—duty first. Your mother and I did not choose one another, but we have learned to love each other.”

“Despite our flaws,” Annya said.

“You will learn to live together just as we did.”

“But, Mother is beautiful! How can you force me to marry someone so repulsive?”

Serren chuckled, then quickly covered the smirk with a napkin.

“Truly, the boy did look more promising when we made the match. That is so,” Garrick said. “But to break the engagement now could mean war with Ansey. Do you want thousands of people to die because of you?”

“Of course not. But there must be another way.”

“Just stop complaining and do your duty,” Serren said gleefully, unable to contain himself any more. “I’m sure he will give you many babies—with bulging bug-eyes.”

“Shut up!” Pattenia said.

“Enough! Both of you!” Garrick said. “Is it too much to ask for one night of peace? Deal with this,” he said to Annya, then turned and strode out.

Annya stared daggers after him.

“Mother?” Pattenia said.

“The arrangement has been made,” she said. “I know it is hard. I know. I wish we could find another way, but unless some radical change in the situation occurs, you must accept your father’s—our—decision. It’s unfair, but it is the way things are for women.”

Serren sensed he could only get himself in more trouble by speaking, so he rose. “May I be excused?”

“Of course.”

The evil part of his brain was churning, thinking up mean little things to say to provoke his sister further, but seeing the abject despair on her face stopped him. Instead he focused on Bucket, giving her butt a pinch as he passed her on the way out.

Pattenia and Annya, hearing Bucket's giggle, seethed.

"Everything is so easy for him," Pattenia said.

"For them," Annya said. "It's easy for them, but that's why we have to be stronger."

"He takes nothing seriously," Pattenia said. "He drinks and lays with any girl he can find, and he makes a joke of everything. I can't believe he gets to be King."

"Hopefully, he will have grown up by the time the crown passes to him."

"And if he hasn't?"

"The crown passes to him just the same. You've always known that."

"But never liked it."

"If you could change it, would you?"

“Of course,” Pattenia said. “What girl wouldn’t?”

“There are some girls who dream of marriage and children.”

“Then let them be wives and mothers. I just feel like I am meant to do more with my life.”

“I hope you will get your wish, then—and that the price is not too great.”

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After dinner, Annya went up to the rooms she shared with her husband. He sat in a great leather chair in the den, sipping brandy and smoking his pipe. When he saw Annya enter he smiled. “I didn’t handle things with Pattenia very well,” he said.

“No,” Annya agreed. “You didn’t. When you dump these things in my lap then I always have to play the villain.”

“But I—“

“Don’t you even care?”

“Of course I care,” Garrick said.

The door to the patio stood open, and a cool night breeze toyed with curtains, making them dance languorously. The Lost Moon hovered in the sky, sending golden rays down to pool at the foot of the doors. Annya's heart fluttered at the sight, and she put her hand to her chest. "The Lost Moon is so lovely," she said. "Isn't it so exciting that it's returned?"

"Yes," Garrick said, absently. "Of course."

Annya sighed. His cold, distant tone made her feel so... unloved. She walked out onto the patio, gazing up at the moon, thinking about what it could mean for her, for her daughter, for everyone, really. Girls would be free to do... whatever they wanted. Was it too much to dream that she could want the same things for her daughter she wanted for her son?

"The moon does light the sky," Garrick said from close behind, surprising her. "But she pales compared to the light in your eyes."

Annya warmed at the compliment, turning and slipping into his arms. "What do you think, Garrick? Of the --prophecies? The return of the goddess?"

Garrick snorted. "Fairy tales for children."

*Children?* Annya thought, instantly raging. "You don't think it could be true? I mean, we thought the Lost Moon a legend, and yet now it appears in the sky,"

"And it is marvelous," he said, "but the lives of men are not governed by the movements of the stars and moons." He tapped her on the nose. "Men make their own destinies."

"I've heard the prophecy states that when the Lost Moon returns, women will rule."

Now Garrick laughed openly. "That'll be the day."

"Why is that so funny?" Annya spat.

*Damn*, Garrick thought, realizing he'd trodden on very dangerous ground. His mind flashed. *Change the subject. Change the subject.* "Forgive me," Garrick said, pulling her to him, kissing her. He put his hand under her chin, tilted her head back, ran his thumb along her lower lip. "You're more beautiful than ever," he said. "I love you more everyday."

“Women can lead just as well as men,” Annya said. “It’s just we’re never given the chance.”

“Let’s not argue. I want to take you to our bedroom and show you how much I love you,” Garrick said.

“Well,” Annya said. “I have a headache. Now.”

“Very well,” Garrick said. He knew that look. He turned and went back inside, to his pipe and brandy.

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Pattenia got up as the sun rose and went looking for her father, but he had already gone off hunting. She shook with anger, frustrated she did not get a chance to say any of the things she’d spent half the night thinking up to say to him. She wanted to tell him about justice, about love, about family. She wanted to tell him she had reconsidered and was willing to see some people die to save her

from marrying The Beetle. But he was gone, and there was no one for her to talk to.

Her life felt so confined, so small, a feeling reinforced by corset crushing her body, the long impractical gowns, the heels. Her clothes were a prison just as assuredly as her impending marriage, and she wondered if maybe Professor Falconette was right, that women's clothes were meant to train them to accept a life of constraint. So many of the things Falconette said had seemed strange and absurd when she was young, but now she was starting to think the old professor was right. Her life, so free and full of possibility when she'd been a child, had shrunk down to a single possibility now that she was a woman: marriage.

And not just marriage, but marriage to a bug boy. It was all so unfair. Pattenia pounded her fist against the cold, stone wall of the castle, then rested her forehead against it, closing her eyes, the rage and frustration bottled up within her.

She remembered a time—years ago when she'd been a small child, with Serren just barely walking and talking. They'd taken bamboo shoots and begun playing pirates,



dueling, their imaginary swords clashing in great flashing torrents of steel as they battled to claim the Crown of the Pirate Lord. They'd been laughing as they imagined themselves on the deck of a pirate ship, the whole thing rocking back and forth.... And she'd been about to knock the sword from Serren's hand when—

“Pattenia!”

She had dropped her “sword” and turned, putting her hands behind her back and looking up... up... up... at her father, whose booming voice she both loved and feared. “Father?”

“Girls don't play fight,” he said.

“But we were just...”

“Fighting isn't ladylike. Go get your dolls. NOW.”

Pattenia hurried off, stifling her objections. She'd run up to her room, but as she'd been about to grab her dolls, she heard clacking in the gardens, and going over to the window, she'd looked down to see her father, bamboo shoot in hand, sword fighting with Serren, who was laughing and grinning, and her father was... smiling.... He so rarely smiled, and it

warmed and chilled her because that smile was all for her brother.

She had felt her stomach burn with jealousy as she watched them, and she rubbed her hands against the coarse stone of the window sill, wanting to hurt, wanting to hurt herself, and when she'd looked at her dolls in their dresses, she'd gone and taken one and thrown it out the window.

All those years ago, it had started. She'd always wanted to do boy things. To hunt and learn to fight and to be able to go off and have adventures with her father! But it had always been dresses and dolls and ... it had all been in preparation for this one thing her life would have to become.

Straightening, Pattenia took a deep breath and pushed all the feelings down, down down, just as she always had, and then she smiled, because she had a pretty smile, and she knew her father wanted her, above all else, to be pretty.

Spring rains had come, and so she lifted her skirts with one hand and muddled along to school, holding an umbrella above her head with the other. As she walked, she

saw Danalia ahead of her, and Serren holding a large umbrella for both of them. She slit her eyes. *No*, she thought. *You will not lay with my lady!*

She came alongside Serren and Danalia. Serren had slipped an arm over Danalia's shoulders. "Good morning, sister!"

"Danalia. Join me under my umbrella."

Danalia, cheeks flush, shook her head. "But, I'm fine. Thanks."

"Join me now!"

Danalia looked up apologetically at Serren, who crumpled up his face in a "my sister is crazy" look. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Don't apologize to him!" Pattenia grabbed Danalia's wrist and pulled her to her side, shoving the umbrella into her hands.

"I'm just being a gentleman," Serren said.

"Stay away from my friends!"

"It's okay," Danalia said.

"No, it isn't." Pattenia stopped walking, causing Danalia to make a sudden, sliding halt

and hop back, to make sure the princess did not get wet.

Serren stood, holding his umbrella, trying to look innocent. “What?” he said.

“Goodbye,” Pattenia said.

Serren walked away, but glanced over his shoulder and gave Danalia a wink.

Pattenia and Danalia began to walk again. “Stay away from my brother,” she said, squeezing Danalia’s wrist.

“Ow!” Danalia pulled her arm away. “I am your lady in waiting, *not* your servant!”

“I’m trying to protect you,” Pattenia said. “Don’t you see that? My brother just wants to annoy me by flirting with you.”

“Annoy you? Don’t you think he might actually think I’m pretty?”

“Danalia, you’d be spoiled. Your reputation destroyed.”

“Just because I’m friendly with Serren doesn’t mean I’m going to let him take me.”

“If you are seen as friendly with my brother, people will assume he has had his way with you.”

“That’s ridiculous!”

“My brother is only friends with girls if he can have them. Your reputation is my reputation. People would talk, and they would also talk about me. “

“They wouldn’t.”

“They would.”

“Oh, I don’t know.”

“Oh, I do. Stay away from Serren, Danalia. Don’t go near him. Ever. He doesn’t care about you at all. He just wants to make me angry.”

“You’re being very mean,” Danalia said, walking off into the misty, morning rain.

“I’m being honest!” Pattenia stood for a time, watching Danalia walk away, with the umbrella. “That’s my umbrella!”

“Have it,” Danalia said, dropping it onto the ground.

“You’re getting wet!” Serren yelled to her.

Pattenia retrieved her umbrella and made her way to school. Back in her first class, she sat down and began to work on the tapestry. She did find the work relaxing, the repetitive motions of her hands, and she found herself getting lost in it, the weaving, her worries and problems not so much disappearing, she felt, as receding to the back of her mind, where her subconscious could work on them and often send them back to her with surprising and effective solutions.

“My Prince.”

Pattenia looked up, her reverie broken, to see Actonia had sat down next to her.

“Actonia,” Pattenia said, forcing a smile.

“Do you mind if I join you?”

“No,” Pattenia lied. “Of course not.”

“Thank you.”

For a time, they sat next to each other, working, but Pattenia found she could not get back into her weaving and lose herself as she

had, so she decided to get to know her stalker.

“Your accent? I have not heard it before at court,” Pattenia said.

“Oh. I thought I had lost it,” Actonia answered.

“It’s faintly there, lingering.”

“It comes from my island. Gaunefer.”

“The others of your house don’t speak like you.”

“They were raised and educated in the capital. I have never left the island until I came here this past week.”

“You never left the island?”

“No.”

“Why not?” Pattenia said.

“I was being prepared for a mission,” Actonia said. “My whole life I have trained for this mission, and when the hekatins saw the signs in the sky and in the moon, they sent me here.”

Pattenia began to feel uncomfortable. There was a look in Actonia's eyes now, a zeal almost like madness, and though quiet, her voice had filled with passion.

"And what is this mission?" Pattenia said, softly.

"*You* are my mission," Actonia said.

"Are you here to kill me?" Pattenia said, shifting away, raising her arms.

Actonia laughed. "No, my Prince. I am here to serve you."

"Stop calling me.... I don't understand? What do you want?"

Actonia took out a note, bound in leather and sealed with wax. "We will talk later, if you are ready." Actonia handed the note to Pattenia.

As Pattenia's fingers touched the nubbled parchment, time seemed to freeze and she had a sudden vision of a hawk in flight across the sun, and shook her head, blinded.

Just then, the bell sounded, class ended, and Actonia moved away, vanishing into the crowd of girls moving off to their next classes.



At the end of the day, Duchess Nemeria Malnae stood at the doors to Ladies' Academy, looking nervously out into the pouring rain. The sky had already grown dark, and the rumble of thunder rattled the windows. "Quite a storm," Nemeria said to the girls gathered around her, including her own first lady in waiting, Lady Vackania Denae. The girls all waited for carriages. They could not expose their clothes and jewelry to weather like this, with the wind so fierce it would blow umbrellas to shreds and maybe even knock them off their feet.

A carriage pulled up, horses hooves clomping, the Falcon Moon of House Malnae emblazoned on the side. The drivers leapt off the carriage and opened up a tarp to bridge the space between the doors and the carriage. "Take off your shoes," Vackania said.

"It isn't proper," Nemeria said. Nemeria was known for her strict adherence to the Book of the Lady, a precise and demanding guide to female etiquette. "Come." She took Vackania's arm, the doormen pulled open the door, and the two girls darted out into the cold

windy rain, hurrying to the carriage. As they approached, the driver pulled open the door and Nemeria stopped short. “You!”

Serren, stretched out on one of the benches, had one arm thrown behind his head, while with the other he held a handful of wild flowers out toward Nemeria. “Sorry?”

“Get out,” Nemeria said.

“Be serious.” Serren sat up and reached for Nemeria. “Let me help you up.”

“I can manage it myself,” Nemeria said, but with her dress and heels, plus the wind and rain, she struggled to find a solid footing on the step ladder and pull herself up into the carriage. Serren grabbed her forearm and pulled. “Stop!” Nemeria said, but the next thing Serren had yanked her into the carriage, and she had landed on top of him.

Vackania, already forgotten, struggled into the carriage, with the help of one of the drivers.

Nemeria, her body pressed against Serren’s, found herself looking down at his smiling face. His brown eyes sparkled with mischief. His golden hair, wet and tousled,

glistened above his face, his cheeks and chin bristling with the stubbled growth of his almost beard. She touched his cheeks with her fingertips, sighing. "I am still furious with you," Nemeria said, kissing him.

Serren brought the damp, limp handful of wild flowers into her view, covering everything below his sparkling eyes. "I ran in the rain and picked these for you," he said. "To show how much I love you."

"You'll catch cold," Nemeria said, smelling the flowers.

"I would gladly catch cold and die to prove my love for you."

Nemeria pushed herself into a sitting position, and Serren slid himself up, so that Nemeria was perched on his lap. She took the flowers and smelled them. Serren slipped an arm around her waist. "You know you're the only one I love."

Nemeria looked at him, shaking her head. "Why can't I stay mad at you?"

Vackania groaned inwardly, looking out the window and trying to tune the whole thing out, disgusted.

“Because we are soul mates, destined to be together in this life and the life hereafter,” Serren said. “We belong to each other, always. I was born to love you.”

“Do you really believe that, Serren? Or are you just using my romantic heart against me? Quoting the poets to make me forget how you bed every kitchen maid in the palace, letting them caress you with their flour covered fingers?”

Serren stifled a chuckle at the image and began tugging the sleeve of Nemeria’s dress, pulling it down. “Let’s talk of you and I, and our future! We marry in a year, and then we’ll be together, every night, and I will show you how much I love you above all other girls.”

“Stop,” Nemeria said, pulling her sleeve back up. “And stop. It hurts me when I hear about you sleeping with these other girls. Don’t my feelings matter to you at all?”

“They do,” Serren said, honestly. “I don’t mean to hurt you. I only want you to be happy. All the time.”

“Then be true to me, Serren.”

The carriage stopped moving. It had arrived at Nemeria's house. Serren stood, giving Nemeria a kiss on the lips. "My heart belongs only to you," he said. "The other girls mean nothing to me at all. Nothing!" With that, he opened the door to the carriage and ran out into the rain and wind.

"Serren!" Nemeria called out.

"Goodnight, Duchess. I love you!"  
Lightning flashed, and a massive thunder bolt rocked the carriage. Serren ran off into the rain and wind, disappearing into the darkness.

Nemeria looked after him. "I hope he gets home okay," she said, "I think. He's so reckless! Is it strange it just makes me care for him more?"

Vackania rolled her eyes. "Let's get you inside milady. Where it is warm and safe, and you can—think straight."

## CHAPTER 4

Professor Ollia Falconette pulled on her rain jacket and pinned a hat to her hair, then dashed out the back door of the girl's school, through the Shepherd's Orchard and into the nearly deserted streets of the city. She saw only a few carriages ferrying children home and a desperate woman hurrying through the storm, clutching a heavily swaddled baby to her chest. Ollia appreciated the darkness and the rain. It was dangerous for the hekatin to meet here in the city.

Then Ollia saw him, the Purgationist, in his black hooded robe with the crimson flame on the chest, standing in a doorway, gazing at her. Ollia just kept moving, pretending not to notice him. The Purgationists were everywhere these days, always lurking and looking, watching and waiting.

She made her way along the main street before heading down a crooked lane and following her nose to Gingham's Bake Shop, it's tart smells of cinnamon, nutmeg and boiling molasses wafting up and down the

block. She opened the door, ringing the little bell, and stepped out of the rain, removing her coat and hanging it on the raw wooden post next to the door. Inside, Ollia saw the shelves largely barren, but even the plump brown loaves of bread made her stomach growl, and the sight of a few of their famous turnovers, dripping in sticky white marble frosting, made her mouth water.

“Ollia,” Baker Gingham said, stepping out of the back room, his hands and arms coated in flour.

“I was just in a battle of wills with your turnovers,” Ollia said. “And losing.”

“There’s one waiting for you downstairs along with a hot cup of tea.”

“Bless you,” Ollia said, giving Baker a hug.

“Praise the goddess,” Baker said back. “The Lost Moon has returned.”

Ollia glanced back at the big, storefront window. “Bless the goddess, but be careful. These are dangerous times.”

“I know, and I will.”

Ollia went through the kitchen, one of the great stone ovens ablaze with fire, something warm and delicious backing within, and then she passed into the pantry and opened a dark wooden door, which revealed a narrow stair and walls of brick. Climbing down the stairs, she came to the basement storage area—shelves and chests and barrels, and made her way behind a shelf, where a narrow door stood open. Inside, candles flickered, and Annya knelt before a small altar with a statue of a smiling Progenita, in the traditional kneeling position, her arms raised, though the left arm had been broken off and the statue still showed scorch marks from when it had been thrown into a fire so many hundreds of years ago.

Actonia sat off to the side, reading from a small chapbook.

Annya finished her prayer, and noticed Ollia watching her. “Oh!” She said, feeling exposed and vulnerable. “Were you there long?”

“I just arrived. I didn’t want to disturb your prayers.”



“Come,” Actonia said, putting her book down. “Sit.”

The three women sat, forming a circle, and then looked at one another, feeling awkward. “So,” Annya said. “You have news?”

“Yes. Actonia?”

Actonia smiled, that same knowing smirk that constantly hovered on her face. “I found the vessel of the goddess. Your daughter, Pattenia.”

“Pattenia?” Annya said. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. I touched her, and the goddess sent a vision. I saw her crowned King beneath the triple moons, and the lion tamed at her feet.”

Annya put her hand to her mouth. She didn’t know how to feel about all of this, about the trials that awaited her daughter, about the triumphs. “And this is certain? You have no doubt?”

“I am a certain that she is the Vessel, but nothing is yet certain beyond that. She will need to accept her destiny, and that will involve hard choices and sacrifice.”

Annya felt overwhelmed. It seemed like so much, so fast. First the Lost Moon, and now the Vessel? The stories from the sacred books, things she'd considered mere myths and symbolic morality tales, were coming true, and it scared her. "I'll talk to her," Annya said. "I'll make sure-"

"No. It has to be the Visikas. That's as written in the Prophecy of the Restoration."

"Oh, of course," Annya said. She had read the story many times. The Viskas reveals her true nature to the Vessel, and then guides her on her journey. Annya felt a pang once more, another letting go. She didn't like the feeling of being written out of her daughter's life. "What can I do, then?"

"Once she knows who she truly is, Patenia will need your encouragement, support, prayers and faith. The path she must walk is not an easy one, and she will need you."

"You'll tell her..." Annya searched her memory for the reading, but could not remember the details, only that it was predicted to happen in a place sacred to Maxis.

“In the Boy’s Chapel this Saturday,” Actonia said. “The day when the last temple of Progenita was thrown down, her altar shattered, the day she closed her eyes, and her moon vanished from the sky.”

“Then I will speak to her after. I had better get back to the palace.”

“Yes.” The three took hands and offered a prayer to the goddess.

Annya would leave first, then the others, one at a time. As Annya turned to leave she stopped and looked back. “Be on guard. Primary Appollon has seen the signs as well, and I heard today that he has ordered his Witch Hunters to scour the city and the country for us.”

“Some innocents will die,” Ollia said, bitterly. “He’ll see to that.”

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Pattenia sat in the cafeteria, staring at the note in her hands. Danalia sat next to her. The cafeteria was otherwise empty. School had let out, and the rest of the girls had gone

home. Rain lashed the windows and thunder boomed.

“You should open it,” Danalia said, quietly, hoping her voice was low enough so she wouldn’t be heard.

“I’m afraid to,” Pattenia said. “You didn’t see her. She seemed insane. I thought she was going to kill me. And then, I had that vision, a Sun Hawk, the sign of my house.”

“Let me open it,” Danalia said. “If there is some dark magic, it will strike me dead instead of you.”

“Danalia,” Pattenia said. “Never.”

“It’s my duty,” Danalia said. “As your lady.”

“No,” Pattenia said, turning the scroll over in her hands.

They sat in silence, until Danalia groaned and kicked the floor. “I will go mad if you don’t at least see what it says!”

“I feel so strange. It is just a letter from some strange country girl, and yet as I hold it my fingers tingle. I don’t know why, but I feel that if I open this letter, nothing will ever be the same.”

“Do it. Open it.”

Pattenia tried to take a deep breath, but her corset kept her waist crushed, and she could only take a shallow, chest deep breaths. “No,” she said. The girl is a freak and a---

Just then there was a rapid tapping at the window, and looking up they saw a hawk there, flapping wildly against the wind, tapping its beak against the glass before flying off into the storm.

The girls looked at each other, eyes wide.

“Whaaaat?” Danalia said. “That was pretty much a major sign.”

“Um, yeah.”

“So, like, you have to read the letter. Right?”

“I do.” Pattenia untied the leather, broke the seal. And then she read:

My Prince;

I have seen a vision involving you, your future and the future of the Shattered Isles. If you would know this vision, if you would embrace your greatness and your destiny,

meet me in the Boys' Chapel on Saturday morning. Come only if you are ready to forget everything you think you know, to abandon the future your parents have planned for you, and to move forward and never back. If you cannot commit to these things, then accept your life as a wife and a mother and never again allow yourself to dream.

Tell no one. Keep this message our secret.

Your humble servant,

Actonia

*Never again allow yourself to dream.* That was what she feared most of all, and it unnerved her to see those words, which could have come from her own mind, written out by this strange girl who had suddenly appeared in her life. *A life without opportunity.* She felt she had to find out more, and possibly let little miss strange know that she was messing with the wrong person.

Pattenia stood up.

"What did it say?" Danalia said.

“I can’t tell you,” Pattenia said. “But it was... disturbing.”

“Pattenia...”

“I need to go,” Pattenia said. She wanted to be alone. To think. “I have work to do on my project.”

“Pattenia....?”

“Just trust me for now. The note is nothing.”

Danalia knew better than to push things, so she got up and followed her friend as she headed toward the main entrance, even as she felt a growing hostility toward this strange new girl who seemed to be coming between she and her friend.

Back in her room, Pattania threw herself on her bed and re-read the note, this time tracing her finger along the line that read “abandon the future your parents have planned for you.” She smiled held the letter to her chest, staring up at the constellations painted on her ceiling. They were a representation of the stars as they had aligned on the night of her birth, and right above her, painted right there in the stars, was the constellation known as The Sun

Hawk: her family's symbol, and the symbol of all who had ruled The Shattered Isles for these past many years.



## CHAPTER 5

Serren wiped the sweat from his brow, legs pumping, burning, as he ran up the steps to the Eternitus Ring, the sculpture depicting Maxis, the God of Man, holding a mighty circle of stone that represented the time circle that bound the universe. It stood as tall as the tallest spire in the castle—200 feet, and Maxis himself was a marvel, carved right out of the rock that had once been the peak of a small mountain, rippling with veins of copper and silver that shone in the morning sunlight even as gentle mists rose from the forests around the spire, twisting around it like serpents. The sun had just begun to crest the horizon, and the morning shimmered in its first golden light. High in the sky, the Day Moon hovered, cold and white.

Serren's feet clanked on the stone, the heavy, steel shod boots he wore adding 10 pounds to eat foot, and his shirt flapped open, his hard, sweat slicked chest rising and falling with each breath.

The steps circling the Great Ring Mountain were old and crooked, but he had run them so many times now he instinctively shifted from side to side, finding the proper footing, stepping over branches and vines that had grown over the stone. Serren's body wanted a rest. He could feel the burn in his lungs and his legs, but he just kept running, thinking to himself "the mind masters the muscle. Take one step, then another step, then another...." He began to lose himself again in his breath, pushing through the resistance. Glancing behind, he saw Asryn trailing behind, his face flushed and full of agony. Serren smiled, and ran harder, eager to reach the peak far ahead of his friend.

He thought about his father, telling him when he was still young, a boy, sitting and polishing his father's shield, while his father had been sharpening his sword, dragging a rock along its length, occasionally testing it with his thumb. "In making love and war," the King had said, "the secret is not speed but endurance. Understand?"

"Yes, Father," Serren had said.

The King had laughed. "You don't, but you will one day."

Serren understood now, though he did not always heed his father's advice when it came to love making. However, he had many times faced other boys in combat training, boys who came out shouting and furious, swinging their swords around and lashing out in a flurry of erratic lunges. Serren had learned to stay calm and parry, and parry, and parry, waiting until they tired, and then effortlessly defeating them.

In the Great Sixteens he would wear leather boots, and his feet would be as light as feathers after all this running in iron shoes.

Serren was now only ten steps from the peak, and he quickened his pace, as he had trained himself to do, leaping up the steps, running once around the great statue, and then slapping his palm against the carved name of Maxis, God of Man. He then clenched his fists and looking down on the palace and the city as it stretched out in terraces beneath him, he shouted, "Endurance!" His voice rolled back to him, and he grinned, feeling strong and proud and feeling that his father would be pleased.

He looked down to see Asryn now at a walking pace, one hand to his side, his face

pained with each and every step he took toward the peak. “Come on!” Serren shouted down at his miserable friend.

“I have a cramp.”

“It must be that time of the month!” Serren said. “Stop being a girl and run the rest of the way. Come on!”

“I can’t.... I...”

“Do it! Come on! Man up!”

Asryn swallowed and started to run, keeping his hand at his side and struggling to the top of the peak. As he did his own loop, Serren ran backwards in front of him, shouting, “Come on! Just a little more! Finish!”

Asryn ran the rest of the way, slapped the name, and then turned and clenched his fists. “Endur....” he started to shout, but then a stream of vomit launched itself from his mouth and splattered at his feet.

Serren burst out laughing. “Enura.... Raaaallppppphhhhh!”

Asryn bent over, had a second episode, then wiped his mouth and plopped onto his

butt. "That tasted better the first time," he said.

Serren patted him on the shoulder. "I'm proud of you, brother."

"Yeah."

"Even if you do run like a girl."

"What does that mean?" A voice said from behind, making them both jump.

Serren turned to see a red-haired, freckle faced girl in a green dress, standing there smirking at him. She held a bunch of roots and leaves in her hands. She stared into Serren's eyes, and then brazenly let her eyes fall to his bare chest, and then the rest of his body.

Serren had never had a girl ogle look at him like that, and when their eyes met again he smiled, showing all his teeth. "You're that new girl everyone has been talking about," he said, now surveying her body, letting his eyes linger on her breasts before rising up to meet her gaze. "Based on what people have said, I thought you would be more beautiful."

Actonia just stared back at him, an arrogant smirk on her face. “You’re prettier than I expected,” she said, stepping forward and invading Serren’s space. “Oh. And you smell good, too.” She put her palm on his chest and looked up at him.

Serren laughed, keeping his eyes locked on hers, surprised that a girl was challenging him like this. “Be careful,” Serren said. “Keep talking like that, and you’ll get a reputation.”

“Oh, no! A reputation? Whatever would I do?”

Serren and Asryn both burst out laughing at that, and Serren turned away, actually unnerved but eager to hide it.

“Nervous?” Actonia said. “I’m surprised because you have a reputation as a little bit of a slut.”

“Is that so?” Serren answered.

“You know it is. So, what do you say?” She stepped forward again, so their bodies were touching. “There’s a spot not far from here where we could be alone.”

“Stop embarrassing yourself,” Serren said,

“Intimidated?”

“Please,” Serren said, walking away from her.

“Now who’s running like a girl?”

Serren turned and now he wasn’t smiling. He looked at her slender arms, narrow shoulders, and then let his eyes rise to that pretty face. He loved girls, loved them for their soft, yielding bodies. But this girl was really pissing him off.

“I’m up for a quickie,” Asryn said, standing and stepping between the two. “Let’s go do it.”

Actonia patted him on the cheek. “You’re not the one I want.”

“You should probably go,” Asryn said. “It’s getting unpleasant.”

“And I thought it was just getting interesting,” she said, turning and walking away, but not down the winding stairs they had taken. She just walked straight down the west side of the peak, down away from the city and toward the forest.

Serren watched her, intrigued.

“She practically begged you for it,” Asryn said. “And yet you declined. I’m proud of you. I just wish Nemeria could have been here to see it.”

“She made it too easy,” Serren said. “Girls should be conquered.”

As Actonia reached the tree line, she wiggled her hips, then vanished into the forest.

“Damn,” Serren said. “I love women!” He punched Asryn on the shoulder. “Let’s go!” And with that he started down the hill, thinking about breakfast and what the new, red-haired girl would look like naked.

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Pattenia rubbed the sleep from her eyes as she made her way downstairs. She hadn’t slept well, her mind racing as she thought about the letter, the promise of freedom. Why did it have to wait for Saturday? And what could that weird girl possibly do to change things?

“Morning,” Annya said, smiling up at her daughter, glowing with the knowledge that



she, the girl she'd always known was special, had been chosen by the goddess.

"Mother," Pattenia said, sitting. "I had the... strangest day yesterday."

"Oh?" Annya said, thinking, *Is my teenager actually going to open up to me?* "What happened?"

"There's this weird new girl who's come to school-- I call her blood baby, because she's so *red*." She paused at the last line, amused at her own cleverness.

Annya struggled to keep her secrets. She wanted to blurt it all out, to tell Pattenia everything she'd learned, so to try and hide her excitement she said, "That's not a nice thing to say."

Pattenia rolled her eyes. "You know what? Never mind," she said, starting to eat her porridge.

"No," Annya said. "Come on. Tell me. You can't start and then stop. It isn't fair."

Pattenia considered. Shrugged. "Well, she gave me the strangest note. She claimed in

the note that she could save me from my marriage. Isn't that odd?"

"Very," Annya agreed, realizing she hadn't thought about the wedding and the other implications of what it would mean for Pattenia to be The Vessel. She tried her best to adopt an air of modest curiosity. "How does she propose to do that?"

"Well, she wouldn't say. She just told me to meet her this Saturday. It was all very mysterious and whooOOOooo. I think maybe she has a crush on me."

Annya hid her feelings. In a sense, it was true, though not the way Pattenia thought. "You should go."

"*You* think so?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, you're so eager to get rid of me, I wouldn't think you would want someone to save me from marriage."

The comment stung, but Annya resisted the urge to defend herself. "Suit yourself," she said. "But your brother wouldn't hesitate."

“Serren would only go if he thought he had a chance of being with her,” Pattenia said. “And what difference does it make what he would do?”

“None,” Annya said. “Just an observation.”

“Not a very astute one in my-”

“What are you hens cackling about?” Serren said, stomping into the room, grabbing a handful of bacon from the serving platter and stuffing it in his mouth. “Kittens and rainbows?”

Pattenia slit her eyes at him. “You’re such an idiot.”

Serren chuckled, slouching in his seat, grabbing a hard-boiled egg and popping it into his mouth. “I ran up the thousand steps and greeted Maxis at dawn,” he said. “That does work up a man’s appetite. Don’t let me stop you. Go on. I’m sure someone just had a baby, or maybe you were discussing hats?”

“I’m going,” Pattenia said, infuriated. “I am not in the mood.”

“Pattenia,” Serren called after her. “Why does it take three girls on their periods to make a bed?”

“Stop!” Annya said. “Enough.”

Serren looked at his mother, shrugged. “I’m just having a little fun.”

“It isn’t fun for us.”

Serren popped another egg into his mouth, gulped down some water. Smiled. “Mom, you look so beautiful today. Radiant!”

Annya smiled, laughed. “You’re impossible.”

“Yes! Exactly! I am The Impossible!”

## CHAPTER 6

Little Weedy Wensley sang as she moved among the trees, looking for herbs. She sang a song she'd learned from her mother, one that had been passed down from mother to daughter for hundreds of years, though Weedy didn't know much about that. She just liked to sing.

Morning comes and dew settles  
Watch out for the thorns and nettles  
Pluck the good and leave the rest  
Twigs are there for the robin's nest

Good works done in the morning sun  
Good works done in the morning sun  
Gotta do good when the day moon comes  
Good work done in the morning sun!

She hopped among the fallen trees, bearded with slippery green moss, and then spotting some Gnomes' Beard, she pumped her fist and hurried over, carefully plucking it from the branches of an ancient oak and putting it into her basket while whispering a prayer of thanks

to the goddess. Kettle Porter was having the worst time with her arthritis, and Gnome's Beard was just--

“Oh!”

Weedy froze as she found herself staring up at six tall, burly men. In the middle, the tallest stood, holding a lock of thick, braided rope in his hands. On his chest flashed the circle of Maxis, but within it the White Flame, sign of the Purgationist. “What are you up to this morning?” he said.

Weedy felt her body shake at the tone of the man's voice, and the cold, hard look in his eyes. She backed away, until her back came to rest against the tree. “Nothing,” she said.

The man looked at the basket on her arm. “Gathering herbs, I suppose,” he said.

Weedy glanced at the basket, shook her head no, but said, “Yes. For cooking.”

“For cooking?” The man said. “Gnome's Beard?” He stepped forward. “Drop the basket and hold out your arms.”

“I didn't do anything—“

“Drop the basket and show me your HANDS!”

Weedy slipped the basket off her arm, and for a moment she stood there, clutching it in her hands. Her mind raced with all the warnings she'd received through her nine years, warnings about the witch hunters, the danger, and most of all the one word her mother had spoken to her again and again about what to do if she ever came across them: RUN.

And yet, she stood there, looking up at the man, frozen.

“Drop the basket!”

Without even thinking, Weedy threw the basket at him and bolted, back, around the tree, and then into the forest, darting among the trees and brush, terrified by the shouts coming from behind her, ignoring the whipping of branches across her body, running into spider webs that tickled and then stuck to her face, running as fast as she could...

Thhhhp. Thhhhppp.

Glancing back, she saw the men running behind. Two of them had crossbows and

were shooting at her, the darts flying through the air in a blur... thhhpppp..... thhhpppp..... She was in an open section of the forest, thick, white trunks rising high above her, their branches forming canopies that sent light down in spackled rays, but she needed more brush, more bushes, places her little body could go that the big man could not.

She ducked under a fallen branch, rounded like an eyebrow raised in surprise, and then forward, forward, right toward the thick, leafy green ahead, someplace she could disappear, sneak, hide...

Thhhhhpppp.

A bolt struck the ground just ahead of her left foot, and with a shriek she turned to the right, running, glancing back, the hunters were getting closer, and one was circling ahead toward the green, cutting her off. Another bolt to the left, and she veered further right, running, just running, and she made a small noise, a terrified little yelp, because she was getting tired, and she was terrified—

Thhhhhpppp.



She veered right, and looking saw three men ahead, grinning, one of them holding a net, and then she veered left, and she saw the man who had run ahead of her, and she turned, and saw men all around her, closing in, slowly closing in, and they were all smiling except for the Purgationist Prime, who held his rope in his hands, snapping it, snapping it, the tendons in his forearms bulging.

“No,” Weedy said. “Please. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

The net fell over her head, and then she felt her feet jerked out from under her and her face slammed into the ground. She tasted leaves and loam, and spat it out, looking up at the big, black boots of Capithian.

“I name you witch,” he said. “And the sentence is death.”

## CHAPTER 7

As school ended, Serren, Asryn, Oper and Kencrick walked together out the door, talking about this and that, but then Asryn chucked Serren in the side and said, “Look who’s coming.”

Serren looked, and there was Actonia walking toward them, the same arrogant smirk on her face. She wore a loose, flowing dress that exposed her shoulders and white, freckled skin.

“She’s hot,” Oper said, leaning in and talking out of the side of his mouth.

“She wants you bad,” Asryn said.

“I know,” Serren said, speaking under his breath. “It’s kind of sad.”

He looked at Actonia, and today she wasn’t making eye contact, but looking past him, and it brought a little smile to his face. How quickly her confidence faded. He looked at her, the wide eyes, small nose, plump lips. It was the kind of face you could look at, admire, appreciate, and caress. You could hold a face

like that, running the back of your palm across her smooth, soft cheek while you kissed her. The face was all of those things, but it was not the face of anyone you would ever take seriously. *Come closer*, he thought. *And let's---*

“Tony!” Prett called, stepping past Serren.

Actonia waved, her face brightening. “Hello. So good to see you!”

The two hurried together, and Prett took her in his arms, and the hug lingered, and it was not something boys and girls did at school. A lot of the other guys noticed and looked on, stupefied.

“What the hell?” Serren said.

Asryn and the other guys laughed. “Looks like she moved on,” Asryn said.

“It’s kind of sad,” Oper said, and they all laughed some more.

“Fine, fine, go ahead, but I get more girls than any of you ever will.”

“Yeah, we know,” Oper said. “You never stop talking about it.”

They started walking again, passing Actonia and Prett. Serren looked away, pretending not to notice them.

“So, you were going to show me the gym where you train?”

“Yeah, come on,” Prett said.

“Are you really the best sword in the whole kingdom?”

“Yeah. I’m pretty much the best with any weapon.”

“What a liar,” Serren hissed, and stopped.

Asryn pushed him forward. “Save it for the tournament.”

“Would you like to see my sword?” Prett said.

“I’d like nothing more,” Antonia answered.

“She’s not really that good looking,” Serren said as they started down the stairs.

“Nah,” Oper said. “Not at all.”

“Shut up.”

Halfway down the stairs, Serren stopped. "I'm going to get her. You don't think I can, but just wait and see."

"Why are you so worried about the new girl?" Asryn said. "Who cares if she likes Prett?"

"I do," Serren said.

"Just let it go," Kencrick said. "Get into the flow of the right now."

"Do you even have a dick? I've never seen you with a girl."

"Come on," Kencrick said. "Don't take it out on me."

"Let's go bowling," Oper said. "They have the greens ready."

Serren looked back up the hill, back to where he could easily imagine what Prett and the Red Menace were getting up to. It made him so angry. "Who wants to bet me that I will have sex with that girl before the end of summer?"

All three guys looked away.

"Nobody? Come on."

“Okay,” Asryn said. “I’ll take your bet. What are the stakes?”

“If I win,” Serren said, “you have to run through the King’s Festival naked.”

The guys all laughed. “Fair enough. And if I win, you have to run through the King’s Festival---

“Naked, also. Very inventive.”

“Okay. Fine. Then you have to run through the festival --in a dress.”

Oper laughed.

“Be serious,” Seeren said, laughing.

“Are you afraid?” Asryn said.

“No. It’s just-- ridiculous. I can’t-- I mean, I’m the crown prince.”

“Well, I never thought I would see the day.”

“Fine,” Serren said. “I’m not going to lose anyway. Done.”

The boys shook hands.

“Okay. Let’s go,” Oper said. “Anyone have some leaf?”

They all shook their heads and mumbled “nah.”

Oper groaned. It would be a very long day.

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Pattenia paced outside the door to her father’s office, known to the world as The Royal Office of the One True King and Ruler by Divine Right of The Shattered Isles. To Pattenia, it was always just Dada’s Room. As she paced, Pattenia rehearsed the debate she intended to have with her father, playing both sides, making her arguments and then answering herself in the deepest voice she could muster. It seemed like he’d been in there for hours discussing who knows what with his ministers. She had half a mind to just storm in and tell them to get out, but with Pillory Pine standing sentry at the door in his floppy hat and brass buttons, she thought better of it.

Instead, she paced, and paced, and then finally the door opened, and two ministers backed out of the office, listening while the King talked. “Get equal numbers of bricks from both of the guilds, and just find something to do with the ones we don’t need. Let’s keep everybody happy. And I’ll send each one a cask of new wine. Right? Good?”

“Just one more thing, King Denae, the matter of the elves’ enclave...”

“Next time, Lord Hevershard. Next time, I am just about... Pattenia!”

The ministers turned, bowed.

“You know my daughter, of course?”

“Yes, your highness. You grow more lovely every year, my dear,” Hevershard said.

“Yes. A blossom” Caully added. “Such a glow to your cheeks!”

Pattenia thanked them for the compliments, then walked into her father’s office.

“What a surprise,” he said, giving Pattenia a hug, plunking himself down in his heavy, leather chair, behind his massive, oaken desk.



“Do you remember when I used to bring you to my meetings when you were a little girl?”

“Yes,” Pattenia said, smiling at the memory. “I used to take notes.”

“Thank god you grew out of that phase. You had your mother and I worried. I prayed on that one a great deal. It’s not natural for a child to take such an interest in the tedium of the state.”

“I think you once told me it wasn’t natural for anyone to take such an interest in the tedium of the state.”

King Garrick chuckled, filling his whale bone pipe, and lighting it up. “It’s a necessary suffering, and one that thankfully you will never have to endure.”

“Thankfully,” Pattenia said. “I think I really just wanted to be around you, to be a part of your life.”

The fire in the hearth crackled, and the room smelled sweet with the burning oak intermingling with the cherry aromas of Garrick’s tobacco. The sounds and smells seemed to envelope Pattenia, and she felt calm and comfortable.

“I’ve always wanted to be like you,” she said. “To make you proud.”

“And you have,” Garrick said, drawing on his pipe.

“You have said you believe in reason. Logic. Those stand as the pillars of Maxis’s temple.”

“If this is about your wedding...”

“Please. Let me at least make my case. I’ve given it a lot of thought, and I would just like a chance to be heard.”

“Very well,” Garrick said, sitting back.

“Good. Then, let me begin. First....”

Pattenia spoke, building her case carefully, offering a series of arguments to demonstrate why she should not have to marry, and how continuing on in an unmarried state was actually a more potent political tool than marriage. As she spoke, she grew excited, passionate. When she finished, she felt thrilled. She loved words and reason, and at school she was known as the best debater among all the girls.

King Garrick clapped his hands together three times. "You make a strong case, Pattenia. In fact, I would go so far as to say your logic is unassailable. Very impressive. "

"And so what is your answer, father? Will you let me remain free? At least for a few years?"

"Pattenia. I can't."

"Why not? You just said—"

"It's just the way it is."

"How can you claim to honor reason and logic and then answer me with something so irrational?"

"One day you will understand. You just have to accept things."

"But what if---"

"It's just the way it is," Garrick repeated.

Pattenia felt the frustration rising in her again, the anger, the bitterness, for all the years she'd heard that same stupid phrase, the ultimate expression of hare-brained nonsense coming from the lips of every man who'd ever claimed to be ruled by reason, and

who belittled women as illogical. “It’s just the way it is,” she said. “That’s it? That’s all you have to say to me?”

Garrick splayed his hands and showed her his palms. They were ridged with scars. “Do you know how many wars I’ve fought? How many men I’ve killed? I did it all for you, for my family and the kingdom, and I would fight a thousand more wars if that was what it took to make you happy. I would climb to the peak of the tallest mountain and tear down the sky.”

“I’m not asking you for any of that. I am asking you to do something that you could do sitting at your desk right now with nothing more than a quill, some ink and a piece of paper.”

“Pattenia, what do you want? What would you do if you didn’t marry?”

“I don’t know,” Pattenia said. “But I would like to find out.”

They both stared at the fire, remaining in the silence. “You’re very smart,” Garrick finally said. “Just like your mother.”

“Thank you,” Pattenia said, her hope rising.

“You’re too smart for a girl. Smart girls live lives of sorrow.”

“Why should it be a defect for a woman to be smart?”

“That,” Garrick said with a wicked twinkle in his eye, “is just the way it is.”

## CHAPTER 8

The next morning, as the Denae family dressed, the Witch Bells rang for the first time in nine years, signaling the capture of a Witch. Pattenia's breath caught in her throat. What if it were one of her friends? Danalia? Professor Falconette?

Dressed, she lifted her skirts and hurried down the hall to her mother's room, but her mother had already left, so Pattenia hurried down as well, rushing into the dining room calling "Mother" only to stop short when she saw Serren already there, tousled blonde hair in his face, slouching in his chair, eating bacon.

"What's the emergency?" Serren said.

"Nothing," Pattenia answered, giving her mother a look. "I had just wanted to... wish mother a good morning and ask how she slept."

"You hurried down here for that?"

"Serren," Annya said.

Pattenia sat. Her heart raced, but she tried to hide her anxiety, to act as if everything were normal. “The Witch Bell rang this morning,” Pattenia said. “It’s such a grim and dreadful sound.”

“Yes,” Annya said. “The sound of it chills me.”

“Why?” Serren said absently as he ate.

“Why? Because it always leads to some poor person’s public execution. It’s so horrible.”

“I hate seeing it,” Annya said. “It’s barbaric.”

“If they don’t want to be executed, they shouldn’t practice forbidden magic,” Serren said.

“How can you be so cold? They are people. They have families.”

“They are poop,” Serren said. “To be scraped off the Royal Boot.”

“That’s a horrible thing to say,” Pattenia said. “Horrible.”

“I hope school gets canceled for the execution,” Serren said.

Annya shook her head. “Let’s talk about something more pleasant.”

“That new girl is something more pleasant,” Serren said. “The red girl from the country? Do you know her, Pattenia?”

“We’ve met.”

“She seems like a wild, untamed creature.”

“She isn’t a creature. She’s a person.”

“Does everything have to be an argument with you?” Serren said, getting up and wiping his hands on his pants.

“Do you have to keep saying things just to annoy me?”

“Good day to you both,” Serren said with a mock bow.

As soon as he was gone, Annya said, “Privacy, please.” The servants left, closing the doors.



Annya switched chairs, leaning in close to Pattenia, their heads almost touching. “It’s Weedy.”

“Weedy?” Pattenia said. “She’s a child. What could she have done?”

“I don’t have all the details, but I listened in when the Purgationist Prime came to see your father. They intend to burn her.”

Pattenia covered her mouth. “They can’t mean it. She’s a harmless little girl.”

“The Lost Moon has unnerved Appollon. He knows the prophecies. He’s scared, and frightened men are dangerous men.”

Pattenia seethed. “We have to stop them. Save her.”

“I wish we could, but I don’t see how.”

“Of course not.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that you always just nod and smile and agree even when you know what’s happening is wrong. Women like you are just as much the problem as the men. You should have forced father to change these laws, to

end arranged marriages, to permit little girls to worship whomever they please. But what did you do? You married and had babies.”

“That isn’t fair.”

“But it’s true.”

“Oh! You don’t know. I tried to persuade your father--”

“Not hard enough.”

“You are getting very full of yourself,” Annya said. “I am the High Hekatin, voice of the goddess.”

“Then it’s high time for you to speak up.”

“And what? Find myself burned as well?”

“You’re the queen. They wouldn’t dare.”

“It didn’t protect Queen Reballia. It didn’t protect Lady Gretana. History is littered with the charred bodies of women who believed ‘they wouldn’t dare.’”

“So,” Pattenia said, standing up and looking down at her mother. “You’re going to let a little girl die?”

“I’ll speak with your father, but you? Keep quiet. These are dangerous times.”

“No,” Pattenia said, walking to the door and looking back over her shoulder. “I won’t.” And she let herself out, slamming the door.

*Children!* Annya closed her eyes. Vessel of the goddess? Vessel of something. Then, took a breath and prayed. “Goddess, give me strength. Let me love and accept my infuriating children, even though they want to drive me insane.”

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When Pattenia arrived at school, Danalia at her side, she found the hallways buzzing with excited talk about the Witch Bells. Rumors flew, with many of the girls expressing a kind of cold, vicious glee as they speculated who might have been caught, and what it would be like to see her burn. Pattenia and her fellow hekatin shared glances, giving each other courage, and when lunch ended and they all headed back to the chapel, glancing back nervously, more wary now of the danger.

The girls took their seats, and Professor Falconette entered, looking stern. The room grew quiet. Professor Falconette took her place at the podium, looking down, searching for words. “These are deadly days,” she said. “The Lost Moon has returned, and the war between Progenita and Maxis has begun.”

“War?” Danalia whispered.

“Yes,” Falconette said. “War. You must all understand—we—must all understand, that we are all in grave danger. Primary Appollon and the Priests have seen the Lost Moon, and they know what it foretells. They will not see the goddess return, and they will do whatever it takes to stop her—and us.”

“What can we do?” Pattenia said. “How can we help our sister?”

Falconette frowned. “For now, we can pray.”

“That’s it? When have our prayers ever been answered?”

“That is it. For now. Do not publicly speak out against Appollon. Do not speak out against the Witch Hunter. They are looking for witches now, for what they will call traitors and

practitioners of blood magic, and they will burn those they even suspect of worshipping Progenita. Now, join me in prayer, and let us pray to accept the will of the goddess.”

“More like the will of Appollon,” Pattenia whispered to Danalia

The prayers began, the girls bowed their heads. Pattenia glanced around, and a question formed in her mind. *Where was Actonia?*

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Weedy squatted in the corner of a small cell, her arms bound and mouth gagged, inside a rune-scrawled circle. Her eyes were hollow and bruised from crying. She was scared and kept calling through the gag for her mother. “Great Maxis,” Garrick Denae said, looking at the poor girl, “you’ve really done it this time.”

Primary Appollon rubbed his chin. “Purgationist Capithian. I send him out to find me a witch to burn. Should I have to specify it be a misshapen and unlikable old crone with no family?”

“Yes. Or a madwoman of the forest. Why did you ring the bells? Now the whole town expects a burning. “

“We have to give them one,” Appollon said.

“Who?” Garrick answered.

Appollon nodded toward Weedy.

“Are you mad?”

“She was caught singing a Witch Song in the forest, gathering herbs to practice blood magic.”

“Burning this child will only turn the people against us.”

“No. It will strike fear into them, and they will come forward and report their neighbors, even their own kin, if that means saving themselves.”

“Is that what you want? A return to weekly burnings in the public square like in the dark days?”

“If that is necessary.”

“What kind of man are you?”

“A man who serves his god. Do I need to remind you? The Blood Moon has risen. The Blood Queen returns. The hekatins rise, and they will usurp your throne, throwing you and your family down in disgrace. It is written that your son--”

“Don’t try to frighten me with those fairy tales.”

“Fairy tales? Don’t you see the Blood Moon in the sky each night?”

“I do,” Garrick said. “But I don’t fear it, nor any ancient prophecy.”

“The law states any found guilty of Progenita worship face death.”

“I know the law.”

“Then this witch must burn. “

“Shut up,” Garrick said.

Appollon started to speak, but Garrick raised his fist, and the priest stepped back, cowed. “You’ll have your burning,” he said, and heard the girl make a small, yelping sound that made him flinch. “Never put me in this position again.”

“As you command,” Appollon said.

“Does the child need to be trussed up and gagged like that?”

“The wardens fear her spells. They will not want her free to cast her enchantments.”

“She’s a little girl.”

“Your highness, I know I have tried your patience, but please let me just say one more thing by way of caution.”

“Say it, but be brief.”

“Do not underestimate the power of the goddess. Look to the sky. Fairy tales are coming true.”

Garrick climbed from the dungeons, heavy with the weight of his crown, murmuring to himself. He had come to the Church through the narrow, damp tunnel that connected it to the palace – the King’s Tunnel – but now he wanted air, time to think, and something to clear his head. He didn’t believe in the moon, but he should have seen how it would rattle people, and now he kicked himself for failing to meet with Appollon and others to ensure the peace of the kingdom remained



undisturbed by fairytales and stories of a goddess. Of course, there were witches. Let them make their salves and potions, cure the rashes on their neighbors' backsides. He had put a stop to the hunting and burning, and all the lands of The Shattered Isles had prospered. Why did Appollon have to stir things up again with hunts and burnings?

Up ahead rose the palace, its white walls and spires bathed in the light of the two moons. Light flickered inside some windows, and it called to him, speaking of calm and peace, of time with his wife and family. His children were growing up. Pattenia would marry in a month, and she would move into a new home with her husband. Serren would be moving to his own compound with his wife in a year. Then it would be just he and Annya, as it had been so many years ago.

He looked up at the Witch Moon, with that pale blue shimmering eye looking down on him, and he felt guilty at the decision he'd made, thinking of the girl's parents, how they'd feel. How he'd feel.

It was times like this that he suffered under the crown. But that was his doom.

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Even as King Garrick gazed up at the moon, that same moon hovered over Gynica Village, some miles to the north and east. A tiny hamlet of cottages with white washed walls and sod roofs, plumes of white smoke rising from crooked chimneys, Gynica nestled among the hills of northern Denae, not far from the King's Springs, fabled for the curative power of their frothy, salty waters. Pilgrims seeking cures for aching bones or itchy rashes passed through the village, especially during the spring and summer, and they all wanted to stay at Ostler's Inn, famed for the steaming meat pies stuffed with beef, potatoes and peas that had been the specialty of the Ostler women for generations, and which were said to aid as much in the healing as the springs themselves.

Hunter Eastway had grown up in the village, with the pies, and was known about the village as a generally good man with a pleasant disposition-- unless he took too much drink. When Hunter drank, he turned mean.

Tonight he had drunk and he had turned mean, and found himself tossed out of the Inn, landing on his face in the street. He got up, shouted some curses at old man Ostler, and began to stumble along the dirt road that led through the village and East, to his own little cottage. As he walked, he looked up at the Witch Moon. The light hurt his eyes, and he cursed it and wished things could go back to the way they had been, the way they were supposed to...

*What's this?* A thick, white fog seemed to rise from the earth and swirl around him. The fog felt cold... and he shivered... and turned in a circle because he had suddenly lost all sense of direction. Squinting through his bleary, drink-muddled eyes, he looked for a tree, a building... anything that could...

He felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Hey!"

Spinning, he saw only the murky mist, pale and white. *I must be losing...* He felt a hand touch him on his back, and he spun again. "Come on," he said. "Stop messing around."

Cold, dry hands covered his eyes, and he shouted, jumping, spinning, falling to the ground. He heard laughter, and now he felt his heart race, and he pushed himself to his feet. "I'm going to find you and beat you senseless!"

"I'm right here."

Hunter turned, and looked up at a tall woman with alabaster skin and flowing white hair, and the deepest green eyes he'd ever seen. Those eyes were hard and glassy and full of hunger."

Hunter swallowed and started to back away, shaking his head.

The woman licked her lips and followed, staring at him, salivating.

"Stay away," Hunter said, moving faster.

"I want you," the creature said.

Hunter stopped, planted his feet. "Now you're making me mad," he said.

The creature came up to him, smiling. "I don't know what anger means, but I would lick the fear from your flesh."

Hunter started to raise a fist, and the woman smiled, eagerly, and he turned and ran. He could hear her running behind him, giggling, but looking back he saw only the mist. Ahead, he saw only the mist, but he could feel her everywhere. He stumbled and fell, tried to run and fell again, and then he felt her on him, grabbing him, throwing him onto his back and straddling him, and when he opened his mouth to shout for help she took on the shape of the mist and flowed into his mouth. He bucked, arching his back, and moaned as she filled his belly, and he closed his eyes, tears rolling down his cheeks, and the world went black.

## CHAPTER 9

As King Garrick approached the family dining room, he paused outside the door to take a deep breath, then swaggered into the room bellowing, “Where is my supper? I am starv--”

Pattenia and Annya glared at him. Serren sensed the chill and immediately sat up. Garrick’s heart felt heavy, and he sat, and when the girl poured him some water, he drank and then set his cup down. “Even the King,” he said. “Is not above the law.”

“Father,” Pattenia said, feeling like he’d just punched her in the gut.

Annya glanced at Pattenia, then turned to her husband. “There must be something you can do. Surely.”

Serren shoveled some spinach into his mouth to keep from talking.

Garrick shook his head. “I’m sorry.”

“She’s just a child,” Pattenia said.

A breeze blew in through the great, double patio doors that lined the room, making the candles and lamps flicker. Outside, the Lost Moon hung in the sky, a great, golden ball.

Garrick looked at the ceiling, stabbing the table with his middle finger, then brought his attention back to his family. “Some nights,” he said. “I do not sleep. I see the bloody faces of men I have sent to their deaths. Or boys. Most often it is Brilan Gaunefer, fifteen years old, younger than Serren. He didn’t even have a hint of beard, and I held him as he choked to death on his own blood, coughing and spitting, his eyes pleading with me to do something, to allow him just one more day in the sun. I told him, “You will know glory on the Island of Forever, and wear the mantle of one who died in battle.” He shook his head, no, no, no, and as the light went out of his eyes they were filled with terror.”

“I have sent men and children to their deaths. I take no pleasure in it, and this soul, too, will haunt me. Every peace is bought with blood.”

Silence. No one moved. The king's eyes had grown wet, and he covered his mouth, staring off into space now, lost in distant memory.

Finally, Annya said, "Let us all pray for our King tonight."

"Yes," Pattenia said.

"Of course," Serren said, his heart full of pride, in awe of his father, of what the man had done and endured. He hoped he could be such a man one day, such a king, such a man.

They resumed eating, their knives and forks clacking against fine, porcelain plates. When they finished eating, Garrick's face grew bright, and he smiled and said, "Pattenia, you grow more lovely by the day."

"Thank you, father."

"Serren, you look strong and fit. Ready for the sixteens."

"Thank you, father."

"And my wife," he said at last, turning to Annya. "You are always my strength."



When Pattenia finished eating, she asked to be excused and went up to her rooms. She paced, twisting her hair, thinking of Weedy, yes, but also of her father and what he'd said, of how he'd spoken of the dying boy, his voice and face aching with sorrow. He'd never opened up like that before. She'd never seen him so emotional, and had never loved him more than in that moment. Her body ached with her need to be like him, to prove her own strength, to live in her own passion.

She went into her studio, then, lighting a lamp, into a closet. Pushing aside a row of old dresses, she looked down at two stacks of canvases. Kneeling, she began to look through them. The first few were landscapes, boring paintings meant to make anyone who stumbled upon these works think they were just nonsense, but then she came to one that made her feel happy and sad and heartbroken as it brought back all the great and powerful feelings she'd felt when she'd painted it back when she was twelve and living in her pain. She remembered the day she'd started the picture--

She'd been outside on the upper porch, watching a great hunting party assemble in the yard. Dogs barked, and men shouted, and

there was a great deal of running about as servants packed a cart with hams and sausages and casks of wine, and the men checked and rechecked their bows. Then, a trumpet had sounded, a blast that thrilled through her whole little body-- until she looked and saw her father on his great horse, Gillifrey, and riding with him was her little brother Serren, going on his first hunting trip with their father.

The tears had come, again, and as she watched the party head out into the golden morning mist, she felt-- an ache that seemed unbearable. She felt her mother's hand on top of her head, and then running through her hair, pulling her to her mother's leg. "Snippet," her mother had said. "Oh. It's okay. Your father will be back in a few days."

"I know," Pattenia had said. "It's not that."

"Then what?"

The words had come pouring out of her, words to express thoughts and feelings she had felt as long as she could remember, but words she'd never been able to speak: "Why does daddy love Serren more?"

Annya had knelt and put her finger to Pattenia's chin, making her look to meet her mother's eyes, and then Annya had said, "I'm sorry. I know it hurts. But, Serren is the boy."

She'd gone to her room. She gotten out her pencils and she'd sketched an image, one that had thrilled her, and scared her, and made her feel proud and ashamed at the same time, so she'd hidden it under her bed. But the next day, she'd pulled it out, and she'd begun to paint over the sketch, adding color and detail, and the next day she'd finished it, and she'd put it in the closet to dry, and then she'd buried it away, pulling it out now and then over the years, as she did now:...

Dogs barked. Men pointed and shouted. A unicorn reeled, hooves in the air, mouth foaming, an arrow having pierced its heart. King Garrick stood in the lower right corner, applauding, and Pattenia stood at the center, bow in hand, celebrating her deadly shot. Only in this image she had a small beard, and she was a boy, and her father loved her.

She smiled, looking at it now. It struck her as childish, silly. She'd been so hurt, so full of drama. Of course, her father loved her. She knew that now.

Just not as much as he would always love Serren.

She began to look through the other sketches and paintings. Her in a suit of grimy chainmail armor, slashing at pirates at her father's side, with a great sword, with a bow. Sitting on a rock with a fishing rod in britches and a loose-fitting man's shirt. She smiled, remembering how for a time she'd come to hate being a girl, how much she despised dresses and fancy hair and all the things that made up the lives of a girl, but she knew now she didn't really want to be a boy, she just wanted to free and loved and valued like one.

She went to her desk and fished out the letter. It was Friday. Tomorrow she would meet with Actonia, and maybe everything would change forever.

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Serren found himself on his patio, smoking dream leaf, looking at the Witch Moon, big and round and golden. He took one last puff from his pipe, tapping it out on the stone railing. Slightly to the left and below the moon's center, he saw the rills and ridges and

shadowy image that people called The Eye, but as he looked at it he smiled. *It really looks more like a nipple*, he thought, basking in the light of that strange new moon. Thinking about nipples made him think of Miss Basket, and he decided to see if he could find her and get her in a closet somewhere for a quick “nap.” The girl did have a glorious bosom, and she always seemed up for some fun.

*Of course she’s up for some fun*, Serren thought as he headed out into the palace and down to the kitchen, where he figured she might be drying plates or doing whatever she did. She’s a commoner and I’m a royal. It’s a treat for her.

Yes, Serren thought. *It is good to be almost king. All the benefits and none of the responsibilities.*

## CHAPTER 10

Danalia and Pattenia walked together to the girls' school. The Purgationists were out, even on a Saturday, standing on corners and in alleyways, staring. The sight of them made Pattenia's skin crawl. They turned their hooded heads, watching her. What cowards, she thought, to terrorize and capture a little girl.

Yet, they scared her.

When they arrived at school, Danalia waited in the cafeteria, and Pattenia went on for her meeting alone.

When Pattenia pushed open the door to the chapel, she found Actonia on her knees, praying to the image of the goddess, Progenita. Pattenia lingered near the door, watching Actonia, whose face glowed with radiance as she prayed.

Finally, Actonia opened her eyes. "My prince," she said. "I am overcome with joy that you choose to meet me."

"Why?" Pattenia said. "Who are you? What's this all about?"

“Let me introduce myself properly,” Actonia stood. “I am the Visikas of the Progenita. I receive visions of possible futures from the goddess.” She held out her hand.

Pattenia shook her head. “Girls don’t shake hands.”

Actonia curtsied, a smirk on her face. “Will you sit with me?”

“Yes,” Pattenia said. “Visions? Of me?”

“Let me tell you directly and without further hesitation. You are the chosen vessel of the goddess, the one foretold in our sacred text who will restore the goddess to her rightful place and usher in the second age of woman.”

“Me?” Pattenia said, shaking her head. She had read the sacred books and knew the prophecies, but the idea that she would be the goddess’s vessel struck her as absurd. “I am not that devout,” she said. “Half the time I don’t even remember to pray before I go to bed.”

“That doesn’t matter. Progenita has chosen you. You only need to accept her invitation.”

“How do I ‘accept her invitation’?”

“When the time comes, you must seize the throne. Become King.”

“Seize the throne? But my brother is next in line. The only way I could...? No. You aren’t asking me to kill my brother?”

“No, but if you are willing, the goddess will deliver the throne to you without any harm coming to your brother.”

“How? The throne goes to the first-born male.” Pattenia felt a pang of fear as the thought suddenly occurred to her, and she spoke it out loud. “Is Serren going to die?”

“In my visions, after you rise to king, Serren enjoys a long and happy life.”

“But how?”

This may seem shocking, even impossible, but what if through magic Serren were to become a girl? Your little sister? Then, she would have no claim to the throne as long as you lived.”

Pattenia laughed, picturing Serren as a girl, in a dress. “Serren? Little sister? Is it even possible?”

Actonia nodded. “The goddess grows



stronger by the day, and the force of her magic swells with her. I have foreseen your brother reshaped into a lovely girl, princess of the realm, sitting at her dressing table as her handmaid fixed her hair. I have seen you sitting on your throne, wearing your father's crown."

"You said no harm would come to her—him," Pattenia said. "But being turned into a girl would be worse than death for my brother."

"That would be her choice. She is a silly, frivolous person now in her male manifestation. She is not suited to be king. She could be happier as a girl if she chooses to be."

Pattenia stared at Actonia, and then a bitter laugh burst from her. "Lunacy. Me? King? Queen, I mean. The Vessel of the goddess? My brother a girl-- and happy?" She started laughing, shaking her head. "I am sorry, but you are mad."

"Pattenia. To restore the rule of woman? To restore the goddess? Don't you see the opportunity being offered to you?"

“I don’t,” Pattenia said, standing. “I don’t at all. Do you really think it would be that easy? Poof-- Serren’s a girl, now make me queen? You’re talking about treason. The Lords would never stand for it.”

Actonia grabbed her wrist. “You can change your fate! I know you do not want to marry that boy you call The Beetle. You could be King, Pattenia. King. And then you could marry whoever you wanted to, or no one at all. Don’t you want that?”

Pattenia shook her head, surprised at herself. “I don’t think I do,” she said. “What you’re saying is ridiculous. Now, take your hand off me-- or lose it.”

Actonia removed her hand, smiling. “You speak forcefully. Like a king, my Prince.”

Pattenia stood, laughing, and left. Actonia watched her leave, smiling. It was exactly as she had dreamed it would be.

Pattenia walked into the cafeteria, giggling and shaking her head. Danalia leapt to her feet. “What happened? Can you tell me?”

“Nothing,” Pattenia said. “That girl is mad. All she did was jabber.”

“What did she say?”

“She told me she could make me King, and turn Serren into a girl.”

“Whaaaat?”

“Exactly. Let’s go.”

## CHAPTER 11

The children cried out as the door to their hut crashed into the room in splinters. Wailing, they turned and ran to their mother, who stood, grabbing an iron skillet.

Three Purgationists stormed in, followed by Capithian, head of their order. The three surrounded the mother and her children, who now clung to her dress, their eyes wide with terror.

“You are mother to the witch girl, Weedy?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Take the children outside,” Capithian ordered.

“Don’t. Please--”

The Purgationists grabbed the children by their arms and dragged them away from their mother, screaming. She swung her skillet, slamming it into a witch hunter’s shoulder, and there was a ringing as it bounced off his armor. He backhanded her, knocking her to

the ground, where she lay, watching in horror as her children were dragged from the room, crying, “mother!”

Capithian grabbed a stool and carried it over to where the woman lay, then sat. “On your knees,” he said.

“What? Why?”

“ON YOUR KNEES!”.

The woman complied, trembling.

“Tell me what I want to know. Your children will be returned to you unharmed.”

“Yes. Anything.”

“The Vessel of the Goddess. Who is she? Where can I find her?”

“I don’t know.”

“Liar! You are a witch. Your daughter is a witch.. Name the vessel.”

“I don’t know. They don’t tell me such things. Please.”

“They. Who are they? Name them.”

“I don’t know.”

Capithian looked at the fire. At the poker, glowing hot and orange in the flames. He smiled.

Outside the hut, the children wept as their mother screamed.

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“An Effenen,” Garrick said, chuckling. “The people of the village will not even leave their houses at night for fear of her.”

The family had decided to take their breakfast outside on the veranda, since the weather was so nice. “It must be a local crank, playing with the simple people,” Serren said.

“One of my own men says he saw her,” Garrick said. “Just like in the stories. Tall and lithe, as pale as moonlight and as silent-- walking in a mist that surrounded her up to her knees and followed along with her as she wandered.”

“So, you really believe this?”

“I do. And I am going to hunt it.”

“Father,” Pattenia said. “You can’t.”

“What a prize it would be to add to my trophy room. An Effenen’s head. Can you imagine?”

“They are said to be dangerous,” Pattenia said.

*Uh, oh*, Annya thought. “They can’t be all that dangerous. You should just send your knights to deal with the creature.”

“Actually,” Pattenia said, “in the old stories the Effenen once killed six knights, leaving them hanging from the trees. They are said to be very dangerous. To men.”

“All the more reason to hunt it down.”

“But you might get hurt.”

Garrick laughed. “Don’t worry about me. I have hunted the most dangerous game in all the Isles.”

“But, father-”

“Pattenia, your concern is touching, but do not concern yourself with this. I am sick of

listening to ministers drone. I need a good hunt.”

“Pattenia,” Annya said, interrupting her daughter before she could speak again. “Would you please come with me for a walk in the garden? It is a beautiful day.”

“I’m not much in the mood for walking.”

“Please,” Annya said, giving her ‘the look.’ “I want some company.”

“Very well,” Pattenia said, getting up and giving her father a kiss on the cheek.

As the women walked away, Serren said, “When do we leave?”

“I leave in the morning. You stay here and be my eyes and ears.”

“I can’t miss out on this hunt, of all hunts. Such rare prey.”

Garrick chuckled. “I know, and in different times I wouldn’t consider going without my son at my side. But these are strange times, with the Witch Moon and Appollon gone mad with his pyromania. I need you here in case something happens while I’m gone.”



“But Mother will be here. She can be your eyes and ears.”

“You’ll find as you get older that women – and I love your mother more than you can know – but women are like children. They are ruled by their imaginations and their emotions, and they see ghosts and phantoms and are always fearful and nervous of imagined dangers. And it is fine for them, and we love them for their weakness, but we cannot rely on them any more than we would rely on the reports of a toddler who talks of seeing fairies. You are a man now, and you will need to protect the women in your life. They need a strong man to guide them, to take them by the hand.”

“So, maybe you could stay behind and let me go hunt the Effenen.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because,” Garrick said, “I’m the King.”

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In the garden, Annya took Pattenia’s arm and pulled her close, talking softly so as

not to be overheard. "Warning your father of the dangers only makes him more determined to hunt the Effenen," Annya said.

"But he doesn't understand what he's doing."

"The only way to make him not want to do it is to make it seem trivial and silly. I'll talk to him some more. See if I can convince him this hunt is beneath him. Get him to go hunt a lynx or something else with big teeth."

"If it truly is an Effenen, he faces grave danger."

"Go to Ollia, see if there are some spells or wards we can give him to protect him from the Effenen's powers."

"Yes. I am sure we must have something, but then-- he will kill her. The Effenen are not evil, they--"

"I know," Annya said. "They are protectors, servants of the goddess. I am delighted to see them return. They only prey upon bad men. I will try to dissuade him, set him on some other course, but you get yourself over to school and see if you can devise some protection for

him. Take Danalia, and be careful. The Purgationists are always watching.”

“I know.”

“Oh, by the way. You met Actonia today. What did she have to say?”

“She’s a raving loony,” Pattenia said.  
“Nothing she said made any sense.”

Annya stopped, surprised. “I heard she told you that the goddess had chosen you as her vessel.”

“Yes, her vessel-- who told you?”

“Ollia and Actonia. It came up.”

“Why are you always meddling in my life?”

“Pattenia, being chosen as the Vessel is a great honor. You should be excited.”

“Mother, she told me my fate was to turn Serren into a girl. Do you want another teenage daughter?”

“Serren a girl? No one mentioned that to me.”

“So, is that what you want?”

“No,” Annya admitted. “That’s not-- it’s strange.”

“Well, then, forget about the vessel because it came along with that bit of madness.”

Annya didn’t know what to think. “We’ll talk more later. See what you can find to protect your father.”

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Pattenia found Danalia, and the two of them went over to the school, where there was a small library as well as materials for conjuring. They spent the afternoon pouring through the dusty old books and scrolls, learning a great deal about a great many subjects that did not have to do with Effenen as happens in the course of research. But they found much lore on the Effenen as well, and soon they found themselves going through the jars and boxes in the storage room, gathering the materials they needed, and then twining them together, licorice root, rose vines with red buds, and dried hawthorn berries, to form a bracelet. Afterward, the two girls made prayers to the goddess, and Pattenia nodded. “This will protect him.”

Returning to the palace, Pattenia gave the bracelet to Garrick and asked him to wear it, for her. "It will protect you."

Garrick's heart went out to his daughter. So emotional and superstitious. He slipped the bracelet onto his wrist and said, "Thank you for this, Pattenia." Then he gave her a kiss on the head and wished her goodnight.

In the morning, as the hunting party prepared to make way, Serren wandered out to bid his father a good hunt. He saw the rosebuds on his father's wrist and chuckled. "That looks like something a twelve-year-old girl would wear," Serren said.

"Your sister gave it to me," Garrick said, rolling his eyes. "A charm against the Effenen's power."

"More like a charm against having balls," Serren said. "Next she will braid roses in your hair! Hunt well and bring home trophies!"

"Indeed," Garrick said. He sent the signal, the trumpets sounded, and the party rode off to hunt. As he rode Garrick looked at the bracelet on his wrists. Serren was right. It did

look ridiculous. He slipped it off his wrist and shoved it into his saddle bags.

## CHAPTER 12

Garrick and his crew rode off, making their way along the roads and paths of the kingdom, drinking in the air and freedom. At night they made camp, and Garrick and his men gathered in a circle around a great fire, where they drank and talked of past hunts and drunks and women. *This, Garrick, thought. This. Why couldn't life be one long hunting trip, free of daughters and weddings and hekatins and weaselly priests?* He raised his horn, frothing with ale, and shouted, "To the hunt!"

The men bellowed in response, while above them the Witch Moon glowed. Eventually, they slept, and in the morning, rose to make their way the rest of the way to Gynica, to hunt the Effenen.

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Back in the city, the Purgationists piled good, dry wood in a pyre around an old, rotten tree trunk. "This will burn," Capithian said,

smelling a piece of the lumber, feeling it in his hands. "We'll have a good fire."

The day passed. People walked by the pyre in the King's Square all day, some grinning, others looking away in disgust. By the time the sun had moved across the sky and begun its descent, people had started to gather, staking out their spots, wanting to have the best views of the burning. Merchants had set up wagons with food and drink. A street performer breathed fire, while another told fortunes, and a third danced, alone, her eyes vacant.

Queen Annya and Pattenia arrived and took their seats on either side of the King's chair, which would remain empty. "You don't have to be here," Annya said. "Why not go home? Spare yourself?"

"I don't want to hide from this," Pattenia said.

Trumpets sounded. A group of Purgationists entered the square, the burning emblem on their robes blazing. As the sun set, a cool breeze blew through the square, and the whole space began to glow with the flickering orange torchlight. Capithian came



next, leading Weedy by a rope tied around her hands. She looked thin, as if they'd been starving her, and her eyes were hollow.

"Oh," Pattenia said, her heart going out to the poor little girl. "Can't you stop this?"

"I cannot," Annya said. "It's not too late for you to leave."

"No. I need to face this."

\*\*\*

In Gynica, Jucken, one of the king's men, walked alone on one of the village paths. The King and his crew were outside the Inn, waiting. Jucken walked, looking up at the sky, the Witch Moon rising behind the trees stretching across it like skeletal fingers. He did not feel afraid, but bored and annoyed. "Why do I have to be the bait?" he murmured. "I always get stuck with the lousy duty, like that time I had to clean the puke bucket even though---"

He noticed the mist- thick, unworldly, floating along the ground up to his ankles. Ahead, he could see it billowing toward him, and turning he saw it approaching from that side as well. His heart started to race. He'd

been ordered to wait until he saw it, but he brought the whistle to his lips and blew, as hard as he could, even as the mist surrounded him and he lost all sense of direction. Drawing his sword, he spun, and spun, waiting for it to appear, blowing and blowing on his whistle, thinking *help!*

Garrick and his men heard the whistle and leapt onto their horses, laughing, and charged off.

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Weedy was tied to the post. Capithian held an iron ring of keys before him, a sacred symbol of Maxis, and called out in a loud voice that echoed through the square:

Those who seek the diseased goddess  
Must find themselves cleansed in fire  
Pestilentia will not rise in filth  
She will not feast on the flesh

She will not spread her sickness  
And those who seek to raise  
Her unclean spirit into our midst  
Must burn for the good of the world

“Take me instead,” a woman cried out, pushing through the crowd. “I am her mother. I am the unclean, not her.”

“Mother,” Weedy said, coming out of her stupor.

Purgationists moved to hold her back, but she broke free and threw herself at Capithian’s feet. “I confess,” she shouted. “I am a witch! I worship Pestilentia! It was I who corrupted my daughter’s soul.”

Capithian gestured, and his men grabbed the woman and pulled her to her feet, holding her arms. “Make her watch,” he said.

“Please! No!”

“Mother!” Weedy called out again, smiling now. “Mother! I’m up here!”

“Stop it,” Pattenia said. “Mother, please.”

“I can’t,” Annya said.

“Goddess,” Pattenia murmured. “Please. Spare her.”

Capithian grabbed a torch and waved it in the air, the flames roaring and swelling. The crowd roared its approval. Weedy’s mother screamed, but Weedy just kept smiling, and said, “Finally. “

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Cold and pale and beautiful in her terror, the Effenen materialized from the mist, and approached Jucken, a chill, hungry smile on her face, but something else in her eyes. “You’re just a boy,” she said. “You’ve done no harm.”

“Stay away!”

Horse’s hooves thundered all around them, but the Effenen ignored the sound. Then Garrick appeared in the mist, swinging his sword and slashing across her back. Feeling pain, she hissed, and turned and ran. Garrick shouted a cheer and made chase.

The other men had become lost as soon as they entered the mist, their horses rearing up in terror, and as the mist cleared they saw Jucken standing there, bewildered.

“What happened?” he asked.

The men got off their panicked steeds, trying to calm them. “There was a mist, and we charged into it, and then I heard some kind of shriek and-- nothing.”

“I saw her,” Jucken said. “The Effenen. She came out of the mist. Then, the king appeared, and she ran.”

The men looked around. Where was the king?

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Capithian held the torch to the bottom of the pyre, and the flames took hold, catching on the wood, spreading fast, leaping, crackling, white smoke rising into the night, the sweet smell of burning oak filling the square.

Weedy's mother screamed and screamed as the flames rose and began to lick at Weedy, at her small little body. Capithian raged and shouted. "I consign you to the flames, you unclean thing. I consign you in the name of Maxis, all powerful ruler of the world and the heavens!"

The flames rose, and the crowd could only see Weedy's shadow. She seemed to be writhing, twisting, and then she called out, "It tickles!"

Capithian stepped back, looked around. Some kind of trick, he felt. Someone throwing voices.

The fire popped and surged, brighter and brighter. Then they heard Weedy giggling. She rose up, floating above the flames in the burlap robe, but fire seemed to dance in her hair and eyes. The crowd gasped and started to back away, some turning and running. "Mom!" Weedy called as she rose into the sky, cinders sparking from her. "I'm flying!"

Her mother covered her mouth, now filled with joy and sorrow, but no longer fear.

Weedy shook her head and burning embers rained down, causing the crowd and the

Purgationists to scatter. “Run!” Weedy said. “Run!”

Weedy’s mother looked around and realized the Purgationists no longer held her. She turned and ran, ran back into the crowd and into the night, glancing back and up, watching as that tiny little flame rose up and vanished into the night sky.

Capithian stood, stunned, staring at the fire, and the burning girl rising into the sky, and felt very afraid.

“Another sign,” Annya said to Pattenia, rising. The Palace Guard was forming a circle around them, ushering them back toward the palace.

“I can’t believe it,” Pattenia said, looking up at the spark rising into the sky, like a shooting star in reverse. “Mother, what’s happening?”

Annya took Pattenia’s arm and whispered, “I’m starting to believe -- Progenita has returned, Pattenia. She really has.”

“Wait until father hears about this,” Pattenia said. “I can’t wait to see his face.”

King Garrick chased the Effenen out of the village and through the hills. Finally, he saw her flee into an opening at the base of a large hill. Hopping off his horse, he drew his sword and, a torch in his free hand, stormed into the tunnel. It was dark and small, so he had to crouch, but at the end he came into a large cavern dripping with stalactites glittering with silvery minerals. The Effenen sat on what looked like an earthen throne, and when she saw him, she cocked her head curiously, and said, "You are no longer protected."

"What?" King Garrick said as a thick mist began to rise about him.

"The charm is not with you," The Effenen said, and then she was standing behind him, whispering in his ear. "And you have harmed women."

Garrick remembered the charm, the bracelet Pattenia had given him, and he spun, meaning to run back to his horse and get it from his saddle bags. The Effenen appeared in front of him and batted first the sword from his hand and then the torch. He swung his



fist, but she caught his forearm and reversed it, jacking his arm behind his back, pulling it out of its socket. Garrick howled as she lifted him off his feet and threw him to the ground on his back, climbing onto him, straddling him, and he struggled as she said, "I want to be inside you." Smoke began to fill his mouth and nostrils, and he spasmed on the ground as he died.

## CHAPTER 13

“Serren. Serren.” He felt a hand on his shoulder, shaking him awake. Serren opened his eyes. It was pitch black, but though he couldn’t make out the face, he knew his mother’s voice. “Get up. Something has happened.” Her voice cracked with emotion as she spoke, and Serren’s heart skipped a beat.

“Mother? What is it? Are you okay?”

“I’m.... fine...it’s your father, Serren. I .... He’s dead. He died.”

“No. He went hunting,” Serren said, his head cloudy with sleep.

“Come,” Annya said. “You need to be there.”

Serren got out of bed, his mind in turmoil. *Father? Dead?* He had gone to sleep in his trousers, so he searched around on the floor until he found a shirt, which he pulled over his head. His mother opened the door to the hallway, and light flooded in, blinding him. He could see shadowy figures out there, standing motionless in the torchlight.

Walking into the hall, he shielded his eyes. “Your highness.” He recognized the voice as that of Lord Turin, Prime Minister. “My prayers are with you.”

“Of course,” Serren said, shaking outstretched hands.

Still struggling to wake himself, he followed the gathered ministers and his mother as they descended the stairs, down and down again, into the lower level and then into the dripping stone space where deliveries were made to the palace. Members of the King’s Guard stood in a circle around a flatbed wagon, their armor flashing with the firelight of the torches and lamps. Serren could make out faces. In addition to his mother, Turin, Primary Appollon Ansey – the church’s representative in the capitol – and Lord Malnae, Nemeria’s father and Grand Lord of the King’s Council, had gathered.

Serren felt panicked, looking at the grim faces of all those around him. He stopped walking, shaking his head, but felt his mother’s hand on his shoulder, urging him forward. He stepped through the circle, and there on the wagon bed lay a corpse. A tall, lean, muscular man. His clothes were ripped and

torn, as was his flesh, as if rent by great claws. The clothes looked like his father's clothes. The hair. But the face was gone—ripped into a bloody gash, beyond recognition. “No,” Serren said, choking up. “It’s not him.” He felt a lump in his throat, felt tears rising, but by force of will held them back, just as his father had taught him at the end of a switch when he’d been a little boy. “It can’t be him.”

“Hush,” Annya said, taking him in her arms, bring his head to her shoulder. “You mustn’t say that,” she whispered. “Appollon will make his determination.”

Primary Appollon stepped forward. He measured the body with a tape measure. “Six feet, five and one quarter inches,” he said. A court scribe noted it and announced, “the height of the king.”

Serren turned his head, forcing himself to look. “No.”

“Hush,” Annya said. “Don’t look.” She tried to turn his head away from the gruesome sight, but he refused to look away.

“On the third finger of the right hand,” Apollon said. “A gold ring bearing the image of a hawk, the mark of the House Denae.”

“The ring of the king.”

“On the back of the right calf, a brown birthmark in the shape of a crescent moon.”

“The king’s known birthmark.”

“I can’t believe it,” Serren whispered, eyes burning with unwept tears.

“Hush.”

“The hair is black with streaks of grey.”

“The same as the king.”

“I, Primary Appollon, high priest of Maxis and the Great God’s representative on the King’s Council, having prayed for guidance and examined the body, do perform my sacred duty and with heavy heart declare that this body is that of King Garrick of the House Denae. The King is Dead.”

Annya turned Serren around to face the minsters. He wobbled unsteadily for a moment, then threw back his shoulders and straightened his back, regaining his composure, drawing his face into an impassive mask, as he had been trained to do since birth. Looking at the gashed, bloody mass that was his father’s face, he saw white

bone sticking through the pulped skin, and forced himself to look, to resist the burning in his eyes.

“Long live the King!” Appollon declared.

“Long live the King!” the men repeated, and all sank to one knee and put their hands to their hearts, including Annya.

Serren stood, alone, all kneeling around him.

Upstairs, Pattenia slept, but her mind whirled with strange dreams. She saw her brother, dressed as a girl, picking flowers and putting them in a basket, singing to herself. She saw herself wearing plate armor, a sword in her hand, waving it in the air as the armies of House Danae charged into battle, the Sun Hawk banner snapping in the wind.... She dreamt of herself, belly swollen with child, looking on as Runtick carefully pinned a twelve-legged insect to a piece of wood, his bug eyes bright with passion, the same passion she saw when he looked at her, and in her dream, she shivered at the thought of his pawing and insectile love-making... then she saw herself dressed as king, saw Serren

holding a baby to his breast, nursing his child, a proud young mother...

Bells. Bells ringing. Ringing. She started to wake, and realizing that the bells she heard were funeral bells, she sat up suddenly, afraid. Who had died? The bells rang only for the deaths of those of royal blood, so it was surely someone she knew, at least a little. She only felt slightly guilty that she hoped it would be Runtick, stung to death by some freakish insect.

Throwing her robe over her nightdress, she pulled on her slippers and left her rooms. Spotting a maid, Miss Bucket, Pattenia said, "Good morning."

"Milady." Bucket said, with a curtsy.

"Do you know for whom the bell tolls?"

Bucket's face turned ashen. She nodded, then shook her head no.

"Do you know, or not?"

"I don't know that I should be the one to tell you."

Pattenia felt herself begin to tremble. "Tell me," she said.

“I’m so sorry, Milady. I truly am. The bell rings for your father, King Garrick.”

“My father? No. It can’t be!” Pattenia’s eyes filled with tears, and she ran to her mother’s rooms, and not finding her there, ran down to the dining room, where she found her mother and brother sitting together, glassy eyed.

“Mother!” Pattenia cried. “What happened? Father died?”

“Yes,” Annya said, rising to throw her arms around her daughter. She had thought she’d cried herself out of tears, but seeing the pain in her daughter’s face brought them right back, and the two wept in each other’s arms, while Serren sat, staring stonily into the distance.

“Oh, mother,” Pattenia said, touching her mother’s face. “I don’t know if I can stand this pain!”

Annya sat, still holding Pattenia’s arms. “You can. We must.”

Pattenia looked at Serren, saw his bloodshot eyes, and she went to him, and they hugged. “Oh, Father!” Pattenia said. “How



did it happen? Where is his body? I ... want to see him. I need to. I can't believe he is gone."

"No," Serren said. "You mustn't look. He was.... Cruelly treated. It was horrible to look upon."

"The Effenen," Pattenia said. "But, I had given him a charm to protect him."

"This was no Effenen," Serren said. "Someone killed him."

"But the villagers," Annya started to say.

"Myth," Serren said. "Effenen. There is no such thing as Effenen."

"Yes," Pattenia said. "Myth." And yet she thought of Actonia, and her talk of the goddess and her return, the talk of Pattenia, King. *As if Actonia knew.*

Serren stood. He felt he needed some normality. Some routine. "I hope it won't seem in any way disrespectful, but I would like to see my friends, train for the tournament. If you need me, Mother, send for me. You, too, Pattenia."

“Serren,” Annya said. “You must meet with Lord Turin and begin to put things in place for your coronation. There can be no delay. This is a very crucial time.”

“It can wait,” Serren said.

“No. It can’t. Son, you must understand that people will be plotting and scheming against you, against our house and our family. You have to move quickly to solidify alliances, show all that we are strong and have the support of the leadership.”

“I feel I need a little time. I would prefer to go to school and—”

“Serren,” Annya said. “Your school days are over. You have a nation to run. Now, you must be King.”

Serren felt a shock at the thought. No more school? No more hanging out with his friends? A little of the weight and reality of what it would mean to be king settled onto him, but he nodded. “If I must be King, I must,” he said. “I will go upstairs and dress. Send word to Lord Turin. Tell him I will come and see him presently.”

“Serren. He will come to *you*, his King. Send word for him to meet you in the King’s Office.”

“Of course. Right. This is going to take some getting used to.” He laughed, nervously. Then, gave Pattenia a look. “Can you believe it? I am to be King? Your little brother?” He spun in a circle and walked out, laughing nervously.

“Mother. He isn’t ready to be king. He is such a—boy.”

“Does it make you reconsider Actonia’s offer?” Anya said.

“Turn Serren into a girl? No. It’s absurd.”

“We will have to be together, as a family, closer than ever, and will all need to be willing to make sacrifices. Remember, Pattenia, that if the King falls, his family falls with him. We could all lose our heads.”

“Do you think we could really be in danger?”

“We are always in danger. I know it may not have seemed that way, but your father had made very strong allies, and we shielded you

and your brother from any ugliness. But, do not worry too much. I believe we are strong enough to do what we must be done. Don't you?"

Pattenia shrugged. She thought of Actonia. Her offer.

"Do you want to go to school today?" Annya said. "I understand if you would like to spend the day in private."

"If I stayed home, I would go mad, I think. I will go to school and see my friends. It will be good for me. But, will you be well?"

"Yes. I'm shaken, but I could use some time alone. Go. Be with your friends."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Come and see me when you get home, though."

"Of course."

They hugged. Annya kissed Pattenia on the cheek. "Be strong," she said. "Be safe."

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Serren entered The King's Office, peeking in, feeling as nervous as he had as a small boy whenever he'd come here, where the grown-ups met and talked about grown up things, and where his father always seemed more distant and cold than usual. The room smelled of sweet tobacco, leather and oil, his father's smell, and Serren once again pushed back the rising emotion that swelled in his chest as the smell reminded him, again, that his father was gone, never to be seen again. He went to the large oaken desk which glowed in the flickering lamp light, and ran his fingertips across the smooth, polished surface, then slipped into his father's leather chair. Serren had sprouted up to 6 feet, and was the tallest of the sixteen-year-olds, broad shouldered and muscular for his age, but he felt skinny and small sitting in his father's chair. Like a child. He thought about sitting somewhere else, worried that he would look ridiculous, wondering if he should maybe just stand next to the desk.

A knock at the door. "Yes?" Serren said, annoyed at the pitch of his voice.

Mr. Clipper opened the door. "Prime Minister Turin and Lord Amper Ansey to see you, My Lord."

“Send them in,” Serren said, pleased he’d placed his voice in a deeper, manlier place, hiding his surprise at the presence of Ansey.

The two men walked in. Bowed. Offered their condolences. Turin outlined the plans for the coronation. It would be in two weeks, allowing the heads of the royal families time to make the journey to Denaerk. While some spent much of the year there and most of their children lived in the city during the school year, others remained in their castles and would need to journey to the city.

Finally, formalities done, Turin adopted a very serious tone and said, “I want you to know, Prince Serren, that you have my undivided loyalty, as did your father. You can always count on me for counsel, and if it should come to it, my sword and the swords of our House.” Turin directed the *our house* to Amper Ansey, who had sat largely silent during the meeting.

“House Ansey proudly stands with Denaer, and we are at your service,” Amper said. “After all, in a few months we will be family, when your sister marries my son, Runtick. As has been long arranged.”

“I feel like something is going unsaid,” Serren said, looking back and forth between the two men.

“There may be those, your highness,” Lord Turin said, gently, “who would seek to pry your sister away from Runtick.”

“They would weaken the growing alliance between our great houses,” Amper added. “As a way to weaken House Denae.”

“If one of your first acts as King was to break the promises made to Ansey, it would destroy the value of your word. No one would trust you,” Turin added.

The men paused, leaning forward, looking expectantly at Serren.

Serren, for his part, thought of Pattenia and her loathing for Runtick. Her arguments with his father. He wanted to deflect the issue, postpone it, but the men were watching him, waiting for an answer, and so he said what was easiest at the moment. “House Denae. We do what we say we’re going to do. Of course.”

“Of course, your highness. Of course.”

“I trust Pattenia is just as excited about her coming wedding as my Runtick?”

“Pattenia? She never stops talking about it.”

The men rose and bowed. “With your permission.”

“What? Oh! Yes,” Serren said. “You are excused.”

As soon as their backs were turned to Serren, the men exchanged a smile.

The door closed, Serren threw his feet up on the desk. He didn’t know if any rival houses would approach him about canceling the plans, but Pattenia would, and she would hate him so much if he didn’t save her. But now he couldn’t, could he?



## CHAPTER 14

Pattenia's girl laced her into a black corset, and then helped her into a black dress with long sleeves and a high lace collar. She'd had her hair put up and then covered with a wide-brimmed black hat, over which Glass now draped a black lace veil. Looking in the mirror, Pattenia pulled on a pair of black gloves, examined her profile, and nodded, satisfied. She heard a knock on her door. Danalia's knock.

"Come in," Pattenia said, a lump in her throat.

The door opened. Danalia came in, her eyes red from crying. "I'm so sorry," she said. "Milady." She knelt.

"Come, Danalia," Pattenia said, opening her arms. "I need my friend."

A look of relief came over Danalia's face, and she rushed into Pattenia's arms.

"Don't cry!" Pattenia said, stroking her friend's hair, feeling the girl's body shaking

with sobs. “You’ll make me start crying again.”

“So? Your father died!”

“I cried so hard this morning, and I know I will cry some more. But I want to look strong and dignified at school in front of the other girls.”

Danalia looked up, her eyes welling over. “You are so strong.”

“I have to be brave, and you must be brave as well. For me. For us.” She handed Danalia a handkerchief. “Compose yourself.” As Danalia pulled herself together, Pattenia considered telling her of her suspicions, the idea that maybe her father had been murdered, and that somehow Actonia had something to do with it, but she stopped herself. It was such a serious accusation, and she would not risk damaging another girl’s reputation without solid evidence, and especially not a fellow hekatín.

Pattenia and Danalia walked to school arm in arm. The other girls also wore black in respect for the passing of the King, and when they saw Pattenia they offered her hugs and condolences, which she accepted with nobility

and grace, keeping her own tears at bay. When she saw the tapestry they'd been weaving to honor her father's 20<sup>th</sup> year on the throne, she put her hand to her heart and took a deep breath to calm herself, knowing that he would never see the tapestry, never know the joy she had imagined on his face when he saw what she and the girls had done for him. Did it make sense to continue? Should they just abandon the project?

Pattenia saw the other girls all watching her, waiting. Even the teacher just sat there, looking lost, waiting for guidance. Pattenia lifted her veil. "Girls, thank you all for your love and support. I ask now that we continue our work, and finish this tapestry, that it may be hung to honor the memory of my father, and all the good he did during his reign."

The girls clapped and nodded, and then they all sat down and got to work.

Actonia did not sit next to Pattenia, but chose a spot across the room. Pattenia glanced at her frequently, trying to read something from her facial expression, to get some sense if the girl seemed to be keeping a secret, or hiding guilt, but her expression seemed bland and unreadable, a cipher.

At lunch, Actonia sat with Nemeria and her ladies, and the girls whispered and giggled about something. *What can they be talking about?* Pattenia wondered, feeling uncomfortable with the idea of her brother's fiancée befriending the hekatin seer. "Has that lunatic been bothering you again?" Danalia said, following Pattenia's gaze. "On the day of your father's passing?"

"What? No," Pattenia answered. "No. Calm yourself. I was just... wondering about her, is all. She is so odd."

When it came time to go to the chapel for the service and what Pattenia considered her real studies, she decided to take action. Kicking off her heels, she marched into the chapel, grabbed Actonia by the elbow and yanked her to her feet. "Come," Pattenia said. "We need to talk." Danalia followed, but Pattenia said, "No! Wait here!"

The girls had all turned to look, and as soon as Pattenia dragged Actonia down the hall, the whole group began to whisper.

"Praise the goddess," Professor Falconette called in a loud, commanding voice.

The girls automatically turned around, knelt and responded, "Praise the goddess."

Pattenia dragged Actonia down the hall, and then shoved her into the old vestry, now lined with shelves crammed with spell casting supplies—candles and glass jars full of powders and bats wings. "You knew my father was about to die!" Pattenia said. "Didn't you?"

Actonia had a slightly bemused look on her face, but she nodded. "I had a vision."

"Did you? Or did you *know* someone would kill him?"

"My Prince," Actonia said, still smiling. "You're being irrational--"

Actonia couldn't finish as Pattenia slapped her across the face. Hard. And then again. "Wipe that insulting smile off your face. I am Princess Pattenia of the House Denae, and your better. Smirk at me again, and I will have that smile cut into your face."

Actonia bowed her head, dropping to a knee. "Forgive me, My Lord."

“Lady!” Pattenia said. “I am a Lady, and I have had enough of your games and your insolence.”

“Yes, Milady. I am sorry, Milady.”

“You deny that you had a hand in killing my father.”

“I know of no plot to kill your father, nor did I have a hand in any such plot.”

“Look at me and swear.”

Actonia looked up and met Pattenia’s eyes. “I swear.”

Pattenia saw no lie in the girl’s eyes. “This vision of yours. Describe it to me.”

“Your father pursued the Effenen to her den. She feared him, but once he entered the cave, he was no longer protected, and she killed him.”

“No longer protected? I gave him a charm. What could have happened?”

“Perhaps it fell off? I don’t know. But, please remember this-- I see many possible futures. Not the only future. I did not know for certain this would come to pass.”

“So, it was the Effenen? Serren is sure he was murdered.”

“That is what I saw, Milady.”

Pattenia stared at her. Again, she saw no lie, but then could she trust her eyes when dealing with this strange girl? Even so, something did not seem quite right. She didn't know what, exactly, but something.

Pattenia groaned in frustration. “Why didn't you tell me? About your vision of my father? Maybe I could have saved him!”

Actonia's eyes flicked to the side. “You wouldn't have believed me any— “

“Tell me the truth.”

Actonia took a deep breath. “Forgive me, Milady. I did not tell you because I didn't want you to warn him.”

“You wanted my father to die.”

“He had to die for you to become King.”

“I will never forgive you for this,” Pattenia said, clenching her fists. “Never!”

“I am your loyal servant nevertheless. Lady, you must take the throne. For the good of all!”

“Turn my brother into a girl? Never! It is grotesque! Goodbye!” And with that Pattenia turned and stormed from the room.

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The day of the funeral arrived. Serren and Pattenia stood on either side of their mother, arms joined. The King’s Guard placed the body of their father, wrapped in golden cloth and bearing the Great Sun Hawk of House Denae on the chest, into a niche in the family crypt, where a stone slab was placed over the space, sealing it. First their mother, then Serren and Pattenia in turn walked up to the slab, kissed their fingers and placed their fingers on the slab that bore their father’s name and shielded his body.

“Goodbye, Father,” Serren said. “I will do my best to carry on our family’s legacy and bring honor to our name.”

When Pattenia’s turn came, she held her fingers against the cold stone. She wanted to



pray, or to have some poetic words to mutter, something she could remember for the rest of her life, maybe write in a book, but instead she remembered her father, hugging her in his thick, muscular arms, his beard tickling her face, and how safe and warm she felt in his arms, and she whispered, "I will miss you for the rest of my life."

Her mother and Serren waited at the the crypt's entrance. The rays of the setting sun poured down the ancient steps, and backlit the two of them, making them look like burning shadows. Pattenia joined them in the sun, and the three walked out of the tomb together.

The palace blazed with light, every torch lit, every candle aflame, and the three of them made their way to the Great Hall of the Feast. The four mighty fireplaces roared, and the room was packed with friends and acquaintances, the members of every royal house in the city. The elderly sat close to the fires, nodding their gray heads and talking, while children ran giggling and screaming among the tables. The Denae family paused at the door, observing the massed crowd of people, and they all sighed and looked deep inside to find the strength after the emotionally draining day. Anya nudged Serren. He

noded and headed into the room, Pattenia and Annya trailing along behind. People reached out to shake hands with Serren as he passed, to pat his back and offer condolences, wish him well on his coming reign. Pattenia felt forgotten and ignored, all eyes in the room turning to Serren as he ascended the steps to the royal table, which stood on a raised dais at the head of the Great Hall.

Serren picked up a golden goblet and climbing onto the table, he held it above his head. The murmuring died down. "Tonight," Serren shouted, "we gather to honor my father's life. And my father? He loved life. He lived as few men have ever lived!" Applause. "He worked hard, but he played harder!"

The crowd roared.

"He has passed now to the Forever Island, to take his place in the honored company of the Great Families, of which we are all members!"

Cheers erupted.

"Let's drink now in the memory of my father, drink tonight as my father drank, so that in morning the wine cellar stands empty, and our heads ache as much as our hearts!"

“Here! Here!” An old man shouted, a cheer answered by the crowd. Serren tipped back his goblet, taking a deep drink, the red wine pouring out of the sides of his mouth and dripping down his chin. Then, he turned raised the goblet again, raised it above his head and poured the remainder over his own head. The crowd laughed, and Serren shouted, “Drink every cask dry!”

Pattenia glared at him as he stood there, wine dripping down his face and chin, wiping it off with the back of his arm, basking in the attention of the crowd. She heard her mother chuckling and glared at her. “I was hoping for something a little dignified,” Pattenia said.

“From your brother?” Annya said. “Well, I’m going to get drunk. Want to join me, or are you going to sulk?”

Pattenia looked at Serren, who was smirking now as Bucket refilled his goblet with wine. “I think I had better get drunk, too.” Soon, she had her own goblet overflowing with wine, and she and her mother clinked glasses and drank, deeply. Pattenia saw some of Serren’s friends approaching, and her eyes went to Asryn. He was tall and his shoulders seemed to have spread in the last

year. His arms had grown thick, like the limbs of an oak tree. She felt herself flush as she looked at him. How strange that the scrawny little boy who'd annoyed her all these years had somehow become... beautiful. She watched out of the corner of her eye as he greeted Serren, the two boys shaking hands, slapping each other on the back. A bright smile had come to Asryn's face, dimples at the corners of his mouth, and she had to look away to hide the blushing of her cheeks.

*Why can't I marry a boy like that?* she wondered, taking another drink of wine. Someone who makes me feel... Oh! She didn't even know the word, but she just wanted to kiss him, and squeeze his arms, and....

"Pattenia!" Danalia and the rest of Pattenia's Ladies in Waiting gathered around her, hugging and kissing her, and they dragged her onto her feet and out into the room, because music was playing, and they wanted to dance. Pattenia followed, wine in hand, casting one last whimsical glance back at Asryn, then started to dance, and smile, and her friends smiled back, and she remembered how much she loved and needed them.

The night grew blurry for everyone. At some point, Pattenia realized her mother had joined them and was dancing and laughing, just as if she had been a young girl herself again. Some boys came along and tried to join them, but they told them to go away, that this was a girl's night, and then the boys came back anyway, so they ended up doing an impromptu Passeur, the formal dance done at every debutante ball, where the girls and boys line up and take turns dancing with each other. Then Pattenia found herself sitting, talking intently with Cassonia, one of her ladies, and she was telling Cassonia how she didn't want to marry, and she preferred to die an old maid, and then she was begging Cassonia to agree to marry Runtick in her place, and Cassonia was laughing and shaking her head, NO!

Serren, Asryn and Kencrick and Oper found their way out to one of the balconies that opened out from the great hall, and Kencrick packed a pipe and they smoked. "Brothers," Serren said, his speech slurred. "I love you guys so much. I mean it."

"I love you, too, brother," Asryn said.

“I’m gonna need you guys,” Serren said. “Do you realize that I am going to be King? Me? The King? With a crown and the whole thing?” He started laughing.

His friends laughed as well. “I kinda knew you would be king someday, but I didn’t think it would happen while you were still such a moron,” Oper said, smoke coming out of his nose.

Serren laughed. “That’s why I *need* you guys. You’ll tell me the truth, like if I’m a moron or something. I need that.”

“I couldn’t stop laughing when you poured that wine over your head.”

“The bards should be singing about that for awhile,” Kencrick said.

“You should do it again at your coronation,” Oper said. “Just dump a bunch of wine over your head, rip your shirt open and yell, ‘I’m the freaking king! Deal with it!’”

“That thing I said about needing you all? I didn’t mean Oper,” Serren said. Looking into his cup, he realized it was empty. “I need more wine.”

Asryn took the cup from his hand. “You better not, Brother. You look a little green around the gills.”

“Oh, come on!” Serren said.

“He’s not training for the tournament anymore,” Kencrick said. “What difference does it make?”

“I’m going to fight in the tournament,” Serren said. “I don’t care what anyone says. I’ve been working on that all my life, and I will be damned if Prett is going to— “

“Oh! I’m sorry. I didn’t realize anyone was out here,” Danalia said, halfway through the curtain that divided the balcony from the hall. “Excuse me.”

“No, no, no,” Serren said, stumbling over to her and grabbing her wrist. “You come out here and keep me company. These guys were just going back inside to get some more wine, and I don’t want to be alone. My father just died.”

Danalia blushed, and when Serren slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her close, she snuggled against him. “I’m sorry about

your father,” she said as the boys started to head back inside. Asryn lingered.

“I feel so alone,” Serren said, looking into her eyes. “I almost feel like I’m dead, like I’m a ghost and none of this is real anymore. The only thing that’s real is the pain. Have you ever felt like that?”

“Yes,” Danalia said. “When my sister died.”

“Your sister. I remember her. Always so sad. It’s unfair that people die. I wish it didn’t happen.”

“Serren,” Asryn said. “Why don’t you come with me. You’re pretty drunk, and...”

“No. No. I’m fine. Go ahead without me.” Serren said.

“I think— “

“Go!”

“Goodnight, then,” Asryn said, leaving.

Serren tilted Danalia’s head back, and then he held her face with his hand, staring into her eyes. “I want to lay with you,” he said. “To remind me that I’m alive.”



Danalia closed her eyes and accepted the kiss, and then another. Serren looked around and said, "I'm going to go up to my room. Wait a little, then follow me up. Make sure no one sees you. Understand?"

"Yes," Danalia said, nodding. "Do I ever."

## CHAPTER 15

Pattenia's head ached; her stomach burned. Sitting up, she pushed her long hair from her face and looked around her room. Frenia, Kickania, Ginia... draped over couches, sleeping on a pile of blankets on the floor. They were all still dressed in their funeral clothes, but they were rumpled and the skirts had been hiked up, corset laces loosened, hair let down. Pattenia's tongue felt like a swollen piece of cork, and she looked around for water. Seeing none, she pulled the cord that summoned her servants, then started going around the room, gently waking her friends, who grumbled and complained. Pattenia threw back the curtains to her balcony window, and as the sunlight flooded in the girls squinted and cursed the day.

A serving girl entered and curtsied.

"Water," Pattenia said. "Lots of it."

"Yes, Milady."

Kickania held her head in her hands, but started to laugh. “You were so funny last night, Pattenia.”

“I can hardly remember any of it,” Pattenia said, biting her lip. “We danced... such silly dances.”

“But I mean after, when you practically threw yourself at Asryn.”

“What?!”

“You grabbed the belt of his pants and started to undo it!”

“I did not.”

The other girls giggled, and moaned with the pain it cost them. “You did,” Frenia said. “And he actually blushed.”

“Did people see? I mean, other people?”

“I don’t think so,” Kickania said. “You were in the corner, and, luckily Danalia came along and stopped you before you could tear his pants off.”

“It would be such a scandal,” Pattenia said.

The girl returned with the water, and the girls all eagerly got up and went to the pitchers, drinking greedily. “Oh, look. Your gift.”

Pattenia looked. On the floor lay a wooden box with a shattered glass cover. Inside, some sort of black and purple beetle with an elaborate pattern on its shell that resembled an eye. “Oh, no. Did Runtick give that to me last night?”

“Yes,” Kickania said with a giggle. “And then he insisted on a kiss, so you kissed him on the forehead and then turned and wiped your mouth.”

“We laughed so hard.”

Pattenia felt guilty looking at the broken gift, hearing how she had acted, remembering it in fragments. “I feel bad.”

“Don’t! He’s repulsive.”

“But he’s still a person. I will have to get this fixed and send him a note. Was he upset?”

“I think he was crying,” Frenia said, snorting.

“But Danalia went and spoke with him. She said he was fine after.”

*Danalia. Again. She is such a good friend.* Suddenly, Pattenia looked around the room. “Wait. Where is she?”

The girls all smiled. “She had a rendezvous—with your brother,” Kickania said.

“My brother?”

“They tried to be sneaky, but he went upstairs, and then a little while later, after stopping you from stripping Asryn, she went upstairs.”

“And she had—that look,” Ginia said. “Like a wolf about to feed.”

“And she never came back down?” Pattenia said, growing hot. “No one saw her again? And you just—forgot about it?”

The girls all pulled away. “What?” Kickania said.

“You know,” Pattenia said, storming out of her rooms and marching down the halls to Serren’s quarters, her bare feet slapping against the marble floor. She ignored the

servants, throwing open the doors herself and storming into the room. She saw Serren and though she was buried in the covers, the kinky black hair was unmistakably Danalia's.

"You!" Pattenia shouted.

Serren looked up, his eyes glassy. Seeing Pattenia, he smiled. Pattenia grabbed the pillow from under his head and hit him with it. "How dare you? I told you to stay away from my friends!"

Danalia woke, sitting up and pulling the sheet up to her arm pits to cover her naked body. "Danalia," Pattenia said, shaking her head. "Get dressed and get out!"

"Pattenia..."

"Just get dressed and go."

"We just did outside stuff," Serren said.

Pattenia hit him on the head. Hard.

"Stop," he said. "You're acting loony."

"How dare you."

Serren sat back. As Danalia got out of the bed and started to dress, he started to look,

but Pattenia slapped him on the shoulder, and he groaned and looked away. “We were both drunk...”

“No.”

Danalia pulled her dress over her head, stepped into her heels. She just held her corset. There was no way to put it on quickly, even if Pattenia had helped her. “Go to my rooms. The other girls are all there. I am sure they will want to know you aren’t dead.”

“You sound like my mother,” Danalia said as she slipped out the door.

“What?” Pattenia said, shocked.

Serren chuckled. His evil brain was working hard thinking of things to say, and he struggled against the urge to see if he could push his sister to an even hotter rage. But Pattenia was calming herself, her mind calculating. Serren was tired. And he’d done something wrong. She sat on the edge of the bed, took a breath and said, “You look terrible.”

“Have you seen yourself? You look like you drank half the vineyard.”

“You owe for me this,” Pattenia said. “You know you do.”

Serren raised his palms. “I know. I know. Whatever you want.”

“Danalia’s virtue remains intact?”

“Yes, and you have no idea how much willpower--”

“Oh, yes. You are so noble. You say you will do whatever I want? Then break my marriage contract. Free me of my obligation to Runtick”. She punched him.

Serren hissed, drawing air into his lungs. “Ow. That’s a difficult matter. There must be something else?”

“No,” Pattenia said. “He’s disgusting and pathetic. He is not worthy of me or of our family. He is not right for me.”

“He’s not the right man for anyone,” Serren said. “But, well, Ansey came to see me. He and Turin.”

“He came to see you already?”



“Yes. He was very concerned that *someone* might try and break off the marriage agreement between our houses.”

“He was right to be concerned. That person is me. Right now.”

“I gave him my word--”

“I don’t care.”

“If House Denae violates its agreements, if I don’t honor my obligations--”

“I am your sister, Serren. What about your obligation to me?”

“The agreement was made by father and mother. Not me,” Serren said.

“And you are now to be King, and I am asking you to break it.”

“I wish I could.”

“You must!” Pattenia said, her anger flashing. “I demand that you free me from this marriage!”

At the word demand Serren’s eyes narrowed. “You? Demand? I am in charge now, Pattenia. I am King. So, my answer to

you is stop your complaining, and do your duty.”

“My duty?”

“Your duty is to marry for the good of the nation, and if you do not love your husband, well, get a man on the side.”

*Serren would never change. Would never understand. Unless...* “You would feel differently if you were a girl.”

“If I were a girl, I would do what I had to do, and I wouldn’t burden all those around me with my endless whining.”

“Mark those words, and mark them well. You may regret them some day if you find yourself in a dress.”

“Listen to yourself. Have you gone mad?”

Pattenia crossed her arms and glared down at Serren. “Maybe I have,” she said. “And maybe that should worry you more than it does.” With that she turned and left.

Serren watched her leave, then pulled his covers back over his head. It seemed being king meant he was always making someone angry. Couldn’t Pattenia see how important

her marriage was to the kingdom? Why couldn't she be reasonable?

But no. She had to put a guilt trip on him. He pulled the cord. The servant came into the room. "Hair of the dog," he said. "Be quick."

"Of course, Your Majesty.

## CHAPTER 16

“Is it truly possible?” Pattenia said. “To change someone’s sex?”

“Yes,” Actonia said. “I found the spell in the Secret Library of Gaunefer.”

The girls rode their horses under a canopy of pink cherry petals. Ancient trees stood all along the length of the Queen’s road. Their branches stretched across to form a tunnel of leaves. In the Spring, those branches burst with bright flowers.

“Can it be undone?”

“I do not know a spell to undo or repeat a change. Once the sex is changed, it stays changed.”

“I just—it seems hard to believe.”

“I could change your stallion to a mare,” Actonia said.

“Oh, no. I wouldn’t want you to do that to Bright. He wouldn’t want to be a girl,” she said, patting his neck.

“Well, then, I have an idea. Follow me.” Actonia turned her horse off the path, moving into the woods that lined the road.

“Where are we going?”

“Just to find a place we can practice in privacy. It *is* forbidden.”

“Of course.”

The girls rode a short way into the old, mossy wood, picking their way along a deer path. Their horses carefully stepped over fallen tree limbs. They came to a clearing and dismounted, tying off their horses. “Watch,” Actonia said. She raised her arms and began to sing in the tongue of the goddess.

Pattenia heard movement in the underbrush, and then a great stag appeared, a mighty rack bristling on his head. He walked up to Actonia, who whispered something to him, scratching him under the chin. The stag sank to the ground, folding his legs under himself.

“He’s beautiful,” Pattenia said. “How did you do that?”

“Magic.”

“Oh, yeah. Of course. I feel foolish,” Pattenia said.

“I will need your help for the next part.”

“Why?”

“The magic of many voices is stronger than one,” Actonia said, taking Pattenia’s hands. “And I want you to feel the pure joy of serving as a channel for the goddess. Stand over the buck, and repeat after me.”

“Okay.”

Once more, Actonia spoke in the words of Progenita, and Pattenia repeated, feeling a trembling grow inside her as she did.

The girls chanted, and began to circle the buck, and Pattenia felt something like lightning run along the lengths of her arms. Her hair rose in the air, flashing with sparks, and as they chanted, she watched as the buck’s antlers seemed to shrink and shrink... getting smaller and smaller even as the buck’s body shrank and seemed to grow a lighter shade of

brown... until finally, where the Buck once lay in the grass there was now a slender, pretty doe, blinking at them with wide, lashed eyes full of confusion.

The spell ended, the girls let go of each other's arms, and Pattenia found herself laughing. "Oh no! Is he—she—really a doe now?"

"Yes," Actonia said.

The doe stood uncertainly, and then came to Pattenia, who scratched her under the chin. At last, unable to resist, she looked down and saw the animal was indeed now a girl. "Oh! I feel sorry for her! She was so grand!"

"Years of living under Maxis have made you believe it is better to be male."

"Well, isn't it?" Pattenia said with exasperation. "He was so big and strong, and she—well, look at her!"

"I think women are better than men," Actonia said. "And the only reason it seems otherwise is because of the rules placed on us by the men."

“You haven’t spent enough time in the real world.”

“You haven’t spent enough time in a woman’s world.”

The doe froze, lifting her nose and sniffing the air, her ears shifting. Then, a buck emerged from the woods. The doe turned and hopped away into the forest, the buck eagerly in pursuit. “There,” Pattenia said. “You see what she’ll have to put up with now? Poor girl.”

“Perhaps she will find she likes it.”

“I don’t think she will,” Pattenia said, reaching up and grabbing a branch, plucking off some leaves. “It’s tiring being chased by silly boys, while the one you truly desire never seems to notice you.”

“You can always chase them.”

“It isn’t-- proper.”

“And yet, I am certain I saw you trying to pull a boy’s pants off the other night.”

Pattenia’s mouth fell open. “You saw? I was drunk, and it was— not right.”



“That is something men have taught you to believe. They say it is the will of their god, Maxis. If you want a boy, you should pursue him.”

“That isn’t how things are done.”

“It is done every day by women who listen to what the goddess has placed in their hearts.” Actonia decided to change the subject rather than push Pattenia too hard. The girl was stubborn and did not yield to pressure. “How did it make you feel to cast that spell? To work such magic?”

Pattenia smiled. “Strong? Powerful? And, also, something else.”

“What?”

“It almost felt like.... I don’t know if it makes any sense, but I felt like I was... coming home? To myself?”

“Yes,” Actonia said. “Welcome.”

The girls got back on their horses and made their way back to the road. “Serren might learn to be happy as a girl,” Actonia said.

“I doubt that very much,” Pattenia said.

“And do you doubt you would be happier as King?”

“No,” Pattenia said without hesitation. “I am sure I would be happier as *Queen*. I could save myself from this terrible marriage. I could free myself and all the other girls.”

“The Shattered Isles would be better with you as ruler.”

“But to turn my brother from a stag to a doe? To trap him in a dress, to make him a princess and not a prince? It seems too cruel, too unfair to him.”

“Is it fair to trap you in a loveless marriage? And if things have to be unfair, why should they always have to be unfair to you?”

“Because I’m the girl,” Pattenia said. “It’s just the way things are.” Even as the words left her lips, Pattenia winced. Had she really just said that?

“Nothing has to be the way it was, the way it has been. Everything can change with faith in the goddess. Your life can change, and the lives of everyone.”

“I will think about your words,” Pattenia said. “I need time to consider.”

“May I offer one last thing to consider?”

“Yes?”

“I have seen a vision of Serren’s future if he stays a man and becomes king. In it, he is assassinated.”

“You’re-- not just saying that to convince me?”

“No. Serren’s life as a man will be short and end in violence.”

Once the girls returned to the stables, the grooms helped them down from their horses, and they said their farewells. Pattenia went up to her rooms and spent some more time working on her design for the goddess temple, then stopped looking at the structure. No amount of ornamentation made it feel right. She thought of the forest, the stag turned doe, the feeling of magic sparking between she and Actonia. Closing her eyes, she had a vision of a great pool lit by a column of golden sunlight. Excited, she began to draw, sketching out first the pool she had seen in her vision, and then working out from the pool, just making a rough

sketch for the time. She was so lost in her work she lost track of time, and was startled when the bell rang for dinner.

Looking down at her drawing, she felt excited and happy. The temple felt right. Just like magic, it felt like home.

She went down to the family dining room, where she found her mother. “How are you holding up?”

“It is a struggle,” Annya said. “Your father was always traveling off to this place or that place, fighting the Travaillians or dealing with some serpent that had risen from the ocean. I got used to him not being around, but now I find myself wondering when he’ll be home, and then—I remember he will never be coming home.” Her eyes teared up as she relived the experience.

Pattenia’s eyes welled up in response. She sighed, and the two women wiped their eyes. “Mother. Now that father is gone, can you break my engagement?”

“That decision belongs to your brother.”

“He says he has to honor father’s word. Can’t you speak to him? He’ll listen to you.”

The Queen shook her head. “I can try, but don’t count on me to persuade him. Your brother hasn’t listened to much I’ve told him—not since he turned thirteen and decided he was a man.”

“Please. Do what you can.”

“I will, but just know it may take something drastic to change his mind.”

They heard someone coming down the hall. “Don’t say anything more about this. I will talk to him after dinner.”

“Very well.”

Serren dragged himself into the room, looking bleary and tired. He made his greetings, and plopping down at the head of the table said, “I would rather face a thousand wild wolves than a single minister with a list.”

Annya frowned. “Long day?”

“The longest. It’s like being trapped in a sand pit and slowly drowning in the dirt. Ugh! How was your day, Pattenia?” he said, hoping to smooth things over.

“I went riding after school, exploring some old paths into the forest and—” she thought of

the doe, picturing Serren in a dress, with smooth, rosy cheeks—“talked with my friend for a time.”

“Sounds better than my day,” Serren said. “Girls have it so easy.”

Pattenia thought. *Well, then...*

They ate and made small talk, and then at the end of the meal, as they finished dessert, Serren smirked. “What is the difference between a girl on the rag and a rabid dog?”

Pattenia glared at him. “You know I hate these rude jokes.”

“Come on. Guess.”

Pattenia took the napkin from her lap and tossed it at him, then stood. “Excuse me,” she said. “Goodnight.”

As Pattenia walked out, Serren yelled after her, “The difference is—the rabid dog, you can kill.”

“Serren,” Annya said. “You know how infuriating those jokes are to women, don’t you?”

“Yes,” he said. “That’s why I tell them.”

“You might want to be more considerate of other people’s feelings.”

“Sensitivity is a woman’s virtue, and a man’s vice.”

“All the same. One’s words have a way of coming back to haunt them.”

“Mom,” he said, kissing her on the cheek. “You know I love you. How are you feeling? Is there anything you need?”

“I love you, too. And no. I am well enough, considering. But, your sister did ask that I discuss the matter of her marriage with you.”

“Oh. That. Ansey has already seen me and made it clear he expects me to honor the agreement between our families.”

“And what did you say?”

“I panicked. I didn’t know what to say, so I just agreed.”

“Then, you have to keep your word.”

“What? I thought you would tell me to break the engagement. For Pattenia’s sake. I mean, when I look at Runtick I understand her revulsion.”

“As do I. But as king, your word must be absolutely unassailable. What you say you will do, you must do, or else none will ever make treaties with you, or they will just as freely break them.”

“So, that’s it, then?”

Annya nodded. “That’s it. Now, you need to understand that Pattenia is also one of your subjects. This must be your decision and yours alone. I will tell her that I raised the matter, and you insisted she must marry Runtick. You must tell her the same.”

“Why?”

“If she and others believe that your decisions are being made by your mother, they will not respect you as King. They’ll think you are a momma’s boy and will constantly come to me looking to circumvent your decisions.”

“Of course,” Serren said. “If it has to be a secret, then it does, but I will rely on your counsel. I know you will always do what’s best for me.”

“What’s best for the kingdom.”





## CHAPTER 17

“Milady,” Actonia said, with a curtsy. “You called for me?”

“Yes.”

As soon as the servant closed the door, Pattenia said, “Come. I want to show you something.” She led Actonia into her art studio, led her to the drafting table and pulled the cover off to reveal her sketch.

“What do you think?”

“Goddess be praised,” Actonia said in a hushed, awestruck voice. “It’s sublime.”

“Do you know what it is?”

“A temple to Progenita,” Actonia said.

“Yes,” Pattenia said. “How did you know?”

“Nothing else could be so beautiful.”

“It came to me in a vision-- like a flash. After our day in the woods. I saw this temple in my mind.”

“Oh,” Actonia said, taking Pattenia in her arms and kissing her on the cheek. “You are blessed by the goddess. You are strong in her embrace. Thank you for sharing this with me.”

“There’s more. I need to build this temple. I dreamt about it last night. I saw myself standing on a bluff, watching as the columns were raised, the sun rising at my back, filling the world with warmth and light.”

“Yes. The return of the goddess. She brings life and joy to all.”

“But, I’m disturbed---”

“What is it?”

“I’ve never felt like this before. Never.” And now she looked directly into Actonia’s eyes. “This isn’t the result of some spell you placed on me, is it?”

“No,” Actonia said. “Never.”

Pattenia believed her. “Then why now? Why is this happening?”

“The goddess longs to return, and she grows stronger. And you, Pattenia, are no ordinary woman. I told you. You are the

Vessel of the Goddess, the primal mother who restores the rule of woman.”

“Me? The Vessel? But I’m not.”

“Yes. I have seen all this in a vision, and when I first met you I knew it to be so.”

“It seems impossible.”

“It is impossible, and it will be impossible, until you believe.”

“I’m not sure I am ready to believe. It would be like you telling me I was an elf. I thought all the writing about vessels and primal mothers was poetry, legend, symbolic.”

“It is all those things, and it is also you, my Prince. You are the one who can build this temple. The only one.”

Pattenia sat down. “What does all that mean? How do I do it? I am just a girl. Even if—somehow—I did gain some power, I would be one against all the men in the kingdom.”

“You take one step, and then you take another. And you must *not* do it alone. There are many women and men who will join you, support you, fight with you. Remember, with

the goddess, all things are possible to those who join hands in faith.”

Pattenia went to her balcony, looking down on the palace grounds, then out over the city to the green fields and trees and off to the blue horizon. The wind tossed her hair and fluttered her dress.

“You can turn my brother into a girl?”

“We can do it. Yes. But we will need a group for magic this powerful.”

“A group? Why?”

“Your brother is a human and protected by Maxis. It takes more power to re-weave his fate. But the hekatins are strong, and we are many, and we are ready to join you. We have been building toward this day for a hundred years.”

“They will need to be people we can trust. Absolutely. This plan must remain secret. If we are discovered, we will all burn. Can you find enough such women?”

“Yes. I know who they are. I have seen the twelve in my visions.”

Pattenia's heart raced. She felt bad for Serren, for what she was about to do to him. She turned and faced Actonia.

"If my brother must be a girl so that we can restore the goddess, then he will just have to make this sacrifice for the good of The Shattered Isles."

"Very good, my Prince."

Pattenia held out her hand. "Let's swear an oath right now of loyalty to each and to Progenita."

Actonia took Pattenia's hand, and the girl's shook hands. "To Progenita."

"I will gather together a group, and we will meet to make plans."

"I want Danalia with me."

"Danalia? I did not see her among the hekatin in my vision."

"I will ask her myself. You may gather the others."

"My visions are --"

“You may gather the others. Danalia will be with me.”

“As you command, my Prince.”

Actonia left. Pattenia sat down at her table, and taking out a fresh piece of parchment, she took a piece of coal and began to sketch, smiling to herself as the picture took shape of a lovely girl with a long braid who watched from her window as her sister and father went off to hunt. At the bottom of the picture she wrote in jagged letters: Serrenina.

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As Serren’s coronation approached, the city swelled with royals from all the Shattered Isles. Each day their caravans arrived, mahogany carriages gleaming in the sun, armored escorts on mighty steeds, lances in the air, banners snapping in the sun, each one proudly displaying the crests of their ancient houses: basilisk and panther, eagle and serpent. Pattenia and her ladies greeted them all at the gates to their compounds, accepting the kisses and hugs, the bows and smiles of lords and ladies. Danalia counted, and

reported as soon as the dignitaries retired to their town houses.

“Wensea,” she would say. “One hundred knights.”

“So, with the soldiers already here?”

“One hundred and seventeen.”

Each day they tallied, and counted the strength of the armored men that would be in the city on the day of their treason.

Throughout the week, each of the families hosted a grand party to fete the new king and announce their friendship. The first took place at the Wensea compound, all raw wooden buildings stained red and fir trees brought in from their island.

Serren drank and flirted, while Pattenia waited for her moments before grabbing an elbow and steering Lord Balderin Wensea to a corner. “My dear,” he said, giving her a kiss on the cheek. “You are a vision.”

“Thank you, Lord Wensea,” Pattenia said, smiling. “It is always a pleasure to hear compliments from such a handsome and distinguished lord.”



“You do flatter me. It makes me think your brother sent you over here to get something from me.”

“Lord Wensea, quite the contrary. I wanted to discuss what my family could do for you.”

“Speak on,” Wensea said, curious.

“I know you have long wanted to add Ulrick’s Atoll to your holdings.”

Wensea’s eyes lit. “It is no secret.”

“In order to show our love for you and your family, as well as our appreciation for your continued support, we would be willing to make a gift of it on the birth date of your daughter, Gallia.”

Wensea could not hide his joy and laughed. “I cannot tell you how much joy it would bring us.”

“And how is Gallia?”

“Wonderful. She just had her second child...”

They spoke more, chatted, touched, and then Pattenia finished the same way she finished every such conversation as she met

the lords of the realm. "Above all else," she said to Wensea, "my family and I value loyalty, and we will never be the one to break it."

"Then it will never be broken," Wensea said.

Pattenia resisted the urge to shake the man's hand, and instead they traded polite bows. "It has been a pleasure," Pattenia said.

"To prosperity," Wensea finished, watching Pattenia go, impressed with her demeanor.

It was the same each night, with Pattenia meeting the Lord of each island, and connecting with them, offering gifts and treasures, letting them see her and know her, and begin to trust her. And she met with the ladies as well, the wives, and let them know, too, of her character and her generosity and her desire that they should remain friends "whatever trials may come."

After the party, Pattenia sent the other girls home, but asked Danalia to stay. "Sit down. I have something very serious to tell you."

Danalia could tell by the tone of her voice that this was something important.

“First off, I want to apologize. I was very rude to you when I said Serren could not be interested in you. It was out of friendship, but I should have been a better friend and more considerate of your feelings. Of course, you are very beautiful and any boy would be interested in you just for you.”

Danalia nodded and sighed. “I’m sorry, too. I should have talked to you more about how I felt, but instead I snuck behind your back, and with your brother, and I knew it would hurt you.”

The girls hugged.

“Thank goodness,” Danalia said. “I can’t be happy when we are fighting.”

“Me, neither. Okay. Now.” Pattenia’s heart was racing. She was terrified of what she had to say, of how Danalia might react. “I am going to tell you a secret. What I am about to say must stay between us. If this secret gets out, it could lead to my death.”

Danalia’s eyes widened. “*Your* death?”

“I am telling you, I have to tell you, because you are my best friend, and I want you with

me. I wouldn't dream of doing *this* without you."

Danalia twisted her hair. "What is it?"

Pattenia laughed nervously. "I can't believe I am about to tell you this. It will sound crazy."

"Go ahead," Danalia said.

"I am going to claim the Crown. I will rule The Shattered Isles."

"How?" Danalia asked, excitedly. "Do you mean to---? What about Serren?"

"The hekatin have a spell. It will turn Serren—I don't know how else to say this, so I will just say it—it will turn Serren into a girl."

"Serren?" Danalia said, shaking her head. "A girl?"

"Yes. Serren will be changed into a female."

"Is this some sort of joke?"

"Not at all. Danalia, I am serious. I have seen the magic at work. I went to the forest with Actonia, and she—we—turned a stag into

a doe. I saw it with my own eyes. You've been working magic at school. You know we can—change—things.”

“But, how does that make you King? Serren will still--?”

“Will be my younger sister, and as such the crown will pass to me.”

Danalia looked away. “I don't know what to say. I—this sounds like lunacy, and yet even if it is true? Can you really do this to your brother?”

“I have to do it, Danalia. For the good of the kingdom, and even for Serren.”

“How is this good for Serren?”

“Actonia has foreseen that if he becomes king, he will be assassinated.”

“Actonia? Are you sure you can trust her?”

“Yes. I trust her.”

“I don't.”

“Then, trust me. I need your help, Danalia. Twelve of us will cast the spell as one. I want you to be among the chosen.”

“You want me to openly practice goddess craft, and use it against the Crown Prince? To turn him into a girl, so you can usurp the throne? Do you know how mad you sound?”

“You are my best friend, and I need you.”

Danalia covered her face and struggled with her thoughts, turning in a circle. “You make it very hard to be your friend sometimes.”

“What does your heart tell you, Danalia? What do you think the Goddess would want you to do? And not just for me, but for all women, everywhere? For all men?” She let Danalia think, but at last spoke again, softly. “Danalia. I need an answer.”

Danalia turned and faced Pattenia. The Lost Moon hovered in the sky outside the balcony, casting the room in cold, silver, light. “You are mad. This is treason. If it doesn’t work---?”

“It will work,” Pattenia said. “If I have you at my side.”

“You do,” Danalia said, “though I think this is the most ludicrous idea I have ever heard.”

Pattenia held out her arms, and the girls hugged. Then, Pattenia held out her hand. “Let’s shake on it, as men do.”

“Um, okay.” Danalia took Pattenia’s hand in a loose, soft grip.

“No. Hold it firmly and look me in the eyes.”

Danalia did.

The girls shook hands. Danalia giggled. “I feel like such a boy! It feels weird.”

“Get used to it,” Pattenia said. “In the new world, with the goddess restored, we will shake hands just like the men do. We will be their equals.”

## CHAPTER 18

Professor Falconette stood at her podium in the chapel. “When the time comes,” she said, “no one can falter. If even one of us fails to do her part, we will fail, and we will burn.”

The women nodded. There were thirteen of them. Some, like Falconette, served as teachers at the Conservatory. Others were alumnae of the academy, now wives of prominent men, but life-long hekatin, raised in the light of the goddess and eager to see her restored. The youngest were Pattenia, Danalia and Actonia.

“The days after Pattenia’s coronation are vital. We must move quickly to establish her rule. Pattenia.”

“Yes?” Pattenia said.

“You must be very hard on your sister. She must be forced immediately to dress and live as a young woman.”

“I thought I might give him time to adjust? Maybe send Serren off to live in the country—in seclusion?” Pattenia said, unable to speak



to Falconette in any but the deferential manner of the school girl she still felt herself to be.

“The whole kingdom must see *Serrenina* as a young woman, as your younger sister. Those who seek to depose you will look to her as the rightful heir, and you must make it clear to her and to all the kingdom that she is not a man anymore, and that she never will be one again. When they see her corseted and gowned, they will see not see her as Serren, crown prince, but as *Serrenina*, little sister. The clothes unmake the man.”

“She is my brother,” Pattenia said. “Isn’t it enough that I take his sex from him? His crown?”

“It is not,” Lady Fawnae said. “Our lives are all at risk. Seeing *her* in a dress will strike fear into the heart of every male in the kingdom. Your brother will serve as a warning to any who oppose your rule. They will fear you and respect you. Put her in dresses and parade her in front of the nobles and the people, let them know that to defy you will end with them laced into a corset and hosting tea parties.”

“Frightened men grow violent,” Annya said. “In any case, she is my son, and I will not have her paraded around and humiliated.”

“She will learn to be happy as a girl,” Actonia offered in a soft voice, “when she comes to accept her new sex and life. Be firm with her; you will help her on her journey.”

Pattenia shook her head. “It’s cruel. My brother will be broken to find himself a girl.”

“Being a woman is not a punishment,” Actonia said.

“A man would simply kill another man who stood between him and the crown,” Falconette said. “You are giving your sister a chance to become a better person, to live a better life.”

“So, this is all for his benefit?”

“Pattenia,” Annya said, putting a hand on her daughter’s arm. “When you were young, you hated dresses. You fought me constantly, wanted your hair cut short, wanted to wear britches.”

“I remember.”

“But in time you accepted it.”

Pattenia considered. "I learned to wear dresses because I had to wear dresses."

"Yes. It will be the same for Serren."

"We all went through it," Ollia Falconette said. "We are born female and free, but custom makes us girls and women. Let Serrenina experience what every girl must. She is strong enough, and if she isn't, it will make her stronger."

"I loathed the very sight of a corset," Lady Fawnae said. "Yet, I wear one today without a thought."

"Very well," Pattenia said. "Serrenina will dress and live as a young woman, but he will not be paraded about and made a mockery."

"We'll help her get through it," Annya said.

"If she ever speaks to us again, it will be a miracle greater than her girlhood," Pattenia said.

"We also need to discuss Appollon and the priests of Maxis," Falconette said. "I suggest we round them up and consign them to the flames."

“Never!” Pattenia said. “Under no circumstances.”

“They will never accept you as their ruler,” Falconette said. “They will never accept us.”

“Appollon would burn you, and he would enjoy it,” Fawnae said.

“What good is all this if we aren’t going to be better than them?”

“There will be time for better once we have consolidated our power,” Falconette said.

“You sound like a man,” Annya said.

“That’s a low blow. A leader must make difficult decisions.”

“And I am making one right now,” Pattenia answered. “We will not rise to rule only to become the thing we hate.”

“As long as they exist they will seek to burn you and all of us,” Lady Fawnae said. “We can’t afford to be kind.”

“I will not send bodies to the flames,” Pattenia said.

“Then what do you propose?” Actonia said.

“I will speak to Apollon. I will give him and the priests of Maxis a chance to make peace with my rule. I will show him that we do not need to live in fear of each other.”

Falconette snorted. “And if he refuses?”

“When he refuses,” Fawnea said.

“I will walk that path if I come to it,” Pattenia said.

The meeting ended with a prayer, and Annya and Pattenia left together, making their way back to the palace. They went up to Pattenia’s rooms, and sat down together. “Are you really ready to do this?” Annya asked.

“Yes,” Pattenia answered. “I know it is the right path for me.”

They sat together in silence for a time. Then, Annya said, “Do you remember when Serren was little? How you used to dress him?”

“I used to put him in my old dresses and pretend he was my little sister. I was just thinking about that.”

“He hates it whenever we bring it up.”

“And now I mean to do it again, but for real and when he is at an age that it will be-- I suspect-- a disgrace far worse than anything he could imagine.”

“At first it will seem that way to her. But we will help her. She’ll get through it just as we did.”

“And then? What’s a girl to do in this life if not marry? Actonia said it is not a punishment to be a woman, but it is. I have felt ashamed of being a girl my whole life.”

“We’re going to make things better for women and girls,” Annya said. “Who knows what she may become? Serren is very lucky. She will grow up in a far better world. Maybe she will even help build that world.”

“And you really think she will forgive us?”

“I have to believe that in time, she will.”

“Let me show you something.” Pattenia got up, found a sketch from the mass on and around her drafting table. She showed it to her mother. In the background a battle-field strewn with bodies, fires and smoke still rising from the charred and broken ground, and in the foreground Pattenia, face begrimed, her

plate mail battered and rent. In her arms was a girl in a long, flowing dress. Beneath the picture had been sketched the word *Serrenina*.

“I had a dream,” Pattenia said. “That I rescued Serrenina. I *saved her*.”

“You are rescuing her. You are saving her life.”

She looked the picture, unsure. “I feel like I am ending it.”

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That night as Serren dragged himself wearily into the dining room, Pattenia looked at him with wet, wistful eyes. His last night as a boy, she thought, and she knew she would miss him, this version of him. So tall, and with broad, muscled shoulders, a dusting of his golden whiskers across his cheeks and chin. So handsome he was almost pretty.

Annya, too, looked at her son with love and tender concern, struggling against tears as she watched him eat, shoveling food into his mouth. He laughed at something Pattenia

said, and as his face lit up, eyes sparkling, a broad toothy grin, the embodiment of masculine contentment, and the thought- *that*. Yes. *That* is what she would miss most.

Watching him, knowing that he had no idea this was his last day, that he would soon be a new girl, she felt deeply sad, and her heart went out to him.

As dinner wound down, Annya and Pattenia exchanged a glance full of love and sorrow and compassion for each other and for their brother and son, for what he and they were about to lose, but also hope for what was to be gained.

“What’s going on with you two?” Serren said. “You’ve been moony eyed all night.”

The two women laughed. Pattenia said, “It’s just that-- I love you so much, Serren.”

Serren shifted awkwardly. “Oh, no,” he said, feeling uncomfortable in the presence of expressed feelings. “Do we have to do this?”

“Yes,” Annya said, and now she found herself crying. “Give your mother a hug.”



Serren rolled his eyes, but got up and hugged her. Annya ran her fingers along his stubbly whiskers, looking up at him proudly. “I love you as well, Serren. Both your sister and I, just remember, we will always love you and help you however we can.”

“Okay,” Serren said, and then added, “Let’s do this then,” as Pattenia got up and threw her arms around the two of them, and they held each other. The women’s tears made Serren uneasy. He didn’t understand them, and he didn’t understand how to respond to them, to make them feel better.

The hug finally ended, Pattenia and Annya wiping their tears.

“I’m going to go out with the boys to enjoy one last night of freedom before the whole crown and king thing,” Serren said. “I need to go get ready.”

“Let me walk with you,” Pattenia said.

“Sure, but will you promise not to cry anymore?”

“No.”

Serren rolled his eyes. “Fine.”

Walking next to Serren, Pattenia reached out and took his hand. "I've always been a little jealous of you," she said.

"Me? Why?"

"Because you got to do everything, with father. And you got to learn swordplay and go hunting-- so many fun things girls didn't get to do."

"Oh. Well, why would you want to do that stuff?"

"It looked fun, I guess, and important, and-- I don't know. I just did. Sometimes I wondered what it would be like to be a boy."

Serren considered her words, wondering where this was going, why she was saying it now, and tensing as he suspected it would soon be all about the whole wedding thing.

They came to the door to the back stair, the private stair that led to the royal rooms. It and the stairwell were narrow, so Serren opened the door and waved Pattenia forward. "Ladies first."

Pattenia smiled. "Thank you, good sir."

"Of course, milady."

They both laughed. Looking back over her shoulder, Pattenia said, "What about you? Have you ever wondered what it's like to be a girl?"

"What?" Serren said, feeling threatened by the question. "Me? No. I'm not a sissy."

"It wouldn't make you a sissy just to think about it."

"Well, I haven't. It would be... so odd."

They reached the top of the stairs. Pattenia took Serren's hands. "It's really not so bad to be a girl," she said. "It can be fun."

"That's great to hear," Serren said, shaking his head. "Where's all this coming from?"

Pattenia looked down. "Nowhere. I was thinking about -- I want us to be friends. Always. Will you promise me that, Serren?"

"Of course," Serren said. He gave her another hug. "I really need to get going." They had reached the outer doors to his rooms, and the sentry pulled the door open and held it. "I will see you tomorrow."

"Enjoy your last night," Pattenia said, as she found herself crying once more, and then

she hurried to her own rooms.

## CHAPTER 19

Serren woke to the sound of a rooster's call. His left arm had fallen asleep, and he looked blearily to see there was a girl on it, her hair in his face. It all started to come together for him. Wine. Lots of it, and a trip out to see Innman's daughters because this was the last night before...

"My coronation," Serren said, sitting up, straw in his hair.

"What?" Skye said.

"I have to go. They're crowning me king today."

"Oh," Skye said, lying back down, pulling the tarp they'd used as a cover over her.

"Okay. Have fun."

Serren gave her a kiss and squeezed her breast. Then, he jumped to his feet, quickly dressing before climbing down from the loft and rousing Asryn, Kencrick and Oper. The other three moaned and groaned, but got up,

leaving their warm girls behind and dressing. “Come on,” Serren said. “I have to get back so they can make me King.”

“What’s the hurry?” Iris said, rubbing her eyes. “They can’t exactly start without you.”

Serren laughed. “Wouldn’t that be something? If I made them wait all day?”

“Better not,” Asryn said, dusting the hay off Serren’s shoulders. “Some of them are probably already looking for an excuse to chop off your head.”

“Not my head!” Serren said, putting his hands over his crotch.

The boys laughed, and then all four made their way out to their horses. Serren mounted, but the other three hesitated, and when he looked at them their faces were glum and full of sadness. “What the hell?” Serren said. “It’s a coronation not an execution.”

“Yeah,” Asryn said. “Right.” He climbed onto his horse. The others reluctantly climbed onto theirs as well.

“What?”

“It’s just that... this is the end. Of us. Our thing,” Oper said.

“The Knights of Smoke and Flagon,” Kencrick said.

“This was our last night together. Today, you become King, and it will never be the same,” Asryn said.

“Okay, ladies,” Serren said. “Let’s not get all weepy now.”

“Of course,” Asryn said. “That’s what I get for speaking my heart.”

“Men,” Serren said, “let’s not talk of this anymore.” They rode side by side, four abreast down the road. “Time for me to get my crown.”

Serren hurried home, and the day became a blur. He bathed, dressed in his formal clothes—a tight shirt that showed off his muscular frame and a pair of black slacks. The great chain of the King hung over his shoulders. He strapped a belt and scabbard at his waist, and sheathed Justice, the great blade of the Denae kings, carried by the first king, who had struck down the Queen Usurper and restored the rule of Maxis. Justice had

been handed down from King to King for 600 years. Finally, he put on a crimson sash, which blazed with the Hawk of House Danae.

Looking in the mirror, he adjusted his sash, his scabbard, making the belt higher on one side so it hung, he thought, rakishly, like a pirate. A manservant brushed the shoulders of his coat, and Annya looked on, her face impassive. "It's time," she said. "Let me go in and take my place. When you hear the trumpets..."

"I know. I enter. Stand up straight. Look ahead. Blah... blah...blah..."

Annya smiled, looking up at her son. "Let me get one last good look at you before the ceremony," she said. "You're so handsome. I want to remember you like this."

"This is so embarrassing," Serren said, rolling his eyes.

Annya started to say something, then stopped, turned and hurried off to the Great Church of Maxis, where the crowning would take place.



Serren followed shortly after, leaping onto a great black stallion. The palace gates rose, the great chains clattering as they lifted the portcullis, and outside Serren saw the King's Path, which wound down from the palace to the church, its dark stone spires thrusting into the blue sky. A massive crowd of the common folk celebrated along the path, pushing up against the low stone wall that lined it. The crowd roared as the gate rose, even before they could see Serren, and when he rode out into the sun, they roared again, louder. Serren raised his hand, keeping his face impassive, as he'd been trained to do, though he wanted very badly to smile as people called out to him. The crowd melted into a messy blur, colorful shapes, a joyful rumble. Serren looked above and ahead, maintaining his regal dignity—the phrase made him want to laugh—while the people cheered and cheered, and soon he found himself climbing the stairs to the chapel, where Prime Minister Turin waited for him, bedecked in his own regal garb, including a soft, floppy white and blue hat. Serren accepted the other man's hand, and as they shook Serren leaned in and said, "You look ridiculous."

“I know,” Turin said, as they turned and faced the crowd, raising their arms.

The trumpets blared, and the great oaken doors of the church swung open. Serren turned and marched through the arch and into the great, cavernous stone walls of the church, lit warmly with the light of ten thousand candles in addition to the columns of light that streamed through the stained-glass windows. Inside the church all the royals of the realm stood in rows filling the pews, looking on politely as the trumpets blared and the crown prince made his way to the altar, where Primary Appollon stood waiting. The crown rested on the altar, glittering gold and flashing emeralds. Annya and Pattenia stood in front of the altar, each wearing a tiara that flashed with white diamonds and pink amethysts. Serren spotted Asryn, Kencrick and Oper, and smiled, breaking his regal countenance, giving them a thumbs up.

He saw Prett looking at him, his face sour and bitter.

He scanned the crowd, looking, looking, and he was afraid he'd missed her, somehow, and it made him feel terrible, but then he finally found Nemeria, his bride to be, and her

face glowed with pride and joy as their eyes met, and he smiled as she mouthed, *I love you.*

Pattenia saw it all, and she felt herself trembling, her lip quivering at the thought of what she was about to do to her brother and to herself. He was so proud and excited, so happy. So clearly in love with Nemeria! *I can't do it, she thought. It's too cruel.*

Serren climbed the steps to the altar and took his place next to his sister and mother. He turned to face the crowd as the trumpets finished their fanfare. It was time for his speech, which he had promised to memorize for the past two weeks, but which he suddenly found he couldn't remember a single word.

Pattenia caught Professor Falconette's eye, and shook her head. No. No. *This is all a mistake, she thought, backing away.*

The fierce, demanding glare Falconette responded with froze her in place. Falconette, Actonia Danalia and the rest raised their left hands, their first two fingers and thumbs raised, and Pattenia could feel the energy flow from them to her as they began to silently mouth the words of the spell. Pattenia started

to reach out to Serren, to touch him on the back, but hesitated. The Professor bared her teeth, eyes blazing.

*I am saving his life*, Pattenia reminded herself. She put her hand on Serren's shoulder and began to silently mouth the words of the spell, the sparks running along her arm and the magic energy flowing into Serren.

Serren felt Pattenia's hand on his shoulder, felt a tingle at her touch. Looking back at her, he smiled, thinking she meant it as a gesture of support. "I am supposed to say a few words," Serren called out, trying to buy time. "To find some way to exp—ress." His voice cracked on the last part. He cleared his throat. "To express..." Serren's eyes went wide. His voice sounded like a tea-kettle. He tried to hide his embarrassment, but when he cleared his throat again and spoke, his voice came out in the same high-pitched girlish squeak: "To express.... Um...My voice?"

He felt hot, his cheeks flushing, and now he felt like his shirt was shrinking, straining across his chest. Looking down, he saw ....what? It didn't make sense. His chest looked rounded... like he had...a girl's

breasts? But no. That wasn't possible. He shook his head, but as he watched his chest continued to swell, and one by one, the buttons began to pop off his shirt. He stared down shaking his head as his shirt burst open to reveal soft, white rounded... .. like Skye's... girl's... He shook his head. Breasts? The crowd gasped, and Serren instinctively crossed his arms over the breasts that seemed to have blossomed on his chest, then felt the back of his pants grow tight as his hips rounded and swelled. Serren's mind swam in confusion, unable to comprehend what was happening, refusing to accept the impossibility of his fluid and changing sex.

“Serren!” he heard Nemeria call out.

He felt a stabbing pain in his groin, and his knees went weak and he sank to a kneeling position as his hair seemed to pour down over his shoulders and into his eyes. “What’s happening?” he said in that small little voice, which echoed around the church.

Looking out from under his new bangs, he saw people staring at him in shock and horror. Nemeria tried to come to him, but her father held her back. He saw Prett staring, eyes burning with fascination.

Keeping one hand across the soft roundness of his chest, he used the other to try and brush back his bangs and then pull the curtain of long hair away from his face. He saw that his sleeve now had grown too long for his arm and it flopped loosely over his hand. Confused, panicked, the flight response kicked in, and he tried to get up, to run from the altar, to hide from the staring eyes of the lords and ladies, but he felt Pattenia's hand on his shoulder, and she squeezed, hard, digging her nails into his shoulder and holding him in place, forcing him to face the crowd, who stared, amazed, at the girl with the wide, frightened eyes, her pink mouth hanging open, the girl they knew had been Serren.

The crowd started to murmur.

Falconette strode up to the altar, while the other members of the twelve formed a semi-circle around Pattenia. "Let all be witness," Pattenia said on cue, her voice shaking with emotion, "that there is no longer a male heir to the throne."

Serren looked back at her, his bangs flopping back over his eyes. "What?"

“Serren is now a female and my *younger sister*. I am, therefore, the rightful heir to the throne.”

The crowd’s murmured grew louder, and they started to stir.

“Witchcraft!” someone shouted.

“Hekatins!”

“Silence,” Professor Falconette shouted. “Let any man who denies Pattenia’s claim to the crown step forward now—and join *Serrenina*,” Falcon said.

Asryn moved, intending to step forward, shocked by having just watched his best friend turn into a girl. Oper stopped him. “Not now,” he whispered.

“Does no man wish to stand by *Serrenina*?”

Silence. No one moved.

Nemeria cried out. “Serren!”

Asryn shook with anger, looking at the young woman who knelt at her sister’s feet, and his mind reeled at the impossible truth that this girl was his best friend, Serren. She had golden hair spilling in ringlets down over

her narrow shoulders, and full round breasts that struggled against her shirt, her big, green eyes wide and shocked, her mouth hanging open, and trapped in this girl, he knew, was a man.

No one stepped forward.

“Does no man here wish to join Serrenina?” Falconette repeated, for a third time.

“Pattenia?” Serren said in that same humiliating, soft voice. “What have you done to me?” He looked at his hands. They were small and white.

“Crown Pattenia,” Falconette said to Primary Appollon.

Appollon looked around, backed away. Shaking his head, he turned and ran, followed by the other priests who had stood with him on the altar in their vestments.

“Very well,” Falconette said, stepping forward and lifting the crown from the altar. She walked up to Pattenia as Actonia removed the tiara from Pattenia’s head and placed it, sparkling white and pink, on Serren’s.



“I crown Pattenia Denae, as the eldest living and rightful heir to the house of Denae, King of the Shattered Isles,” Falconette said. “All hail the King!”

The hekatin on the stage answered, “All Hail the King” but their voices seemed weak in the otherwise empty chamber. Pattenia looked out and saw angry faces, people staring, and she felt afraid. No one would support her. How could she have been such a fool?

A low rumble began to sound, and the ground trembled. Someone cried out, and then the shaking grew more intense, the glass windows shattering and falling in flashing shards of red and blue. The crowd cowered in their pews, men covering their wives and children, and the floor in the center of the church split, a great narrow slit opening along the center isle between the pews, and the statue of Maxis that stood on a great stone dais at the back of the altar toppled and crashed to the ground, splintering, dust rising from broken pieces. The quake stopped, and the people looked around, marveling that no one was hurt.

“All hail the king,” Annya called out in clear, proud and commanding voice.

Shocked, unnerved, terrified of what further magic the hekatins might unleash, the crowd sank to a knee and murmured, “All Hail the King.’

Pattenia stood there, feeling the weight of the crown on her head, looking out at all the royals, seeing the shock and fear on their faces. She looked down at Serren, and the King’s crown on her head slipped forward, so she held it with her hands. Serren looked back at her, blonde hair sweeping across his eyes, now wide with shock and rage. He had a very pretty face, and full, round breasts, and Pattenia felt sorry for him, for what she’d made him, because he was pretty and she knew that would make it harder for him. “Serren,” she said. “I’m sorry. I had to do it.”

“You didn’t,” he answered in his new voice, like a tea kettle.

Pattenia looked out at the gathered royals, all kneeling. *I’m the ruler*, she thought, and only now as that reality began to sink in, did she ask whether she really wanted to be— *King? Me? I need to do something-- kingly.*

"I know all of you, all of your families, Pattenia said. "I have made promises to all of you, and those promises will be kept. Nothing need change between us. Let us continue to enjoy the peace and prosperity we have known these long years. Loyalty above all."

"Loyalty?" Serren laughed, though it came out more as a girlish giggle. "You betrayed me," Serren said, and the sound of his small, pretty voice echoing throughout the church filled Pattenia with compassion. "You made me ..." he looked down at himself, but he couldn't acknowledge what he'd become... "you stole my crown." He pulled free of her grip and got awkwardly to his feet, feeling his breasts sway. He was far shorter than he'd been, a head shorter than his sister, and the sword he now wore on his wide, round hips dragged across the ground. He grabbed the hilt and tried to pull it from its scabbard, but he wasn't strong enough and he struggled, awkwardly, grabbing it with both hands and pulling fruitlessly with a high-pitched grunt, shocked and appalled by how weak he'd become.

"Oh, Serren," Nemeria said, covering her mouth.

“Take the princess back to her rooms and put her to bed,” Falconette said, gesturing to the guards, hand chosen for their loyalty to the goddess. They stepped forward and grabbed Serren’s slender arms, dragging him to the back of the altar and the priest’s chambers, where there was a private tunnel that lead back to the castle.

“Take your hands off me,” Serren shrieked, hair in his face and mouth. “I am the rightful heir, you owe me your--” A hand went over his mouth, and he squirmed helplessly in the arms of the men as they dragged him from the room. Serren felt like a child in their arms, so small and weak.

Pattenia stood at the altar, surrounded by the hekatins. Annya had watched the whole thing, her face expressionless, but then she took a position behind Pattenia, who looked forward, her face blank. Everyone just stood, paralyzed, unsure what to do, how to react, but then Danalia stepped forward, curtsied and said, “My King.”

Another and another of the hekatins stepped forward and acknowledged her as king, and then Prime Minister Turin stepped forward, bowed and said, “My King.”

Falconette watched as one by one the nobles followed suit, stepping forward to recognize Pattenia as their King, falling into line. It was a miracle, another miracle. Her eyes filled with tears as she offered prayers of gratitude to the goddess for letting her be there to witness the crowning of the Girl King.

## CHAPTER 20

Appollon and his men fled back to the walled in grounds of the rectory. They'd made it halfway across the yard when the ground began to shake, and while the others knelt and cried out to Maxis, Appollon looked back and saw the windows shatter, watched as the whole church listed to the side and seemed to wobble. A great cracking and crumbling rose from the church, and then a thunderous impact of stone on stone, and then suddenly it grew quiet.

Appollon stared at the broken church, thinking of what he'd just seen, the horror he'd just witnessed as Serren had been reshaped into woman, reduced from man... subjected to femininity, in front of the entire world. Was such a thing truly possible? Did he really see it? Was the goddess so cruel and so strong?

"Go!" He shouted his priests. "Sound the alarm. Alert the templars and the Witch Hunters."

"Primary," Secondary Drewin said, his voice shaking. "What is happening?"

“The goddess has declared war on man,” Appollon said, “and claimed her first victim. Pattenia claims the crown.”

“The prince is dead?” Drewin said, looking back, seeing the church now slanting to the side, the empty windows.

“Worse,” Appollon answered. “He is a woman.”

Appollon hurried back to his office. The quake had sent his library tumbling to the ground, and his books lay in piles, willy-nilly, across the floor. Frantically digging through the spell books, he examined their titles, rooting in his memory, trying to remember a ward that could protect him from-- that. His hands shook, and he finally just grabbed one of the books, slammed it open and began to page through the spells and enchantments.

The horn sounded three times, and he heard shouts and footsteps flooding the halls as the men armed themselves, the gate slammed shut with a thunderous ringing, and the rectory became a fortress.

“Primary,” Baltin, head of the templars, called from the doorway. “The rectory stands

secure. I have sentries stationed at every point.”

“Sentries?” Appollon said. “Did you see the witch’s magic?”

“I was on duty here,” Baltin said, unnerved by Appollon’s panicked demeanor. “What happened?”

“Something... terrible. A spell. Foul, blood magic. The very earth shook, and the hekatins have seized the throne. I never knew they could wield such awful and damnable power.”

“But we have magic of our own. Our Wizard Priests will counter them.”

“Yes!” Appollon said, looking up. “Yes! You’re right. Where is Zickaster?”

“I don’t know. Should I--?”

“No... no... I’ll find him,” Appollon said, tossing the book aside and hurrying out the door. “Attend to your duties.”



## CHAPTER 21

The guards dragged Serren into his room and tossed him roughly on his bed. He pulled his hair out of his face and ran after them, striking them weakly on the back with his small fists, but when they opened the door they shoved him backward, and he fell and landed on his butt, staring up at them through his long hair. "I'll remember your faces," he said, and then the door slammed, and Serren sat there, breathing heavily, trying to make sense of what had just happened.

He looked down and saw breasts-- *his* breasts? It seemed surreal, like some kind of impossible dream or nightmare, and he reached up with soft hands and cupped the breasts --*my breasts?* he thought-- feeling their weight in his hands, their soft, round shapes, but also feeling his own breasts being cupped, and he took a quick intake of breath at the tingling he felt inside his body.

"No." Scared of what he was feeling, at the strange clenching he felt inside himself, he

pulled his hands away, shaking his head. Getting to his feet, he felt the new weight of his chest as it swayed in his shirt, pulling on his back and sternum. *I really don't want to think about you right now*, he thought, looking at the impossible swelling and the way it seemed determined to keep his attention,

He pushed up his sleeves and looked at his arms; they were slender and elegant, lithe like a girl's. *Impossible*, he thought looking at his tiny wrists, feeling a strange twisting in his stomach. *No* and *impossible* just kept ringing in his brain as he confronted the body that could not be *his* because it belonged to a *her*.

As if in a trance, he walked to his dressing room, and swallowing hard, stepped in front of his full-length mirror. A curvaceous girl with long, wavy, golden hair that flowed halfway down to her waist looked back at him, and by force of habit he instantly thought, "I'd bed her" even as his brain struggled to accept that she was him. He put his hands on top of his wide, round hips. His shoulders were narrow, and his breasts, straining and almost bursting out of his shirt, seemed wider than his shoulders, and he felt sick looking at his skinny little arms. Everything that had made

him proud of his body had been erased and replaced with curves.

Turning to the side, he saw that he had a plump, round behind, with a feminine curve at the small of his back that gave his hips a tilt, raising his behind like a race horse. Running his hands through his long blonde hair to again pull it out of his eyes, he looked at the girl's face—his face?—she had big, bright green eyes, a tiny little upturned nose, and pillowy lips that filled Serren with impure thoughts. Her skin had a peachy glow, and all together she looked young, innocent, like she was maybe 13---- a sprinkling of freckles across the bridge of her nose added to the effect, and as Serren looked at that pretty girl with the woman's body, he fought back tears, shaking his head, refusing to believe she was him, that his sister had done this to *him*.

But she had. And she had done it in front of all the royal families of The Shattered Isles. Everyone.

Even Nemeria.

She had seen him turn into this *feeble*, *female thing*. Nemeria, the woman he was set

to marry. He'd been within moments of being crowned king, and now what was he?

A laughing stock.

A female? The fairer sex?

*A good lay* some part of him murmured, and he whispered, "Shut up."

A female. Was he really? In every sense?

He couldn't feel anything down there anymore, and he was pretty sure what he had between his legs now, but---

He had to look, to confirm. Closing his eyes, he unbuttoned the waist of his pants, then struggled to wiggle out of them. His wide, round and fleshy hips made it hard, but he pushed his pants down over them, kicked them away, and then lifted his shirt, opened his eyes and then fled from the mirror, trying to forget that he'd just seen his-

He couldn't even think the word.

Grabbing one of his robes, he slipped it on- it was too long and too big in some places, and too small and tight in a few embarrassing others, but it would do. He tied the sash, pulled the top closed over his swelling

cleavage and paced among his rooms, anxious, tense, annoyed by the bouncing of his new body, the soft jiggling of his new shape. He couldn't stand it. Wouldn't stand for it. *She may have given me a woman's shape, but I am yet a man*, he thought.

Pattenia would pay for this.

He went to the outer doors and pulled. Locked. He pounded. "Let me out," he said, cringing at the silly little voice Pattenia had given him. "I want to speak to my mother."

"Sorry, *Princess*," the man called back. "We have our orders."

"I'll have you hung for this!"

The guards just laughed.

Serren had never felt so powerless, and he clenched his fists in frustration. He couldn't stand being trapped in his rooms, being trapped in this soft, woman's shape, but he was....

Helpless.

He felt his heart race, and his breathing became labored, his chest rising and falling annoyingly, his nipples rubbing against his

shirt, and something was pinching his left breast. He felt like he was going to lose it as he squirmed and reached into his robe, yanking at it, adjusting his boobs, trying to get comfortable, somehow, with this woman's shape. He groaned in frustration as his hair flopped into his face for the umpteenth time, strands getting into his mouth, and he just about screamed, but he stopped himself, paused, and just tried to calm down, to think about something other than his new sex.

He needed to do something. To find some way to calm down, to think. He spotted the decanters of liquor on his bar. He'd been allowed to drink since he turned fifteen. He pulled his robe closed, walked over to the bar and poured himself a drink, taking a huge gulp.

The liquor burned, and he gasped, and for a moment thought that his new sex had made him so weak he couldn't even drink like a man, but then he remembered that it had always burned, and he shook his head and took another drink. Closing his eyes, he felt the liquor spread warm in his belly, and his limbs loosened, his breathing started to calm. He sat down, and blew out a puff of air and

crossed his legs, immediately worried that he looked too feminine and spread them.

*What is my course of action? Find allies.  
Who?*

Primary Appollon and the Priests of Maxis.

They stood to lose almost as much as he did if Pattenia got away with her coup. He searched his memory, trying to recall where Appollon had been when the witches had cast their spell and unmanned him, but he couldn't remember. It had all happened so fast and seemed so impossible. It was all a jumble, fragments that even now his mind rebelled against accepting as real, even as the moments flashed through his mind His voice cracking. The reshaping of his body.

The look in Nemeria's eyes: shame, horror, pity.

Falconette calling out, "Who will join Prince Serren?" No. She'd called him, what? Princess Serrenina. Princess. The titled rankled. "Who will join Princess Serrenina?"

No one. They had all just stood there like cowards. Not one person had come to his aid.

Serren took another sip of his drink.

If his sister thought to make him a princess, she was in for a very unpleasant surprise. He would show her that it was what was inside him that made him a man.

He wondered what was happening outside in the city, and stood. His head swam, and he wobbled, lost his balance and plopped back down on his fanny, his chest bouncing. His cheeks felt hot, and he realized he was drunk. *How much did I drink?* he thought. He looked at the glass. The bottle. Not that much.

He stood and once again found himself swaying unsteadily, and he frowned, knowing that this small, female body couldn't hold as much liquor as his male body had, but he refused to accept the limitations of his sex, and picking up the glass, he swallowed the rest of the booze and then stumbled blearily to his room, opening the doors to his balcony and walking out into the sunlight.

Squinting, he looked out beyond the castle walls to the Imperial City, and he saw...  
what?

A celebration?



King's Street had been lined with stalls for a fete to honor the new King, and there was bunting and banners flapping in the wind. The streets teemed with people who lined up in front of the stalls, buying cakes and treats, and others milling about the streets. He could hear music.

Where was the unrest? The rebellion? How could the people be going about the coronation festivities as if everything were normal? Had they not heard about Pattenia's treachery? Her use of blood magic to unman her brother in front of the world?

His slender hand pulled his hair back in what was already becoming a habit. Serren leaned woozily on the railing to his balcony, his chin on his fists. Impossible. This could not be happening.

"Hey," he cried out, cringing once again at the sound of his voice. "Doesn't anyone care what she did to me? I am your king!" But hearing the squeaky little voice that came out of him, he couldn't even believe what he was saying.

He stared out at the city, imagining Pattenia sitting in the grandstand, greeting nobles and

commoners, accepting their fealty and admiration, and the image brought cold hate to his heart, for her, for everyone.

“Is that her?” he heard someone say down below in the gardens.

“It has to be,” he heard another answer, and he recognized the voice immediately as belonging to Prett Wensea.

Serren looked down, spotted Prett and one of Prett’s friends standing next to a large, leafy tree, and their eyes met. “She’s so... busy...,” Prett said to his friend.

“I’d lay with her till the cock crowed,” his friend said.

Serren felt something twist inside him, a clenching in his abdomen of revulsion and disgust, and his cheeks burned with shame. He felt assaulted by the words, and he felt afraid to hear those words spoken about him. *I’d lay with her.* It made him shiver.

*Her. She.* Are they talking about me? His skin crawled, and he stared down at Prett, wanting to say something, but locked up, ashamed and confused to be subjected to... men. *They can’t be talking about me,* he

thought, looking around. There must be a girl around somewhere.

But then Prett smiled, looking directly at Serren, and Serren felt a hot new shame come over him, to be held in a man's eyes like that, to be looked at like... prey.

And then Prett held up his little finger and wagged it at Serren. "You look lovely," Prett shouted. "Like a fresh rose waiting to be--plucked."

Serren couldn't breathe or speak, and he rushed back into his rooms, trailed by gruff, masculine laughter. He slammed the doors to the balcony shut, locked them and stood for a moment with his back to them, pulling his robe closed over his breasts, trying to process what had just happened, what it all meant.

*I would lay with her.*

He hugged himself, hating the way those phrases made him feel, the way Prett's stare made him feel. He weaved back to the bar, grabbed the bottle, poured another drink, and sinking back into his chair, pulling his robe closed over his annoying breasts—again—he slammed it back, thinking *I can never show*

*my face to the world now. I can never let them see me in this body.*

*Can't show my face.* True in more ways than one. Because the face he had now? It wasn't his. It belonged to a princess.

A princess?

Never, Serren thought as he closed his eyes and sank back into his chair. The glass fell from his hand and tumbled to the floor, spilling the brown liquor across the stone.

"Princess...." Serren mumbled as he sank into oblivion, ... "never... never..."

## CHAPTER 22

“I need a ward, some sort of shield, something to protect me from their... magic,” Appollon shouted, bursting into Zikaster’s study.

Zikaster looked up from a book he’d been consulting. “What magic?”

“The hekatins. They have the power, the prince, those unclean animals, they...”

“Turned him into a girl? I saw. I was there.”

“So, how can I, can we, protect ourselves?”

“It took a group of them, and physical contact with the prince, and time. This is not magic that can be worked on one who is aware and untethered. Had the prince realized--”

“A ward! A shield! There must be something.”

“Very well,” Zikaster said. “Calm yourself.” He got up and walked over to the cabinets that lined one wall, drawers small and large stretching from floor to ceiling, and he began to open and close drawers, mumbling.

“Don’t you understand this is a crisis?” Appollon shouted, losing patience.

Zikaster stopped and looked him over. “Crises call for calm,” Zikaster said. “Compose yourself.”

Appollon clenched his fist but otherwise reined in his desire to pummel the old man. Finally, Zikaster said, “Here it is,” and removed a ruby pendant attached to a silver chain. “This will offer protection from all varieties of spells.”

Appollon took it and draped it over his head. The pendant dropped to the middle of his chest, and the weight of it there made him feel instantly more calm. He clutched it. “You’re sure.”

“As long as you wear that necklace, you need not fear joining Serren among the ranks of the fairer sex,” Zikaster said, then he winked. “If that is your true fear.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Not a thing less or more than what it is,” he said, then added. “I am preparing for the assault on the palace.”

“What assault?”

“The one you will order. I have foreseen it.”

Appollon felt his skin crawl. He hated Zikaster’s ability to see the unseeable, and the power he felt it gave the man. But, right now, he wanted information more than he wanted to push the other man down. “You’ve foreseen it? I won’t deny that I plan to order an assault against the usurper,” Appollon said, putting his hand over the pendant, “but have you seen-- do we triumph?”

“I haven’t seen the outcome--”

“Of course not! Useless! All you seers are useless!” Appollon turned and stormed from the room.

Zikaster smirked.

## CHAPTER 23

“Princess,” Serren heard a voice calling as he emerged from a boozy sleep. “Your mother, the Queen.”

“Mother!” Serren sprang up from his boozy slumber, stumbling.

Annya looked at the girl she’d made of her son; he was gorgeous. Stunning, “Serren,” she said. “Is that really you?”

“Yes,” he said, drawing his hair back from his face. “I tried to come and see you. We have to stop Pattenia.”

*He doesn’t know, Anya realized. He doesn’t know I helped do this to him.*

Annya pulled Serren in for a hug. He squirmed, unnerved by the feeling of his soft breasts pressing against his mother’s.

“You’re drunk,” Anya said, putting her hands on Serren’s smooth, soft cheeks and



looking over his face, then into his bleary eyes. They now stood about the same height.

“Oh, I --just a little.”

“Come. Sit.” She took her son’s small, soft hand in hers and led him to a pair of chairs by the window. Outside, the Lost Moon glowed gold, a pair of wispy clouds drifted over its face.

“Let’s rally the nobles. Order the palace Guard to seize Pattenia and her witches.” He paused. In his excitement, his already small voice had risen to a squeak, and he put his hand to his throat. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I sound ridiculous.”

“You don’t ever have to apologize to me. Let me look at you.”

“D- don’t,” Serren said, dropping his eyes, remembering the image of the girl in the mirror, the girl he’d become now. “I’m ashamed.”

“You shouldn’t be. Ever. Not in front of me.”

Serren couldn’t find words. How to describe the shame he felt to sit here now

before his mother, no longer her son, but just a girl. Like her. “There must be a way to undo this curse.” He looked up, his face brightening. “We’ll go to Appollon. I will regain my true body, and my crown. Let’s go.” He stood, but Anya sat, gesturing for him to sit back down.

“What is it?”

“Please sit. I need to tell you something.”

Serren sat. Anya tried to take his hand, but he pulled it away. “What?”

Anya looked at Serren, searching for words. He looked like a thirteen-year-old girl with his big, bright eyes, the long hair framing his smooth face. His breasts were pushing open the top of his robe, round and white. What could she say? How could she say it so he would understand?

“I’m going to help you get through this. It’s going to be okay.”

Serren shook his head. “I don’t understand what you’re telling me.”

“You’ll get used to being a girl.”

“I’m not a girl,” Serren said. “I’m not going to get used to being a girl.”

“Serren, this can’t be undone.”

“Why would you say that?” Serren stood. “I’m going to go see Appollon. He’ll restore me. I will claim my crown.” He walked to the outer doors. Knocked. The door opened, but when Serren started to walk out, the guard threw his arm across the door, blocking him, then looked beyond him to Annya. Serren looked back over his shoulder? “Mother? What is this?”

“Come back, Serren. Sit.”

“I will not,” he said, trying to duck under the guard’s meaty arm.

“Bring her to me,” Annya said.

The guard hooked Serren around the waist, lifting him effortlessly off his feet and carrying him back, squirming and cursing, to Annya, plunking him down in the chair across from her, knees together, hair in his face.

“You’re on her side,” Serren whispered, feeling sick.

“This had to be done,” Annya said. “It was the only way to save your life.”

“Get out,” Serren said.

“I know you’re upset--”

“Get out!” he screamed, standing. “GET OUT!”

Annya headed to the door, pausing. “When you’re ready to talk--”

“OUT!” Serren shrieked, throwing his stone mug toward her, watching it shatter and splatter brown whiskey across the floor.

His mother left. The door slammed shut. Serren sank to his knees. His sister. His mother. They’d betrayed him. “They are going to pay for this,” he said. “They are all going to pay.”

## CHAPTER 24

Pattenia entered the throne room-- her throne room. She wore her father's crown, a lining added so it rested on her smaller head. Elverous, Captain of the king's Guard, stood with her, along with a handful of armored men. Lord Baldric Wensea, who'd been nervously awaiting her arrival knelt and said, "My King."

Pattenia resisted the urge to laugh. It would take some getting used to being called "King." She waited, looking down on Wensea, then Elverous nudged her. "Oh! Please rise, Lord Baldric. Forgive me for my... I'm still learning..."

"My Lord," Baldric said. "A King need never apologize."

"Oh, sorry-- I--- there I go again."

Baldric smiled, then made another small bow. "May I speak freely, your highness?"

"Of course."

“First, let me say I am in awe of your courage. What you did today only one in one thousand men would ever even consider, far less dare.”

“Thank you,” Pattenia said.

“And you must realize that you are in grave danger. Already, there are those who conspire against you.”

“I-- suspected that would be the case. And you?”

“I come to personally swear my allegiance to you and your family. To recommit the ancient alliance between Wensea and Denae. To promise that I will fight and, if necessary, die at your side.”

Pattenia nodded, wondering what to say, how to respond, and she ended up saying the words she'd heard her father say, because they felt right and true. “And I would fight and die at your side as well.” Pattenia considered. “What can you tell me of the other houses?”

“I believe Fawnae and Gaunefer stand with you.”

Pattenia nodded. She knew as much. Both houses were run by hekatin.

“Malnae and Onsey remain uncommitted. They will not act until they sense which way the wind blows.”

“So that leaves Ansey,” Pattenia said. “Would they rise up against me without allies?”

“They have allies. Have you not heard? The Brothers of Maxis have closed their gates and begin fortifying their Rectory. They prepare for revolt.”

“I intended to reach out to Appollon and offer to make a treaty. Perhaps he will listen?”

“May I speak freely?”

“Of course.”

“I believe that is a mistake. Do not offer a treaty. Demand their complete and total loyalty to the crown on pain of death. They respect only strength.”

Pattenia put her hand to her chin. “I will consider it. Would you be willing to do something for me?”

“Whatever you command.”

“Sound out Ansey. See if they would join with us, to preserve the peace and prosperity.”

“I will, my King.”

“Perhaps we will avert war after all,” Pattenia said, out loud, though she mostly spoke to herself.

“Let us pray it is so,” Wensea said.



## CHAPTER 25

The next morning, Serren gradually emerged from a deep, alcohol hazy sleep. He felt warm under his covers, and became aware that his right hand cupped a large, soft breast. He heard a girl sigh with pleasure just as he sighed, and he squeezed. He felt his hand squeeze, and he felt something large and soft on his own chest being squeezed, and his eyes popped open as the memories of the day before flooded back to him.

Pulling his hand from his chest he looked at it—his wrist and arm were tiny, his hand small, with long, graceful fingers. It was a girl's hand, a girl's arm, and sitting up he felt the weight of *his* breasts shift as they swayed and settled on his chest, and he felt them shift again as he swept the soft hair away from his face and thought—*it isn't possible*. His mind reeled again as it struggled to understand the input from a new, female shape, and Serren just stared at that hand and that delicate wrist and thought, *I can't be a girl*.

He found himself in his same old rooms, his same old bed under his same old covers. Pushing the covers off, he saw he wore the same shirt he'd worn for the coronation, with the too long sleeves rolled up, the too small chest area pushed open by the round swelling he couldn't possibly have, and beneath that he saw his rounded, soft legs—legs that belonged to a teen girl, and not to a man.

He sat there like that, looking at his hands, turning them over, too stunned to think or move, refusing to believe what he saw, what his mind and even his memory told him. He remembered Pattenia standing above him, saying, “Serren is now a female and my younger sister.”

*Female. Younger sister.* He felt sick to his stomach, and he shook his head, refusing to believe that Pattenia would betray him, destroy him, reduce him to... girlhood. He wanted to pull the covers back over his head, just hide under them forever. Everyone had seen it, had heard him cry out in that ridiculous voice.

*“Serren is now a female and my younger sister.”*

He pulled the covers over his head, rolled onto his side. Nothing felt right. His hip seemed to be sticking up high into the air, and he could feel the soft, yielding presence of flesh squeezing between his arms.... Some strands of hair had gotten into his mouth and he also felt a pressure, a need he didn't want to face, because he needed to go to the bathroom and he didn't want to deal with it now, not in this girl's body.

But he had to go to the bathroom, or else wet the bed, which didn't seem like much of a way to regain his dignity. So he rolled out of bed, glad there was no one there to see him, and, careful to avoid looking in any mirrors, he hurried to the privy, unnerved by how the very act of walking seemed so strange to him—his legs felt too long, and his hips too wide, and his chest swayed and jiggled with each step, so that he finally crossed his arms over his chest, trying to keep it in place even as his brain sparked and sizzled, the sensation making him think of Skye and Bucket, and how he loved to come up behind them and wrap his arms around their chests, only now the breasts were his, and the feeling was confusing and wrong. Coming to the privy he stepped in, pulled the doors closed and saw a

card on the lid which read—in his sister’s hand—“*Welcome to the Squatter’s Club. I left the seat down for you!*”

Serren seethed. *Did she actually think this was funny?* He pulled up his shirt and sat, blushing with shame. Thank Maxis none of his friends could see him; thank Maxis *no one* could see him sitting down to pee like a girl.

Back in his room, he sat on the edge of his bed, his shame starting to transform into rage as he once more looked at his small hands, clenching them into fists. Pattenia. She had done this to him. Humiliated him. Stolen his crown. Well, if she thought he would just accept this, just allow her to steal his future and leave him trapped in this little girl’s shape, she was very much mistaken. He would rally the lords to his cause, depose his disloyal sister, and force her to undo this black magic, to restore him to his true form. His resolve growing, he got up and went to his wardrobe, throwing it open to find.... Dresses?

He looked in the drawers. Nothing but... girl things.

He looked under his bed, hoping he’d kicked some pants under there. Nothing.

Glancing back at the row of dresses hanging in his wardrobe, he felt his stomach turn. *Pattenia couldn't mean for me to wear those*, he thought. Even she in her cruelty wouldn't force him to dress this shape in girl's clothes. She had to know how humiliating that would be for him, how people would laugh at him, the Boy Princess.

The Boy Princess.

Laughter.

Was that what she wanted? For everyone to look at him now as a joke?

*Of course*, he thought, looking at the silken dresses in their pinks and powder blues. *Of course that was what she wanted*, he decided, feeling his stomach turn.

She wanted them laughing at him because no one would rally to a joke, to a man reduced to wear the body and the clothes of a girl. Serren's rage and disgust grew. It was like Pattenia had become a different person. He couldn't imagine his sister being so cold, so cruel. And yet the awkward feeling of his new body reminded him each and every moment that she *was* that heartless.

*I won't wear a dress, he decided. I will never wear a dress. I don't care what soft shape she has trapped me in. I am a man.*

He would call his manservant and have some proper clothes brought to him. He pulled the cord to call his manservant, and sat down, thinking. He could find some way to hide these breasts, have this annoying hair cut off. Then, he would find Appollon. The Brothers were surely already preparing to fight.

The door to his chamber opened, and in walked a tall, burly woman followed by Miss Bucket. Shame consumed him as he faced one of his former conquests now as a member of her own sex. He pulled his covers to him, pulling them right up to his chin, trying to hide his woman's body from this girl he'd taken as a man.

“Why are you here?” he said, trying to make his soprano voice sound a little deeper. He thought he saw Miss Bucket smirk at the sound of his voice. “Where is my manservant?”

“I am Miss Stone, your handmaid,” the large woman said, with a clumsy curtsy. “I am here to dress you, *Princess*.”

“Don’t call me that,” Serren spat, the word princess burning like a hot brand. “I am Prince Serren.”

“The King has ordered all to refer to you as Princess Serrenina, milady, now that you’ve.... changed.”

Serren shook his head at the wave of insults heaped on him by Pattenia. “I don’t care what she-- Get out of here. Both of you.”

“I am so sorry, milady, but I have orders to get you dressed.”

“Tell my sister I refuse.”

“Again, I am sorry, milady, but I am under orders from the King, herself, to get you dressed by any means necessary, and that is final. “Come,” Stone gestured to Bucket. “She’s ready.”

It was only then that the snow-white corset festooned with bows Bucket held in her hands registered for Serren, and he realized it was meant for him. Serren stared in horror at the garment of lace and silk, as if it were an apparition, the ghostly embodiment of the feminine shame he dreaded more than death—it had an hourglass shape, an ideal

woman's shape, and his mouth fell open. "No! Never!" he said. "Call my sister. Tell her I need to talk to her. Now!"

"Never mind that," Stone said, crossing her arms beneath her own large, matronly breasts. "Now be a big girl and get up so we can dress you."

"I am not a girl!" Serren shouted, but in his small voice it came out more like a shriek. "I will not be talked down to and ordered about by servants, I...."

Stone grabbed Serren's arm and yanked him to his feet.

"How dare you!" Serren said. "Take your hands off me."

Stone ignored him, pulling the covers from his hands and tossing them aside. Serren felt himself burning with shame as the women saw him standing there, his chest spilling out the top of the shirt, which came down to mid-thigh and left much of his coltish legs exposed. His long hair had gotten in his face and eyes again, and he was so embarrassed and furious that as Stone began to drag him along, he punched her in the belly, but his slender little arm and small fist just seemed to



bounce off her solid flesh, and he hit her again, shocked to discover how weak and ineffectual he'd become as she shoved him forward so his arms were on either side of one of his bedposts.

Bucket came around and started to tie his wrists, and he pulled his hands back, but now Stone grabbed one of his nipples and twisted it cruelly, causing him to cry out in agony. "Owwwww! I will have you hanged! Bucket. Don't do this. You know me!"

"Sorry," Bucket said, adding "milady." in a soft voice.

"You, too?" Serren said, struggling.

Stone, holding him in place as his wrists were bound, leaned forward and whispered in his ear. "Your sister told me to put you over my knee and spank you if necessary. Do you want word of that spread around the castle?"

In answer Serren tried to elbow her in the face, but Stone blocked the blow with her slab of an arm, then grabbed a hunk of Serren's long hair. Yanking it back hard she slammed her fist into his stomach, knocking the wind out of him and leaving him stunned as Bucket quickly bound his hands around the bedpost.

Serren tugged, trying to free himself, but he was powerless, and he heard a shredding noise as Stone cut away his shirt, and found himself naked, his nipples growing hard in the cool air. He twisted and kicked, but Stone managed to wrap the corset around his body, and then he felt her tugging on the laces. It felt like a belt being tightened around him, crushing his sides and stomach, shoving his internal organs up into his lungs, warping his ribs. He tried to take a deep breath, but the corset constricted his breathing and he found he could only take shallow breaths that went no lower than his chest. "I can't breathe," he gasped.

The women giggled, knowingly.

"You'll get used to it," Stone said. "Now, you can either keep fighting and embarrass yourself further, or you can just stop being such a baby. Either way, you're still going to end up in a dress."

Serren looked back over his shoulder at the dresses that hung in his wardrobe, his long hair sweeping across his now bare, narrow shoulders. "I would rather die."

Stone smiled. "You won't be getting off that easy, missy."

Half an hour later, after a great deal of squirming and squealing, Serren found himself standing in the dress, covering his face in shame as Stone and Bucket circled around him, tugging at and adjusting his gown. He gasped for breath, his breasts heaving as he struggled to get air into his lungs, exhausted from his struggles with Stone.

"There. Now you are *almost* properly dressed for a young lady."

"I'm not a young-- almost?"

"We should do something with that hair of yours."

"Yes," Serren said. "Cut it off."

"We could put it up," Bucket offered. "Then it wouldn't be in your face so much."

"I don't want to have my hair done," Serren said. "I am not a girl. How many times do I have to tell you?"

"Well, your sister did not order us to do your hair, so that's as you wish. "Come now."  
Stone took him by the elbow. Serren followed,

his eyes downcast, so he didn't realize that Stone led him to full length, three-way mirror until he saw the hem of his pink dress flowing into view.

"No," he said, trying to turn away. "I don't want to see myself like this."

"Just stop being such a little boy and take a look. You have to face yourself some time."

She put her hands firmly on Serren's soft little shoulders and turned him to face the mirrors. He let his eyes rise gradually along the length of his flowing dress until they came to his hips, which rounded dramatically to a tiny waist, so small it seemed impossible. His slender rib-cage rose until he saw the full, firm shape of his breasts straining against his dress, so large and round and—

His eyes went wide in shock as the boy in him automatically responded with lusty admiration at the sight of his perfect figure, even as he quailed at the realization that the gorgeous body was his. His eyes kept rising, now consumed with a need to see his face, to see what he looked like, and he looked up past his long, graceful swan-like neck to a pair of full, plump red lips, a tiny upturned nose,

and big, wide green eyes, *his* green eyes, surrounded by damp, curly lashes, green eyes that looked back at him with a look of shock and surprise. His mouth dropped open and he saw the girl's perfect white teeth as her hand went to her cheek and she whispered, "Is that me?"

The girl he'd seen the night before had been pretty, but now seeing himself corseted and draped in a woman's gown, he trembled at her, the she he'd become, and the words of the boys came back to him-

*I would lay with her...*

He was *very* pretty, and in fact looked very much like the portraits of his mother he'd seen when she'd been a girl his age. There was nothing in that mirror of the man he'd been.

He could see his profile in the side mirrors— and he saw his high, firm and large behind, exaggerated by the bustle on his dress, and it mortified him to see how inviting a shape he had. The dress, the corset, he felt like—a bauble. An ornament. A piece of frosty cake waiting to be eaten. It was one thing to be a girl, it was another thing and just as terrible, he thought, to be dressed as one.

“I look ridiculous,” he said.

“You look lovely,” Stone answered. “Pretty as a peach.”

“You really do,” Bucket said.

“As I said. Ridiculous.”

“The King would love to see you at the breakfast table,” Stone said, reciting the message she’d been told to deliver.

“I would prefer not to be seen like – *this*.”

“Very well. Breakfast will be brought to your room. If you won’t be needing anything else?”

“No,” Serren said, turning away from the mirror. “You’ve done more than enough.”

Stone smiled. “We’ve never met, but you know my daughter here very well.”

“Mother,” Bucket said.

“Oh. You mean...?” Serren said, embarrassed.

“I guess I don’t have to worry about you taking advantage of her anymore.”

Serren couldn't think of anything to say in response to that, so he just said, "Go."

"Yes, *milady*," Stone said, she and her daughter curtsying then leaving.

As soon as they left, Serren went to the mirror and examined the back of the dress. It laced up in the back and tied off at the top. He pulled his hair over his shoulder, and reached, trying to grab and untie the laces, hoping to loosen them and get out of the stupid gown, but though he strained, his fingers just brushed against the silk laces and he was unable to untie them. He was helpless even over his clothes.

"Damn," he said.

Looking at himself again, at the narrow waist, wide, round hips, the way his dress flowed out around him, he cursed. Anyone who saw him like this-- they would never respect him as a man again. They would only want to take him, he thought, as a maiden.

*What am I supposed to do now?* he wondered, walking over to a chair and finding that, corseted and gowned, he couldn't even sit down the way he was used to. Putting one hand on the back of the chair for support, he

kind of knelt into the chair, and then discovered he could no longer slouch as he preferred because the corset held his back ramrod straight. He put his hands in his lap, and stared out the window, powerless-- and hating it.



## CHAPTER 26

Actonia walked up to the gates of the Rectory, flanked by a dozen members of the King's Guard. "I bring a message from your King," she shouted up to the men on the battlements.

"Speak it, then," a man shouted back. Around him faces looked down, curious. Some wore the peaked helmets of the Temple Knights, others the circlets that marked them as Wizard Priests, while others just the simple robes of the brothers.

"I am to deliver it to Primary Appollon or not at all."

The man spoke some words to another, who ran off. "I have sent word to let the Primary know you are here."

Actonia raised her arms, and one of the Wizard Priests shouted "Hold!" His own hands sparking with arcane energy. Actonia pulled a pin from her hair, and it tumbled down over her shoulders.

“Don’t be nervous, boys,” she said. “I’m not going to unman any of you.”

“If you tried, you would die where you stand.”

“So serious,” Actonia said. “Have you lost your sense of humor along with your church?”

“Do not trade words with a witch,” Appollon said, appearing on top of the wall. “For her words are venom.”

Actonia smiled and curtsied. “Honored Primary Appollon. I bring a message from your King.”

“The witch girl is no King.”

“She bids me to offer a truce. She doesn’t want war and needless bloodshed and would live in harmony with the Brothers of Maxis.”

“And how can I trust the word of one who betrays her own brother?”

“The King asks that you state the conditions under which such trust could be earned.”

“We have spells, and I am sure you have the same, spells we can use to bind our agreements. If the witch would be willing to

subject herself to such a spell, I can foresee peace between us.”

“I will deliver your message to the King.”

“In the meantime,” Appollon called. “I offer an armistice. Let each side hold its hand until we have settled this matter, if it can be settled.”

“I will tell my King of your offer, and her answer will come as swiftly as we may.”

Actonia returned to the castle and delivered her message to Pattenia in the Office of the King. Ollia, Annya and Danalia were also there, along with Elverous. “Don’t trust him,” Ollia said.

“I don’t,” Pattenia said. “But if we both submit to a spell of binding, we will have to keep our words.”

“The Brothers of Maxis will never accept your right to rule,” Annya said. “Anything they suggest otherwise is a trick, a trap.”

“You don’t know that,” Pattenia said.

“I do,” Annya said. “I know this in my heart.”

The doorman opened the door. “Lord Wensea to see you.”

“Send him in.”

The room grew quiet as Wensea entered, bowing. “I bring word from Ansey.”

“Is it good news?” Pattenia said, hoping she would, after all, be able to avoid war.

Wensea looked around. “Perhaps it should be delivered in private?”

“These women are my closest allies and advisors. Speak.”

“Very well,” Wensea said. “Lord Ansey congratulates you on your crowning, and expresses his continued joy at your impending wedding to his beloved son, Runtick.”

Pattenia’s face fell. “Runtick?”

“Yes. He is quite excited that his son is about to marry the King.”

“Oh,” Pattenia. “About that...”

## CHAPTER 27

Serren found a book, lounged around reading. Fell asleep. Woke, read some more. The day seemed to be dragging on forever. He got up, opened the doors to his balcony and peered out, carefully keeping himself out of view from anyone on the grounds below. He saw the walls fully manned with King's Guard, but otherwise no sign of anything other than a normal day, a bright, sunny day, a good day for riding. If only he were still...

He went back inside and sat down with a sigh – still with the unnatural rigidity forced on him by his corset – and picked up his book. Read some more, fell asleep. When he woke to knocking, the sun had set, and a cool breeze blew through his room. The Witch Moon lit up the night sky. The doorman poked his head in the door. “Duchess Nemeria to see you, milady,” he said.

“No,” Serren said, “I’m not--”

But Nemeria walked in. She stopped and stared. “Serren?”

He turned away, ashamed. “I don’t want you to see me like this.”

Nemeria walked slowly into the room. “Serren, please, you don’t need to be ashamed.”

“I am ashamed,” Serren said, plucking at the skirt of his dress.

Nemeria felt his pain, and it hurt her. “Please believe me that I don’t think any less of you. I still... I am still your friend.”

“Please leave.”

“I can’t. I am- your sister sent me.”

“Why?”

“Serren. What does it matter? I am here. Let me help you.”

Serren closed his eyes. He felt lonely. He needed someone.

“Turn around,” Nemeria said.

“Promise not to laugh.”

“Of course not. Please.”

Serren turned, his eyes downcast. Slowly he raised them until he met Nemeria's; she was slightly taller than him now, and he found himself looking up at her. Nemeria looked right back at him, unblinking, then she reached out her hand, and Serren took it, and she led him to his bed. He sat on the edge of his blue quilt, she across from him. They looked at each other in silence, until Serren finally said, “Well, this is me now.”

Nemeria looked at the gorgeous girl sitting on the bed, knowing that she was Serren, the man she'd been meant to marry, but still struggling to believe it, despite the fact she'd seen him change with her own eyes. She didn't know how she felt about him now, or what to say to him, or how to talk to him. So, she finally said, “I don't even know what to say.”

Serren grabbed one of his pillows and hugged it to his chest, wanting to hide his body. “I'm sorry. It's painful for me to have you see me like this. To hear me speak in this voice. Why did my sister send you? To humiliate me?”

“I...” Nemeria’s voice cracked and her eyes filled with tears. “I...”

The heartbreak in her voice alarmed Serren. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“I’ve been made your Lady in Waiting,” Nemeria said, now openly weeping.

Serren slumped back down. He wanted to say something, or do something to comfort her, but he was too consumed by his own burning shame, and this latest humiliation filled him with a sense of hopelessness and despair. Yet, he refused to cry. He would never give Pattenia that satisfaction. She had given him a woman’s body, but she would not see him cry a woman’s tears. “My sister... she looks for every way to humiliate me... as if this body weren’t enough...”

“I’m sorry,” Nemeria said, feeling alone and hopeless, looking at the woman that the man she loved had become: so closed off, so distant, so selfish in his pain. “I’m so sorry.”

Serren closed his eyes, and almost on its own a thought sprang from his lips. “This corset is driving me mad.”



“Let’s get you out of it, then,” Nemeria said, getting up.

“You want to undress me?” Serren said, hugging the pillow tightly to his breasts.

“You don’t have anything I haven’t seen before,” Nemeria said, reaching out to pull the pillow away.

“That’s what I’m ashamed of,” Serren said, pulling it tight.

“You’ll have to get used to it.”

“Maybe. But not yet. Not tonight.” Serren’s pretty eyes were wide and pleading.

*He’s so pretty*, Nemeria thought, not sure how to feel about that, but she finally shrugged. “Okay. Should I call your handmaidens?”

“Yes. I don’t want to offend--”

“No. I understand,” Nemeria said, pulling the cord. “You’re not engaged to marry them.”

“I’m not in love with them,” Serren whispered, looking away.

“Oh, Serren,” she said, reaching out, touching his soft, smooth cheek with her fingertips.

“Don’t,” Serren said. “Please. It reminds me I have been... unmanned.”

Nemeria pulled her hand back. “I’m so confused. I don’t know how to reach you now. I don’t know how to help you.”

“Can you get word to Apollon?” Serren said. “Tell him I’m held prisoner here, and I need to see him.”

“I will try.”

The door opened. Stone and Bucket entered. “Yes?”

“I would like to change out of this ridiculous gown,” Serren said.

“Very well. Come.” Stone offered her arm. Serren took it, and she helped him to his feet.

“Would you wait in the other room?” he said to Nemeria. “I’ll call you when I get out of this --*dress*,” he said, tugging on the waist.

Nemeria resisted the urge to hug him, knowing it would only embarrass him. Serren

walked off, still holding Stone's arm. As they were about to leave his bed chamber and pass into what had become his dressing room, he glanced back over his round little shoulder and mouthed, *Go!*

Nemeria went to Serren's sitting room, but she couldn't resist the urge to peek in through a crack in the door. She watched as they unlaced and helped Serren out of his dress, then freed him from the corset, revealing his soft, naked little body. She got only a glimpse, then looked away, struck breathless at how perfectly formed he was-- for a woman.

"Is it possible for this take any longer?" he said, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Yes," Stone said. "We really should do something about your hair."

"Cut it off!"

"It needs to be brushed out."

"Why does everything need to be so complicated?"

"Stop being such a boy," Stone said.

He tossed his long, golden hair, then ran a slender hand through it to pull it away from his

eyes, which went wide as he saw the pretty girl's night dress Bucket brought him. White with embroidered pink roses, it made him want to vomit. "Why?" he said. "Can't I at least wear something normal to bed?"

"Lift your arms," Stone said.

Serren, remembering his futile attempts to resist earlier in the day, raised his arms. Nemeria got another glimpse of his naked body—the full, womanly breasts and round hips, the gorgeous glow of his soft skin—and this time didn't look away.

A clattering in the receiving room pulled her away from the sight of Serren's beauty, and she turned and ran in time to see servants entering the room with trays of food and drink.

"Dinner," Nemeria called, her heart still racing at the memory of Serren's body. She hurried back to the dressing room door hoping to get another glimpse, but Serren now wore the gown, which he was tugging on, trying to adjust it on his hourglass figure. He looked sweet, the sleeveless gown showing off his slender little arms. "Dinner," Nemeria repeated.

“I’m starving!” Serren said, starting toward the door, but Stone took him by the forearm. “We have to brush your hair.”

“I can do it,” Nemeria said. “After we eat.”

Serren agreed. “She can do it.”

“Very well, but make sure to brush it good, now,” she said to Nemeria. “One hundred strokes. If the princess’ hair isn’t perfect, it’s my hide.”

“I will. I know,” Nemeria said.

Serren walked out to his reception room, taking full breaths for the first time all day, relieved to have the pressure taken off his ribs and waist, to move freely now that his corset had come off, but with no corset to support them, his breasts now swayed and bounced freely with each step he took. The weight of them and sensation of their movement annoyed him. He crossed his arms under them, trying to keep them from bobbling around. “You would think the islands were going to sink into the sea if my hair doesn’t get brushed.” The smell of roast duck, sweet potatoes and currants wafted through the room, and his stomach growled.

“She’s right,” Nemeria said, examining his gorgeous golden waves. “You don’t want to get tangles.”

“I don’t give a damn about tangles,” Serren said. He saw that two servers had stayed in the room. “Go,” he called through the door. “I don’t need you.”

The girls curtsied and left. Serren eagerly pulled the lid off the duck and breathed in the steamy aroma with a smile. “Join me,” he said, and then he grabbed a drumstick with his hand and ripped off a chunk of meat with his teeth. “What’s going on out there? In the city?”

“Nothing much,” Nemeria said.

“And what of your family? The other nobles? Do they mean to allow my sister to get away with this act of treason?”

“I don’t know,” Nemeria said. “Appollon has fortified the Rectory. People say he will go to war.”

“There!” Serren said. “See? There is a loyal man. But your parents? They aren’t with me?”

“I don’t know, Serren. They don’t speak to me of these sorts of things. I’m sorry,” Nemeria found herself looking at Serren’s big, soft lips, now glistening with duck fat. She wondered what it would be like to kiss him now he was a girl.

“Eat,” Serren said, picking up a glass and trying to drink, only to find his hair somehow had gotten into his mouth. He tilted his head to the side to get his hair out of his face and gulped down half the glass.

Nemeria cut some duck for herself, and spooned some of the stuffing onto her plate.

They ate, and when he was full Serren patted his belly and yawned. “I’m going to sleep.”

“Your hair,” Nemeria said, maybe a little too eagerly. “It has to be brushed.”

“Forget it,” Serren said. “Who cares?”

“I promised Stone. She will be furious.”

“Nemeria, I can’t sit here and let you brush my hair like we’re girl-friends. Please. Don’t join with these others in humiliating me.”

“Then you have to brush it yourself.”

“Nemeria?”

“It will get tangled, and you don’t want that. Trust me.”

“Fine,” Serren said. “What do I do?”

“I’ll show you.”

Later, Serren sat on the edge of his bed, one leg tucked under him as he pulled the brush through his thick hair. Nemeria looked out the window as Serren had insisted. He didn’t want her to watch him brushing his hair ‘like some ridiculous maiden.’ It made him feel weird. As he brushed, his thoughts drifted among strategies for getting his sex back, for reaching out to allies, but gradually they drifted through his day, and his night, and the way his arm was starting to ache a little from all the brushing. “Being a girl should not be so much work,” he murmured.

“I agree,” Nemeria said softly. She was looking up at the Lost Moon, but she was remembering the sight of Serren’s naked body.



## CHAPTER 28

Lord Ansey strained to keep the smile on his face, and the strain showed in the wrinkles forming between and around his eyes. At his side, his son Runtick stood, looking bashfully away. Nemeria sat on her throne, weary but ready to do what she needed to do. “King Pattenia,” Ansey said, bowing. He pushed Runtick into a bow as well.

“Lord Ansey. Thank for you coming at such a late hour and on short notice. I know you are a very busy man.”

“Never too busy to see you,” he said. “Let me once more offer my condolences on the loss of your father. He and I had become great friends in these last years.”

“And let me assure you the friendship of House Ansey is treasured by House Denae.”

“A friendship that will only grow stronger when our families are joined. Runtick?”

Runtick half-waved and said, “Hello, Pattenia.”

“That’s Your Highness,” Ansey hissed.

“Never mind with that,” Pattenia said. Then, she took a deep breath and steeled her nerves, thinking, *Remember, Pattenia. You’re the King now.* “Allow me to speak plainly. I have long abhorred the practice of girls being forced into marriage.”

She saw the smile melt from Lord Ansey’s face, replaced by a simmering rage in his eyes.

*You’re the king,* she reminded herself. *Not the child anymore.*

“Among my first acts as King, I will end the practice and nullify all marriage contracts.”

Lord Ansey’s eyes now blazed with fury, and when he spoke his words were hard as stone. “I am not pleased,” he said.

“Please do not take this as an affront to your family, as it--”

“Is an affront!” Ansey shouted. “You say you want to speak plainly, and yet you speak in lies.”

“Be careful,” Ollia said. “She is your King.”

“She is a nothing but--,” Ansey started, but then held his tongue. “You think you’re too good for my son.”

“Dad,” Runtick said weakly, but Ansey raised a fist and Runtick cringed.

“This is not about Runtick. It is about fairness and justice for young women.”

“We have an agreement! Does your word mean nothing?”

“I never gave my word. I was never even asked.”

“Well, that’s the way it is,” Ansey said.

“Not anymore.”

“You will marry my son, young lady, or you will lose the love of House Ansey.”

“I will not marry your son,” Pattenia said, furious. “You are dismissed.”

“Dismissed?” Ansey said. “You uppity bitch.”

Elverous drew his sword and the Palace Guard followed.

Pattenia stood. “How dare you?”

Ansey paused, looking around the room at the flashing blades. “Forgive me,” he said, bowing. “I am sorry for my outburst.”

Pattenia shook, her whole body boiling with rage. “Elverous,” Pattenia said, “Take Lord Ansey to the dungeon.”

“Your highness,” Ansey said. “Please. We could still be allies.”

“Yes,” Pattenia said. “But first you are going to spend some time in my dungeon, that you may learn to think before you bark.”

Ansey started to speak again, but thought better of it, and instead surrendered to Elverous, who led him away.

“Runtick,” Pattenia said. “I am sorry. I hope your feelings are not hurt so deeply that we can’t be friends again someday.”

“It’s fine,” Runtick said, looking at the ground. “I didn’t want to marry you, either.”

“Pardon me?” Pattenia said.

“You’re too tall for me,” Runtick said, “and also kind of scary.”

Pattenia chuckled, surprised that being rejected by Runtick actually stung. A little.

“I should probably get home and tell my mom that you sent dad to the dungeon. She’ll want to know.”

Pattenia laughed. “Say hello to your mother for me?”

Runtick snorted, shaking his head. “Very well. Goodbye, Pattenia. Your highness, I mean.”

Runtick trotted off.

Pattenia looked around the room. “I had to send him to the dungeon. You heard what he called me.”

“I would have had him executed,” Ollia said. “You showed noble restraint.”

“Can’t we turn him into a girl, too?” Danalia said. “Make him really short and cute!”

“We can’t turn them all into girls,” Annya said. “As much as I wish we could sometimes.”

The talk of turning men into girls brought Serren to mind. “I wonder if I should go see

Serrenina?" Pattenia said, blinking back exhaustion.

"Let her come to you when she is ready," Annya said. "She needs time."

"Very well, mother. But I do hope she will be able to forgive me. Now, since we seem to have a moment, I would like to get some rest."

## CHAPTER 29

Duke Asryn Fawnae took a deep toke, and held the smoke in against a sudden need to cough, pounding his chest. The waning moon hung in the sky above, as he and his friends sat around on a stairway at the back of the Fawnae Estate.

“I can’t believe Serren’s a *girl*,” Kencrick said.

“We need to help him,” Asryn said.

“How?” Oper said, taking the pipe. “We’re just kids.”

“I don’t know,” Asryn said. “We have to do something.”

The other two looked around, shuffling their feet.

“What?” Asryn said.

“Didn’t you hear that old lady? She threatened to turn anyone who tried to help him into a squatter,” Oper said.

“She didn’t say that.”

“It was very much implied,” Kencrick answered.

“So, you’re just going to quit on Serren? Just like that?”

“Dude, I like having a pecker,” Oper said putting his hand on his junk. “I’m not giving this up.”

“You’re pathetic,” Asryn said, starting up the stairs. “I can’t even believe you mudcluds call yourselves men.”

“This isn’t just some school thing,” Oper said. “Like he’s running to fight Prett. They turned him into a girl. That’s not just something to fight it out over.”

“I’m not afraid, and I’m not going to just abandon my friend.”

“Yeah? Well save a kiss for me Asryana.”

“You’re the one acting like a girl,” Asryn said, going inside and slamming shut the door to his parent’s house.

“Man, this is not relaxing at all,” Kencrick said. “I’m going to go hang by myself.”



“Come on,” Oper said. “Hang here with me.”

“I can’t deal right now,” Kencrick said, looking up at the sky. “Just need some star time.” He wandered off into the night, leaving Oper to smoke as he walked home, alone.

Inside, up in his room, Asryn tore off his jacket and threw it against the wall. The image of Serren’s face flooded back into his mind— Serren’s new face—and his full, soft lips. “Maxis,” Asryn said, shaking his head. “Damn.”

He lay down, drifting in and out of a fitful sleep. Finally, seeing the sky just beginning to turn gray, he got up and went to one of his windows, the one overlooking the walls of his parent’s estate. Beyond, he could see the broken church, and then up on the hill the palace, golden beneath the Witch Moon. He thought of Serren in there, trapped by his sister, trapped in that perfect little body, with that perfect face...

*No. Asryn said. I can’t think of him that way. He’s my best friend, and he’s a man, and I can’t have a crush on him. It’s... mad.*

And then he saw a flash, and heard a thump, and a section of the palace wall exploded.

## CHAPTER 30

Stone and rubble flew through the air, and men found themselves knocked off their feet by the concussive impact of the explosion. Elverous, who'd been walking along the wall, checking on the sentries, nearly fell from the parapet, managing just barely to grab hold of the wooden planking and dangle precariously, feet swinging in the air, until his men reached him and hauled him back up. But even as he was pulled to safety, the sound of deep, howling voices filled him with dread, and he looked back to see the Tigers of Ansey pouring through the breach in the wall, their tiger-striped helmets distinctive beneath the gold light of the Witch Moon.

“The wall is breached! The wall is breached!”

The Tigers charged across the courtyard toward the palace steps, cutting down the small unit of guardsman who stood in their way. Elverous' heart leapt into his chest. The

King. They would reach the king, and they would kill her.

The door to the palace flew open, and Palace Guards poured out, forming a shield wall on the steps, and Elverous shouted joyfully at the speed and efficiency of their movements. *That's why we train so hard*, he thought.

The Palace Guard lowered their spear, the points glinting with death, but the Tigers charged forward without hesitation, and Elverous had to admire their ferocity as steel clashed on steel, men howled, and the Tigers hurled themselves against the shield wall, a tide of orange and black. For a moment the shield wall seemed to buckle, then it strengthened, and the Tigers found themselves grinding against it, struggling against the men on the steps.

Elverous grinned. "Archers! Archers!" The archers notched their arrows and pulled, but even as they fired their first volley a great screeching filled the air, and the men spun to see the sky teeming with crystacrafts, crystal birds that swooped down across the rising sun, their bodies scintillating rainbows that

blinded Elverous' and his men even as they ripped and with their razor beaks and talons.

Outside the wall, Appollon crouched behind some bushes, watching, a lip-less smile on his pudgy face. Zikaster crouched next to him. "If we would attack with the full force of the Wizard Priests and the Templars, bring the unbridled wrath of Maxis down on this Girl King," Zikaster said, "we would crush her defenders and have her in chains--"

"Have you foreseen this of which you speak?" Appollon said.

"I have not."

"Then shut up. I will not risk her knowing of my role," Appollon said, touching the amulet of protection he wore around his neck. He turned to Capithian and a small group of Purgationists who waited behind him. "Go through the servant's entrance to the back. Find the girl and bring her to me-- slightly harmed."

Capithian grinned and moved out.

"I have one more gift to send to our silly little girl," Appollon said, withdrawing a small crystal statue of a winged man from his robe.

“You would summon a Virilian?”

“I will go to any lengths to serve Maxis,”  
Appollon said.

*Any lengths short of risking yourself,*  
Zikaster thought.

On the ground below, as the Palace Guard clashed with The Tigers, the Purgationist Prime and his men stepped through the breach in the wall and hurried toward the rear of the palace. Elverous, battling against three Crystacrafts, saw it, and shouted warnings, trying to get someone to see, to stop the Witch Hunter, but he could not be heard above the noise.

## CHAPTER 31

Serren woke at the sound of the first blast, rolling out of bed and running to his window. His room was on the west side of the palace and did not face the front, but he could see smoke, and then heard the howling, and he cheered. “Yes! Yes!” *They are coming for you, Pattenia. They are coming to throw you down!*

The door to Serren’s room slammed open, and the doormen stormed into the room. “Come, princess. We need to get you to safety.”

“Safety? No.”

The doorman grabbed Serren’s elbow. “Come along.”

“I’m not in danger,” Serren said, yanking his arm free. “They’re after my sister.”

“Come, or I will carry you.”

Serren tried to run past him, to the door, but the guard grabbed him and hoisted him over his shoulder. “Put me down!” Serren

shrieked, punching the man on the back with his little fists.

The men didn't even respond, just ran out of the room, carrying Serren into the palace, where soldiers and servants ran about in frantic motion. Serren hid under his hair, hoping no one who saw him being carried around like a sack of potatoes would recognize him. The men carrying him passed down, down down, until Serren finally found himself being gently placed on a cold stone floor, and the guards ran off without another word, slamming a heavy iron bound door shut and then locking it from the outside.

Serren pulled his hair back and looked around the room. He saw children, some crying and clinging to their mothers, others sitting in small groups, and women, and... women and children. And him. He was in the safe room where they sent girls to keep them safe.

Of course.

He got up and went to the door grabbing the handle pounding on the thick oak. "Why are we locked in?" He asked out loud.



“So if some silly girl panics and tries to run she can’t put the rest of us at risk,” a woman said. ‘I’m Miss Pitcher. By the looks of that pretty evening gown, you must be a noble woman.”

“Yes,” Serren said, looking down, realizing the woman didn’t recognize him. “Yes, I am, but--”

“What’s your name?”

“Um, my name is...” he searched his mind for a girl’s name, and something from an old story came to him, and he just blurted it out, “Dollyny.”

“Well, Lady Dollyny, come and make yourself useful.”

“No, I...”

But the woman grabbed his hand and dragged him over to the corner, where he was sat down and handed a crying infant. He looked at the tiny little head, felt the small little body in his arms, looked up, shaking his head. “I don’t know what to do, I mean, I’m not really...”

“Just rock him and talk to him,” the woman said, turning away to attend to some other children.

Serren started rocking the baby in his arms. “Hey, there, baby,” he said. “Could you please stop crying?” He looked toward the door again. He had to get out of here, to find out what was happening, see if he could help whoever had attacked the castle. The baby screamed, and Serren cringed. He had never liked children. “Little baby,” he crooned, his voice slipping into a soft sing song without him knowing it, “I would really love it if you stopped all that crying because it is making my head hurt.” He looked around, trying to figure out what he could do about this baby, when it stopped crying, and looking him right in the eyes, smiled.

“Dollyny!” Miss Pitcher said. “You’re a natural.”

“No,” Serren said, still rocking the baby. “I am...” his words trickled into a mumble... “unnatural.”

“You’ll make a perfect little mother someday.”

Serren looked up at her in shock, his skin crawling. "I'm never going to be a mother," Serren said, shaking his head. "Out of the question. No. Not me."

"That's what they all say, but you just wait. Pretty soon you'll want nothing more than a baby of your own. You'll want one so bad you'll be willing to do anything to get one-- even put up with a man."

"You are much mistaken," Serren said, blushing. The thought disturbed him. Would he, if he were stuck in this girl's body, someday want to have a baby? He looked down at the baby in his arms. Did he feel any differently now toward infants than before? How often had he seen his mother and sister looking at some bald little monkey and cooing and gushing over it, calling it beautiful? And yet he'd always seen them as weird and kind of gross.

He looked down at the baby in his arms, waiting to see if he would have the urge to coo and gush, but nothing came. It just looked like a bald monkey. Kinda gross.

"He's beautiful, isn't he?" Pitcher asked.

“Yes,” Serren lied, plastering a fake smile on his face. “So beautiful.”

“Thank you,” he heard a woman say. Looking over, he saw her sitting, running her hands through a crying little girl’s hair. “He’s mine. I’m Miss Rain, milady”

Serren fake smiled again, thinking *I have to get out of here. Motherhood could be contagious.* Another explosion, and dust fell from the ceiling. *What is going on up there?* he wondered, looking up at the ceiling, aching to get in on the action.

He felt something pawing at his breasts, and looking down he saw the baby grabbing at his breast with his little hand. He laughed at how silly it seemed for this little baby to be doing-- that, and said, “He’s starting young.”

“He’s just hungry,” the baby’s mother said.

“Oh. You mean he...?” Serren wanted to curl up and hide as he realized the baby wanted him to, thought he would...

“Let’s trade,” the mother said, leading the crying little girl over to Serren and taking the baby from him.

“I really need to go...”

But the little girl held her arms out to him, her eyes full of tears, obviously wanting a hug.

Serren sighed, reaching out and taking the girl into his arms, holding her little body against his breasts, trying his best to play the part of the woman he seemed expected to play. Meanwhile, Miss Rain had opened up her dress and held the baby to her breasts, and he was sucking away blissfully.

Serren squirmed, wondering what it felt like, shivering, remembering Pitcher’s words. “You’ll want one so bad....” His nipples tingled as he watched the woman breast-feed, and he could almost feel the baby’s wet little mouth suckling on his teat, and the whole thing just seemed so... gross.

The little girl was now sitting in Serren’s lap, playing with his hair. “You’re pretty,” she said.

Serren looked to the door, wishing there were some way out of this, but he just smiled and said, “Thanks. You’re pretty, too.”

He felt someone behind him, and looking back he saw a girl with her hands in his hair. “Do you mind?”

“Let me braid it for you,” she said.

“Um, no, that’s not necessary. I don’t-- you don’t need to bother.”

The girl started braiding. “It’s no bother. Just try and be still.”

Serren sighed, trapped there in this woman’s world with a child in his hands and another braiding his hair, when what he really wanted was a sword and a chance to fight like a man.

## CHAPTER 32

Pattenia held up her skirts and raced down the grand stair, coming to the front doors of the palace. She was beside herself, furious it had taken so long to get dressed, the battle raging on without her. Outside, steel clashed against steel, and the sounds of men fighting and dying could be heard. Annya, Ollia and Actonia were with her, along with a dozen guards. Pattenia's heart raced. She had never seen combat. "I don't know I'm doing," she said to her mother.

"No one does," Annya said. "Do what feels right."

Pattenia paused, listening to her heart. "Open the doors. I would stand with my men."

"Your highness, you should not..."

"My father always stood with his men, and I will, too. Open them. Now."

The doors were thrown open, and Pattenia saw the backs of the men as they struggled to hold up the shield wall against the relentless pressure of the Ansey Tigers. Meanwhile, the

crystacrafts swooped down and hectored them. “Do something about those things,” she shouted to Ollia and Actonia, while striding forward.

She wanted a sword in her hands. A spear. Anything. But she would do what she could, and remembering her father’s stories, she found words, calling out, “Give them hell! Let their blood soak the earth!” As she spoke, she felt power flow through her, and her words rang loud and true over the palace grounds, and the men heartened to hear the voice of their King, and to feel her there on the steps with them.

Ollia and Actonia moved in a circle now, staring into each other’s eyes, teeth bared, as they chanted in the ancient tongue of the goddess, louder and faster, louder and faster, and then a great shrieking and hissing filled the air, and the crystacrafts squawked as a pride of winged serpents formed of dirt and stone rose from the ground and launched themselves skyward, ferociously attacking the crystacrafts, slamming into their crystalline bodies and sending them exploding in rainbow shards, plunging to the earth.



“Your end has come,” Pattenia shouted at The Tigers. “Your cause is hopeless. Run! Run! Run!”

The Tigers felt their resolve weaken, their courage falter, and the Shield Wall began to advance against them, their own ranks beginning to break. “Hold,” their commander cried out. “Hold!”

Pattenia clenched her fist. The day would be hers. The people of The Shattered Isles would see a woman could rule, could stand strong in times of war.

Then she heard an explosion-- from the back of the palace! Trumpets sounded, and distant voices called out, “The palace has been breached! The palace has been breached!”

Nothing we can’t handle, Pattenia thought, shouting, “Route them!”

And then there was a great wind, and a thumping, thumping, thumping, and a Virilian rose up above the palace walls, his great wings flapping, and he brought a horn to his lips, and when he blew upon the horn the Tiger Warriors felt the exhaustion drawn from their limbs, and new strength came into their

hearts, and they shouted and pushed forward, driving the Palace Guard back, back, reeling. The Virilian drew his sword, fire flickering along its blade, and he called out “For Maxis and the rule of man!”

“Stand strong,” Pattenia shouted. “Stand strong.” A stone struck her on the temple and she stumbled and fell to a knee. Putting a hand to her forehead, she felt warm, sticky blood, but she stood, wiping her hand on her dress, and once more she shouted, “Break them! Break them!”

The Virilian moved along the wall, swinging his sword in great arcs of smoke and flame, knocking men from the walls, shattering their bodies, his face a mask of grim determination. Actonia and Ollia looked on, their faces begrimed with soot. “We have to stop him,” Actonia said, pointing. “We have to stop him.”

“I don’t know what spell we can cast,” Ollia said, then gasped and spun to the ground as a bolt pierced her left shoulder.

Actonia went to her, helping her up. Ollia grasped her shoulder, wincing. The Palace guard had now been pushed back to the doors of the palace, Pattenia behind them,

exhorting them on, blood on her face. “We’re lost,” Ollia said. “We’ve failed.”

“Come on,” Actonia said, pulling Ollia back into the palace, to the entrance and then down a hallway, where she dropped to her knees. “Join me.”

“Why? We have no magic to fight this,” Ollia said, looking on in despair as the shield wall broke, and the Tiger Warriors poured through the breach, a wild melee breaking out on the floor, blood splashing across the marble.

“When magic fails, pray,” Actonia said.

Ollia nodded. “Yes,” she said. “I will pray with you.”

The women dropped to their knees, looked to the sky, and prayed to their goddess, while blood and death surrounded them.

Pattenia and a small group of Palace Guard retreated up the steps, battling a group of Tigers as they retreated, but the Palace Guards were falling one by one, exhausted and overwhelmed, and she didn’t know how much longer they would last, how much longer she would last. *Where is my mother?*

*Danalia?* She couldn't see them. Couldn't see Actonia or Ollia. Were they all dead?

## CHAPTER 33

Serren had finally managed to free himself from child care duties. He walked around the room, looking for some means of escape, spotting an air shaft that was too small for him, or would have been, he thought, looking at his little arms, if he were still a man. Finally, an advantage to being as girl! The shaft rose from the room at about a 45-degree angle.

He pushed a trunk over to the shaft, getting low, pulling up the hem of his nightie, annoyed, and using his legs, then tossing his long braid over his shoulder, he got on the box, squatted and leapt, reaching the ledge, thumping against it-- his breasts hurt!-- and slid back down. Determined, he jumped again, and landed with his body halfway up the shaft. Pulling with his arms, pushing with his legs, he got into the shaft and started to crawl upward, toward the square of light at the top.

He climbed and climbed, his legs and arms starting to burn. His abs aching. He glanced back to see the opening of the shaft below him, flickering orange light, small, fifty feet down. He started to climb again. A foot

slipped, and then another, and for a moment he was sliding back down, flailing his limbs, but then he found purchase and, breathing hard, closed his eyes, calming himself. Part of him wanted to climb back down, down to where it was safe, to the room for children and... women.

*You can do this*, he thought, looking back to the top of the shaft. Now, when he pushed himself back to all fours, his body ached and seemed stiff, but he thought, *The Mind is stronger than the muscle*, and he started to climb, carefully, making sure his fingers and toes had purchase in the seams between the stone work, making each move with precision, climbing, climbing, until finally he reached the top of the shaft. Pulling himself out, he dropped to the floor and lay for a moment, soaked with sweat, gasping for breath, but free.

Endurance!

## CHAPTER 34

Lord Wensea swung his sword down onto the helmet of the man below him, the blade bashing a crease in the hard steel, and getting wedged in the metal. The man's legs went weak and he dropped, almost pulling Wensea from his saddle. But he kicked the man in the side and wrenched his sword free. Around him, men clashed, the Wensea Knights with the image of the Sleepless Basilisk on their chests and the Tiger Warriors of House Ansey. Then, a trumpet sounded, a mighty trumpet that shook the walls. Wensea looked up to the palace and shook his head, disbelieving his eyes, as a Virilian, a messenger of Maxis, flapped his wings and hovered at the castle wall, amid plumes of flame, the Witch Moon and the sun behind him.

“Prett!” he yelled to his son. “Secure the streets!”

Prett nodded, hacking away imperiously at the men on the ground.

“To the palace!” Wensea called to his lieutenant, and snapping the reins he charged toward the palace, cutting his way through the Tigers, watching even as... the Lost Moon... Could it be...?



## CHAPTER 35

Actonia and Ollia prayed, on their knees. A pair of Tiger Warriors covered in blood and soot approached, their swords in their hands. “Are you prepared to die for the Girl King?” One of them said.

“No,” Actonia answered. “Are you?”

The man did not answer, but raised his sword, looking down on Actonia with dead eyes.

Outside, Elverous stood with his sword ready, looking at the Virilian, who flapped his wings, his great flaming blade in hand. “You can’t hope to beat me,” the Virilian said. “Elverous.”

“A man who dies with his sword in hand dies a worthy death,” Elverous said.

The Virilian slapped the sword from his hands, then flapping his wings, sent a mighty gust of wind that knocked Elverous off his feet. “There will be no worthy death for you, traitor.”

Elverous lay on his back, exhausted, looking up at the Virilian. Behind him, the Witch Moon began to move across the face of the sun, and the sky started to grow dark, a cold wind blowing across the palace grounds. Elverous, shielding his eyes, saw something emerging from the dark space of the moon against the sun, something like-- wings...

The Virilian raised his sword, then howled as a spear punched through the front of his stomach, and he found himself lifted on the spear of a great, winged woman, who swung him around and then planted him into the ground of the courtyard, squirming on the tip of of her cold spear, surrounded by the mist now frosting the ground and the body of the Virilian.

Elverous could not believe his eyes. A Mulierbrita. *Here? How?*

A scream from the palace, and the Mulierbrita was gone in a flash. Elverous, grabbing his side, climbed to his feet, holding his side-- it felt like he'd broken a rib, but he thought of only one thing, his King.

Actonia and Ollia saw a flash of wings, and the Tiger warriors fell to the ground. There,

standing before them, radiant, stood the most beautiful winged woman, and they both knew her as daughter and messenger of the goddess, and they bowed their heads. “Get you to your King,” Mulierbrita said, before vanishing in a flash.

Elverous climbed down the steps and started across the courtyard. The Mulierbrita flew back out, grabbing her spear and lifting the Virilian into the air, writhing like a crab on a spit. “Mother would like a word,” she said as she rose into the air and flew back toward the moon, which was now moving away from the sun.

Pattenia and her final three defenders backed down the hall, followed by a dozen Tiger Warriors calmly closing in, ready to capture the false King. “Surrender,” Mason, the senior Warrior called. “You and the members of your party will not be harmed.”

Pattenia and her group reached the end of the hall and found their backs to the wall. The three battered and bloodied men looked back at Pattenia. She shook her head. “We’re going to win,” she said. “I can feel it.”

“Your highness,” the man said. “I don’t see a way out of this.”

“Have faith,” Pattenia said. “Believe as I believe.”

The Tigers closed, closed... down the hall, Annya and Danalia stepped out from one of the side rooms, a smoking gourd in her hands, which she lobbed underhanded, over the heads of the Tigers. Thinking she was supposed to catch it, Pattenia lunged, the potion falling just beyond her outstretched hand, crashing against the stone floor and exploding.

## CHAPTER 36

Serren, looking back over his shoulder, ran around a corner and thudded right into a man, almost falling, but for the arms that grabbed him and pulled him to his feet. He stared right at the symbol of a flame. Looking up, he smiled. “Capithian!”

Capithian shoved Serren against the wall. “Stay here and do not cry out, or you will pay.”

The Purgationists started to move on, but Serren shouted. “Wait! It’s me. Serren.”

Capithian turned and looked at the girl. “Serren?” The sight of him, reduced by witchcraft, to woman, sickened Capithian. *I would have killed myself*, Capithian thought, *had I found myself with a slit between my legs.* “We seek your sister.”

“I think they might have retreated to our family wing,” Serren said.

“Seize her.”

“Wait? What? I’m on your side-- I mean, you’re on my side.”

But Capithian had already started his march toward the grand stair, and he was not interested in the words of a woman.

## CHAPTER 37

The Tigers dove for cover as the potion exploded, and when they rose, they found the hall clouded with thick, white smoke. Shadowy figures moved in the smoke, and the tiger's leader heard doors slamming. Getting up, he said, "Find the usurper. Take her alive."

He moved into the smoke toward one of the figures, and as he got closer he saw it was one of the palace guard, looking the other way. He plunged his sword in, but the figure vanished as soon as it was touched by his weapon. Mason stared at the spot, bewildered, then saw another guard moving in the smoke, and another. "Illusions," he murmured.

Just then he heard one of his men scream out in agony. Then another. And another. He spun in the smoke, and now he saw images of Pattenia, if he'd his wits he would have counted twelve, and they surrounded him and closed in on him, brandishing a wicked dirk

that flashed bright and cold. A small army of Palace Guard stood behind her.

“Surrender, and I will be merciful,” Pattenia said.

“Careful,” the Palace guardsman said.

Now Mason saw a dozen images of the queen, and the girl Annya, and they were all looking at him, watching as the Pattenias moved near.

“I would sooner die, you pathet--...”

He couldn't finish his insult as Pattenia, behind him, plunged her dagger into his neck and pushed it home with both hands, sending him falling to his knees, blood gushing from his neck and splattering across her dress.

Downstairs, Capithian came to the foyer. Lord Wensea was there, along with a handful of men and two witches. The room was strewn with bodies, sticky with blood. He froze and hurried his men back down the hall, away from Wensea.

He looked to the boy princess. “There must be another way,” he said.



Serren, no longer trusting the man, shook his head. "That's the only way." He looked past Capithian, wondering if he should scream, call for help, but he didn't want to seem like-- such a girl.

Capithian grabbed Serren's braid and yanked his head back, then put his blade against Serren's throat. "Tell me."

Serren's eyes went wide, and he swallowed, feeling helpless and afraid and then to his shame, he said, "There is a private stair."

"Show me."

Upstairs, Pattenia knelt, vomiting. The body of the man she'd killed lay beside her, his dead eyes staring at the ceiling, her dirk still sticking from his neck.

Annya knelt next to her daughter. They both realized it at the same time, and looked up and around, listening. Silence. "It's over," Annya said.

Pattenia climbed to her feet.

They heard a door open and saw Capithian step into view. In his arms he held a young woman with wide, frightened eyes.

“Serren,” Annya called.

“Stay back,” Capithian said, putting his blade to Serren’s throat. His Purgationists entered the hall behind him. “Lay down your arms or the princess dies.”

“If you harm her, you will never leave this palace alive,” Pattenia said.

“Lay down your arms,” Capithian shouted, punching Serren in the side, making him shriek.

“Do it,” Pattenia said.

The men around her all dropped their arms. “Let her go.”

“I will trade her-- for you.”

“Very well.”

“Don’t!” Serren said.

Behind Annya, Serren saw Actonia making a cupping gesture with her hand, and a fist. Serren got the message immediately. Punch

him in the place it hurts worse, but he slit his eyes and shook his head. It was something a girl would do.

Wensea, Ollia and Actonia came up the stairs followed by a limping Elverous.

“You can’t trust him,” Annya said.

“I have to,” Pattenia said. “I will not allow harm to come to my family.”

Serren struggled feebly in Capithian’s arms. “No witchcraft,” Capithian said. “No tricks!”

Pattenia held out her open hands. “No tricks,” she said. “Let my brother go, and I will come with you willingly.”

Serren closed his eyes and took a deep breath. *Be a man*, Serren, he thought. *Be a warrior*. As soon as Capithian took his arm from around Serren’s shoulders, Serren took a deep breath and turned, hiking up his gown and slamming his foot into Capithian’s tender parts. Capithian gasped, and Serren fled, running right into the arms of his mother.

Capithian howled and dropped his sword. In a flash, the palace guards pounced on Capithian, the Purgationists turned and ran

back toward the stair, and Serren found himself in the arms of his sister and mother.

“You sure you don’t want to make a move?” Elverous said.

Capithian, eyes full of fear, shook his head. “I surrender.”

Then they heard footsteps on the stairs, steel shod boots clanking. Looking over, they saw the shadow of an armored knight brandishing a broadsword, stomping up the stairs. Everyone sighed. “What now?” Danalia said.

Wensea and his men formed a semicircle. Actonia and raised their arms, preparing to cast whatever spell might help bring down this new, terrible threat.

Clunk. Clunk. Clunk. The Knight approached, its shadow growing larger and larger, until he finally appeared, climbing up the top step, turning to face them all, staring. Then, the knight pushed back his face plate and said, “I’m here to rescue you.”

*How sweet!* Pattenia thought, her heart fluttering. *He does care for me.*

“Asryn,” Serren said, cowering behind Pattenia, trying to hide his shape, his nightdress. “You’re too late.”

“I missed the whole thing?”

“Almost,” Wensea said. “There is business yet at the Ansey compound. “My King?”

“Let’s go.”

“Your highness, perhaps you should rest here, regain your strength?”

“As I said, let’s go.”

“Serren, can I talk to you?” Asryn said, eyes wide, mouth dropping open as he stared at his old friend’s new face and shape.

Pattenia marched to him and slapped his face-plate down. “Stop staring at my sister and come along.”

Serren watched them go, longing to follow, feeling broken, wishing he could be part of the action even as his mother took him by the hand and led him back to his rooms, saying, “You need a bath.”

The party made their way to the Ansey compound. Bodies littered the streets of the

city, but the fighting had ended, and as Pattenia walked among them, the soldiers and citizens cheered. Pattenia waved in the detached, regal manner she'd observed her father adopt, but inside her heart soared. *I am their King*, she thought. *They accept me.*

They found the gates to the Ansey Estate open and the grounds nearly deserted. A few servants peeked fearfully at them from windows and stables. When they came to the Grand House they found Runtick sitting there on the steps, head in hands. When Pattenia and her party arrived, he looked up and said, "They are all gone."

"Who?" Pattenia said.

"My mother. The last of her Tigers. When she saw her attack failed, she fled the city."

"We should pursue her," Wensea said. "If she gets to Ansey Isle, we'll never root her out."

"Let her run," Pattenia said. "There has been enough death today."

"Wensea is right," Runtick said. "My mother? She wants you dead. She will not relent. She is... stubborn, and she won't

forgive you for breaking off our engagement. And she would not be ruled by another woman, let alone a girl.”

“Your mother? But, it was your father--”

“Mother wore the pants,” Runtick said. “Father was furious because he knew if he went home and told her you refused him she would scream at him all night long and blame him for it. He was much safer in your dungeon.”

Pattenia shook her head. “And why did you stay?”

“I am more scared of my mother than anyone else.” He looked away.

“Go,” Pattenia said to Wensea. “Catch Lady Ansey and bring her to me.”

## CHAPTER 38

Pattenia returned to the palace. The servants had already cleared the bodies from the steps and worked to wash away the blood. Pattenia made her way upstairs, eager to get out of her bloodstained dress. Her body had started to ache with the stresses and strains of the day, so when she was informed about a messenger from Appollon it took all her will to go and greet the man. "Speak," she said.

"Primary Appollon wishes me to convey his great joy at learning your survived this attack."

"Wonderful," Pattenia said, acidly.

"And he wishes to assure you he had nothing to do with this attack."

"I have his Purgationists prisoner."

"A rogue acting alone."

"I will determine the truth of all this," Pattenia said. "Tell Appollon I very much hope these words are true and not an act of cowardice. Now, go."



“Yes, Your Highness.”

Pattenia watched him go, her eyes slitted with fury. As she made her way upstairs, she thought of the man she'd killed, the men who'd died protecting her, and the men who'd died trying to kill her. Her father had once told her she was lucky that as a girl she would never have to face the responsibilities of a king.

It had been a terrible day, one that had seen the end of many lives, and changed many others permanently. But, as she got to her rooms, and her handmaids began to free her from her gowns and corsets, she thought - *- no. I don't regret taking on the crown.* In fact, more than ever, she felt she was born for this.

But for now, she needed sleep.

Pattenia tossed and turned. She thought of the dead eyes of the man she'd killed, the feeling when she'd slammed her blade into his neck. She dreamt of smoke and fire, clashing steel, and she dreamt of Asryn, his smile, and his words, “I came to rescue you.”

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She woke before dawn, rolling out of bed, her head and body aching. She coughed and pulled the cord. When her servants arrived, she said, "I need Bright Brew. Send for it." They led her to her bath, bringing her a steaming cup of the mulled herbs while she was still in the hot, perfumed waters of her bath, and she sipped it, closing her eyes and sighing as she felt the clouds clearing from her head, and a surge of energy in her limbs.

As her handmaids laced her into her corset, she gasped in pain, her bruised ribs barking. Sipping again from the cup, thinking about her struggles during the battles, she wondered if she shouldn't find some other form of dress were she going to be King. She remembered reading of women Kings in the days of old who'd worn armor just like the men.

Downstairs, as expected, she found Lord Wensea, Ollia, Annya, Actonia and Danalia waiting in her office. Not expected was Wensea's son, Prett. They all stood and bowed as she entered. *This is going to take some getting used to*, she thought. "You may sit," she said.

“Your highness,” Lord Wensea began. “I wanted to introduce my son. He fought with my knights in the streets for you.”

“We know each other,” Pattenia said. “Prett.”

“Your highness,” Prett said, bowing. “I wondered if I might stop in and visit with Serren. We are --friends-- from school.”

“It might do my sister good to see an old friend,” she said. “But I don’t think she is ready just yet.”

“A shame. Do send *her* my love.”

“I will.”

Prett left and the meeting began in earnest. Lady Ansey and her party had escaped, and they were already at sea on their way back to her island. The Purgationist had said little.

“We fed him cherry blossom and dogbane,” Ollia said. “The Purgationist says that he acted alone.”

“Do you believe him?”

“No.”

“My men have been gathering the bodies of the fallen. So far they count 321 Tigers of House Ansey among the casualties. I do not believe House Ansey had more than a hundred in the city. At the most 200.”

“They didn’t!” Danalia said. “We counted. 152.”

“So where did the others come from?” Pattenia said.

“Another house that secretly plots against you,” Lord Wensea said. “Or, and this is my guess, the Knights of Maxis.”

“I’m sure it is Appollon,” Pattenia said. “But I need proof before I move against him.”

“Why?” Danalia said. “We all know he’s our enemy.”

“I am not a tyrant,” Pattenia said. “I won’t simply strike out against people based on my suspicions. More, the Church of Maxis still has many followers through the islands. I will not give them a martyr.”

“Good decision,” Annya said.

Pattenia hid her annoyance, thinking, *I don't need your affirmations, mother. I am doing what you never had the courage to do.*

"You should turn him into a girl," Danalia said. "Make him your laundress!"

"We can't turn them all into girls," Pattenia said.

Danalia frowned. "I would."

"What of the restoration?" Ollia said.

"I mean to call a meeting of the King's Council tomorrow," Pattenia said. "I will announce the restoration."

"It may be too soon," Lord Wensea said. "Perhaps you should people give more time."

"Too soon?" Ollia said.

"We've waited six hundred years!" Actonia spat.

"You're impossible to believe!" Danalia said.

"Men!" Annya said.

Wensea raised his hands in surrender. "Mercy! Mercy!"

“Turn *him* into a girl,” Danalia said, “and see if he still wants to wait.”

“We *can't* turn them all into girls,” Ollia said, laughing. “Though,” she added, turning to Wensea, “you would make an excellent woman.”

Wensea blushed. “I’m not sure how to respond.”

“A thank you would have been fine,” Pattenia said. “I wish to speak to Wensea alone,” she said. “Unless there is anything else?”

The others left, and Wensea said, “Your highness, if this is about my comment regarding waiting--”

“No,” Pattenia said. “Think no more about it, but I do hope you understand that asking these women to wait for justice will not win you many friends.”

“Yes.”

“I want to ask you something else. I-- from the beginning, you have been a staunch supporter, and proved the strength of your words in the battle for the palace. But, I am

not clear as to why. I have not known you well, and you have all these years seemed a devout follower of Maxis.”

“My King, if you doubt my loyalty even still, I must say it grieves me that my actions do not speak clearly for my intentions.”

“I do not doubt your loyalty,” Pattenia said. “I seek to understand it.”

Wensea thought, then looked at Pattenia. “I saw the Lost Moon return to the sky, the very floor of the temple split open, and the statue of Maxis fall and crumble at your feet. I saw your brother reshaped into the form of a maiden. I did not need any more evidence for me to conclude that you will win this war. I wanted to be on the winning side.”

Pattenia nodded and laughed. “I appreciate your candor. You are excused.”

Lord Wensea stood, bowed, then paused. “Your highness. May I add one additional thought?”

“Yes.”

“Though my motivations were initially pragmatic, what I saw of you yesterday, when

you offered yourself for the life of your brother? I follow you now because I admire your heart.”

“Thank you,” Pattenia said, keeping her face neutral but appreciating the man’s words. “I am honored to count you as a friend, Wensea. If you ever need anything, just ask.”

“Your highness.”

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Stone dragged Serren out of bed that morning, forcing him into another corset, another dress, this one a pale yellow, and always festooned with ridiculous bows and lace. *For my own good*, he thought bitterly as she pulled the laces tight, crushing his ribs. He let Bucket do his hair. He’d found it much easier to deal with when it had been braided. It seemed to take hours, and he endured it, barely aware of them, exhausted and depressed.

As soon as she left he climbed back into bed, but with the corset stifling his breathing and forcing his back straight, he couldn’t get comfortable, and finally got up, sighing, going



to his bar for a drink, and then sitting in what had become his customary chair by the window, sitting with his hands in his lap, staring into space, wondering what he could possibly do with his life. He'd thought the Tigers had come to free him, but they had only come to throw down Pattenia and he'd been nothing to them, just a hostage.

Just a woman.

A knock. The door opened. "Your highness," the doorman said. "A message." Serren shrugged, and the messenger came in carrying a large bundle of lilies bound with a strip of white silk, which he placed on the table in front of Serren, then handed a note to Serren, bowing. "Duke Prett Wensea sends his love," the messenger said.

"Get out," Serren said, crinkling his nose in disgust and throwing the note to the ground. He sat, humiliated, disgusted and furious that Prett would be such an-- ass. *If I were still a man*, he thought, bitterly, *he wouldn't dare*. He found himself looking down at the note. *Burn it*, he thought. *Don't read it. You know it's just some attempt to mock you about your new sex*.

Damn. Curiosity won out. He finally got up, but when he tried to lean down to pick up the note he found he couldn't reach it with his back held straight by the corset. He tried to kind of squat down to get it, but then the skirts of his dress got in the way. He was breathing hard from just that little effort, his breasts heaving, but then he pulled a chair over, and with one hand on the chair, he sort of knelt down, knees together, and was finally able to pluck the note from the ground, feeling the nubbled parchment against his fingertips. He ripped it open, breaking the Basilisk of Wensea in its red wax and reading:

*P. Serren--*

*I know we have had our conflicts in the past, but I want you to know that I am your friend and ally in these troubled times, and if you need anything at all, just call, and I will be at your side.*

*Your humble servant,*

*Prett.*

Serren put the note down feeling annoyed and ashamed and-- confused. It had to be some sort of trick. He remembered the way Prett had looked at him, that stare, his comment about Serren's bust. *He's playing games with me*, Serren decided, *as if I am just another silly maiden to be -- conquered.*

But what if he's sincere? some part of him wondered. *Could he help me escape this shape?* But then another voice from deep inside him said, *Don't trust him.* Every instinct in him warned him Prett was a threat, and he shivered at the thought of the new way Prett threatened him.

Yet some small part of him wanted to believe otherwise.

He opened the doors to his porch, peeking out, wanting to stand in the sun. He walked out onto the balcony, trying to take a deep breath of the fresh morning air, gasping as his corset refused to allow it. He tugged at it, annoyed, then looking down into the garden he gasped again as he saw HIM-- Prett. The boy was standing beneath a tree, staring up at Serren with that same hungry look in his eyes. Serren stared back. Prett waved.

Serren turned and went back inside, his skin crawling. *So revolting*, he thought. He took the flowers and the letters and tossed them into the fireplace, hugging himself, feeling chilled. *He's so foul!* Serren thought. *Why won't he just leave me alone?*

## CHAPTER 39

Pattenia woke before dawn, during the morning twilight when the air pouring in through her windows was cool and sweet, and the first light of the unrisen sun had yet to seep over the horizon and paint the world in purple shadows. Uncovering the ever-lamp next to her bed, she turned up the wick, and it sputtered from an ember to a full flame. She walked over to her closet, opened the door and walked in, running her hands over her dresses. *What does a King wear to her first meeting with a council of lords?* Pattenia wondered. She tried to remember the lessons she'd had on women's history, from the days when the goddess and women ruled, but she couldn't remember much being said about the fashion choices of the rulers, other than Pontifick Gaunefer, who'd worn a suit of plate armor to her coronation, which Pattenia had always found funny for some reason.

After a few minutes, she tugged one of the cords that hung from her walls, and went back into the closet, rifling through her dresses.

There were so many, and yet none seemed quite right. Eventually, Danalia came stumbling bleary-eyed into the room, and found Pattenia, illuminated by the flickering fire. “What are you doing?” Danalia said.

“Trying to decide what to wear,” Pattenia said. “And I know, that may not seem very Kingly of me, but I need to look right when I go and meet all those old men. Help me.”

“Hmmmnnn,” Danalia said, taking the lamp and starting to browse through the dresses. “Which dress is appropriate for a King? There is no precedent to go by.”

Pattenia looked through her formal gowns—all of which seemed with their lace and bows to invite something less than kingly reverence. “I feel like in the eyes of the men, these dresses will invite... um...”

“Yes,” Danalia said. “Rude thoughts.”

“I was going to say condescension.”

“That, too.”

“I would have something made if there were time,” Pattenia said.

“Well, we’ll have to find something....  
Wait,” Danalia said, stopping and going back,  
pushing some dresses aside to highlight a  
black gown.

“A mourning dress?”

“It’s dignified.”

Pattenia looked at the dress, then at the  
others, powder blues and daffodils, pinks with  
ribbons and bows and... “let’s pull out all my  
black gowns, and find the best one.”

“Yes!”

Sometime later, Pattenia stood in front of a  
full-length mirror and examined herself. Her  
hair had been pulled back and pinned into a  
bun at the back of her head. She’d  
considered wearing no make-up, but realized  
she would feel more confident with some  
minimal strokes intended to make her look  
more mature and powerful, emphasizing the  
intensity of her eyes, her regal cheekbones.  
The dress had a high, stiff collar and long  
sleeves, and swept to the floor from her hips  
in sharp, angular lines. She looked less a  
seventeen-year-old girl, and more a woman,  
and when the chain of state was placed over

her shoulders, its gold flashing against her black gown, she felt like she thought a king should feel, though at the same time she felt butterflies going mad in her stomach, and she caught herself more than once digging her fingernails into her palms.

“You look very Kingly,” Danalia said.

Kickania, Frenia and Ginia nodded agreement. All four wore black dresses and had their hair pulled back as well.

“Ladies,” Pattenia said, turning to her friends. “Let’s go make history.”

The girls all smiled nervously, and then followed along behind Pattenia in a V-formation as she made her way through the palace and came to the King’s Door, that let them into the King’s Council Chamber from the head of the room, whereas all others entered from the foot. Elverous, the head of the King’s Guard, greeted her at the door with a bow. “Are you ready for me to announce you, your Majesty?”

“Yes,” Pattenia said. “And, Elverous, announce me as *King Pattenia Denae*.”



Elverous entered the room and called out, “All rise for her highness, King Pattenia Denae.”

Pattenia heard the shuffling of the chairs, and entered, head high, her girls behind her. As she circled around the throne she saw the lords there with their balding heads and long, graying beards, wrinkled faces, all but one younger man, who though not yet gray still looked old to Pattenia’s young eyes. This was The King’s Council, the Lords who kept the kingdom running, the men who would now be expected to listen to a seventeen -year-old girl.

“All hail the King,” Lord Turin intoned, solemnly.

“All hail the king,” the men answered. Pattenia thought she detected a tone of derision in their voices. Had she imagined it? Was she being too sensitive?

“You may sit,” Pattenia said, looking around the back of the room to the gallery, where she saw Actonia and Professor Falconette, as well as her friends. Their presence made her feel strong.

“I know how you men like to get right down to business,” Pattenia said, pausing, expecting a chuckle or two, but the men all just stared at her stonily. She swallowed. “So, I will get right to it. As of this moment, all edicts forbidding the worship of the goddess are nullified, and any attempts to punish those who worship the goddess or practice her magics will be considered acts of treason against The Crown.”

No one spoke, though she saw a few of the Lords glance at each other, then at Primus Appollon, who sat with his fingers templed and eyes closed, his lips moving as if in prayer. The silence unnerved Pattenia, who found herself getting angry at the old goats and their veiled hostility to her. “Your silence *will* be taken as an indication of your assent.”

“Your highness,” Turin said. “Begging your pardon, but traditionally we have an affirmation by-”

“I don’t care about your tradition,” Pattenia said, glancing at Falconette, who nodded. “Under my rule, this council will affirm its agreement with me by remaining silent.”

The Lords kept looking at each other, at Appollon, as if each waited for someone else to speak up, but none did.

“Let it be noted that the restoration of the goddess was agreed to without objection. The goddess Progenita is restored.” Pattenia looked at Falconette, who put her hand over her heart. Actonia had taken Falconette’s other hand, and she was beaming with joy.

“Your highness,” Appollon said, smearing the word *highness* with disdain.

“Primary?” Pattenia said, bracing herself.

“As the high-priest of Maxis, and the embodiment of his will on this world, I would like to....” He paused, looking around the room at the other men. “... suggest it would be appropriate.... To honor your *goddess*.... With a feast day to be celebrated throughout the kingdom.”

Pattenia’s eyes narrowed. *What are you up to?* she wondered.

“An excellent suggestion,” Turin said with a little too much zeal. “What a great way to mend these unfortunate divisions in our kingdom!”

“Yes,” Appollon said. “Exactly my feelings.”

Pattenia felt sure this was some sort of plot, though she couldn't figure out the objective. Yet, a feast day seemed like a good idea, and a proper recognition of Progenita's return. Looking around at all those nodding heads, she finally said, “Excellent suggestion. I hereby decree there will be a feast day to honor the return of the goddess. It shall take place on the day preceding the next triple moon, and will end at midnight.”

“I would like to volunteer to organize this profoundly important celebration,” Turin said with a bow.

“Yes,” Appollon said. “Excellent idea. I second.” Some of the other Lords all nodded and agreed. Yes. Yes.

Lord Wensea remained stone faced. Runtick, who'd replaced his father on the council, was staring at his hands.”

“No,” Pattenia said. “That honor must go to a woman. I will assign--”

“Maybe you can get your pretty little brother to do it,” Darmack Menea said.

“Do not mock my *sister*,” Pattenia said.

“Me? You’re the one...” Darmack started, but Appollon interrupted.

“Show our new *King* the respect she and her family expects,” Appollon said. “Silence yourself.”

Darmack clamped his mouth shut in frustration.

Pattenia didn’t like that Appollon was giving orders. It annoyed her, and she wanted to push them, make sure they knew that she, and not Appollon, ruled. A thought struck her, and she said, “One more thing. The line of succession. As of now, the crown passes to the eldest living daughter. From now on, the rule of the Shattered Isles belongs to *women*.”

The men all sat back, looking at Appollon, who looked down at his hands, his jaw clenched. “The edict is approved unanimously,” Pattenia said, watching as Turin made note of it. “Good. That is all. I call this session to a close.”

The men stood; Elverous held the door; Pattenia walked out, and her ladies followed.

Outside, as soon as the door closed, Danalia and the other girls smothered Pattenia. “You are such a warrior!” Danalia said.

“Progenita’s Sabre!” Kickania said. “They were all —duh—and you were —I’m the King!”

“I was terrified,” Pattenia said. “Could you see me shaking?”

“No! You were ferocious,” Danalia said. “They just agreed to everything.”

“Yes,” Pattenia said, “which makes me... I’m worried.”

“Why?”

“Because I think they agreed so easily because they believe the proclamation will not last long. They plan to kill me.”

The smiles vanished from the girls’ faces. “What should we do?” Danalia said.

Pattenia shook her head. “I don’t know. But I do know that right now I want to hear the bells ringing for the goddess. Let’s go!” She lifted her skirts and hurried off to the bell tower, her friends running behind.

Back in the chamber, as soon as Pattenia exited, Appollon and Turin had turned to stare at Falconette, their eyes burning with malice. She'd stared back long enough to let them know she didn't fear them and then turned and walked out, Actonia at her side. They trod the palace halls, keeping their faces impassive, but as soon as they got outside Falconette pumped her fist and said, "Glory!"

Actonia threw her arms around Falconette, hugging her tightly. "The goddess is restored," she said, bubbling over with joy. "We don't have to hide anymore. Is it real? It feels more like a vision."

"Let's go and tell the others," Falconette said, eager to share her happiness. She started running toward the Lady's Conservatory, and Actonia ran alongside her, shouting "Praise the goddess! Praise Progenita!"

"Praise the goddess!" The Professor cheered, her usual serious demeanor completely abandoned.

Most people passing looked at them strangely, but one window popped open and a cleaning woman shouted. "Has it happened?"

“Yes! King Pattenia has restored the goddess!” Actonia shouted.

“Praise the goddess! Praise the King” The woman shouted.

Just then, the bells in the palace began to peel, ringing out over the palace walls and the city, their joyous sound soon joined by the towers that ran along the city wall. At the school, the girls heard the ringing of the bells, and ran to the windows, staring out, grinning and laughing as they saw Falconette—smiling, as she and Actonia ran up to the school shouting, “The goddess is restored! The goddess is restored!” They saw she was followed by a growing crowd of men and women, mostly commoners.

The goddess? Most of the girls, who were not part of the hekatina, looked at each other, perplexed. Wasn't the goddess evil? But the hekatina all cheered and began to answer the call, “The goddess is restored!” And other girls, swept up in the excitement, followed them and their teachers as they ran together out the front doors and gathered in the courtyard, chanting and laughing, cheering as the bells rang and rang.



The boys came out of their school as well, along with their teachers, and looking down from their perch on the hill they saw the crowd gathering in front of the girl's school. "What's going on?" Asryn said.

"Some dumb girl thing," Oper said. "Who knows."

"It looks like they're having fun."

"All right. Enough of that," the headmaster said, clearly annoyed. "Back inside."

Asryn felt someone's shoulder slam into him, and he looked to see Prett smirking back. "Failure," Asryn said.

"We'll see at the Sixteens," Prett said.

Asryn stared until Prett walked off, heading back into school.

"He's probably going to destroy you," Oper said.

"How about a little faith?"

"Brother, I am just being honest," Oper said.

“He’s pretty much the best fighter,” Kencrick said. “Now that Serren is, well, a princess and stuff.”

“I’m going to win. I have to win,” Asryn said. “For her. I mean him.”

“Do you have feelings for Serren?” Oper asked, studying his friend’s face.

“What! Don’t be ridiculous! He’s my oldest and friend and I want to win it for him as a friend, is all, and not...” He trailed off, thinking *because of those soft lips...*

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Appollon watched it all as well, from the high tower at the rectory, where the bells remained silent. Turin stared down as well. “The goddess has many followers,” Turin said. “She is more popular among the common people than I suspected.”

“And now they are all coming out into the open,” Appollon said, smiling, though his eyes burned with hate. “It will be so much easier to mark them all for death when they are no longer hiding under rocks like worms and maggots. Look at them. Foul. Corrupt.”

“They look happy,” Turin said, but at one withering glance from Appollon he cringed and said, “They... sicken me. So evil and—bad. Just bad.”

“Falconette,” Appollon said. “I knew there was something unnatural about her. Never marrying. Always with her head in a book. I will enjoy setting the fire to her. And to that *Girl King*. She will beg me for mercy in the end, and I will watch the flesh melt from her face.”

Turin covered his mouth, hiding his revulsion at Appollon’s gruesome fantasies. “And then the crown passes to the rightful heir, Serren.”

“*Serrenina*? Appollon snorted. “The princess?” “No. She may be useful to us, but it is time for the Denae family’s reign to end. Their blood has grown weak and been corrupted by the Pestilentia and her diseased magic. The time has come for my brother and your cousin, Amper Ansey, to rise to the throne and rule The Shattered Isles.”

“Amper?”

“He is a man, and he will rule as a man should.”

Yes, *by doing whatever his wife tells him*,  
Turin thought, but decided it best to keep it to  
himself.

## CHAPTER 40

Serren sat in his chair by the window, reading. Then the bells began to ring, and ring, and ring. It was a song of celebration, and it jarred Serren from his sleepy peace and got him to his feet, rolling out of bed. His nightgown had become bunched up around his hips, and he wiggled, tugging it back down to fall over his long legs. Pulling his hair back from his face and tossing it back over his shoulders—it wasn't even worth groaning over, he'd finally realized, as it was now as much a part of his life as breathing. He walked over to his window and looked out over the gardens, beyond the palace wall, and down over the city that dropped away below. He couldn't hear the cheering or tell that the crowds were milling. It just looked like a typical spring day.

*What is going on?* he wondered. He went to the front door and poked his head out, souring at the sight of Yurkan, who immediately leered at him as if he were a pork

chop. Serren swallowed his disgust. “Why are the bells ringing?”

“Don’t know, Princess,” Yurkan said. “Been on the door all morning.”

“It’s the goddess,” a chambermaid who happened to be walking by said, grinning. “She’s been restored!”

“The goddess?” Yurkan said.

“Yes. The King has restored her worship. Praise Progenita!”

Yurkan smiled, showing his crooked, blackened teeth. “Praise the goddess,” he said. “Praise the King!”

“You?” Serren said. “Worship the goddess?”

“That’s right,” Yurkan said, his eyes dropping and resting on Serren’s breasts. “Maxis’s church is only for the rich. He doesn’t care about the common people.”

“Pffft,” Serren said, closing the door. *You’d think someone who worshiped the goddess wouldn’t stare at a girl’s breasts*, he thought, then caught himself. *Not that I’m a girl, but I*

*look like one, so he shouldn't— I know I used to all the time, but....ugh. Don't think about it.*

He climbed back on his bed and rolled onto his stomach. Feeling his boobs smooshing against the mattress, he rolled over onto his back. The bells kept ringing, and he realized he was hungry and thirsty, and had to pee. He hated peeing. It reminded him in a very physical way that he was a girl now, and it reminded him of how proud he'd been when he'd been a boy, when he could stand and pee like a man.

“God,” he thought, hiking up his nightie and sitting down on the privy. *It was kinda dumb to be so proud of something so stupid,* he thought. And yet, as he wiped himself the way Stone had taught him and stood, once again wiggling and pulling his night gown down over his legs, he thought he would be willing to do almost anything to be able to stand up and pee like a man again.

*It was better to be a man,* he thought, *in every way.*

*I would do anything,* he thought, *bitterly, but so far I've done nothing.* He had to find some way to get out of the palace, away from his

sister's guards, who wouldn't even let him leave his room without her permission.

As much as he hated the idea of anyone seeing him in this soft female shape, he knew he had to get out and get some allies, reclaim his place. And *not* other kids—Nemeria or Asryn. He needed men on his side. Grown men. Powerful men who could free him from this cursed shape and tiny little life.

*Damn!* he thought, looking at his small hands. *If only I could swing a sword. If only I were still a man! I could fight my way out of this, and the men would rally around me, and we would reclaim this kingdom!*

He'd had every advantage as a man, a boy. He realized that now.

*But now I am only a girl,* he thought. *And that's no advantage at all.*

Serren spent the rest of the day alternating between sleeping and getting up and standing at his window, staring longingly off into the world outside, the world he'd once roamed so freely. Nemeria came by after she got out of school. "Have you been sleeping all day?" she said, when she came in to find Serren in his chair, bleary eyed.



“Reading and sleeping. What else can I do?” Serren said. “I’m a prisoner here. I’m not allowed to leave my room without my sister’s permission.”

“Why don’t you ask her permission?”

“I won’t give her the satisfaction. Me? Beg to leave my own room as if I’m a child? It’s ridiculous.”

“It is, but swallow your pride and ask. We could go to the park, or-- ride horses! That would be fun.”

“I don’t-- I don’t want to.”

“Why not?” Serren just turned away. “Tell me. Please.”

“I feel foolish.”

“Because of your dresses?”

“Because of my sex.”

“You’ll have to face the world sometime.”

“There’s something else.” He covered his face, remembering the boys’ comments.

“What is it?”

“I heard some boys. Talking.”

Nemeria shook her head. “And? You must have heard boys talking before.”

“No. Yes. I mean- they were talking about me. One said-- it’s stupid, I know, but he said he wanted to lay with me, and it made me feel... gross and, well, afraid. It’s so stupid.”

“Serren. It’s not stupid. I know. I have been a girl for all my life.”

“They looked at me, like...”

“You were a piece of meat about to be devoured?”

“Yes. Not even a person! I felt -- dirty.”

“Serren, you’ll get used to it.”

“Used to it? Why should I have to get used to it?”

“It’s part of being a girl in this world. Even since I can remember men have looked upon me and stared and made comments. I’ve seen *you* do it.”

“Never! When?”

“Every day. You were always looking at girls, shouting at them.”

“It’s not the same.”

“Why not?”

“They liked it,” Serren said. Nemeria cocked her head. “Because I was a prince and good looking and---- you mean?”

“I assure you there were times those girls felt the exact same way you felt when you heard those boys talking about you.”

Serren puffed some air out of his mouth. “Bucket’s mother,” he said.

“What?”

“When she first dressed me in this body, she made a comment about how she was glad I would no longer be able to take advantage of her daughter.”

“That was cruel of her.”

“Yes, but now I’m just wondering-- could she have been right? I always thought Bucket wanted the attention, but if her mother said...?”

“Maybe you should talk to her.”

“I think I will.”

“So, what of it?” Nemeria said. “Will you get permission, so we can go riding together?”

“I’m not ready. I feel so confused and I just don’t want people to see me like this.”

“I have an idea, then. How about your closest friends? What if they came here and visited? Just as a way for you to get used to being around people as you are now?”

“I especially don’t want *them* to see me like this.”

“You’re bored and lonely. Wouldn’t it be good to see your friends?”

“I guess,” Serren said. “I’m just-- I’m worried they will laugh at me.”

“They won’t, Serren. I promise. Do it? For me?”

“I’d have to ask my sister.”

“I’ll ask her. Let me do it. Please? It will be good for you.”

Serren tried to take a deep breath, and once again was reminded of the corset crushing his body. "Fine," he said. "I would like to see them."

"Wonderful," Nemeria said, giving him a hug and a kiss on his soft cheek. "Let me go now and see to it!"

Serren watched her go, his insides churning with a storm of mixed emotions. He sat back down and picked up his book, reading until he'd once again drifted off to sleep.

Stone came and asked if he cared to join his sister, The King, for dinner. He declined, and she helped him out of his dress and corset and into his nightdress. She had started out the door when he called, "Wait."

"Yes?" Stone said.

"I would like to join my sister for breakfast in the morning. Can you let her know?"

"Of course."

Once Stone had gone, Serren went over to his dresser, pulled out the bottom drawer and dug around until he found a pipe and a wooden box with some blue dream weed in it.

Back out on his balcony, he looked around to make sure Prett wasn't still lingering, then used a candle to light the pipe and, taking a toke, started coughing, but managed to hold the smoke down, feeling it surge through his system, bringing a sense of calm. He'd smoked out here often since becoming a teenager, and for a moment sitting there, breathing in the sweet yet acrid smoke, for a moment he felt like he was just himself again.

A cool night breeze tossed his hair and sent a chill through his slender frame. His nipples hardened and poked at the cotton of his nightshirt, and he cursed his shape—again—as he stared up at the moon, blew out a circle of smoke, and offered a prayer for deliverance to Maxis. For an hour he just smoked and prayed and thought, idly pulling a brush through his long hair, looking at the Witch Moon, still thinking it reminded him of a woman's breast more than an eye, though it didn't seem so funny, he decided, looking down at his own.

Fortified with two bowls of weed, he stumbled uncertainly back into his room giggling a little as it seemed to tilt to and fro, like he was walking on the deck of a ship. He fell into bed, kicking his legs in the air, and

then rolled onto his side, pulling his legs to his chest and hugging them, as his eyes drifted closed and he sank into sleep, the lamp by his bed still blazing.

## CHAPTER 41

Appollon knelt in the crumbling ruins of his church, praying before the broken altar of Maxis. The shards of Maxis's statue lay where they had fallen after the earth had shaken, a hand here, a sliver of his face. The witch moon shone through the empty window frames, though Appollon had found a spot in darkness, free of its rays. "Please help me," he whispered. "I am lost. The Girl King thrives, and the people openly worship Pestilentia. Women seem all-powerful, and men diminished. I can't sleep at night, for this infernal moon, and the dreams it brings me, shame me." He thought of the dreams, the dreams that had haunted him since the return of the goddess-- in them, he was always a woman, dressed in the flowing crimson dress of an acolyte to the goddess. Sometimes, he saw himself in a gully of some kind-- seven waterfalls splashing all around him, and he was dancing and laughing among unclean women.... Other times, he dreamt that he lay with men, or that he knelt at the feet of Ollia



Falconette, and he clung to her legs as she ran her fingers through his hair...

When he woke he felt sick at the memory of these dreams, and he dreaded sleep because in his dreams he was always a woman, and in waking hours he sometimes felt strange, like he missed the weight of breasts on his chest, or the wide hips... and he felt that the dreams were bleeding into his waking hours, that somehow the goddess had infected him, and he was becoming unmanned.

His back burnt from the lashes he'd given himself, punishing himself for these weak and sinful thoughts, and his stomach growled with hunger from fasting, yet the dreams came, unmanning him, night after night.

"I would serve you," he whispered. "I would see that whore goddess thrown down once more, her servants burned, but I don't know what to do. How to serve you. Please, give me the strength, give me the knowledge, show me the way."

He closed his eyes and leaned his head against his hands. He heard an owl hoot, and there was a screeching as a colony of bats wheeled over the moon. Appollon saw

himself, and in his vision he was a man, and in his hand he held power.

Appollon stood, smiling. "Thank you," he said, looking at the broken statue of Maxis. "I will do your will."

## CHAPTER 42

It seemed like Serren had just fallen to sleep when Stone slammed open the door and shouted “rise and shine!”

“It’s not even light yet.”

“You want to eat breakfast with your sister, you have to beat the sun.”

“Never mind,” Serren said. “I need to sleep.”

“No,” Stone said, grabbing the quilt, and yanking it off Serren. “The King expects you, and she does not like to be disappointed.”

He sat up and glared at her from under the hair in his face. She smiled and, remembering the last time he’d gotten into a battle of wills with her, he said, “I hate you so much.”

“Good,” Stone said. “Now, let’s get stinky girl into a hot bath.”

Serren sighed, and got up to face the long, painful and endlessly tedious ordeal that

getting ready had become for him. As Stone walked ahead of him to the bath, he noticed his boobs ached, and thought, *Great. Now what? Girl's bodies are so stupid.*

After his bath, which left him smelling like lilacs and honey, he grabbed “the post” and gritted his teeth as Stone yanked the ribbons of his corset so tight he thought she was going to squeeze him in half, then put him in a powder blue dress with white lace and bows, and sat him while Bucket and the handmaidens did his hair. By the time they finished, he needed to pee again, so they all followed him in and held up his dress while he made water, and then finally he slipped into a pair of girl’s slippers—with “little girl heels” according to a grinning Bucket—and finally made his way daintily down to the family’s dining room.

Once again, he found breathing a struggle, and by the time he reached the dining room he needed a rest, collapsing down onto his old chair with a gasp, his breasts rising and falling as he tried to catch his breath. He wanted to slouch arrogantly as he’d always done, but his corset forced him to sit up straight, shoulders back, chest out. “I can barely breathe in this,”

he said, tugging at his corset through his dress.

Pattenia looked at him, feeling both amused to see him enduring the things she and other girls had put up with their whole lives—and which he had taken such joy in mocking her over—and guilty that she'd inflicted girlhood on him. She resisted the urge to rub it in. “Serren,” she said tersely.

A pain, like something was torn inside him, burned in his belly, and he put his hands gingerly to his stomach. “Pattenia.”

Pattenia looked at him with his hands on his belly, the look on his face, and said, “feeling sick?”

“No,” he said. “Just a stitch. I think it’s this stupid corset.”

“Hmmmnnnn...”

The servants brought in bowls of steaming oats laced with cream and honey, sprinkled with cinnamon. Pattenia was taken, again, with how incredibly beautiful her brother had become, and she felt a pang of jealousy looking at him sitting there so—radiant.

“Did you want to talk?” she said. “About-- everything?”

“Yes, but...” He glanced at the servants, who stood silently at attention.

“Privacy,” Pattenia said in a matter of fact way that assumed acquiescence.

The servants left, and Serren stirred the oats, mixing the cinnamon into the mush. “I am not sure what I want to say, or how to say it,” Serren said.

“I don’t know where to start, either, other than to say that I am very, very sorry for the pain I have caused you.”

“How could you do this to me?” Serren said.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“I was angry about... Danalia, about Runtick, and so many things, and I had to get out of my marriage somehow, and it just seemed at the time like it was— something I had to do, and I believe it could actually be good for you.”

“It isn’t.”

“Actonia had a vision. She said this would save your life.”

“Save my life? You destroyed my life. What am I supposed to do now? Like this? What life can I have as a woman? Change me back. Please. I can’t live like this.”

Serren saw the agony on Pattenia’s face, and he guessed the truth. “You can’t?” He said. “You can’t undo this curse?”

“It isn’t a curse--”

“You can’t reverse the spell?”

“I don’t believe the spell can be reversed, Serren. You’re -- a girl now, and for the rest of your life.”

“I can’t-- this is-- I feel like I’m-- I don’t know what to say. There must be a way. I can’t be *this*.” He gestured at his body.

The room was silent for a time, neither speaking, neither having any clue what to say. “It’s not so bad being a girl, Serren.”

“It’s terrible being a girl-- because I am a boy.”

“You’ll get used to it.”

“I don’t want to get used to it. How can you be so dense?”

“I truly am sorry. I don’t want this to be hard for you.”

“No? Because you might notice I am crushed inside a corset and draped in a girl’s dress. And the servants tell me you ordered them to call me *Princess Serrenina*? How is this anything but cruelty? An attempt to humiliate me and make me a laughing stock throughout the islands?”

“Girls wear dresses. You must wear dresses.”

“Why?”

“Because you are a girl now, *Serrenina*. I wanted to wear boy clothes when I was young, to be free to run and climb and fight with swords, but I was forced to wear dresses, and in time I accepted it.”

“But you were born a girl.”

“Serren, mother and I agreed this is best for you. With your figure, you would, quite frankly, look ridiculous and improper dressed as a boy.”



Frustrated, seeing he was not making any progress on the matter of clothes, Serren changed tactics. "Can you at least give me some freedom? I'm locked in my rooms. Stop holding me prisoner."

"Yes, fine," Pattenia said, as she'd planned on freeing Serren anyway. "You may leave your rooms as you wish," Pattenia said. "But you will need an escort."

"An escort? Don't you trust me?"

"It's not a matter of trust. You can't go anywhere alone anymore. Like it or not, you're a girl-- and a princess-- and there is the question of your virtue."

"Virtue?" he snorted. "Me?"

"As a girl, Serren. You are a virgin."

"A what?"

"Your crown remains unbroken."

"Oh, Maxis, don't talk about my... my...."

"It's not safe for you to go gallivanting around like a boy."

“I am a *man* inside this female shape you have cursed me with. I can take care of myself.”

“What you are inside won’t mean anything to the kind of man who likes—hurting girls. Or to enemies of our family who might kidnap you. You have to be protected, as does your reputation. Go riding. Walk in the park. But you must have a member of the palace guard with you until things are more settled. Even with another girl, you will not be safe.”

“Oh, yes, and since you mention *another* girl-- how dare you bring Nemeria into this and humiliate her?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You made my fiancé into my lady in waiting. You knew--”

“I did no such thing.”

“Then why did she tell me you did?”

“Ask her. Or, maybe we should ask her together.”

“I don’t understand. Well, let me speak with her. I -- don’t know what-- you swear it was not you?”

“I have not spoken to her at all since your change. Serren, I really do want to help you get through this, find happiness. I want us to be friends.”

“I don’t know,” Serren said. “But after the attack, and you offered to be taken prisoner in exchange for me...” He looked down. “We can at least be... not enemies. Maybe.” But then he pounded his fist on the table. “I should be king.”

“I can’t offer you that. But I can offer you freedom.”

“So, I am free to leave my rooms?”

“Just so long as you don’t leave the palace alone, Serren. It really isn’t safe for us.”

“Very well. I will -- I’m going to go back to my room. I have a lot to think about.”

“I’m sure we all do.”

Serren got up and left, once again wincing and putting his hand gingerly to his tummy. “Ow!”

Pattenia watched him, knowingly hiding her amusement. The time for a little payback on one particular matter was fast approaching.

The servants and guards she'd ordered out, for privacy, filed back in.

"Well," Pattenia said out loud, but to herself. "That went about as well as could be hoped."

"Teenage girls," Elverous, the head of the King's guard said. "Always upset about some silly thing."

"Oh?" Pattenia said. "Are we?"

Elverous, remembering Pattenia herself was only seventeen, swallowed. "Begging your pardon, Your Highness. I forgot my place and spoke ignorantly."

"Don't let it happen again." Then, she added, "I would like to take some fighting lessons from you, Elverous."

"As you wish," Elverous said, holding back all the objections that sprang to mind.

"We'll start tomorrow morning after I breakfast."

"Of course, my King."

When Serren got back to his rooms, he tried to grab the door handle, meaning to slam

the door, but stepped on the hem of his skirt and stumbled, then couldn't get his hand out of the long, flowing princess sleeve on his dress, and Yurkan, looking on, amused, had finally said, "I'll slam it for you."

"Fine," Serren said, still struggling with his sleeve. Yurkan grabbed the door and yanked it closed with a satisfying "WHAM!"

Serren stood there, pushing the long sleeves up his arms, staring at the door, growing calm. He blew the bangs out of his eyes, and suddenly had to fight back the urge to start crying, as he felt himself overwhelmed with emotions, with the feeling of being trapped in this girl's shape: powerless, helpless.

Inferior.

*You have to be careful, Pattenia had said.  
It's not safe for us.*

Would he have to live in constant fear? For the rest of his life?

Pattenia said he was stuck like this, but might she be lying? He didn't think she was, and he looked down at himself, past his breasts, to the skirts of his dress, and he

thought-- I can't face people like this, dressed like this... looking like this.

He thought about the balcony, wondered if he should just jump off, end it all, save himself from the shame and humiliation of his sex. He started walking in that direction, as Miss Stone appeared along with Bucket. "Everything okay?" Miss Stone said.

Serren composed himself and turned to her, forcing himself to smile. "Everything is fine," he said. Then, he turned and marched into his room, closing the door behind him. He walked straight out to the balcony, looked down. Yes, he decided. It was far enough down to kill him. The thought of leaving a note flickered through his mind, but his body seemed to be moving on its own, the decision had practically taken over his limbs, and it was like he watched himself as he hiked up his dress, lifted one leg and got it onto the rough stone ledge, then--

"Serren!" he heard someone call from below.

Looking down, he saw Nemeria staring up at him, terrified. He stopped where he was, frozen, aware, back in his body, and he

realized he couldn't do it to her, make her watch as this body he wore flopped over the edge, plunged to the ground... No. Nemeria had done nothing wrong, and he didn't want her to suffer. He climbed off the ledge, and went back into his room, sitting down on his bed and staring numbly at the floor.

## CHAPTER 43

Pattenia spent her morning meeting with the ministers of this and that, hearing their reports and requests. She remembered Serren complaining about the bureaucracy, but she found herself becoming fascinated with the inner workings of the palace, the city, the kingdom. Hundreds and hundreds of officials all over the kingdom ran kitchens and guilds, maintained the roads and bridges. She had never really paid attention or even thought about these people, and as she met them and learned about their activities she began to see many ways she could improve the kingdom, including making sure that some of the ministers reporting to her would be women.

After, she met with a classmate, Vintania Onsey, who dreamt of designing clothes, though all the tailors and designers in the islands had always been men. “I am going to need to something to wear to the sixteens. Something a King would wear.”



“You want me to design your outfit?”  
Vintania said.

“Only you.”

“But, I’ve never designed anything anyone  
actually wore.”

“Then it’s about time.”

“Shouldn’t it be someone more—well,  
more--”

“It’s you, and you are someone more.”

“Thank you.”

“Now, also, while you’re here, I need  
something to wear for sword fighting practice.  
Can you adjust these old clothes of my  
brother’s?”

## CHAPTER 44

Serren sat, looking glum while Nemeria brushed his hair out. “You have to talk to someone,” Nemeria said. “Who better than me?”

“My former bride?”

“Your current friend.”

He tried to take a deep breath, again finding his corset cutting off his ability to do more than take shallow breaths. “My sister told me that this is forever. I am stuck in this shape.”

Nemeria kept brushing plates of his long, silky hair, giving him time.

“I don’t know if I can do it. Have everyone... laughing at me.”

“The people who matter won’t laugh at you. Your friends won’t laugh.”

Serren covered his face. “I can’t face them. Like this? In a dress?”

“I can’t imagine how hard this must be for you,” Nemeria admitted. “But I just feel it will be less hard if you have your friends with you.”

“I have you,” Serren said. “And, by the way, my sister denies she ordered you to serve as my lady in waiting.”

“I assure you, she did.”

“She said she would deny it to your face,” Serren said. “What games is she playing.”

“Well, I didn’t hear it from her directly,” Nemeria admitted. “But from Actonia.”

“Actonia?” Serren thought about it. “Puzzling. I feel she is orchestrating some drama my sister knows nothing about with all these little schemes and such.”

“Well, I am glad to be here with you in any case,” Nemeria said, tying his hair back in a ponytail. “Done.”

Serren turned his head side to side, and felt his long ponytail swishing along his back, but no hair flopped over his shoulders or into his face. “I can actually see!” A bright, pretty smile spread over his face. “You were right,” he said to Nemeria.

Nemeria resisted the urge to tell him how pretty he looked, but just smiled and said, “I can’t believe a man just admitted he was wrong.”

Serren gestured down at himself. “It must be my body talking.”

“So, what are you going to do with yourself now that you’ve been granted your freedom?”

“Probably just-- hide?”

“Serren. You can’t. You have to face the world sometime.”

“I guess I will. One day.”

“And I’ll go with you. We’ll do it together.”

They faced each other, staring into each other’s eyes. Nemeria reached out and took Serren’s small, soft hands in her own. *She is so beautiful*, she thought, looking into Serren’s wide, innocent eyes.

Nemeria licked her lips. Leaned forward. Serren felt his nipples getting hard, and he let go of her hands, standing and walking across the room. Nemeria looked back at him, frustrated, as he dug through his dresser

drawer. “Look,” Serren said, pulling out his pipe and weed box.

“No,” Nemeria said.

“Yes,” Serren said, going out to the porch. As he packed the bowl, he looked blankly at Nemeria and said, “Wait. What were we just talking about?”

“I don’t remember either,” Nemeria lied.

Serren lit the pipe, took a toke, handed it to Nemeria.

She took a deep drag and held it, enjoying the silky feeling that flowed through her body, the way her brain lit up. They passed the pipe back and forth. Serren giggled.

“What?”

“The thought just-- I was thinking about Asryn. You should have seen him clomping up the stairs, so serious-- only to find the battle was over. He is such a fool.”

“He showed up after the battle?” Nemeria giggled, and they both found themselves giggling.

“And then he was all-- I am here to rescue you!” Serren said, pretending to brandish a sword.

Nemeria laughed out loud, shaking her head. Serren laughed, leaning back against the rail.

Nemeria looked at Serren, and seeing him laughing, joyful-- it took her breath away. She took him in her arms and hugged his soft body to hers. “I love you,” Nemeria said. She looked expectantly at Serren. He stood half a head shorter now, and looked up at her. His eyes, full of bright, golden moonlight, sparkled with confusion and love and terror, but he smiled and said, “I love you, too.”

Their faces moved closer. “You’ve been so good to me,” Serren said, overcome with emotion.

“You’re really pretty,” Nemeria said.

“Not as pretty as you.”

Nemeria tilted her head to the side and parted her lips, waiting. Serren leaned up toward her, then put his hand behind her head and pulled her down to him, and their lips met, and when the kiss ended they both sighed.

Nemeria started to climb onto Serren's lap, and then Serren started tilting backwards, his legs popping up off the ground as he fell backwards over the balcony rail. He might have fallen all the way down, but Nemeria grabbed his arms, planted herself on the balcony floor and then pulled him to her, catching him in her arms. They clung to each other, their soft bodies touching, hearts racing.

"Maxis," Serren said, shaking as he clung to Nemeria. Then, he looked up at her again, and she ran the back of her hand across his soft cheek, and this time Serren tilted his head back, and closed his eyes, and Nemeria leaned in and kissed him.

Serren started giggling, and slipping out of Nemeria's arms, covered his face. She giggled, too. "That was strange," Serren said.

"I liked it." Nemeria stepped toward him again.

"We better stop."

"Why?"

"Because I am so confused, and a little high, and I don't even know who I am or what I am, and this is all weird because when we

kiss I feel things in my body, and they are things a man isn't supposed to feel when he kisses a girl."

"Oh," Nemeria said, thinking about that, what it would be like for a boy to feel what she was feeling. "I hope you're not mad at me."

"Mad?" Serren turned around, crossing his arms, and then glanced back over his shoulder. "You drive me *mad* but I am not mad. I like kissing you."

"I like kissing you, too."

"You know what's weird?"

"Kissing a girl who used to be a guy?"

"Yes! THAT! But also, I am so hungry for cake right now."

"Sounds good."

Serren marched into his room and pulled the cord. "Chocolate cake," he said, flopping onto his bed. "They better have some!"

"If they don't, tell them to make some. You are a princess."



“Don’t ever call me that,” Serren said, giggling. “I hate it.”

“Yes, milady.”

Serren glared at her, then they both laughed. He tried to think of some comeback, but his mind seemed hazy, and he felt one of those *stitches* again, and put a hand to his side. *Stupid corset*, he thought, *it feels like it’s somehow scraping inside me.*

Nemeria, seeing the gesture, tilted her head to the side. “A cramp?” She said.

“No,” Serren said. “This stupid corset.”

“Oh, well. Welcome to my world.”

“You don’t have to keep reminding me that you’ve been putting up with this for years.”

“But I want to,” Nemeria said. “Because it’s fun.”

## CHAPTER 45

Professor Falconette and Actonia had worked late after school, but they didn't realize how late until they stepped out the front doors of the Conservatory and found a dark, quiet city, shrouded in a thick mist. "What time is it?" Actonia said, looking up and trying to spot the moon. Both women were exhilarated. They'd spent the afternoon and evening making plans for the festival of the goddess and were still full of excitement about the coming festivities.

In the shadows, two men, Plait and Waggot, shrouded by magic, watched as the women talked and walked, laughing excitedly. As they moved past, the two men followed, staying hidden and quiet, but moving closer, closer.

Professor Falconette, as a scholar, lived in a small, shabby flat down in the lower quarter of the city. As they headed down that way, the streets grew more narrow and twisted, the buildings older and slanted, and the mist grew thicker and darker.

Falconette and Actonia paused at the end of the narrow cul de sac leading to her flat. The two talked for a little bit more, and then Actonia walked away, heading back up towards uptown, where the Gaunefer Estate nestled among those of the other royal families. The men watched her go, regretfully, and then moved quickly, closing in on Falconette as she stood at her door, searching for the key in her satchel.

Plait pulled the garrote tight in his hands, while Waggot prepared a spell in case Falconette resisted. The garrote came down over Falconette's head, and she gasped as she felt the man's body press against her, his hot breath on her cheek, the garrote touch her throat.

Plait yanked so hard on the garrote that he lifted Falconette right off her feet, and she kicked while she reached up with her hands, her mind already screaming for breath as Plait crushed her windpipe. "Die, you diseased witch," Plait said. "In the name of... Ahhhhhhhhh!"

Plait screamed as fingernails dug into his eyes.

Waggot, shocked to see Actonia materialize out of thin air, saw Falconette fall to the ground, gasping, and unleashed his fireball at her. Falconette looked up, raised a hand, and the fireball froze in the air, shrinking and shrinking until it fizzled out to nothing. He launched another and another, moving closer and closer. Falconette batted the fireballs away, but couldn't get a moment to go on the offensive.

Plait, meanwhile, had elbowed Actonia in the gut and then thrown her over his head to crash to the street. He advanced on her, fists clenched and blazing and sparking with electricity. Actonia raised her hands, weaving a protective shield, but Plait hurled lightning at her, shattering the shield and sending her spasming across the street and slamming against a wall as the bolt coursed through her body.

"And now, you... neighhhhh," Plait put a hand to his throat, and tried to speak again, but all that came out was a "neigh" like a horse. He looked on in horror as his hands reformed into hooves, and looking over at Plait he saw his partner now had a golden mane, and his own set of hooves.

The hekatin emerged from the darkness, then, chanting in the language of the goddess. Plait and Waggot fell to all fours as their faces elongated and their bodies reshaped themselves, until the two terrified men stood looking at each other, seeing they had each been shaped into leggy white ponies with golden tails and manes. They moved nervously together, whinnying in shock and fear as the witches converged, still chanting, and before either realized what was happening they found someone had slipped bridles over their snouts. When the men clomped their hooves and reared, Falconette said, "Stay still," and both of them felt compelled to obey her commands, dropping to their hooves and standing stock still, not even able to twitch their tails.

"Are you okay?" Falconette said, her voice hoarse and gravelly, hurrying to Actonia.

"Fine," Actonia said. "Your throat?"

"It hurts, but I will live."

She turned and walked up to the ponies. Putting her hand on Plait's head, she mumbled and then said, "Tell me who sent you."

*“Partin farliant...”* Plait started in a high-pitched voice trying to cast a spell, but Falconette removed her charm before Plait could finish.

“Let’s give these girls some time to consider their situation,” Falconette said. “Take them to the stables. Put them in a stall next to a stallion and let them imagine their possible future.”

The hekatin grinned. “With pleasure.”

*Girls?* Plait and Waggot thought, looking at each other in terror as the hekatin lead them away. *Stallion?* Plait thought, terrified. *No*, he thought. *They wouldn’t. They couldn’t.* He wanted to cry out, but couldn’t even whinny now. All he could do was follow along, clomping through the streets as the hekatin led him to face his destiny.

## CHAPTER 46

Serren did not sleep well. His breasts ached and he felt... puffy, like his whole body had been somehow over-inflated. He rolled onto one side and then the other, finally just lying on his back, staring at the ceiling, trying not to think about the kiss with Nemeria, and the strange way his body had reacted, the feelings he'd gotten that were all so wrong but felt so good. Eventually he drifted off to sleep, his mind haunted by jagged, troubling dreams where he found himself standing wearing nothing but a corset in front of an auditorium full of girls, trying desperately to cover his body while the girls all pointed and laughed...

He woke. Through strands of hair falling across his face he could see a purple sky outside his balcony. The sun was rising, so he sighed and sat up and stretched. His boobs still ached, his nipples feeling a little painful as they brushed against his nightie. He wondered if he should ask a healer about it now that it had gone on two days, but figured it was probably just from his corsets. Rolling out of bed, he stopped. *What's this?*

He looked at a dark stain on his sheets, and reached down with his finger and touched the sticky substance, still wet. It looked black in the morning light, and when he smelled it the smell reminded him of copper, which reminded him of...

*No*, he thought, his stomach turning, that feeling of terror and shame that had so often accompanied his journey into womanhood sweeping over him once more. He picked up the lamp next to his bed, turned up the flame and looked at the spot, his heart sinking, his knees getting weak and caving in, pressing against each other. *It isn't fair, he thought. I'm a man...*

He pulled up his nightie, until he saw a dark spot on his inner thigh, then squealed and pulled his nightie down, feeling and dirty and... female....

*I just had my... this body just had its...but* he couldn't even use the word. *What if people find out? I have to hide this!* He felt his eyes fill with tears, and he had no power to fight them. Instead, his legs feeling so weak that he sat on the edge of his bed, he covered his face in shame; both because of what his body had done, was doing, and because he



couldn't stop the tears, couldn't be a man about having his... his body having its shame.

He heard someone at the door, the side door that led to his changing room. The door started to open...

*Oh, my god!*

"Good morning, Princess," Miss Stone said, as she entered.

Serren jumped up and yanked his quilts up over the stain. He spun and tossed his hair back, and found himself smiling, chirping, "good morning" back, trying to look as if nothing was happening, wiping away his tears.

Miss Stone stopped and put her hands on her hips. "Well," she said, nodding. "You are no longer a girl."

"Very funny," Serren said. "Hahaha! Well, time for my bath." He started walking past Stone, heading toward the bath, eager to get her away from the evidence of his disgrace.

"You aren't a girl anymore," Stone said. "Now that you've had your period."

"My what?" Serren said, shocked. "I didn't..."

“I saw the stain on the back of your nightgown.”

Serren looked back, saw the rusty stain. His mouth dropped open. “Please don’t tell anyone,” he said. “It’s too... awful. I’ll be disgraced forever if people find out I had...my.... um... this body...”

“Menarche. Your first period.”

“Don’t say it!”

“Goodness. Every girl overreacts to her first-”

“I’m a man!”

“Well, you are certainly acting like a typical girl.”

“Stop. Please. I have to keep this a secret.”

“When they come to see your sheets, the servants will see the stain.”

“No! They can’t! I’ll... wash the sheets myself! I’ll do my own laundry.”

Stone walked over to the cords on the walls.

“No. Please,” Serren said, rushing to her, grabbing her, trying to keep her away from the cords, from his shame, but Stone was too big and strong, and she dragged him along as she reached out and pulled the cord.

Serren found his eyes filling with tears again. “Why? You didn’t have to do that.”

“I did it for your own good,” Stone said, repeating that hated phrase. Then, taking him by the arm, she said. “Let’s get you cleaned up. You have visitors coming this morning.”

“I have to break the engagement. I’m sick.”

“You aren’t sick. You’re a woman.”

“But how am I supposed to... when I’m?”  
He made an ugly face.

“Goodness, you can be such a helpless boy sometimes.”

“I’m not being a... I mean...”

“Every other girl goes about her life when she has her period. Are they tougher than you?”

“No, but they aren’t boys.”

“So, girls are stronger than boys.”

“No, they aren’t.”

“Then be a man and prove it.”

Serren huffed.

They were about to pass from the changing room to the bath, when Serren heard the voices of his handmaids coming from the room he froze, and remembered the stain on his nightie. “No. Let me change. I don’t want them to see...”

“Come on,” Stone said, refusing to let go of his arm.

Being dragged into the bath like a child made Serren cringe even more. As he entered the steamy bath chamber, the girls curtsied and called out, “Good morning, Princess Serrenina.” They approached, and with a nudge from Stone Serren raised his arms so the girls could pull off his nightdress. Miss Bucket stood right in front of him, and made brief eye contact as the dress was pulled over his head, and then he heard the girls giggle, and he hurried into the bath, wiping another round of tears from his cheeks, covering his face in shame.

“Oh,” he heard Miss Bucket say in a soft voice, empathetic voice. “It’ll be okay.”

“Shut up,” he hissed. “I don’t want your pity.”

Later, he stood in stony silence as they towed him off. He found himself standing naked, one arm across his breasts, the other covering his womanhood. Stone approached him holding a piece of what looked like white padding, and he swallowed. “Here is your blood moss,” Stone said, “the Rag.”

He stepped into his underwear, and Stone put his rag in place. No one said anything, but he felt sure all the girls were laughing at him, and he glared in fury at them and the unfairness of it all as they crushed him inside another humiliating corset, and then draped his leaking body in another absurd dress. They put his hair up with combs and pins.

As always, Stone led him to the mirror and forced him to look at and internalize himself as he now appeared to the world. The dress was white and purple, with the usual lace and bows.

“I feel stupid,” he said, plucking at the dress.

Stone just shrugged.

“Good morning!” Nemeria called as she popped into the room, joining Serren at the mirror, slipping her hand around his narrow waist and putting her smiling face next to his gloomy one. “Smile!” she said. “Your friends are coming to visit!”

“Be gentle with her,” Stone said.

“Don’t!” Serren said. “Please.”

“She just had her first period.”

“Stone!” Serren turned away from his former bride. “Do you have to tell everyone?”

“Privacy, please,” Nemeria said, her heart going out to Serren.

Stone and the handmaidens left.

“Serren...”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“It’s just--”

“Stop!” Serren said. “Let me just... pretend this isn’t happening.”

“Fine. Fine,” Nemeria said. “But, take this.” She held out a small round piece of cloth. It smelled like roses.

“What is this?” He asked..

“Put it in your cleavage, so you don’t smell like a red penny.”

“Smell?” Serren closed his eyes, shuddering at the latest gross revelation about his new sex.

“Girls will know. And some boys.”

Serren pushed the little ball down between his soft breasts, then wiggled until it seemed to settle into an open space.

“Time for breakfast,” Nemeria said.

“I’m not hungry.”

“You need to eat,” Nemeria said, taking his hand and pulling him along. “You don’t want to faint when the boys get here.”

He and Nemeria made their way to the private dining room, where they found Pattenia about to open a sealed letter, which she set aside as soon as Serren walked in. “You look so lovely this morning, Serrenina.”

“You know I hate it when you call me that,” Serren said, a servant taking his elbow and helping him sit.

Pattenia smiled, looking him over. “Feeling unusually irritable today, little sister?”

Serren glared at her. *Did she know?*

“You look healthy, my King,” Nemeria said as she sat.

“Thank you, Nemeria.”

“I understand I ordered you to serve as my sister’s lady in waiting?”

“The confusion has been resolved,” Nemeria said. “Actonia asked me. I assumed it was on your behalf.”

“Actonia? Strange. Well, if you wish to be free of the responsibilities, just ask. I understand things might be awkward between you.”

“As it turns out,” Nemeria said, “we have grown closer than ever.”

Annya arrived, smiling brightly, looking at Serren with soft eyes full of compassion. As



she sat she said, “Well, does anyone have any news?”

“Serrenina?” Pattenia said. “Mother and I talk often, and I have so much going on as King, of course, but you must have your own special moments to share.”

Serren just mumbled, blushing, eyes downcast.

“I have some news,” Nemeria said, eager to draw attention away from Serren. “My mother is putting in a new garden this spring.”

The conversation turned to gardening, and Serren sat silently, but the way Pattenia and his mother kept looking at him, he was sure they knew, and he wished he could just crawl into a cave somewhere, vanish.

What would father think of me? His only son on the rag. How often they’d rolled their eyes at the women, commiserated at their feminine lunacy during their special time? And now here he sat, blushing, after having cried that morning, cried just like some silly girl over his first... event.

The servants brought in the food—this morning it consisted of roast pork and hard-

boiled eggs. Serren helped himself to some of the roast pork. He actually felt famished, and the three ate in silence, though when Serren glanced at Pattenia he always found her watching him with a little smirk on her face. His mother had a moony look on hers, like she looked at him on his last night.

As they were all finishing their meals, the servants brought in a bowl of strawberries and cream, as well as pouring each of them a cup of tea that smelled like peppermint. Nemeria looked at Pattenia, thinking *please don't*.

"I heard a very funny joke the other day," Pattenia said.

The servant spooned the strawberry cream into a bowl and placed it in front of Serren.

"Why does it take four girls on the rag to make a bed?"

"Your highness," Nemeria said.

"That's not appropriate for the table," Annya said, reaching out to cover Serren's hand.

Serren snatched his hand away, then stared at Pattenia, furious. "Stop."

“Guess,” Pattenia said.

“I’m not in the mood,” Serren said, conscious of the blood moss between his legs.

“It takes four girls on the rag to make a bed” Pattenia laughed, along with her dutiful servants. “Because.... it just does!”

Serren felt the tears pooling in his eyes, and he burned with rage and shame. Glaring at Pattenia he whispered. “Have your fun. Go ahead.” He took another spoonful of strawberries and cream.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of,” Annya said.

The words and the motherly tone stung deeply, and Serren felt the room growing smaller and smaller, and he struggled to breathe, the corset crushing him, and the weight of his long ponytail, swishing on his back, and the soft bulk of his breasts, and the feeling of some stray hairs tickling his long, slender neck, and he needed to run, to get out, but he didn’t want Pattenia to have the satisfaction. He sat, forcing himself to eat. Trying to calm his breathing.

“Well, you can’t say I am without compassion. One of the best things for a girl

when she's *dancing with the red queen* is strawberries."

The strawberry in his mouth suddenly seemed revolting to him, and Serren spat it out. "I hate you."

"It will ease your cramps," Pattenia said. "Don't be such a baby."

"This is your fault," Serren said, standing. "This body. How can you use it as an excuse to mock me?"

"You teased me mercilessly over mine," Pattenia said.

Serren spun and stormed from the room, his ponytail swishing behind him. Nemeria rose and curtsied, but let her eyes and tone convey her disdain. "Your highness."

"She needs to learn," Pattenia said. "This is her life now."

"Of course, your highness," Nemeria said. "But you needn't be quite so cruel."

"I'm going to go check on him," Annya said.

"Her," Pattenia said.

“I don’t like you very much right now,”  
Annya said, leaving.

“He used to make jokes about my period all the time!” Pattenia shouted angrily, as Nemeria and Annya left.

“Ugh!” Nemeria’s withering gaze left her feeling guilty and furious and annoyed and most of all disappointed. She’d wanted to really rub it in, the same way he used to mock her. And now it had all left *her* feeling terrible. Everyone was on Serren’s side. Still!

A messenger came in, a young girl from the academy. “Someone tried to kill Ollia and Actonia last night,” she said.

“Goddess,” Pattenia said. “Are they okay?”

“Minor wounds only. She asked you come to them. They have prisoners.”

Pattenia rose, her mind moving away completely from her little brother’s first period and to matters of life and death and the survival of her rule.

## CHAPTER 47

Serren lifted his skirts and ran back to his rooms. The doorman opened the door. “Want me to slam it for--”

Serren wheeled on him. “Shut! UP!” he screamed, before running into his room and tossing himself onto his bed. A few moments later, he heard the doors opening, Nemeria and Anya whispering. He didn’t look, but just cringed as he heard footsteps approaching.

“Honey,” he heard his mother say, as she put her hand on his shoulder.

“Leave me alone,” Serren said.

“It might help to talk about it.”

“I don’t want to talk about *it*.”

Anya looked at her son, her daughter, and her heart melted. She wanted to help, but she understood. It had to be hard for her. So, she just said, “You’re strong. You’ll get through this.”

Serren didn't answer.

"If you ever do want to talk," Annya said.  
"I'm there for you."

Serren didn't answer.

"I love you."

Serren dug his fingers into his pillow. *Then why?* He thought, *Why did you do this to me?*

Annya left. Serren heard Nemeria moving around the room. At first he cringed, waiting to endure whatever feminine thing she would want to share with him about his disgrace, but she didn't say anything. He heard a drawer open, and a few moments later, he smelled the sweet, pungent odor of the dream leaf.

He sat up, wiping his cheeks with the backs of his hands. Nemeria, blew out a cloud of smoke, her eyes bright. "Want to dream?" She said, holding the pipe toward Serren.

Serren smiled, his whole mood changing, brightening, and he shook his head. "Do I ever."

He took the pipe and smoked, and soon the two girls laughed as they got high.

By the time the knock came, and the doorman opened the door to announce Asryn, Oper and Kencrick, Serren had forgotten all about the fact that his old friends had been invited to visit.

“What are you doing here?” he shouted, coming in from the porch, Nemeria following close behind, giggling. “You mudcluds!”

Asryn, Oper and Kencrick stood there looking at Serren, their mouths hanging open. None of them had seen him in a corset, a dress, prettied up, and seeing him there now with his tiny waist, wide hips and the swell of his breasts, that pretty face, cheeks flushed, eyes bright, they were all shocked that this girl, this radiant girl, was their old friend.

“What?” Serren said, looking back at them.

“You, um, you’ve--” Asryn gestured toward Serren’s dress. “You’re wearing-- a dress?”

“What?” Serren looked down at himself. “Oh! This!” He gestured at his body. “This is me now. My sister insists on these ridiculous clothes.”

“Brother,” Oper said, “you are-- so--”



Serren felt awkward, expecting some embarrassing comment about his femaleness, but instead Oper blurted out, “sooooo high!”

Serren laughed, a high-pitched, silvery laugh, and twirled, his dress flowing out around him. “The question,” he said, smirking wickedly, “is why aren’t you? Come on!” He turned and ran out to the porch, lifting his skirts without even thinking about it.

The three boys watched him, looking at his narrow waist, at the way his dress flared out in the back, the bow tied just below his waist, the long ponytail, and they glanced at each other, then shrugged and followed.

Nemeria watched them, smiling to herself, and then joined them all on the porch.

They smoked and drank. Worked their way through the preliminary conversations about what was up at school, which teacher did something lame. They talked about the eclipse. No one mentioned the Great sixteens, or Serren’s sex. Kencrick didn’t speak at all, but alternated between looking out over the garden and staring at Serren, quickly looking away each time Serren looked in his direction.

Once they had smoked awhile, Nemeria put a hand on Serren's arm. "Will you be okay?"

"Yes," Serren said, covering her hand with his own.

"I'll let you boys catch up for a bit," Nemeria said, smiling as she headed back inside.

"You don't have to leave," Asryn said.

"I'll be back," Nemeria said.

Nemeria left, and the four friends shifted around the balcony, positioning themselves in a rough semi-circle. They didn't look at each other, but looked away, clearing their throats. "Someone has to say it," Oper finally blurted out.

"What?" Serren said, flushing.

"You look incredible," Oper said. "I mean, you might be the prettiest girl I've ever seen."

"Come on," Asryn said. "Let's not--"

Serren kept looking out at the garden. "It's fine. I have seen myself. I know. But, you have to think of me as Serren, as your old

friend. I am not this body, or this face. I am trapped in this body, but I am still me.” He glanced back at them, laughed nervously, then looked back at the garden. “I want you to treat me as me. Can you do that?”

“Yes,” Asryn said. “Of course. I see my best friend still, in your eyes.”

“I don’t see any problem with that at all,” Oper said.

“Good,” Serren said. He turned around, putting his elbows on the banister and leaning back. The day grew late, and the sun had started to sink toward the horizon. A cool breeze tossed Serren’s ponytail, and he shivered, hugging himself. “You’re so tall now,” he said, looking at Asryn and Kencrick.

“You’re just short,” Asryn said.

“I feel like a dwarf!”

“Hey,” Oper, who was about the same height, said. “You’re not that short.”

For an awkwardly long moment, no one spoke. The boys glanced at each other, then back at Serren, then back at each other.

“What?” Serren said.

“On the way over here we were talking,” Oper said.

The others giggled. Even Asryn, who had turned red. “We probably shouldn’t ask.”

“What?” Serren said.

“Would you show us-- can we see your— um-- your breasts?” Oper said.

“Noooooo!” Serren shrieked. “In the name of the gods!”

The boys laughed nervously. “You would ask us if we were the ones with--” Oper made the cupping gesture for breasts.

“You’re ridiculous!” Serren felt himself blushing furiously as he crossed his arms over his breasts, feeling consumed with self-consciousness. “Go away!”

“You’d be saying the same thing!” Asryn laughed. “If I were the maiden.”

“Arrrrghhhhhh!” Serren shouted at the sky.

“What are friends for?” Kencrick said, finally speaking.

“I’d show you mine -- if I had them.” Oper said.

“Just for one second,” Asryn said, laughing.

Serren turned away, shaking his head. “Idiots!” he said, annoyed, but unable to stop laughing at the absurdity. “Imbeciles!”

“What’s happening?” Nemeria said, coming back at the sound all Serren’s furious objections. With Nemeria’s appearance, the boys desisted, though still giggling.

Serren had his back to them, hugging himself, looking up at the sky. “My friends are being-- boys. They want to see my....” He glanced down.

“Very well,” Nemeria said. “I think that’s probably enough socializing for one day.”

“Yes,” Serren said.

“Oh, no,” Asryn said. “Come on. We were just fooling around.”

“Brother,” Oper said. “It was all just in fun.”

“It’s been great seeing you again,” Serren said. “Truly. But, I am tired.”

“We won’t bother you with that nonsense anymore,” Asryn said.

“I really am exhausted,” Serren repeated, and then the next words surprised him. “I don’t have the endurance I once had.” He couldn’t believe he’d said it, and it made him feel like a girl.

“You heard him,” Nemeria said, herding the boys toward door.

“Brother,” Asryn said, stepping forward, arms outstretched.

The two had often hugged, and Serren tried to hide his discomfort as he embraced his old friend. It all felt wrong. He felt small, his head only coming to Asryn’s chest, and as they embraced he felt his soft body pressing against Asryn’s ribs, and his head swam as Asryn’s manly musk swirled around him. Asryn held Serren tight and what seemed a little too long.

As Serren stepped away Asryn gave Serren’s little shoulder a squeeze. “I will always be there for you,” he said, looking down at Serren, who looked up at him wide-eyed, his head buzzing with confused emotions.

“Goodnight,” Serren said, with a small wave, turning his back to Asryn and once more looking up at the sky, thinking, *what is happening?*

The boys left. Nemeria slipped an arm around Serren’s waist and kissed him on the cheek. “Was it fun to see your friends again?”

“Right up until they asked me to show them my breasts,” Serren said.

“Boys!” Nemeria said, chuckling. She turned Serren’s head and gave him a quick kiss on the lips. “Boys can be so dumb.”

“Don’t talk about us that way,” Serren said, walking back inside.

“Where are you going?”

“To summon my handmaids,” Serren said, spinning, then whispering, “I’m leaking.”

Nemeria nodded in understanding and waved him on, shaking her own head at the crazy twists and turns her own life had taken. The man she was supposed to marry was dancing at the red queen’s ball. Why did that make her love him even more?

## CHAPTER 48

Pattenia joined Actonia and Falconette at the stables. Morning sunlight cut through the shadowy barn and motes danced in the golden rays. When they approached the stall where Plait and Waggot waited, the two ponies pawed the ground with their hooves and tossed their manes. "Take the littler one and question her," Falconette said. "I will talk with this one."

Actonia took Waggot's bridle and led him away. Falconette entered Plait's stall. "Not one word of magic," she said. "Stomp your hoof twice if you understand." Plait stomped his hoof twice. Falconette put her hand on Plait's head and cast her charm. "Who sent you?"

"Lady Ansey," Plait answered in a girl's voice. "Please don't make me..." but he lost the ability to speak and just neighed.

"Ansey," Falcon said. "But she must be working with someone inside the kingdom."



How did you get into the city? Answer only my question if you want any hope of being restored to your form.”

“A gate left unguarded in the lower city.”

“Are there more of you? More attacks planned?”

“I heard some talk. They mentioned the feast of the goddess, but I don’t know if there is a plan.”

“Good girl. Now, go stand in the corner.”

Plait did as he was told, but clomped his hooves and lashed his tail, looking back imploringly. “It’s up to the King to decide what to do with you now,” Falconette said. “But if you told the truth, there’s a chance she will have mercy.”

Actonia brought the other pony back, and they walked some ways from the stables. “Ansey,” Actonia said. “The Feast.”

“Mine said the same.”

“What now?” They looked to Pattenia.

“Leave them in their current shapes for now. We go ahead with the feast day. I will

keep my eye on Appollon. I know he is behind all this.”

After, Pattenia hurried back to the palace, and her rooms, where she had her handmaids help her out of her dress and corset, and then slipped into the clothes Vintania had tailored for her; baggy pants that had been shortened to fit and a shirt plus a waistcoat. Looking in the mirror, she felt-- improper, but she could move. “Clear the hall between here and the training room,” she said, embarrassed to have anyone see her dressed as a boy.

Once the hallway was clear she hurried down to the training room, where she found Elverous waiting for her.

As soon as she walked in, Elverous looked away. “Your highness,” he said. “You’re dress--”

“I can’t very well wear a corset while sword fighting,” Pattenia said. “I barely managed to get through the siege, smothered as I was.”

“Of course, your highness.”

“Just treat me the same way you would a boy.”

“Are you sure that’s what you want?”

“I am sure.”

“As you wish,” Elverous said, taking one of the ghost blade pommels from the rack and handing it to her.

Pattenia took it into her hand, and the smoking blade materialized. She felt a current pass from the blade up her arm, a surge of power. She waved the blade, striking Elverous, who hissed as the blade sent a shock through his body.

“Oh!” Pattenia said, dropping the blade.  
“Are you-”

“Never swing the blade about like a toy!”  
Elverous shouted.

“Oh- I-”

“And you were holding it wrong, and your stance was improper!”

“You don’t have to shout,” Pattenia said.

“Do you want me to treat you the same as I would a boy or not?”

“Um, yes. Treat me the-”

“Then shut your mouth and listen.”

Upstairs, Serren grabbed his bedpost and hissed as Stone tugged the laces on his white, silken corset tighter, and tighter.

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The lessons began. Pattenia found herself standing in an engage position, just standing there, until her legs burned, and she wanted to scream. Then Elverous forced her to lunge and lunge and lunge, back and forth across the room, her legs burning, holding the sword in front of her in both hands, shoulders on fire, her face a mask of suffering and determination.

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Serren raised his arms and his handmaids lowered the dress over him, then adjusted the skirts and top, tying laces and bows, pulling it tight against his soft curves. He stared blankly as he was sheathed in femininity, unable and unwilling any more to fight the way it changed him, to find himself in a soft pink dress that celebrated his shape, the skirts swirling around his legs. He felt more like a girl, a real girl, when they dressed him like this, and he sighed.

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Pattenia held a squat, wooden blade above her head until her arms began to shake, and just when she thought she couldn't hold it a moment more, Elverous would shout, "Don't you dare lower your arms. Hold it! Hold it!" And she would take a breath and then another, and another, and when Elverous finally said, "Release," she dropped the blade and shook her arms, grimacing as they tingled and stung.

"You have a strong will," Elverous said, approvingly, "and a stubborn streak."

"I know. I will try and be less stubborn."

"Be more stubborn," Elverous said, "when stubborn is called for."

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Serren sat with his hands in his lap while his girls did his hair, today weaving a delicate silver chain among his thick golden locks. They didn't ask and he didn't object when they rubbed some blush onto his cheeks, and some olive oil on his lips.

“You look lovely,” Stone said, and his handmaids murmured agreement.

“Thank you,” he said, softly. Stone no longer made him look at himself, but as soon as she and the girls left, he walked to the mirrors and looked at himself-- herself-- in her pink dress, her long hair piled high on her head. His hand maidens had done well. Satisfied, she went down to breakfast.

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At last they sat together, backs to the stone wall. Pattenia was drenched in sweat. “I don’t know if I will ever be any good at this,” Pattenia said. “I am too old.”

“He who makes excuses needs excuses,” Elverous said. “No one is ever good at this. I’m not good at this. I am just getting better. In any case, the primary purpose in learning swordplay is not swordplay.”

“Am I to contemplate on the meaning of that statement tonight and find wisdom?”

“I will tell you what it means. We teach swordplay not to make sword fighters, but to make men.”

Pattenia laughed. “And will you make a man of me?”

“You will become something else altogether, my King. Something more.”

“And what is the meaning of that cryptic comment?”

“I don’t know. I just feel it to be true.”

Pattenia’s whole body ached as she got to her feet, her hands stinging, but she had never felt more excited to be alive.

Serren, just finishing breakfast, offered his arm to one of the servants, who helped him to his feet, and then he headed back up to his rooms. Along the way, a young man he didn’t recognize came walking along, and he swallowed, nervously, wanting to get to his rooms before the boy made some rude comment, or gave him one of those looks that made his skin crawl, but the boy called out, “Serren!”

Serren stopped and looked, realizing as the “boy” approached that it was Pattenia. Serren shook his head, looking up at her, then down, and then said, “Are those my clothes?”

Pattenia looked down. "Oh!" She said. "Yes. I needed something to wear for sword fighting practice, so I had them tailored."

"Sword fighting?"

"Yes. I always wanted to do it, and now that I'm King? Why not, right? Well, I need a bath," she said, sauntering off, calling back as if in an afterthought, "You look pretty!"

*Unbelievable*, Serren thought, watching her swagger off, feeling more aware of his corset, his dress, the powder on his face: the trappings of his girlhood. Pattenia really had taken his life, and trapped him in hers.

Exasperated, he fluffed his skirts and went back to his room, where he found a bundle of wax paper and a note waiting for him. He rolled his eyes and read the note:

*P. Serren--*

*I thought you might appreciate these candied cherries, picked from the Wensea Orchards. Hold your had high, and as always I am here to help you. You need but call, and I will come to you as swift as the summer storm.*



*Your loving friend,*

*Duke Prett*

Serren tossed the note in the fire. He stood for a moment, thinking about tossing the cherries as well, but shrugged and kept them instead. They did look good.

## CHAPTER 49

Serren spent the day much as he had spent every day since becoming a girl-- seated by the window, reading and napping, until Nemeria came bounding in. They kissed, and then Nemeria held his face, smiling, staring into his eyes and said, "Why don't you come to school with me tomorrow?"

"School? With you? I don't know that I need to learn to walk with a book on my head."

"Your walk could actually use a little more grace," Nemeria said. "But come with me just so we can spend more time together."

"No," Serren said. "People would laugh at me. Do you know how many of those girls I used to chase, to flirt with when I was a boy? How many I kissed? Now, I am just another girl, and I know they would mock me for my woman's shape."

“Perhaps you shouldn’t have chased so many other girls,” Nemeria said, her mood darkening.

“Oh,” Serren said. “I’m -- I didn’t think.”

Nemeria looked at him there, looking so pretty in his dress, and said, “You are forgiven.”

Serren opened a wax bundle and said, “Candied cherry?”

“Oh. Thank you,” Nemeria said. They each took one and chewed, enjoying the sweet, earthy taste of dark chocolate, and then the fruity cherry juice, and the feeling of the skin on their tongues, and finally the aftertaste of just a little brandy. “Exquisite,” Nemeria said. “Where did you get these?”

“A gift from Prett,” Serren said, rolling his eyes.

“He is such a creep,” Nemeria said. “He’s after you.”

“I know,” Serren said. “It makes me feel... scared.”

“Be careful with him. He has a look in his eyes. Not like other boys.”

“Like he wants to hurt me.”

“I have seen that look. It makes my skin crawl. And he knows you’re really a boy.”

“I think that might be a thing for him,” Serren said, twisting his hair.

“You have to be careful,” Nemeria said, taking his hand and freeing it from his hair, holding it between hers.

“It’s one of the reasons I don’t want to leave the palace,” Serren admitted.

“Are you just going to hide in your room for the rest of your life?”

“I don’t know. I want to get out of this body, but as long as I am stuck as *her*? I can’t face the world. I don’t feel safe in this shape.”

“You aren’t,” Nemeria said. “But neither were you completely safe as a boy.”

“I felt safe. And it’s different. As a boy, I never worried that a man would want to do things to me. I felt I could fend for myself. Now, I can’t even leave the palace without an escort because my sister thinks I am so helpless. And, in a sense, she is right. I can barely move or breathe in these absurd

clothes we are forced to wear. I can't even run in them!" He popped another cherry in his mouth. Chewed it up. "I feel like Appollon would have a spell, some way to change me back. But how can I go to him when I am to be followed around constantly by a member of the Palace Guard?"

The two thought for a bit, brows furrowed, and then Nemeria sat up. "I have it!"

"What?" Serren said, brightening.

"Come to girls' school," Nemeria said.

"I told you already--"

"No! Serren. Listen. The escorts for all the girls-- they wait outside the school and stand watch. They don't come into our school."

"So?"

"So we could ditch your escort and sneak out. Go meet the Primary. I could show you."

"Sneak out?"

"Yes. There are so many ways. I've done it before."

“You? Snuck out of school? Duchess Prim and Proper?”

“We snuck out and smoked down by the river just last week.”

Serren shook his head, hooking a loose strand of hair behind his ear. “Why have I never seen this side of you?”

“There are so many things you don’t know about me, Serrenina.”

“But you always seemed so goody goody.”

Nemeria sat back, arching an eyebrow, a snarky smile on her face. “I had to show you and your family I would be a good wife and mother,” Nemeria said.

“So? Wow.” Serren shook his head. “You’re a sneaky one.”

“Yes. So, it’s settled then, right? You’re coming with me to school!”

“So, this actually could be sort of great. If only...” He plucked at his dress. “I didn’t have to wear a dress.”

“And be a girl?”

“That even more so than the dress.”

Just think of this as maybe a test, a challenge of your courage! Like when Trimack had to climb into the dragon’s mouth...”

“Somehow putting on a dress and learning to host tea parties doesn’t have the same sense of glory.”

Nemeria laughed. “I think most boys would rather climb into a dragon’s mouth than be turned into a girl.”

Serren nodded. “I would absolutely rather crawl into a dragon’s mouth than be a girl.”

“See? This is a test of your heart, of your manhood. How badly do you want to be a man again, Serren?”

Serren thought about it. “Badly enough. Enough to act the girl,” Serren admitted. “At least for a day. Or two.”

Nemeria popped one of the cherries into her mouth, and then she climbed onto Serren’s lap and they kissed, sharing the sweet chocolate and brandy between them. *It’s a shame he can’t stay this way, Nemeria*

thought as they kissed. Somehow, she just liked him better.



## CHAPTER 50

Serren and Nemeria walked together, and he felt his cheeks flush as they passed beyond the palace walls. It was the first time Serren had left the palace grounds since becoming a girl, and he felt not only self-conscious about his female shape, but how the hobbling nature of his clothes and shoes seemed to render him feeble. He felt, if not a helpless maiden, a far less self-sufficient one than he would have been without the corsets and dresses and shoes—which wobbled uncertainly whenever he stepped on a crevice or crack in the cobblestone streets. “These streets aren’t made for girls,” he murmured.

“Nothing is made for girls,” Nemeria said.

Elverous and three armed footmen trailed behind, far enough to give the two privacy, but close enough to move if someone attacked, or Serren tried to make a run for it.

Already, Serren saw groups of girls on their way to school staring at him, covering their mouths and whispering. Three girls hurried past, one of them calling out, “Good morning,

princess,” and then they all giggled. He thought he heard one snicker, “He walks like a gorilla.”

“These girls are horrible,” Serren said, when he felt someone bump him from the side and send him falling against Nemeria, clinging to her so he wouldn’t fall down.

“Prett,” Nemeria spat.

“I am so sorry, princess,” Prett said, putting a hand on Serren’s shoulder and squeezing.

“Don’t touch me,” Serren said, yanking his shoulder away. He forced himself to look up at his rival, to meet his eyes.

“You are so cute when you’re angry,” Prett said.

“If only I had a sword--”

“Instead of a clam.”

“Prett!” Nemeria said. “You’re disgusting.”

“Move on,” said Elverous, who’d been trailing along behind as he hurried to defend Serren. “Get off to school.”

Prett smirked as he moved away, giving Serren's figure a once over. "I'm going to win the Sixteens for you, little princess! You'll see!"

"I don't care," Serren said, unable to think of any better comeback.

"Farewell, ladies," Prett said, swaggering off.

"You okay?" Nemeria said, taking Serren's arm.

"Yes," Serren answered, fixing the skirts of his dress, setting his jaw. "Ugh. He's so... ugh!"

They made it to school, where once again Serren could see the girls all looking at him, whispering and giggling, but then Nemeria led him to a group of girls who all brightened at the sight of the two of them. Serren recognized the girls: Nemeria's ladies in waiting, and among them his cousin, Vackania Denae, who greeted Nemeria with a hug and then held out her arms to Serren, who hesitated, knowing how much Vackania disliked him.

“Cousin?” Vackania said, keeping her arms out.

Serren relented, accepting the hug. “I thought you hated me?”

“Hated? Nonsense. We are family. Come, sit with us while we wait for school to start.”

Serren sat. The girls began talking amiably about the upcoming day—their classes, and thoughts, and Serren found himself looking out across the way, where he could see the boys climbing the great stair, making their way up to the boys’ school, his school, the place he belonged. Looking halfway up the stair to The Spot, he saw Prett and his crew, but no sign of Asryn or the others. The empty space where they had always gathered filled him with sadness.

Professor Falconette came out, ringing a bell. The girls all came to their feet and lined up in rows, standing with their hands clasped behind their backs. At first, Serren just let his dangle at his sides, but Nemeria nudged him, and he reluctantly clasped his hands behind his back as well.

“Good morning, girls,” Professor Falconette said, adjusting a scarf around her neck.

“Good morning,” they responded in bright, sing-song voices, then started to file into the school. *Thank Maxis that Prett can't see me now*, Serren thought.

“Princess Serrenina,” Professor Falconette said, taking his arm and pulling him out of line as he passed. “Welcome to the Ladies’ Conservatory. We are very excited to have you with us.”

“Thank you,” Serren said, his voice dripping with acid. “My attendance here wouldn’t have been possible without you.”

Falconette smiled and patted Serren’s arm. “We all serve the will of the goddess.” She noticed that Nemeria had stepped out of line, and waited dutifully behind her mistress. “You may go on, Nemeria.”

“I thought I would wait for the princess. I am her attendant.”

“Yes, but the princess will be joining the tens today. If she needs you, she may send for you.”

Nemeria reluctantly left, and watching her go Serren felt very insecure about his... cycle, and wished he’d asked her some questions

like—what the hell am I supposed to do if I start bleeding again? Now it looked like he would just have to make it to lunch hour somehow. Why did he have to wear a white dress on this day of all days?

“The tens?” Serren said, annoyed but not surprised. “Despite the fact that I am sixteen?”

“You have to catch up on some basic skills for *girls*,” Falconette said, “before you can join the classes for young *women*.”

The two walked together, Falconette still holding Serren’s arm. “Very well,” Serren said, once more letting the rage drive him in his determination. “Enjoy your victory, but when I regain my shape and my crown, I will remember this.”

“Of course you will, *princess*,” Falconette said, opening a door and putting a hand on the small of his back, guiding him into a room where a bunch of nine and ten-year-old girls wiggling in their seats excitedly began clapping and cheering.

Serren found himself smiling in spite of himself.

“They are very excited to have a real, live princess in their class,” Falconette whispered to him, leaving him to the class and the young teacher, Miss Wall, who stood up from her desk.

“Let’s all welcome Princess Serrenina to our class today, girls.”

The girls stood and applauded, calling out “welcome!”

Part of Serren wanted to vomit at the sheer girliness of it all, but seeing the happy, smiling faces of the little girls, he responded instead to their joyful innocence and just waved and smiled and said, “Thank you all so much. That was... unexpected.”

Serren made his way to the sole full-sized desk in the room, and as he sat down he saw the girls kind of staring at him in awe. One of them whispered, “You’re so pretty,” and it seemed to him one of the first times he’d heard that coming from someone where it didn’t seem either insulting or weird, but just a pure, genuine compliment. It made him feel warm, and again he smiled and said, “thanks.”

“Okay, girls,” Miss Wall said, trying to get the class on track. “Let’s continue on with the

life of the great queen, Danis Progenita, and her twelve innovations, which did so much to make our lives better.”

*Progenita?* Serren thought. *The house of witches who'd tried to overthrow the rule of man? What heretical nonsense are they teaching in this school?*

But as Wall spoke, he saw the girls all taking notes, so he used the paper and pen in front of him, and began to write as well, intent of seeming like he was cooperating. Besides, he thought as he wrote, the girls had been so friendly, he didn't want to seem rude. The things Miss Wall related struck Serren as utter nonsense. Progenita responsible for the building of the first aqueducts? For domesticating horses? It was like they were trying to give women credit for everything.

“I know this may all come as a little bit of a surprise to you,” Miss Wall said at one point, as if reading his mind. “But this is the true history of our nation, forbidden for hundreds of years. But we are finally free to teach about the contributions girls have made over the years”



Serren just nodded. "Very interesting," he said, thinking, *At least I am not walking around with a book on my head.*

In second period, though, he found himself walking with a book on his head, a book which kept falling off as the little girls around him circled him, and went up and down stairs without the books so much as wobbling. They were giggling at him good naturedly, but his competitive nature came out, and he found himself eagerly taking instruction from the teacher he'd at first ignored. By the end of class all the girls knelt, watching as he walked up and down a small set of practice stairs, the book balanced perfectly on his head, and when he finished all the girls cheered for him, and he actually smiled and pumped a fist triumphantly. *Anything a girl can do, I can do!* he thought. *Tell me I walk like a gorilla.*

He walked out of the classroom far more gracefully than he came in. He spent third period working on making his penmanship more graceful, and fourth period learning to weave. The curriculum struck him as somewhat muddled, as so much time seemed devoted to dumb girl stuff, and yet all morning the teachers' talk had been full of exhortations about girls being strong and powerful and

equal to boys. *If that's all* so, he wondered idly, *why aren't we—I mean why aren't they—taught important subjects like math and geometry?* He answered his own question, remembering what he'd been taught: *Girls' brains weren't made to do math, to understand geometry. They were made to mother children.*

*Does that mean I can't do math anymore, he wondered? Am I best suited for raising children? Maybe that's why...*

*Shut up! You're still a man.*

*But what if I...*

He threw the thought away. *I need to focus on getting back into my male body, he thought, and not let this scattershot girl's brain and my body's... weakness... distract me.* As it was, his rag felt damp, and he wondered if he should ask Nemeria what to do? Should he get a new one? Or was it normal to feel... wet? God, he hated having to put up with girl problems. They were so *gross*.

He'd been walking along, following the girls as they made their way toward lunch. The Tens had surrounded him, and were walking along, gazing up at him, peppering him with

questions he was murmuring empty responses to. “Do you like pudding? Were you really a boy before?”

“Serrenina!” Nemeria hurried to his side and took his arm.

“Thank god,” he whispered. “I can’t get away from my admirers.”

“Hey, girlie girls,” Nemeria said. “Can you run ahead and save a table for Princess Serrenina?”

“Yes!” they answered, running ahead in a cloud of laughter.

Nemeria pulled Serren to the left, down a narrow hall. “Hurry,” she said, picking up her pace.

Serren lifted his skirts and hurried along behind, looking back nervously as his shoes clicked and clacked along the stone flooring. Nemeria led him back along a zig zagging path through what seemed like storage areas, and then they came to a narrow wooden door. She turned the handle, pushed it open, and then the two ran out into an old apple orchard that stood in a walled-off area behind the school.

Nemeria pushed the door shut behind them and laughed. “We’re free!” she said. “I told you.”

Serren smiled and answered her laugh. “You’re amazing,” he said, looking up into the sun and feeling free for the first time in his life as a girl. His breasts heaved, as he struggled for breath against his corset.

“Come on,” Nemeria said, her chest heaving prettily as well. “We have to hurry.”

“How do we get out of here?” Serren said, looking around.

“This way,” Nemeria said, leading him through the trees until they came to the back of the orchard, where bushes had grown along the wall. Pushing aside the bushes revealed a rusty metal door, which Nemeria opened, peering out carefully before stepping through. Serren followed, and found they were in a narrow alley that abutted a line of tall, old brick buildings. Nemeria grabbed his hand and dragged him toward the end of the alley, where horses and wagons moved among pedestrians on a busy city street, and in just moments the two found themselves holding

hands, hurrying along on their way to the Temple of Maxis.

“Nemeria,” Serren said, smiling up at her. “Please. I need to catch my breath.”

Nemeria smiled down at Serren, seeing the sparkle in his eyes, and the pretty smile on his face. It made her happy. “Come on,” she said. “We have to hurry.” She started running, pulling Serren along.

They came to the temple, and went around to the side door that led to the priest’s offices. “Okay,” Serren said, putting his hands to his cheeks. “Let me catch my breath for a moment before we go in.”

“Yes,” Nemeria said, fussing with his hair, then his dress. “Let me freshen you up.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Serren said, fidgeting.

“It does for you now. Trust me.” Nemeria took his chin in her hands and tilted his head back. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes bright. “For luck,” she said, kissing him on his soft lips.

Serren giggled. Pulled on the door. It didn’t budge. “Locked,” he said.

“No,” Nemeria said. She pulled, then took the handle and clapped it down on the wooden door as hard as she could, three times. “Let’s go in the front door,” Nemeria said.

“Maybe we should wait?”

“Come on!” she said, once again grabbing Serren’s hand and tugging him toward the front of the church. He didn’t budge.

“Ow,” he said. “One second.”

Nemeria looked and saw he had his arms wrapped around his belly. “Cramps,” she said.

“Why now?” Serren said.

“They always come at the worst times.”

Serren looked down at his dress, looking nervously for any spots. “I feel like my... um...the...”

There was a clanging, and the door swung open. A tall, rail thin, gray old man looked down, squinting. “Who’s there?”

“Vicar Blevick! I need to speak with Primary Appollon,” Serren said.

“Who are you, young lady?”

“I am Prince Serren,” he said.

“Oh,” Blevick said. “You? Oh, yes. Enchanted. I remember now. Well, you look just like your mother did at your age. She was such a pretty girl, and...”

“Vicar. I must speak with Appollon immediately. It’s an emergency,” Serren said angrily, before ducking under the old man’s arm and rushing past him.

“Just hold on,” Blevick said.

“Sorry,” Nemeria said as she ran past him, trailing behind Serren. “He’s such a princess!”

Serren hurried down the hall, up the steps, and came to the double doors that led to Appollon’s office. He grabbed the handle and pulled, barely managing to budge the door. Grabbing the handle with both hands he leaned back, using all his weight, and the door slowly came open before someone inside pushed and he fell back into Nemeria’s arms.

“Serrenina?” Primary Appollon said, his eyes going wide

“*Prince Serren*,” he said, as Nemeria pushed him back up on his feet.

“What are you doing here?” Appollon asked, his eyes drifting down to Serren’s breasts.

Serren felt a chill as the man’s gaze wandered up and down his body, but he ignored it, straightening his dress and marching into Appollon’s office. “I’m here for your help,” he said. “To get my body back and claim my throne.”

Appollon followed Serren. “Of course,” Appollon said. “Does anyone know you’re here? Come,” he added to Nemeria. “Quick.” As soon as Nemeria entered the office he pushed the door closed.

“No one,” Serren said. “I snuck away.”

“Good,” Appollon said, with obvious relief. “Take a seat.”

Serren sat, with Nemeria next to him. “I need your help,” Serren said. “Your mages must know some spell which will free me from this body.”



Appollon steeped his hands beneath his chin. "The situation is complicated, Prince Serren."

"Complicated? Help me. Turn me back into a man, so I can reclaim the throne."

"Let's not be hasty."

Serren glanced at Nemeria, then back at Appollon. "What's wrong?"

"The witches are very powerful, Serren, though I don't suppose I need to tell you that." He gestured at Serren's body. "I have made a truce with your sister."

"What truce?"

"I have promised not to attack her in exchange for peace between our religions."

"Well, then, don't attack her. But turn me back into a man."

"I feel your sister would consider it a breaking of her trust. Perhaps you will get used to being a young lady-- in time."

"What are you telling me? That you can do nothing for me? That you, too, say I am stuck in this female shape?"

“I’m sorry, but—“

“No!” Serren screamed, standing. “Your apologies are not enough. You will help me regain my throne! You are my subject!”

“Serren,” Nemeria said.

“Calm yourself,” Appollon said condescendingly. “You’re being irrational.”

“Irrational?” Serren said. “Irrational? How dare you! Don’t talk to me like I am some silly girl. Inside this body is a prince, a man. Your rightful King!”

Appollon covered his mouth. His eyes drifted down to Serren’s breasts again.

“Stop looking at my breasts!” Serren yelled, exasperated. “Help me.”

“I can’t help you, Princess Serrenina.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“You, by order of your sister, the King, are to be referred to as Princess Serrenina,” Appollon said, coldly.

“I told you not to—“

“Shut up!” Appollon shouted, taking a step toward Serren, his fist raised.

Serren stepped back, shocked and a little scared. Nemeria put her hand on his shoulder.

“Listen, *little girl*, and listen well. You have been defeated. Your sister has stolen your sex, and your crown, and she has turned you into a joke. You? A man? You’re a debutante. Unless you show the kingdom otherwise, they will forever think of you as a castrated cow.”

“How dare you,” Serren whispered. “No.”

“Yes, and running to *men* and begging them to rescue you from your sister does not improve your image.”

“What are you saying?”

“You want your throne?” Appollon went to a large, mahogany cabinet, unlocked a drawer and removed dagger with a green blade of glass. “You say you are still a man? Then prove it. This is a Waste Blade. Pierce anyone’s skin with it, and they will age, wither and die in seconds.”

Serren looked at the dagger. At Nemeria.  
“You want me to kill my sister?”

Appollon raised his hands. “I am not telling you to kill anyone. I am giving you a dagger. I will only say this much. A man stands up and takes what’s his, *Serrenina*. A woman lays back and accepts what is thrust upon her. You need to show the people of this kingdom that you are yet a man, despite your shape.”

“And, if I should kill my sister? Then, you would support my claim to the throne?”

“Of course,” Appollon said, softening his tone. “I support your claim now. But, I know politics. People have been saying the witch’s spell gave you not just a woman’s shape, but a woman’s mind and heart as well. You must show them they are wrong. If you choose to take action, and I am not saying you should, you would have to do it in public, in the full view of witnesses. Show them the man inside the girl. Do that, and my wizard priests can give you the life of a man once more.”

Serren got up, went over to the desk and paused, his hand reaching toward the Waste Blade. A cramp hit him, a light one, but one that reminded him of what his sister had done

to him, what she'd made of him. He took the blade and left without saying another word.

Appollon watched the slender little princess walk out, taking in her narrow waist, the inviting rise of her hips and firm young behind. *I would like to taste her*, he thought. *Maxis willing, I'll get my chance after we seize the throne. And then I'll sell her to the Travaillians as a slave girl.*

## CHAPTER 51

After hiding the dagger, Nemeria and Serren made it back to school just before lunch let out. As they were trying to slip into the lunchroom, however, Miss Carpenter spotted them. “Where have you been?” She said.

“Um....” Serren started.

Nemeria stepped forward. “Miss Carpenter,” she whispered. “The princess is having her period.”

“Nemeria!” Serren said, blushing.

“Oh,” Miss Carpenter said, nodding understandingly. “Of course.”

“Thank you for your discretion,” Nemeria said. Miss Carpenter walked away.

“That worked?” Serren said, puzzled.

“There are advantages to being a young lady. Now, you get back there with the *other* little girls.”

“Ha, ha,” Serren said.

Nemeria kissed him on the cheek. "I'll meet you after school."

Serren drifted through the rest of the day, thinking about the dagger hidden in the wall outside the school; the encounter with Appollon. His sister. After school, he and Nemeria retrieved the dagger, and then, escorted once again by Elverous and his men, walked back to the palace. They had no privacy until they were alone in his rooms, where they lay on his bed, the dagger between them.

"What are you going to do?" Nemeria said.

"I don't know," Serren said. "I thought I would get my body back, and put Pattenia in the dungeon, or send her into exile. But to kill her? With my own hand?"

"I couldn't kill my sister," Nemeria said. "No matter what she did."

"Maybe you shouldn't be here," Serren said.

"Wait, I don't mean that I am not with you," Nemeria said. "I was just saying..."

“No. It isn’t that, but I don’t want you to be in danger. Who knows what the hekatins might do if they find out?”

Nemeria covered Serren’s hand. “I’m in this with you no matter what.” She leaned in and kissed him.

“If I do it,” Serren said, picking up the dagger and waving it around. “I will do it at the Sixteens.”

“Careful with that,” Nemeria said.

Serren smiled, but he pulled a pillowcase off his pillow and wrapped the dagger in it. “I’ve never killed anyone,” Serren said. “Never went to war. Do you think it’s true? What Appollon said? That I have not only a woman’s body now, but a woman’s heart and mind?”

“What if you do?” Nemeria asked.

“Then maybe I won’t be able to do it.”

“Because, what? Women are so sweet and gentle?” Nemeria said.

“Yes.”



“The lioness kills just as the lion,” Nemeria said.

“I wonder if...” Serren got up, went over to his desk and found some parchment and a quill. He began working.

Nemeria rose and looked over his shoulder to see the page filling up with a mathematical equation. “What are you doing?”

“Math,” Serren said.

“I can see that.”

Serren finished and set down the quill. “I can still do math,” he said, tossing his long hair.

“So what? Does that mean you think you still have a boy’s brain?”

“Yes.”

“Or maybe girls are just as smart as boys.”

“You know what? Either way, I am fine with it.” He kissed her, giggling, and she kissed him back, and they rolled onto his bed together, kissing and laughing and holding each other.

Danalia draped a slender gold chain around Pattenia's neck and held it there for her to look at. "I don't know. Is it, too ostentatious?"

"No," Danalia said. "It's elegant."

"Okay," Pattenia said, looking at herself in the mirror. Her hair had been put up, and she was wearing a silk dress with a low-cut neckline, and felt she looked pretty, but she just wasn't sure if it was the right pretty, or even if she should be doing what she was doing at all. "Maybe I should cancel?"

"Nonsense," Actonia said.

"But with the attacks, and everything else, I should be focused on more important things."

"In addition to being the King, you are a young woman," Actonia said. "You have to live your life."

"I don't feel like a King right now," Actonia said, looking at her glossy lips and blush dusted cheeks. "I feel like a silly girl. I never should have invited Asryn here! Girls don't court boys."

“You are changing all that. If you like a boy, you should go after him.”

“It feels strange.”

“It’s okay,” Danalia said, cutting in. “It’s normal to feel strange. It means you like him. Now let’s go. You have kept him waiting long enough.”

When Pattenia entered the room, Asryn’s eyes went wide, and he stood, bowed and said, “Your highness. You look... um... very much like you are wearing a special dress...” He found himself blushing and sputtering. She’d never looked so good, and seeing her all dressed up like this made her almost as pretty as Serren.

Pattenia, also blushing, held out her hand. Asryn took it and kissed it.

“I am trying to say, I mean...” he looked desperately at Danalia and Actonia. “What is the proper way to tell a King that she looks ravishing?”

Pattenia laughed. “Excuse us, ladies.”

“Of course, your highness.”

Asryn felt his nerves rattling even harder as the girls left him alone with the King. He looked around, feeling nervous and awkward. Pattenia, too, found herself unsure what to do or say. Finally, Asryn said, "So, you summoned me?"

"Yes, right," Pattenia said. "Take a seat."

Asryn sat, and Pattenia sat in a chair very close to his. Their knees were almost touching. "I summoned you here, Asryn, because, well, let me just come right out and say it. I think you're cute."

"Cute?" Asryn said, surprised. "Me? As in.... cute, cute?"

"Like I find you a handsome young man. Yes. What do you think of that?"

Asryn looked and saw two glasses of bubbling wine on the table. "Mind if I?"

"Please do."

He took a drink, trying to think of what to say, his mind racing as he tried to wrap his head around the fact that his best friend's older sister, who had turned his best friend into a girl with some kind of forbidden magic,

who was King, and who kind of scared him, had just called him cute. “I think you are cute as well,” he finally said.

“I kind of thought maybe you had a crush on me,” Pattenia said, touching Asryn on the knee.

Asryn’s leg tingled where she had touched him. He had not had a crush on her, but now that she looked so much like Serren, and she was quite something, and he was afraid anyway that if he denied having a crush she might turn him into a girl, so he tossed back the rest of the champagne. “Oh, was it that obvious? I’m sorry if I...”

“It’s fine,” Pattenia said, pouring him another glass of champagne. “I used to imagine kissing you.”

“You did?” Asryn said, shifting away from her.

“Yes,” Pattenia said, moving closer. “You’re so nervous! I won’t bite.”

“Ha ha. Well, um, does Serren know I’m here?”

“Don’t worry about my sister,” Pattenia said, taking a hold of Asryn’s collar.

“It’s just that... um...she...”

“Shush,” Pattenia said, pulling him in for a kiss. Feeling him pulling away, she felt a little annoyed, but as she held tight and pushed her tongue into his mouth, Asryn suddenly seemed to relax and lean in, accepting the kiss, relaxing into it.

When they separated, Asryn’s eyes were hot and glassy. A very small voice was telling him this was wrong, that he owed it to Serren to say no, but that voice was shrinking and falling away, and a stronger urge that did not speak pushed him forward toward the beautiful girl in front of him. He put a hand on Pattenia’s shoulder and shifted forward, until he was sitting tall and looking down at her hungrily.

Pattenia tilted her head back and smiled. *It’s good to be King*, she thought, and then grabbed Asryn’s neck and pulled him down for another long, hot, wet kiss.

*Should I feel guilty for putting an aphrodisiac in Asryn’s drink?* she wondered. *Maybe a little*, she decided. *But mostly not.*

Later, Asryn made his way out of the palace, tucking in his shirt. He glanced up at Serren's window, saw the lamplight flickering and paused, looking up. *Serren will hate me if he ever finds out about this*, Asryn thought. It bothered him, the feeling, but what bothered him most was that he really couldn't regret what he'd done the way he felt a good friend would.

Much to his surprise, he kind of liked—really liked—Pattenia. He just wished he knew what he was allowed to feel about her while still being loyal to Serren.

Serren.

Asryn imagined her naked, wondered if kissing her would taste as sweet as kissing her sister. *We should go riding*, he thought, still with that image of Serren's soft little body in his mind. *Like the old days. Just for the sake of friendship.*

## CHAPTER 52

Elverous escorted Serren to the stables. Serren felt absurdly feminine. Ignoring his objections, his handmaids had pinned a wide brimmed straw hat to his hair, made worse by the flowing ribbon that trailed down the back and the flowers pinned to the brim. His riding dress was, thankfully, a royal blue, with a stiff, lace collar.

Asryn, who'd been checking the horses' saddles, looked up and did a double take. "Nice hat," he said, smirking.

"Oh, please," Serren said, reaching up and touching the hat with his white gloved hands. "My girls insisted, so I would not get a red face like a peasant girl."

"You look very pretty," Asryn said.

"Don't talk to me like I'm a girl," Serren said.

"As you wish... milady."

Serren frowned and punched Asryn on the arm. "Idiot." He went to his horse.



“Let me help you,” Asryn said.

“I can do it,” Serren said, lifting his skirts and putting his little booted shoe to the stirrup. It was then that he noticed the saddle. “What’s this? Side saddle?”

“Your dress?” Asryn said.

“Of course. Fine. Ugh!” He tried to pull himself up, but his arms were weak, and with his dress entangled around his legs, he plopped back down. Lifting his skirts once more, he found his footing, but again only managed to get himself halfway up the saddle before sliding awkwardly back down and plopping to the ground, losing his balance and falling with a yelp... right into Asryn’s arms.

He looked up into his friend’s eyes and felt his heart skip a beat. His breasts pressed into Asryn, who smiled down at him, and Serren felt something inside him melting at the sight of the boy’s smile. The feelings terrified him, and he stepped away, looking back at the horse, back at Asryn. “Help me up,” he said, annoyed at his feminine weakness.

Asryn put a hand to Serren’s back and led him to a platform. He put his hands on

Serren's narrow waist. "Come on," Serren said, annoyed.

"It's just to help you onto the horse," Asryn said, lifting Serren off his feet and setting him gently down onto the saddle. "You hardly weigh a thing," Asryn said. "Now wasn't that easy?"

Serren blushed and looked away. "Yes," he said. "Oh, Maxis save me."

"It's okay," Asryn said. "I know inside you are still Serren, but you have a girl's shape, and it is okay for you to get help. You're weaker now. I don't mind helping."

"I could easily get onto this horse," Serren said, "if I were wearing boy's clothes. It's not this body that is so feeble, but I'm made weak by these ridiculous girl's rags I must wear."

Asryn looked at Serren's slender little arms, his narrow little shoulders, but decided it was better not to say anything more, so he just murmured, "Of course."

"Girls are not as weak as we think," Serren insisted.

Asryn nodded.

Serren watched enviously as his friend swung effortlessly up onto his own horse, straddling it with his legs. Serren didn't feel secure on his own horse, riding with his legs to one side, perched on it uncertainly. "I thought we could ride through the forest a bit. Maybe go down to the ruins of the first tower?" Serren said.

"No. Let's ride down the King's road. Find a place to picnic."

"If that's what you'd rather do," Serren said.

Elverous rode a discreet distance behind, and the three set off at a leisurely pace.

The morning was still cool, but the summer sun felt hot, and the air buzzed with the sound of insects. A dragonfly wafted past Serren, and he felt his mood lightening with the canter of the horse, the fresh air, and his oldest friend by his side. Neither spoke, they just rode, the steady clip clop of the horses' hooves, the occasional whinny.

Finally, Serren said, "Is there anything new in your life these days?"

Asryn, thinking of his night with Pattenia, looked away. “No. Training very hard for-- No. Nothing.”

“Training hard for the Great Sixteens?” Serren said.

“Yes,” Asryn said. “I didn’t know if I should mention it because you--”

“I understand,” Serren said, playing with the reins. “But I am pulling for you, Asryn. I will be there to cheer you on, though it kills me that I cannot fight, too.”

“I’m going to win it for you,” Asryn said, glancing at Serren.

“Me? No. Win it for yourself.”

“I will win it for you. Because we all know you were the best swordsman in the islands, and I want to win it for you, and I will give you the trophy.”

Asryn’s passion caught Serren off guard, and he felt something, he felt like a girl, and Asryn had never seemed so much a man, and Serren smiled and said, “Thank you.”

There was something in Serren’s voice, his eyes, something new, and Asryn felt his own

heart respond, and he thought once more of kissing Serren, and holding him, and this time he did not push the thought away, but glanced back at Elverous bitterly.

They arrived at a grassy clearing near a small brook. "Here we are," Asryn said, swinging down from his horse.

Serren looked down, unsure how to dismount.

"May I help you, young miss?" Asryn said, smirking.

"Fine," Serren said, rage building in his eyes.

Asryn put an arm under Serren's thighs, and then put the other to his back.

"You have to be kidding me," Serren said.

"Let's just just get it over with."

"It's so humiliating," Serren said, putting a hand on Asryn's shoulder and sliding off the horse and finding himself cradled in Asryn's arms, throwing his arms around Asryn's neck for lack of a better place to put them.

Asryn started to sway, then spun in a circle. “You’re light as a feather!”

“Put me down!” Serren shrieked, feeling bubbly and free, but scared and ashamed to be swung about like a child.

Asryn gave him a little toss, then caught him, and spun him around once more.

“Stop!” Serren said, now getting annoyed. “NOW!”

Asryn set him down. “Just having some fun.”

“I told you,” Serren said, smoothing his dress. “Don’t treat me like a girl.”

*She is pretty when she’s angry*, Asryn thought, but bit his tongue before the comment snuck out. Instead, he went to his horse and untied the basket from his saddle. “Food,” he said, showing the basket to Serren.

“Just food?” Serren said, his hands on his hips.

“And wine and maybe just a little dream leaf?”

“And that is why I put up with you.”

“If you want some, come and get it,” Asryn said, running away from Serren.

*He is insufferable*, Serren thought, lifting his skirts and trotting after Asryn.

“You’re like a turtle,” Asryn said, running backwards, just ahead of Serren.

“I can’t run in this dress,” Serren said, frustrated. “Or I would catch you and smack you.”

“If you promise to smack me I’ll stop running now.”

Serren stopped, already gasping for breath just from the brief exertion, his breasts heaving. “Please. I can’t anymore.”

“Let’s sit,” Asryn said, glancing at Serren out of the corner of his eye, thinking, *she is so gorgeous. It’s an injustice she used to be a guy, that we can’t...*

Asryn spread the blanket. Serren knelt. They ate and talked about old times. Drank and smoked.

As they talked, Serren finished recounting some adventure they’d had, then, feeling a pinch, tugged at the top of his corset, shaking

his shoulders from side to side, blowing a stray hair from his eyes and saying, "I wish I could get out of this infernal gown." When he looked up, Asryn was staring at him with a strange look in his eyes.

Serren stared back, confused, but that look - he felt something inside him respond, a kind of clenching he didn't want to understand, and he nervously licked his lips.

Asryn suddenly leaned forward and kissed Serren on the mouth. Serren, shocked, pushed him away. "What?"

Asryn flushed. "I thought-- I mean-- I'm sorry. I don't know what I was thinking."

Serren gathered his skirts and shifted away, shocked, embarrassed, horrified, but most of all desperate to hide the fact that his fingers and toes were tingling, and he felt flush with-- pleasure. "I'm a man inside this body," Serren said, his voice rising to a higher pitch, his hand at his throat.

"I know, but it just-- I mean, the way you were flirting?"

"Me? Flirting? You're mad."



“You deny it?” Asryn said

“What you’re suggesting is absurd.”

“I wish I could get out of this dress,” Asryn said in a mock feminine voice, shaking his shoulders, making a cupping gesture under imaginary boobs.

“That-- No! I wish I could, but not to get naked with you. Ugh! How could you even think it?”

Asryn covered his face. “Oh, Maxis, save me. More wine?”

Serren glanced back at their horses. He wanted to leave, get away from Asryn, but was that just the girl in him? What would Serren do? The old Serren? “Yes,” he said, looking at Asryn, his eyes hot with challenge. “More wine.” I’ll show you, Serren thought, that I am yet a man and I do not run away.

“Enough of that, you two,” Elverous said.

The two had forgotten he was there, and they both looked up in shock to realize the kiss had been observed.

Serren's cheeks burned and he wanted to crawl into a hole. "That wasn't... I mean... we didn't..." Serren said.

"I didn't see or hear anything," Elverous said. "And I don't want to not see anything again."

Elverous stepped away, but this time stayed a little closer.

"Serren, I am sorry, I don't know what..."

Serren was breathing heavily, his breasts heaving-- again. "Let's forget that ever happened. I'm-- drunk."

"Yes. Fine."

Serren found his hat and put it back on, pinning it a little crookedly. "We should probably get back."

"Serrenina," Asryn said. "I can't believe I just--"

"It never happened," Serren said, a look of horror coming over his face. "Don't you dare tell Oper and Kencrick about this."

"I won't."

“Swear to me. Swear on your life!”

“I won’t tell anyone. I swear it on my life.”

“Good. Now,” he gestured to the horse.  
“Help me up?”

As Asryn lifted him, Serren’s whole body tingled and ached with need. *Why do I have to be a girl?* He thought, cursing his woman’s heart. *Why do I have to have to start crushing on my best friend?*

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Oper’s mouth dropped open and smoke poured out. “You’re lying.”

“No,” Asryn said. “She was begging for it.”

“Serren?”

“I swear. If it hadn’t been for Elverous?”

“But she is a man,” Oper said. “How weird are you?”

“You look at that body and tell me you see a man?”

“Inside! Inside! But he actually begged for it?”

“Yes. Just like any maiden would. Now, this is just between us, right?”

“Of course,” Oper said, taking another toke. “My lips are sealed.”

“They better be. Well, I have to go get ready. Pattenia is expecting me.”

“Pattenia, too?”

“That also needs to be our secret.”

“Fine,” Oper said. “But you are a fool.”

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The lower quarter, known as Hilter Skilter Town, or just Hilskit, consisted of small cottages with straw roofs, built one on top of the other, and with odd shapes and sizes -- few square, many triangles and wobbly rectangles with odd rooms protruding like growths. Narrow paths wove through it like ant tracks, and at night the smells of boiling stews overcame the odor of the latrines. Tonight, down the end of an alley far to the

western end of the quarter, a fire blazed, and a woman with alabaster skin and long, golden hair stood on a small wooden platform. Known as Phoebia, she wore the red robes of the hekatina, the top hanging open, exposing more of her full white breasts than normally considered proper, and between them dangled a flashing pendant. There were angry red scratches across her left breast.

She'd appeared some weeks ago, preaching in the streets, performing small miracles in the name of the goddess, and now over two dozen people gathered each week when she appeared to share the message of the goddess, and she was bright and pretty and smiled a lot and people had fallen in love with her.

But tonight, she was different. Phoebia's eyes had a hard, angry look, and she did not smile. She gestured down to the marks on her body, and she said, "Tonight on my way here, I was attacked."

"What? Who?"

Phoebia raised an arm and pointed East. "Them. The Eastsiders, who still cling to the worship of their false god, Maxis."

The crowd mumbled and shouted, anger building.

“They attacked me like animals!”

Shouts. Rage.

“I don’t have to tell you. Your whole lives you have had to hide your faith from them, and you had to fear for your lives and the lives of your children!”

“Yes!”

“I don’t have to remind you that they gathered and cheered when they tried to burn Weedy-- an innocent child!”

“No!”

“And for what?”

“Nothing!”

“Gathering herbs-- to help people!”

The crowd grumbled and roared.

“People do not attack children for doing good! Animals attack children! Wild animals! Rabid dogs!”

Phoebia reached down and lifted an unlit torch before the crowd. “They love fire so much? They like to see people burn? Then let us give them what they want! For the goddess!”

“Yes!”

People began to grab the torches, dipped them into the flames, and then they followed Phoebia as she marched East, fire in her hands.

## CHAPTER 53

Pattenia lay in Asryn's arms, her head against his bare chest. She idly ran her fingers through the thatch of hair he had in the middle. "I feel like I am living three lives," she said. There were candles all around the room, flickering in the gentle evening breeze, which smelled vaguely of lilac, wafting up from the garden.

"Un hunh," Asryn said, staring at the ceiling.

"In the morning, I put on my trousers and train with Elverous. I feel like a boy, but it feels like a performance, as if I am an actor playing a version of myself. Do you know what I mean?"

"Un hunh."

"Elverous shouts and yells. You wouldn't believe it. Then, I go and put on one of my power gowns, and I become King, and I play that part-- I think very well, but it is so much different than when I'm with Elverous in my boy clothes. I am someone completely



different, and yet I am still an actor playing her part.”

“It must be something,” Asryn said, still staring at the ceiling, thinking about Serren, trying to decide which of the sisters was prettier.

“And then there’s this.” She ran her hand down over his belly, then back up to his chest. “When I feel most like-- my real self. When I am with you, I can be me, just a girl. With you I don’t need to put on act.” She had planned all day to tell him these things, especially the part about how she could be herself with him, because it was true-- mostly-- but she also felt very romantic. She waited for Asryn to respond.

“Un hunh,” he said. “Yes. It must be something.”

“Are you even listening to me?” Pattenia said, turning Asryn’s face so he had to look at her.

“Of course,” Asryn said, swallowing, trying to recall what she’s been on about. “You feel-- comfortable with me.”

“That’s all you heard?”

“You feel you can be yourself?”

“Yes. Exactly. Doesn't that-- don't you feel anything when I tell you that?”

*Poop*, Asryn thought, wondering what he was supposed to say, how she wanted him to feel. He pushed himself up on an elbow. Looking down at Pattenia and sorting through every poem he'd ever been forced to read in school, he said, “My feelings may remain hidden. Sometimes I may seem cold, or distant. But that's only because I am afraid that I will be lost in you, consumed by you, that you so fill my life with light that should you ever turn from me, I would fall like a shooting star and die in the darkness.”

“Asryn,” Pattenia said, touched. “You don't have to be afraid. I just-- I want to know everything about you, but you won't fall from the sky. You will only burn brighter.”

Asryn smiled, caressed her cheek. “You are the most amazing girl in the world.”

“Thank you,” Pattenia said, hiding her disappointment behind a smile. Why did he have to be so guarded with his feelings? Why couldn't he share his secrets with her, his dreams? She just wished she could be sure

that he felt the same way about her as she felt about him, and she felt he did, but there was something between them.

“I would never do it to you,” she said. “You know that, right?”

“Do what?”

“If you’re worried that, maybe, if I were to get angry with you, I might turn you into a maiden? I won’t. I don’t plan on ever doing it to anyone again. If that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I don’t worry,” Asryn said, annoyed.  
“About that or anything.”

“I mean, you don’t need to be scared.”

“I’m not scared,” he said, shaking his head, sitting up/

Pattenia remembered, too late, everything her mother had told her about boys and their insecurities. “I didn’t mean... I meant only that...”

“Can we just kiss?” Asryn said.

“Yes.”

“Good.”

They kissed, held each other, kissed some more, and then lay back down.

Pattenia put on her robe and walked to the window, looking out at the Lost Moon, the beautiful golden light, the eye of Progenita. She felt good, and she felt the goddess was proud of her, glad that she had gone after the man she wanted, and taken him. She was glad, too, for the potion Actonia had given her that staved off pregnancy. It meant she was free to lay with the man she loved, free to express her passions, to enjoy her body in ways that women couldn't when the goddess and the hekatin had been banned.

When the time came, she supposed, she and Asryn would have the most beautiful babies, but that would not be for a few years. She had too much to do now as King. She made a fist and saw how hard and strong her forearm looked from the training she'd been doing with Elverous. Her whole body had taken on a lean, firm look, a strong look. *I am becoming someone new, she thought, and I like it.*

The bells began to ring. “Now what,” Pattenia said getting up, settling her robe about her. Asryn joined her as she went to her window. Looking down from her room, she could see flames roaring in the lower quarter, the light red and lurid in the night. “Oh, no,” Pattenia said. “I better deal with this.”

“What can you do?” Asryn said.

Pattenia gave him a kiss and then patted him on the chest. “Lead.”

Asryn dressed and left. Pattenia summoned her servants, wishing again that it didn’t take so ridiculously long for her to get dressed, wishing she could just throw on some clothes and get down there, but just after they got done lacing her into her corset Ollia was ushered into the room along with Actonia. They looked disheveled, but alert.

“My King,” Ollia said.

“Ollia. Actonia.”

“With your permission, we can bring the rains, help to douse this blaze.”

“Go!” Pattenia said. “I will be there as soon as I can. Take some men with you. This could be another trap.”

“I don’t think--”

“Take some men.”

Ollia and Actonia hurried off, grabbing a half-dozen members of the Wensea men and racing down terrace by terrace. Passing by them in the other direction were people-- women, children and old men with soot stained faces, haunted eyes. Many glared at the two, and a few cursed them.

Priests of Maxis were with them, and as they got down to the bottom of the city where the fires burned, there were groups of Maxis’s priests working a bucket line, trying in vain to keep the fires from spreading, while others were shouting “to the rectory! Shelter at the rectory!”

Ollia and Actonia pulled agents from the pouches at the hips, and began to circle each other, chanting.

“Witches!” someone shouted.

“Don’t let them curse us! Stop them!”

A crowd began to form around them. The armored guard drew their swords, forming a circle. “Stay back. We’re here to help!”

“You did this to us!”

Ollia and Actonia stayed focused on their task. A wind gusted down the narrow streets, and the flames roared.

“They’re feeding the fire!”

A rock flew through the night and struck Actonia on the leg. She kept her focus on her magic. The crowd started pressing closer to the soldiers, who shouted and pushed them back with their shields.

“Get your magic working,” the leader said. “You are in grave danger.”

They raised their arms and called down the rain. Thunder clapped and lightning slashed across the sky, and torrential rain poured down on them all and the burning buildings, rain so heavy it hurt, and the crowd panicked, running for cover, while the fire started to die.

“Praise Maxis,” someone shouted.

Stones and pebbles rained down on the group, who covered their heads with their hands.

“Let’s go,” the guard said, grabbing Ollia’s arm. “While we can.”

“Let’s,” Ollia agreed.

The group hurried off into the rain soaked night, hurrying up to the palace, trailed by curses and the occasional stone. By the time they reached the palace and looked back down to the lower tiers, the fire had largely burnt out. They caught Pattenia hurrying down the stairs. “You did it,” she said. “I saw the fires dying.”

“For all the good it did us.”

“What happened?”

Ollia and Actonia told her what had happened. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“These people have always blamed every misfortune on witches, and they always will. I told you-- some will never accept the goddess.”

“I’m going to go down. To show the people that hekatin are not to be feared. That we



care about them. We have always been for the poor.”

“I would advise against it,” the guard said, “your highness. They nearly rioted. At least wait until morning. And bring an army.”

Pattenia went back to her room. She couldn't sleep. Looking out her window, she saw smoke rising silver in the moonlight. The fires gone, everything looked peaceful, calm. *Do these people hate me?* she wondered. *I have done nothing to them, and things will be better for them now if they'll just-- agree.*

In the morning, she gathered with her advisors-- Actonia, Ollia, Annya, and Lord Wensea. “The people say a golden-haired witch stirred up the mob,” Ollia said. “She calls herself Phoebia.”

“Phoebia?”

“I know of no witch by that name,” Ollia said. “It's an old name. Not much used since the usurpation.”

“She may be some sort of haystack conjurer. There are many in the country,” Actonia said.

“So that is why they blame us for the fire,” Pattenia said. “Let’s see if we can find this witch.”

“Very well.”

“I have some news from Ansey Island as well,” Lord Wensea said.

“Yes?”

“Lady Ansey builds ships. A small fleet.”

Pattenia nodded. “She plans war.”

“I think so.”

“Lord Wensea, I would not be caught unprepared. We must prepare for war.”

“As you wish.”

“Ollia. That goes for you as well. Muster the hekatin.”

“Yes, my King.”

Pattenia paused, allowing the gravity of the situation to settle over them all, then she raised her hand. “Thank you all. I have much to consider.”

All but Annya rose and departed. “Mother?” Pattenia said.

“Can we talk?”

“Very well,” Pattenia said, rolling her eyes. “What is it?”

“I just-- I wanted to offer my advice and counsel. These are troubled times, and you are so young.”

“Mother? I can’t believe-- I’m fine.”

“It’s just that with all these troubles--”

“I don’t need to be mothered!”

“I didn’t say you did.”

“Well, then don’t mother me.”

“I am offering to help--”

“I am grown up now.”

*You’re only seventeen*, Annya thought, but resisted the urge to speak the words she knew would only set Pattenia off. “If you ever just want to just talk, please come to me. I won’t give advice. I promise. I’ll just listen.”

*She's so needy and controlling,*  
Pattenia thought. *How did father ever put up with her?* "Thank you, mother. I will. Now, if you don't mind? I have affairs of state to attend to."

Annya left, feeling hurt and empty and sad. Then, she smiled and changed direction. *Maybe Serrenina wants to talk? She's going through so many changes now!"*

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Serren did not feel he was changing, so much as becoming himself again. He had always liked spending time with girls, and making out with them, and flirting with them, and he and Nemeria got closer and more comfortable together, and he got used to the way his strange new body responded, and he learned to like the new feelings and to look forward to them, and Nemeria enjoyed hearing him make soft little noises as she squeezed and hugged and kissed him, and now even when he was not intoxicated Serren found himself wondering what it would be like to go all the way.

He sat in his chair by the window one evening, after Nemeria had left, looking at a book he'd had hidden away in his dresser since he'd turned twelve. The book showed men and women in different positions, and discussed the art of love making, and Serren looked at it now with new eyes as he imagined what it would be like to be her, to be the woman, in those positions, with a man...

A knock on the door. Serren gasped, and slipped the book under him, sitting on it and trying to look innocent as the doorman stuck his head in the door. "Lady Actonia to see you," the man said.

"Send her in," Serren said, curious.

Actonia swaggered into the room, smiling. "Princes Serrenina."

"Lady Actonia," Serren said.

Actonia looked at Serren, saw he was flushed, and the glassy look in his eyes. She smiled. On the table there were little squares, fudge with powdered sugar. She took one and popped it into her mouth, sitting across from Serren and looking him up and down. "You're the most beautiful woman I have ever seen," Actonia said.

“Stop,” Serren said, though he flushed with pleasure at the compliment.

Actonia put her chin on her hands, and smiled. “I want to paint you,” she said.

“I don’t--”

“Naked.”

Serren stared back. “Aren’t you afraid you might lose control?”

“No. I know I would lose control. You are the one who should be afraid.”

“I’m not.”

“It’s so hot in here,” Actonia said. “Would you loosen my dress?”

Serren giggled. “Maybe we should take these dresses off? They are so uncomfortable.”

“A girl after my own heart,” Actonia said, getting up and circling around behind Serren. She started to unlace the back of his dress.

Serren glanced back over his shoulder at her, smiling. “Have you foreseen what is about to happen?”

“No,” Actonia said.

Serren stood, and his dress dropped to the floor at his feet. He stood before Actonia in his corset, one hand on his hip, while with the other he pulled a pin from his hair and let it tumble down over his slender shoulders. “I have.”

Actonia looked at the book on the chair where he’d been sitting and smirked. “Getting some ideas?”

“Let me show you.”

“No. Not tonight. Tonight, young miss, I will show you.”

Actonia slipped one arm around Serren’s waist, and with the other she pulled him in for a kiss. He tilted his head back, leaned into her, kissed back, their tongues met, and he moaned softly. Actonia pushed him, and he fell gently onto his back, on his bed, his golden hair glittering all around his little face, and Actonia said, “Let me show you how much fun it can be to lay as a girl.”

Serren buried his hands in his hair, arched his back and whispered, “I can’t wait.”

When Actonia finished, Serren lay tangled in his sheets, his eyes soft and unfocused, his body humming. Actonia kissed him, gently caressing his cheek. "Don't go," Serren said, grabbing her arm.

"I have to get home," Actonia said, kissing him again, gently freeing her arm.

"Let's do it again," Serren said.

Actonia laughed. "Not tonight, my love. But soon."

She left. Serren hugged his pillow to his chest, remembering Actonia's lips, her soft body against his, and of how she'd made a sound, a small, mewling sound, and he'd made the same sound, and he'd curled his toes, and they started tingling, and then there had been these little tremors inside his body, and like a pinpoint of intense pleasure that almost hurt, and he cried out, just the way he'd heard girls cry out, and a tear had rolled down his cheek, and Actonia had giggled and kissed him and said, "You're such a pretty girl."

It had been so good. He never wanted it to end.



He thought of Asryn, his bright eyes, his hard chest, his smile, and Serrenina's body ached. What would it be like to be with him? Serrenina wondered, squeezing her legs together, and then her eyes popped open as she realized what she had just been thinking.

Serren shook his head, got up and poured himself a drink. Never, he thought. Never.

In the morning, a dozen long stemmed roses arrived, bound with lace that held a note. Serren thought to just throw it in the fire, but the writing on the outside of the note-- his name, Serrenina-- had a distinctive feminine shape, so he knew it wasn't from Prett. Curious, he opened the note and read:

*Princess--*

*You were so sweet and lovely last night. I will forever cherish the memory of our night together. I am never more alive than when I see you smile. Promise me you will always be my special girl.*

*Actonia*

Serren smelled the flowers, looked at the note again. *I'm someone's special girl?* He thought amused, and yet his heart felt light and full of joy, and he decided he liked the way it felt to be cherished as a woman.

But also totally weird.

## CHAPTER 54

The week of the Great Sixteens arrived. Throughout the city and at school, excitement grew with the approach of the weekend and the Big Sixteens tournament. It was always one of the biggest events of the year, as the oldest boys dueled and one of them emerged to be named a Master Swordsman of the Isles, a title of honor that would stay with them their entire lives.

Serren thought about that every morning as he sat, patiently waiting while his handmaids did his hair, and painted his face. He had trained his whole life for that tournament, and now he would never be able to fight in it, to earn the title. Even if he eventually got back into the body his sister had stolen, he would never have the opportunity to fight in the Sixteens, to prove he was the best of men. Having traded corsets and dresses for sword and shield, he would have to sit in the stands with the girls and watch, a pretty little nothing, as the boys fought and won glory.

The unfairness of it all sickened him.

He thought constantly of the blade that he'd been given, the one that waited, hidden in his closet, the one he could use to avenge himself, to reclaim his crown. To take back his honor and dignity, and do it at the Sixteens, the place he was meant to rise as the best among the boys? It seemed right. It seemed just. And yet? Murder? Nemeria had tried to talk to him about it, but he always deflected her, changed the subject. He didn't think it was fair to make his burden hers, and though he could see it hurt her, he kept it all to himself.

One morning when he arrived for breakfast, Pattenia had said, "That pink is such a lovely color on you. You look so pretty."

"I know," he'd answered, sitting with grace and elegance, as he'd been taught to do. "Some say I am the prettiest girl in all the Isles."

Pattenia made a sour face.

"I heard a joke the other day," Serren said, sipping his tea. "What do you call a King everyone hates?"

Pattenia glared at him, but Serren went on. "Pattenia. Isn't that so clever?"

“You are awful,” Pattenia said, getting up.  
“And you are not that pretty.”

The whole week, he went to school and worked on his penmanship, his grace and manners. He painted, and when he found himself in chorus he sang, though it shamed him to be placed among the sopranos, to find that even some girls younger than him now had deeper voices. He endured it all, suffered through his girl's life, waiting for an answer, praying for an answer, but when the sun rose on the morning of the tournament and Stone came to wake him he still didn't know what he should do with the dagger.

After his bath, Stone brought him some new kind of dress. The top looked like a corset, and the skirt at the bottom was of some kind of thin material that seemed to almost float. The corset was black with gold lace and ribbons, while the skirt was white with black trim.

“This dress is indecent, milady.” Stone said.

Serren smiled, looking at the dress. “It will make a splash, don't you think?”

“You will make the wrong kind of impression. People will say you’re...”

“A fallen woman?” Serren said.

“Begging your pardon,” Bucket said. “But already there is some talk that you are a bit of a -- I can’t think of a proper word for it.”

“Wanton? Licentious? Debauched?”

“Um, yes?”

Serren chuckled. “I’m just doing the same things I did as a boy.”

“That’s the problem, milady,” Stone said. “It’s different for young ladies.”

“Not anymore,” Serren said. “Not for me. Now, let’s get this body into that lascivious and depraved gown.” He chuckled. “Everyone will be talking about me. My sister will be furious!”

When the girls had finished with his hair and makeup, he got up and marched over to the mirrors. He looked at himself. The dress was sleeveless, leaving his small shoulders and thin arms bare. The top part looked like what it was—a girl’s corset. Looking at himself, he knew what the boys would be

thinking, how the sight of him dressed like this would affect them, and the girls, too. It wasn't just the corset. The skirt ended above his ankles—another scandalous detail. Let the whole world see his ankles and the pretty golden heels on his feet, sparkling. A tiara flashed in his thick, blonde hair, and a necklace nestled in his breasts, ensuring people's eyes would be drawn to his bust.

“You're wearing that?” he heard Nemeria gasp as she entered, and caught him looking at himself.

He turned fluidly on his heels, and Nemeria noted that his hours of training were paying off. “I'll be the talk of the town!”

“You'll be a sensation,” Nemeria said, nodding approvingly as she examined his daring dress. “The poor boys won't be able to think straight.”

“Wonderful,” Serren said, his voice oozing with sarcasm. “I am so honored to be a part of their indecent thoughts.” Then, he turned back to address Stone and his handmaidens. “Thank you all. I look wonderful. You are all wonderful.”

The girls all curtsied.

“That was... different,” Nemeria said when they were back in his rooms.

“They work so hard,” he said, tugging on his corset, trying to get it to show a little more cleavage. “The least I can do is show my appreciation.”

Nemeria smiled. Whether he knew it or not, Serren’s training at girl’s school was having an impact on every area of his life.

“Where am I supposed to put the dagger?” He said, tossing his skirt in frustration.

“Give it to me,” Nemeria said. “I’ll carry it in my bag.”

“No. I don’t want you involved in this.”

“I am involved, Serren. You can’t do everything alone.”

“But if I get caught...?”

“Then maybe they will turn me into a boy, and we can be together.”

“I don’t want *you* to be the boy,” Serren said, getting the dagger out of his closet.

“Oh?” Nemeria said. “I’d treat you right.”



“You’d be a terrible boy.”

“I’d curl your toes.”

“Goddess! Yeah, well, are you really sure about this?” he asked, holding out the dagger towards her.

“Yes,” she said, taking it and putting it into a cloth bag she had, concealing it under the picnic food and drinks. “Are you?”

“No. I still don’t know what I’m going to do. I thought maybe it would come clear, but I just don’t know. My sister’s rule fails, the city rises against her. I need to do what’s best for the kingdom, but to kill her? I want another choice, but I don’t know if there is one.”

Nemeria bit her lip. “Do you want to know what I think?”

“No,” Serren said. “I must decide this for myself. It is my burden.”

“But, I...”

“No!” Serren said. “It’s time to go. Come.”

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Serren, Nemeria and Nemeria's friends piled into a carriage that would take them to Martial Parade Grounds, where the armies of The Shattered Isles trained, and the boys had competed in the Sixteens for over 400 hundred years. The carriage was white and pink, the princess's carriage his sister once rode in with his mother. Nemeria's friends gasped when they saw Serren's dress and gushed over how bold and daring he was to wear it. "Everyone can see your ankles. My mother will rip her hair out!"

"All the girls at court will want one!"

"You're outrageous!"

He smiled and drank in the praise and attention. He hid it well, but he felt nervous as they reached the grounds and he climbed down from the carriage. A large crowd had already gathered, and when Serren stuck his head out of the carriage they cheered and applauded, and he blanched as he had to offer his arm and be helped down from it.

He walked along, through the lines of people, Nemeria and the other girls walking behind. People clapped and cheered, though he saw some older women's faces twist up

with disgust at his revealing dress, and he kept thinking, *get used to it!*

Finally, he came to the stands, where a sun screen had been set up over his chair, which stood next to and slightly lower than the King's chair. The chair that was supposed to be *his* chair.

Elverous stood next to the chair, ready to help Serren sit, but as he approached, Serren said, "No. Wait. I want to—wish the boys well."

"That's not traditional, milady."

"I don't care," Serren said, stepping back down from the stands and marching over to the low stone lockers where the boys would be dressing and preparing to fight. He wanted to see his friends; he wanted to see Asryn. Elverous followed, and Serren told him to go and find Asryn and bring him out. Nemeria had followed as well, and stood by ready to help if needed.

Moments later, Asryn stepped out of the locker, tall and broad-shouldered, his armor gleaming in the sun. Serren's breath caught in his throat at the sight of his friend, and Asryn looked at the ground, awkward and

bashful. Before either of them could speak, Kencrick and Oper barreled out of the locker room, shouting, "Serren!"

As soon as they registered Serren looking impossibly pretty in his dress, his shoes sparkling in the sunlight, they froze, their mouths dropping open. It was the first time they had seen him since the little party in his room, and Oper gasped, "Brother! I will dream of you in that dress!"

Serren shook his head and said, "You are a pervert!"

"No, I don't mean... I mean..."

"I know," Serren said, but when he put a hand on Oper's shoulder the boy turned deep red and stepped away, shaking.

Serren felt short, standing there with his oldest friends. He'd been the tallest, but now Asryn and Kencrick both towered over him. Dressed as he was, he couldn't help but feel like a girl, a true girl, and it was strange to be a girl among the boys.

"I just came to wish you all well today," Serren said, his voice slipping into a slightly higher register.

“Thanks,” Asryn said, avoiding eye contact.

Serren held out his arms. “Come on, brother.”

Asryn shrugged. “I don’t....”

“What?”

“I’m in,” Oper said, throwing his arms around Serren and pulling him in for a crushing bear hug. They both laughed, and then Oper said, “Your breasts are amazing. I’m just saying.”

“*Enough*,” Serren said, laughing. “About my breasts!”

Kencrick leaned in awkwardly, barely touching Serren, and then mumbled something.

“Come on,” Serren said. “It’s weird for me, too, but for luck.”

Asryn kicked the ground, came over and gave Serren a quick hug, then said, “I need to get ready. See you later,” and headed back into the locker room without looking back.

“What’s with him?” Serren said, feeling cold and rejected.

“I don’t know,” Oper said, “but can I have another hug?”

“You’ve had enough hugs,” Serren said. “Just calm yourself.”

“Well, let’s get together and smoke some weed sometime.”

“I better go. Good luck, guys.”

“Thanks.”

When Serren turned to walk back to the stands, Nemeria was grinning. “I think Asryn likes you.”

“He seemed like he didn’t want anything to do with me.”

“Because he doesn’t want you to know how he feels.”

“Perhaps,” Serren said, remembering Asryn kissing him, holding him in his arms. “It’s just—we’ve been friends since we were little.”

“Boys and girls can’t ‘just’ be friends, Serren, especially not when the girls are really pretty.”

“I’m not really *that* pretty,” Serren said. “Am I?”

“You kind of are.”

Elverous took Serren’s arm and helped him to his seat. Nemeria sat behind him with her friends, and they started chatting. Annya had arrived and tsked disapprovingly at Serren’s outfit. “You’re creating a scandal,” she said.

“Well, mother, if I am a bad girl, you have only yourself to blame.”

Annya shook her head. “You’re impossible.”

“I know.”

After what seemed just a little too long, the trumpets announcing the arrival of the king sounded, and as Serren looked around for the King’s coach, he was surprised to see the color guard charging onto the Martial Grounds, followed by Pattenia and her ladies riding on warhorses. As he saw what she was wearing, Serren’s mouth fell open and he was overcome with shock and anger.

Pattenia rode her horse right up to the stands and then swung down from her horse,

her ladies in formation behind her. The crowd buzzed and clapped, and people looked on in surprise, some smiling and others angry and some just bemused because for the first time in the history of the Shattered Isles a woman was appearing in public wearing pants.

Pattenia stood for a moment next to her horse, smiling, waving up at the crowd as they cheered. The tight black pants hugged her legs and hips, making the shape of her body clear to everyone to see, and she had knee length riding boots of glossy black leather. She had long daggers strapped to each leg, and the jacket that hugged her upper body blazed crimson and gold, and on her left breast shone the sign of the Sun Falconette. She had her hair tied back, giving her an almost boyish look. Her ladies wore outfits in the same style, though all white, and they stood looking arrogant and proud, loving the reaction they were all getting from the crowd

Before the applause could dwindle, Pattenia strutted to the King's chair, her ladies swaggered behind her and took their seats behind Pattenia, next to Nemeria and her friends.



“You look like a fallen woman, little sister,” Pattenia said to Serren.

“I don’t even know what to say to you,” Serren said. “What happened to girls wear dresses? You’re unbelievable.”

“I know,” Pattenia said, feeling proud of herself. She signaled. The trumpets sounded again. The boys marched out, Prett in the lead, wearing silver armor, the black and gold basilisk of House Wensea painted on the chest plate. He stared right at Serren, his eyes lingering on Serren’s body. Then, he let his eyes rise to Serren’s face, and he stared at him hungrily, a smile on his face. Serren forced himself to stare back and hide the creepy chill Prett gave him, thinking, *I should use the dagger on that mudclud.*

After the boys bowed, they filed off to the benches where they would wait for their turn to duel. Serren waved at Asryn, wanting to give him a thumbs up, but Asryn stared straight ahead, refusing to even look in his direction.

“I should be out there,” Serren said, crossing his legs at the knee and adjusting his skirts.

“You’re too small and pretty,” Pattenia said.

“I’m the best sword fighter in the kingdom.”

“You know girls can’t fight. How many times did you tell me that when I asked our father to let me take fighting lessons?”

“Shut up.”

The first meet started, and Prett launched himself against his opponent with animal fury, beating him to his knees and then kicking him in the head, sending him crashing to the ground, the crowd cheering as Prett spat on the fallen boy. Then, he pointed at Serren and shouted, “I dedicate my victory to Princess Serrenina!”

“Oh, isn’t that sweet!” Pattenia said.

*“Shut. Up!”*

Asryn won his first meet as well, easily but with grace. He raised his sword and looked at Pattenia, shouting, “For the King!”

Serren slitted his eyes. *What?*

He glanced at Pattenia, but she was just politely applauding.

The competitors had been divided into two brackets, with the top two, Asryn and Prett, on separate sides. As the day progressed, and they each moved closer and closer toward a final showdown, Serren found himself impressed with Prett. He'd gotten quicker and stronger, and his sword work was precise and efficient.

Asryn was pretty good, but not nearly good enough. And he lacked Prett's animal lust for violence. As Serren watched them, clutching his hands in his lap, he knew that Asryn could not win. Not unless he could get an edge.

Serren watched each match eagerly, looking for any flaw or weakness he could find in Prett's skills, something that would give his friend at least a fighting chance. In the third round Oper went up against Prett. Serren cringed as Prett slapped away Oper's clumsy strokes, barraged him with a flurry from his flashing blade. Instead of finishing Oper quickly, Prett toyed with him, circling him, goading him, slapping at his legs with the flat of his sword. "Fight me!" He yelled. "Fight me!"

Oper, exhausted and emotionally spent, lunged. Prett easily dodged his swing,

slapping him in the ass with the flat of his blade, sending a shock through his body. "Ow!" Oper said, spinning and swinging wildly. Prett ducked under the swing and Oper stumbled. "FIGHT!" Prett screamed, slapping Oper on the head, spinning him, then coming up behind him and grabbing him around the waist, slamming his hips into him and making grunting, dog sounds. The crowd laughed, and then Prett tripped him and sent him smashing face first into the ground before delivering a finishing blow. The fight was over, but Prett then pulled Oper to a kneeling position, so the crowd could see him crying.

Serren clenched his fists. He felt helpless sitting there in the stands with the girls while his friend was humiliated, and hearing the crowd cheer Prett's antics galled him further. "I vanquish this little pig for the love of the beautiful Princess Serrenina!" Prett shouted, bowing toward Serren, who looked away, his cheeks burning.

"Ignore him," Nemeria said, putting a hand on his shoulder.

Serren nodded, but he had spotted a tell; Prett nodded right before he struck. It was a little nod, like he was talking to himself, but if

another fighter spotted it, they could anticipate his attacks and be ready to counter, essentially turning him from the quickest sword in the tournament to the slowest. Serren couldn't wait to tell Asryn. It would be enough to turn the fight in his favor!

In the fourth round, Asryn faced his first real challenge, Jebick Onsey, a quick footed and very smart fighter who moved and floated and darted around, luring Asryn into chasing him. Serren sat, twisting his hair around his fingers, watching as Asryn grew tired and frustrated, and his form began to get sloppy. Jebick waited and waited, smiling, patient, and then he began to dart in for quick attacks, staying low and striking at Asryn's legs, making him stiff legged, limping, lumbering. Serren couldn't stand it, and he stood and shouted, "Asryn! Think! Think!"

Asryn heard Serren's call. He back peddled, took a deep breath, felt himself calming, and freed of the anger and frustration, he saw Jebick's strategy. He settled into his fighter's stance, his sword at the ready.

Serren pumped his fist and smiled, but then Asryn started to pursue Jebick again,

stumbling after him, swinging his sword clumsily. “No! No!”

Jebick darted under a clumsy swing, and slapped Asryn’s leg, and he howled in pain, grabbing his leg with his free hand as it collapsed under him and brought him to one knee. Serren’s hands went to his cheeks. “Wait,” Asryn yelled to Jebick. “Wait.” Jebick smiled and pounced, going for the winning blow, and Serren closed his eyes as the crowd roared.

*No*, he thought. *No*.

“For the King!” he heard Asryn shout.

“What?” Serren said, opening his eyes, looking out in confusion to see a mortified Jebick on his back, Asryn standing over him triumphant. “How?”

Pattenia, Actonia and her friends jumped up and down, cheering and hugging. Serren looked back at Nemeria. “How?”

“It was like he faked the leg injury or something,” Nemeria said. “He suddenly just was, like, so fast with his sword and everything.”

Serren looked back, smiling and clapping, hoping Asryn would look at him, but Asryn's eyes were on Pattenia, and as he helped Jebick up and the two made their way off the field, Pattenia blew him a kiss, and Serren looked at her, feeling a sudden flash of some new hate he didn't fully understand.

The boys' tournament paused after the fourth round. The boys went off to eat and rest before the second half of the competition. The crowd did likewise. Some moved to mill about the colorful tents that had been set up behind the stands, while others, like Serren and his girlfriends, sat down on blankets to enjoy picnic lunches. However, Serren had just knelt down and chatted a little, when he got up, saying, "I need to go and run a quick errand."

"Hold on," Nemeria said, getting up to join him.

"Can't I do this one thing alone?"

"When you ask like that—no."

"Fine."

"So, what's this secret mission?" Nemeria said.

Serren smiled. "I spotted a tell in Prett's attack. He nods before he strikes!"

"So?"

"So," Serren said, "I am going to tell Asryn, so when they fight, Asryn will-"

They just turned a corner around the stands and could see clearly down the length of locker room. There, beneath the thick arms of an ancient oak, its limbs draped in moss, Asryn stood, holding Pattenia in his arms. She was looking up at him, smiling, and he brushed her hair away from her face and then leaned in and they shared a lingering, loving kiss.

Serren froze and stared, his eyes burning as he felt his strange new hate blaze into a bonfire, consuming him. He turned, his skirt swirling as he stalked off, back toward the picnic.

Nemeria followed along, hurrying to keep up, waiting until they got far enough away that Pattenia wouldn't hear her grab Serren's arm and say, "What?"



“What?” Serren said. “He’s supposed to be my best friend! And now he’s kissing *my sister?!*”

“Do you have a crush on him or something?”

“No! How can you even ask me that? For him to be kissing my sister, on this of all days? Knowing she did this to me, stole my chance to fight, to be a man? And now she steals my best friend? It’s crap!”

“I know, but Prett...”

“Who cares? Let Prett win.” He started to walk away, turned back. “The dagger. Give it to me.”

“Serren, I don’t think...”

“Don’t you betray me, too.”

“Are you sure this is what you want?”

“Yes,” Serren said, picturing the two of them kissing, feeling himself seethe.

“Let me hold it. In my bag. I...”

“Nemeria!”

“I will hold it in my bag until we sit, and then I will slip it under your seat. No one will see it. You will be able to do what you feel you must.”

“Don’t even think about refusing me.”

“I won’t. I told you. I am loyal to you and only you.” *But don’t do this*, she thought. *Don’t.*

They rejoined the girls and ate. Serren plastered a fake smile on his face, nodded and laughed whenever the girls laughed.

They took their seats. Nemeria slid the dagger beneath Serren’s chair, as promised. He glanced down, pleased to see it there, wrapped in cloth, and when Pattenia returned, her cheeks and ears flushed, he smiled at her, and said, “Did you have a fun time at lunch?”

Pattenia laughed nervously, tossed her hair. “It was okay. You?”

“About the same.”

He glanced back and saw that Danalia had not returned. “Where’s your sneaky friend?”

“Who?” Pattenia said, looking back, seeing the empty seat. “Where’s Danalia?” she asked the other girls.

“I thought she was coming behind?” Actonia said. “Should I go look for—oh. There she is.”

They all looked to see Danalia waving, walking towards them.

The trumpets sounded, and the tourney continued. Serren watched, but now with nothing more than seething resentment as he watched the boys take their positions, lauded with applause, then clash in manly battle, while he sat in his dress and heels, trapped in the life of a girl. He didn't smile or applaud anymore, and he watched eagerly as Prett and Asryn advanced, gleeful at the thought of Asryn's coming humiliation, and as he watched the swaggering boy, his former best friend, who obviously thought he was so great, Serren thought of the dagger beneath his chair, and the look he would see on his former friend's face when he not only lost to Prett, but watched as the friend he betrayed took the life of his backstabbing sister.

Serren sat, arms crossed, watching and waiting. He'd seen nothing to change his mind about the ultimate outcome. Asryn would be defeated. He didn't have the skill or ferocity to match Prett. *I am going to enjoy all*

*this, he thought bitterly. I will show everyone that I am yet a man.*

Actonia excused herself as the last preliminary match ended, with Asryn winning to join Prett in the final round. Asryn saluted the grandstand, but this time he shouted, "I dedicate this victory to my dear friend, The Princess Serrenina!"

The word "princess" and the name "Serrenina" stung Serren and solidified his hate for his former friend. When Pattenia reached over and put an arm over his shoulder, he shrugged her angrily off.

After a break for Asryn to rest and prepare, the trumpets sounded and the two boys returned to the fighting ring, their freshly polished armor glistening in the late afternoon sun. The crowd rose into a frenzy now, good and boozed up. Fueled by the blood-lust that had been rising all day watching the fights, they stomped and cheered and howled. Prett and Asryn beamed, bowed, and waved, basking in the glory, and Serren watched, so jealous, feeling small and absurd in his little dress, with his bare shoulders and puny little arms.

Prett and Asryn took their positions. The trumpets blared. The boys began to move, parrying, testing each other, lunging and withdrawing. Prett feinted, and when Asryn over extended in his response, he brought his blade flashing around for a sure strike and Serren grinned, eagerly anticipating Asryn's pain, but Asryn's blade flashed through the air with impossible speed, and he blocked the blow.

Serren shook his head. Asryn wasn't that fast. No one was that fast. He could see the surprise in Prett's eyes as he backed away. Asryn actually laughed, and then lunged forward like a flash of lightning, moving so quickly Prett barely managed to deflect the blow, and stumbled, his face showing worry for the first time. *What?* Serren thought, but then he remembered Actonia leaving with some of the girls—some of the hekatins.

"Magic!" he hissed at Pattenia as the crowd roared.

She raised an eyebrow and shrugged.

"You're cheating."

Pattenia leaned over. "I'm helping your friend win."

“He’s—an ass. I *hate* him.”

The crowd roared, and they looked out to see Prett holding his side where Asryn had struck him with his ghost blade. Sweat was pouring down his face, and he was breathing hard, straining to match Asryn’s unearthly speed.

“I saw you,” Serren said.

“I’m watching the fight,” Pattenia responded.

“I saw him kiss you.”

Pattenia laughed. “Oh? So-- wait. You’re jealous?”

“No.”

“You are! Oh, how perfect. You have a crush on a boy!”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Serren shrieked, furious.

On the field, Prett managed to get his blade locked with Asryn’s at the hilt, and keeping Asryn close, he slammed his fist into Asryn’s face, striking him on the temple and drawing blood.

“Yes!” Serren yelled. “Yes!”

Asryn turned and turned, trying to get away from Prett, to a position where his magical speed would help him, but Prett punched him again, and when Asryn disengaged in a sloppy, desperate move it left him wide open for Prett to slash Asryn’s non-sword arm so badly it went limp and hung at his side like a dead thing.

Serren jumped up and down, shouting with joy, but stopping quickly when his chest threatened to bounce right out of his dress.

Asryn was on the defensive now, slapping away a flurry of attacks that sent him to the edge of the ring, his feet dancing dangerously close to the line that, if he stepped over it, would result in a shock penalty that would weaken and slow his entire body. Prett grinned, nodded, and Serren knew he was about to strike, about to win, and raised his hands to clap, but Asryn suddenly blew by him in a blur, and as Prett lunged into empty space, Asryn kicked him in the butt and sent him sprawling on his face outside the circle, while the crowd cheered and Serren bit his lip, disgusted.

It was over. Volmack came over with his shocker and Prett trembled and shook, then doubled over in pain. When he returned to the ring, his legs wobbled, and he wavered dizzily. Asryn, blood flowing freely down his face, grinned to the crowd, now circling Prett, slapping at him with his sword, striking him again and again, making him spin and swing wildly with his sword. As Asryn swiped him he started to howl with pain, and the crowd, having watched him torment people all day, cheered Asryn on as he toyed with Prett who fell to his knees three times, but each time struggled back up and pressed on. He had a glassy, faraway look in his eyes, like he'd lost awareness of where he was or who he was, but his body still fought on, moving by force of habit. The fourth time he fell to the ground, Asryn looked like he was no longer having fun, and said, "Stay down. It's over."

Prett groaned again, that kind of animal groan, and he slowly pushed himself back to a standing position, wavering like a drunk, his sword barely raised above the ground. Asryn looked to the attendants, "Call it," he said.

Volmack shook his head.



“Finish him!” someone in the crowd yelled. “Finish him!” The crowd began to stomp and chant. “Finish him... finish him... finish him....”

Asryn turned and looked at Pattenia, who raised her hand in a fist, and he nodded. His gaze shifted to Serren for a moment, their eyes met, and Asryn smiled.

It cut Serren like a knife. He’s laughing at me, Serren thought. At what I’ve become, while he gets all the glory, and... my sister.

Asryn plunged his ghost blade into Prett’s heart, and Prett shook and trembled, then finally dropped his sword and collapsed to the ground, burying his face in his hands. Asryn turned to face the crowd, raising his sword in the air, while the people erupted in applause, and seeing the loving look of joy on Pattenia’s face finally broke something in Serren, and he felt like all emotion left him. He just felt numb, and wanted to do something, anything, to reclaim his place, the respect he’d lost, the life, and he wanted to ruin the joy he saw on the faces of the people he hated. *Why should they get to be happy?*

Serren tried to reach down to get his dagger, but his corset kept him from bending his spine. Cursing, he pulled up his skirt and squatted, trying to get low enough to reach the dagger with his short arms, and his hair tumbled into his face as he looked down. The frustrations of his sex and his woman's clothes added to the feeling of rightness he experienced, and as he strained, Nemeria reached down, grabbed the dagger and handed it to him. Her eyes were wet, and she was shaking her head—*no. Don't.*

Serren took the dagger in his small, soft hand, and stood, trying to keep it close to his body. Asryn had run over to Oper and Kencrick, who were holding a huge bouquet of flowers, which they handed to him, and which he carried, grinning, toward Pattenia, whose face brightened as she put her hand over her heart. Serren tightened his grip on the dagger, and raised it flashing into the sun—

—and then plunged it into the chest of Danalia, screaming “Watch out!”

Pattenia turned, shocked, as Elverous stepped forward. Danalia held a blade in her hands, dripping with poison, and had been

about to plunge it into Pattenia's throat when Serren had seen her and attacked.

But the so-called Wasting Blade did not cause Danalia to wither and die. Instead, on contact with her skin it merely shattered and fell to the ground in harmless shards. A fake!

Danalia grinned, even as her face and body melted and took on their true form, a War Priest of Maxis, who now slashed at Elverous as he thrust his sword into the assassin's belly. Meanwhile, other members of the crowd were melting and reshaping, rising up with bows and swords, Maxisians trying to kill the queen.

"Pattenia!" Serren yelled as the panicked crowd rushed from the stands, pushing him away from her even as her guard surrounded her with raised shields and began to ward off the attacks. All of his hate and resentment melted away as he saw her threatened, people trying to kill her, and he threw the hilt of the dagger away, horrified at what he'd been thinking, had come so close to doing.

Struggling to not get trampled by the crowd, he found himself getting swept back and away from Pattenia, who he saw look over at him,

her own eyes full of concern. She looked like she was yelling something. Serren couldn't hear her, he shook his head, frustrated that he was so small, and in heels, and the people were pushing him back and back... "Pattenia!" He yelled. "Patten-"

A hand grabbed Serren's arm and he found himself being dragged along by a man- Prett, still looking frazzled from his defeat. "Let go of me!"

"I'm getting you to safety!" Prett said. "This is no place for a maiden!"

Serren relented, lifting his skirts and trotting along, letting Prett drag him away from the battle, looking back to see Pattenia, her swords drawn, slashing at an attacker.

Prett led Serren to a small stone building-- the steam room. Serren recognized it. He'd nursed his sore muscles there many times. Prett opened the door and dragged Serren inside, slamming the door shut. He turned and looked at Serren, and he had that hungry, glassy look in his eyes.

Serren started to back away. "Prett? Don't..."

Prett stepped forward, smiling down at Serren.

Outside, Pattenia and her guard had broken the attack, and were now running down members of the attacking force, when Nemeria ran up.

“Pattenia! Serren!”

“Where is she?” Pattenia said.

“Prett took her,” Nemeria said, pointing.

Pattenia growled. “Come!” She shouted, and her guards followed.

## CHAPTER 55

Prett threw Serren to the ground. “Let me go,” Serren said.

Prett didn’t answer. He paced back and forth in front of Serren, like he was thinking very hard about something.

“Let me go, and I’ll forget this ever happened.”

Prett started to undo his pants, and Serren felt a lump in his throat, skittering backwards and looking for anything he could use as a weapon. Seeing the fear in Serren’s face made Prett smile, and he advanced until Serren found himself crouching against a cold, stone wall. “Stay away from me.”

Prett stepped closer, reached out toward Serren’s face. Serren screamed, “NO!” and lashed out, swinging his fist up at Prett’s nose, but Prett caught his wrist, and then the second. Pinning Serren’s arms above his head, he pressed him against the wall.

Serren struggled, but he was too weak to free his arms, and Prett had turned his own body to the side, blocking his legs. “Get off

me!” Serren yelled, hating the feeling of being so powerless, of being controlled and--

Prett kissed Serren on the neck, then moved down to his breast.

“No!”

Now pinning Serren’s arms with one hand, he let his other explore Serren’s soft body, and Serren felt his skin crawl with disgust and began thrashing with all his strength. He couldn’t breathe, and felt he was suffocating.

“I’m gonna break your crown,” Prett said. “Make you my woman.”

Serren’s eyes went wide. “No. Don’t. You’ll be hung. Executed.”

“Ha!. That’s not gonna happen, little girl, because you aren’t going to tell anyone. Know why? You’ll be too ashamed, Prince Serren, too ashamed to have the world know I have taken you as a maiden.”

“I’ll tell. I will,” Serren said, his terror growing, because he knew Prett was right. He knew he would never tell anyone that he’d been---

“No, you won’t,” Prett said, running his finger along the top of Serren’s corset, trailing across the soft swell of his breasts. Reaching back, he found the laces, and began to untie them. “Don’t struggle, and I will be... gentle.”

Serren froze, paralyzed with fear. He’d stopped struggling, couldn’t seem to think or breathe as he felt his corset loosen, now no longer feeling like an annoying nuisance, but a layer of protection being lost. Prett shoved a hand under his skirt, pawed around at his legs. “Please,” Serren heard himself beg. “Stop.”

“You are so soft,” Prett sneered, his hand sliding up Serren’s thigh.

The door to the room swung silently open, and Pattenia walked in, blades flashing in her hands, thunder in her eyes. She walked right up to Prett and planted the dagger in his shoulder.

Prett screamed in shock, and turned, meaning to strike, but seeing it was the King, and the cold fury in her eyes, he dropped to his knees and raised his hands, even as Elverous, bloodied and battered, along with the King’s Guard, Asryn, and Pattenia’s



Ladies filed in behind her. Serren rushed to Pattenia, throwing his arms around her as the tears flowed freely down his cheeks.

“Are you okay?” Pattenia asked, her own eyes filling with tears.

“Yes,” Serren said, looking up at her. “Yes. You?”

“Just a few scratches. Thank the goddess.”

“Thank the goddess,” Serren sighed.  
“Thank the goddess.”

Pattenia broke off the hug. “It is time,” she said turning to Elverous. “That we finished things with the Maxisians.”

## CHAPTER 56

Appollon stood on the walls of the rectory. Outside the gates, soldiers of all the houses save Ansey had gathered, their armor flashing in the sun. Banners snapped in the wind. Mighty siege engines stood ready- enough to level a castle, and he could make out bands of hekatin, spells ready, eager to destroy the heart of the Church of Maxis.

Pattenia, mounted on a mighty steed, trotted forward alongside Ollia, Actonia and Lord Wensea. Appollon sneered at Wensea. A man willingly serving this girl? How could he respect himself? “We will not surrender!” Appollon shouted.

“Surrender or die,” Pattenia said. “You have twice sought to kill me. You have tried to murder my friends. You have broken treaties and shown that your word is worth nothing. I sought peace and received only treachery. My patience is at an end.”

“There are people here. Innocent women and children who came here after the

peace-loving witches burned down their homes,” Appollon said.

“I will allow them to leave before we lay waste to this stain on the Royal City.”

“Very well,” Appollon said. “I ask for a day to --”

“You have two hours,” Pattenia said. “And then I am coming to destroy you.”

Appollon left the wall, went down and gave the order for the refugees to be made ready to leave the grounds, then went to his office. Zikaster waited for him. “We can’t win this battle,” Zikaster said. “Perhaps you should surrender? Spare the remaining followers.”

“No,” Appollon said. ‘I will not have the head of the Church of Maxis taken prisoner.’ He went out in the hall. “Boy.”

A young acolyte came into the office. Appollon opened the ancient book on his desk and worked the magic. The air around the boy swam with flashing motes of light, then an illusion formed around him, and Appollon found himself looking at an exact duplicate of himself. “Go,” he said. “Stand upon the wall

until the last of the refugees has passed. Then, return here, and I will undo the spell.”

“Yes, master,” the boy said, glancing nervously at Zikaster.

“Go on,” Zikaster said. “It’ll be fine.”

When the boy left, Appollon said, “I don’t suppose you foresaw anything useful about all this?”

Zikaster’s eyes narrowed. “You escape,” he said. “And join Lady Ansey on Ansey Island, there to continue fighting the Girl King, but there will be an unexpected price to pay.”

Appollon smiled. “And you?”

“I will remain here, to what end I haven’t seen.”

“Goodbye.”

Zikaster took his leave. Appollon, taking a bundle from his closet, pulled his hood over his head, and pressed against a stone until an ancient, hidden door opened in the wall. He stepped through, closing it behind him. Hurrying down the hallway, he came to the end and paused, casting the glamour spell upon himself, and the illusion shrouded him

once more, making him appear a woman with golden hair. He slipped out of his priestly robes, and opened the bundle, pulling on the peasant dress, the bonnet, the stockings and shoes, and he stood there looking like a peasant woman, feeling safe in that shape and that dress. He pulled on a burlap cloak, raised the hood, and went to join the refugees as they made their way out of the keep and to freedom.

As they filed out, he walked right past Pattenia, and he thought she looked curiously at him, but if she did she did not raise an alarm. He risked a glance at Ollia, who seemed to be looking at all the refugees closely, but once clear of them he glanced back and saw the image of himself standing on the wall.

The refugees made their way down into the lower levels of the city, most dispersing to seek out relatives they could stay with, but Appollon headed to the nearest gate out of town. As he walked, he spotted a basket and slipped it over his arm, and when he came to the gate the guard said, "What business do you have outside the city?"

“I go to pick some herbs,” Appollon said.  
“My neighbor has terrible swelling in his feet.”

“Very well. Be careful out there.”

“Of course.”

Appollon walked out the gate, smirking. Now, all he had to do was get to Kit’s Ferry, and he would be on his way. He heard a thump from up in the city, and then black smoke rose into the sky, and he knew the siege had begun.

He smiled to himself. With any luck at all, they would think he was dead, and by the time they figured out he was with Ansey--

“Hey! Hey!”

Ansey looked back to see a man running through the gate, waving.

“What?” Appollon said.

“You were with us, right? The refugees?”

“Yes?”

The man gave Appollon the once over. Smiled. “Where are you going?”

“Kit’s Ferry,” Appollon said, without thinking.

“What a coincidence!” The man said, grinning. “I am going to the very same place! Let’s walk together.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“I insist,” the man said, putting a hand to the small of Appollon’s back. ‘It’s not safe out here for a pretty young lady.’”

Appollon cursed inwardly, but nodded. “Very well,” he said. “But please don’t touch me.”

“Pardon me,” the man said, taking his hand off Appollon. “I’ve always been a bit forward.”

## CHAPTER 57

“Can I come in?” Pattenia said, poking her head into Serren’s bedroom.

Serren sat up from his nap, pulling the hair out of his eyes. “My doorman? Why didn’t he-?”

“I asked him to let me come in unannounced. I just want to talk, like we used to. Not like it’s some official state business.”

“Okay,” Serren said, gathering his hair and plucking a leather hair tie from his bedtable, putting his hair in a ponytail with a fluid motion.

Pattenia sat down on the edge of the bed. Serren tucked his legs under himself.

“Well, first of all, I wanted to say—to admit—that I was wrong to do what I did. I am sorry that we cast the spell on you, in front of all your friends and the kingdom. I regretted it the moment it happened.”



“I forgive you,” Serren said, almost surprised at how easily the words came, and how light he felt as he said them, how free.

“Do you? Because that would mean so much to me.”

“I do,” Serren said. “I’m still mad at you, and some days I do kind of want to kill you a little bit—or a lot—but when I saw that assassin about to attack you, I was so scared, and so angry at them, and I realized...”

“What?”

“You’re still my sister, despite everything that has happened, and I still....” He swallowed hard. “Well, I?” He shrugged. “You know.”

“I love you, too,” Pattenia said, and they embraced and found they were both crying.

“Look at us,” Pattenia said, wiping the tears from Serren’s cheek.

“I know?” Serren said, smiling.

“I can’t tell you how much I have been suffering.”

“Hate is hard.”

“Well, I’m going to be different from now on. I want us to be friends, Serren. If we can.”

“Is there a way?” Serren had to ask. “Can I be a man again? I don’t have to be King, but I would like to be me.”

Pattenia shook her head. “I don’t know of one now, but I promise I will get the hekatín looking. We will see if we can find a way, but...”

“What?”

“I don’t want you to get angry, but as I watch you—like the way you slipped your hair into a ponytail just now—you seem to be getting pretty good at being a girl. Do you think you could ever come to accept it?”

“I have been making peace with this body and the life of a...” he rolled his eyes...  
“princess. But inside, most of the time, I still feel like I am a man.”

“Then I will see what I can do to help you be a man again in body and mind. You can even wear pants, since, well, I started that amazing trend!”

“Well, I started the trend of girls showing their ankles, thank you.”

“History will always remember you!”

“For all the most embarrassing reasons.”

“Well, still,” Pattenia said, brushing his bangs back from his eyes. “It’s something. Maybe you will be famous as the most fashionable girl in all the isles!”

“Let’s leave the conversation behind before it makes me hate you again.”

“Okay. Right.” Pattenia stood. “I feel like we should do something together. Like.... Um....”

“Sisters,” Serren said. “You can say it. For now.”

“YES! So, what should we do, then?”

“I have an idea,” Serren said, with a smile.

\*\*\*

The white and pink Princess carriage bounced down the old country lane toward Innman’s Farm. Kencrick sat atop with Elverous, driving the horses. Smoke poured

out the windows, along with boisterous laughter. Inside, Oper, gleefully pressed between Danalia and Nemeria, took a long toke from his pipe and passed it to Nemeria. Asryn, Pattenia, Serren and Actonia were also there, laughing and talking loudly, swapping old stories. Serren still struggled with his feelings toward Asryn. Sometimes he wanted to kiss his old friend. Other times, he wanted to kill him. But mostly he just wanted Asryn to be happy, and as much as it still seemed impossible to Serren, both Asryn and Pattenia seemed like better, happier people when they were together. They were a *good* couple.

“So, won’t it be weird to see one of your old conquests now that you are a girl, too?” Actonia asked.

“Actonia!” Pattenia said.

“It will be weird,” Serren said. “Like everything is weird. But, just wait until you meet them. These girls are so fun, and I am kinda looking forward to hanging out with them now that the sex won’t get in the way. Probably.”

“What will you talk about without sex to get in the way?” Asryn said, chuckling.

“Progenita. History. Math. You know, the stuff girls talk about when guys aren’t around.”

“Needlepoint. Kittens,” Oper said.  
“Rainbows.”

“Sounds like maybe someone needs to see what it’s like to be a girl,” Nemeria said, punching Oper on the arm.

“Yeah!” Danalia, said. “He’d be such a little cutie.”

“I do need some more ladies in waiting,” Serren said. “Yes, let’s do it.”

Oper’s eyes went wide. “No! Just kidding! Women are awesome and the goddess is so great.”

The girls all laughed. “Don’t worry,” Actonia said. “You aren’t strong or brave enough to be a girl.”

“Good. I mean, wait...”

“Just quit while you’re ahead,” Serren said, passing the pipe back to Oper.

“It does take an especially brave and smart boy to become such an amazing little sister,”

Pattenia said, putting her arm around Serren's shoulder and pulling him to her.

"Awwww," Serren said.

"It's true."

"Yes, I am an amazing little sister now, but just hopefully not forever."

"Hopefully not," Pattenia said. "But it wouldn't be so bad if it were, Little Sis."

Serren just shook his head. He never could seem to get the last word with her, so he let it go and just let himself enjoy the day, his friends, and the pleasure of being a hopefully not forever girl.

End

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If you enjoyed this book, then I'd really appreciate it if you would post a short review. I do read all the reviews personally!

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

T.G Kadee is a writer, teacher, actor and singer with a life-long interest in gender fluidity. Also, a big fan of protein cookies and energy drinks. Plus, the beach. Also, the mountains. More stuff, but that's enough for now.

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