

THE MEN WHO WOULD BE
QUEEN



The following material is rated

X

Mature Readers

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by

T.G. Cooper

- Drums beating. Beating. Beating. Matched by the racing of my heart. My husband, Khrag, stepped into the tent, his eyes burning with lust. I stepped back, shaking my head, and he watched me, his face expressionless, until I found my back against a post, and clamping my knees together I put my hands to my cheeks and cried, "No!"

Khrag ripped open his shirt, buttons flying, and he threw it aside, his body rippling with hard muscle, his chest crisscrossed with a web of scars from all his battles. He charged at me, and I froze, terrified, making a small, whimpering sound as he grabbed my shoulders and turned me around-- I struggled, but I was like a child in his powerful arms, and when he grabbed my arm and twisted, I bent over, my hair falling in my face, the impossible weight of my full, firm breasts swaying, and with my ass in the air, I felt a new terror overtake me. Khrag slapped me on the ass, hard-- and then then again-- and I shrieked even as he grabbed at my panties and tore them off me, and I could feel my ass and my slit exposed, increasing the throbbing of terror pounding in my head. To my shame, I just knelt there, stunned and incapable of further struggle, even as I braced myself for the ultimate humiliation. I heard him spit on his hands, and then he slipped them up between my thighs and inside me-- I gasped in a high-pitched voice, almost like a frightened dove, and arched my back, disgusted at the feeling of his slimy fingers entering me, sliding into the gap between my legs, and then I felt it-- his hard manhood, press against my thigh, and my eyes filled with tears as I grabbed the tent post in front of me, and he put a hand on my back and then shoved into me--I felt my hymen tear, an agonizing ripping of my flesh as I creased to be a virgin girl and became fully this other man's wife...

He was so thick and long, I couldn't believe as he pushed in further and further until it felt like he was sticking himself into my stomach, and I wretched at the impossibility of what was happening to me even as I held onto the pole with my small hands, mostly bracing myself against his savage thrusts, each one of which lifted me off my feet, my breasts bouncing and my hair flowing around my face... I started ahead, stared at that pole, at the sight of my small hands and slender wrists, at the chipped ochre paint... I lost track of time as he thrust into my soft body, thrust and thrust, and then I felt him explode into me-- hot and wet, and as soon as he pulled out he grabbed me around the hips, lifted me in the air and tossed me on the bed, my eyes full of tears and wild strands of my hair, I could barely see him standing there, looking down at me. I

curled up into a ball, hugging my long legs against my breasts, looking down, not seeing anything, too stunned to even process what had happened, was happening, bracing myself for the possibility that he wanted more, would take me again, but instead he just grabbed one of my skirts, wiped himself with it, then pulled on his pants and swaggered out of the tent, and as he left I heard the crowd outside cheering him.

"All Hail the King! All Hail the King!"

My attendants came into the tent, chatting merrily, and they climbed onto the bed next to me, brushed the hair back from my face and dragged me to my feet, leading me down a narrow corridor that attached me husband's tent to mine, where a steaming bath drawn in a wooden tub awaited me. Still dazed, I found myself in the steaming, scented waters. My female parts ached and burned. Stone excused the other girls and took my hand. "How do you feel?"

"Horrible," I said. "I wish I were dead."

"Oh, then, just like every other girl on her wedding night."

"No," I answered, struggling against the tears that once again burned my eyes. "I am not like every other girl. I am a man."

Stone did what she always did when I asserted my manhood, grabbing one of my breasts and squeezing my nipple.

"Stop!"

"Then stop claiming to be a man."

"I was a man. As you well know."

"You were once a child, but you are no longer a child."

I covered my face, trying to fight off the memories of what had just been done to me. "My sister is laughing right now. She has won. I am now a woman, a wife, a queen. Just as she wanted."

Stone didn't answer but started gently washing my back with a soft piece of cloth, and she had me lift my arms so she could wash my smooth arm pits, then she lifted my breasts and washed underneath them before bringing the cloth over my nipples and up to my sternum.

"She took everything from me and left me in this shape to be raped by a savage."

Stone kept cleaning, reaching down. I hissed with pain as she cleaned my slit, and she patted my hand, then put her hand on my forehead and kissed me. "I'll leave you with your thoughts for now. Soak. Recover. In the morning you'll be a new girl."

I put my hands over my nipples, feeling them big and fleshy against my soft palms, and said, "I am not a girl."

"Good night, my queen." Stone said, glancing down at me, cupping my hands over my big, firm breasts and insisting I wasn't a girl in my tiny little voice, her eyes dancing with amusement. Then, she left me there alone in my bath to contemplate my complete and total defeat at the hands of my wicked stepsister.

I closed my eyes and leaned back, letting the warm water drain the trauma from my body. I must have drifted off because I found myself being awakened sometime later by my other girls, my bath cold, and they dried me off, dressed me in a thin silken gown and then led me to my bed. I lay down and they put out the sputtering lamps that lit my royal tent, and then I lay on my back staring at the ceiling, weeping silently, feeling broken and alone and hopeless, completely lost in this soft, round little body that was not and never would be mine.

I am a man, I thought. I am a man. I am a man, but that didn't seem to stop the throbbing pain in my slit, or the aching in my breasts. I slept and dreamt of my past life.

The Beginning: One Month Prior

"Good morning, m'lady."

I sat up, feeling the strange weight of my newly blossomed breasts sway on my chest, reaching up with my dainty hands to pull masses of hair out of my face and throw it back over my slender white shoulders. "M'lady?" I said, irritated and confused, but even as I looked down at the soft swelling of my breasts the memories of my transformation came back to me.

"Who are you?" I said, annoyed at the high pitch of my voice.

"I am Kathanne. Your dresser, M'lady."

I hissed.

"Is there something wrong, M'lady?"

"Yes. I am..." I cleared my throat, disgusted at the tea-kettle chirping coming from my mouth, but it did no good. "I am not a lady. I am LORD Baldur."

"Begging your pardon, but by queen's orders are that we address you as M'lady from now on."

I lifted the slender straps of my nightgown and shrugged, annoyed by the feeling of my breasts, my nipples, rubbing against the soft fabric of my woman's gown. "Where is my man,

Falteroy?"

The nervous girl curtsied, blushing. "Um, it wouldn't be appropriate for you to, um, well...?"

"Okay. Fine," I said, sitting up, once again pushing my ridiculous mass of hair out of my face. "Then, get me some clothes. I will see the queen and settle this."

"Very well... M'lady."

"Don't call me that!"

"But, I will be whipped, and I can't...."

"Just don't use any honorific, then. Call me by name."

"Yes, Delicatha."

That was not my name. It was the name I had been given by my wretched stepsister after my humiliating transformation, but I had already wasted enough time arguing with this girl, who as much as she infuriated me was just following orders. "Get me some clothes!" I shrieked, pounding my little fists into my mattress. I felt the shock of embarrassment as I realized I sounded just like a hysterical girl.

Mortified at my outburst and the shrill, feminine sound of my voice, I tried to cross my arms over my chest, but my arms were too small-- I felt my breasts press together and I struggled to comfortably cross my arms, but it was like I was hugging two large pillows against me, and finally I slipped them beneath my breasts and crossed them, lifting my shameful bust and squirming and shifting on my bed, trying to get comfortable in this alien body.

I should not have been surprised when the girl returned to my room holding a corset. Seeing the ridiculously feminine object-- pink silk with white lace trim, shaped like a woman's body-- I felt like I'd been punched in the gut, nausea rising within me. That my mother and sister would have the audacity to do this-- to turn me into a girl, and then to expect that I would, what? Dress the part? Simply accept a girl's life and name without standing up to their treachery?

"Bring me *my* clothes, girl," I said.

"But..."

"Men's clothes."

"There are no men's clothes in your closet."

"What?"

I climbed out of bed, my long hair swirling around, my breasts shifting and swaying, and I felt like there was now an abundance of jiggling flesh on my hips and butt. My legs seemed too long, and I felt that I was perched on stilts as I walked awkwardly to the side room where my clothes were kept and stopped, clenching my fists as I saw rows of corsets and dresses, skirts and blouses. I spun, furious. Kathanne cowered away from me, raising her hands pitifully, and I took deep breaths, my breasts heaving, as I regained control. There was no point railing at this girl any further for the compounding sins of my relatives. "And I suppose the queen has forbidden you to fetch me any male clothes?"

"Yes," the girl said, nodding nervously.

I looked at the dresses, the corsets. They were all in soft, pastel colors, delicate fabrics, lacey, embroidered and utterly feminine-- the kind of clothes coquettish young lady of the court would wear. No, I decided. I would not be dressed as a girl. I would not play along with this farce. I had to make a stand and now.

"You are dismissed," I said.

"You don't wish me to ..."

"I said you are dismissed," I said putting as much ice into my soft voice as I could muster.

The girl left. I went to my desk and was relieved to discover paper, quills and ink. I dashed off a note, sealed it with wax, and then went to my balcony, where, with a whistle, I summoned Ollie, my hawk. He landed on my slender wrist and turned his head to the side, puzzled at my strange new shape. "Yes," I said, scratching him on the head. "I have been ensorcelled by a witch. Take this message to the First Minister. Make haste and use the utmost caution!"

Ollie seized the note and flew off. I returned to my room, closing my balcony doors and climbing back into bed. It felt good to have taken some action, and now I intended to bide my time until I could rally my allies and prevent mother from usurping my throne and dooming me to a life trapped in corsets.

Just as I sank back into my pillows and pulled my quilts up to my chin, I heard a knock at the door. I ignored it. The knock was repeated, and then I heard a voice call, "Princess Delicatha. The queen commands your presence."

"Tell her I do not feel well."

I heard a key clanking in my door, heard the door open. I had not thought to bar it from the inside when Kathanna had left, and my temper rose at the audacity of this woman who dared let herself into my chambers. "I am entering now, princess."

"Do not dare!" I said, but the woman walked in, nonetheless. She was tall and broad shouldered and looked almost like a man with her big hands and burly arms. I recognized her-- a common woman, one of the Iron Mountaineers. "I command you! Leave my room at once and pray I do not have you whipped."

The woman marched right to my bed, grabbed my ear and dragged me from the bed. Now, understand I was-- am-- a warrior, and I had faced death many times, fought in many battles against the mightiest warriors in the land, faced Griffins and other fell beasts. So, I knew how to defend myself, and I slammed my fist into her side intending to stun her and then throw her. My blow drew barely a grunt, and when I grabbed her arm and tried to reverse it, throwing her from her feet, instead she lifted me off my feet then grabbed a fist full of my hair, yanking it painfully and punching me in my stomach, knocking the wind out of me and sending me collapsing to my knees. Stunned, I stared at the floor, gasping for breath, struggling to process that this woman had just effortlessly disabled me. "I will..." I said panting, hyper-aware of the heavy breasts swaying from my chest. "Have you hung for this."

The woman laughed, once again grabbing my ear and twisting, pulling me to my feet. I howled and slapped at her, but she grabbed my slender little arm and twisted it behind my back. I screamed, and she said, "raise your arms," once more twisting my ear until I complied. She then undid the ties on my shoulder straps and though I struggled to keep it up she pulled it off me, leaving me naked in my shameful new body. I tried to run, but she grabbed me around the waist and carried me to my bedpost, which she then tied my arms around at the wrists. "How dare you!"

"I am following your sister's orders, little princess, and I suggest you cooperate unless you want a spanking."

I struggled to free my wrists, and turning my head I was mortified to see that Kathanne had returned and was now watching me get bullied by this woman. Knowing that this girl was witnessing my shame took the fight out of me. She would talk, the servants would gossip, everyone would hear of what happened in this room, and I could not stand the thought of them all laughing as they heard me being spanked by a... *woman*.

"I am called Stone," the woman said, returning with the same pink corset I had earlier refused to wear. "And I am here to make you into a proper young lady."

"Never!" I shouted, looking back over my round shoulder and glaring at her through the hair which now shrouded my eyes.

"We'll see," she said, wrapping the corset around my body. The inside of the corset felt so soft against my smooth body, and my skin tingled with pleasure, but then Stone grabbed the stays and started pulling them tighter and tighter, lifting my breasts even while she crushed my ribs, making my already slender waist tiny. I didn't want to give her the satisfaction of knowing

how much pain she caused me, so I gritted my teeth, swallowing back the groans of agony that longed to escape me. Stars flashed in my eyes, and I thought I might faint, but finally she stopped, untied my hands and chuckled as I stumbled awkwardly away from my bed, once more tossing my long hair back from my face and shoulders.

Stone grabbed my elbow. I tried to yank it free, but she dug her nails into my soft skin, and once more I swallowed my pain. She led me to a spot outside the closet and said, "stand."

I was struggling to breath and reached back trying to grab the ends of the stays, hoping to loosen my corset. I looked over and saw Kathanne, covering her mouth, but I could see the smirking pleasure in her eyes as she took in the sight of me in my corset, my breasts heaving, my hair pouring down over my shoulders. I started to walk away meaning to take a stand, but immediately felt Stone's arm encircle my tiny waist as she effortlessly lifted me off my feet and then tossed me back against the wall. I saw that she held a pile of pure white petticoats in her arms. "Girl," she said, and Kathanne rushed to her side, taking the slips and petticoats. "Step into this," Stone said, holding out a slip.

I shook my head. "I am a knight, a warrior, the crown prince. You can't-- wouldn't dare-- to humiliate me in this way."

Stone frowned. "You are a petulant little girl, and you will do as you are told."

"No," I said. "No!"

I didn't see the slap coming, but I saw stars and felt the stinging burn of her hand, and then she grabbed my chin and lifted my face, forcing me to look at her. "You are one more refusal away from a spanking of that pretty little ass of yours, princess. And I will make sure the whole kingdom hears of it."

It was like she'd read my mind. I stood there, my chin in her hand, powerless, searching for some strategy, some approach I could use to get the upper hand, to save myself from choosing between these humiliations. "Money," I said, a flutter of hope. "I will give you gold."

She let go of my chin and said, "step into your slip."

Was it that easy? Did I, who had climbed onto the throne of the Blood King, my own hot blood pouring from a wound in my back, death closing on me, but with no thought of surrender in my mind, give in so easily? Why? When I think back on it, I can't explain why I lifted my long, lithe leg, wobbled, put one slender arm to the wall to balance myself, and stepped into the slip. Stone pulled it and slipped the slender straps over my shoulders, then patted me on my cheek and smiled.

Soon I had layers of petticoats draped from my wide hips, and then I closed my eyes and

raised my arms as a pink gown was lowered over my body, and then I was perched on a pair of heels which forced me to balance on my tip toes. I had to take Stone's arm as she led me tottering across my chambers and helped me to sit down on a stool. I had never felt this helpless. I couldn't walk or even sit without assistance. "Kathanne will do you hair and face."

I frowned, started to object, but the words wouldn't come. I didn't have any fight in me. Kathanne stood behind me and began to brush my hair chattering in a girlish manner about how soft and pretty my hair was. I didn't listen or care. I was looking at my slender wrists, my small hands, thinking about how easily Stone had overpowered me. Only one day ago I had been planning my coronation as king of this kingdom. It didn't seem possible that I now found myself wearing a dress, entombed in a woman's body, completely stripped of everything that had once made me-- me.

Chapter Two

I smelt him before I heard him; my husband stomping and clomping around in his tent, then the sound getting closer and closer. Memories of my wedding night returned, the feeling of him inside me, and I fought back the urge to vomit, burying my head in my pillows and pretending to be asleep. He stumbled into my tent smelling of smoke and stale ale, sour sweat from a night drinking and sitting around the fire with his *friends* no doubt telling them all about how much fun he'd had fucking me... the thought sickened me further, and I found myself praying, praying to I don't even know what, asking to be spared another...

He slapped me on the ass, grabbed me by the hips and pulled my ass in the hair. My face was buried in the pillows. I wanted to scream, to run, but instead I just gritted my teeth. My slit still ached from the night before, my first time, and this time he did wet me with his spit but just rammed himself into me, making a deep grunting noise. He kept his strong hands on my hips, his fingers digging painfully into my soft flesh, and he forcibly pulled me back into him as he pounded into me-- deeper and more painful than the night before. I couldn't help myself-- a small cry escaped me, like a wounded bird, and I heard him laugh and start to thrust even harder, and harder, as I just closed my eyes and waited for it to be over, feeling no pleasure at all but only relief when he finally delivered his load and climbed off me. I sighed, but this time instead of leaving me he put his arms under me and flipped me onto my back. I lay there, my hair in my face, passive, scared.

He slid his hands along my belly, then up to my breasts, kneading them, squeezing them gently now, with none of his animal anger. I felt my nipples getting hard, and my cheeks grow flush. "No," I whispered, hating how my body was reacting. I reached up and grabbed his wrists, pulling weakly, but he kept on caressing me, now taking my nipples between his fingers and pinching them, hard, so hard and arched my back and squealed as feminine pain and pleasure flooded my soft woman's shape. Now, keeping his hands on my breasts, he began to kiss me

along my collar bone, and then up the length of my long, slender neck. My skin tingled, and I struggled to get away from him, to get out from under this which suddenly seemed so much worse than what he'd done before, but he kept on, ignoring my girlish resistance, and when he kissed me chin and seemed to be searching for my lips through the tangled hair that lay across my face, I turned my head to the side, fearing that kiss, that intimacy, that connection...

One hand left my breasts while the other pinched my nipple, harder than ever. He grabbed my chin and forced me to face him. I stared into his eyes, and he held my there, powerless, staring back into mine, his black eyes hard and hungry like a wolf's, and then he kissed me, covering my plush, soft lips with his own, forcing his tongue into my mouth as he once again squeezed my breast. I put my palms on his chest, trying to push him off me, but he was so big, so strong, that I just pushed myself down, deeper into the soft quilts of my bed, and he kissed me again, taking his free hand, keeping one busy playing with my nipple, and then he slipped his other down between my legs and found my ... special button that women have...and the tears poured from eyes as my body, ignoring my horror and my will, seemed to explode, a fireball of pleasure spreading through my belly and my limbs and curling my toes.

I lay there stunned, not sure for a moment where or who I was, staring at this man as he stared down at me, cupping my smooth cheek. Then, he brushed my hair from my eyes, brushed it back gently, like I was a child, and he said, "woman." He patted me on the hip, then he stood and sauntered off, back to his own tent, leaving me there to pull my long legs to my chest and hug myself beneath the veil of my long, soft hair.

Woman. No. Still, I clung to myself. I am a man. A warrior. And I will be king, I thought, ignoring the pain between my legs, in the slit I shouldn't have, couldn't have. I am man, I thought, pushing away the memory of that feeling, the feeling of my button, my nipples, the pleasure and the pain... but no. No. I began to fill with despair. I was defeated. The whole kingdom would know of my wedding night, of that fact that I'd been taken as wife by another man. Even should I regain my proper shape, I would never regain my lost respect.

"M'lady," I heard a soft voice say.

Looking over my shoulder, I saw my best friend, the former Sir Paul Forest, now a leggy, beautiful slave girl known as "Sparkle."

He came over and knelt by my bed, kissing me on the wrist. "How are you?"

"Terrible," I said, reaching out to take his soft hand. "I have been fucked by another man. I couldn't stop him..."

"No," Sparkle said. "They are so much stronger than us."

"I am destroyed."

"Hardly," Sparkle said. "Now let's get you cleaned up and dressed. The king's party rides soon for The Valley."

"The Valley?" I chuckled, thinking of my own valley. "Kill me."

"I can't, much as I would like to."

He managed to draw a laugh from me. "You don't know what it's like," I said.

"I don't what?"

"Know what it's like to be taken by another man."

"I am a slave girl," Sparkle said, amusement flashing in his big, pretty eyes. "The men take me whenever they want."

"You mean? You?"

"Too many times to count."

I sat up, alarmed and appalled, taking both his hands and looking in his eyes. "Oh no! My friend. I didn't know. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I didn't want to trouble you..."

"This is my fault!" I said, pulling him in for a hug, holding his soft, slender body against mine, feeling our breasts press together. "You should have told me!"

"My queen," Sparkle responded. "I didn't tell you because for a slave girl to be raped is no more significant than for her to shit."

I shook my head. "But, you are no ordinary slave girl!"

"Yes, I am," Sparkle said, then taking my wrist she pulled me to my feet. "Now, let's get the smell of sex off you, then you can sleep one last night in your own bed."

He took my hand and led me to my bath. My mind whirled now both with my own shame and humiliation and my friend's. He'd seemed withdrawn, sad, deeply sad, but I had been so focused on myself I hadn't seen it, what should have been right in front of my eyes. Something inside me twisted, and I felt a great pressure build in me, a tearful sorrow, but no tears came from my eyes, which instead burned with rage. I felt nothing as I stepped into the bath. The water could have been freezing cold or scalding my flesh, but I was somewhere else, somewhere terrible, my mind filled with women screaming, being ... taken... Sparkle, me... faceless men who were so big, so strong, so terrible in their lust.

I found myself back in my room, dressed, sitting with my knees together, my hands on

my belly. I thought of my husband, his seed in my belly, and I slipped from my bed, sank to my knees, and closed my eyes and prayed a prayer I never expected to pray as a man.

"Sweet Luna, moon goddess, mother of the night, please send me my menses. Please, I beg you and swear myself to you."

It was a prayer no man would make, would ever need to make, and as the words passed through my mind, I thought again of how my soft skin had tingled at my husband's touch, at how I had cried out in ecstasy when he'd touched me... in that place...

It shamed me to pray to the moon goddess, to beg her to send me my first womanly bleeding as if I were some girl child, but I did not—would never—bare that man's child—and so I humbled myself and prayed as a girl for the gift of my first menstrual blood.

Chapter Three

Stone helped me to my feet and led me toward my standing mirrors; as a man I had always sought to look my best, had been vain, truth to tell, but now I paused. "I don't want to see," I said, terrified of what the mirrors would show me.

"Come," Stone said. "Face the truth of what you've been made into by your mother. Maybe it will help you accept your fate."

We approached from the side, and I first saw a beautiful girl appear in the far mirror, my stomach sinking as she stepped in front of all three and stood there holding onto Stone's arm, and my reeled against her, against this vision of feminine perfection who stood there looking so delicate. She was the embodiment of female perfection from her sweet, innocent freckled face, to her full, firm breasts and narrow, waspish waist above full, round hips that promised a ripe, abundant female for breeding. Her skin shone, her hair, and the stunned, frightened look in her big brown eyes made her all the more alluring. One slender hand went to her cheek, and I felt my fingers brush against her soft skin, and even as my mind reeled in horror at her-- me-- another part of my brain felt a surge, an imaginary swelling in an organ I no longer possessed, and I felt myself enflamed with a desire to take myself and break my cherry...

I wobbled, dizzy, and fell against Stone, who easily held me from falling. "It must be a shock to see yourself like... this."

"That's not me," I said. "I can't be *her*."

"You are, my dear. Now come along. Time for you to meet the world."

"No. Please. Don't make me."

"You will have a chance to regain your old shape," Stone said. "But you must come down and meet her in the ballroom."

"Can you please turn me away from the mirror?" I said, clinging weakly to Stone. I couldn't take my eyes off that girl, the one I'd become. I had seen many lovely girls in my day, but none so perfect as the one I had now been forced to become. I couldn't think as long as she was there, so helpless and pretty, so enticing to the man that was still in me.

Stone turned me. I took deep breaths, my breasts heaving.

"It could be a trick," I said. "A scheme."

"You can walk, or I can carry you, but either way you will be going to the ballroom."

"Very well," I said. "I will walk." It seemed to me at the time that being carried in would be even more humiliating, though later I would wonder if I hadn't already reached a point where I could not have fallen any further. At the time, I had not surrendered to my fate. I had allied. They had enemies. I just needed to get my friends together, to rise up against them. I was a man, and I was the rightful heir to the throne.

I would win.

Or, so I thought. Even in my slender, girl's body. I was a warrior at heart and would not surrender so easily.

"Shoulders back, chin up," Stone reminded me before I left my chambers. I hadn't realized I was slouching, looking down, but I threw my shoulders back, even though it thrust my breasts forward, and then I set my eyes ahead, determined to look at the world head on, just as I always had-- with the pride and confidence of a king!

I had to walk much slower in my gown and heels, but I took small steps and kept my head high ignoring the feeling of my jiggling breasts, the dress swirling around my feet. The people we passed along the way stepped aside deferentially, girls curtsying, men bowing, but I heard whispers as I passed and, I was sure, some snickering, though it seemed to come mainly from the various girls and young women I passed, who seemed quite amused to see a man forced to dress and live as a girl. As I walked, I made eye contact with any who would meet my gaze, and kept my face impassive as stone. A prayer rose within me--

Mighty Death, Lord of all Warriors

Let me send mighty gifts to fill

Your glorious hall

And even should I die in the battle

I beg for the honor of my enemies' blood

The clicking of my heels on the stone floor of our castle now took a new sound in my

ears-- the sound of marching, steel shod boots clattering across the stone as I marched to meet my sister, the usurper, and to begin my quest for vengeance.

Chapter Four: Foundation Keep

The library door burst open, dust swirling in the air. "My Lord. News from Grand Court."

King Bastille Gaunt did not look up from the book he read by the light of a flickering oil lamp. "Calm yourself, Halsey. There is always news from Grant Court."

"Not like this," Halsey said. "Not in all the history of the Splintered Isles."

Bastille finished the line he had been scanning, placed a bookmark in his book and carefully closed the ancient, leather bound tomb, forcing himself to bring his mind back to the present, to the room, to the flushed and excited Halsey, his pudgy cheeks pulsing like a frogs. Palsey shifted from foot to foot like an excited child, despite his advanced years, and the king found himself growing intrigued for the elderly servant had himself not shown such excitement in many years.

Bastille kept the old man waiting, his body seeming on the verge of exploding with the desire to share his news. It was not out of any sense of cruelty that Bastille kept the old man waiting, but only a desire to guess at the news. Murder? Death? A revolt? No. Halsey lacked the shroud of seriousness he always gathered around himself when delivering such news. Finally, Bastille shook his head. "I cannot guess the nature of this news, Halsey. Tell me, though I can't imagine that it will live up to this --frantic display."

"Princess Gawain has claimed the Throne Supreme, naming herself Queen of the Splintered Isles and Lord and Master of the Five Realms."

Bastille nodded. "I have long expected she would not surrender the crown when her brother reached age. This is no surprise." Already, though, his mind was plotting ways to take advantage of the move, and wondering if he might have an ally in his schemes. "And what of Baldur? Dead? Exiled?"

"That is the part, excusing me my lord, even you could not have guessed or imagined!"

Bastille smiled, letting his longtime servant enjoy his moment. "Thrown in the dungeon? Vanished without a trace?"

"Turned, my lord, into a woman!"

"A woman?"

"Yes. Gawain used some magic-- they say a mysterious witch has come to the kingdoms, a witch who wears of gown of spider silk-- and she cast some ancient magic upon the prince, turning him into a woman as the whole court watched."

"Outrageous!" Bastille said. "This obscenity is confirmed?"

"Reported by every spy we have in the capital my lord."

"So, with her younger brother now a younger sister, the crown rightfully belongs to Gawain. But, surely Baldur with not stand for this."

"He has been forced to marry Khan Khrag."

"Marry?"

"The marriage is consummated. The prince is now wife to Khan Khrag, and Khaness of the Eastrons."

"Impossible. It sounds like madness."

Halsey nodded, pleased. "I thought the same thing."

"This witch? Where does she come from? How does she wield such perverse and terrible power?"

"No one knows."

"Someone knows, Halsey. Just not us."

Halsey didn't speak. The old man knew, just as the king knew, that these actions would ripple throughout the realm, as each and every house began to look for ways to gain favor with the Queen-- or else supplant her.

"Say nothing of this to anyone."

"Of course."

"Is there any more news?"

"Yes, and more-- terrible-- still."

"What is it?"

"Your cousin, Paul Forest, is also trapped in a woman's shape. He has been made a slave girl and given to Khan Khrag as a wedding gift."

"That will be all," Bastille said. "No. Call Schimmers to meet me in my council

chamber."

"Of course."

"And well done, as always, Halsey. This news was most surprising and worth being disturbed from my reading. Your judgement only grows sharper with age."

"You are too gracious, my lord."

When Halsey left, Bastille slammed his fists on the wooden reading table.

As Schimmers entered the Council Chambers, he found King Bastille looking over a map of the Splintered Isles he'd spread out on the council table. Schimmers raised an eyebrow, pausing in the doorway, waiting to be acknowledged. There was something new about the king, or rather something old-- an intensity to his face and body that had been missing since the Glass War.

Finally, the king looked up, saw Schimmers and gestured for him to enter. Schimmers bowed.

"Trouble?"

"Opportunity! Princess Gawain has usurped the throne."

"Most expected news, if I may say so, my lord."

"Yes. She has an ally. A witch who wears a gown of webs, one that it seems has turned Prince Baldur into a woman. "

"Begging your pardon?"

"Yes. We have it from many sources."

"He'd have been better off if she's just killed him."

"It gets worse. He has been married to Khan Khrag."

"The other rulers will find this most disturbing."

"Yes, the Queen's action will foster a great deal of anger and resentment-- and fear. I need you to find out everything you can about this witch, and if you can, kill her."

Schimmers swallowed. "As you wish, my lord."

"Go, then. As fast as you can."

Chapter Five

As I walked out the castle door of Grand Court and made my way carefully down the steps of the great keep for the final time, I did not feel sorrow or anger, but relief. First, because no crowd had been assembled to watch me, and second because my ancestral home had now become a place of shame and horror. How could I live here now, face these people, after so many public humiliations, with them all knowing I had been bedded by another man?

No, to leave now and never return was a blessing, and I thanked my new patron goddess. At the bottom of the stairs stood my carriage, my husband and his wedding party. I was trailed by my servants and ladies in waiting, Sparkle among them.

I thought back to the night of my transformation. It had been at a party in the Grand Ballroom, a party to celebrate my coming thirtieth birthday and my ascension the throne occupied by my sister since the deaths of our parents. I had taken position to make a speech, my sister at my side, and the crowd had grown silent.

“This is a glorious evening,” I started, holding up my flagon of wine, “and I *wish*—“ My voice cracked. I cleared my throat, but when I spoke again the voice was not my own, but the sweet, birdlike voice of a girl. “I wish to...” I stopped, taking a drink of my wine. The crowd was starting to murmur, and I felt hot—suddenly very hot—and my shirt was growing tight. Looking down, I saw breasts—small, firm little breasts—pushing out against my white linen shirt—the crowd gasped, and I dropped my flagon clattering to the floor, blood red wine spilling out in a crescent at my feet— buttons burst from my shirt as my breasts blossomed, swelling larger and larger until I found myself staring down at cleavage as deep as the Primal Canyon—my cleavage—No. It wasn’t possible that these were my milky white breasts. I looked up to see the shocked faces of the crowd, and I heard my sister giggle, but even as I looked to face her a sheet of hair fell over my eyes and a painful cramp struck my belly. I had been trained since birth to always remain in control, dignified and unflappable, and had face many battles and stresses of the court without betraying the slightest panic, and my training held here as well.

With one hand pressed against my side, I reached up and brushed the hair from my eyes—my slender little hand was now tipped with long, pink nails-- even as it poured down over my shoulders, and I said, “I shall need a moment...” in my soft voice, but as I started to walk toward the door behind me-- the mighty King’s Door through which the rulers of my family had long entered and excited the ballroom-- my sister grabbed my arm and pulled me back around the face the crowd, slipping one hand around my waist even as I felt my waist *pulling in, shrinking*—and the excess body mass seemed to shift down to my hips, which rounded and

spread even as I felt my behind swelling, and heard and felt my pants tear. In the moment, shocked and confused, I did not truly realize what was happening to me, only that I needed to exit the room and assess the situation. Of course, I knew something was happening to my body, but despite my huge breasts, I did not—could not—comprehend that I was turning into a woman. Nothing in my life had ever prepared me for such an eventuality, and so I knew only confusion.

“Gawain,” I hissed, struggling to free myself from my sister’s hold, “I need privacy.”

Some of the members of the crowd had started to back away. I heard a voice call out “Sorcery!”

But the Royal Guard that had been stationed at the perimeter of the room pushed them forward, kept any of them from leaving.

I gasped as the cramps and stabbing in my belly grew more intense-- I felt like someone had thrust a dagger into my belly and cut open a hole inside me—and my eyes were now growing blurry with the pain. I tried once more to pull myself free of my sister, but she held me tight and impossibly she suddenly seemed taller than me. As I struggled I felt my breasts bounce—a feeling I had never experienced and which felt undignified for a man, and once again my training took over and I sought to regain my composure, but just then the burning in my body grew even hotter, and I felt now like the blade which had been thrust into my belly had planted itself between my legs, and I felt it being drawn down, slicing open my flesh, and my knees went together and despite myself I screamed, thrusting my hands between my legs and feeling—nothing. Absence. Overcome with agonizing pain as my manhood seemed to be cut away, replaced with a woman’s slit, I would have collapsed but my sister now held me up, letting the whole crowd watch my transformation.

“Behold!” My sister called out. “My former brother-- now a girl *and* my *younger* sister. I name her Princess Delicatha!”

“You?” I managed to blurt out through the pain. “You did this to me?”

“As the older daughter, I claim my rightful place as Queen of the Splintered Isles!”

“Usurper!” I shrieked, no longer mindful of my shameful new voice, my soft, curvaceous body. I tried to pull my arm free, desperate to free myself from her arm around my waist, but she held me, and as I struggled my long hair fell in my face, and I found myself blind, powerless in my sister’s arms.

“Take her away,” I heard my sister say, passing me to the arms of some other, who pulled me away, toward the door I had so eagerly wanted to retreat to earlier.

“Raise your glasses,” my sister called out. “A toast to me. Your true and rightful Queen!”

I struggled against the man who was leading out of the room. “No!” I screamed in my girl’s voice. “I am the king! I am the king!” I heard my little voice echo through the chamber, heard how absurd *she* sounded even to my ears, screaming out that she was king. The poor silly woman I had become.

My sister laughed as I found myself dragged from the room. That was what I heard as I was taken away, my eyes blinded by my long, thick hair—her laughter, and then the slamming of the ancient, iron bound Door of the King.

I had no choice but to accept the hand of my *husband* as he helped me climb into my carriage. In my petticoats and skirts, I couldn’t even manage such a simple task without help. I met his eyes as I gathered my skirts at the top of the steps. He had that same hard, predatory look, and he let his eyes drift down to my breasts and linger there. I felt violated, disrespected, feminized—and when he looked back up at my face and saw my shame he smiled. He liked making me feel bad, and that fact made me even more angry. Stone climbed into the carriage with me. It wasn’t my choice. I would have preferred Sparkle, but he was just a slave girl and would have to travel with the other slaves.

Stone, meanwhile, was my keeper and had threatened that we would spend the trip working on making me a graceful young lady. We moved. With every pebble in the road, I felt my breasts jiggle, even held up firmly as they were by my corset. The sensation drove me mad—that and the constant tickling of my hair as it swished across my back and shoulders—left partially bare by this internal dress I had been squeezed into—the weight of all my hair was also annoying, and-- I am man. Understand? This is not my body. I am not supposed to feel my breasts bouncing like ridiculous balloons on my chest.

I could not focus on anything else. My body kept reminding me of my shame, my defeat, the essential wrongness of my world now that I had gone from king to woman and wife in only days. I looked out the window, watching the green, rolling lands of my childhood roll by, and tried to focus my mind on the trees and fields, the servant’s cottages with their thatch roofs.

“Shall we begin your lessons, my queen?” Stone said.

I knew it wasn’t a question, and sighed, my breasts rising and falling dramatically. “Can’t it wait? What can you teach me here in this carriage anyway?”

“Proper posture for starters.”

Posture. It had been drilled into me my whole life, but I knew I was slouching. It felt more comfortable to me—I felt like it made my breasts less prominent, or showed I was not proud of them or something. Nevertheless, a straightened my back, pulled back my shoulders. “Better?”

“Better,” Stone said. “But knees together, and let’s talk about your hands.”

I pulled my knees together, the act of which shamed me deeply. I had long teased my sister about this particular rule. As a tomboy, she’d been punished many times for “sitting like a boy,” and I had often sat down next to her, spreading my knees extra wide just to taunt her. Now, I was being told to sit with my knees together, and it was another strike against my crumbling efforts to hold onto my masculinity.

Still, I obeyed. I had already learned that I could not defy Stone, and so I pulled my knees together and under her direction placed my hands demurely in my lap. “Excellent,” Stone said. “But one more thing.”

“What?”

“Show us that pretty smile.”

I smiled though I felt no joy. It didn’t matter. Stone nodded at me and said, “good girl.”

Chapter Six: Grand Court

The Grand Council Chamber. Silence. The Council of Lords had gathered, all 12, a rarity. They sat in their great, wooden chairs arrayed along the length of the King’s Table, a slab of ancient oak, dark and smoky with age. No one spoke. They barely moved. The men studied their hands or stared up at the round cut of blue sky that glimmered above them, visible through the oculus. They had all been there the night of what was being referred to as The Shaming, had all attended the wedding of the crown prince, had seen the horror in his pretty eyes.

The tension grew as the morning idled away, but no one dared leave the room, no one dared complain as the circle of sun shifted along the walls and moved toward the center of the room. They had all spend the past years seeking to put themselves in positions of influence with the new king, the vanquished enemy of Queen Gawain.

Footsteps echoed from down the hall. The men stirred, sitting up, checking the buttons on their coats. Lord Turin, First Knight of the Splintered Isles, cleared his mind, carefully drawing his face into an expressionless mask. His felt heartsick with shame. He’d turned his back on the pleas of the Crown Prince, begging him to stand by him in his time of need, to fight that he could be restored to manhood and his proper place. Instead, on orders from the Queen, it had been he that had taken the poor man’s arm and led him down the aisle, giving him to the savage to make him fully a woman. The Crown Prince had said nothing, merely looked at Turin through his veil, his big eyes full of contempt and disgust. But seeing the Crown Prince in his wedding gown, watching him stand there, passively, as Khrag lifted his veil, tilted his head back

and kissed him, that had only steeled Turin's resolve, solidified his choices. He would not be made a woman, forced to marry, and that was the fate that awaited all those men who opposed the Queen.

A door opened along with the smallest of breezes. Esper, head of the Queen's Guard, entered. "All Hail Queen Gawain!" He shouted.

The Lords all stood and shouted back, "All Hail Queen Gawain," their fists over their hearts. Turin kept his eyes on Esper and saw how keenly the man watched the lords. Even the slightest show of anything less than total enthusiasm for the queen would be noted in his Black Book, and the lord would be under suspicion.

The Queen entered, her face impassive. She inspected the lords, nodded to Esper, who withdrew to his place behind her great chair, and then she sat and nodded to Turin.

"The Queen wishes for her lords to rest, that they may attend to the business of the kingdom."

The men all sat.

"The goddess," The Queen stated flatly, "is restored, and I decree today the Age of Restoration throughout the Splintered Isles. The temples of the goddess will be rebuilt, the open worship embraced as it was in the first days of this land. You all agree to this very reasonable proposal, I am sure. You signal your agreement by remaining silent."

The Queen waited. No one spoke.

Turin kept his feelings hidden, but he felt both disgust and admiration. Goddess worship? Not since the time when their ancestors had been ignorant savages squatting around fires! It had been the ascendance of Rationalus, the God of Gods, and the abolishment of the Witch Goddess that man had risen to glory! His admiration came from the queen's tactics. She was training the lords to embrace silence, to agree by saying nothing. How much harder it would be for them all to speak up when things—

"In accordance with our shared project to restore our nation to its true and original faith, we also decree, and the law shall show, that the crown shall pass down from mother to daughter from this day forth, as it did in the days of the Quills, the first rulers of this realm. Agree by your silence."

The lords sat in stony silence. Turin felt a sting, a sense of outrage. This insolent woman!

"Furthermore, as a token of your loyalty to me and a reward for your service, all the lords of the land will now receive from me a glorious gift." The queen raised her arm. The door was opened. A group of girls entered, each clutching a wig which had been affixed to a bow, which pulled the long hair back in a braid that was at least a foot and a half long. "Please sit while you receive your loyalty bows."

Now the lords shifted, clearly agitated. Turin wanted to get up and slap the queen across her smirking face. The insult! But instead, he held it back, straining to keep his feelings hidden. Now was not the time to act, and so he sat, stone still, as the girl came behind him and began to fix the bow to the back of his head.

“Never!” Lord Xeter suddenly said, standing up and shoving the girl away. “You foul perverted creature!” He stepped toward the queen. Esper stepped forward, drawing his sword. Xeter stopped, trembling with rage.

“Do you openly refuse my gift, Xeter?”

“Rise up you cowards!” Xeter shouted looking around the room, the veins in his forehead popping. “Would you let this *woman*—” His voice cracked.

His hand went to his throat. “Make fools of you?” He now, as all expected, spoke in the voice of a girl. He lunged toward the queen, but the nearest lords, Paulson and MacFortune, grabbed him even as his coat burst open, and his swelling breasts spilled out. Seeing his breasts, realizing what was happening, his eyes filled with fear. “My queen,” he called in his soft voice. “Forgive me. I spoke without thinking.”

“Oh, young girls are prone to their outbursts. I will not have you killed for your words of treason. In fact, to show you my love, I promise to find you a dashing husband.”

“No. Please,” Exeter said as he was pulled from the room, his body growing soft and curvy, his hair pouring down over his shoulders.

“Let us continue with the awards!” The Queen said.

The men all sat, shocked and sickened, as their wigs were affixed to their heads.

When the girls finished the Queen smiled. “Most pleasant. You are the loveliest men in the kingdom.” She looked to Turin.

“I speak for us all when I thank you for your generosity, your highness.”

“Well,” the Queen said. “We did get a lot done today. I will be sending all of you specific instructions as to the roles you will be honored to play in the restoration.” She paused and started to stand, and there was an actual non-audible sigh as the men all relaxed, but then she sat back down.

“Oh. There is one person who deserves special recognition for his loyalty to me during this transition. Lord Turin, stand.”

Lord Turin swallowed, standing, feeling his braid swaying against his back. “I am sure I do not deserve this honor,” he said.

“You are too modest,” the Queen countered, her eyes dancing with mischief. “You have been such a valued and perfectly obedient servant all these years, Lord Turin, that I want to elevate you. From this day forth, you shall be known as Lady Turin, First Lady of the Splintered Isles and ward daughter to the queen.”

“M-my queen...” Turin stuttered, shocked, horrified.

“Please. You do not need to thank me, Lady Turin. A curtsy will be fine.”

Turin had never curtsied, of course, but he had seen it done many times. And so he found himself imitating the gesture, the action, he’d seen so many girls do over the years, shocked not only that he’d been asked to something so shameful, so humiliating, but that he couldn’t seem to stop himself.

“Boys,” she said to the lords. “You are excused. I wish for a moment of privacy with my *daughter*.”

The lords filed out, eyes downcast in shame. Turin stood, staring straight ahead, stunned.

“I know this is hard for you,” the Queen said, reaching up to take hold of Turin’s braid, pulling it forward over his shoulder and stroking it idly. “I know you think this some sort of punishment.”

“I—I would n-never.” Turin struggled to speak, his whole body sick with self-disgust.

“You can admit it,” Gawain said. “I need to know you are always honest with me when we speak in private.”

Turin nodded, trying to find words to describe how he felt, but when he opened his mouth, nothing came out. He shook his head. He couldn’t even look the queen in the eye as she stood there, fondling his braid.

“Just nod if you feel I have... dishonored you.”

Turin nodded.

“See?” Queen Gawain said, putting a hand to his cheek. “I know. I know. You must understand. With my ascension and The Restoration, this is a woman’s world, as it was in the early days. It will be even more so in the future. I am honoring you by awarding you the status of lady and daughter. Your opportunities will be boundless! Do you understand?”

Turin nodded, still staring at the ground.

“You will see, in time, that this is such a great gift I am giving you. You do trust me.”

Turin nodded.

“Good.”

“May I ask a question?”

“Of course, my dear.”

“Am I—is my body to---“

“That will be your choice. You will live as a woman, dress as a woman, but your body will remain exactly as it is unless you ask me to change you.” Gawain took his hand. “I need you now. More than ever. With you at my side, we will remake this kingdom, restore it to its former glory; as I rise, so, too, will rise Lady Turin Gawain.”

“I am at a loss for the words, my Queen.”

“Oh, when we are alone, call me mother.”

Turin responded automatically, powerless anymore to resist or assert himself in the presence of the Queen. “Yes, Mother.” He said, curtsying unbidden. “May I be excused now?”

“Of course,” The Queen said. “I am so proud of you, young lady. Always remember that.”

“Ein acht fullen crat,” I said, repeating the phrase that Stone had just pronounced for me from the parchment in my lap.

“Good, but hit the ts harder, and further back in your throat. It is a sound like you are clearing your throat. “Acht. Crat,” she spat out in the coarse tongue of my husband’s people.

“Acht. Crat.” I said.

“Good. Now the whole phrase.”

“Ein acht fullen crat!”

“Excellent!”

“What does it mean?” I asked as I perused the other phrases she’d written down on the parchment she’d given me.

“It means, “Fuck me hard.”

I looked up at her, a long strand of my hair across my left eye. “You are joking.”

“No,” she said.

“Stone! You said these were phrases to help me communicate with my husband!”

“And they are. Do you think he is going to ask you for your suggestions on how best to organize his soldiers?”

“He would be wise to!”

“You are a woman now, my sweet. He would never take your advice on anything related to war.”

I sighed with exasperation. I knew it was true. I had one of the best military minds in the islands, but all that mattered to men would be the slit between my legs. They would sooner march their men off a cliff than listen to a woman, let alone their own wife.

“However true that may be, I will never speak these words to my husband. Why would I?”

“Because sometimes a woman needs a good, hard fucking.”

“I am not a woman!”

“Insists the wife of Khrag. Very well. The next phrase.”

“Teach me to say, ‘I have a headache.’”

“That would only get you a smack in the face.”

Sullenly, I looked at the phrase. *Mawen goode passeur De*. I would have to learn them all, I knew. Stone had already proven that she was too strong for me. “And what horrible thing am I asking for in this one?”

“It translated roughly, in crude, common speech, to ‘I want to suck your cock.’”

“Mawen goode passeur De,” I said angrily.

Stone burst out laughing. “You said that one perfectly, M’lady. Like you’ve been saying it for years.”

I folded my arms beneath my breasts. “You are really enjoying this aren’t you?”

“I thought that much was obvious,” Stone said, still laughing.

Despite myself, I found myself laughing in response to her contagious chortling, my disgusted and sullen attitude melting away to the ridiculousness of my situation. What difference did it make if I learned these stupid phrases? I would never speak them anyway. “Which one of these is take me up the ass?”

“The last one on the page. Only I wrote it so it says, Fuck me like a bitch.”

I don’t have to ask him to do that, I thought, but I wasn’t ready to reveal my husband’s brutal acts to Stone yet, so I groaned and took a shot at the phrase.

Stone applauded. “You are a natural!”

“I’m a filthy girl.”

“That’s the fifth one from the top.”

The days crept by. I spent some time each day learning to present myself as a pure embodiment of femininity in public and a slut in bed with my husband—neither of which I desired to do in the least—and in between my lessons in being a virgin whore I read and napped, stared out the window. Each night I prayed to Luna, begging her to send me my menses, to let

me bleed as a woman bleeds. I longed for my first period like any young girl, and my early shame at the prayer faded as it became just a part of my life.

I missed Sparkle's face. His pretty smile, those big, gorgeous eyes, and I often found myself thinking of his long legs, his taut tummy, and his full, firm breasts. His skin was so smooth and even, so soft.

On the third night when our little caravan halted and the tents were set up, my husband entered my tent as I slept. I woke as he mounted me, my head still clouded with sleep. I had forgotten I was a woman, his wife, and I had swung at him, slamming my little fist into his chin. He had laughed and backhanded me, and then rammed himself between my legs, and I had screamed out in shock and pain-- I was still dry—and I remember it all, remember it and fell back, surrendering, letting him ride me as I grabbed at the edges of my narrow bedding and stared at the ceiling, praying it would be over. He finished, pinched the soft flesh of my hip and stalked out into the night.

His sour sweat clung to my skin, and I could feel him leaking from me, so I had no choice but to get up, go to the basin and use a cloth to wipe myself clean, spraying some of my perfume on the sheets to at least cover his manly stink.

Then I got on my knees and prayed to Luna, again, begging her to send me my bleeding. Days passed. A week. Often I watched as the king and his men rode off in the morning, hunting for sport to pass away the days, riding ahead to meet us along the road—leaving, of course, a substantial force to protect me and my ladies. How I ached with longing then to join them! To feel a horse beneath me, a spear in my hand, to ride freely in the company of my fellow men and not to spend my days trapped here in dresses! I found myself growing cross. Moody. I endured my lessons with growing spite and bitterness, which only seemed to draw a small, knowing smile from Stone.

Finally, I awoke one morning, my stomach aching in a way I had not known before, and when I rolled out of bed, I looked down to see a rusty brown stain on my snow white sheets. My heart leapt with joy, and I lifted my gown to see the same stain on my panties. "Thank you goddess!" I whispered, once again falling to my knees. "Thank you!"

I felt light as air, like a great stone had been lifted from my slender shoulders, and I spun about my small tent, feeling like a man who'd just been spared a death sentence. Stone entered and looked at me, her face screwing up with a look of shock. "Are you drunk?"

"No," I said, still twirling. "Something wonderful has happened." I took Stone's hand and led her to my bed, to the glorious stain that represented my freedom, or at least as much freedom as I could hope for in my new shape and life as a wife. "I had—I think I had my menses!"

"Yes," Stone said, looking at my face, mystified. "That is what your bleeding means. But---?"

“What?” I said, dancing away from her, lifting my arms over my head and making small triumphant fists. My hair was swirling around me, getting in my eyes and mouth, and I didn’t care.

“I thought you would—as a man—I thought you would be ashamed.”

“Ashamed?” I said, jumping on my bed and kneeling before her, tossing my hair back. “Ashamed? I am overjoyed!” I was enjoying her confusion, having this little secret to tease her with.

“Have you gone mad?”

“No. I am merely overjoyed that I have had my period.”

“You are lying. No man would take joy in such an embarrassing day.”

“Do I look like I am lying?” I asked, letting the joy radiate from my innocent face.

“No. But you must be faking it.”

“Were you going to taunt me, Stone? Are you frustrated that I am not sitting here and weeping over the blood leaking from my slit?”

She refused to engage in my taunts and instead put her hands on her hips and said, “Why are you so happy?”

“I am happy, ridiculous woman, because this means I am not with child!”

Stone’s eyes lit up with amusement and understanding. “I see. Well, you do still think like a man, then.”

“I am a man!”

“Who is celebrating his first menses like any girl who has just become a woman.”

“Not the same. Not the same--- OW!” A painful cramp stabbed at my side, and I put my hand to my ribs. “What is that?”

“Part of the joy being a girl on the rag,” Stone said, thrilled at the opportunity to taunt me after all.

I sank back on my mattress. “How long will this last?”

“Days,” Stone said.

“Why haven’t I ever heard a woman complain about the pain?”

“Because we are not men,” Stone said. “I’ll prepare an elixir that will help with the pain, then you need to bathe and get dressed. The caravan leaves in an hour.”

“Can’t I just stay in my pajamas? I’m sick!”

“You’re not sick, silly girl. You’re menstruating.”

The cramps continued for a time, and I found myself craving oranges, though we had none. I got into my carriage and, looking out the window, I saw a chestnut stallion, the morning sun glinting off its slick coat. In one of those tricks of memory and emotion, for a moment I thought he was my first horse, Scrapper, somehow come back to me, and my heart leapt with joy as memories of our time together charging along the dirt roads and country paths twisting through the forests surrounding our family's country estate, leaping logs, dashing through puddles, coming home splattered in mud, brambles clinging to my pants flooded my brain—

But then one of Khrag's men mounted the horse, the spell was broken, and I realized it was just a horse, and those days and Scrapper were gone, and my eyes filled with years, my breasts heaving as a sobbed uncontrollably. Stone sat next to me, taking my hand and cradling my head against her shoulder. "Hush, hush," she said. "Hush, now girl."

I blubbered out the story of what had happened, the horse, my memories of Scrapper, and gradually my sobbing subsides, and I sat back, while Stone smoothed my long hair back from my face, and then wiped the years from my cheeks.

"Forgive me," I said, embarrassed by my outburst. "I don't know what came over me."

"You really do know nothing of women, do you?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's part of your menses, sweetie. You will be even more emotional than usual. It's perfectly normal --for a girl."

Normal for a girl. The phrase stung. I had prayed for this. Wanted this. Had I already lost my battle to remain a man – and not even known it? And yet, wasn't this the far lesser shame than having a baby in my belly? The questions rattled me, and I found myself crying again, this time throwing my arms around Stone and burying my face in her shoulder of my own accord. Some warrior I was! If my father had seen me like this, he would have disowned me, but those thoughts were only distant in my agonized mind. All I knew as that I was scared, alone and confused, and I needed someone to hold me.

Stone did not take her opportunity to chuckle or mock. She held me and stroked my hair. Only later did I find out she had decided to encourage my budding femininity.

Lord Bastille rubbed his eyes. The table around him was piled high with books, scrolls, clay tablets. He'd been reading feverishly for days, searching for some mention of a mysterious witch gowned in webs. The door slammed open. He looked up expecting Halsey but groaned to see the tiny little shape of his wife storming into the room, her eyes burning with rage.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

“What?”

“Don’t play coy with me! The usurpation.”

“I didn’t want you to try and meddle,” Bastille said, bluntly.

Lady Phorchia frowned. “Perhaps you might consider me less a meddler and more a wife.”

“Of course, I consider you my wife. Don’t be absurd.”

“I wonder sometimes.”

“You look quite lovely today.”

“Don’t try and distract me. Why are you sitting here in the dark reading your books? Why not take action?”

“I have taken action.”

Phorchia crossed her arms and stared at him.

“Secrecy is of the utmost importance.”

She waited, staring.

“Fine. I have sent Schimmers to spy on the queen, to seek out especially information on this mysterious witch. That also, my darling wife, is what I am seeking here among these books.”

Phorchia considered. “That’s it?”

Bastille sighed. “Some wives are supportive of their husbands, dear.”

“This is our time,” Phorchia said, sitting next to Bastille, grabbing his arm, her eyes burning with zeal. “The throne is ours for the taking! The lords are seething, ready to revolt! The provinces look for a leader. The gods have answered our prayers! We must be bold, fearless and take what is ours by right!”

“We cannot show our hand until we know more of this witch!”

“We have our wizard! Our spells and wards. Why should you tremble in fear?”

“I am not afraid,” Bastille said, but his eyes dropped on the word afraid, giving away the truth.

“You are afraid,” Phorchia said, and it was clear to her. “You fear you will end up in a dress, reduced to a woman, a bride like Baldur.”

“It isn’t fear.”

“It is. It is. I see it in your eyes.”

“Get out. Let me work.”

“What will it matter if she gives you a woman’s slit if you already cower like a maiden?”

Bastille’s backhanded her, a loud crack as his hand smashed across her cheek.

Phorchia looked up, shocked. “How dare you?”

Bastille stood, stepped toward her, his fist raised. Phorchia flinched, stepped back. “Get out! Get away from me!”

Phorchia turned and left, her hand to her cheek.

Bastille found himself shaking, pacing, his body trembling from the violence and abhorrence ever what he’d done. He’d never struck his wife. Never. He *was* terrified at the thought of being turned into a woman, terrified of finding himself in a soft, rounded shape, terrified at the loss of status, the shame, terrified, too, by a strange and disturbing thought that lingered beneath it all and had haunted him since the day he’d heard of Baldur’s travails Lord Bastille was terrified he might like it.

Chapter Seven

I had changed into my nightgown and was sitting on my small cot brushing out my hair, when I heard someone outside my tent. I grew tense and angry, thinking it might be my husband come to have his way with me, and I looked around for my panties, intending to show him the stain, which I was certain would send him hurrying away from me.

Instead, Sparkle pushed his head through the opening to my tent, and cried, “Delicatha!” in his bright, pretty voice, his eyes sparkling.

I leapt to my feet and met him in a hug, our soft bodies pressed together, and then I pulled back to look at his gorgeous face, drinking in those big, bright eyes, those soft lips. “I have missed you so much!”

“And I, you!” Sparkle said, and then he kissed me—on the lips.

I was surprised, and tried to pull away, but she had his hand on the back of my head and held me, pulling me closer, and I found myself answering him, letting him slip his tongue into my mouth as I pressed my breasts against his. When the kiss ended, we lingered in each other’s arms, and I looked once more into his eyes, his face, and my vision was hazy now, and he looked prettier than ever. I took his hand and led him to my bed. “I have news.”

Sparkles sat, close, our thighs pressing together, and he brushed my hair back from my face, staring at me lovingly, keeping a tight hold on my hand. “What is it? Tell me!”

“I had my first menses this morning—“

Sparkle shrieked and threw his arms around my neck, hugging me again. “Praise Luna!”

“Yes,” I said, smiling brightly.

“What’s it like?” Sparkle said, cupping my face, staring into my eyes. “I am afraid of it, truly. The women are so secretive about it, I think it must be awful.”

I told him about my experiences.

“It doesn’t sound so bad, I guess,” Sparkle said.

“And when it comes it means we are not with child!”

“I am happy for you,” Sparkle said. “But, you know---“

“What?”

“Your husband will expect you to give him babies.”

“Who cares what he expects?” I said, my eyes drifting down to Sparkle’s brown breasts, pushing out the front of his chambray dress. I absently started to tug at the laces.

“If you don’t have children...”

I covered his lips with mine at the same time I pulled open his shirt and found one of his firm, heavy breasts, squeezing it. I felt his nipple in my palm, getting harder, pressing against my soft skin, and Sparkle pushed me onto my back, his long hair framing his face, pooling around my face, mingling with mine. My hands tore at his shirt, and I pulled his shirt down past his smooth shoulders, his breasts spilling out now, and then we both desperately began to tug and tear at my nightgown until I’d wiggled out of it and lay naked beneath Sparkle, who pushed his dress down over his hips and then lifted my breasts with both hands while he began to smother them with gentle kisses.

I had never felt the things I was feeling now—the pulsing pleasure from my breasts, my hard nipples, the feeling of our soft, silky thighs sliding together, the wet, searing heat from between my legs and a ravenous need to be filled!

As for Sparkle-- I had lain with many women, and some even as beautiful as the woman he’d become—but now when I touched his breasts, or ran my fingers across his taut belly, or squeezed his soft, plump rear I knew these same feelings of pleasure I offered him and felt them tingling in my own woman’s flesh. I felt like we’d melded, become one—my racing heart was his racing heart, my heaving breasts were his heaving breasts, my soft, plaintive sighs and feminine gasps echoed by his-- we moved together, sang our song of passion, and when I slid down and found his slit with my tongue, teasing and pleasing until he screamed with pleasure I felt an explosion within myself and we held out sweat slicked bodies together, trembling in each other’s arms, kissing, caressing, running our hands through each other’s hair until we finally fell asleep like that—my curled into a ball, hugging my knees against my breasts, and Sparkle spooning me from behind.

At some point in the night, I felt him stir, untangling his slender limbs from mine. “Don’t go,” I whispered, looking at him through the strands of hair that fell across my eyes.

“I have to,” he whispered softly. “Work.”

He came over and kissed me on the shoulder. “I will see you again as soon as I can.”

“I love you,” I said, softly.

“I love you, too.”

I watched him leave, a feeling of sorrow and emptiness joining the warm glow that lingered from our lovemaking.

Sparkle. Sir Paul Forest. It was my fault he now found himself in his perfect, soft woman’s body, living as a slave girl. I had felt sick with guilt, but now basking in the glow of our lovemaking, I couldn’t help but feel some sense of joy that he’d shared my fate, and that we had now found each other’s arms as women, there to comfort one another in our strange new bodies and lives. My thoughts returned to my first day as a woman, and our escape attempt:

Stone had led me to the Grand Ballroom, where the night before I had been transformed into a woman while all the leading men of the kingdom watched. Now, when the doors opened, a man called out, “Princess Delicatha” and the room went silent as I minced into the room in my silken dress, a tiara glittering in my thick hair, my shoulders back, breasts out, the bustle of my dress accentuating my rear. The room went silent, and I walked in keeping my face regally impassive. I felt eyes wandering over my shape—admiring looks from men and woman alike, all seeing me arrayed in feminine finery for the first time, seeing the girl who would have been king, put in her place, reduced to a pretty bauble.

Gawain came to greet me. “Sister!” She said. “You are blossoming into such a stunning beauty.”

Eyes and ears were upon us. “I owe it all to you,” I said.

Gawain smiled, putting a hand to my cheek and taking me by the arm, leading me about the room and introducing me to all the lords and ladies. Of course, I knew them all, but now I was being re-introduced to the world as Princess, the little sister of the queen. I looked into one constrained face after another, each meeting strained and awkward and everyone pretended what was happening was normal. Soon, and to my shame, constrained by my corset, I grew light-headed and after fighting against the dizziness I wavered at one point and was forced to cling to my sister’s arm to keep from falling.

‘Oh, dear!’ Gawain said. “You’re such a delicate little thing! Let’s sit down and give you a chance to compose yourself.”

“I’m fine,” I said, but allowed myself to be led weakly to a divan along the wall, where my sister helped me to sit before plopping down next to me. The dress she wore was far less constricting than mine.

She took my hand. “Stone told you that I would offer you a way to reclaim your manhood?”

“Yes,” I said. “Though I did not believe her.”

“I will offer you a chance,” Gawain said gleefully. She paused to brush my bangs from my eyes, straighten my tiara, and then her eyes fell to my impressive breasts. “You have bigger breasts than I do,” she said. “I’m jealous!”

I did not respond.

“And your waist is so tiny! Any girl would love to have your figure.”

“And I would love for them to have my figure as well,” I said.

“You are doing so well at hiding your feelings, little sister. I am so proud of you.”

“I am still a Baldur,” I said.

“Why don’t you ask me about regaining your manhood? Do you like being a girl?”

“I do not ask because I know you want me to ask.”

Gawain snickered. “Swell, then you can just remain in your new shape. You are much more pleasant to talk to now that your voice is so soft and birdlike. I’m going to mingle!”

I grabbed her wrist. “No,” I chirped. “Tell me.”

Gawain smiled. Patted my hand. “I thought so. I will restore you to your former body if you agree to do two things.”

“One is abdicate,” I said.

“Of course,” my sister said. “Clever girl that you are. The second, well, do you want to guess and show me smart little sister you are?”

I shook my head. “I only surmise it is something terrible.”

Gawain laughed. “I don’t know about terrible. But let me whisper it in your ear.” She leaned in and cupped her hand to my ear. “Pleasure a stable boy of my choosing with your mouth.”

“Never,” I answered without hesitation.

“Of course not. Such things are beneath a young lady of your breeding. Well, time to get up. There is one more person for you simply must meet, darling.” She took my hand, helped me to my feet and began to lead me through the crowds, both of us greeting as we moved along.

My sister's suggestion that I should fellate a commoner appalled me on every level. How could she even think to disgrace me so, even given what she had already done? Worse, how could she think to disgrace our family? Didn't she know that the dishonor she smeared upon me tarred her as well? But there was something more about her, a strange gleam to her eyes, and though we had always had a rivalry between us, she had never shown the streak of sadism and cruelty I had experienced in this past day, and I began to wonder if some spell had been placed upon my sister by the mysterious Witch in Webs. I was so distracted by my thoughts I was scarcely aware of where my sister was leading me until I finally was jostled out of my revelry when she elbowed me in the side and I found myself looking up at a tall man with long, black hair and a chin like a slab of granite.

"King Khrag," Gawain said, still holding my hand. "May I present to you my sister, Princess Delicatha." I tilted my head back to look up at the man, who now towered over my small, feminine frame like a giant.

Khrag looked at me, gazing deep into my eyes, and then letting his eyes fall brazenly upon my breasts, lingering there far longer than was appropriate. He took my hand from my sisters and grasped it within both of his, swallowing my tiny white hand within palms ridges with hard callouses. I felt myself blushing, my skin tingling, and when Khrag raised his eyes from my breasts and once again found my eyes, my mouth dropped open and I could barely match his gaze, which was hard and full of animal desire. He lifted my hand, leaned down and opening his palms, gently brushed my hand with his lips before letting go. "You," he said in a voice so deep I not only heard it but felt it resonate within me. "You are the most beautiful woman in the world."

I sighed, my knees together, my one hand dangling in the air while with the other I tugged at my earring. "I--- I—um—" my mouth had gone dry, and I stared into his eyes, trying to find some words.

"My sister is flattered," Gawain said. Then she grabbed my hand, which still hung idiotically in the air where Khrag had kissed it, and she led me to the edge of the dais where we stood.

Trumpets blared. The room grew silent. I was still flustered, confused by a rush of impossible feminine feelings, glancing over at Khrag in fascination-- I had met him before, known him for years, but suddenly him seemed like a new and wholly *terrifying* man—and then my sister spoke. "I have joyous news! King Khrag, Lord of the Valley and ever faithful friend to the Splintered Isles, has asked for permission to marry my sweet little sister, and I am honored to accept his proposal! This marks the joining of our two great houses and makes what has always been an alliance built on honor and shared admiration into an alliance built on love and family! Let us all now congratulate King Khrag and his lovely bride!"

I turned to my sister, horrified at what I was hearing, the more so because of the beating of my heart and the way Khrag had woken up womanish passions within me. "You wouldn't!" I hissed into her ear. "You can't!"

“I did,” Gawain answered.

The crowd was applauding, and the orchestra had begun to play the royal wedding march. “I won’t marry a man!” I hissed.

“You will do your duty, young miss. For the good of the kingdom.”

I seethed, standing there, my sister clutching my hand. I knew the sentence well. My father had uttered it to Gawain many times when he’d arranged a marriage for her and she’d spoken out in revolt, and when she came to me for support, I had said the same words back to her. It is a woman’s fate. Accept it. Of course, now that I was the woman being forced to marry for the good of the kingdom I felt very differently.

My dear sister had escaped her own wedding fate when my father had died, and she’d become Queen in the interim. But now I, who’d been a man only a day before and destined to be King, stood there before all the lords and ladies, all who had known me as man, and I felt sheer terror. I glanced over at Khrag. He smiled at me, a smile that made me feel naked, like he would take me right there on the floor of the ballroom while everyone watched.

No, I thought to myself. No. I will not allow this to be done to me. A bride? A wife to another man? I would have to escape. To get free of my sister and seek some cure for my new sex. I was so--- helpless! I needed someone, and that person would be my loyal friend, Sir John Forest.

Flush. Confused, my head swimming with emotions, I lifted my skirts and made my way around the room until I found Sir John, who was with a small group of people—all men I had grown up with, fought with in the wars, and I struggled with my shame to approach them now in my dress, my body, with the sentence hanging over me. I had once been the first man among them, and now I was a woman given away by her sister like a toy.

Spotting me, most of the men looked away from me, but Sir John looked right at me and said in a very loud voice, “Princess. My heartfelt congratulations on your joyous news!”

I stopped in my tracks and almost fled. My oldest friend? How could he? But then he made the smallest little smirk—imperceptible to all but me who had been friends with him since we were both little boys, and my heart swelled with hope as I perceived he was merely acting the part in order to keep any who listened from suspecting he was still my ally. The other men came around and offered their congratulations, all of them awkwardly bowing, clearly uncomfortable being near me, as if my girlhood might be somehow contagious. The cowards! But I hid my contempt, made some small talk and then, after milling about the room a bit more and enduring more awkward and false congratulations—as well as more than a few lewd glances at the swell of my breasts—I casually made my way out onto one of the porches that surrounded the ballroom and looked out over the royal gardens.

The sun was setting, casting long rays of golden light across the trees and flowers below me, and the night blooms had spread their petals, filling the air with their musky scent. I breathed it in, my breasts rising and falling, and I looked down at my small, soft hands, my tiny

wrists and shook my head, feeling my hair brush gently across my bare shoulders and again my head spun. None of this could be real. I was a man. A lord. How could I be trapped now in this female shape, this dress? Engaged to a man? A bride? A wife. I leaned out over the stone rail of the balcony, looking down to see the cobblestone path that snaked its way through the garden. The thought popped into my head: jump, and with that thought came a feeling of complete and total freedom. I had grown used to the feeling of my corset, but now I felt it anew crushing my ribs and waist, and the weight of my hair and my dresses all of it suffocating me, killing me, and imagining myself falling, falling, light and free, and then blackness a smile spread across my face, and grasping the rail with my slender arms I began pulling myself up, pushing with my feet, my breasts crushed against the hard stone...

A strong hand grabbed my arm, pulled me back, and spun me around to find myself looking up into the face of Sir John. He had his hands on my shoulders, and his face was stern and angry. He reminded me in that moment of my father. “No,” he said. “Never. You must live.”

“Why?” I said. “When I have no more honor?”

“You must live because you are rightful king. Because your sister has gone mad. And because as your friend I do not want to live in this world without you.”

I resisted my girlish impulse to throw my arms around him. “Paul. You are a true friend.”

“Never truer than you, Baldur.”

Baldur. It was the first I had heard my true name since this crime had been committed against me, and I felt strangely moved, a single tear rolling down my cheek. Paul gently wiped it away, and once again I felt tremulous, staring into his eyes, and my lips parted as I stared up at him, leaning forward for a kiss...

Paul was stronger than I, breaking off the eye contact and stepping away from me, from the heat that had grown between us. I felt relieved and grateful that he had not allowed me to make a woman of myself, and also a little angry at him as the girl in me stomped her foot in frustration. “We have to get you out of here,” Paul said.

“Yes?”

“I will make arrangements. Play along with whatever your sister has planned. Once all is prepared, I will come for you and take you away someplace safe. Understand?”

“Yes,” I said, nodding.

“You go in now. I will wait a bit so we will not be seen together.”

“I would like to take in some more air, so you go first, and I— “

Paul put a hand on the small of my back and steered me toward the curtains that led back to the ballroom. I felt a thrill at his touch, at the way he was leading me. “I do not think it is wise for you to be out here alone in your—condition.”

“Thank you, Paul,” I said, glancing up at him, wanting one more look at those eyes before I went back into the nightmare of the ballroom, to face everyone as a girl. He practically pushed me through the curtain, and when I re-entered the ballroom, I felt hope along with my despair.

The next morning, I found myself dressed in a wedding gown—white lace, with a full, billowing skirt. I felt like a walking pastry, and then I stood in the light as painters captured my image. My sister wanted to have copies made of me in my bridal gown, to be sent to all the lords as “gifts” and, of course, to replace the painting of me in my armor that now hung in the royal hall. She would have it that I would remembered forever not as a brave and noble knight who had fought in many great battles, but a blushing, virginal bride.

It stung, but my fears over my coming wedding—and the wedding night—which fought with the hope that Paul would rescue me from my fate—kept me too distracted to worry about such things. Instead I stood there in my dress, smiling prettily, and worried.

The morning seemed to drag on forever, and my calves ached as I stood there, perched in my heels, the weight of my dress and my breasts—even supported by my corset they were heavy and strained my back—exhausted me, so that when noon came as I was helped to a divan to sit I sighed with relief, putting my hands on the small of my back and throwing my shoulders back, arching outward trying to relieve my aching muscles.

I heard my sister snicker. “Quite a strain carrying those girls of yours around, isn’t it?” She said.

I ignored her.

“You look so pretty,” she said, plucking at my veil. “Just like a doll. Your husband will be so pleased.”

“I will make you pay for this,” I said, trying to put some steel into my chiming voice.

“Oh, dear sister, I very much doubt it.” She put her hand on my belly. “You are a very fertile girl. Your womb ripe and eager for your husband’s seed. You’re going to be such a busy little mommy you’ll barely have time to do your hair.”

“I will never bear a child. I’d ... I’ll kill myself first.”

She kept rubbing my belly. I slapped her hand away. “Oh, you will hold a child to those perfect breasts of yours, feel its mouth on your nipple, feeding. You will be a mommy, and I will be laughing at you.”

“I am a man,” I said. “I will always be a man.”

“Well,” Gawain said, standing. “For a man you make a perfectly lovely bride.” She held out her hand to help me up, knowing I couldn’t stand on my own.

I refused her help, and she walked away humming the bridal march, leaving me sitting there, helpless.

Chapter Eight

Turin grabbed the post as he’d been ordered, his eyes dead, and felt the corset being fitted around him. It felt cool, silky against his bare skin, and then as the dresser pulled it closed, he felt it tight against his ribs and waist, pressing against them, nudging them toward an hourglass shape. His cheeks flushed, and he was glad his wife wasn’t there to watch him being fitted into this woman’s garment, his body reformed into a woman’s shape. The dresser began to pull at the stays, and he felt the corset grow tighter and tighter around him, crushing his waist and ribs, and he labored to breath as his body was forced into a smaller, daintier form. Each time he breathed out, the corset grew tighter, and tighter, and a sense of panic began to overtake him. Why had he agreed to this? Why was he standing here like a fool, a coward? And yet stand there he did. When they were finally finished, he stepped away from the pole, his head spinning, and fell against the dresser, who caught him in her arms.

“A girl must take shallow, dainty breaths,” the woman said, taking him by the elbow and leading him to a mirror, when he looked upon the ridiculous thing they had made of him. His corset was a soft pink color, silk, with a pattern of roses embroidered into it, and it was trimmed with white lace. It gave him a tiny waist and a distinctly feminine, hourglass figure, but his face and skinny legs were unchanged, making him look like some sort of prank drawing.

“I look ridiculous,” he said.

His dresser didn’t disagree. “We’ve only just begun, Lady Turina.”

A dress hung from a dummy. It had a full, pleated pink A line skirt and a white top with puffy sleeves and a rounded collar of the kind worn by schoolgirls. He raised his arms and allowed it to be draped over him, standing their feeling the skirt swirl around his legs while the dresser buttoned it up the back, tugging and adjusting. The dress had a modest bustle, but he could feel it back there like an extension of himself, and when he walked it gave his gait a distinctly feminine wiggle.

Next, his wig and bow, and then he sat while the dresser worked on his face, paints and powders and liners for his eyes, and then he was adorned in a variety of simply but sparkly jewelry- a necklace bearing the Queen’s Mark, bracelets for his wrists and little rings on his fingers.

Finally, perched on a pair of women's high heeled shoes, he walked uncertainly back to the mirror, once again clinging to his dresser's arm, and this time he was surprised to see a young woman looking back at him. She was not pretty, as Baldur had been; in fact, she was quite plain, but to his shock there was no doubt that he would now be taken for a woman by anyone who saw him. The masculinity of his features had been softened away by his make-up and the frame of his long hair, and the dress and his tiny waist would be more than enough for any who looked at him to instantly see him as a female.

He felt nothing other than the relentless crushing sense of humiliation and shame he'd felt grinding away at his ego and his pride since the day before when the queen had declared that he was a woman and made him a lady. It all seemed both impossible and inevitable. How could he fight what had been already been done? How could he reclaim the respect he'd lost?

The Queen claimed this was an honor, an elevation of his status, but looking at himself there in his dress, his lips a wet pink, echoed by the soft pink blushing that had been rubbed into his cheeks, he saw only someone who'd been made ridiculous, a mockery of a man. He didn't know what to do. How to stop it. Well, he had work to do. Work had always been his salvation, his first, best and only way of coping. And so, he walked daintily away from the mirror, his heels clicking, and made his way out into the main room of his chambers.

His wife, Isle, was sitting on the couch by the fire, and looking up she snorted and said, "You disgust me."

"I have to get to the Chancellery," he responded, clicking across the room, hyper aware of the way his hips were swaying with each step, his bustled backside wiggling.

"That's it? You're just going to go outside dressed like that?"

Turin kept walking.

"She's disgracing us both!" Isle shouted, her voice breaking. "How am I supposed to show my face at court with my husband walking around in a dress?"

Turin stopped, turning carefully on his heels, wobbling, grabbing the wall for support. "Do you think this is easy for me?" He said. Some strands of hair fell across his eyes, and he drew them away with a long, pink nail, his slender bracelet flashing. "Do you think the Queen asked me if I wanted this? I am sick with shame!"

"Then fight her," Isle said, getting to her feet. "Fight for yourself."

"You saw," Turin answered, dropping his eyes down to his heels, "what she did to her own brother."

"Don't give her the chance! Kill her! Claim the crown for yourself!"

Turin stood, staring at his feet, then sighed. "I have always been loyal to The Crown." Still holding the wall for support, he tossed his ponytail back over his shoulder. "I have to go to work."

Isle watched her husband—was he still her husband? Walking away from her, his pony-tale swaying in counterpoint to his hips, his waist more slender than any man’s should be, and she didn’t see the man she’d married, the ambitious man who’d been practically running their nation. No, she saw a meek girl, a young woman walking primly and obediently out to do her Queen’s bidding, and she found herself crying, feeling lonely, abandoned, and without hope for her future.

She had dreamt of children, a happy family. But even if Turina was still technically a man, the thought of having his babies? No, she thought. That wouldn’t do at all. Her children would need a man for a father, and not a girl who wasn’t even a woman.

Chapter Nine

Schimmers rode into the Imperial City on the back of a farmer’s cart surrounded by beets. He wore a straw hat, tattered pants and a ragged shirt made from an old burlap bag. He might have looked too ridiculously rustic, enough to arouse suspicion, but the farmer driving the wagon was dressed in the same way, and the cheerful, gap toothed rube was well known to the city guard, who waved him in hearty thanks as he handed them each a bunch of beets to take home to their families.

Schimmers smiled and waved, playing the country idiot, amused to have finally discovered some use for beets. He surely would sooner starve than eat the horrible things. Once in the city, he went down to the People’s Quarter—dirt streets, crumbling little hovels with patchwork rooves and broken plaster, and rented a cellar from an old, blind woman, who nearly cried with gratitude for the bronze coins he pressed into her palm, and then did weep openly when he gave her the beets he’d bought from the farmer. Truly, the woman is staring, he thought, to think of beets as a gift and not an insult.

The next day, Schimmers found himself leaning against the stone wall of a millinery that stood along a narrow, winding cobblestone street. The sun had not risen, though the air had the cool, sweet smell of dawn. He heard voices. Small groups of servants began to appear, making their way to the castle and their work, some of them eyeing Schimmers warily, taking him for a beggar. Finally, a single young woman came along—barely more than a girl— not seeing Schimmers in the shadows, she had an arrogant, defiant look on her face and was mumbling some sing song nonsense, “they call her the queen cause she’s less than a bitch.”

“Girl,” Schimmers said.

She looked at him with a sneer, made an obscene gesture.

Schimmers flipped a coin in the air, and it flashed in the lamplight.

The girl stopped. “What ya need?”

“Information.”

Chapter Ten

Days melted away, weeks. Finally, our caravan came to the manor house of one of Khrag's Lords, Murtagh Blayde, which stood near the city. Here we would spend a night, so that in the morning we could be dressed most regally for our grand entrance to the city. I was to be shown off to all the people, my husband's pretty little trophy, brought back from the capital like the spoils of war.

My carriage pulled right up to the front steps of his great, stone manor, and the lord and all his family stood outside along with his guard, glittering in their armor. I felt a twisting in my stomach. These last weeks I'd spent in private, ignored for the most part by all but Stone and my sweet Sparkle, but now all of these people waited eagerly to see me, the king's bride. I should have been out there among the men in my armor, with my sword at my side, tall and strong. Instead, I wore a pink dress with a plunging neckline, a diamond necklace nestled in my soft, bountiful cleavage. I was peeking out the window, flush with shame, and saw Khrag ride up to my carriage and dismount his horse with an arrogant leap.

He opened the door to my carriage. Stone helped me up, and then I moved to the door, daintily taking the first step out, wobbling. Khrag put a steadying hand on my back, and I put a hand on his shoulder, though it shamed me for them all to see me so helpless.

"Pretty smile," I heard Stone whisper, as she had so many, many times over the past weeks, as my pretty smile spread across my face I realized she'd been training me, conditioning me; the mere sound of her saying the words brought a smile to my face. Still, I kept it there and looked up, raising my slender hand and giving the crowd a dignified, regal wave. I was still royalty.

The crowd roared in response to my small gesture, and suddenly I found myself lifted into the air as Khrag picked me up, and then, briefly cradling me in his arms, set me on the ground, his arm around my waist, as the crowd laughed and cheered more loudly. I put an arm around Khrag as well, since it would have felt awkward not to, and when the crowd finished their cheering, Murtagh Blayde strode forward, a sheathed sword held out before him, carried on his palms, and kneeling, he said, "King Khrag, my Lord and Brother, I welcome you and your Queen to my humble home, and present you my sword as a sign of my devotion."

"I refuse, Lord Blayde."

"I must insist, my King."

"Again, I refuse."

"My Lord, since you decline this offer, I have no choice but to end myself in accordance with the laws of our people."

Silence. The crowd stood still. Unmoving.

“Lord Blayde, I must accept your offer, as my love for you demands it.”

With that Khrag accepted the sword, and then Lord Blayde led us into his manor while the crowd cheered once more. As we crossed the threshold, Khrag leaned down and whispered, “I am so proud of you.”

Shocked, I smiled up at him and spoke words that surprised me, both to speak them and because I realized they were true, “It please me to hear you say that.” He pulled me closer, and I felt a warmth in my heart, a little tingle in my skin, and feeling just a little like what I felt when I was with Sparkle, and those feelings scared me, very much.

We ate. I found myself looking at the women. The clothes they wore were much more—daring—than the women in the north wore. And though my dress showed off my slender shoulders and breasts, they were thin, clingy, nearly transparent garments that showed off—almost everything. Their clothes clung to their breasts and hips, and even outlined their sex. Their long dresses went to the floor, but the fabric clung to their thighs, sliding silkily along their skin as they moved, hiding and revealing and erotic. I would have to be dressed in the same manner, and I wondered that Khrag or any man would not be driven mad with lust at the sight of my body in such clothes.

After cursory meetings with Blayde and his knights, I found myself in the drawing room with the ladies. If they knew who I was—or had been—the subject did not come up. Instead, they asked about my wedding, my dress, and as Stone had suggested, I asked them about fashion in the capital, about social life, about the arts. We talked of children and motherhood, as all of us either were mothers or were expected to be mothers very soon. It was the duty of the young woman, after all.

We drank wine—the wine there was very good—and the girls turned to gossip, who was sleeping with who, who wanted to sleep with who—and I feigned interest though I found little of value in what they were saying. Perhaps I had not acquired the female love of such things along my new sex. The whole thing left me feeling angry, frustrated, trapped more than ever in my dresses, my jewels. I felt like my breasts had gotten bigger, that they were two huge weights, dragging me down, and the suffocating corset crushing me into an even more feminine shape seemed to grown tighter throughout the evening, making it nearly impossible for me to breath, and the more I suffered the more I laughed and giggled and pretended to be having a glorious time with the girls.

Stone helped me undress, and I found myself in my gown, in my bed, angry and scared and once again feeling so lost and alone and frustrated at the unfairness of my fate. I wanted to scream, to smash something, to stick a sword in a man’s gut and watch him die, but brushing my curls from my face, I knew those days were over for me. What could I do with such feelings as a woman? Cry?

The door opened. Closed. Khrag stood at the foot of my bed, staring down at me. He saw the trouble in my eyes, and I saw him smile cruelly as he pulled down his pants. I opened the top of my gown, pulled it down, cupped my breasts and lifted them towards him defiantly,

my eyes burning with anger. Khrag stared back at me, his eyes burning with animal lust, and I felt myself getting wet as we stared at one another, locked in, both of us refusing to look away.

I licked my lips. The words came out of me as if spoken by another woman, my voice hoarse with need. “Ein acht fullen crat.” Fuck me hard.

Khrag was on me like a rabid wolf. He grabbed my hair, yanking it painfully. I slapped him across the face as hard as I could, and we both laughed while he yanked again, forcing my head back and sucking on my neck. I dug my nails into his back, ripping the flesh and felt his hand down between my soft thighs, and then he plunged it into me, and I thrust my hips toward him, wanting it deeper, harder, wanting it to hurt more. He was pulling my hair so hard, and just shoving his fingers into me, it hurt, the pain searing through my body, and I paid him back, not only with my long nails, ripping bleeding channels in his back, but twisting my head I locked my teeth onto his arm and bit as hard as I could.

Khrag stymied his shouts—we were guests in another’s home—but he shoved even deeper into me; then, grunting, yanking his hand out, he grabbed my nipple and twisted, laughing as my eyes shot open with agony and I bit down my own scream of pain and pleasure. He let go of my hair, finally, and I swung my little fist wildly, toward his face. He caught my wrist, then the other, pinning my slender arms above me, loving how much stronger he was, showing me how much weaker. Our faces were close, so close we could feel each other’s hot breath against our cheeks. “I hate you,” I whispered with a sneer. “I wish I could kill you.”

Khrag smiled. Kissed me on the cheek. “Finally. The truth.”

He slammed into me, then, into my slit, my fucking slit, the slit I shouldn’t have, and I squirmed, pulling away, but he pounded me—really pound me- still holding me down, and I found myself making soft, little sounds, pretty female moans, and he pounded and pounded and I despite all my hate and frustration or maybe because of it I started to chant in my small, pretty little voice, Ein acht fullen crat! Ein acht fullen crat! Fuck me hard! Fuck me hard! Fuck me hard!

And he did. And he did. And he did.

He was the man. I was the woman. And I wanted to be hate fucked like one by my asshole of a husband.

I was senseless when he finally left, sprawled out on the bed, my face buried in my long hair, my body limp and exhausted, aching with a new pain that hurt so good it was better than pleasure.

In the morning I did not know my own mind. My whole body felt light, loose, free of tension like I hadn’t felt a single day since I’d become a woman, and yet a maelstrom raged in my mind—shame, humiliation, gratitude, hate... I had begged for it, needed it, wanted it, and he had given it to me, and now I wanted more, and I wanted to squeeze my legs together and never surrender to those feelings again. I am a man. I will be king! I repeated the thoughts in my head as I sat at the dressing table in my room, staring at myself in the mirror, distractedly

running a brush through my long, thick hair. They seemed weaker than ever. Did I even believe them?

Thoughts do not make a man, but actions.

The line from the ancient philosopher Patterous, came to me.

And what did my actions make me, as I lay on my back, my legs spread, and begged a man to fuck me hard?

The answer could only be—woman.

And yet, was I not still myself in many other ways?

I looked at her face in the mirror. Those lips. Those eyes. Her smooth, round shoulders and the swelling of her large, firm breasts, breasts that rose with each breath, that swayed each time she brushed her hair. Still, looking at that gorgeous woman in the mirror, I longed to take her, to be the man, to know the power and the thrill of conquering such a creature, to hear her call out in her small voice...

I hated Khrag both because he had reduced me to his woman, his mate, and because he got to be the man, got to take this perfect female I had been reshaped into, got to have the woman I myself desired.

Did I not long for Sparkle and her soft curves, her gentle kisses?

Yes! Yes! And yet now I also found myself—poisoned—by these new feelings, this new need to be filled, entered, conquered. Could I just accept this body? This life?

No.

Even if I could crawl into this soft little shape and live her life, even were I myself capable of that, I couldn't allow myself to do it as long as there remained the laughing face of my sister, burned into my brain. Man or woman, I still had my own code of honor, and such an affront, an insult, could not be left unanswered.

More, my sister was mad, the Spider Witch had tainted her, and I owed it to the kingdom to find some way to remove her from the throne!

Stone came, along with other girls, and soon I was bathed and dressed and primped and painted, perfumed and adorned with jewels. No corset for me now, as a slinky silk dress of silver was draped over my slender frame, a dress woven with small diamonds that sparkled each time I moved. With no corset, my breasts swayed freely with each step, and the feeling of the watery silk against my nipples made me flush with pleasure. I was led to the mirror and gazed upon myself, once again stunned by own beauty, and hungry with lust to possess this creature for myself, even as my mind continued with struggle with the realization that I was her.

Finally, Khrag entered. I dropped my eyes in a sudden rush of feminine modesty, but I could feel him looking me over. Finally, he took my chin in his hands and tilted my head back,

so I had to look up into his eyes, my bangs partially blocking my vision. “You are the most beautiful woman in the world,” he said. “And marrying you is my greatest achievement.”

The passion in his voice, more than the words, touched me deeply, and again I was shocked to feel a warmth in my own heart. My voice cracking with emotion, I answered, “You honor me, my king and husband.” I felt sparks pass between us, for a moment I was on my back again, my arms pinned, as he took me, and guessing my thoughts Khrag grinned, took my hands and kissed my fingertips. “Time to meet your people.”

He put his hands on my hips and turned me to face the mirror. Then, standing behind me, he lowered a glittering tiara onto my head—emeralds, rubies and diamonds flashed, and my heart fluttered with pride as I accepted my crown as Queen. I smiled back at my husband, and then followed him out of the room as my adoring maids clapped and squealed with excitement for me.

We climbed into a kind of elaborate chariot, tiered almost like my wedding cake, with knights dressed in flashing, chrome plated armor arrayed along the bottom layers to protect us. I stood at the top, next to my husband, his arm around my waist. “They are lined up for over a mile outside the city, my Queen,” Khrag said. “Your cheeks and arm will be aching by the time we reach the palace!”

“You are very beloved by your people.”

“They are not here to see me. They are here to see their new queen. Legend of your beauty and grace have spread throughout the kingdom.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. Beauty and grace. Charm and poise. I just smiled and nodded as our chariot pulled away from Blayde’s Manor, and as we pulled out of the iron gates, I saw a great mass of people lined up along both sides of the road, and they cheered and shouted, and I smiled and raised my slender white arm, and waved, while my husband kept one arm protectively around my slender waist.

Chapter Eleven

Exeter lifted his skirt and squatted over the wooden bucket in the corner of his cell, then heard the sporadic tinkling as he relieved himself. When he was done, he stood, pulling his skirt down, and then running his hands through his long hair, he sat in the corner of the cell, hugging his long, slender legs to his breasts.

The only light in his cell came from the torchlight in the hallway, which flickered and danced, but gave him no sense of time. There was nothing to do in the cell. No books to read. No cards to distract himself with. All he could do was think about his new shape, his woman’s body, and replay in his mind the moment the Queen had taken his manhood. He had for some time, plotted revenge, imagined how he would escape, find her, kill her, force her to restore him

to his rightful sex. But those dreams had faded away, vanished, and more and more he imagined himself on his knees before the queen, begging her to let him take a bath, see the sun. He was so lonely. Depressed. He stank. He could smell himself even over the smell of the piss and shit in the bucket.

Chapter Twelve

Lord Hallyhock stood stiffly while Turin signed off on the requisition for repairs to the south gate. Turin looked up at the man, with his proud, arrogant features now softened by the long, feminine hair that framed his face, and the large bow. “Very good,” Turin said.

“Thank you, Lady Turina,” Hallyhock said, bowing. “Give my best to your mother.”

“Thank you, I will,” Turin answered, annoyed to be addressed as a woman, though he knew none of them had any choice. The queen would not tolerate the slightest sign of disobedience as she solidified her control of the kingdom.

As Hallyhock exited, Turin was shocked to see the Queen herself saunter into his office. He stood and curtsied. “Mother,” he said, almost choking on the word. “I was not expecting you.”

“I was in the area and decided to stop by, Turina. You look lovely.”

“Thank you, Mother.”

“But, you don’t sound right. You don’t move right. You are very lacking in the charms expected of a lady of the court, particularly of my sweet daughter.”

Turin felt himself growing angry, but he hid his feelings behind a bright smile. “How can I better please your highness?”

“Mother. Call me mother.”

“I how might I better please you, Mother?”

“Lessons, sweet girl! I shall have private tutors give you lessons! You will learn all the things you should have learned when you were a little girl.”

Turin kept the smile locked on his face. “As you wish, mother.”

“That’s a good girl.”

“Oh, Mother. Dear. When shall these lessons take place?”

“Right now. I have a teacher here, stern but fair, who will teach you to speak more ... pretty. Isn’t that exciting?”

Turin started to object. He had work to do! He wasn't a girl! How could he continue to run the kingdom while frittering away his time learning to speak in pretty cadences like a girl out of finishing school? But he stopped himself. Something in him warned that if he complained about the lessons interfering with his work, it would be his work he would lose. So he nodded, curtsied and said, "I am ever so grateful, Mother."

"I thought you would be," Gawain said, patting him on the cheek.

The teacher came in, sat at Turin's desk and had him sit in a chair in front of her, his knees together, hands in his lap. She handed him a chapbook open to a page with a series of sentences on it. "Read the first one."

Turin stared at the phrase. Looked up at the imperious teacher, who stared down her nose at him, a smug look of amusement on her sour, withered features. "I am a pretty girl."

"Higher. Through your nose."

"Pardon?"

"Speak in a higher register and through your nose!" She held a long stick in her hands and whacked him with it.

Turin did his best to comply. "I am a pretty girl."

Whack! "Higher! More nasally!"

"I am a pretty girl."

Whack. "Terrible. Again! LIKE A YOUNG LADY!"

Turin swallowed, resisted the urge to rise, smack the woman back. He knew she was following orders, knew that to do anything but comply would result in loss of his position, in loss of everything, and he'd sacrificed so much, everything—to remain chancellor. He thought, remembered, the way young ladies spoke, sought a higher position, more nasal, and then with all the focus he could muster he said, "I am a pretty girl." The voice that came out of him was high, sweet, airy and unrecognizable, he looked at the teacher expectantly.

"Better. Not good, but better."

Turin smiled.

"Now, the next line. Sweeter. Softer. Prettier."

Turin read the line to himself, then tried to find that place, the one he'd just spoken from, and find a higher, lighter place, a more feminine energy within himself. He tugged on the hem of his skirt, squeezed his knees together. "I am ever so fond of ponies!"

The teacher nodded, her eyes glinting with sadistic satisfaction. "Good girl," she said. "Good girl."

“Thank you!” Turin heard himself gush in his airy, high-pitched falsetto. “Thank you, teacher!” He knew himself less and less with each breathy word from his pink, painted lips.

Chapter Thirteen

For a week I clung to my husband’s arm as I was paraded about, displayed, shown off to all the people of the court, the kingdom. My husband—Khrag-- was correct. My cheeks did ache from smiling, my arm from waving, but it went on for a week as I was draped in one gown after another, perched on one pair of pretty heels after another, brought to another ball, another dinner, another garden party. The only constant was my tiara, my glittering tiara, and I came to look at it as my anchor, the one constant in the breathless rush of a woman’s life in which I found myself. One thing that surprised me was how proud he was to have me on his arm. I had started to realize this on the road, but throughout the long week he beamed as I was introduced to the lords and ladies of his kingdom, and he fussed over me and showered me constantly with compliments and praise.

My woman’s heart melted, and as much as my masculine intellect struggled against it all, feeling that he was treating me like any man might treat any woman, the woman in me was winning out, as more and more I found myself looking upon him—so tall and strong—as my protector and friend and, yes, the word love was starting to make itself to my dewy lips. And as much as I tried to fight against it, I longed for another night of—can I call it love-making? Ravishment. Animal lust. I longed for him to come to my rooms and – slam into me like a stag.

But I found myself alone. Each night. Exhausted, empty, I lay in my bed, staring at the ceiling, wishing for my man to come and take me. And if not him—Sparkle. I longed to see him, to hold him in my arms, to kiss those sweet lips, those breasts. I had asked Stone about him, but she’s only diverted me, or stated flatly that she did not know where the slave girl was, and that she didn’t care.

Finally, I found myself in a carriage, with just Khrag. We were rarely alone, and overcoming my pride I leaned against him, pressing my breasts into his side, putting my palm on his chest. He put his arm around my shoulder and kissed me on the head. “Do I please you, my king?” I said, letting my voice rise to an even higher register, as woman had done with me when I was a man.

“I tell you so every day, Delicatha. You are a perfect wife and queen.”

“I’m just... I need reassurances,” I said.

“Of course,” he said, with a chuckle. “Insecurity is the nature of woman.”

He knew I was—or had been a man—and it annoyed me whenever he asserted that I was a typical woman, but I ignored the sting and said, “Would you do something for me? Pretty please?”

He grunted. “Do not test my love for you.”

“No,” I said. “Nothing like that. It’s just something.... Something that would make me happy.”

“What do you ask then, woman?”

“There is a slave. Her name is Sparkle.”

“She was once a man,” Khrag said with an arrogant chuckle, it irked me that he expressed such amused disdain for Sparkle’s unjust fate, and even more that he was so insensitive to my position, knowing I, too, had been reduced to womanhood.

“She was once a man, a nobleman, and-- and my friend. Could you, would you please, allow her to attend me as my servant?”

Khrag considered. “This would make you happy?”

“Oh, yes! So happy!” I said, taking his hand.

“Will you do something for me, then, my Queen?”

“Of course. It is....” A pushed back against the man in me. “It is my duty as your wife to serve you.”

He put a hand on my tummy. “Go to the temple of Hermora. Perform the Rite of Fertility.”

My mouth fell open. “My lord?”

“She is the goddess of fertility and the harvest-- in my kingdom. Go there, and the priestesses will cast their spells, call upon the goddess. Send us a child, an heir.”

I stared into Khrag’s eyes, and I am sure he could see my terror. He took my hands and kissed my fingertips, as had been his way. “It is your destiny as a woman.”

I felt like I had stepped into my own snare. How could I refuse? It was expected of me to bare my husband’s children, and though I had prayed and prayed to be spared this most female expression of my new shape, I would never make any progress with Khrag, would never make him an ally, if I openly refused this request.

I nodded, thinking that I would agree, but put off the actual consummation of my promise, put it off forever. I would regain my manhood, and as man and king I would not also be a mother. “Of course, my king. As you wish.”

Khrag took my chin in his hands, tilted my head back and kissed me. “Good. You go tomorrow.” I was sure I could hear my sister laughing.

Chapter Fourteen

Schimmers woke, rolled out of bed. He pulled his dress over his head, pulled on his striped stockings, his black boots. It was too dark in his narrow little room to see anything. He would have to polish his boots and smarten up his outfit once he was outside and had a little of the early morning light. Finally, he gathered up his long hair, and tucked it under his bonnet. He had never liked taking on a woman's shape, and particularly a young woman of low standing. Men would assume they could press him for sexual favors all day long. But the Queen only allowed women into the upper floors now, and he had become certain after several exploratory infiltrations, that the Spider Witch lurked somewhere up there at the top of the palace.

He ignored the leers and come-ons from the guards as he made his way into the castle, then to the sweltering kitchen—he couldn't help but notice the complete and total lack of beets on the royal menu—and for a time he scrubbed the pots. Once he was certain that no one was paying attention to the insignificant skinny dish-girl, he slipped silently from the kitchen to a narrow, dark access hall he'd found on an early scouting expedition. Moving quickly and silently down the hall, he entered a narrow doorway which led to a narrow, winding stair that led up and into the dark and mysterious upper chambers of the palace. Known as the Sacred Stair, it was part of the original construction of the palace, dating back to when it was an actual fortress built in a time of endless war, and a defensible entrance was important than ease of access, or the arrogant display of power that the new, wide and inviting stairs in the newer section conveyed. For many years it had served as the entrance for the priests and ministers to come and visit the royal family in secret, allowing them to minister to the sick or cursed or dying without word getting around the kingdom.

Now largely forgotten, it sat unused and poorly guarded, and of course, Schimmers, born to identify weaknesses in security, had found it.

At the top of the stairs, he pushed the narrow, ancient door open, just a crack, and glanced down the hall. Two tall, broad-shouldered women stood at attention, their backs to him, facing down the hall toward the main chamber. He slipped out the door and seemed to almost float down the hall, silently as a shadow. He passed the Queen's chambers, those of her entourage—all the doors still closed this early in the day, the occupants sleeping peacefully. He had no interest in the Queen—just yet.

The palace grew progressively smaller as it rose from its foundations and up into the sky, and it was not hard to find the entrance to the next, and he believed last, stairway, the one he believed would lead him to the spire, where he suspected the Spider Witch plotted and schemed. For the first time, his heart began to beat faster, and he felt a small amount of sweat on his upper lip, beneath his small breasts. Sneaking in a castle among the armored sentries was just a typical day at work for him. An interesting intellectual exercise, but not one that truly scared him.

The Spider Witch? He knew nothing of her. Nothing. Few were those in the world who had both vast power and complete obscurity. He knew nothing of her, and therefore she

was a truly dangerous foe. Once he faced her, when that day came, he would have to move and react completely on instinct, and one false move would result in either death or—worse—marriage and motherhood!

The thought sent a shiver through his spine. Men were selfish, repulsive, and spending his life married to one would be, he suspected, worse than death.

The shiver made him smile. It was good to be afraid.

He reached for the door handle, and his fingertips tingled. He cast a spell, and he now saw the flickering energy of the witch's wards. The door was well shielded, as he had feared it would be. He would have to seek some way to...

Footsteps. Heavy, steel shod boots. Coming toward him.

Schimmers stood near the end of a cul-de-sac, in front of a small door warded with magic far too powerful for him to penetrate with his rudimentary magic skills. He cursed, sneaking further down the hall, drawing forth his chameleon powers so that he and his clothes blended into the wall. He stood stock still. One of the sentries came around the corner, paused, turned and walked back the way she'd come. A routine patrol. Not taken to the end, Schimmers thought with contempt, certain that the sentry was supposed to walk the full length of the hall; well, the sloth of a sentry had served him very well for many years. Had kept him alive.

How to reach the Witch? He could attempt to scale the outside of the castle, hope that whatever protections the witch placed on windows or tower top egress was weaker, but that seemed unlikely. The best plan would be to wait. To wait until the Witch came down, or the Queen went up. He began to sneak back down the hall, silently. He would be back, but it was too risky to just linger in the hall for hours on end, hoping the queen would decide to pay her Witch a visit. No. He would just have to find a way to join the queen on her next visit.

Chapter Fifteen

"My legs hurt," Turin said, his voice high-pitched, light and musical. He had a book on his head and was walking across his office in his dress and heels. His arms were held out slightly, his wrists bent.

"And they should," the teacher said.

Turin frowned, but only in his mind. On his face he had plastered a bright smile, completely convincing and completely divorced from any connection with what he was actually feeling. The teacher had impressed upon the absolute need to smile, to be bright and cheery at all times. He had no idea how long this had all been going on, but he felt more and more he was under some sort of spell. After finding a soft, breathy placement for his voice, the teacher had drilled him on his elocution, reshaping the way he pronounced words, and forcing him to replace his flat, male delivery with a sign-song speech pattern identical to that of any young woman of the court. He'd struggled, just as he had struggled at first with his pitch, but then it had clicked—just clicked—and rapidly what he'd just learned felt and sounded normal to his ears.

In the same way, his walk had been remolded, and he had now walked back and forth across his office countless times, sat down and stood up, all with the book on his head, demonstrating perfect poise, the book never moving even the slightest as he maneuvered around in his high heels.

“Stand,” the teacher finally said.

Turin turned to face her, his feet together, arms folded behind his back, the book still balanced on his head.

“You’ve done well today, young miss. Now, you must maintain proper decorum at all times from now on.”

Turin thought of his wife. “Thank you, teacher. As you say, teacher?”

“Did I hear a question?” The teacher said, smirking.

“Yes, teacher, if it pleases you.”

“It does not, but out with it, girl!”

“In private? At home? I mean, must I, um...?”

“At all times means at all times, young lady.”

“Of course,” Turin said.

“You’ve worked hard. I am not displeased. You are dismissed for the day.”

Turin, his big, bright smile still radiant on his face, curtsied, and said, “Thank you so much, teacher.” His mind was in turmoil. He had many tasks that needed his attention, the kingdom’s work had not been done. Yet, he’d been dismissed, and he knew that he had to leave, so he walked toward the door, confused and afraid of what it all meant.

“Young miss!” The teacher hissed.

Turin stopped, turned, a hand on his hip. “Teacher?”

“The book. It is still on your head.”

“Oh, my!” Turin said. “How absolutely silly of me!”

“Never you mind,” the teacher said. “You are only a girl, after all.”

As Turin approached his rooms, he saw a sentry at the door, a tall, stout woman of the type the Queen had brought in to serve as her private protection. His heart raced. Had something gone wrong? He smiled prettily. “Pardon me, but is there some problem?”

“Lady Turina,” the guard said. “Not at all, but the Queen is concerned for your safety, so she assigned sentries to watch your door day and night.

“Oh, goodness,” Turin said. “Thank you, then. It is a comfort to me knowing I am protected.”

“Of course, M’lady.” The sentry opened the door and held it open. Turin paused, one hand on his cheek. He dreaded facing his wife. What would she say when he spoke to her now, in his new voice? I won’t, he decided. No one is here to see or hear. No one will know. At home, I shall still be ever so much the man!

He walked in, trying to put a little male swagger back in his step, but he felt awkward, unbalanced, ridiculous. His wife waited in their living room, sitting by the fire in her day dress, working at some needlepoint. She looked up at him, the same look of disgust as before. “What’s wrong with you?” She spat, seeing his strange, herky-jerk walking like some kind of golem.

Turin found himself smiling, a bright, pretty smile. “I should prefer,” he said, intending to speak the words in his male voice, his real voice, but instead out came the soft, breathy and high-pitched voice of a girl, the voice he’d learned that morning.

“Oh, for all the gods in the heavens,” his wife said. “Please do not address me in that.... Tone!”

Turin cleared his throat. “You speak of my...” the voice remained the voice of a girl. “My tone?!” He stomped a foot and locked his fingers together, twisting his wrists in frustration. “I can’t stop.... I can’t speak...”

His wife grew more livid, watching her husband stand there before her in his dress, speaking in the high-pitched voice of a school girl, his arms, his stance, all of it suggesting a young woman. “This is some new wickedness of the Queen and her witch!”

“I can’t speak like a man anymore?” Turin heard himself say, in a pretty, surprised manner.

“I warned you,” his wife said, standing, furious. “I warned you to fight! Now, listen to yourself! You’re pathetic, and you thought you would be rewarded for your loyalty?” She stood and stalked toward Turin.

Turin gracefully stepped away, retreating from his wife, who seeing his reaction grew all the more enraged. “You’re useless,” she spat. “Worse than useless.”

She grabbed Turin’s wrist and dragged him to the couch, shoving him down. Then, she threw her needlepoint onto his lap. “Sit and sew, little girl! You are no good for anything else.”

Turin found himself smiling. He scarcely believed the words that came out of his mouth, nor the sweet, pleasing tone. “As you wish.” He picked up the needlepoint, and somehow his fingers seemed to know just what to do.

His wife turned and walked away, slamming the door to her chambers.

Turin sat primly pulling the needle and thread through the pattern. I wonder, he thought, how long she wants me to sew for? He didn't like making her angry, and he knew he would have to try ever so much harder to please her. The thought was not his, but it was now more than his. He felt so frustrated, betrayed. He should have fought, fled, schemed or—something! But now it was too late, and as he sat sewing, he could hope that somehow, someday, someone would rescue him.

Chapter Sixteen

Bastille almost didn't see it. He'd been reading for so many hours without finding anything about the Spider Witch, he'd started to just skim, expecting nothing his mind wandering among his memories, the stories he was reading, and the histories he'd poured over, almost like a lucid dream shimmered between he and the page. But he stopped. Something. He went back. He'd been reading an obscure and ancient fairytale, the Song of Belledin:

Belledin, bereft of crown, did eastward wander far from renown
he worked as a fisherman, a mason and a cook
the noble life he forgot, forsook
and all forgot the benighted king until one spring—glorious thing
from the east a great cloud of dust arose
and the ground trembled with the beat of hooves
and frontiersmen to the capitol fled
and shouted beware! Beware! A mighty army marches here
and at its head the crownless king
Belledin, the wrathful, his vengeance brings

More so, they whispered, at his side there rides
a witch with piercing emerald eyes
a witch from the kingdoms beyond seas
who fills all who see her with terrible dread
and her gown is made of spider's web.

Belledin's Witch. He read on. There was scarce mention of her for the rest of the story, which related how Belledin and his mighty host conquered the capitol and reclaimed his crown. Bastille rose, excitedly, and made his way to the back of the library, where stood a narrow, iron bound door. He found the great key on his ring, turned the ancient lock, and swung the door open, a cloud of dust swirling at his feet. Holding his lamp high, he moved into the tiny room, where he kept his extensive collection of forbidden books. Somewhere in here, he was sure he had it... and YES!

Thankful for his meticulous cataloging over the years, he pulled the dusty and dry tome from the shelf, and opening the hard, leather cover, he saw the words written in the florid style

avored by the scribes of the ancient world: The Song of Belledin. But this would be an older version, one that predated the rise of Rationalus- written before the royal scribes had gone back through all the ancient stories and eliminated or minimized any mention of powerful women or even female gods.

Belledin did hammer on the throne room doors, and they shattered at his blows.
Crumbling in a great tumult to the stone stairs of the throne room.
Invincibillia, Warrior Witch, strode into the room, her blazing sword
matching the wrath in her eyes, and the False King Astor strode forth
to meet her in combat, his sword trembling in his hands. Even before
he reached the Invincibilla, his armor did began to flow and change
and instead of hard steal from his shoulders fell a silken gown
he shrieked in the voice of a frightened girl, and the sword fell
from his now slender hand, twirl he did, and twirl again, and with
each twirl did he begin more and more a maiden become

Until at last, fetching and fair, did he plead, with sweet tears and despair
Kill me, please, I can't live as a lass, I would rather face my doom than this
but the Queen would not offer the false king such false mercy, and so he was
given to Belledin to marry, bore him many sons and daughters, too
the false king a good wife did make, and true.

Invincibillia! Now, Bastille had a name, and so he went back into his forbidden room, and began to search for more knowledge on this ancient and powerful warrior witch. No doubt, given her role in restoring the rule of Belledin, much more had been written, all of which had been carefully eliminated from the history of the world in the name of establishing and maintaining the rule of man over woman.

Even as Bastille began to learn the secrets of the Spider Witch, Turin chaffed against his newfound girlhood, the manner of his speech, his walk and even thoughts bound by the spells of his Queen and mother. Baldur, meanwhile, wife and queen, prepared himself for the fertility rights, and the very likely possibility that he would soon be with child.

Queen Gawain, herself, spent much of her time alone, in her rooms. Things had gone very well for her, and she was determined to continue to strengthen her grip on the kingdom while restoring the matriarchy fully. Soon, the rule of woman would be absolute throughout her lands, and her daughters and her daughters' daughters would rule for a millennium.

Of course, she would find a husband now—though he would be very surprised when he learned that he was actually to be her wife and bare her children. She found the thought of having a baby insider her repulsive, and the whole process of childbirth demeaning and utterly

disgusting. No. She would leave that to her man. Perhaps, she thought with a smile, he and her brother could become friends and chit chat about babies and diapers and whatever else silly nonsense mothers talked about. As for her, she would be too busy remaking the world in the image of the Spider.

Part II

Winter had come and shrouded the lands around the capital in deep blankets of white snow. Plumes of smoke rose from the chimneys of every house and shack and woodland cottage, as people throughout the land huddled near the fires, satisfied just to stay warm on the brutally cold and brief days, throughout the long, dark winter nights.

As the sun rose low over the horizon, casting its wane winter rays along the frozen earth, painting the snow in shades of gold, a lone figure emerged from the forests that rose some miles outside the city's walls, moving slowly and carefully along on snowshoes, head and body bundles in layers of furs. Stopping for a moment as he emerged from the dark of the forest, temporarily bewildered by the wide-open spaces and the light of the sun, he paused and, leaning on his walking stick, gazed up at the sheer rock walls of the ancient capital. He noticed... birds. So many birds swirling among the plumes of smoke, racing from place to place.

Something had happened to send all these messengers flying to and fro—and more than a few winging their way beyond the city walls in all directions.

Chapter Seventeen

“The baby is really kicking this morning!” I said to Sparkle as I held my swollen belly and felt another kick.

“He’s healthy and strong, just like his mommy,” Sparkle answered.

Mommy. The word still repulsed me. As did the baby growing inside me. I hated it and filled me with disgust even as I grew to care for it and love it more with each passing day of my humiliating pregnancy. My husband and all the ladies of the court, of course, were delighted and couldn’t stop congratulating me for my “accomplishment.”

What accomplishment? I had lain on my back and spread my legs, and my husband had shoved himself into my vagina. How was that any kind of achievement? How was letting another man fuck me and plant his seed inside me an accomplishment? Back in my previous life, my life as a man, I had true accomplishments—deeds of action and valor! When the demon Demigoth had awoken from his slumbers and laid waste to Foretell Isle, enslaving its people

under shackles of madness, I had fought through his unholy host with my knights, and then faced him alone. We battled for three days, unleashing mighty blows upon one another, blows that shook the earth and roiled the seas. Finally, I had won the battle of wills and planted my great sword into skull of the gibbering fiend, condemning him to another 1000 years of imprisonment beneath the island, where still to this day his wailing can be heard, and his struggles to escape shake the land.

Demigoth! I had slain that demon, had looked into his eyes and laughed, had shaken off all his foul sorceries and deadly blade craft, and I had been hailed- hailed! As a mighty hero and that was an accomplishment.

And now I had been reduced to this. My breasts were swollen and sore, and I was already leaking milk—a sign, according to Stone and my women friends, that I was very maternal and would be a great little mommy. Hooray for me. My great achievement of getting fucked by my husband had started with me vomiting, which seemed about right, and though I was feeling less sick lately I now suffered back aches from the strain of carrying the little parasite around with me on top of my huge tits.

Worst of all, I received weekly messages from my sister taunting me.

My husband had lost interest in having sex with me once my belly started to swell, which was great and terrible at the same time. I was relieved and also bereft, as I craved a good hard man between my legs as much as ever, and more so because I found myself seething with jealousy, convinced that he was sleeping around, bedding some slender young girl and fucking her while I sat alone at home feeling like a beached whale.

I felt the baby kick, again! -- and it poured out of me. “That bastard whore- fucker!” I hissed. “I hate him!” And, on cue, burning tears began to pour from my eyes.

Sparkle hurried over, his big, pretty eyes bemused. “Oh, it’s going to be fine, sweetie!”

“Don’t call me that!” I spat.

Sparkle handed me a handkerchief and I dabbed at my tears. “I know he’s cheating on me! Probably fucking some slave bitch right now!”

‘Or one of the daughters of his lordlings,” Sparkle answered.

“To hell with you!” I said.

“Well, it’s probably true. I’m sorry to say. He’s a man, after all.”

“Don’t take his side!” I shrieked.

“I’m not. But, why are you upset, anyway? I thought you would be glad for the relief

of not having to *service* him, as you call it.”

‘I am... and I’m not. I want it...’ I said, and Sparkle smiled, knowingly. “That’s not what I mean!” I lied. ‘I mean, I don’t want him to catch some gross disease and get me sick is all.’”

“You’re just a typical, jealous wife,” Sparkle said, smiling, putting a hand to my cheek. ‘It’s okay, my Queen.’”

‘I’m not just a typical woman,’ I said. “You know that! I’m supposed to be the king! A man! A warrior! Not some savage’s brood sow!”

Sparkle snuggled up to me, wrapping her arms around my belly, putting her hand on my shoulder. “As you say.”

I was still crying, still angry. “Don’t mollify me!”

“I’m just comforting you.”

“You’re telling me what I want to hear.”

“That’s impossible because you don’t know what you want.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Exactly what it means.”

I was getting calmer. Feeling Sparkle’s warm body against mine, his full breasts pressing into my body, the smell of his soft, round body, the sound of his pretty voice. “I want to be a man again. I want for this to never have happened. I want for... I want...”

“Your husband to desire you and you alone?”

“Yes,” I admitted.

“You wish you’d never become a woman? Never gotten pregnant?”

“Yes.”

“And yet you want to protect your baby, and you want it to be born and be happy and healthy?”

“No,” I said softly. “No.”

“My Queen?”

“Yes,” I sighed. “I want this... insult... to my masculinity.”

“Your baby....”

“My... my baby... to be healthy and I want to protect it and....”

“What?” Sparkle said, curiously, sensing I was about to walk down a path I had been avoiding, or avoiding admitting to.

“Nothing,” I said, kissing him on the head.

“Tell me!” He said.

“I have caught myself fantasizing about breast feeding... this... my... baby.”

“That’s so sweet!”

“No! Because it doesn’t make sense! I long to have a sword in my hand again, to once more live the life of a warrior, to have adventures. I can’t want to have a baby, too, to have it suckle at my breast! It... it’s just like with Khrag! I loathe the sight of him, the male stink, and yet some nights when I am alone and.... I want him inside me! I want him to mount me like a wild stag! But, I can’t be a king and a warrior and want these pitiful female things. This life of a woman! It is some weakness in me!”

“You’re confused,” Sparkle said, sliding his hand up and onto my full breast.

I winced, but when he started to take his hand away, I grabbed it and gently put it back on my swell of breast, his soft palm covering my nipple. “They’re tender,” I said, “but it hurts good.”

We sat together in silence. Holding each other. Sparkle had an arm across my belly, the other on my breast. His breasts were pressed into my side, and I had an arm around his slender little waist- which made me soooooo jealous as I bloated—and with the other I idly played with his long, silky hair.

“Who am I?” I said after a while. “A man? A warrior trapped in this female body, in this woman’s life? Khaness of the Eastrones? Or am I a woman? An expecting mother who... loves her baby and her husband and just isn’t ready to admit it? Or, do I hate my man, and his baby, because they are all a part of this feminine nightmare? Tell me, Sparkle. Tell me who I am.”

“You are all of those things, my Queen.”

“I can’t be. It’s driving me insane.”

“What’s driving you insane is the fact that you refuse to accept that you are all of those things. You keep fighting it, and as long as you fight what you are you will always be unhappy, you will always feel crazy, because you are telling yourself that reality is wrong, that you are

wrong to feel the way you feel, to be the thing you are.”

“The thing I am?”

You are a woman, and we are complicated, emotional creatures.”

“Do you think of yourself as a woman?” I asked.

“I think of myself as a man who has been turned into a woman. And I think of myself as a slave girl.”

“You are not a slave girl! You are my friend and ally!”

“And a slave girl.”

The baby kicked and kicked again. “I felt it!” Sparkle said excitedly. “He is really kicking!”

“If it is a he!”

“It must be with such a strong little body!”

“Well, Khan is certainly hoping for a boy.”

“And you?”

“Boys have it much better.”

“Yes,” Sparkle said. “Though I hear things are much better for us in the old kingdom.”

The old kingdom. My sister. “Do you ever regret trying to help me escape?” I asked, finally raising the topic for the first time.

“Sometimes. When my period is really bad.”

I chuckled. Sparkle knew how desperately I had once prayed for my menses, as they proved I was not with child. Now, how strange that I felt jealous of him with his still taut, smooth tummy, and his blessed bleeding. “Do you remember?” I asked. “The day you came to rescue me?”

“Yes. It was my last act as a man.”

“I wish you wouldn’t put it that way. It vexes me.”

“I don’t mean it in a sorrowful way, or as a statement of regret. I mean it as a cherished memory, a memory from my past life, from our past lives. You were so beautiful.”

Beautiful? I was exhausted, furious, tired. Humiliated. Still horrified and shocked at the reality of the womanly shape I now wore, and the corsets and gowns and infernal clothes I had been forced to wear. I certainly hadn't felt beautiful as I found myself sitting in my room in my wedding dress, waiting for my girl to come and help me undress. I had spent the day posing for the court artists, who would now make paintings and sculptures of me in my gown, artworks that would replace every image of me as a man, replacing the warrior and lord I had been with the image of a glowing, virginal bride. I could barely walk in the layers of silk and lace I'd been bound into, hardly breath. I was so helpless in my gown that I couldn't undress myself or even stand without help. So, there I found myself, a warrior and a man, slayer of kings and demons, sitting on bench twisting my bracelets, my breasts heaving as I worked myself into a tizzy waiting for a girl to come and help me out of my white gown. "Girl!" I shrieked. "Girl! I need your help!" The sun had set. The moon risen—a bright half crescent in the inky sky—and I was starving! "Girl!"

Just then, a hand covered my mouth while another planted itself firmly on my shoulder, and I felt a shock of terror as I dug my long fingernails into whatever man had snuck up on me and grabbed me. I was helpless, and female, and the thought of having some strange man have at me now was so frightening!

"Hush," Paul Forest whispered. "Calm yourself."

The sound of his voice turned my terror to joy. He took his hand off my mouth. "You're here to rescue me!" I said.

"Keep your voice down," Paul said, bemused. "And, yes, I am here to help. Though I am not a girl."

I wanted to throw my arms around him and hug him, and forgetting myself I tried to stand and made a kind of half rise before plopping back down gracelessly. He held out his hand, and I took it—his palm was rough with callouses, and I felt a little spark of excitement as he wrapped it around my small, baby soft hand and then confidently but gently helped me stand. He kept hold of my little hand, and standing next to him I was once again aware of how tall and broad shouldered he was, and how small I was standing next to him, and it filled me with a confusing warm glow.

"Come in now."

I saw a girl emerge from the stair—a girl who looked exactly like me, and who even wore an identical wedding dress. It was strange to see myself—my new self—and to feel myself shocked at my beauty, and to feel again the longing to have me, to take the woman I had become. I was stunning. "Who?"

"She will stay here in your place."

“Paul, you are so very clever.”

Paul helped the girl onto the bed, and then she drank a draught, and passed out, falling gracefully onto her back, her long black hair spread out around her sweet angelic face.

‘Let’s go,’ Paul said.

“Help me out of this dress.”

‘There is no time. Come.’ He pulled me along, and I almost fell as he yanked me nearly off my feet.

“I can barely walk in this gown,” I said, tugging at my skirts.

And then in one quick move Paul swept me up into his arms, lifting me as easily as if I had been a child, and I instinctively threw my arms around his neck, feeling a girlish rush of joy to find myself in a strong, handsome man’s arms even as a crushing sense of disgust at what I had become made me close my eyes in disgrace—perhaps that was when the confusion really started for me? Or had it been sooner? Oh! I can’t say! But that was certainly one of the times where I began to truly feel the horror of my new life, as I was both thrilled to be a girl, pretty, carried in the arms of a strong brave man, reveling, even, in my helplessness, while at the same time sickened by my feelings and actions.

Why did I want to be helpless? Why was it so exciting for me? I had heard my sister talk of such things, seen them played out in plays and celebrated in song, and it had always struck me as proof of the essential weakness of females, this pleasure they seemed to take in being protected, saved— in being dependent on us— on men.

And now here I was in a man’s arm, helpless, female, and I was shocked and appalled to feel a thrill and a pleasure unlike any I had ever known. I kept my eyes closed with a feminine desperation born out of the simple fact that I feared if I looked at Paul now, at those gorgeous eyes and that chin! If I looked at him now as he cradled my soft little body in his arms, I was terrified that I would fall in love with him, and that nothing in me would be strong enough to resist the tender longings of my woman’s heart.

“Lord Turin got your message. He has arranged safe passage. I just have to get you to the servant’s entrance.”

“Yes. Of course,” I said.

‘I’m taking you down the secret stair. Keep quiet.’

“But, the guards? My sister...”

“I killed them already.”

Again, my pretty little heart leapt with this strange, new feminine excitement. He had killed for me. And more, the way he said it—flat, emotionless, the same way you might say I ate a sandwich—he was such a man.

In the palace there is a forgotten stair that leads to the main hall, and in addition, each of the rooms of the royal family has its own secret exit. These stairs had been built in in case the castle was ever overrun. It was this stair Paul had used to sneak into my room, and it was this stair which he now carried me down.

Once at the bottom, we hurried out into the servants' quarters-- dinner! They were all out and busy performing their duties, and I felt myself gush with additional admiration for Paul and his planning. Hurrying to the servant's door, I heard keys clanking, and risked a look to see Old Grembly, the oldest of our servants and a man I had known since I'd been a boy, unlocking the door.

"Thanks," I said as we moved past him, reaching out to gently touch his cheek.

"Always your servant, Lord Baldur" Grembly replied.

Paul carried me to a covered, farmer's wagon, and he placed me in the back, on my side, then jumped in with me, pulling the flap closed and tying it down. He slapped on the floor. I heard a horse whiny, and then the wagon creaked into motion. I was struggling to push myself into a sitting position, but my slender little arms were so weak, and so I looked at Paul—oh! What a foolish girl I was! And he put his hands under my arms and lifted me so that my back was against the side of the wagon, my legs curled beneath me, the long skirts of my dress spread out around me like a blanket.

Paul put a finger to his lips. I nodded. We had not gotten out of the city's gates. We were not yet free. I mouthed *thank you*, and put my hands over my heart.

Paul made a fist and nodded, then mouthed, *brothers*.

The word pleased and annoyed me, my same confused state returning, and I gestured down at my body, shaking my head.

Paul made the fist again. Mouthed *brothers. Always. Brothers.*

I felt my myself start to tear up, and I put one of my hands over my mouth to stifle the cry that threatened to escape my lips. It was so good to have such a good and loyal friend. He looked past my woman's shape, my dress, the sparkling tiara in my hair, and he still saw the man, the friend, the warrior who'd he'd fought with, hunted with and...

I blinked, blotting out that last one. I made a fist, my tiny, soft, white little hand, my delicate wrist glittering with thin, feminine bracelets, and I mouthed, *brothers*.

We were staring into each other's eyes. All the years of our friendship, the battles, the carousing, the times we'd shared since we'd been little boys hung in the air between us, and he leaned forward. I knew the look in his eyes. I felt terrified, but I also felt a burning need, a need for us to renew our friendship in a way that made sense in my new body, and I tilted my head back, my lips parting, locked onto his eyes, seeing my own need and warmth and—love?—reflected back. He reached forward and brushed a strand of hair from my cheek, put his hand at the back of my head, and pulled me to him, and as our lips met I sighed, my breasts brushing against his hard, armored chest, and I felt my fingers and toes tingle as I touched his stubbled cheeks with my little hands, squeezed my knees together and felt like a rose, opening her petals to drink in the sweet spring rain...

The wagon hit a rut and jostled us, breaking the moment. I suddenly felt ashamed, and wrapped my arms around my chest, looking down and away as my cheeks burned. Paul cleared his throat, moved away from me in the wagon. I glanced at him, quickly, and gave him a little nod to say—I'm fine, but let's just forget that happened—and he nodded back, the same. But as I sat there, I couldn't stop replaying that kiss in my mind.

We were not, by any means, out of danger. My doppelganger might be discovered at any moment. The guard might choose to search the wagon. The wretched Spider Witch might somehow skry my place—who knew the limits of her power? And so, we huddled, and when we came to the city gate I held my breath, listening to the exchange between the city guards and the man who drove the wagon.

“Heading home?”

“Ayah.”

“Business good?”

“Ayah. But, well, I do have some beets I saved for ya.”

“Oh, the missus will be pleased.”

“Good health and sleep.”

“Right.”

I looked at Paul. That was it?

Paul smiled.

Our wagon pulled through the city gates and rumbled off into the countryside. As soon as we reached the edge of the forest, the wagon stopped. Paul helped me out of it, and into a commoner's couch, where at least I could sit like a normal girl—person. We then headed off into the night as the farmer headed off his own way, and a couple Foresters loyal to me worked

to obscure any tracks. I watched the men working, sitting with my hands in my lap, resisting the urge to call out a suggestion as I knew how annoying it was for men when a woman tried to interfere in the work while she sat in her little dress being pretty. I struggled to keep my eyes from lingering on Paul. It seemed he'd been transformed somehow, and I found every move he made in that tall, muscular body of his fascinating. The kiss, I felt now, had been a terrible mistake, and all sorts of shame of self-loathing consumed me. I had to be a man! I could not let myself give in to the whims of this silly woman's shape!

Once we were ready to get underway, Paul came back, and judging by the look on his face, he was feeling a little ashamed as well. "Okay. I'm going to ride up top."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" I asked in my little voice. "I mean, um, someone might recognize you?"

I saw the irritation in Paul's face and regretted my decision to offer advice. Hadn't I just told myself not to say anything because men didn't want advice from a princess? It irritated me, but I was a man and knew how annoying it was for us when a girl got herself into things-- especially when she was right! I understood it and hated at the same time—men could be so stupid! Paul pulled a hood over his head, and, hiding the flash of irritation, gave me a roguish smile that melted my heart. "I'll be fine, *My Lord*."

He closed the door to the coach, and I found myself alone. I felt safe for the first time since leaving the castle—no. For the first time since my sister had cursed me with this female form. And the first thing I realized as the stress melted away and I finally relaxed, was that I was *hungry*. I hadn't eaten since I'd had a little breakfast, and my tummy was rumbling now. I thought to ask for some food, but no. I didn't want to seem like a princess, and stopping my rescue to demand some snacks seemed like the worst princess move I could possibly make.

No. I resolved myself that from here on out, I would be one of the men again, no matter what my body wanted. And that would mean I roughed it with the men, and I would get a pair of pants! And, most of all, I told myself, most importantly of all, Prince Baldur, slayer of kings of demons, you will not kiss any more boys!

Hmpf! There. Done.

And with that I curled up on the wagon bench and drifted off into a fitful sleep.

Chapter Eighteen

The forge fires cast Lord Bastille Gaunt's face in lurid, red light. His sweat drenched brow was furrowed, his fist clenched, his body tense, and yet all he did was watch as

Plantagenet, his court wizard, poured a liquid, silvery molten metal into a form in the shape of a circle with four arrows thrusting outward. As soon as the form was filled, the wizard set the vice down, raised his hands and began to chant in the ancient tongue: *diliburious astoro foshe forshe nieck!*

The room shook and darkened, not from the diminishing of the light, but from the rising presence of some greater thing, and Plantagenet chanted, louder and louder, but his voice confident, commanding. *Pertek fatalen iteneral*

There was a growl, and the room shook more, and then a roar, and a feeling of raw, masculine power. Gaunt watched as tiny fingers of lightning began to dance along the surface of the newly forged ward, and then grow more intense, filling the room with jagged hissing as the lightning rose and rose, seeming to dance between the ceiling and the ward, the room shaking, the darkness around the blazing eldritch power of the lightning as it sparked and flared, Plantagenet now weaving his hands in and out of the storm, as if conducting a symphony, and then the lightning seemed to rise, pause flickering in the air, and then it dove into the ward and—

Everything stopped. Or, rather, everything supernatural. The room returned to the now dull red flames of the forges. Plantagenet leaned forward and squinted at the ward, lifting it and popping it free of the form. “Done,” he said, nodding.

Gaunt walked forward, looking curiously at the ward. It seemed—plain. Just a piece of white gold. “This will protect me?”

“The Spider Witch’s spells will not touch you.”

“How can I be sure?”

“Did you not see the lightning? Feel the presence of Maledictus?”

“I did. I did. But, the risks are great. I must know that this ward will protect me from... her.”

Plantagenet nodded. “We can try some tests. Perhaps? Have a servant wear the ward, and I will cast a spell upon him.”

“Do you have spells? Spells like the ones used by the witch?”

“You mean a sex-change spell?”

Gaunt nodded.

“I could find one, I am sure. But, my lord, it is feminine magic. It is not honorable for a man to ask for such a thing.”

“I can’t risk ending up a woman myself. My ends are noble. I will restore the rule of

man. Do you know what Gawain has been doing to the men in this kingdom?"

"Yes, but— "

"Find the spell. We must move quickly."

"As you wish."

Gaunt took the ward, lowered it over his head and let it rest against his chest. He could feel the power flowing into him, surrounding him. It was a relief. Even all these many miles from the capital and working in as much secrecy as possible, he feared the queen and her witch, feared that he would wake up in the body of a girl, weak and pathetic. Twice he'd had nightmares where he was a woman, and his wife had bent him over and taken him, and he'd struggled helplessly against her, crying pitifully. In one nightmare, he'd been her dressing girl, brushing her hair and putting it up, helping her dress and then watching as another man, a real man, came and took her arm, leading her off and leaving him to cry in his skirts and...

No. He pushed the thoughts from his mind. He was protected now. He was mostly certain of it. And he would go to the capital now, slay the mad queen and restore the natural order of the world to the kingdoms before it was too late.

Returning to his castle, he searched around and found no sign of his wife. She was probably down at the Temple of the Goddess. Overseeing the restoration of the temple had become her latest little project. The queen had ordered the restoration, and he'd meant to drag his feet, but dear Phorchia had insisted, saying she was only doing it to "fool the queen" but he could see right through her. She was thrilled by all this... nonsense of a goddess. Gaunt went back to his library, lit his candles, sat down and began to read once more in the Great History—a book long banned for its corruption and deceit, but which he'd known had been banned and burned because it recounted the true history of the world, the history of the Splintered Isles, or a time when women ruled, and the goddess reigned supreme. The story he read now was called, The Third Temptation of Queen Astoria:

In the morning Queen Astoria sang softly as he suckled his youngest babe the fifth of his babies born, and once he did finish feeding his newest son he gathered his other children and fused over their clothes and hair kissing them all and sending them off to learn with motherly hugs and sweet blessings, and his husband did watch, proud of the sweet woman the man who once sought to steal his throne had become, and he did kiss his wife and set off to attend to the kingdom's rule alongside Lady Gaunt, as the kingdom was ruled now, as the Goddess decreed, by both man and woman alike, and so Astoria did sit with her needles and knit, eager to make a new

blanket for her newborn babe, when did sneak into her chamber a knave known as Pontian, bearing with him a potion that glowed blue. “Drink this,” he said, “and reclaim the life of a man! Free yourself of your breasts and soft shape! Once more know the power and pride of a man!” Astoria did look upon the vial, and she did remember when she had wielded a sword, had slain those who stood in her way, had taken the women he wanted and not surrendered his body to another man. But then he looked at his babe, sleeping in his crib, the babe he’d carried in his belly, that he’d birthed and fed and loved and known the love only a mother could know, and he’d shook his head, NO! And said, “I know no shame in this form. I am a woman, and I am happy, and I don’t want the silly life of a man!” The knave grabbed Astoria by the shoulders and shook him. “You have been bewitched, my lord! Invincibillia has filled your mind with these female frivolities! You were born to rule!” Astoria began to cry, and tried to push the man away, but Pontian was too strong, and pushed Astoria onto his back, his long golden hair falling across his face, and he said, “Do you like this? Do you like how this feels?” And he began to claw at Astoria’s dress, yanking it up and up, and Astoria heard his child begin to weep, and he did cry out to the goddess and with a sudden surge of strength he threw Pontius off, causing him to crack his head upon the stone, and as Pontius lay stunned, Astoria took a moment to pull down his dress, checked on his baby, and then finding the vile he did place it to Pontius lips, and pour the liquid down the wicked man’s throat, and then watched as breasts blossomed on his chest, pushing out and out, full, womanly breasts, and as his hips swelled his arms and shoulders shrank, and as his beard seemed to pull back into his face, lush curls poured down over his shoulders, and his face did grow as sweet and delicate as a china doll, with smooth white skin and pink lips, and an adorable little nose, and as the pretty little man, now a gorgeous young woman, sat up, and looked down to see his breasts, he did realize what had happened, and tears filled his big, pretty eyes and he whispered in his sweet new voice, “I am doomed.” And Astoria hugged the sweet little man, and said, “You are reborn.”

“Absurd!” Gaunt said, surprised to find he’d gotten hard. “No wonder his—filth was banned!”

“What filth?” He heard Phorchia say, causing him to jump in surprise. Phorchia giggled, and the sound of her laughter was like daggers.

“You shouldn’t sneak up on me like that,” he said, slamming the book shut.

Phorchia swaggered into the room, a smile on her face. “What are you reading?”

“Nothing. Just one of my old books.”

“You are Oh my!” Phorchia said, spotting her husband’s arousal. “Something saucy,

I see.”

Gaunt felt himself flushing, annoyed that she'd caught him, ashamed at what had gotten him going. Desperate to change the subject, he said, “How are things at the temple?”

“Oh, it's just to keep the queen happy,” Phorcia said, sitting on the edge of Gaunt's chair and reaching down to wrap her hand firmly around his stiff member.

Gaunt's thoughts immediately began to blur at the feel of her hand on him. “That feels good,” he admitted.

“I can make you feel even better,” Phorcia said, squeezing, and then reaching down to unbutton the top of his pants.

“What brought this on?” Gaunt said, his voice hoarse. “It seems— “

Phorcia silenced him with a kiss, got his pants open, yanked down the top of his long johns, so they rested under his balls and added a pleasing pressure to the squeezing of her hand. Gaunt moaned. Phorcia kiss put her free hand under his chin, tilted his head back and to the side, kissed him, at the same time squeezing him again, and Gaunt moaned. “You like that, don't you, kitten?”

“Kitten?” Gaunt grabbed the wrist of her free hand. “What did you call me?”

“Just a sweet nothing,” Phorcia began to move her hand up and down his shaft, came in for another kiss, but Gaunt put his hand up, blocking her. “Don't talk to me like that.”

Phorcia put her hand to his cheek. He pushed it away. She kept her hand on his member, though, sliding it up and down, squeezing. It was driving him to distraction, but he was unnerved by the way she was acting, talking to him. Like he was--- he remembered the story of Astoria, how it had gotten him so aroused. “Stop it.”

“Stop showing my husband how handsome he is? How he turns me on?”

“You know what I mean.”

“I really do not, my dear.”

“Stop being.... Acting like a....” He could feel the pressure building, the stroking of her soft hand growing more intense. “being so... um... uh... aggressive.”

Phorcia stopped moving her hand, but she kept her grip on his member.

“But aren't you hard? Harder than you've been in some moons?” Phorcia quickly slipped her hand into his shirt, rubbed his nipple as she began to stroke him once again. “Sit back and enjoy. Let yourself experience the pleasure of the dove.”

“No,” Gaunt said. “You will not insult me in this manner.”

“It isn’t...”

But Gaunt had had enough. He slipped his arms under Phorcias legs, planted his feet on the ground and stood, lifting her up and then putting her ass on the table. She kept her hand wrapped firmly around his member, but now she was letting her long, sharp fingernails dig into the flesh, and the surge of pleasure and pain brought a below of rage from Gaunt’s clenched jaw. “Let go, you unholy sow!”

Phorcias laughed, seemingly amused by her husband’s shouting. And the laugh was the last straw as Gaunt slammed his fist into her gut, and then again. Phorcias saw stars, but dug her nails further into Gaunt’s shaft, “You’re an ass!” She hissed. “I was just loving you!”

“No,” Gaunt said, punching her a third time. Phorcias hand finally came free, and Gaunt shoved her onto her back and yanked her dress up, pulling her undergarments down. He climbed on top of her and pinned her flailing arms above her head, staring down into her face. She glared up at him in contempt. “Coward! Pig!”

“I’m going to put you in your place,” Gaunt said. “You need to remember that you are the woman!”

He spat in his hands and reached down, rubbing into Phorcias slit. She was writhing, trying to pull her legs together, to free herself, but then she saw a strange look on Gaunt’s face. He let go of her arms and reached down, looking angry and annoyed, then he climbed off her. Phorcias looked up and saw the trouble—flaccid and dangling pathetically.

“Count yourself lucky,” Gaunt said, turning his back, pulling up his pants.

Phorcias rolled off the table and stumbled from the room, hiding her smile.

They ate separately and slept in separate rooms. Gaunt tossed and turned. His dreams were filled with horrors--- his wife walking up to him in front of a crowded room of people and ripping open his shirt to reveal large, milk white breasts swaying on his chest. Him, on the battlefield, ready to lead his men to war, when his wide rode up and pulled his helmet from his head, letting his long black hair spill free, revealing to everyone that he was a girl... and then he, dressed in a silk gown, bending over, lifting his gown, offering himself to his wife, smiling, a pretty and shy young maiden, so slender and white...

In the morning, he rose before dawn, dressed and made his way out to a small cabin that stood on a bluff overlooking the ocean. The rustic old cabin was full of fishing and hunting gear

and served as a storage space and retreat for him when he wanted to be away and alone. But he would not be alone today. Instead, Plantagenet waited along with a serving boy from the keep. The boy stood at attention, his face as placid as a cow. He was tall and bony—lanky. Probably didn't get enough to eat. He draped the ward over the boy's shoulders. Stood back. Nodded.

“My lord, I must once again suggest that this feminine magic is cursed, and it can only bring— “

“Do it.”

The boy looked nervous now. Plantagenet had drawn a magic circle around him already, and now, with deep concern and resignation, he lifted an ancient spell book and began to chant in words that seemed to Gaunt to be moist and round and soft like a woman.

“eeeewwwaaaaahhh... Oooooonnnneeeaaaaa.... aaaaaaaafffffffffaaaaahhhniahana....”

Nothing happened.

“You see?” Plantagenet said. “The boy is protected.”

Gaunt felt an emptiness. A disappointment. “What if the spell you chose is nonsense? This isn't your area of specialty.”

“I assure you, my lord. The spell is---“

“I cannot take chances.”

“Sometimes, a man must take risks in order---“

“Do not lecture me on manhood, wizard,” Gaunt spat, putting the same emphasis on wizard he would on *woman*. “No. A further test.” He took the ward from the boy's neck, being careful not to step on the magic circle. He could feel his cheeks flushing, his palms growing damp with excitement. “Cast the spell again and spare me anymore of your effete lectures.”

“As you wish,” Plantagenet said, eyeing his master curiously.

“Did I do something wrong?” The boy asked. Despite his bony build, his voice was deep and booming.

“Shut up,” Gaunt said. Then, curious. “Have you ever been with a woman?”

The boy seemed confused but knew better than to trifle with the lord of the castle. “Yes, my lord. Several, actually.”

“Did you enjoy it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you like fucking girls?”

“Well, yeah. Doesn’t every man?”

Gaunt smiled. The thought of this boy being reshaped into a woman now gave him even more pleasure. “Do it,” he said to his wizard.

The feminine chanting began once again; “eeeewwwaaaaahhh....
Oooooonnnneeeaaaaa..... aaaaaafffffffffaaaaahhhhhniahana....”

The room seemed to brighten, and the sound of soft giggles could be heard, but they echoed as if the room were a cave and Gaunt backed away, nervous... as the air swirled and he thought he could see the round limbed shaped of nymphs and sprites swirling in the air around the boy,, who shook, his eyes wide... and the giggling female forms began to run their hands across his body.... And it began to round and soften.... His hips grew round and his butt plump, and long hair flowed down from his head even as firm young breasts swelled on his chest... “What’s happening?” He called out in a spritely voice. “What did I do? Ow!” His knees went together, and he put his hands over his groin, his pretty eyes going wide, and then the nymphs and sprites began to dive in and out of him, and he began to cry as his breasts swelled bigger, and his hair grew longer, and then finally the feminine shapes seemed to join arms and embrace him in a massive group hug, giggling prettily as they vanished, and Gaunt felt himself go off, shooting his load into his trousers as he bit his lip, and looked at the gorgeous girl that boy had become, with his long, coltish legs, tiny waist, full breasts and that pretty, kissable mouth hanging open in shock as he processed what had happened, what had become of him, and Gaunt looked right into the gorgeous boy’s eyes and a terrifying thought came into his mind: *I want to be her so much.*

“My Lord?”

Gaunt stayed in the shadows, afraid the wizard would see the dark stain on his pants, or his raging hard-on. “Go,” he said, his voice hoarse. “The ward works. You have my thanks and admiration.”

“But, shouldn’t I return her—I mean the boy—to his proper shape?”

“Go. We must not dabble any further into this obscene... feminine arts... you were right all along.”

“But, my lord---“

“GO!” Gaunt shrieked.

Plantagenet took his spell book and left, casting a concerned eye back at his master, seeing the hard, hungry look in his eyes.

Gaunt stepped forward out of the darkness, letting his eyes drift up and down the beautiful boy who stood, trembling in the middle of the circle, his knees together, his hand over his maiden's mound. The swelling of his breasts had popped the top buttons off his shirt, and Gaunt looked at the shadowy mystery of the boy's cleavage, his generous breasts straining against the cloth of his working man's shirt.

The boy, seeing the hard look in Gaunt's eyes, seeing the man's eyes were now locked onto his breasts, felt a chill as he was subjected, for the first time, to the male gaze, and he instinctively raised his slender little arms and crossed them protectively over his soft breasts. "My lord," he said in his pixie voice. "Please, don't leave me—"

"Quiet," Gaunt said, walking up to the boy. He took his arms and removed them from his breasts, then unbuttoned the boy's shirt, letting the ripe melons swing free, the pink nipples growing hard in the cool morning air. The boy tried, again, to cover his breasts—but Gaunt stopped him, and then cupped one of them with his rough, calloused hand, lifted and started to rub his thumb across the boy's hardening nipple.

"Please..." the boy said, smelling the salty odor of Gaunt's discharge, but now with the nose of a woman, and it made him feel strange and terrified, and he glanced down and saw the man's hard member straining against his pants, and a terrible new fear formed in his belly. How is this possible? He thought, as Gaunt squeezed his breast, teased his nipple. I am a man! I am!

"Do as I say, and I may give you back your shape. Return you to the form of a man. Understand?"

The boy bit his lip and nodded eagerly.

"Good, then. Good. Now, tell me what it feels like to have a man hold your breast, caress your nipple."

"It's strange. Scary. Weird," the boy blurted out.

"Good. Keep going."

Gaunt now took the boy's other breast in his hand and began to need them both. Squeezing them together, massaging his hard little pink nipples. "Weird. Strange."

"How does it feel?" Gaunt whispered, staring into the boy's wide, lashed eyes.

"Weird..."

“No. More. Just the feelings. Not your reaction to it. The feeling itself. Do you understand what I am asking you?”

“Yes,” the boy said. “I... it feels... it tingles, and it makes me feel kind of almost like a bubble? It makes me feel soft... and it feels comforting... and I feel a... wetness... and heat...”

“Where?”

“In my... between my legs, in my tummy...”

“And do you like it?”

“It... scares me,” the boy admitted.

“Why?”

“Because a man isn’t supposed to feel what I am feeling.”

“Yes,” Gaunt said. He brushed the boy’s curly black hair away from his face. Tilted his head back. Kissed him gently on the lips. “Again. Tell me how it feels to be a man in a woman’s body. I *need* to know.”

They sat, and Gaunt explored the stunned and stunning boy’s body, and the boy told him all how it felt in that pretty little voice, and soon they were both naked, and then they were caressing each other, and Gaunt said, “I want you to fuck me.”

The boy, raised a servant, had been trained to obey, and so even now, as much as the thought of being penetrated, being another man’s woman, abhorred him, he nodded and whispered, “Yes, m’lord. But, I am not sure how.”

“You said you had fucked many women.”

“I... did, my lord. But I never was fucked as a woman.”

“Well, I want you to... be the man.”

“My lord?”

“You be the man,” Gaunt said, flushing with shame. “Do what you do.”

The boy nodded, pulling his long hair back and tossing it over his slender white shoulders, feeling his large breasts bounce. The lord was full of surprises, he thought, but if this would get him his body back? “You are such a sexy little thing,” he said, climbing onto Gaunt, taking his face in both hands and kissing him. “I want to fuck you until you cry.” The words sounded ridiculous to him, coming out in his tea kettle voice, but Gaunt fairly swooned.

“Yes,” Gaunt whispered.

“You’re my little dove, aren’t you? Just me sweet little dove?”

“Yes,” Gaunt said. “Yes.”

The boy pushed Gaunt onto his back. Gaunt reached up and put his hands on the boy’s firm, swaying breasts, but the boy slapped him and pushed his hands away. “No! Bad girl! Never touch me like that again!”

Gaunt put his hands at his sides, but the boy put them on Gaunt’s own chest and said, “play with yourself while I fuck you.”

The boy lowered himself onto Gaunt’s hard member, shocked as he felt something enter his slit for the first time, and the tearing of his hymen. He ignored the pain and disgust he felt, and began to bounce up and down, up and down... thinking come on darn it! Finally, frustrated, he slapped Gaunt across the face, and felt the man explode inside him.

He rolled off, grabbing his shirt and wiping some sticky cum that was leaking out of him off the soft inside of his leg. Gaunt lay on his back for a moment, his head swimming in confusion, but very quickly he felt a powerful wave of shame and disgust come over him. He looked at the boy, the gorgeous boy with his slender little arms, those firm, full breasts, the long round legs, and he grabbed the boy’s long hair and yanked, slamming his fist into the boy’s flat stomach.

The boy doubled over, and Gaunt grabbed one his nipples, pinching and twisting viciously, feeling a surge of power as the boy screamed a high-pitch, woman’s scream, and then let lose a whimper. Gaunt pushed her down, and she curled up into a ball, her thick hair covering her face.

“Stupid bitch,” Gaunt said, standing up, dressing. “If you ever breath a word of this to anyone I will fucking cut your tits off! Got it?”

“Yes,” the boy said softly. “Yes.”

Gaunt kicked her, then, shouted “Stay here!” and then pulled on his clothes and trudged off into the morning sunlight, looking out from the bluff over the dark, raging sea. A blustery wind buffeted him, and he raised his arms and shouted into the wind. Not a word, a but a sound, like the sound an animal might make when it finds itself caught in a trap.

The Temple of Rationalus, he thought. I must go to the God of Gods and beg for strength, that he might drive this... womanly weakness... from me. I must. And so, he turned from the crashing waves, the weeping boy-girl in the cabin, and he hurried down the hill and to the dark, stone shrine of his god.

Chapter 19: The Grand Court

“I now call this meeting of the Queen’s Ladies to order,” Lady Turina said in his pretty little voice.

Around the table had gathered the men who were once the lords of the Shattered Isles—each one the son of a lord, raised to fight and ride and rule. Now, they wore matching silk dresses of pink, with white lace trim at the bodice and puffy little sleeves. Their corsets pushed the smoothly shaven chests up, giving each one the look of having small breasts, a pretty little bit cleavage exposed by their plunging necklines. They wore white lace gloves, and wigs of long hair affixed with large, pink bows that matched their dresses. Their smoothly shaven faces were painted—lips a wet pink, with silvery and pink shadow above their eyes, each and every one with long, dark wet lashes. It was truly astounding what the queen and her witch had done in so short a time. Three of the seats, though, were now taken up by actual women-- Exeter’s former wife, who had replaced him when he’d defied the queen, been transformed into a woman and stripped of his name and titles, and Westfall and Parlour, who’d voluntarily ceded their seats to their wives. The official announcement had been that they’d decided to devote themselves to their families, but Turin knew they had chosen to get out rather than don the corset and pink dress and accept the title of lady.

Turina smirked, thinking of the two back at their estates, sitting around like any housewife, tending to the children, puttering around in the garden. They had chosen women’s lives over women’s dress, while Turina had sacrificed all to stay in power, the far better choice. What did it mean to be a man, and not a lady?

“All rise and recognize your queen,” Turina said in his girl’s voice.

Each of the Queen’s Ladies rose, smoothed his dress, and then clasped his hands behind him. The Queen entered to a room of total silence, all the pretty men and women standing still with a wide, bright smile on his face. “Lady Asrkin, your waist is so slender! Like a wasp’s!”

“Thank you, my queen,” Lady Askrin answered, blushing with pride beneath his make-up.

“Tell my other girls how you are doing it.”

“Diet and the prokean root.”

“Listen well, girls. You are all doing well working on your figures, but you must strive to get a tiny little waist like Lady Askrin.”

“Yes, my queen,” they chanted in unison, all speaking in the soft voices of schoolgirls.

“Lady MacGregor. Your skin is radiant! Tell us your secret.”

“Thank you, my queen” he answered. “I drink partine milk, and each morning and night I use a poltice made from lava stones and coconut butter!”

It was traditional now for the queen to single out particular men and praise them for their success in moving toward a traditionally feminine definition of beauty. They had all learned that the path to queen’s favor and the power they all craved now came from having soft, radiant skin, sweet, pretty voices, narrow waists and blossoming breasts. Turin had delighted in listening to them before the meeting sharing beauty secrets, talking about ways to get sleek, slender arms and increase their busts. The queen had, he was sure, used some of her witch’s craftwork on this, but she also had simply made these things the path to power—for men, at least, and used their own hunger for status against them. Meanwhile, as they found themselves squeezed into hourglass figured by unforgiving corsets, she wore pants and loose, comfortable shirts as well as a short sword at her hip.

“Sit, girls,” the queen finally said. “The time has come for business.”

The Queen’s ladies all sat, smoothing the skirts of their dresses beneath them, then placed their white gloved hands in their laps and looked at the queen, all keeping the sweet, vacant smiles plastered on their faces. “Girls, you may signal your agreement to each of the following decisions by remaining silent. School reform measure. You were all given this to read. Our boys must be schooled in the domestic arts...”

Turina was sitting with his hands folded in his lap, smiling prettily, when a shadow on the wall caught his eyes. Something about it...it just seemed... it was moving, and yet the sun... “Mother!” He shrieked as the shadow dislodged from the wall and he saw the flash of steel. He stood and leapt, felt a cold steel blade slice into his side, and then he fell to the ground.

Esper, now a gorgeous 6’ 6” amazon woman, grabbed the shadowed figure and pulled him—her?-- Off Turin, throwing the assassin against the wall. The woman drew another blade from her shoulder harness, and lunged at Esper, who’d drawn his own sword and now found himself slapping away a furious series of attacks, even as he became aware of the clashing of steel around him, high-pitched screams. He risked a glance to see more assassins had emerged from the shadows, but the Queen’s guard had formed a circle around her and were fighting their way toward the back exit, while the Queen’s Ladies had all lifted their skirts and were running toward the front door in their little heels, their slender white stockinged legs flashing.

A grazing flesh wound brought his attention back to the lithe, wiry little warrior who was hectoring him, and he locked blades, and using his superior size, pressed the fierce little woman back until she was pinned to the wall.

He heard the queen shout out in pain. He turned, forgetting all about his own welfare, and he saw that a few of the assassins, behind those with the blades, had pulled out bamboo shoots and fired darts at the queen, one of which now stuck out of her neck. “No!” Esper screamed,

trying to fight his way to the dart shooting assassins. “Nooooooooo!”

A sword thrust into the back of his knee, and as his leg buckled Esper felt the hilt slam into the back of his head. Then, everything went dark.

Chapter 20

Schimmers was singing to himself, tossing his ponytail side to side as he pulled the top sheet tight against the queen’s bed, his skirt swirling around his skinny little legs:

In the morning, the lovebird sings to the sunrise
Then she sleeps her noon day dreams
But when the sun sets she goes off and flies
to the moon for a sweet surprise

Kisses! Kisses! Kisses!
The lovebird gets her kisses!

Kisses! Kisses! Kisses!
The moon is the place for loving!

It was a nursery rhyme he remembered hearing his mother sing as a child, and even as he sang in his pretty girl’s voice, he was thinking, “I have been a girl for far too long!” Then, he skipped to the base of the bed and gathered up the big, soft quilt, and tossed it over the bed, staring the song again:

In the morning, the lovebird....

Bells! Alarm Bells! Ringing! Schimmers put a hand to his cheek and ran to the window, looking down to see the castle guard scrambling, racing to positions on the wall even as the great iron gate slammed shut. He spun, his knees together, eyes wide, and saw the messy quilt, still tossed untucked across the queen’s bed. Forget the quilt, he thought. You need to go and find out what’s happening!

He skittered toward the door, reached for the handle, paused. Looking back at the bed, the quilt, he bit his thumb and stomped a little foot. Blast it! He rushed over to the bed and began to pull the quilt tight, tucking it in, tucking it and re-tucking it. He simply couldn’t leave the bed looking a mess! He was the queen’s maid, and he would do his duty!

You’re a spy, you silly girl, he answered himself. You were sent here to find out about

the wretched witch, not to be the best little maid in the castle.

But, still... he thought. Shut up and just get it done.

He worked, intensely, until the quilt was so tight he could have bounced a royal crown on it, and when it was done he piled up the pillows, started toward the door, rushed back to straighten up the bed table, dusted a cobweb away from the corner, moved toward the door, looked back...

The door slammed open, and three members of the queen's guard stomped into the room. Tall and stout in their silver armor, two of them fanned out and began to search while the third one grabbed Schimmers by the arms and pushed him against the wall. "Who are you?" The woman bellowed. "What are you doing here?"

"I ... I'm Missy, the Queen's maid!" Schimmers said.

The Queen's guard looked down at the trembling little female in her hands and then glanced toward the door. "She is the maid," Young Miss Grembly, head of the servants, said from the door.

"How long?"

"A few weeks?" Grembly said.

"Your name is Missy?"

"Yes."

The guard eyed Schimmers. "What is your mother's name?"

Schimmers thought, and that was enough. When he spat out, "Molly?" He could see it in the guard's eyes that she didn't believe him.

"The room is clear," the guards said.

"Take this one and have the spellcunts take a look at her. Something doesn't seem right."

"Please," Schimmers said. "I'm just a girl! I didn't do anything wrong!"

"We'll see about all that. Go."

Schimmers was pushed forward and found himself walking down the hall, the guards on either side of him. He had no weapon, and if returned to his true shape now his dress would hobble him. He thought about running, but the halls were teeming with armored women, and there was little chance of escaping to a place where he would be out of sight and could take a

new form. So, he walked along, waiting for his opportunity. “What happened?” He asked. “Why all the commotion?”

“Shut up, little wench,” was all the answer he got.

Schimmers felt a rush of relief as he was led down a series of stairs and into the dark, wet dungeon. It might be awhile before any attempt to use magic to reveal his identity were attempted, and if he was locked away in the dungeons, he knew he could easily make his escape. It would just be a matter of deciding when and as whom—or what!

And so it was that he hid his smile as the great keys rattled in the lock, an iron door was swung open, and he was shoved into a small cell with a naked, dirty girl, and great iron door slamming shut behind him. Schimmers found a corner, sat down, undid his ponytail and shook his hair out over his shoulders. The girl had curled up on the other side of the cell and put her arms across her breasts, and she was looking at him furtively through strands of her long, tangled hair.

“What’s your name?” Schimmers said.

“I don’t... like to tell people my name.”

“Mine’s Missy,” Schimmers said, trying to be friendly.

“What’s going on upstairs?” The girl said. “I heard the bells.”

She is a gorgeous girl under all that muck, Schimmers thought, eyeing her round thigh and fleshy hips, her slender arms that did not hide her large, firm breasts. “Tell me your name!” Schimmers said.

The girl looked away, clearly ashamed. Schimmers smiled. “You used to be a man, didn’t you?”

The girl looked at him, her eyes filled with fear. “No! Why would you say that?”

“It’s okay. I... used to be a man as well.”

“You?” The girl said, softening, relaxing.

Schimmers nodded. “I angered the queen, so she turned me into a girl and made me a maid. I was a warrior and a scout, and now I wash dishes and do laundry.” He plucked at his skirt. “Dress like a stupid girl, too.”

The girl seemed to be thinking, finally said, “I was a man. A lord. Lord Exeter. Now I am nothing.”

“Don’t say that.”

“I have no name. No title. No lands. I am just a nameless girl now. Forgotten.”

Schimmers sat forward, folding his arms under his breasts. “You are still Lord Exeter. You will be restored! You must believe it!”

Exeter smiled, and it was a pretty smile. “You seem very sure.”

“The queen will be...”

“Hey!” The guard shouted, coming over to the cell. “No treasonous slander in here you little bitch, or I’ll cut your tongue out.”

Schimmers scooted back to his corner. “My apologies.”

The guard turned and walked back to her post. Schimmers waited a bit, then scooted back across the cell, then he cupped his hand to Exeter’s ear and said, “Let’s share secrets!”

Exeter smiled and nodded. Schimmers put his arm around Exeter shoulder and began to whisper. He was sure the two would be besties in no time, and it was Schimmers belief that one could never make too many friends. You never knew who might come in useful. The thought was still very much present in his mind when sometime later the Queen’s Guard came clattering down the stairs, dragging two small, young women who looked like they had been sorely beaten, and tossed them in the next cell. The women lay on their backs, groaning in agony.

“Who do you think they are?” Exeter whispered in his ear.

They were dressed in identical black gear from head to toe. Schimmers smiled, intrigued by the new possibilities opening up to him. “My guess? Assassins.”

Chapter 21

My dreams were confused and muddled. I was chained to a wall in a dragon’s cave, naked, my female body exposed, and the dragon was looking at me, flicking his tongue out from between his huge, rapier-like teeth, letting it brush across my belly. I screamed and screamed! And then Paul entered the cave, his sword flashing with fire, and I watched as he battled the dragon and then... I was on horseback, a mighty stallion between my legs, a lance in one hand and a shield in the other, my long hair trailing behind me, my skirt billowing... and Paul was charging at me, only he was wearing a dress as well, and his shield bore the mark of a pink rose... and as we charged toward one another, we dropped our lances, and we came together and I realized he was a maiden, and he hugged and laughed, and I kissed him on his smooth, soft cheek...

And we were hunting together, men again, young men, and we were talking about girls, and which ones we would like to fuck.

“Baldur. Baldur.”

I felt a hand shaking me. I opened my eyes, and saw Paul looking down at me, though my vision was blocked by something, and reaching up I brushed strands of my long hair from my face, becoming aware of my female shape, my corset, the weight of my breasts. “What?” I looked at my hand, still surprised at how tiny my wrist was, how long and graceful my white hands.

Paul helped me to sit up. “We’ve arrived.”

“Where?”

“Someplace safe.”

My body ached, but as Paul grabbed me by the hips and lifted me down to the ground, I felt that same sense of lightness and freedom as I looked upon a chateau built of brown stone that rose above us on a bluff. It had a slate roof, tall, narrow windows, and thick green ivy growing upon its walls, while ancient willow trees draped the grounds in their great green beards. “It’s beautiful,” I said. “Like something out of a fairytale.”

“Yes,” Paul said, sweeping me off my feet and once more cradling me in his arms.

“Paul!” I squealed, throwing my arms around his neck. But then, remembering my determination to act the man, I said, “Put me down! I am your king!”

Paul carried me up the steps toward the front entrance of the castle. “I am sorry, my king, but it will take far too long for you to climb these steps in your wedding dress.”

“Paul!” I said, but I couldn’t manage to keep up the fight, and so I allowed myself to rest my head against and be carried about like a maiden. “This is the last time! Swear it!”

“I swear. This is the last time. From this moment forward, I will treat you not as a girl, but as my sister.”

I punched him on the shoulder. “Idiot.”

At the top of the stairs, Baldur set me down on my feet, and I felt a great deal of relief that I would soon be free of my corsets and dresses and heels. In addition to the driver, there was one other servant there—a woman for me, of course, and I was definitely much more comfortable now having a woman undress me. She helped me out of my dress and corset, my petticoats, and I gasped with relief as I took my first full breath in days, my breasts swaying freely with each gulp of air. I gave another sigh as I lowered myself into the steaming hot bath she’d drawn for me, too tired and relieved to pay the slightest attention to the pretty perfumes that she’d put in the water. I closed my eyes and relaxed, luxuriating in the bath, and I felt as I rested there, alone, that I was me again. Prince Baldur. With no one here to look at me and talk to me as a woman, and free of the infernal clothes that exaggerated my woman’s shape and

served as a constant reminder of my sex, I was just a person, just me, and it didn't seem to matter much whether I was in a man or a woman's body.

It made me wonder if the soul really is free of dependence on physical form. I had been taught such things were heresy, the lies of those who dabbled in the dark arts and witch craft. But here, free of the expectations of the outside world, I felt I was me despite the slit between my legs, the full, heavy breasts on my chest. I was still Prince Baldur, and the man I had always been, and it didn't matter what body I wore. If I were stuck like this, fated to live out my days as a girl and not a man, that didn't mean I would have to stop being me. I would Baldur, the man my father had been so proud to call son, even with a woman's shape! Of course, it would mean that I would never get to be a father myself, and never raise a son of my own.

I could have babies now. But that thought made my skin crawl. No. Trapped as a girl, I would never allow myself to sleep with a man, let alone bear his children. That, I felt, was beyond what could be expected of any man. No. The thought of having a man climb unto me, spreading my legs for him, letting him--- Never! No! Girl or boy, I would take my rightful place on the throne of the Shattered Isles, and I would reign as the man I was, not the woman my sister tried to make me.

When my bath was done, my servant helped me towel off, and I went into the bedroom to see what clothes had been laid out for me, crying out in joy to see a pair of trousers! A shirt! Thank Rationalus! Finally, to be free of corsets and dresses and to be able to move free like a man! I eagerly pulled the pants up over my wide, round hips and cinched them tight to my tiny little waist. I pulled on the shirt and buttoned it up over my breasts—it was a little tight around my chest and gave too much emphasis to my very large breasts, but it was a shirt, nonetheless, with sleeves, and I felt warm and comfortable and quite the dashing boy in my new clothes. The serving girl helped me put my hair up in a messy top bun, and then I swaggered out into the central room, held out my fist to Paul and in the lowest voice I could summon from my swan's neck and dewy lips I said, "How hangeth your balls, brother?"

Paul laughed and bumped me back.

"Thank you for this," I said. "You have no idea how incredible it feels for a man to be freed from the prison of his corsets."

"And I hope I never will."

There was meat and cheese on the table, so I sliced off a few lumps of sausage and some cheese, popping them in my mouth and talking as I ate. "Where are we? What's the plan?"

"A private estate belonging to Lord Turin."

"So, he is with us."

"Yes. He is organizing, gathering the lords who support your claim to the throne, while remaining in the capitol, serving as our eyes and ears."

"I knew I could count on Turin!"

“He is also seeking a wizard who can restore your true form. Sex-change spells are not unknown in this kingdom, though they have long been banned as feminine magic.”

“And well banned they were, I say.”

“Indeed. My Prince, and I don’t want to think it, but I want you to know that all have pledged to support you even if you should be trapped in your maiden form.”

“Impossible. I will regain my manhood and claim the throne.”

“But should you be a girl, we will place you on the throne as queen.”

“No. I will not be the queen,” I said, my voice rising in pitch. “I will be restored. I will be a man again! I am a man!”

“Very well. Then, let me inform you that those loyal to you will be gathering, and you need to be at the war council.”

I bit my lip. “You do not tell your king what he needs to do,” I said, throwing my shoulders back, too late realizing this had the unwelcome effect of lifting and emphasizing my breasts, the rough cloth of my man’s shirt running against my sensitive nipples. Ignoring how awkwardly feminine that made me feel just as I was trying to establish my place as a man, I kept my eyes locked on Paul’s, my head tilted back. “I need to make it clear to you that I am Prince Baldur, slayer of kings and demons, your liege and the man you swore to serve.”

Paul seemed taken aback, but responded, “Yes, M’lord.”

“You will never speak to me like I am a woman again. Understood?”

“Of course, M’lord. I apologize for my error.”

“Very well.” I turned and walked away, satisfied, though I did glance back for a moment, and I was almost sure I had caught Paul looking at my ass. “Men!” I hissed as I closed the door to my room, deciding not to make an issue of it as I felt I had made my position clear, and that Paul had understood very well that the flirting that had crept into our relationship had to come to an end.

Paul, back in the present, gave my boob a little squeeze. I giggled. “Well,” I said. “That’s what I thought at the time!”

“I was glad you said it. I felt it needed to be said, and I just wasn’t strong enough to stop flirting with you on my own. You were—are—so beautiful.”

“I wish I had made love to you—just once. You were such a strong, handsome man, and so brave.”

“Well, we’ve made love a few times after all.”

“Yes,” I said, looking into his bright, pretty eyes, touching his smooth cheek. “And it has been... oh!”

I threw myself on my bed, on my stomach, my legs hooked together at the ankles, but with my big boobs it wasn't comfortable, so I rolled onto my side. I was already bored, but I didn't think I could go back out just yet, not after my big, dramatic exit. I wanted Paul to stew for a time. So, I got up and explored the room, finding a bookshelf stocked with an assortment of books that must have cost Turin a small fortune, and yet which he left here for the pleasure of his guests. I was looking through the titles when I heard a knock on the door.

“The horses are rested, my Prince. Do you think we should be on our way?”

I folded my arms under my breasts and blew a strand of hair from my face. He put it as a question, but I could tell Paul believed we should move, so I said, “No. Let's spend the night here and leave in the morning.”

There was a long silence, but then Paul said, “As you command” and I heard him walking away. I smiled to myself. It felt good to assert my authority once more, and I plucked one of the books from the shelf, lay down on the bed on my back, and read, engrossed in what was a new kind of writing that had just become popular in the kingdom in the past ten years-- called prose, it abandoned the poetic ornamentation and structure that had marked most writing for many years and conveyed the story in a more natural, direct manner. It had been celebrated by the priests of Rationalus as being a more masculine form of writing, and I had agreed. I felt no different now that I wore a woman's shape, once more causing me to feel that I was the same man I had always been. As I read the chateau filled with the smells of broiling meat and rising bread, and my taut little tummy began to rumble. Sensing the time for our meal was approaching, I got up and let down my hair, brushed it and fussed with it until I finally decided to put it back up in a bun, letting a couple of curls dangle by my cheeks. It was just something to do, and I didn't think anything of it, though as always, the sight of my own gorgeous face bewitched me. When I looked at my full, plump pink lips, my long, curly lashes, my pert little upturned nose and perfect white skin, my thick, curly hair, I always wanted to kiss those lips, to stroke that cheek, to make love to the woman I had become. It had not changed since the first time I had looked upon her, and it steeled my resolve to be freed from this soft, feminine prison as I could not imagine a future where I would always be the object of men and their passions.

Finally, my girl came and found me sitting at my mirror, putting coconut oil on my hands.

“Prince Baldur,” she said with a curtsy. “Dinner is ready.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Wait. What was your name?”

“Naomi,” she answered.

“A very pretty name,” I said.

‘Thank you, m’lord.’

I had always prided myself on knowing a few things about my servants and treating them with respect, although always from a place of authority. I had learned it from my parents. Looking in the mirror, on impulse I undid my bun and let my hair fall over my shoulders in shimmering curls. It just felt better, and I stood and made my way out to the table, where Paul stood waiting by the table. His eyes flickered with appreciation for my feminine beauty, but he quickly hid his manly feelings, his face turning impassive. Poor thing, I thought. It was so hard for him. He was a doll for trying so hard, and I appreciated his efforts.

“Permission to join you, my Prince?” He said.

‘Of course, Paul,’ I answered with a silvery laugh and a wave of my slender little hand. “I insist.”

We sat and ate. The food was rustic, and quite good. Roast hen, local roots, and a steamy, moist bread which I slathered with butter. My eyes turned out to be much bigger than my belly, as I managed to eat only a third of the food on my plate, and I was reminded again of my much smaller appetite as long as I was in the body of this skinny little girl, with her tiny waist. I looked on somewhat jealously as Paul shoveled down two whole plates of food, and longed for the days I would be able to eat like that again.

We finished eating and then sipper from cups of some sort of hot brew made from a local bean. I said “So, we leave first thing in the morning. And to where?”

“I have the directions from Turin. A ruin where those loyal to you will be gathered and we can form our plans. It will be a challenge. All of the men in the kingdom are filled with... concern would be the polite word. Concern for what it means to defy your sister.”

“They don’t want to end up in a dress,” I said. “I understand very well. But she can’t turn all the men in the kingdom into women, can she?”

Paul raised an eyebrow. “Begging your pardon, but does your sister seem... I mean, there is a suspicion that she might be...”

“Mad? I know. I have wondered the same thing. Or, ensnared in some enchantment by the Spider Witch. She does seem to be acting in ways that I would not have expected from her.”

“And, who is to say that she will not turn all the men into women? That fear has spread through the kingdom. Men who have faced death without even the slightest hesitation cringe in terror at the thought of being turned into a woman.”

“But is she did turn all the men, who would protect her? Who would protect our lands from our enemies to the south and west?”

“She had already used her magic to create warrior women—they are tall and strong, fast and bold as any man.”

“So, she would field an army of women?”

“It seems so.” I thought about this news, idly toying with a strand of my hair. “I fear my sister has bigger plans than to seize the throne and *merely* rule.” This, of course, was before she had revealed even the first stages of her larger plan to the world, but I felt a new concern and threat from her and her witch and the room seemed to grow darker as we talked. And colder.

“Some fear she means to break our nation’s covenant with Rationalus, to restore the rule of woman and the Goddess.”

The rule of woman? The goddess? The thought unnerved me. I remembered my lessons from my boyhood school days. We had learned of the chaos, war and famine that had drenched our lands in blood and darkness when women ruled and the Goddess had been worshipped above all. Her witches had been cruel and unstable, ruled by their wild emotions, and people had been reduced to beasts as she and her coven fed on human blood to sustain their dark power and eternal youth and beauty, which above all else every woman craved. It had been the coming of Rationalus and the rule of man that had brought forth civilization, that had placed intellect and reason above the feminine reliance on emotion and intuition, and had led to order and long lasting periods of peace. It was man who had redeemed the world, and all female bore the sins of the mothers down through the generations.

“We have to stop her,” I said, and then quoted the First Book of Reason: “The rule of women leads only to madness and despair,” though the words struck me as slightly hollow as I spoke them in my high-pitched, girl’s voice.

Paul nodded. “Yes, My Prince,” he said. “I fear these are dark times, indeed. But Rationalus is powerful and strong, and you are his chosen King and man among men.”

I became very conscious of the weight of my breasts, laying heavily upon my ribcage, their soft round mass tugging at my collar bone. I felt my long hair tickling my cheeks, and I thought about the slit between my legs. Was I still Rationalus’ chosen? Man among men? Could I be when I had failed to hold onto my manhood, when I had allowed myself to be smacked around by a woman, forced to dress in women’s clothes, paraded around like a debutante by my sister and offered to another man in marriage? Women had taken everything from me, even my name. Could I still claim to be a man among men?

Yes, I thought. I am the same man I have always been, and the war is not over yet. I will reclaim my name, my sex, my sword and throne! And yet a doubt had crept into me now, a doubt based on my own beliefs about women and what we—they—were meant for in this world. How could I lead us back to a Rational world, a world where the roles of men and women were clearly defined and should never be breached, if I were a woman wearing man’s clothes, playing a man’s part? Was I not, myself, now acting in defiance of man’s law? How many times had I mocked my sister’s longing to wield a sword, to join the men in combat? The law was clear. A girl must prepare herself for her sacred obligation to marry and bear children for the glory of the Shattered Isles, I told her, quoting the scriptures. Now that she had turned the tables and placed me in a woman’s body, I no longer felt so certain of the old laws, and it unnerved me as I considered that by law, it was my duty to marry and become a mother now that I was a member of the fairer sex. The scriptures said nothing of whether one had been

enchanted into female form, but how could I now stand before the men and women of the kingdom and speak of a woman's sacred duty without seeming a hypocrite and a fraud?

More, another thought struck me. Was I acting on emotion now instead of reason? Had this woman's shape denied me of my reason and reduced me to the silly and unstable creature known as woman? How could I know?

"Prince Baldur?" Paul said. "Are you okay?"

Paul. Paul will tell me if I am thinking like a woman. I felt some sense of relief at the realization that I had a man there to help me keep my thinking logical and not womanly. I looked up, smiled. My feminine face was not as good at hiding feelings as my male. "Oh, just tired is all. I think I will take my rest, so I will be ready for tomorrow." I stood and Paul stood as well. I started toward my bedroom, but stopped, glancing back over my shoulder. "Do you have armor that will fit me? A sword? I don't want to meet the lords dressed in so humble a manner as this."

"I apologize," Paul said, bowing low. "I did not have time to acquire appropriate armor in your size. As for a sword, you may use mine."

"It would be too long and heavy," I said, feeling a little girly and embarrassed. "I am much shorter than you now, and from these hips, I am afraid it would drag across the ground. I would look like a... little boy, play-acting with his father's sword, and that is not the strong image I am hoping to project."

"I will find a way to make sure your appearance represents you nobly as our commander and future king."

"Excellent," I said, and then I turned and made my way to my room—once again, feeling sure that I could sense his eyes on my plump, heart shaped bottom! Men! I thought again. They are so vexing! But then I tossed my hair and climbed under my covers, grabbing my book and proceeding to read myself to sleep.

In the morning, I rose and sat, sipping the hot, bitter brew I had first tasted the night before, while Naomi brushed out my long hair and then started to put it up, but as I watched her, I said, "Missy. Do you have something here you could use to cut this infernal nest of hair? I'm quite sick of it."

"I am not skilled..."

"I don't care," I said. "I just want it short."

Naomi left, and I sat running my hands through my long, thick hair, pulling it over my round little shoulder, imagining myself with short hair. I thought I would look rather like a boy! A pretty boy, to be sure, but better to greet my lords looking like a boy than a princess, I decided.

Naomi returned with a pair of scissors. Stood behind me, meeting my eyes in the mirror. "Are you certain about this, m'lord?" It will take many seasons to grow it back, and your hair is so lovely."

“Remember, Naomi, despite appearances, I am a man.”

Naomi went to work, by hair falling away in great lumps, and soon I was running my hands over short bristly hair. “I feel ten pounds lighter!” I said, standing and giving Naomi a hug. Glancing back at myself in the mirror. I smiled, wryly. My short hair seemed to have only enhanced my feminine features—my eyes seemed bigger, my cheeks higher, my full, pouty lips more kissable. But I at least looked less like a princess, and I felt free, just as the same thrill of freedom I had felt wearing pants for the first time since I had been recast into this woman’s body.

I was getting things back, and my confidence surged. If the Splintered Isles were to be ruled by a woman, that woman would be me, and not my infernal sister!

Dressed once more in my boy’s britches and shirt, I made my way out to the central room, where once more there was meat, cheese and bread. Paul stood, bowed. “Good morning, My Prince,” he said, looking at my hair. He started to say something, but stopped, and instead he reached down and held up for me a short sword. “For you, my lord.”

“Paul,” I said, accepting the blade, which immediately plunked to the ground. “I was just, um, surprised by the weight,” I said. I strained to lift it, by my tiny wrist and weak little arm could not lift it. I looked at Paul, my cheeks flushing with feminine shame. “It’s so heavy...” I said, wrapping both of my soft little hands around the hilt and lifting it, straining to raise it above my head, smiling proudly. “For the rule of men!” I said.

“For Victory,” Paul answered, bemused, but then his eyes flicked down to my breasts, and I realized that lifting my arms above my head like that, using all my strength to lift the sword, my big, round breasts had been pushed together and out, and my shirt had popped open, showing off a whole bunch of my deep, soft cleavage.

I let the sword clunk to the ground, keeping one hand on the sword while I used the other to pull my shirt closed over my breasts. Paul took the sword from me, and Naomi hurried to help me fix my shirt. I was blushing furiously, feeling humiliated, my boyish confidence evaporating. I felt I needed to make some sort of joke, so I said, “I will NOT so that at the Council!”

“That is a very wise decision, my prince,” Paul said, laughing.

“Where did you get the sword?” I asked, popping a bit of cheese into my mouth.

“It is my sword,” Paul said. “I went to the chateau’s forge and whittled my long sword down, refreshed the chrome plating.”

“Paul!” I said. “Wasn’t that—isn’t this-- your father’s sword? Justice?”

“Yes,” Paul said, pretending that he was examining a map. “Yes, it was. I have renamed it,” he said looking over the short blade. “Vengeance.”

My woman's heart swooned, and in spite of myself I felt tears in my eyes, and my determination to play the man crumbled as I put a hand on Paul's thick, muscular shoulder. "Paul..." I whispered, my voice muddled with tears.

"It's nothing," Paul said, stepping away.

"No," I said. "It's... such a noble and manly sacrifice. I don't know if I can find the words to thank you." I followed him. I needed to hug him, to show him how much I ... loved?... him... Yes. Loved his as a man loved another man, and as a prince loves his subjects. I looked again at the short sword, forged from his father's blade, reduced until it could be carried by a woman, by me. It was such an amazing act of love and loyalty! I needed to return his love. To show him.

"Don't..." Paul said, keeping his back to me.

I slipped my arms around his waist, pressing my soft body against his hard, manly frame, placing my cheek against his back, squeezing. "Thank you," I said. "I will never forget your sacrifice."

Paul turned and took my hands. I looked up him through my tears. "You and me," Paul said. "Together, we will reclaim the throne."

"Yes," whispered.

Paul lifted my little white hands to his lips and kissed them each on the back, then turned them over and kissed me on the wrists. My knees went together, my heart fluttered. "Now, I think you better compose yourself. You need to be a man, now. Baldur."

"Yes," I whispered, "yes," but I stepped closer and tilted my head back, parted my lips breathlessly and asked for the kiss with my eyes and my body...

"Pardon, my lords," our coach driver said, clearing his throat.

It broke the spell. I stepped away from Paul, and he moved across the kitchen. "Yes?" I said, becoming aware that my nipples had gotten hard and were poking out through my shirt.

"An emergency message."

"Where?"

"It is still with the falcon. I did not think..."

"You are correct," I said, marching out to the front porch, where the falcon awaited, a scroll dangling from its neck.

I took the message, scratched the bird's head. "Thank you," taking the scroll. Reading:

Turin is a traitor. Come to me for protection!

Your loyal subject, Lady Evangeline Mordaunt.

Lady Evangeline? I walked back into the chateau, puzzling over the message. “Paul.”

“Yes, My Lord?”

We avoided looking at each other, our bodies still feeling the tension. I handed him the message. Paul read. Looked at me. “The Lady Evangeline. Curious.”

“Yes. Our houses have, through the years, been allies, but I have only spoken with her a few times in my life. She could be working with my sister. Seeking to lure me into a trap.”

“I was just thinking the same thing.”

“And yet...” I felt I should trust her. Something did not feel right to me. “I wonder if we should heed her words?”

“My Prince, your emotions...”

I gave Paul an angry glance.

“My apologies. Of course. It is my duty to enact your will.”

“Where is this meeting?” I asked, looking for some evidence, so way to make up my mind.

Paul and I went over to the map, and he pointed. “Here,” he said pointing to a spot not far from Turin’s secret chateau.

“Why there? It looks like wilderness.”

Paul shook his head. “Turin said there are ruins there. He stumbled upon them one day while riding. He chose this spot because it is obscure and forgotten. No one would think to seek you there because no one knows there is a there, there.”

I nodded. It made sense. But my intuition was screaming at me. I put my pink finger in my mouth. “I don’t know what to do.”

“My Lord, if I may offer some evidence to consider?”

“Yes,” I said, staring at the map.

“If Turin meant to betray us, he could have done it from the start. He knew of my escape plan, helped arrange it. Why would your sister have allowed you to escape?”

I nodded. It made sense. It was good, as much as I hated to think it, to have a level-headed man to help me see what made sense. “You’re thinking is very logical,” I said.

“Okay.” I sighed and nodded. “Put this scroll back on the falcon. Send it back, so Evangeline and my sneaky sister will think no one was here to read it.”

“Yes, my lord.”

We loaded up into the carriage. Paul rode with me this time, though we sat on opposite sides of the cabin and avoided eye contact, both of us determined not to let our emotions get carried away. I was so frustrated being a young woman. It made things so awkward with men. Paul and I had been friends since we were boys, and it was so vexing to me to find myself getting all got and bothered when I was around him.

Just as the carriage started to move, I felt a rush of panic and anxiety, and every instinct I had screamed—No! Do not go to the council meeting! Turin is a traitor! I gasped, putting my hand to my cheek.

“My Lord?” Paul said, concerned.

I looked out the window, feeling like a silly girl. “It’s nothing,” I said, loathe to tell Paul of my woman’s intuition and have to reveal, once more, what a girl I could be. No. Paul’s logic made total sense, and I would not let some feminine fluttering make my decisions for me!

“If only I had listened to my woman’s heart,” I said to Paul, back in the present day. “If only I had listened to my intuition! You would still be a man and not a slave!”

“If only I had listened,” Paul said. “I’m the one that talked you out of trusting yourself.”

“If we had both been more respectful of women, we might still be men.”

Paul rubbed my pregnant belly. “I guess we both had to learn the hard way.”

Chapter 22

Bastille Gaunt knelt before the great granite statue of Rationalus, deep in prayer. Rationalus had an impassive face, and held in one hand a compass, in the other a ruler and an abacus. His temple was all planes and right angles. It comforted Bastille to find himself here in a place of reason and strength. Yet, visions of the boy haunted his thoughts—his full breasts and slender waist, his wide, soft hips and the wet slit between his long legs.

“Help me!” Gaunt called out. “Take these visions from my mind!”

“Lord Gaunt?” It was the Temple Logician, Germanus, who’d been moving about the temple, lighting the lights in anticipation of the coming evening.

“Forgive me,” Gaunt said, ashamed of his outburst as well as his unclean thoughts.

Germanus approached. “Do you wish to speak? I always have time for my congregation.”

“No,” Gaunt said, his voice shaking. “No.”

“You seem troubled. You know the teachings of Rationalus. A troubled mind cannot calm a troubled mind.”

The thought of confessing to what he’d done filled Gaunt with revulsion. He shook his head, looking at the floor. “No. No. I am fine. Really.”

“Very well,” Germanus said. “May the light or reason guide your footsteps.”

Germanus returned to his duties. Gaunt folded his hands and returned to his prayers. He closed his eyes and he saw the boy on top of him, the look in his eyes, his plump, wet lips, himself saying *you be the man*. Gaunt imagined that he, himself, was the one with the breasts, the soft skin, the wet slit between his legs, and he felt himself growing hard at the thought, and he called out, “Germanus. I have sinned.”

“Come,” Germanus said. “Unburden yourself.”

Gaunt told him everything. Once he started speaking it all just poured out of him, and Germanus sat, listening, nodding. When Gaunt finished, he sighed and said, “I wish I could go back. Undue it all. I fear this thing has unmanned me, and I will never be a rational man again, but will always be haunted by these woman’s.... needs.”

“None who seek reason shall remain lost,” Germanus said. “But you must stop looking back and wishing you could undue your error. The solution is always to move forward, to take action.”

“I can have him turned back into a boy.”

“No. You must never again dabble in feminine magic. To do so will only fill your heart with ever more womanly needs.”

“But, then, what can I do?”

“You must kill the girl, and she is a girl now, wicked and fallen.”

“But...”

“NO! Whether she means it or not, she is a servant of the Witch, tainted by the foul magic of woman, and she has ensnared you in her enchantment. Kill her, and you will be free of this curse.”

“I don’t know if I can.”

“You either kill her, or your life as a man is ended. Go. Now. Do it. Be a man.”

Gaunt nodded. “It will be done.” He checked the dagger, which he carried at all times for protection. Stood and walked with purpose and intent out of the church, up the hill. The

sun was setting, and the winds had risen, tearing at his cloak, tossing his hair, seeming to push him back, away from the little shack on the bluff. Gaunt leaned into the wind, his eyes stinging, struggling to breath, pushing forward. You will not stop me, witch, he thought, focusing one step at a time, staying calm, stepping forward step by step until at last he came to the cabin and found himself standing at the door. He drew his dagger. The blade flashed in the moonlight. Gaunt had killed before, and looking at the blade he imagined himself plunging into the boy's heart, putting it right through his full, round breast. He paused. The boy was a loyal servant, so docile and meek, he was a lovely boy and —no, girl! She was a wicked girl! Germanus was right. Yet, he thought of her sweet, innocent face, her sweet lips...

No. She must die that I may be a man.

I. Must. Be. Free., he thought. I must dispel this curse and the womanly weakness it has woken in me.

He opened the dark cabin, stepped in and pulled the door shut. "Girl? He said. "Boy?" His heart began to race. He searched. The cabin was empty. The boy was gone. Gaunt bit his thumb and fought back tears. Why? He called out to his god. Why have you done this to me?

His dagger clattered to the floor. Gaunt spun and fled back down the hill, back to the stout, stone safety of his castle.

He rushed through the castle gate, barely acknowledging the guards, raced up the stairs and plunged into his study, slamming the big, oaken door. He gasped for breath, and his clothes were damp with sweat. Grabbing a piece of wood, he added it to the low fire his servants always kept burning in the cold months. Then added another, grabbing the poker and pushing the logs around, his hands shaking. He pushed and pulled and fussed, but he couldn't get the fire quite how he wanted it and finally threw the iron poker down, against the granite floor in front of the fire.

His head ached. His hands shook. He needed something to calm himself. Two things, actually, he thought, going over to his liquor cabinet and splashing a couple of fingers of brandy into a glass, tossing back a generous mouth full. His shaking began to calm, and he found his pipe and packed it with tobacco, lighting it and taking a long, satisfying draw from his pipe, letting the syrupy tobacco fill his lungs. He held it in, feeling the rush of pleasure and relief that always came with the first toke, the tobacco mingling with the brandy in his system, relaxing him. He sniffed the brandy, tossed back what was left in the glass, enjoying the hot burn of the whiskey as it poured down his throat and his belly like a shot of lava. Closing his eyes, he smoked, listening to the popping of the fire, the wind now whistling outside his stone walls, rattling the windows but now rendered harmless.

Calming, calm, he laughed at himself. The girl was no problem. Where would she go? Where could a fool like her go but home? He would find her in the morning and kill her. It would be simple, and then...

He felt a draft and opened his eyes to see his wife slamming open the door to his study and screamed, “Bastille! We must go! Now!” She looked like a madwoman, her hair in a crazed disarray, like some wild woman from the woods.

“Woman!” He said, rising. “What madness has possessed you to burst into my study screaming like a harpy?”

Phorcias marched forward and shoved a piece of parchment into his hands. “Read.”

“I don’t..”

“READ!”

There was a wild joy in Phorcias’s eyes, and some strange force in her that caused Gaunt to step back and look at the paper, reading. He looked up, smiling. “You are right, my wife. We do need to go. And now.”

“To claim the throne,” Phorcias said.

“Yes. My throne.”

Phorcias turned and walked away, smiling to herself. All her hopes and dreams were coming together. She looked back at her husband, who stood there re-reading the parchment, deep in thought, and she giggled as she headed up to her rooms and thought about their futures.

For Gaunt, the night turned into a fever dream as he supervised the servants, loading up a small caravan for the trip to capital. It was no small thing, especially given the unsettled circumstances and the uncertainty as to what they would find when they got there, how long they would stay. He’d sent frantic messages down to the city trying to establish where they would stay, but he meant to leave in the morning, and he would sleep in a stall if that was what it meant to claim the throne.

When morning came he was bleary, but satisfied, and he went up to his rooms, looking for his wife, ready to argue with her about how long it was taking her to get ready. When he got to their rooms, he found her standing outside the door, dressed in her travelling clothes, standing close and talking to the wizard, Plantagenet.

“Phorcias,” Gaunt said. “Plantagenet. I wasn’t expecting to find you here this morning.”

“No. Nor did I expect to be summoned here so early,” Plantagenet said.

“What business brings you here?” Gaunt said, his mind growing dark with undefined suspicions.

“I needed some salve for a lady problem,” Phorcias said.

“Yes, your wife...”

“Spare me the details,” Gaunt said, feeling queasy at even the mention of the unclean issues that women dealt with. “Thank you for coming. We, my darling,” he said, offering his wife his arm, “must be off. As I suspect you have heard, there is trouble in the Shattered Isles.”

“Yes. I will see you down there soon. I have been summoned.”

“By whom?”

“All sorts of people on every side of this fight,” Plantagenet said. “It will take all my craft to get through this without losing my head.”

Gaunt laughed. “Stick with me, old friend, and you will be fine.”

“Of course,” Plantagenet said, stepping away with a bow.

Phorcia and Gaunt made their way down to the carriage. He helped her in, and then went to check on his entourage, get the caravan moving, double check with his travelling guards. It would have been faster to ride ahead, but with turmoil in the kingdom there might well be those who would see him dead, so he was forced to travel with his escort, moving more slowly but more surely.

The two rode in silence, Phorcia looking out the window, watching their lands roll by. Gaunt lost in thought, staring into space, his eyes unfocused. He wanted to clear the air. Start them back toward what had been until recently a workable if not loving relationship. He cleared his throat. “Phorcia?”

“Yes?” She said, snapping out of her own thoughts and musings.

“Things have not been good. I have not been the kind of husband you deserved. I have not been the man that you deserve. I just want you to know that I will do better, I will. It was just the tension over these atrocities perpetrated by the usurper, my frustrations! I should not have taken it out on you, and I want you---“

“Bastille...?”

“Let me finish! I want you to know I will never lay my hands upon you again.”

“Thank you,” Phorcia said. “For my part, I have not been the wife you deserved. It is my duty to the loving and obedient wife of the man I married. I took an oath to obey my man in all things, and I will not break that oath again. Truly.”

“Phorcia. How could I ever have doubted your noble and loyal heart? It gladdens my heart to know you will be there to witness my moment of triumph.”

“There is nothing I look forward to more in this life than being there for the moment of triumph,” Phorcia said.

Gaunt patted her on the knee. Smiled. “Very good.”

Phorcia turned back to the window and smiled.

Lady Turina drifted in and out of consciousness. A slender male nurse in a white robe and habit appeared at times, gently daubing at his forehead with a damp cloth. He felt himself being turned over. There was a pain in his back, and he felt alternate chilled to the bone and burning from within. During his brief moments of consciousness, he asked, again and again, “How is Mother?”

Finally, he opened his eyes one day and saw light streaming in from the window. The nurse was there, his back to Turin. “Boy,” Turina said, surprised by the soft, feminine sound of her voice. The memory of his recent changes returned to him at the sound of it.

The slender boy turned to face Turina, his eyebrows raised in surprise. “You’re awake!”

“My mother,” Turina said, ignoring the boy’s pointless observation of the obvious. “How is she?”

“Who?”

“My mother! The Queen, you fool.” He pushed himself into an upright position, hissing as a sharp pain shot through his back and side.

“You shouldn’t move, m’lady...”

“My MOTHER!”

“She remains in a deep slumber, my lord.”

“Was she badly wounded, then?”

“Only a tiny prick on the neck, but she was poisoned.”

“Take me to her,” Turina said, forcing himself to stand, holding his side.

The boy knew better now than to question, so instead he grabbed a robe from the closet and handed it to Turina, who only then realized he was wearing a thin, cotton gown and nothing else. He gratefully wrapped the robe around himself, tying the sash, and the boy led him down to the room where his mother slept. It was heavily guarded, with many of the Queen’s guard, as well as a War Witch. They let Turina pass, and once inside the room she found Esper there, kneeling at the queen’s bedside. “Turina!” He said, smiling prettily. “You’re awake!”

Esper stood and gathered Turina in for a sisterly hug before leading him to the bedside of the queen. Turina covered his mouth when he looked upon his mother; her skin had a greenish look, and there were deep black circles under her eyes, as well as dark blotches on her neck and her hands were twisted and gnarled, as if she were clawing at her pain. “Goddess,” Turina said. “Oh, my Goddess, where are you?”

“We have everyone working on this, m’lady,” Esper said. “We will save your mother’s life. But, m’lady, if I may, there are---“

“The Spider Witch!” Turina burst out. “What of her and her magic? Can she do nothing?”

“No one dares enter her chambers, m’lady. They are protected by dire spells and snares, and the door itself refuses to open for any but the queen.”

“But, surely, my mother left someone with some way to get through?”

“I was hoping that person was you.”

“I don’t... she didn’t ever tell me. She was ever so secretive about the witch!”

“Begging my pardon, but the other matters I mentioned?”

Turina turned and looked upon her mother, the woman who had made him into the girl he was, the woman who’d turned him from a man and a husband into a girl and a daughter. It didn’t seem like anything else mattered now. If she died, he would be stuck as a girlish man, talking and walking and thinking like a woman, but with no place in a world returned to the wicked rule of men. He sank down into a chair and said, “Yes. What is it?”

“Open rebellion, m’lady. Armies are gathering to the east and west. Lords are openly defying the Queen’s law. Many now travel to the capital, all claiming they come to serve, but they all come to make claims upon the throne. The Shattered Isles are slipping into chaos.”

“Fiddlesticks!” Turina said. “Those sneaky sneaks! We will crush them. Who is in charge with my mother lost to sleep?”

“You, m’lady. As the regent and the queen’s daughter, you know rule the Shattered Isles.”

“Oh!” Turina said. “My goodness. Well, then, it seems I better get to work.”

“Yes, and I want you to know, you command my blade, m’lady, and the ladies of the Queen’s Guard will stand with you against all the filthy men in the Shattered Isles.”

“Thank you, Esper. It means ever so much to me.” He offered his hand to Esper, who kissed it and then helped Turina to his feet. “It seems it falls to me to defend the rule of woman. I will not fail my mother, or the goddess. Call the Queen’s Ladies to Court. Let it be known that any lady so rude as to fail to heed my summons will lose her titles and her lands. I will hear no excuses.”

“Very good, m’lady,” Esper said. “Very good, indeed.”

Turina, with an escort of the Queen’s Guard, made his way back to his rooms. He did not find his wife there, which was of little concern under the circumstances. He serving girls bathed him, and dressed him, and once he felt the firm grip of the corset around his body, and the swirling of his skirts about his legs, he felt like a strong and confident woman again, and with the Queen’s Guard at his side, he marched down to meet the Ladies of the Court.

None of the male lords appeared. The only ones who came were the women who’d replaced their husbands at court when the men had refused to wear dresses and accept the title of “Lady.” That meant Turina was greeted by a mere three Ladies, who looked nervous and unsure. He told them the status of the queen, and kingdom as he understood it. Then he stood,

and said, “The Day of the Witch is here, and no man can stop us! The rule of woman will not be turned back or delayed! I know you may be afraid, you may be nervous, as am I. It may look like we face impossible odds with the forces arrayed against us, but stand with me, sisters, and the goddess will prevail! We will only grow stronger as we put down this last desperate grasping of the men; we will spank them and send them to bed without their suppers!”

The Queen’s Ladies stood, raising their fists in the air. Turina explained his plan. All three ladies would pull their armies back to the capital, and with the Queen’s Guard and the Women’s Battalion the queen and her witch had formed, they would have a sufficient force to garrison the ancient city. Meanwhile, foraging parties had already gone out and were gathering all provisions in order to withstand a siege. If the boys wanted a war, Turina thought, a war they would get! For over 600 years no army had managed to breach the walls of this mighty city, and Turina felt sure he and his girls could hold it for 600 more if they had to.

But the bigger problem? Yes, the biggest problem, was the enemy within the walls, and that was a much harder matter to settle. Who were the assassins? Who had sent them? Stomping his foot, Turina twirled, his skirts fluttering about him, and headed for the dungeons, his security detail hurrying along to keep up.

“There,” the prison guard said, pointing to the two assassins, still sprawled out on their backs.

Turina, tossing his long hair back over his shoulders, walked over to the cell and looked them over. They were both short, maybe five feet tall. Slender, with pretty but not beautiful faces. Short black hair, like boys. He decided to give the direct approach a try. “Who sent you?”

Neither of the women responded.

“You can tell me now, or you can tell me after you’ve been tortured.”

No response.

“Very well. Summon Illick.”

“Pardon, m’lady, but Illick has gone missing.”

“Missing?”

“Left town this morning.”

The traitor, Turina thought. “No matter. I am quite adept at inflicting pain. “Her,” he said, pointing to the one on the right. “Bring that jackal The Room.” He started to head to the chamber himself, wanting to examine the tools he would have at his disposal, but he spotted a girl dressed as a maid curled up in the corner, seeming to hide her face. “You. Show your face.”

Schimmers pretended not to hear.

“Look at me, girl, or I will have one of these guards come into the cell and stick you with her blade.”

“Pardon,” Schimmers said, showing his face to Turin.”

“Wait,” Turina said, recognizing the girl. “Aren’t you the Queen’s Maid? Missy?”

“Yes, m’lady,” he responded.

“Why is she here?” He asked the jailkeeper, his anger rising.

“Conspiracy.”

“You little bitch! You betrayed our queen. Are you the one who let these assassins into our castle?”

“I am here on suspicion of conspiracy, only! I was arrested based on circumstantial evidence! I know nothing of the assassins.”

“So, tell me, Missy. How does a lowly maid learn to speak like a barrister?”

Schimmers realized his mistake. “I... don’t know. I overheard many conversations. But, I *am* innocent.”

“I will deal with you later,” Turina said, leaving the room.

The prisoner was brought in and tied down on the bloodstained wooden table that stood in the center of the room. She did not speak or resist, but simply allowed herself to be tied down. Turin selected a pair of pliers, and handed them to one of the guards, a woman named Meadow.

Turn went to the table and leaned down, looking the assassin right in the eye. “I will make you scream with a single move. You will wish you had never been born. Do not try me.”

The woman’s face remained passive, but Turin saw a flicker of amusement in her eyes. Yes, he thought. Just as I suspected. Best to make sure, though, he decided.

“Take the fingernail off the first finger.”

Meadow nodded, gripping the end of the fingernail with the pliers and then... ripping.

The assassin did not react at all. Just lay there as if dead.

Turina nodded. “Rip out one of her teeth.”

The assassin opened her mouth, wide. Meadow took the pliers, locked onto the tooth, looked back at Turina. “This is not---“

“Do it.”

Meadow closed her eyes and yanked the tooth free. The assassin closed her mouth as if nothing had happened, blood gushing onto her chin,

“Thank you for telling me what I needed to know,” Turin said. “Take her out back and hang her.”

“But, she told you nothing.”

“To endure such pain without the slightest reaction, not even a whimper? There is only one group of assassins in this world trained to that diamond toughness. The Cloak of Mordaunt.” He watched the woman’s face for a reaction. Any reaction. But she still just lay there, unmoved. He had to admire the discipline, the strength of will. Truly impressive. And daunting to know that they were enemies of House Gawain.

The assassin was carried out to the back of the castle. The rope was placed around her neck. Her eyes were closed and her face calm. The lever was thrown, the hatch opened beneath her, and she plunged down, her neck snapping with a POP. “Hang the body in the public square with a sign reading, “This is what happens to betrayers.”

“Yes, M’lady.”

Turina headed back into the castle, through The Room and back through the cell block. Schimmers remained curled up in the corner, hoping to have been forgotten, but as Turin passed, he stopped and said, “I haven’t forgotten about you, you little cow. You will hang in the morning along with your fellow assassin, and the whole city will be invited to watch.”

Tonight, Schimmers thought, *I make my escape*. He glanced at Exeter. The pretty little man nodded.

Chapter 24

The carriage moved along a well-maintained road for a time, then turned off the road and began to move through the woods on what seemed little more than a deer path. Branches scrapped along the sides of the wagon, and snapped off in the leaves shook and branches cracked as they got caught in the wheels and snapped. The wagon bounced and shook as it sunk into gullies and had to be hauled over stones and thick roots. Baldur’s breasts swayed and bounced everywhere to the point he actually wished he had a corset on or at least something to tie them down, finally wrapping his arms across his boobs and holding them in place.

Late in the morning, the carriage came to the top of a large, bowl-shaped gully of white rock. A waterfall plunged from the top of the gully, and leaning out the window, peering down, Baldur saw that the floor of the gully was full of green, leafy trees and flowers. White birds sang, some circling just above the lip of the gully, while others dotted the trees. “I don’t see anyone,” Baldur said, his intuition chiming in again.

“We’re too far up,” Paul said. “Turin will be there. He is a man of honor.”

Baldur bit his thumb. “You’re right. I must have faith.”

The carriage began to slowly creep down the path that wound down to the floor of the gulley. Along the way, Baldur noticed broken columns. “What was this?” He asked.

“I believe Turin said it was a bath in the days of the old kingdom.”

“A bath? This far from the city?”

“Well, for the private use of some Lord’s family. This would have been a part of their country residence or something of that nature.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Baldur said. “Should we just get out and walk down?”

“No. Turin is to greet us before we get to the gathering of lords. He has brought along attire suitable for the occasion, at your request.”

“Paul. You really are quite a good man.”

“Thank you,” he said.

Finally, the carriage reached the bottom of the gulley and a small clearing, where, indeed, Lord Turin stood waiting along with a pair of footmen. Next to him was a large trunk.

Paul got out of the carriage, then stood at attention as Baldur emerged. Turin and the footmen put their fists to their hearts and bowed. Baldur walked up, shoulders back, head high, and when he came close to Turin, he reached out his small, soft hand. The men shook hands, looking into each other’s eyes. “Well met,” Baldur said. “It is good to see you, friend.”

“Your highness.”

Paul joined them.

“Under the circumstances, I believe we can dispose with any additional pleasantries. You have some proper clothes for me?”

“Yes,” Turin said, opening the chest, the top of which swung toward Baldur. “I have some clothes that are very appropriate.” He stood, and Baldur gasped to see he was holding a wedding dress.

“No,” he said, and just then he heard his sister laughing, and she and a group of women emerged from the trees around the edges of the clearing clapping and shouting, “surprise!”

“Betrayer!” Paul said, reaching for his sword, finding nothing, having forgotten that he’d given the blade to Baldur.

“Bastard!” Baldur hissed, grabbing the short sword himself meaning to cut Turin’s throat, but the footmen had drawn their own weapons, and one slapped the sword from his hand, while the other lunged at Paul, who raised his fists and slammed it into the man’s chin.

“Run!” Paul called, picking up the short sword and waving it, keeping Turin and the footmen at bay.

Baldur hesitated, watching as Gawain and her entourage advanced, the footmen began to circle Paul. He didn't want to abandon his friend, but looking at his sister's smirking face, and then at the wedding dress Turin had tossed over the top of the chest, his heart filled with terror, and he spun, running back toward the carriage, the path out of the valley, and freedom. His breasts bounced and swayed, and he never even saw the coachman who grabbed him around the waist and lifted him off his feet.

“Let me go!” Baldur shrieked, kicking helplessly.

The coachman just laughed.

Turin and the two footmen had subdued Paul. The men were holding him, one on each arm, and he was struggling, cursing. They kicked his feet out from under him and got him to his knees, where he continued to fight. Baldur was thrown to his knees and struggled weakly, as his sister walked up, grinning.

“Oh, little sister, did you really think you could escape your destiny?”

“You are a witch!” Baldur said.

“Flattery will get you nowhere,” Gawain said, taking Baldur by the chin and tilting his head back. Baldur yanked his chin free.

“You can imprison me again. Haul me back to the castle. I will escape again! You can't force me to live the life of a princess!”

“I won't have to. You will be your husband's problem in an hour or two.”

“What?”

“Do you think it was an accident that I picked this place? This is ground sacred to the goddess. One of her most sacred temples stood here before the dark times. Don't you think it fun that you shall be married here, in the Temple of the Goddess?”

“No,” Baldur said. “Please don't do this.”

“Oh, sister.” Baldur saw Stone coming out of the clearing, along with several other dressers. Stone was holding a lacey white corset with pearl inlays that flashed whenever they caught the sunlight. At the sight of the corset, which perfectly symbolized a return to the feminine prison which he thought he'd escaped, Baldur began to weep.

The tears ignited Paul's rage, and he suddenly tossed off one of the men that was holding him, then smashed his fist into the other's face. He charged toward Gawain, meaning to break her neck, but suddenly he felt a terrible pain, like something was gnawing at his insides, and he put a hand to his belly, stumbling, but still moving forward, even as his hair seemed to flop down into his eyes. Another cramp hit, even more powerful than the first and he gasped-- even as he kept moving toward Gawain, brushing his bangs from his eyes as he felt his chest start to swell,

and his shirt burst open as his breasts swelled large and round, and he whispered “no!” as another cramp brought him to his knees, and he felt hot, sticky menstrual blood flowing down his leg, and he covered his face in shame.

“Paul,” Baldur whispered, seeing his friend reshaped into a woman, watching the dark stain appear on his pants and feeling a womanly surge of empathy for what the man was suffering. “Not him,” he said, crying harder. “Please. Turn him back.”

“But little sister, don’t you want your best friend to be your maid of honor?”

“And so, my rescue became a trap. For both of us.”

“But it was so brave of you to come for me. You were the only one.”

“It was brave of me to put on that dress and be your *maid of honor*.”

“You did look adorable.”

“I thought I would never be more embarrassed.”

“And then she publicly stripped you of your titles and named you Sparkle.”

Paul rolled his eyes.

“Khaness!” Stone called rushing breathlessly into the room.

“Stone?” Baldur said, shocked as he had never seen Stone lose her composure.

“News, My Queen. Your sister. Assassins!”

“Assassins?” Paul helped Baldur sit up. “My sisters is dead?”

“Not dead. Poisoned. She lives but remains in an enchanted sleep, and she grows weaker day by day.”

“Who else knows of this?”

“None. I came straight to you when I heard the news.”

“Summon my husband,” Baldur said.

“Yes, ‘M’lady.”

Stone left. Paul took Baldur’s hand and helped him to a chair, then knelt at his side, holding his hand. “What will you do?”

“What can I do?” Baldur said, his hands on his belly. “I’m pregnant!”

Chapter 25

The next weeks were full of furious preparation, and then waiting. Reports came regularly as the armies of the east and west gathered and began their march on the capital. As much as could be scavenged and commandeered from the villages around the castle had been gathered, but stores were much lower than Turina had hoped. Looking over the numbers, he knew that they would not be able to withstand a long siege. Not without magic. And so, he spent hours and hours searching his mother's rooms, looking for some key that would allow him access to the tower and the Spider Witch.

Meanwhile, The Three Ladies were all thriving under pressure. Ladies Malbec, Grimbergen and Townes had all taken on responsibilities, without even being asked, taking care of matters through the city from checking on the supplies of pitch and the condition of the catapults to arranging lodgings for the thousands of peasants who streamed into the city to escape the advancing armies, that pillaged as they crept toward the capital. Turina felt his heart swell with pride and gratitude, and their faith in him and the Goddess drove his own tireless efforts.

He visited Queen Gawain each day. Sat by her side. Sometimes he wept as he saw her slipping further and further into the endless sleep, her skin growing a gray/green color, as she wasted away, getting thinner every day. He prayed and prayed as he went about his daily work, and yet each day the news got worse. The men of the Shattered Isles rallied to the rebellion, eager to save themselves from a coming age of woman. The armies of the East and West swelled with each passing day, and not just with soldiers, but wizards and the Spellwards of Rationalus.

At least I don't have to worry about Baldur, Turina thought, smugly, tossing his long hair. He had spies keeping an eye on the little Khaness, and knew he was growing great with child. With his marriage and now looming motherhood, he would not be a part of any attempt to restore the rule of man. That was over for him, probably the day word spread throughout the castle that he'd menstruated, but certainly now that he'd been taken as bride by another man and been implanted with that man's seed.

That left only a few players. MacGregor led the armies of the East. He had no legitimate claim on the throne. His family had been commoners until only 20 years prior, when they had been awarded lands and titles in return for loyal service in the StormWinds War. On the other side, Fallon, who as a cousin to the Queen at least shared some blood with the royal family, but there were many others who had closer familial ties.

And that left Bastille Gaunt, who had a very strong claim as his family had once sat on the throne, back in the lost days, and had in fact been deposed and exiled to the Northern Isles due to their then loyalty to the Goddess. Could he be turned into an ally? Turina knew from messages he'd received from his spy inside Gaunt's castle that the man meant to come to the capital and claim the crown. But, perhaps, he could be turned? His mind changed? He had heard the lord was moody, emotional, given to impulse.

From the walls of the castle, the garrison watched as the Armies of the East and West gathered and set up camp on either side of the city, their tents dotting the horizon as far as the eye could see-- blue and white on the one side, scarlet and white on the other. The banners flapped in the breeze and smoke rose into the air from the campfires.

Small parties of horsemen rode back and forth between the camps. The armies did not move on the first day, but rested. In the city, the tension grew as they waited for war. Bastille Gaunt and his party arrived, and horsemen began to ride back and forth between his group and the other two camps. Turina watched, frustrated. He'd sent multiple messages to Gaunt, but received no replies. He had a sudden flash of inspiration—thank the goddess—and he sent a message north.

Parties of knights in full armor rode out at dawn on the second day, as MacGregor, Fallon and Bastille met in the open field that stood outside the main castle gate. Again, Turina watched, annoyed and dismayed, as the three men talked, wishing he could hear what they said, to seek to influence them in some way. The meeting ended. The parties rode back to their camps. What happened? Turina wondered. What had been decided?

He saw a falcon rise from Gaunt's small camp, and lifting his skirts he ran to the cages and eagerly took the scroll from the boy who'd been about to run it over to him:

*I, Bastille Gaunt, assert my claim to the Throne of The Shattered Isles.
Surrender the city and all will be spared.*

All spared? Turina spat. No women would be spared in the return to the rule of man and his cold, cruel god. He sent back his own message:

Queen Gawain is the rightful ruler of these lands. Abandon your treasonous war and you will be spared. Meet with me, and let us discuss how we may form a mutually beneficial arrangement.

The falcon flew off and over to the Gaunt camp. When it returned, its leg was bare. The message was clear. There would be war.

Night came. The city was quiet. The camps as well. Turina searched and searched Gawain's rooms, and, finding nothing, cried himself to a fitful sleep.

In the morning, just as the first rays of sunlight began to smolder on the horizon, a single bugle called out from the Eastern camp. Just a single clear, high note, sustained like a lonely voice calling out toward the rising sun, hoping for some warmth and light. Then, a second bugle answered, and a third, and they all began to play different patterns, rising and falling and

forming a perfect polyphony, and then the trumpets of the west answered, their own song rising with the sun, and the armies of men took up formation, and as the sun rose over the horizon, and a tide of bright light rolled over the forests and fields and then right up and over the walls of the great city, the men shouted, and shouted again, a great booming of voices, and they marched forward and brought with them great siege engines and the machines of war.

Turina marched along the wall, exhorting her armies, men and women, promising them they stood with the goddess. “For the goddess!” He cried.

“The goddess!” The Queen’s army shouted.

The siege began as a mighty battering ram began advancing on the city gates while groups ran forward with ladders, shouting. Turina’s archers began to loose their arrows, and barrels of burning pitch were prepared. Arrows flicked back from the ground, and Turina saw some of them strike home, piercing armor. Soldiers on both sides fell, and the battle began in earnest, the ladders rising, the struggle to push them back, the strike down the climbers. The battering ram reached the main gate, and the great crashing that shook the walls could be felt as it hammered against the doors.

Turina nodded. Her forces were doing well. The climbers were being systematically repelled, and the gates of the city had been formed from dragon scale and had not failed in the history of the city.

But then more forces swarmed against the back of the city, then the eastern and western walls. So many soldiers, and the garrison had to spread out to fend off the climbers, and as Turina watched he began to grow concerned because he had to use all of his people to defend the walls. He had no reserves, and the men from below were coming in cycles, taking rests from each assault while another group attacked. It was only a matter of time before exhaustion took them down.

He glanced back at the witch’s tower, the upper part enmeshed in webs. Come on, he thought. Can’t you see what is happening? Help us!

He heard a great shrieking coming from the forest, and turning he saw Skaw rising from the forest, great birds with oily black feathers, and they rose as a murder and began to fly toward the city. No, Turina thought. No.

But as they approached, he could see the birds each carried a rider and saddle bags. The Skaw Riders! They had not left their isles far to the south in 200 years! Turina ran, calling to the archers. “The sky! The sky!”

The looked, saw the approaching Skaw, and turned, raising their bows and fixing their arrows. “Let them get closer! Closer!”

The Skaw split into two columns. Heading to the south and east of the city, away from Turina’s archers. “No!”

He watched as they began to swirl above the walls, dropping firebombs onto the soldiers, who, bursting into flame, screamed and threw themselves from the wall, or else threw themselves to the ground, rolling, trying damp out the burning pitch. A ladder slammed against a vacated section of wall, and another, and another. Armored men began to pour up and over the ladders, and they made formation, pushing out and along the wall to either side, and more ladders and more clattered onto the walls, and men poured in, and the city was breached.

Turina felt a lump in his throat. “Keep fighting!” He shouted. “Keep faith! The Goddess will...”

The wall shook and he fell. Getting up, he saw that the Spellwards of Rationalus had taken formation. Eldritch energy swirled about them, purple and black plumes of energy, and then they collectively hurled them against the front wall of the city, and again Turina was knocked from his feet, and the wall held but he heard concrete snapping, and the sound of crumbling, and he knew it would not be long before the wall crumbled, and more soldiers poured into the city from the north.

The Queen’s Army fought bravely. They stood and did battle where they could. Where they couldn’t, they fell back and made new lines, steel clashing with steel as they sought to defend their city and queen. Smoke and blood filled the streets as the firebombing spread, and Turina could hear cries of agony above even the hammering and the steel.

And more and more men kept coming, and then the giants, and the Small Ones, and the Desert Fighters and the Coltish, that were both man and beast. It seemed all that was male in the lands had risen up against the queen. Turina looked back at the Spider Tower. Where was their champion? Where was the goddess?

Lifting his skirts, he ran back toward the castle. The witch could yet save them. She had to. For the goddess.

As Turin ran up the steps to the keep that surrounded the castle proper, he saw that the Queen’s Guard were fortifying their positions. Lady Malbec, wearing silver plate that shimmered in the sun, her long hair tied back in a ponytail, directed the efforts, striding confidently about, shouting orders and encouragement. She saw Turina running toward her, lifting his skirts, his face drenched in sweat. “Lady Turina?” She said.

Turina stopped, struggling to catch his breath enough to speak. Malbec put a steadying hand on his shoulder. “I go to beg the Spider Witch for help.”

“Have you discovered a way to open the door?”

“No, but the Goddess will provide. She must!”

“How bad is it?” Malbec said.

Just then there was a great crash, and looking down they could see the city wall implode, stone flying into the steers, a great gap opening in the space. The men began pouring through the smoke. “The city has been breached, and it will fall.”

“We will hold them here,” Malbec said.

“Lady Malbec. I won’t blame you if you and your women decide...”

“Turina. I am a free woman for the first time in my life,” Malbec said. “And I will die a free woman. Now, go!”

“For the Goddess!” Turina shouted as he lifted his skirts and ran forward.

“For the goddess!”

Turina ran into the castle, up and up and up the winding stairs. His legs aching, lungs burning. He saw the door, stumbled and fell. Too tired to stand, he crawled the last 20 feet to the door, sent a prayer for help to the Goddess, reached for the handle and pulled.

Nothing. It would not move. The door would not budge. Turina could hear the rumble of war, the hammering of steel on steel, shouts and thunderous explosions. He began to cry, sank to the ground and curled up into a ball. I have failed you, Mother, he thought. I am so sorry. Perhaps had I been born a girl, I could have served you better.

Lady Malbec and her women stood in formation as the Army of Man approached, their swords and armor gleaming. The men were covered in soot and blood. MacGregor and Bastille led them.

“Lady Malbec,” Bastille said, surprised to see her in her armor, brandishing a blade. “You look quite lovely in your armor.”

“As do you, Lady Gaunt.”

“Despite your insolence, I offer you an opportunity to surrender. Put your down weapon and go back to the kitchen.”

“Why? You look so much better in an apron than I do.”

“Any of you who surrenders now will go unharmed. You cannot win, and there has been enough death,” Gaunt called. The Queen’s Ladies stood, their faces calm.

“Very well. Advance!”

The men charged forward. The Queen’s Guard lowered their spears, raised their shields and braced themselves. Spears bit into flesh and bone, but there were too many, and soon shield clashed against shield, and the mass of men pushed forward, and outnumbered the lines of the Queen Guard broke. With the lines broken, swords came out, and the melee deteriorated into chaos. Lady Malbec stood side by side with her women, cleaving with her sword, batted blows away with her shield, feeling her heart sing with the thrill of combat, and... a sudden agonizing pain in her neck. Her shield fell to the ground as her hand went numb, and she felt hot blood pouring from her neck as she reached up and felt a crossbow bolt lodged in the side of her neck. Wheeling, she saw Bastille, standing on a low stone wall, reloading his weapon.

She opened her mouth to curse him, but blood poured out, so she broke ranks, stalking toward him, her sword still clenched in her fist. Bastille raised his now, smirking, and loosed another bolt. This one came in at the joint between her chest plate and her shield shoulder, piercing the chain. She spun and fell to a knee, her vision growing murky. Bastille reloaded his weapon. Using her sword for support, Malbec got back to her feet and continued moving toward Bastille, who calmly raised his weapon, took careful aim and said, "goodbye."

The bolt caught her in the left eye, and she fell back with a great clanging of steel. The last thing Malbec saw was the noonday sun, directly overhead, and she felt a great peace come over her as she felt herself rising into the light.

Bastille climbed down off his perch, walked over to Malbec. Looking down at her, he thought, such a pity. She looks like she was a pretty good lay. The sun dimmed. All looked up to see a Pegasus careening across the sun and then landing on one of the castle's porches.

The last of the Queen's Guard were being butchered. Bastille smiled. How things had changed in his favor in just a few paltry hours. He could feel the amulet against his chest, and he smiled. The time had come for him to slay Invincibillia and claim his crown. "Bring my wife and the bard," he said. "Let's make history."

Phorcia was summoned along with the bard Ulnight, famed throughout the lands as the greatest poet. Bastille wanted to make sure his victory lived on in song, that his legend was recorded for all time. The three of them, joined by Macgregor and a contingent of soldiers and lords, nervously entered the castle and made their way to the door where they found Turina curled up in a ball. He sat up at their approach, brushing the hair out of his eyes. "So, it is over."

"Yes. The rule of woman has ended, as it always must, in death and chaos."

"It was man who brought the death and chaos."

"Seize this traitor," Bastille said.

A pair of soldiers grabbed him and held him. Turina didn't resist. Bastille and his wife approached the door, arm in arm. "Are you sure you wish to remain here?" He said, turning to face MacGregor and the other men.

"I do not wish to chance my manhood," MacGregor said.

"Very well. I go to slay this abomination. And then we shall celebrate."

He smirked, reaching toward the handle, his heart racing as he was, truly nervous, though he would not show it. Before he could reach it, the handle turned, and the door swung open. Bastille, his wife still on his arm, took a step back. Macgregor and his men retreated and meant to flee, but found their limbs filling with a heaviness and growing stiff, until they stood there, frozen like statues, but aware and watching all that would transpire.

A tall, pale woman in a gossamer gown stepped forward, radiating a cold, lunar beauty that filled all with wonder. She wore a gossamer gown of spider webs that clung to her body,

and her hair and eyes were as dark and hard as onyx. All but Bastille and his wife, who looked upon her without awe or intimidation, seeing her ethereal but protected from it, they remained unbowed.

“Invincibillia,” Bastille said, thinking of the bard and the legend he would write, “I have come to kill you.”

“Invincibillia?” She said in a chill, icy voice, thinking back. “Yes. I have been called that. You are of the House Gaunt. The rightful rulers of these lands by rule of the Goddess. You are fated to rule again. I have seen this.”

Bastille smiled. “Then you know you must die.”

“You will die, and you will be reborn. You are the mother of a new age, the prima-female who will usher in the age of woman. From your womb will be born a line of girls who will rule for generations! They will suckle at your breast, and you will be remembered always as the most beautiful of women, and the most nurturing of mothers. You have dreamt of this, my girl. You have wanted it.”

Bastille felt himself flush with anger as she spoke of his secret shame. “You lie!” He said, drawing his sword, eager to shut her up, to claim his legend, to save his manhood. His wife stepped away, smiling, and even as she did Bastille felt a sudden icy chill, and Invincibillia seemed to grow taller and more intimidating as he charged at her. “I strike you down for man!” He shouted, raising his sword, but as he did, the sword began to shrink, dwindling before his eyes even as he felt a sudden stabbing pain in his stomach and a burning in his groin that caused his knees to knock together and him to cry out as the sword in his hand turned into a blood red rose.

Bastille himself was flowering. He felt breasts swelling on his chest even as his armor seemed to melt away, leaving him naked. His hips spread. Long golden hair spilled down over his narrow little shoulders. Phorcia watched, delighted, as his skin took on a soft, feminine glow, lightening until it was a soft pink color, and his legs grew longer and rounded into gorgeous woman’s legs. His face grew soft and sweetly heart-shaped, and it thrilled her to see the slit form between his legs as he cried in a soft, girlish voice—not words, but just a sad desperate moan.

He lifted a slender white hand to toss the long hair back from his face, feeling his breasts bounce with the gesture, and then he stood there, his pretty eyes stunned, his full, pink lips hanging open in shock, knees together, a rose extended in his little hand. Around his neck, nestled in the soft canyon of his cleavage, was the amulet. “My amulet,” he squeaked.

“You will need ladies in waiting,” Invincibillia said, walking down the hall to where MacGregor and his men stood paralyzed, unable to express their horror. Turina was among them. “These girls will do nicely.” They could only stand there as their armor melted away, and they found themselves standing their naked in slender young female shapes. Invincibillia smiled as she looked over the pretty young girls. “And so ends the age of man...” She said, then stopped as she felt a blade pierce her back.

She turned, stunned, to see Phorcias standing there, drawing a second dagger from her hip. “You?” Invincibillia said, raising her hands, sending blue bolts of lightning to burn the upstart to death, but the lightning simply fizzled as Phorcias, holding her dagger in both hands, plunged it into Invincibillia heart.

Invincibillia dropped to her knees, cold black blood pouring down her chest and, through the dagger into her back, filling her lungs. She spat, the terrible possibility of mortality rushing into her mind as she stared at Phorcias. “How?”

Phorcias opened the top of her dress, revealing the amulet. “The Power of Man,” she said.

The Spider Witch fell over on her side. Dead.

Phorcias turned to Ulnight, who hid behind a column, the only male who had managed to keep his manhood. “Make sure to write this all down as soon as you can.” Ulnight nodded.

“How?” Bastille said. Now able to move, he covered his breasts and his vagina with his hands, blushing with maidenly modesty and manly disgrace.

“I switched your amulet for a fake, my dear little husband. And I took the real one for myself.”

“Why?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Because I shall be Queen.”

She turned to MacGregor and the rest of the girls, who had sunk to their knees and likewise had their arms across their breasts. Pulling a dagger free from the corpse of the witch, she put it under MacGregor’s little chin and tilted his head back. His was a lovely maiden, with big green eyes and plump, inviting lips. Bright red hair and freckles across the bridge of his little, upturned nose. “Swear your loyalty to me, MacGregor. On your life and the lives of your children.”

“I swear,” MacGregor said in a soft little bell-like voice.

“Which of you is Turin?”

As soon as he raised his slender arm, she knew him; he looked like his own twin sister. “Take her. Keep her under watch.”

“M’lady?” MacGregor said. “We have no clothes.”

“Go find some. Stop being such little girls. We must move quickly to secure and solidify our power.”

“Yes, my queen,” MacGregor said. Getting to his feet, he bowed, and the rest of the girls followed his lead.

Phorcia smiled. It was acceptable for now, but as girls they would all have to learn to curtsy. She was going to have none of the confusion and silliness Gawain had sought to establish. Women and men would keep to their proper places under her rule! Rationalus was the one true god, and his will would be the will of this queen and her people.

Dagger in hand, she made her way downstairs, where the castle servants were beginning to emerge from their hiding places and her soldiers had secured the door to prevent any looting by the “liberating” armies of East and West. Phorcia asked a servant where she might find Queen Gawain. The boy glanced at the bloody dagger in hand and his eyes went wide. There. At the end of that hall. The Infirmary.”

Phorcia walked calmly down the hall. Came to the door. Opened it. There was a slender little male nurse there, crying. The sight of him repulsed Phorcia. This is what happened under the goddess. “Stop your girlish blubbing and tell me—where is Gawain?”

The boy looked at her as if confused. “The Queen?”

“Don’t play dumb you little cunt. Where he she?”

“Gone,” he said.

“Gone?”

“Yes. When I returned here after tending to the men in the field, she was gone.” He pointed to an empty bed with tousled bed clothes.

Phorcia’s knuckles turned white as she squeezed the dagger and cold fury, and walked over to the boy, she grabbed his hair and pulled his neck back.

“No!” He cried. “Please! My mother needs me.”

She brought the blade to his neck, right to his jugular, and then she let go of him. “Get out of my sight. Go find some employment suitable to a man.”

The boy ran and did not look back.

Phorcia went over to the empty bed. Who had taken the false queen and where? She would have to send agents out looking. Gawain had to die. It was necessary to end that line forever. As for Baldur? He was not the man he used to be, she thought, and from she had heard he was about to be a mother. He would be no threat at all.

As for the infirmary? Well. Phorcia thought, Nurse MacGregor had a nice ring to it.

“I am a man!” Baldur cried out in agony, his whole body bathed in sweat. “I’m not supposed have to feel this!”

“Push!” Sparkle said, holding his hand. “Push!”

“You’re crowning!” The midwife called. “Keep pushing.”

“Agggghhh! I am going to kill my sister for this!” He felt like his vagina was tearing, and his groin burned with a pain unlike he’d ever felt as he breathed and tried and tried to push the baby out of him.

“Breath!” Sparkle said. “Push!”

He felt a sudden—almost squirting feeling, and the baby slipped out between his legs, where the midwife caught it and slapped it on its tiny bottom. The baby cried out, and Baldur craned his neck, trying to see his baby through the tears as he... “Oh!”

“What is it?”

He lay back, putting a hand on his belly. “Did I have the baby?”

“Of course. Can’t you hear him crying?”

“It’s a him? I had a boy? Ow! Oh!”

“What?”

“I feel like he’s still in there.”

The midwife touched his belly, and then he felt her spreading the lips of his vagina, poking and prodding. “A twin,” she said. “You’re having twins.”

“Twins? No,” Baldur said. “I have to do that again?”

“Wow. You are quite a woman, popping them out two at a time!” Sparkle said.

“Shut.... uuuuuuupppppp!” Baldur squeezed hard, trying to ignore the pain, breathing and pushing and just wanting to see his son, his first born, and he pushed and breathed and then the second baby slipped from between his legs, and the midwife said, “she’s a girl!”

And Baldur fell back and sighed, exhausted, and then someone was handing him a tiny little baby all swaddled in blankets, and as soon as Baldur saw the baby that he’d carried for nine months in his womb, the one he’d resented and feared and felt was a total source of shame, as soon as he held that little baby and felt its little body against his breast, his heart swelled with love like he’d never felt before, a pure and unconditional love, and he knew that he would do anything for his baby, his son! And then the nurse handed him his second baby, his little girl, and his heart swelled all over again, and he sat there holding his babies to his breasts overcome with joy, and though he thought he would have run out of tears by now his eyes welled over and he cried like he’d never cried before, and he looked up at Sparkle’s blurry face through the tears and said, “They’re so beautiful.”

“And so is their mommy.”

‘I’m a mommy now,’ he said, shaking his head. Mommy. How strange and yet wonderful the word sounded to him. He’d been a warrior and a knight, and he’d done great things as a man, had stood on the threshold of kingship, and now here he was a wife and a mommy, and he realized as he held his newborn babies that he wouldn’t trade the chance to be a mommy for the world. No. He did not need to be king. Not when he got to be the mother of two beautiful babies.

The midwife came to take the babies and put them down to sleep. Baldur reluctantly allowed his little bundles of joy to be taken. He wanted to just hug and hold them forever, but he was also struggling to keep his own eyes open. He kissed each one on the top of the head and whispered, “Mommy loves you” before drifting off to a blissful sleep.

Chapter 27

Bastille Gaunt sat on the windowsill in a pink silk dress, and sighed. It was a beautiful spring day, and the breeze tossed his long, golden hair. He wished he could go out and hunt in the woods as he once done, back when he was a man. But those days were over for him, and his wife—former wife—had already set the date for his marriage. He’d been given no say in the matter—just like any other girl.

“It is a nice day M’lady Gaunt, is it not?”

Gaunt turned and saw a petite maid sweeping the floor along with two other young women.

“Ever so nice,” Gaunt said, smiling prettily, glad for the company of other girls.

“The weather here is much nicer than it was at Castle Gaunt. It was always so cloudy and rainy, dark and gloomy!”

“Are you from the north?” Gaunt said, his heart leaping with excitement at the idea of meeting another girl from the North.

“You might say that,” the girl said in the voice of Schimmers.

Gaunt’s eyes went wide.

‘Miss me?’

“I am missing more than you.”

“These are my friends Exeter and She.”

“Friends of yours are friends of mine.”

Schimmers curtsied. “Can I help you up, m’lady.”

Schimmers held out his arm. “That would be a delight.”

Chapter 28

Gawain leaned out as far as she could and opened her mouth, retching into the wind. Her arms were wrapped tightly around the waist of her rescuer, a mysterious knight in shimmering plate- mail armor, and her legs were clinging desperately to the sides of the Pegasus on which she found herself flying. “Where are we going?” She called.

“To the Great Khan Fortress at the edge of the world!”

“What? Did my brother send you? No!” She looked off to the side thinking to jump, but it was far too long a fall.

“Do not worry about your brother. She is busying birthing her babies. Besides, she doesn’t know you are coming.”

“Doesn’t... but, then, who sent you?”

“The Khan. In honor of your alliance.”

The Khan. Gawain put her head against the armor of her savior. The Khan? That he should turn out to be a man of honor above all other men? It was... intriguing. He was a very powerful king, and with a very formidable army.

The goddess, Gawain thought, chuckling. Well, she does have a way with weaving.

The End

Dear reader;

Thank you so much for reading my book. Just a note here to let you know that I consider this story complete. I realize there are what might be called loose ends, but in life there are always loose ends, and things we believe we are done with have a way of coming back. So, for now, let it be that Phorcias, the traditionalist soul that she is, has restored the kingdom to the way it was before Gawain’s actions, and that walls have been repaired, bodies buried and lives returned to normal. Of course, for some men who now find themselves living lives as women, things are not as good as they were before, and more than a few may find herself cursing man’s rule and wishing for a little more woman’s rule after all—but what are those but any maiden’s silly dreams?

There may be another installment in this saga. I don’t know. But if there is, it will be some months or maybe even years from now. Thanks again, for reading.